

# **META-GOODS IN FASHION-MYTHS: PHILOSOPHIC-ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FASHION ADVERTISEMENTS**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper intends to investigate which aspects of human nature are responsible for the recurrence of new fashions. It is divided into five sections: the first explains the multidisciplinary approach used in the research on this phenomenon, the second provides a very brief and stroboscopic historical overview of the issue in question, the third distinguishes different notions of fashion, the fourth introduces the term meta-goods as indicators of values and symbols for philosophic-anthropological features in fashion advertisements and the last section elucidates the myths narrated by fashion advertisements, which have philosophic-anthropological implications.*

## **Historical Prelude**

Plato in his dialogue, *Phaidon* states that a real philosopher does not really care about clothes since he considers them to be merely the “wrapping” of the body (*Phaidon* 64 d-e). Clothes, therefore, have quite a low ontological status. The highest ontological status – for the human being – is, of course, occupied by the soul, while the body is just more or less a vehicle of the soul. Since clothes wrap the body, they are merely a “wrapping of the wrapping of the mind” in Karen Hanson’s provocative criticism on Plato’s *en passant* statement on clothes (1990, 109).

Aristotle did not write about clothes – but, according to Diogenes Laertios – he was dressed elegantly (5/1, 1-2). The first German philosopher, and, to my knowledge, the first philosopher who dedicated an entire book to fashion, was Christian Garve, a contemporary of Immanuel Kant. In his book on fashion, which was published in 1794, he indicates the important philosophical anthropological implications of fashions, but does not elaborate on them in detail.<sup>1</sup> One of these anthropological implications is *variation*: It means that we do not enjoy being confronted with the same issues and things for long, preferring change. An anthropological phenomenon which is related to variation is *neophilia*, which, literally translated, means *love of the new*, in particular, it means love of new things.

Fashion is also a manifestation of the human wish and capacity to imitate, which was an important theme in Aristotle's *Poetics* where it was considered an anthropological factum (1448 b 4-9). All three phenomena – mentioned by Christian Garve – variation, neophilia and imitation, have to be considered as essential aspects of human nature, as we will see later. The first famous philosopher who wrote briefly on fashion was Immanuel Kant in his *Anthropology*, published in 1798. According to Kant, imitation is an anthropological feature by which human beings tend to imitate the “better ones”. The French poet Charles Baudelaire was also concerned – intellectually and aesthetically – with *beauty* and *amelioration* as anthropological features (1988, 9 and 38). Amelioration basically means improvement. He was the first author who holistically embraced the phenomenon of fashion in a positive way and was not as deconstructively critical as his predecessors. An economic-sociological approach on fashion can be found in Thorstein Bunde Veblen's 1899 *Theory of the Leisure Class* where he emphasizes the sociologically important aspects of distinction: He believed that through clothes in general and fashion in particular, we distinguish ourselves from others (1997, 173). Georg Simmel, in various papers published between 1885 and 1908, wrote on fashion – and Roland Barthes in his *System of Fashion* (1987) emphasized two important aspects, namely the relation of fashion to the present time and the fixation of humans by fashion to presence.<sup>2</sup>

## The Notions of Fashion

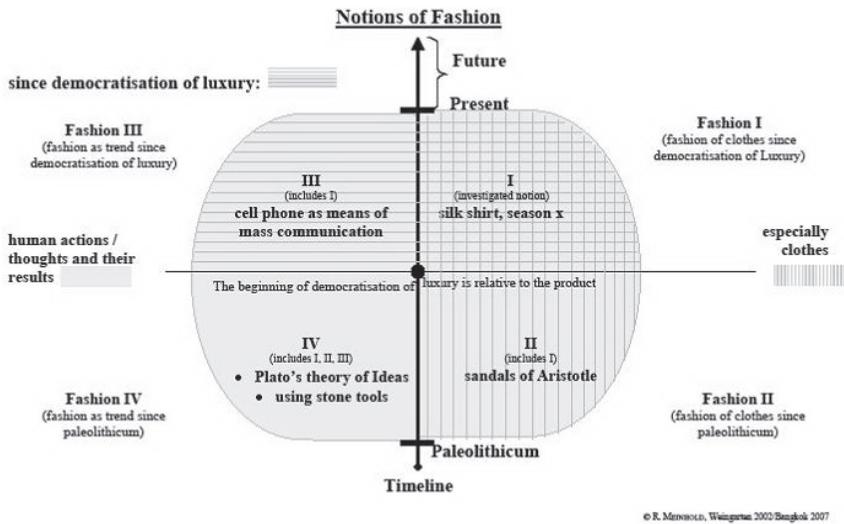
We can now distinguish between various notions of fashion.

One notion – which I call *Fashion IV* – includes, for example, features from architecture, but also non-material entities like theories – Plato’s theory of ideas, for example – and techniques, for example, the usage of tools. In general, it can be said that the notion of *Fashion IV* includes all human actions or thoughts and their results. This means, theoretically, that fashion could be anything and everything could be fashionable. *Fashion IV* thus refers to material or non-material trends: human actions, and/or their results, since paleolithic times.

For a historically narrower notion of fashion, *Fashion III*, we can give examples such as mobile telephones as means of mass communication or cars as means of mass transportation. This type of fashion can be detected since the *democratization of luxury* of a particular good, which does not refer to a single point of time in history, rather, it has to be seen in a relative way: each and every consumer product which has been transferred from a luxury item into an everyday product by mass production emerged, at one time in history, as a mass product. Before the time of its luxury democratization, it was only used by *consumer elites*. The mobile phone, for example, was initially only used by a minority of wealthy people, but now it is a product used by nearly everybody who lives a “western lifestyle”. Another significant characteristic of the *Fashion III* notion is that a fashionable product is *up to date*. This applies especially to state-of-the-art products. So, the notion of *Fashion III* could be seen as a *trend* since the *democratization of luxury*. I already mentioned that the democratization of luxury is *relative* to the consumer product.

The notion of *Fashion II* includes, for example, sandals in antiquity, but also fashionable ones today. This means it applies particularly to clothes which have been (or are) *in fashion* since paleolithic times (including *haute couture*).

*Fashion I* applies to presently fashionable clothes, for example, a silk shirt or a wool skirt in a particular season. The elementary features are (1) the *democratization of luxury*, (2) *clothes* (including accessories) and the fact of (3) *being up to date*. So this means that the notion *Fashion I* does not include clothes in general but it does include clothes since democratization of luxury which are presently up to date. *Fashion I* excludes *haute couture*, since those fashionable clothes are – although up to date – not products for mass consumption. The notion of *Fashion I* will be used for further analysis in this paper and will, henceforth, just be called ‘fashion’. Other notions of fashion will be used with their qualifying labels.



The notion of *Fashion IV* includes the notion of *Fashion I*, *Fash-*

*ion II* and *Fashion III* since everything can be fashionable in the widest sense. The notion of *Fashion III* includes the notion of *Fashion I* since clothes are usually mass products like cell phones, but it excludes *haute couture*. The notion of *Fashion II* includes *Fashion I*, but also *haute couture* because it refers to all clothes.

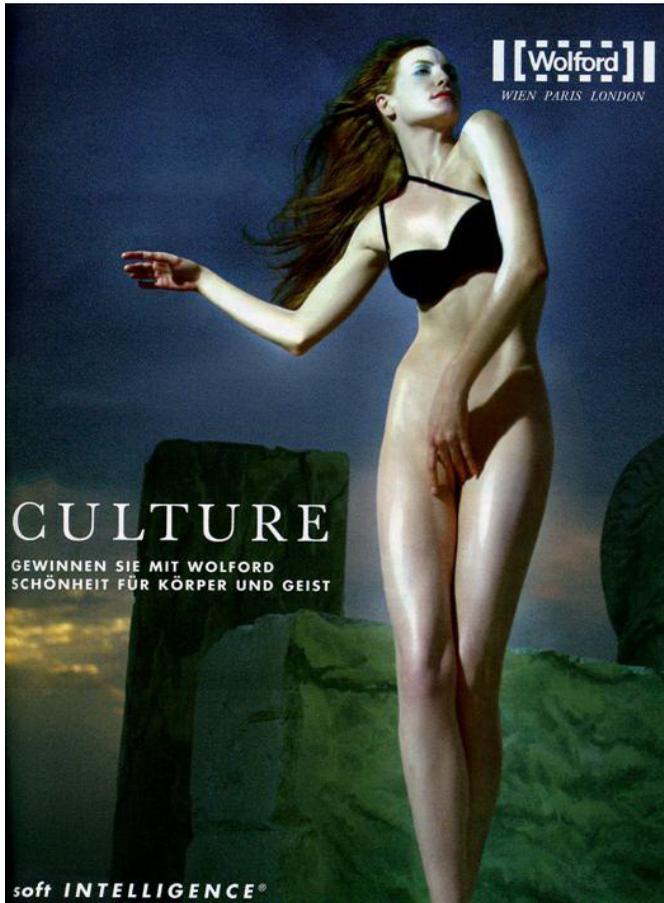
## **Meta-Goods: Indicators of Philosophic-Anthropological Implications of Fashion**

Having introduced the above analytical distinction of the four notions of fashion, I will now present an approach to the philosophical dimensions of fashion which is analytically divided into three aspects, which are, of course easier to distinguish in theory than in practice. The approach focuses, in particular, on philosophic-anthropological implications of fashion in fashion-advertisements.

The *first* aspect refers to social or philosophic-sociological phenomena: *performing on the stage of our everyday life* but also *imitation of the better ones* are important features of today's fashion. The *latter* aspect is an aesthetic one which is concerned with *improvement* in general and *beautification* in particular. The term *amelioration* signifies improvement of life in general. Beautification and aesthetization refer to the endeavor to improve the beauty of something. The *third* aspect is – in relation to fashion – perhaps the remotest one imaginable; it has metaphysical implications and is related to the wish for *transcendence of time and decay*. On the one hand, human beings transcend time with fashions and stay routed in the present by fashions; on the other hand, fashion “reincarnates” (“reinvestinates” see below) a human being symbolically and metaphorically into the “right time”.

To approach these three aspects of fashion from a philosophic-anthropological point of view, let us recall the main research question: Which aspects of *human nature* are responsible for the *recurrence of new fashions*? We are interested in those aspects of *human nature* which are not responsible for the utilization of clothes in general, but which are responsible for our urge to buy *new clothes* with *every new season*.

Thus these aspects are indirectly responsible for the recurrence of new fashions because – as will be shown below – marketing strategists utilize those philosophic-anthropological implications in fashion advertisements. The question why human beings use and buy clothes has traditionally been answered with the classical functions of clothes; the answer comes in a form of an analytical distinction as well: There are four basic functions of clothes (which do not entirely explain the *recurrence of new fashions*). The first one is protection: human beings want to be protected by clothes from climatic conditions and other physical influences. The second aspect refers to sexual features which are usually covered by clothes. The third aspect emphasizes an aesthetically important feature, namely that clothes serve as decoration for the human being. The fourth aspect is that clothes can serve as symbolic insignia, for example, as attire or uniform. Although the aspect of decoration points in the direction of beautification, the first two features, namely physical protection and protection in a more psychological-sociological way, do not explain the recurrence of *new* fashions, since we even buy new clothes when old clothes are still catering for those two aspects of protection, that is, protection from climatic conditions and covering of primary sexual features.



Wolford (Source: Vogue, Heft 6, Juni 2001, Hamburg)

Although all of the four functions are still served by old clothes, the question, ‘*why do we buy new clothes?*’ has been answered by Roland Barthes in his *The System of Fashion*. He emphasizes an economical fact according to which producers want to sell their products faster than they are worn out. Thus something must be added to the product to create a *new appetite* to seduce the consumer to buy a new product although the old product still performs its functions (1995, 10).

We can now introduce the notion of *meta-good*. An example of such a meta-good is *beautification*. In an advertisement which was pub-

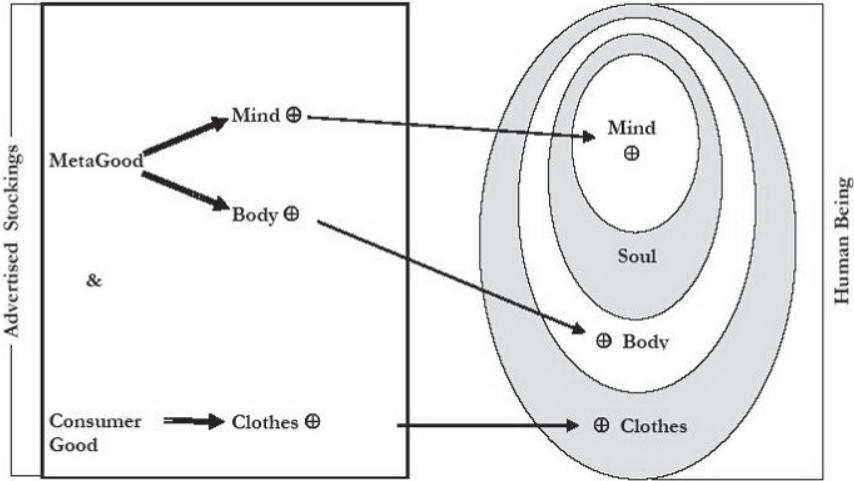
lished by the German edition of the fashion magazine *Vogue* the brand *Wolford* published an advertisement for stockings in a quite aesthetized manner. In the picture – which itself is a form of aesthetization – we can see a woman, but we do not see the stockings. The text which is displayed to the left of the woman’s upper legs reads “*culture*” followed by “*With Wolford, you acquire beauty for your body and mind*”.<sup>3</sup> The products which the company obviously wants to promote with the help of that ad are stockings. But the stockings are neither mentioned in the text nor are they displayed. What the “reader” and viewer (or voyeur) of the advertisement can recognize is a woman who is regarded to be beautiful – at least from a western aesthetical mass-perspective – and the text.

Exactly that *beauty* – mentioned in the text, and recognizable in the picture – *for body and mind* is something which is *good*, is a “good”, but it is not an ordinary consumer *product*, it is a *good* which somehow is *attached* to the (invisible) stockings and it is somehow *behind* (Greek: *meta*) the consumer product, it is a *meta-good*. The context and the style of the advertisement show that the beauty as “good” or value (manifested in picture and text) is of even greater importance than the mere product, the (invisible) stockings.

What are the features or characteristics of such meta-goods? Very often the meta-good is placed *behind* or *around* the real product. In many cases, the meta-good also represents the *motivation* why a certain product will be bought by the consumer. Meta-goods are *existential, intellectual, psychological, emotional, social and spiritual values or symbols*. They are immaterial “by products” of products or services. When bought, meta-goods are, apparently transferred (in)to the consumer. In the above example, the product is the stockings, while the meta-goods are beauty and intelligence. What is really sold by the company is just the product, what they pretend to sell *additionally* are the meta-goods namely beauty and intelligence. What is offered in the advertisement is a “charged” product namely *beautifying stockings*. Using the semiotic interpretation, the product becomes the signifier of the meta-good which is the signified, the “charged” product is the sign.

## Diagram: Holistic Melioration

„Holistic“ Melioration of the Human Being due to Consumer and MetaGoods



Aristotle in his *Peri Psyches* already analytically divided the human being into body, soul and mind. This, of course, is an analytical division and the lines of demarcation between these spheres, physical, psychological and mental/spiritual are anything but clear or do not exist at all. The holistic human being in advertisements especially in fashion advertisements, are complimented by additional components. So the human being is not just composed of body, soul and mind, but of mind, soul, body, clothes and other consumer products. Thus, in such advertisements, the human being is even ‘more holistic’.

If the consumer buys a product which usually includes meta-goods, a holistic melioration of the human being takes place. Not only will the repertoire of clothes of a human being be improved, beautified or ameliorated. In addition, there is a beautification for the body itself, for the mind and for the soul. Typically, in fashion advertisements, we can observe three streams of meta-goods which are analytically distinguishable and which modify the human being in a holistic manner: The human being is improved, ameliorated holistically with the help of the consumer product. In that way, fashion advertisements are “narrating” three myths. The first

myth tells the consumer that fashion *guarantees perfect staging in everyday life*. The second one holds that fashion is a *holistic amelioration, beautification or improvement*. Thirdly, fashion *renews* the consumer with the help of *new products*; this is a kind of *pseudo-reincarnation* which I coined *reinvestination* (see below).

## **Fashion-Myths – Philosophic-Anthropological Implications of Fashion Advertisements**

The first myth is closely related to the phenomenon of *performance* and *staging*. Very often consumers appear to perform in the theater of their every day life with the help of consumer products. The meta-good which is used in that context helps “*to make the scene*” with the product (to which the meta-good is attached), or to *get into the lime-light*, or simply to *act as if one were famous*. Here, the producers of fashion advertisements use two anthropological facts which were already highlighted and explained by Aristotle in his *Poetics* and by Immanuel Kant in his *Anthropology*.

According to Aristotle, imitation is part of human nature. According to Kant, imitation of *the better ones* is also a natural anthropological feature. This is exactly what happens in many fashion advertisements: the models depicted in advertisements imitate or act like famous people (this myth often becomes reality or is already reality). This imitation of *prominent* individuals or the *imitation* of better ones I call *imitatio prominentis*. This term is parallel to the term *imitatio dei*, frequently used by Mircea Eliade, who used the term in his comparative religious studies in ritual, cultural and religious contexts (e.g. 1957, 59).

In rituals, priests *imitate gods* and due to that imitation the priest or the shaman is part of the world creation, part of transcendence or eternity which leads to a renewal, purification or catharsis (ELIADE 1988, 15). In that regard the *imitatio dei*'s purpose is a kind of therapy or catharsis. *Imitatio prominentis* refers to the imitation of prominent people in the consumer sphere. With the help of *imitatio prominentis* consumers

are *part of the life-style of prominent figures* which leads to the symbolic improvement or amelioration of the self of the consumer and might lead to a kind of pseudo-catharsis, pseudo-therapy or might be only a compensation. There is much more to say and to research about those allegedly therapeutic aspects of consumerism which cannot be discussed here in detail.<sup>4</sup>

The third fashion-myth refers to *reinvestination* (*re-in-vesti-nation*) a form of pseudo-reincarnation. Reincarnation is often used interchangeably with metempsychosis; both denote the transmigration of the soul upon death. The soul takes up residence in a new body. These phenomena are found in many religions in different parts of the world, and in various cultures. This is the most complicated philosophical anthropological implication of fashion. It is based on the natural fear of human beings to die, our fear of decay and our rejection of aging which is particularly obvious in developed societies. The cosmetics industry, in particular, makes use of that philosophical anthropological implication to market their products. The neologism *reinvestination* is a parallel-construction to reincarnation. Re-in-car/n/ation literally means “being-born-back-into-flesh”; *reinvestination* means “being-born-back-into-(new)clothes”. With new clothes, the consumer feels new as well. One of the *Diesel* advertisements mentions that one can be “*young, beautiful and sexy for ever*”. Additionally with new clothes, the human being is fixed to the present and not to the past. Behind that phenomenon lies a rejection of decay and death.



### **Advertisement: Diesel**

(Source: Advertisement Supplement by Diesel in Vogue: Issue 612, August 2001, Milano)

Thus the three myths narrated by fashion advertisements are based on philosophic-anthropological features namely: the human being wants to be recognized by others in a social context. Aristotle already mentioned in his *Politics* that a human being is a *zoon politikon* which needs the company of others (1253 a 2-3); secondly, the human being lives and thinks in a comparative mode. And thirdly, the human being is concerned with meta-physical questions and transcendence.

One interesting feature of human beings is that they do not merely think in a positive mode, for example of being beautiful. According to common sense, human beings think in a superlative mode; if that claim would be right some human beings would like to be simply the most beautiful. Nevertheless, this seems not to be true since once a person has achieved an allegedly superlative status, s/he will think that this superlative in reality, is not a superlative at all, because there is always something that (or someone else) is bigger, more beautiful or nicer. The former superlative – after comparison – loses its status as a superlative. It seems that the human being mainly lives and thinks in a *comparative* mode, since human beings want to be *more* beautiful and the car should be faster, bigger or more powerful (than, for example, the neighbor's or the colleague's car). This is why we live and think in a comparative mode.

## Conclusion

Human beings desire to be recognized in a social context. They also think and live in a comparative mode and are concerned about metaphysical problems and transcendence. Thus human beings consume fashionable products in relation to an imitation of the better ones: the *imitatio prominentis*. They consume those products in expectance of an amelioration and holistic improvement and beautification, but also for reinvestigation, a pseudo-reincarnation: with fashion the human being is anchored in the present time and thus rejects age, decay and death. Therefore – according to the narration of fashion advertisements – fashions stage, improve and renew human beings and their lives.<sup>5</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> GARVE 1987, e.g. 57, 75, 105, 196.

<sup>2</sup> SIMMEL [1895] *Zur Psychologie der Mode*; [1905] *Philosophie der Mode*; [1905] *Die Mode*; [1908] *Die Frau und die Mode*. BARTHES 1985, e.g. 279.

<sup>3</sup> Translated from the German text by the author. The original reads: "Gewinnen Sie mit Wolford Schönheit für Körper und Geist". Source: Vogue, Heft 6, Juni 2001, Hamburg.

<sup>4</sup> For detailed explanations compare Meinhold 2005 chapter II.

<sup>5</sup> How to deal with such *myths*, which are essentially *lies*, I have discussed elsewhere (Meinhold 2005, chapter IV and Meinhold 2001 a and b).

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