

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON FASHION

Edited by Giovanni Matteucci
and Stefano Marino

BLOOMSBURY



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INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON FASHION

Giovanni Matteucci and Stefano Marino

Fashion represents one of the most relevant, fascinating, and, to some extent, also difficult to comprehend, phenomena of the modern age, if not a phenomenon characterizing in various ways the entire history of the human species. In this respect the theorists' views largely differ, opposing those who see an intrinsic connection between the essence of fashion and the spirit of modernity to those who, vice versa, have a "universalistic" approach and thus understand fashion as something whose roots lie in the very nature of the human being as such, and not in the spirit of a particular epoch in the history of mankind.¹ In any case, it is out of doubt that fashion represents one of the cultural forms that perfectly embody the heterogeneous, multiform, contradictory, to some extent perhaps superficial but also exciting tendencies of the present age. From this point of view, fashion can be assumed as a mirror of the contemporary age and appears then of decisive importance in order to gain insight into ourselves and the world we live in.

Although often criticized because of its frivolous character and put aside until recent times as a topic considered not being worthy of broadly speaking intellectual consideration, for the past few decades now fashion apparently seems to have been recognized in its significance by a growing public of both common people and academic scholars. Gradually it has thus acquired the status of a subject worthy of scientific inquiry, notwithstanding the persistence of some resistances to this kind of recognition that must not be withheld. More precisely, it is apparent that since the early 1980s there has been a real "explosion" of fashion studies and theories that

may be understood, among other things, as a consequence of a wide movement of redefinition, rethinking, and, so to speak, reweighting (or leveling, from the point of view of various critics of such tendencies) of cultural spheres and hierarchies that can be associated, in turn, to the advent of the so-called “postmodern condition” (Lyotard 1999). It is thus not by accident that several distinguished fashion theorists have established an essential, intrinsic connection between the rise of fashion as a decisively influencing factor on our lives and also as a subject of scientific inquiry, on the one hand, and the entrance in the postmodern age, on the other hand. At the same time, the fashion/postmodernity relationship should not be overemphasized, inasmuch as the relative crisis that seems to affect to some extent postmodern thought today—and that is perhaps testified, in the specific field of philosophy, by the gradual weakening of hermeneutics and postmodernism as leading philosophical paradigms—does not imply in any way, in our view, a parallel crisis in the field of fashion studies and theories.

Quite the contrary, even a brief survey of the field reveals that, if until very recent times fashion could not “at any rate be said to be a fashionable theme in philosophy” (given that, notwithstanding the 1980s–1990s “stream of academic publications on fashion,” with a few exceptions “these have not been written by philosophers” (Svendsen 2006: 17)), at least to some extent the situation has changed and so today it is also possible to find philosophical entries in the main bibliographies of fashion studies. It is precisely within this general trend, as we will further explain, that the present collection also aims to place itself and should therefore be contextualized. What has been just said, however, does not exclude that philosophical works still remain a minority in the field of fashion studies. In other words, and plainly speaking, although philosophical research on fashion cannot be said to be entirely missing, it is nevertheless true that the major part of scientific inquiries into fashion have been and are conducted with sociological, psychological, anthropological or cultural studies-influenced approaches.

This has perhaps to do with the very nature of philosophy as it has been conceived in the Western tradition from Plato onwards, namely as a theoretical activity concentrated on the non-transient and profound essence of things. Conversely fashion has rather and always to do, because of its very nature, with surfaces, appearances, transience, and mere play of forms. So, although the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy shows that a heterogeneous group of thinkers expressed a genuine curiosity and interest about clothing and fashion, and although various authors have recently attempted at developing philosophical (and, in particular, aesthetic) inquiries into fashion,² it still remains true that there is a gap on this point, namely on the fashion/philosophy relationship, that needs to be filled. Our present goal lies precisely in the attempt to contribute to the filling of this gap by calling for a specifically philosophical in-depth analysis of fashion, where “specifically philosophical” is referred here to interpretations and perspectives basically based on a conceptual approach (rather than on empirical

research, mathematical-experimental method or other approaches otherwise characterizing the field of science). A conceptual approach that we assume to be the characteristic approach of strictly speaking philosophical work, also following an insight provided by Ernst Cassirer who once defined Socrates' so-called discovery of concept and its further developments as the fundamental event of the entire history of Western thought (see Cassirer 1981: 275–87).

As Herbert Spencer once noted, fashion is a phenomenon that “is difficult to deal with in a systematic way” (Spencer 1966: 205). In our view, this is due to the nature of both fashion and philosophy. On the one hand, the topic “Fashion” may be inquired into from different points of view, because of the well-known protean and ultimately ambiguous nature of fashion itself. On the other hand, the existence of different philosophical ways of approaching the same subjects or contents by means of conceptual analysis testifies the constitutively multiform nature of philosophy as such and, in particular, of contemporary philosophy. Given all this, it is appropriate to speak here of “interpretations” and “perspectives” in the plural form. The present book consists of nine chapters, each autonomous from the other, but at the same time all united both by a common subject, namely fashion, and a common general framework, represented by the abovementioned conceptual approach. In conceiving and structuring our volume this way we have been guided by the conviction that a collection of different contributions from various authors, although probably lacking the systematic consistency of a monograph (which, however, is sometimes obtained at the price of a lack, in turn, of variety and pluralism), would be more coherent and fitting with the variety, the unending dynamism, and the pluralist character of the matter itself at issue, namely fashion. The nine chapters of the book address different aspects of this complex and fascinating phenomenon, mostly focusing on fashion as referred to the experience of clothing but at the same time highlighting the way in which fashion, understood in its essence or concept, may apply to many other domains of the human experience, virtually to the human experience in its entirety.

Our proposed selection and organization of the materials, our approach, and our treatment of the subject, are aimed at providing a somehow unique combination of methodological accuracy and argumentative rigorousness applied to such a popular and (seemingly ...) light or simple subject. It is our hope that this will encourage a broad audience—potentially ranging from philosophers to academics and students of various disciplines (fashion studies, art history, sociology, psychology, philosophy, cultural studies, humanities) to a wider public of common people theoretically or even practically, i.e., in their everyday-life experience, attracted by fashion—to read the book and discover in, through, and beyond it innovative ways of dealing with things that everyone of us consciously or unconsciously has to do with most every day. It is our basic conviction that such publications as the proposed one are actually much needed in the field of *philosophy*, in order to contribute to bridging the gap between a certain tendency

to excessive abstraction and even asceticism that has sometimes characterized philosophical reflection, on the one hand, and the attention to the manifestations and even appearances of the “real world” that is nevertheless required from all of us, on the other hand. But the same need goes for the field of *fashion studies*. As a matter of fact, it is probably true that:

There is no one set of ideas or no single conceptual framework with which fashion might be defined, analysed and critically explained. [...] Rather, there are theories about fashion or, to put it another way, there are fashion theories. What one finds is that various and diverse academic disciplines apply themselves or are applied to the practices, institutions, personnel and objects that constitute fashion. [...] There are many academic disciplines, then, that take an interest in the history, analysis, and critical explanation of fashion. Each discipline will have its own idea, or theory, of what fashion is and of what sorts of activities count as analysis and explanation.

BARNARD 2007: 7–8

It is precisely the aim of this book to try to show that also philosophical approaches, beside those of other abovementioned disciplines, can prove to be useful in order to gain a better understanding of such a complex and elusive expression of the human culture as fashion.

Having taught and lectured in Philosophical Aesthetics at the Degree Course in “Fashion Cultures and Techniques” at the University of Bologna for many years now, and having confronted our opinions with colleagues and also students, we have understood that the world of fashion studies is precisely in need of works that may open new horizons and directions in the interpretation of fashion, as we assume a philosophical account of it will do. This is why we felt so motivated to publish a book on this subject now, hoping that our proposal may be welcomed as a source of ideas, insight, and information: more precisely, as a valuable contribution to contemporary fashion theory, one that enriches the way one looks at the form, purpose, and meaning of fashion.

Both the two first contributions, written by the book editors, have to some extent the character of a reconstruction: a historical-philosophical reconstruction, the former, and a conceptual reconstruction also containing a specific theoretical proposal, the latter. In his essay, Stefano Marino moves from the assumption that, notwithstanding the great importance of clothing and fashion for the human being, there has been until recent times a general intellectual tendency to ignore them. Now, if this is true for the field of the social sciences, as various scholars have argued, it is even more valid and appropriate for philosophy. At the same time, however, a survey of the field shows that various philosophers expressed a genuine interest in fashion, sometimes only in a cursory way, but at other times in a more systematic way. The aim of the author is thus to provide a historical

reconstruction of some stages in the development of a philosophical discourse on fashion during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and also to show that fashion, should one want to assign it to a particular domain within the great field of philosophical disciplines, would definitely need to be assigned to the field of aesthetics and thus considered as an aesthetic problem. Giovanni Matteucci's contribution, for his part, highlights, by means of a survey of the main philosophical implications of fashion, how the latter may lead to a general rethinking of the aesthetic phenomenon. This essay is systematically divided into four parts, the first of which deals with the question concerning the place of fashion within the existing cultural system and is meant to rehabilitate the nature of the aesthetic as everyday practice, thus criticizing the traditional ideology of the fine arts. The second part discusses the categorial structure of fashion, by virtue of which the aesthetic appears as a dynamic field exceeding one-sided definitions, while the third part is dedicated to an understanding of fashion as an anthropological problem and especially deals with aesthetic factors participating to the constitution of our identity. A crucial aspect of this analysis is the concept of the aesthetic as a "form of life," i.e., as the space in which "institutionalizing" but not "institutionalized" practices arise: practices that possess a normative, binding, and distinctive character without being prescriptive or discriminating, and therefore rooted in the everydayness. Finally, the fourth part dwells on the specific ("Adonic") experience of beauty that is characteristic of fashion, where the aesthetic corresponds to an ephemeral but original kind of appearance. According to the author, fashion thus proves to be a constellation, a field rich in relations and tensions between mutually irreducible poles, that finds its fulfillment in the moment of its manifestation, thus amounting to an essential source of meaningfulness that appears particularly efficient today.

The next three contributions, by Nickolas Pappas, Richard Shusterman, and Lars Svendsen, display particular philosophical perspectives by focusing on crucial issues. In his essay, Nickolas Pappas starts with the observation that one way that philosophers understand an object is by understanding what it is not. But approaching fashion this way, as Pappas explains, yields several opposites: the unfashionable, or dress before fashion, etc. By another route we find the specific kind of rejection of fashion known as "anti-fashion." According to Pappas, if fashion rests on the mechanism of social imitateness, anti-fashion represents instead the attempt to justify social presentation without reference to social forces. In antiquity, Greek athletic nudity and black dress in several cultures worked as anti-fashion, whereas today's anti-fashions include jeans, black clothing, tattoos, the shaved head, and the man's suit. Anti-fashions, so Pappas, are typically male, often arise in religious contexts, and tend to abide a long time without changing. To some extent they all bear witness to the (male) body, taking that body as the natural object that determines the appearance, and justifies the social function, of the anti-fashion. Based on his personal experience with the fashion industry, in his

essay Richard Shusterman—one of the main representatives today of pragmatist aesthetics and the theorist of a new philosophical orientation known as “somaesthetics”—first explains the crucial but theoretically ignored function of the fit model in the making and marketing of clothes, outlining how the model’s defining exemplarity as ideal rests paradoxically on being average in a particular, desirable way. The essay then shows how the paradoxical figure of the fit model is emblematic of other important, paradoxical features of fashion that relate more generally to contrasting ambiguities in the concept of style, such as inclusion and exclusion, novelty and familiarity, group identity and personal distinction, classification and evaluation. Shusterman then explores how fashion can be essentially understood as trying to reconcile such opposites or contrasts by integrating them into a dynamic, changing fit. In doing so, he also considers the views of such important theorists as Georg Simmel and Adolf Loos. The contribution of Lars Svendsen moves from the presupposition that the legitimacy of fashion as an aesthetic practice depends on the existence of genuine fashion criticism. However, with some notable exceptions, for Svendsen such criticism is virtually non-existing in the domain of fashion. There has been little tolerance for negative criticism in the realm of fashion, and this marks it off from all the other arts. Fashion criticism places itself somewhere in the continuum between fashion reportage and fashion theory. In Svendsen’s view, proper criticism has five major components: evaluation, description, comparison, contextualization, and interpretation. The key feature of criticism is evaluation. Genuine criticism aims at drawing distinctions, separating what is of higher value from that which is only of lesser. The goal of thinking about fashion is not to produce abstract knowledge, but rather to give us the ability to judge, to make distinctions. Which is what fashion criticism should do.

At this point in the book we encounter an intriguing case-study: Christian Michel’s philosophical analysis of what he defines as Carol Christian Poell’s “paradoxical aesthetics.” Poell is an Austrian designer who holes up in a studio in Milan’s Naviglio district where he unperturbedly designs collections that he displays to the public only when he pleases. In Poell’s work each and every constituting element of a garment (fabrics, stitches, shapes) is interrogated in its structure, function, and meaning. Poell, however, does not only play with fabrics and shapes, but also interrogates the specific identity of what makes a garment, notably its *catastrophic* points (in the sense established by René Thom), i.e., the points where a sudden change appears on a surface (*kata-strophê* meaning “change of form”), where the stitches play a major role. His thoughts, however, are not conceptual, they are neither worded nor verbalized, but incarnated, embodied in the garment: according to Michel, like any artist or craftsman Poell thinks materially. By remaining silent, his thoughts are nevertheless true thoughts, since his works bear the trace of an investigation that: (1) explores all the logical possibilities of a form or a technique; (2) displays them logically and articulates

them together; and (3) gives the form/technique both an aesthetic and ontological meaning. In Michel's interpretation, what Poell proposes is a formal and material transposition of the struggle opposing life and death, which constitutes the main theme of his work, and which is revealed through the tension between continuity and discontinuity. This is what defines the Poell garment as essentially paradoxical and makes it possible to explain the contradictory feelings experienced by wearers of these creations: an impression of confidence and omnipotence, as the garment is a shell, but, at the same time, induces a feeling of fragility and anxiety, for it is constantly menaced by loss.

If Michel's contribution is the only one, in the present collection, that concretely deals with the effective creations of a specific fashion designer, Winfried Menninghaus' essay is the only one, in turn, explicitly interlacing philosophical and scientific (more precisely, Darwinist) perspectives. Menninghaus' contribution traces how Charles Darwin renegotiated the close relationship between aesthetics and biology that already informed late eighteenth-century aesthetics, most notably Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Darwin did so by creatively projecting both the aesthetics of capricious ornaments and the modern notion of fashion onto his understanding of the many elaborate sexual body ornaments found throughout the animal kingdom (see also Menninghaus 2007: 66–137). For Menninghaus, Darwin's hypothesis regarding the evolution of human naked skin serves as a key example of the novel perspectives opened up by his transformative use of concepts of cultural aesthetics to highlighting key aspects of his evolutionary theory of sexual selection. The anthropological roots of fashion also represent (though in another way) the core of César Moreno-Márquez's essay that methodologically assumes the point of view of "fashion as such" rather than that of "fashions/styles." In his investigation Moreno-Márquez recovers the figure of Proteus (borrowed from Pico della Mirandola) in order to determine the specific trait of the human being and introduce the semio-sociological aspect of the problem. Such an approach allows us to gain a better understanding of the fashion phenomenon from the reflexive, "specular," and spectacular point of view of the desire of being fashionable. In this context, the author pays attention to "euphoric manifestations" (Roland Barthes) of the fashion phenomenon that become significant because of their high level of reflexivity, that actually take place in at least two showing spaces (the "fashion show" and the "street fashion"), and that are also given in a precise temporal dimension, namely that of the quick-time of "fast fashion." On this basis, the author attempts at explaining the reason why we are witnessing today the explosion of such tendencies as "fashion as such" or "fashion for fashion's sake": a minimum of signified for a maximum of signifier. If Proteus constitutes the pillar of diversity and change, Narcissus represents in turn the *ars combinatoria* in the horizon of possibilities of personalization. From this point of view, it is difficult to interpret fashion today as limited to mere imitation. In our disseminated and fragmented societies the ideal condition to be achieved in the world of fashion is

not that embodied by imitation but rather that of the “process of personalization” (Gilles Lipovetsky). The “liquid” relations predominating in the social relations of our time require a sort of liquid fashion and liquid “care-for-oneself” that pay attention to the fragmentary, occasional, superficial appearances recognizable by other people. So “fashion for fashion’s sake” perfectly fits with the requirements of today’s quick life and its peculiar quick time, at the same time working as an accelerator of this same temporality. The last chapter by Elena Esposito assumes a philosophical-sociological perspective and inquires on this basis, in particular, into the decisive question concerning the relationship between fashion and modernity. According to Esposito, fashion is an inherently paradoxical phenomenon, as it was observed in the seventeenth century, namely at the beginning of its diffusion. Fashion relies on different mechanisms that are intertwined and support each other, implementing a very efficient combination of flexibility and reliability, and allowing for a complex and unlikely form of imitation that seems capable of combining the orientation towards others with individual specificity. In Esposito’s view, fashion thus involves crucial aspects of modern semantics, as the forms of individuality and the relationship with time. The key issue of her essay is the concept of contingency, which in modern times acquires an unprecedented significance, illustrated by fashion and its forms. In general, the mechanisms that are at the basis of fashion show the spread of contingency in modern society, which moves from necessary and stable references to transitional and fungible references, that hold just because they could be different and one knows it. The observation of fashion allows us to reflect on these changes and their concrete social impact. Fashion always changes, and thereby its variability becomes a stable reference. Furthermore it allows everyone to express his/her originality, imitating models that are the same for everyone, and in this ambition everyone is like everybody else. The efficacy of fashion relies then on an accumulation of paradoxes, showing how contingency can generate its own flexible and complex form of order.

Considering the mutual relationships between aesthetics, modern society and culture, fashion and the fine arts, and the way these relationships have influenced and shaped our views on identity and taste, the contributions collected in this book explore the various intellectual and cultural movements that inform how people dress. As we have noted, the fashion and philosophy scholars contributing to this volume refer to and apply theories posed by key thinkers of the modern and contemporary age, from Darwin and Wittgenstein to Goodman and Barthes, from Simmel and Husserl to Danto and Baudrillard, in order to answer such questions as: “What is the essence of fashion and what are the reasons behind its fascination?”; “What is anti-fashion?”; “What or who do we imitate when we ‘follow’ fashion?”; “What is fashion criticism and what should it be?”; “Can philosophy remain unconcerned to fashion or can fashion lead philosophy to rethink itself?” To the extent that *Philosophical Perspectives on Fashion* succeeds in contributing to the

clarification and disentanglement of such major questions concerning fashion, the book will lead (we hope) to a better and indeed new understanding of the matter at issue, open new theoretical horizons, and thus make significant advancements within this field.

Notes

- 1 Among the main representatives of these two different interpretive lines one may mention, respectively, Gilles Lipovetsky and René König.
- 2 Beside Lars Svendsen's attempt to develop a veritable and, so to speak, systematic philosophy of fashion (see Svendsen 2006), other works on fashion that appear as broadly speaking or strictly speaking *philosophically* interesting include those of Lehmann 2000; Meinhold 2005; Scapp and Seitz 2010; Edwards 2011; Wolfendale and Kennett 2011; Gecky and Karaminas 2012; Rocamora and Smelik 2015. More specifically conceived from an aesthetic point of view, that is, aimed at providing an interpretive framework for those aspects of fashion that are mostly interesting for philosophical aesthetics, are—for example—the works of Eckman and Wagner 1995; DeLong 1998 and 2011; Loschek 2009.

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1 PHILOSOPHICAL ACCOUNTS OF FASHION IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURY: A HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION*

Stefano Marino

*I am ahead, I am advanced
I am the first mammal to wear pants.*

PEARL JAM. *Do the Evolution*

*I wore the clothes you wanted
I took your name
If there is some confusion
Who's to blame?*

R.E.M. *I Took Your Name*

1. Preliminary remarks: On imitation

In this chapter I will provide an overview, a reconstruction of a certain number of various articulations of philosophical thought about fashion by means of single, specific examples. From this point of view, the aim of this chapter is not strictly speaking *theoretical*, is not to neatly develop a central argument or idea across the

philosophers I discuss, but is rather *historical*, reconstructive, and descriptive. This, however, does not exclude applying an *interpretive* and to some extent also *critical* approach to each single philosopher discussed. So, for example, it will be attempted to throw light on the limits and deficiencies of some philosophical approaches to fashion.

This chapter does not claim completeness and thus it is not my goal to reconstruct the whole history of the philosophy of fashion—which would be clearly very difficult to do in the limited space of just one chapter. Rather, I will focus upon a few *key figures* in the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy (and sociology) of fashion.¹ In my view, this historical development can be interpreted in a quasi-teleological way—much in the same way in which one, for example, once used to interpret the history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy as a quasi-teleological development culminating in Kant’s reconciliation and at the same time overcoming of different traditions by means of his new transcendental approach. Namely, I will interpret it as the gradual development of an investigation of fashion mostly centered on the moment of *imitation*, and sometimes on the moment of class or individual *differentiation*, meant as quintessential to the phenomenon of fashion.² The development in theories of fashion is gradual, and viewed retrospectively it appears *as if* it were meant, quasi-teleologically, to lead to the overcoming of the “either/or” logic: imitation *or* differentiation, imitation *as opposed to* differentiation. In place of that logic fashion can be seen to move toward a reconciliation of both moments or forces, in a certain, so to speak, richer and more nuanced conception of fashion that contains imitation *and* differentiation, imitation *on the condition of* differentiation. In my view, the first occurrence of such a reconciliation or, as it were, dialectical synthesis is traceable to the conception of fashion of the German theorist Georg Simmel. From this point of view, I will suggest to interpret Simmel’s theory as a *turning point* in the historical development of a philosophy of fashion: that is, as the culmination and fulfillment of previous tendencies, and also as the basis for further treatments of this subject.

By choosing to focus on the conceptual pair imitation/differentiation I obviously do not want to deny that also other concepts and dimensions may play an important and sometimes even essential role in defining this phenomenon. As has been noted, fashion represents indeed such a *multifaceted* reality that it is actually possible to understand it as “a process of individualization and socialization,” and then, for example, also as “a means of self-presentation and social mobility,” or in terms of “relation between production and consumption,” or finally as “a means of differentiation with regard to the dimensions of gender and age” (Riello 2012: IX). Far from denying all this, namely the possibility of applying various concepts to the world of fashion in order to try to understand it, in this chapter I will rather try to show that those nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers who, unlike other thinkers, paid a non-superficial or not merely occasional attention to fashion, implicitly or explicitly relied on the ideas of imitation and demarcation in the