Vintage Hunters: Creating Vintage in The Czech Republic

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Abstract: *The paper examines the creation of value in Czech vintage stores, focusing on how sellers transform pre-owned garments into desirable vintage items. Based on twelve semi-structured interviews and observations at seller-organized events, I explore the strategies and practices sellers employ to produce and enhance the value of second-hand clothing. The research highlights that they draw on their expertise, knowledge, and skills to justify the value of garments and reintegrate them into the market exchange. The findings suggest that while sellers perceive value as intrinsic to the quality of the item, the process of "valuing" (Heuts & Mol, 2013) requires their active engagement. This paper aims to contribute to the growing scholarship on thrift and second-hand economies (Greeson, 2018; Brooks, 2019; Alexander & Sosna, 2022), highlighting the interplay between sustainability, nostalgia, and fashion.*

Keywords: *vintage fashion, material culture, anthropology of value, consumption, thrifting*

Introduction

> "Used clothes have this one great advantage, you know… these clothes have been around for a while, had some kind of a life, and you can see how the fabric changes as the clothes get old and live on," – says Aneta as we sit in her vintage boutique in Prague. It is closed now because of the Covid-19 pandemic, and we are wearing masks – a reality that seems so unreal.
>
> Fieldnotes, February 2021

When I started my research in 2020, it was already apparent that fieldwork (spending time in thrift stores and talking to customers and sellers) was impossible, and even setting up an interview proved challenging. That's why I immediately agreed when Aneta offered to meet in person (while observing all safety measures). Eventually, safety restrictions were lifted, shops reopened, and my research had a happy ending – all the stores I have been in contact with made it through the pandemic. They proved to be resilient, just like the clothes sold there.

Social scientists were interested in second-hand clothing long before Vogue started publishing lists of the best thrift shops and vintage retailers. While many studies are dedicated to customer motivations and attitudes (see, e.g., Palmer, 2005; Lemire, 2005; Jenß, 2005; Cassidy & Bennett, 2012), the sellers' perspectives and practices have received less attention. During his ethnographic research in the Community Thrift Store in San Francisco, Frederik Larsen (2018; 2023) examined how used things transform into commodities on their path from the donation box to the shelf. He identifies several valuation practices employed by the store workers "in order to allow [objects] re-enter the second-hand economies" (Larsen, 2018: 156). For instance, drawing inspiration from Mary Douglas, Larsen argues that the cultural value is attached to the objects through the process of categorization.

Along the same lines, Liroy Choufan and Nir Tila-Cohen (2023) in their study of The Realreal Online Marketplace investigate how the company develop strategies to "alter the narrative of cultural biography" (2023: 21). The marketplace which specializes on selling branded objects focuses customers' attention on the originality of items while detaching them from previous owners. The authors conclude that The Realreal steps in as "self-appointed fashion police" (ibid.) and, as it is apparent from its name, is in charge of making sure that the goods are authentic.

The second-hand economy of used clothes, including the sellers' practices of valuation, is thoroughly explored by Emma Greeson (2018) who conducted her

ethnographic fieldwork in the UK and Poland. Her research, guided by the questions "How is used clothes made valuable?" (2018: xiii), sheds light on the global supply chain of second-hand clothes and traces processes of value production. Greeson points out that Polish consumers seek for quality items and thus become "experts at recognizing clothes that they consider to be good quality" (2018: 210). She, however, argues that it would be misleading to explain such approach to the clothes-buying by the lower economic status of Poland compared to the Western societies.

Greeson refers to the paper by Smith, Kostelecký, and Jehlička that examines relationships between consumption, sustainability, and class formation (2015). Their study conducted in Poland and the Czech Republic concludes that as economic development and incomes rise, the consumption habits of the Polish and Czech middle classes do not evolve in the same way as they do in Western countries. The authors argue that "quiet sustainability" practices such as food self-provisioning remain popular not as survival strategies but to "nourish and represent their own identity" and maintain social relationships and networks (2015: 231). Authors call for further research focused on practices of quiet sustainability not in terms of environment-friendly behavior but rather experiences of solidarity, sharing, pleasure, and exuberance (ibid.).

The majority of studies focused on the consumption of used clothes have emerged, as Greeson (2018: 50) puts it, in the starting (the USA, the UK, Western Europe) and ending points (South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa) of the supply chains, while "midpoint countries" like Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe remain an underexamined region. This paper aims to contribute to filling this gap. I draw on twelve semi-structured interviews conducted with shop owners (nine interviews), experts working in fashion industry (two interviews), and an employee of a vintage boutique. Apart from the data generated through interviews, the paper is based on observations at events organized by the sellers such as a launch of new collection or a pop-up sale.

My goal was to study the creation of value in the context of Czech vintage stores, so the analysis was guided by the following questions: How do the sellers produce the value of pre-owned pieces? What practices and strategies do they employ and what knowledge and skills do they mobilize? How aspects like nostalgia or fashion uniqueness contribute to increasing the value of a garment? After briefly outlining main anthropological theories of value production, I introduce Aneta, one of the study participants – her story is the narrative backbone of the paper. I then present the findings which are organized into three sections: Creating Value, Finding Skvostalgia, and Telling Stories.

Anthropological Theories of Value: Review

The question of the origin and nature of the value is one of the fundamental areas of anthropological interest and first appeared in the works of the French sociologist Marcel Mauss, who put forward the idea that the value of an object depends on the context of exchange. Almost one hundred years after the publication of *The Gift* (1925), anthropologists are still studying how value is created and defined in different societies.

According to Karl Marx (1857), every commodity is characterized by two types of value: use value and exchange value. While use value, which is only performed in the process of consumption, expresses the usefulness of an object and its ability to satisfy needs, exchange value is rooted in the amount of social labor invested in its production. However, once a commodity is bought and sold on the market, the true source of its value is replaced by the idea that it is inherent to the object and arises from its qualities. This process of attributing various properties to objects and creating the capitalist illusion that their value derives from their very nature is what Marx calls "commodity fetishism" (Marx, 1985 [1857]).

An influential author within the theory of value is the American anthropologist David Graeber, whose book *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (2001) provides a comprehensive overview of all anthropological conceptions of value to date. Graeber argues that value can be conceptualized in three different ways: value in the sociological sense (the idea of what is ultimately good, proper, or desirable in human life), value in the economic sense (the degree to which objects are desired), and value in the linguistic sense, or "meaningful difference" (Graeber, 2001).

In his text, Graeber outlines how anthropological perceptions of economic value have developed over time. According to Georg Simmel, value is rooted in the exchange and is measured based on what a person is willing to give up to acquire an object – value thus is an effect of individual desire. Simmel's definition is further developed by Arjun Appadurai when he writes about regimes of value being established by the elites in the competition to dominate and control exchange and consumption (Appadurai, 1986). In contrast, the American anthropologist Annette Weiner, the author of the concepts of alienable and inalienable property, considers the source of value a fear of losing a particular object (Weiner, 1992).

A unique approach to the origins and nature of value is proposed by British anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (see, e.g., Strathern, 1984; Strathern, 1988). Value, according to Strathern, is the meaning attributed by society to an object within a broader system in the Saussurean sense (Graeber, 2001: 39). She argues

that value, which is essentially a meaningful difference, originates by placing an object within some more extensive system of categories.

However, Graeber concludes that more than the theories described above is needed. The truth lies beyond the economizing notion of desirability and Strathern's semiotic paradigm: what unites both approaches is that they see value as static and stable. A compromise, the author believes, might be the work of the American anthropologist Nancy Munn, who argues that value emerges in action and arises from a social process in which the human action potential is "transformed into concrete, tangible forms" (Graeber, 2001: 45). In the book, Graeber offers his own conception of value, which, according to DuBois and Salas (2021), attempts to synthesize all the theories described above and sees value as meaning that is created in the process of action: "Rather than value is the process of public recognition itself, already suspended in social relations, it is the way people who could do almost anything (including, in the right circumstances, creating entirely new sorts of social relation) assess the importance of what they do, in fact, do, as they are doing it" (Graeber, 2001: 47).

Referring to the studies summarized in the Introduction (Greeson, 2018; Larsen, 2018; Larsen, 2023; Choufan & Tila-Cohen, 2023), the process of value creation in the context of used clothes involves certain actions, knowledge, and material transformations invested into reintegrating a garment back to the circulation. Although, as I outline in this paper, the sellers perceive the value of a vintage piece as inherent and tied to its intrinsic features, they develop strategies and engage in practices that actively construct the value (cf. Greeson, 2018). I argue that the sellers act as mediators who, by leveraging their skills and experience, assume the authority to decide what is valuable.

"I Love to Hunt"

Aneta is a woman in her early thirties with fifteen years of experience in the fashion industry. She is particularly passionate about vintage clothes because it runs in her family – her mother ran several second-hand stores in Prague in the 1990s. After the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the fall of the communist regime, thrift shops were one of the few places where people could buy clothes from "the West." Their popularity and number grew rapidly; however, the importance of second-hand clothing began to decline gradually once clothing retailers like H&M, Zara, etc., appeared on the Czech market at the turn of the century. Due to the change in the consumerist practices of the Czech citizens, who turned their attention to first-hand shopping, a stigma started to build up around used pieces. In her paper dedicated to second-hand clothes in Hong Kong, Clark (2005) writes

that in the context of a growing economy, used garments are associated with poverty and non-conformity. In Czechia, some people still associate second-hand shopping with "impurity" and believe it can negatively impact the buyer's social status (see, e.g., Han et al., 2017). However, in the past few years, this narrative began to change – now, thrifting in Czechia is widely perceived as an alternative to first-hand shopping.

For the last ten years, Aneta has worked as a visual merchandiser with a fast fashion brand. Fast fashion brands can quickly respond to changing trends and distribute new items rapidly while maintaining low prices (Hall, 2017). Such efficiency often comes at a cost to the environment and workers. Aneta left her job when she realized that fast fashion philosophy was at odds with her ethics and beliefs.

Aneta describes her fashion approach as slow fashion. Slow fashion builds on principles of environmental sustainability and fair trade, calls for slowing down the whirlwind of trends, and promotes conscious consumption. Fletcher & Grose describe slow fashion as "a blatant discontinuity with the practices of today's sector; a break from the values and goals of fast (growth-based) fashion" (2012: 128). Shopping for vintage clothes can be perceived as a part of the slow fashion consumer strategy. Aneta says she is on a mission to popularize slow fashion as an alternative to fast fashion brands, prompting her to start this business with her mother. Now they co-run two vintage boutiques in Prague.

According to the study participants, the primary source of the used garments is countries of Western and Northern Europe. Some owners work directly with suppliers from abroad (mainly the UK), and the rest rely on Czech importers. Other sources of supply include local charity shops, flea markets, and junkshops. Many study participants told me they often travel to other cities and even countries looking for vintage treasures they can bring to their stores.

Every two or three weeks, Aneta and her mother go to a *hrabarna* (from the Czech word *hrabat se* – to rummage), a wholesale second-hand clothing store. They have everything they need in their blue IKEA bags: tape to mark minor imperfections, small lamps (because of the poor lighting in the store), and more IKEA bags for "the loot." The clothes they like undergo multiple sortings, are tried on and carefully examined. Aneta also tries to learn the origin of each garment, searching for brand names on the Internet and looking through old collections:

> "We take the piece and go through it, every single seam. We look at the buttons, the zipper to fasten, the size, if it's not shrunken, the color, if it's not frayed, just everything. So, it's not just about "It's nice, let's take it," but first, it's nice, we like it – we put it to the side. We've got a big pile of clothes, and then we're

> doing a proper, thorough check – of woolen coats to see if it's been eaten by a moth somewhere or if there's a spot somewhere. Plus, the lights are awful in those sheds, so sometimes we bring a lamp to plug in."

The goal is to discover a *poklad* (Czech for treasure) – an item with unique features that, for some reason, has been overlooked by others. Elizabeth Parsons (2007) describes this process as "finding objects" (Aneta uses the word *lovit* – to hunt). During the hunt, Aneta mobilizes her skills and expertise in order to detect a worthy piece:

> "I absolutely love [hunting]; that's why I do it. I always get a terrible adrenaline rush from it, and everyone laughs at me about what an adrenaline rush it is to go to the wholesale, but what I love about it is that you go there and – what do you find now? And you rummage, and then you find this treasure, and that's what I enjoy so much about it. I think a person who doesn't like that can't do it because that's a lot of work."

Aneta goes through the piles of clothes to discover garments that can be saved from the liminality of wholesale and returned to the world of what Thompson calls "transient and durable things" (Thompson, 2017). She has strict criteria: no fast fashion brands and only natural materials, but sometimes for the sake of thrift, she can bend the rules and purchase something that does not entirely match her vision. In this case, she says, it is all about "saving a garment" and "passing it on." For Aneta, one of the thrift's main goals is to keep objects on the move. A vintage garment must live its social life and never stop circulating because, according to the sellers, this is its ideal biography (see, e.g., Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986) – it must not end up undiscovered in a wholesale store.

> "Sometimes the garment is so good but then I find out that it is not vintage. Just somebody managed to make a good piece of clothes [in the last years]. I am not against that. Sure, that's not quite vintage but is of good quality and unique, and it is second-hand. I just qualify it as a valuable thing that deserves to be brought back [to the market]."

Once the treasure is found, it travels from the chaos of the wholesale to the aestheticized space of the boutique. A garment is cleaned, steamed, repaired if needed, and photographed – Aneta publishes some of the most unique pieces on the boutique's official Instagram account to let the followers know about the new delivery. She sometimes publishes the photo alongside a certain fashion

inspiration – for example, Carrie Bradshaw's outfits from the Sex and the City or Princess Diana's paparazzi photos. This strategy can be perceived as what Greeson calls a "narrative individualization" (2018: 163) aimed at creating a background story of the garment.

Before putting a cleaned and steamed piece on display, Aneta must think through the price. She believes that it is fair and consistent that used clothes in her store sometimes cost the same as the new ones from the retail. According to her and other sellers, vintage garments of high quality are much more resilient, and thus more valuable than fast fashion goods that will soon look worn out. Aneta also believes that setting low prices for used clothes can trigger overconsumption such as when, for example, people buy cheap second-hand garments for themed parties or photoshoots – and then throw them away. She stands her ground when it comes to pricing and without hesitation argues with customers who question her prices. Aneta is convinced that people who have *knowledge* understand the mechanism behind the pricing of vintage garments and are eager to pay more for one piece from her store than for several items from a fast fashion chain.

> "We had a beautiful woolen men's hat in the window display, and an elderly couple came in to ask about it. And then the lady looked around and said, 'Is it a second-hand?' and I answered, 'Yes, it is,' and it was like I'd insulted them, like I'd said a something vulgar, so they left straight away. I thought it was really funny."

Once Aneta sets the price, she finds a spot for the garment in the store. The store space, like the pieces sold here, is aesthetic but also functional.

> Aneta opens the store, and we enter. The space looks more like a clothing atelier – naked mannequins with tailoring meters around their necks, fabrics, a steamer, Ikea bags full of clothes. She explains that now, during the lockdown, is the best time to prepare pieces for sale. Shelves and stands are placed along the walls, two armchairs and a coffee table are in the middle of the store – Aneta offers that we sit here during the interview. There is no cash register as such, but a payment terminal, a tablet, and a box for cash are hidden in a cabinet near the entrance. I especially like the colors – a combination of navy blue and oak brown, an "old money" palette. We sit down, and Aneta puts aside a glass vase with flowers, so we can see each other.

Aneta explains that she wants customers to feel comfortable. They can rest in big leather armchairs or have a glass of water. Fitting cabins have enough

space and good lightning. People working at the store are always here to help. Compared to the bustling atmosphere of Primark or Zara shops, where bright lights and energetic pop music are meant to motivate customers to sprint around the three stores, Aneta's boutique appears as an oasis of calmness in the world of ultra-fast fashion, with slow lounge music and fresh flowers on the coffee table.

Like many fashion brands, Aneta wants to build a name and, in addition to the visual aspect of marketing and advertising (logo, corporate font, professional photo, and video shoots), pays attention to elaborating the values and philosophy that her brand represents. She also tries to make her store look a little like a fashion house by preparing new collections. Unlike Dior or Gucci collections, created "from scratch" for the upcoming season and a fashion show, vintage collections have the nature of bricolage: a parallel can be drawn here with Lévi-Strauss's comparison of bricoleur and engineer (Lévi-Strauss, 1962). According to the French anthropologist, while an engineer chooses tools and materials based on the goals, a bricoleur operates with whatever she has at hand to create something entirely new; Aneta, like a bricoleur, uses pre-existing garments to create a "new" collection. I argue that the preparation and presentation of new collections serve a dual purpose: first, as with the tradition of fashion houses, a sense of luxury and exclusivity is evoked; second, belonging to a collection makes the garment more than a mere second-hand item; it is "elevated" as a part of a collection, which may increase its desirability.

Building a community around the store is also very important. Aneta admits that she is happy if customers tag the store on social media. Aneta sees "sharing and tagging" as a very effective, unobtrusive, and authentic form of promotion. For this reason, some stores often develop unique hashtags that customers can use on social media. Aneta believes it creates a sense of belonging, which can be described as "being in the club" (Duffy et al., 2012: 521).

So far, I have used the words "second-hand" and "vintage" somewhat interchangeably, in the manner of the study participants. But according to the standard definition used by professional vintage dealers, only a clothing item from a designer brand and older than at least 25 years can be considered vintage (Veenstra & Kuipers, 2013). Nevertheless, for Aneta and other sellers, the line between second-hand and vintage is not that strict but rather porous and blurry – they refer to their stores as vintage boutiques despite selling pre-owned contemporary garments along genuine vintage pieces.

According to Aneta, "vintage" can be used for clothes that is unique, lasting, of timeless design, and high-quality, and her definition does not exclude items from last year collections. In this context, vintage is not a chronological category but rather a set of certain features. Through hand-picking garments that meet

her definition of a vintage piece and creating a curated selection of pre-owned items, Aneta, like The Realreal, steps in between the wholesale and the customer as "vintage police." Once a garment is in her store, it is not old and used – it is vintage. Aneta does not merely find vintage garments in a wholesale store – she engages in "doing vintage" (Duffy et al., 2012: 519) which requires learning and acquiring specific cultural capital and knowledge developed with time and experience. She *makes* them vintage.

Creating Value

As the overview section indicates, value in anthropology is not a given characteristic of an object but is derived from the social context. The study participants, however, perceive the value of vintage clothes ontologically: they believe that the value is the garment's intrinsic feature that originates from its essence. When I asked Aneta what is so special about the vintage garments, she said, "quality." But from the conversation, it becomes apparent that by "quality," she means the material.

> Aneta tells me about the woolen garments: "When you buy a woolen coat, it will last your whole life, and then you will pass it to your daughter. While wearing a polyester coat feels like wearing a plastic bottle."

According to Aneta, the value of vintage garments is rooted in the material. Wool has value because it lasts longer and keeps you warm in winter. For Aneta, the material is the main reason for the item being re-commodified and sent back into circulation. In Stallybrass's essay, the coat had many purposes and meanings for Marx: it protected him from the cold weather and made him look like a respectable citizen who might be allowed entry to the British Museum (Stallybrass, 1998: 184). But the coat as the exchange value, which constantly circulated between Marx's wardrobe and the pawnshop, was stripped of its utility: "The physical properties of goods only come into consideration at all insofar as the utility of the goods depends on them, i.e., insofar as they make the goods use-values. On the other hand, the exchange ratio of individual commodities is characterized precisely by abstracting from their use-values" (Marx, 1985 [1857]: 31).

But Aneta insists that the exchange value of a wool coat depends on its use value; in other words, the value of a coat depends directly on its ability to keep the wearer warm and stay resistant to wrinkles – and according to what I have seen in Aneta's store, aesthetics and style also play a huge role. During the interviews, I noticed that some sellers have relatively limited expertise in textiles and fabrics,

which usually forces them to rely on personal experience, sensory perceptions, and the information on the label.

> Aneta teaches me how to distinguish wool from non-wool: "Weight says a lot. A real woolen sweater is heavy. You can always tell." She also tells me how to recognize cashmere, cotton, and silk, but silk is problematic even for Aneta: "I am right in 90% of cases, but I am never sure with the silk. I am always like, is it or is it not? Sometimes I just write it on the price tag, that I am not sure."

Based on this conversation, it can be said that the essence of the material is related to the sense perception it evokes in physical contact. We can even speak here of double wool – wool-as-material and wool-as-feeling. The wool-as-feeling is a communication between the seller and the customer. The seller is a translator between the garment and the customer, constructing the object's value by attaching specific ontological properties. The seller also represents an elite group that controls the flow of things and produces regimes of value where a wool coat has more value than a polyester coat but always loses to a cashmere one (Appadurai, 1986).

The value of a wool coat also arises from the temporal aspect: the longer it lasts, the more valuable it is. This attitude implies two interpretations: on the one hand, the economizing individual seeks to minimize costs and maximize utility, but on the other hand, the interest in the estimated "life expectancy" of a coat is indicative of a change in consumer behavior towards more sustainable strategies (Vivienne Westwood's famous "buy less, choose well, make it last" principle). There is a third explanation, which recurs in interviews: since these are second-hand items, the fact that they are in good condition after several decades is evidence of their quality.

> Aneta shows me some garments at her store: "These things should be much more expensive because they are so high-quality. It lasts long. It is resilient. When I know that it has been worn for 20 years, I know it will serve me at least for the next ten years."

For the sellers, the value depends on the garment's ability to survive in the best possible condition. Aneta says that such a "test of time" indicates the presence of certain intrinsic qualities that guarantee the garment will last. By attributing different characteristics to an object, the sellers can return it to circulation and increase its value by changing the social context. As Parsons puts it, the sellers "are involved in creating new lives for objects, as they die in one context, they are revived in another, thus becoming re-enchanted" (2005: 89). Hence, the original

value, derived from the temporal aspect, can grow along the way from the wholesale to the store. In their study on tomatoes, Heuts and Mol (2013) use the word "valuing" instead of "valuation" to suggest the processual nature of value – value is performative and can be tinkered with. This approach implies that value is not the result of some immutable properties but is also shaped by individual practices that the study participants believe would benefit the value of a piece.

A crucial tinkering technique that can increase an object's value is care. As if speaking of living beings, Aneta says that vintage garments deserve to be adequately cared for. Care is not only about washing and ironing but about providing the best possible care for the garment:

> "We try to educate customers about care. We tell them about the material, why it is different, and how they should wash it, dry it, store it, and iron it. We have these pamphlets about cashmere, wool, merino wool, and silk, so customers do not need to look for information. They just get a pamphlet with a purchase."

By caring for the pieces, Aneta also manifests her care for customers – she makes maintaining a good shape of a garment easier for them. Like leather armchairs and good lights in the fitting cabins, information pamphlets serve the purpose of making a customer feel welcomed and valued. Aneta does not want people to simply leave with new clothes. She wants their shopping to be an *experience*. Aneta believes that such approach is the reason why people come back and become regular customers.

Aesthetics also plays an important role in the value production. The store space decorated with flowers and tasteful pictures, steamed and scented garments meticulously organized on the shelves, branded paper bags, aesthetic Instagram account with fashion inspirations – paying attention to these details allows Aneta to distinguish her store from what she and other sellers call "a suburb consignment store." Such positioning of being rather a quasi-fashion brand than a clothing retailer enable them to claim authority to decide what is vintage and how valuable it should be (Aspers, 2008).

Aneta uses her fashion knowledge to discover worthy garments; she invests in care and makes them look desirable. Simply put, Aneta changes how customers see an item (cf. Parsons, 2005) highlighting their "intrinsic value" which is based on their quality and resilience. Thanks to specific symbolic capital and knowledge, Aneta can justify the value of used clothes and explain why it is better to buy a pre-owned wool coat for three thousand Czech crowns instead of a new acrylic blend coat from a fast fashion brand for the same price. In Graeber's (2001) sense, vintage value is an effect of the seller's actions.

Finding Skvostalgia

Unlike used contemporary clothes that Aneta decides to save from the liminality of the wholesale and bring back to the market because of their good quality and unique style, *true* vintage garments are perceived as artifacts of the past, conveying the atmosphere and sometimes moral values of the time (see, e.g., Jenß, 2005) when items were not thrown away but mended and passed on. Perhaps surprisingly, moral values constitute another important aspect of the vintage value. Aneta looks sad when she speaks about "how things used to be done." This nostalgic narrative is strongly connected to an image of a mother or grandmother: during communist Czechoslovakia, many women had to actively care for the family possessions, including clothes, due to the deficit of new goods in the context of the socialist economic system and widely used upcycling and recycling techniques. It is particularly fascinating to see resemblances in consumption practices of those who lived through times of austerity and those who now live in prosperity.

Vintage consumption thus can be analyzed in terms of moral economy commonly conceptualized as "economic activities carried out by people who have values and aspirations and who live and act in a meaningful world" (Carrier, 2017: 31). As mentioned in the beginning, Aneta considers herself being "on a mission" of popularizing second-hand shopping and advocating for reducing fast fashion consumption. For her and other study participants, selling and buying pre-owned pieces is not merely about economic benefits but also engaging in the process of exchange that reflects and reinforces their ethical commitments and shared values. It helps to maintain a sense of community and mutual responsibility, where transactions are not just financial, but are also imbued with social and moral significance. As Herzfeld (2004) points out, nostalgia and longing for past times can be rooted in the feeling of "a damaged reciprocity: the virtue that has allegedly decayed always entails some measure of mutuality, a mutuality that has been, perhaps irreversibly, ruptured by the self-interest of modern times" (2004: 111). Such framing echoes the argument of Smith et al. (2015) that participating in consumption practices characterized as "quiet sustainability" is about cultivating social cohesion and mutual support rather than financial surviving or sustainable behavior.

Many study participants also believe that clothing production of the past focused on quality, while today, it is pushed forward by the urge to create greater profits. Czech vintage sellers thus see garments from the last century as products of honest, conscientious work, a lost standard of tailoring that survives in the form of vintage gems that are artifacts of the fashion industry's golden age and must be, as such, found and preserved:

> "I think things used to be done better than now. Now the industry is expanding, exploiting people and resources. It's an awful machine. And before it came, fashion was different, and I think it is a beautiful idea to bring it back."

I decided to name this feeling of longing "skvostalgia" derived from the words *skvost* (Czech for gem or masterpiece) and nostalgia. Skvostalgia can be defined as a longing for 20th-century clothing and accessories (mainly of Czechoslovakian and European production) that the sellers perceive as more high-quality and ethically made. Skvostalgia often manifests as resistance to contemporary fast fashion and positions itself against modern tendencies in both fashion and society. Most of the study participants can be described as skvostalgic according to their preferences: they highly value locally made vintage garments, look for inspiration in old European movies and magazines, and speak fondly of their grandmothers' fashion outfits.

Another important point related to accelerated production is that of uniqueness: "Vintage has now shifted from subculture to mass culture because of the disappointing fact that, regardless of price, fashion today is rarely exclusive" (Palmer, 2005: 197). Vintage enthusiasts achieve the original look by combining the "present" and the "past." Customers use this creative approach to clothing as an instrument to create a unique style and new identities (DeLong et al., 2005). The social critique of the drabness of mass-produced clothing, which often appears in fashion blogs and magazines, creates the impression that, while today's assortment of retail brands is more akin to a "uniform," vintage and second-hand stores are a source of not only quality but also unique garments. Vintage pieces in the wardrobe thus can act as a "symbol of fashion independence" (Palmer & Clark, 2005). This gives rise to the paradoxical notion that second-hand clothing boutiques provide a more extensive and diverse selection than first-hand stores (Miller, 2005). The main argument the sellers give for buying second-hand pieces is the desire to acquire something "that no one else will have."

> Even though Aneta used to work in retail, she never buys fast fashion: "You go there, and there is this one t-shirt on twenty hangers, and more than five people are trying it on. And when you go to a vintage store, there are these one-of-a-kind garments, and nobody else will have it."

Vintage pieces have their hau (Mauss, 1925), but unlike the Maori hau, the vintage hau does not threaten the owner but gives them a sense of individual "fashion" power. But people wearing vintage clothes are not just passive protectors of fashion exhibits. Instead, they actively re-think and change the garments and how they are worn.

> Aneta shows me an oversized blue shirt that probably used to be someone's office attire: "You can wear it as a jacket with a dress or just tie it up. It looks cool."

The skvostalgic critique is also directed at the consumer and condemns an individual's irresponsible and sometimes contemptuous behavior towards clothing resulting from the endless supply of cheap, readily available goods. There is no doubt that reuse can, to some extent, replace the consumption of new garments, provide a space for a circular approach to fashion and represent more sustainable shopping. But on the other hand, it can contribute to responsibilization. Those who shop vintage stereotypically consider people who, for some reason, refuse to shop second-hand "lacking knowledge" and criticize them for choosing fast fashion. Some sellers tend to idealize the concept of the responsible consumer who calculates the environmental and global impacts of their shopping choices.

As Richard Wilk writes, such "green consumerism" represents only a tiny, "passive" part of the activities that can prevent, or at least slow down, climate catastrophe (Wilk, 2009). Daniel Miller (2008) supports the same view – in the article "*What's wrong with consumption*", he argues that this rise of "eco-chic" can create tensions in society: sophisticated green consumers label people whose lifestyle is not green enough as "less educated, vulgar, and wasteful" (Miller, 2008: 45).

Telling Stories

> Aneta finds vintage clothes beautiful not only because of their quality or link to the past; she likes the idea that the story of a garment can continue in her wardrobe: "I always say that I wish these clothes could tell their stories! I sometimes notice that some garments are adjusted or repaired, and I start imagining – what happened? What did the person who wore that dress go through?" I start to think about it as I look around and see all these garments in Aneta's store. There is a story behind every one of them: "I think it is a positive value rather than a negative, the fact that somebody wore it before me. Because this thing survived, like this sweater, I can imagine somebody wearing it in America… it just seems so sentimental to me."

Swedish anthropologists Staffan Appelgren and Anna Bohlin build on the ideas of Igor Kopytoff (1986) and develop the concept of cultural biographies. In their study of second-hand stores in Sweden, they approach circulation as "growth": "Similar to that of an organism, this growth is continuous, irreversible and dependent on forces both internal and external to it" (Appelgren & Bohlin, 2015: 143).

According to the authors, second-hand goods are a hybrid category between the anthropological dualism of gift and commodity (cf. Parsons, 2005). Second-hand objects are embedded in a dense network of social relations and sold along with their sociality, often perceived as their own "unique story."

But a biography is not always desirable. As the study by Choufan and Tila-Cohen (2023) mentioned in the beginning illustrated, in some cases, the previous life of a garment is downplayed. Through highlighting the item's belonging to a famous brand, The Realreal Marketplace "off-set[s] the histories of the items that it picks along the way" (Choufan & Tila-Cohen, 2023: 18) to enhance its chance to be resold. Greeson (2018: 163), on the contrary, observed that situating a garment within a particular historical narrative is one of the main valuation practices in Polish vintage shops. Nevertheless, as she points out, these narratives are far from a precise outline of the item's life trajectory but rather represent a general temporal framing like, for example, "dress from the 60s."

The sellers in Czech vintage stores also admitted that it is almost impossible to know the story behind the garments since they are rarely purchased directly from their previous owners. Still, the study participants repeatedly referred to second-hand items as "clothes with stories." I assume that such "story" does not at all mean a timeline or an actual biography of an object. Rather, it implies the idea of its past as an "empty frame" that sellers fill out using their imagination. These invented biographies are usually, like in Greeson's study, general and formless since indicating that the item had "a life before" is enough to contribute to its value. The story does not need to be specific. Little hints – such as adjustments, name tags, or clothing labels – work as well.

Conclusion

When I was leaving Aneta's store, she told me to stop by sometime when the store was open. I did so several times, but I never met Aneta again. When I was looking through the clothes on the hangers, I could imagine Aneta in a wholesale store with her IKEA bag, looking for a unique *skvost* to bring back into circulation.

In this paper, I have focused on how the sellers of used clothes create its value. It appears that before making garments valuable, they have to make them vintage. Their expertise allows them to assume the authority and power to determine what is considered vintage within their stores. Like Aneta, the sellers rely on their knowledge about fashion and fabrics to justify the value of used clothes and its reintegration into market exchange. Although the study participants perceive the item's value ontologically, as an intrinsic feature rooted in its quality, I argue that apart from detecting a worthy piece, they engage in different practices such

as material care, anesthetization, and situation within a narrative aimed at its valuing (Heuts & Mol, 2013) and valorization.

Thrift has a contradictory nature: a virtue and a sin at the same time (Alexander & Sosna, 2022). It is good when we talk about climate change and ecological consumption, but as demand for used garments grows, the second-hand industry must keep pace: researchers and activists warn about the devastating impact of second-hand clothing imports on the Global South emphasizing that only a tiny percentage of the used clothes is passed on to a second owner (see, e. g., Hanses, 2000; Brooks, 2019). It is good when we talk about fashion independence and creativity, but celebrities wearing vintage outfits on the red carpet are criticized for hypocrisy. It is good when we talk about preserving memory and traditions, but too much nostalgia can cause people to lose hope for the future.

The sellers shared that behind their idea to open a vintage shop was an intention to rescue and keep in the move garments that still have the potential to live their social lives. For some of them, this purpose has mainly environmental undertones, for others, it is about selling quality clothes. For Aneta, running vintage stores is her way to stand up for slow and sustainable fashion and defy the fast fashion domination. Vintage garments represent an analytically provocative dimension beyond traditional categories of the gift and the commodity. This brief exploration of the Czech vintage stores shows that vintage value intertwines with questions of fashion and style, sustainability and care, the past and the future – a vintage garment is never just valuable.

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