

BATAILLE

New Philosophy of Fashion

An essay by Julian Jäggi

Fashion is not just clothing; «mere» clothing is reduced to functional, practical utility, whilst fashion is characterised by an aesthetic surplus. Clothing is necessity and practicality. Fashion is excess, extravagance. As something that transcends the realm of the necessary and the functional, fashion belongs to the realm of luxury. *That something can be luxury or fashion, therefore, presupposes transgressing what is considered necessary, expedient or appropriate.*

LUXURY AND FASHION AS SUBJECTIVE QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE

«Necessary» and «superfluous» are relational terms. Their meaning depends on the personal situation of the individual, their social and cultural context, their lifeworld. An act of consumption can only be a luxury consumption if this act transgresses usual standards of conduct.¹ The question of what luxury and fashion is cannot be determined solely on the basis of sociological, economic, system-theoretical or structuralist criteria, since answering this question must include a subjective component.

For something to be luxury, we have to subjectively experience it as luxury. Likewise, only in consciousness, in experience, is a garment transformed into a vestimentary fashion artifact. It is a subjective quality of experience that turns clothing into fashion. *We experience, perceive* clothing as fashion.

Luxury and fashion have enormous pulling power. People are attracted to it out of many different motives. The desire for fashion, the possible intention behind luxury consumption, is overdetermined: People buy and wear fashion and surround themselves with luxury goods for all sorts of reasons.² One of these motives resides in the subjective experience of luxury, the inner experience of fashion, in the pursuit of immediate enjoyment.

The question as to the subjective experiential quality of fashion is a question that is hardly ever asked or described, neither by academics, journalists nor fashion experts. What is and encompasses the experience of fashion for the subject, the individual? This question actually belongs at the centre of fashion discourse.

¹ Note: What usual standards of conduct are, what is deemed necessary or superfluous being historically, culturally and sociologically contingent and thus different for each individual. Therefore, what constitutes transgression depends on the social situation of the individual. The so-called *sinus milieus*, for example, divide society into milieus in which similar basic convictions and mentalities prevail. Depending on the milieu to which one belongs (Consumer-Materialists, Modern Mainstream, Intellectuals, Performers, Digital Avantgarde, Hedonists, etc.), other norms of behavior and other notions of the necessary and appropriate apply. cp. <<https://www.sinus-institut.de/en/>>

² Note: These can be social and extrinsic motives (power, intimidation, craving for admiration, representation of wealth, status symbol, reputation, deception, fame, social prestige, social or gender exclusion, distinction, affiliation, recognition, political protest, etc.) or aesthetic and intrinsic motives (eroticism, sensuality, pleasure, lust for life, beauty, elegance, self-referentiality, individual and personal reasons, etc.) or even due to psychological explanations (narcissism, exhibitionism, etc.).

Whether someone experiences something as fashion and luxury cannot be determined objectively from the outside, because it is a phenomenological fact that can only be understood from the perspective of the first person, the subject's internal perspective. To pursue the question of the subjective experiential quality of fashion thus means to write about something that can ultimately be nothing else than *lived experience*.

LUXURY AND FASHION WITH BATAILLE

The question of the subjective experiential quality of fashion is a philosophical question which I approach with the French philosopher Georges Bataille - the philosopher of luxury. Bataille was a scandalous and avant-garde thinker;³ he belongs to the most important and influential philosophers of modernity.⁴ Following Bataille, luxury frees the individual from orientating their existence towards necessity and self-preservation, a servile existence subjected to utility and expediency. Subjectivity is the sovereign part of a human being. This part is an expression of luxury, of profligacy.⁵

The value of luxury fashion and other sumptuous things (such as jewels) only stems from the squandering of the fortune that is sacrificed for it. In his work, Bataille deplors the atrophy of luxury: the disappearance of ostentatious, generous, decadent, excessive, feudal luxury.⁶ Bataille was strongly influenced by Sade, Nietzsche, Freud, Psychoanalysis, Baudelaire, Proust, Dandyism. I therefore regard Bataille not only as a philosopher of luxury, but also as a philosopher of decadence.

Bataille came to understand that today's modern society disappoints and oppresses us because it holds us captive in ends-related, instrumental contexts, so that an essential factor of life is forfeited: the loss of intimacy, life intensity, sovereignty. The desacralization and disenchantment of the world in modern times has led to this loss. The absolute value of life belongs to sovereignty and not to utility or instrumental reason.

FASHION IN A NUTSHELL

Luxury and fashion are to be understood as subjective quality of experience, because they are phenomena that carry the purpose, the end in themselves. They have the end in themselves if they are consumed for their own sake, if their aesthetic value is the motivation for consumption. The aesthetic value, as Bataille

³ Note: Marguerite Duras commented on Bataille: «Critics shy away from the name Bataille alone. Not having a casuistry at hand to address his darkness as they deem necessary, they wait to be in an acute state of grace to try to do so. The years pass: they continue to live in the illusion that one day they will be able to speak about Bataille. This illusion allows them to last parallel to the capital importance of his work. This abstention becomes their pride. With the greatest concern for their reputation, they will die without daring to grab this bull by the horns.» *A propos des Georges Bataille*, in: *La Ciguë* 1, January 1958, pp. 32-33.

⁴ Note: Bataille has influenced many great thinkers of the 20th century. Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Luc Nancy should at least be mentioned here (among others).

⁵ Note: When Bataille speaks of profligacy, he does not mean careless, wasteful, selfish use of resources, but refers to activities in which we consume life energy or resources in a way that is an end in itself and not a means to another end. By wastefulness Bataille describes things that, like eroticism, art, games or poetry, have an autotelic value for human life.

⁶ cp. Georges Bataille: *The Notion of Expenditure*, in: Fred Botting / Scott Wilson (ed.): *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford UK (Blackwell) 1997, pp. 167-182.

states, is the ultimate value because it transcends use value; it is an immediate value because it is «independent of any effect beyond the instant itself».⁷

Luxury and fashion are defined by the unnecessary expenditure that is spent on them. The purpose of this expenditure is the aesthetic experience itself. The motivation to shop and wear fashion lies in fashion itself, in what fashion opens up: self-experience, the aestheticizing of reality, enjoying the instant.

Fashion, as I set out in this text, has a social-emancipatory power, as it defies purpose-oriented reason. Fashion emanates a contagious excitation, a vibrant exuberance of electrifying energy.⁸ If we are susceptible to it, fashion can open up an aesthetic and transcendent self-experience. Fashion is part of the life-form, which conceives one's own life as a work of art.

To be fashionably clad, to be a fashionable person does not mean buying and wearing just brand names and expensive designer pieces, but is rather a matter of the relation and attitude to clothing. This relation and attitude can best be grasped with the concept of style. To be fashionable is not possible without the creative effort that must be put into it. The decisive point hereby lies in *sprezzatura*: this effort must not be visible in any way. Fashion must always appear to be effortless. A fashionably dressed person is being perceived as such from the observer's perspective, because fashion evokes atmosphere: radiance, mood, aura.

Since fashion only becomes real when it is worn (which is why fashion exhibited in a museum is rather bland), that's to say it always needs a form of embodiment, must be brought to life, vivified, it has no duration, but exists merely in the here and now. It is the single moment of bodily presence in which fashion manifests itself. Only in such precious moments does fashion blossom and unfold its appeal.

SOVEREIGN LIVING IN THE MOMENT vs. POSTPONING LIFE TO LATER

The essence of fashion is novelty.⁹ Fashion is about the new, the contemporary, the current moment in life. Fashion reflects the present; it is a symbol of life in the instant, the pleasure of the present moment, the aesthetics of existence. The meaning of fashion lies in the fleeting, the present, the momentary, the short-lived. Fashion is directed against any idea of duration.

Hence fashion is bound up with a profound philosophical understanding. *Human life constantly confronts one with the question of either living the individual moment, the instant, or, worried about the future, deferring life to a later moment.* In hardly any other philosophy has this perpetual human dilemma been treated as urgently as in that of Bataille.

⁷ cp. Georges Bataille: *The Tears of Eros*, San Francisco (City Lights Publishers) 2001, p. 70.

⁸ Note: Like the fascination that emanates from an outstandingly dressed person or the thunderously charged energy flows at fashion shows.

⁹ Note: Even if the novelty consists in the return of the old, which becomes resignified.

Bataille has placed the dilemma of living the individual moment aimlessly and purposelessly or subordinating it to distant interests at the centre of his philosophy of life. Human life is inevitably marked by this ambivalence: On the one hand the urge (and compulsion) to work, productivity, accumulation, on the other hand the desire for luxury, expenditure, enjoyment of the instant. For thousands of years, from prehistory to the present day, work has been the foundation of human existence. The invention of work made human beings human in the first place because it made civilization and modern prosperity possible.

Through work, the human being first created themselves, but got lost in the process, since they ceased to know how *to live in the moment and enjoy the instant*. The invention of work has created the existential problem of the dilemma described in the first place. Even if we seek to resolve the dilemma through an alternation, through a balance over time, it is ultimately impossible in life to always satisfy both demands, for productivity over time and for luxury in the moment, in a fulfilling way.

«The splendour and the bright, quasi dazzling light of the present moment» extinguishes when we are focused on work, when we subordinate ourselves and our life to the determination of future aims and purposes. Work, subject to a logic of utility and calculation, is connected with reasonable concern for the future. Living in the moment, on the other hand, has no other use or purpose than the pursuit of the moment itself, of «the incitations of desire, of burning passion». To work, to pursue useful projects - even if we do it voluntarily and gladly - still means to serve and to miss out. Work, after all, is always connected with obligations, constraints and subordination. Human activities and life itself then no longer have any value in themselves, but are measured solely on account of their usefulness, their profit.

Modern society is under the dominion of the ideology that measures people only in terms of their usefulness, productivity and reasonableness. As a result of this reduction, the individual threatens to lose access to themselves, to their subjectivity, and no longer feels complete, no longer feels whole. *One is sovereign only when one is able to give the momentary instant priority again over forward-looking calculation and a concern for the future, by momentarily freeing oneself from constraints and obligations*. Bataille writes that the beauty of the sovereign person is that they are indifferent to duration.¹⁰ The sovereign moments in life are the moments «in which nothing counts but the moment, the staggering moment». This is Bataille's philosophical and anthropological quintessence.

The sovereign life in the moment is the subjective life, which is primarily about what one pleases, and not what is useful or profitable.¹¹ According to Bataille's definition, only the one who in the moment decides

¹⁰ cp. Georges Bataille: *Literature and Evil*, London (Penguin) 2012, chapter on Genet

¹¹ Note: But what one pleases may prove to be useful in retrospect. In this case, usefulness is not intended, however, but merely a side effect, a coincidental consequence.

precisely according to how he or she pleases is sovereign. «What is sovereign in fact is to enjoy the present time without having anything else in view but this present time.»¹²

THE TRANSGRESSIVE SOCIAL-EMANCIPATORY POWER OF FASHION AND LUXURY

Luxury is a consumption or expenditure whose interest lies in the moment itself. In his philosophy, Bataille thinks and understands human existence and history in terms of luxury and abundance.¹³ He postulates that the primordial event in the history of life on earth is the emergence of luxury and highlights in human history a defining human tendency to profligacy.

This tendency to profligacy, an anthropological constant that manifests itself in luxury, is inseparably linked to life in the moment and is shown in sovereign human experiences such as poetry, excess, eroticism, art, etc., or fashion! According to Bataille, such practices are sovereign when the individual experiences them as a transgression of what is usually expected of them from society, namely to be useful, productive, reasonable: in short, the transgression of social norms.

According to Foucault, we live in a «normalising society». The transition from the ancien régime to modernity has been accompanied by a shift in the operating principle of power, whereby power no longer emanates primarily from laws and prohibitions or institutions and power is no longer concentrated in individual subjects. The basic principle of the new form of power is the norm. Modern power regulates and normalizes. Today we are dominated by norms. The modern instrument of power is normalization. «This is because we live in a society in which crime is no longer merely and above all a violation of the law, but first and foremost a deviation from the norm.»¹⁴

In a world managed completely by utility-maximizing rationality and practicality, there would be no luxury, no fashion, since everything considered unnecessary and superfluous would have been rationalized away. Life in the moment would be impossible. There would be no sovereignty anymore. Reducing people to the «necessary» would be totalitarian. In this sense, the sovereignty of the individual stands or falls with luxury. *Bataille defines sovereignty as the liberation of human existence from the yoke of necessity.*¹⁵

Fashion enables us to create a certain amount of freedom in relation to the moral norms and standards of behaviour of the established order. Fashion transcends the bourgeois decorum of «good taste»: it stands out, steps out of the frame. As a superfluous expenditure, fashion is inappropriate, excessive and free of constraints. Therein lies its liberating effect. Freedom is the state in which one disengages from the

¹² cp. Georges Bataille: *Knowledge of Sovereignty*, in: Fred Botting / Scott Wilson (ed.): *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford UK (Blackwell) 1997, pp. 301-312. here: p. 302.

¹³ Note: And not conventionally in terms of need and scarcity.

¹⁴ cp. Michel Foucault: *The Meshes of Power*, lecture given at the University of Bahia, Brazil on 1st November 1976, in: Jeremy W. Crampton / Stuart Elden (ed.): *Space, Knowledge and Power. Foucault and Geography*, Hampshire/Burlington (Ashgate) 2007, pp. 153-162 [the quote is from the discussion, which is not translated here, but is printed in the French edition: *Les mailles du pouvoir*, in: Daniel Defert / François Ewald (ed.): *Dits et écrits*, Vol. IV, 1994, text no. 297.]

¹⁵ cp. Georges Bataille: *Eroticism*, San Francisco (City Lights Books) 1986, chapter *De Sade's sovereign man*

established order and traditional morality. Traditional morality is directed against wasteful carefreeness, condemning the enjoyment of the present moment. Traditional morality sees the root of evil in favoring the pleasure of the immediate moment!¹⁶

Fashion, as a form of nonconformist luxury, transgresses prevailing conceptions and notions of the normal, the necessary and the appropriate¹⁷ and can thus open up an aesthetic self-experience that sets off a transformation, an inner liberation. Bataille describes such moments of transgression as sovereign, because they can intensify our quality of experience, our existence and give us back a feeling of wholeness. The idea behind this is that fashion is not only an autonomous cultural creation, but also impinges on the instrumental and moral order of the world.

The more society is being functionalized by norms of utilitarian ideology, the stronger the desire to transgress these norms so as to preserve the subjective life, the aesthetic experience, living in the moment. Such transgressions have a liberating and transforming effect, because they intensify and renew our mode of existence and our sensibility. Bataille describes how in these transgressive moments the individual experiences an inner vitalization, like a flame, and is delivered from depression and anxiety.

Living in the moment means inflaming this inner force. «Life only finds its grandeur and its reality in ecstasy».¹⁸ The pinnacle of life is the beauty of the immediate moment. Not a missed moment will ever come back. Walter Pater made it a life principle: «To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life».¹⁹

THE TRANSFORMATION OF ONESELF INTO A WORK OF ART

«One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.» (Oscar Wilde)²⁰ Fashion stands for a lifestyle that is about luxurious self-fashioning, about the refining cultivation of the self: treating oneself as a work of art, to be the curator of one's own life. In «The Birth of Tragedy» Nietzsche writes that our highest dignity lies in our significance as works of art – for only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified.²¹ By beginning to turn ourselves and our own life into a work of art, carving out its beauty, a transformation takes place both in our relationship to ourselves and in our relationship to the world.

Foucault sees in this transformation the potential to counteract the power of normalization. Fashion is part of the art of living, which can be described as «care of the self». Fashion as care of the self is about,

¹⁶ cp. Georges Bataille: *Literature and Evil*, chapter on Proust

¹⁷ Note: With these terms I paraphrase what Bataille calls homogeneity». Bataille uses this term as a terminus technicus and it would be too cumbersome to introduce it here.

¹⁸ cp. Georges Bataille: *The Sacred Conspiracy*, in: Allan Stoekl (ed.): *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, Minneapolis (University of Minnesota Press) 1985, pp. 178-181, here: p. 179.

¹⁹ cp. Walter Pater: *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, New York (Columbia University Press) 1974, p. 60.

²⁰ cp. Oscar Wilde: *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*, in: Isobel Murray (ed.): *Oscar Wilde. The Major Works*, Oxford 2000, p. 573.

²¹ cp. Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Birth of Tragedy*, in: Oscar Levy (ed.): *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol.1, Edinburgh/London (1910), §5. Online available under: < <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/51356/51356-h/51356-h.htm> >

along the lines of Foucault, the experience of what we are, what our present is, the experience of our modernity, in the sense that it might permit us to emerge from it transformed.²²

To seek after fashion for its own sake means to dress according to one's own sensibility and individuality and to model one's own personality. This requires the endowment of that indefinable faculty that Honoré de Balzac called «spirit of the senses». This talent, as Balzac put it, always leads us to choose the really beautiful and good things that in their entirety coincide with our physiognomy and our destiny.²³

STYLE

Fashion, as the way of conceiving oneself as a work of art, is unfolding of style. Style is an epistemological term because it relates to the mode of experience, to sensibility. Style structures and organizes our view of the world, our perception. I refer here to two basic texts about style by Walter Pater and Susan Sontag: Style as access to the world, as sensibility.²⁴

Transposed to fashion, this means that subjective states, inwardness, sensibility show themselves in how we dress ourselves. Sontag equates style with art. The person as a work of art can be regarded as an autonomous individual creation as well as a living form of consciousness. Such an artwork enralls, prompts excitation, captivates, for fashion overcomes reality through imagination. According to Pater, the function of style lies in correcting, enlarging, refining, differentiating reality through tact and taste.

Fashion enables escapism, flight from reality, refuge from ordinariness, vulgarity, tedium, normality. In the words of Baudelaire: «Fashion should thus be considered as a symptom of the taste for the ideal which floats on the surface of all the crude, terrestrial and loathsome bric-à-brac that the natural life accumulates in the human brain.»²⁵

Fashion is artificiality. Fashion can never be a natural phenomenon, because style has a denaturing function. According to Wolfgang Iser, what presents itself in style is an artificial world that is an expression of the perspective view of the individual. *In style, the natural world of what can be experienced loses its autonomy in favour of a subjective order.*²⁶

²² cp. Michel Foucault, *Remarks: On Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, New York (Semiotext(e)) 1991 [originally published in Italian in 1981, the interviews were conducted in 1978], p. 33sq.

see also by Foucault: *The ethics of the concern for self as a practice of freedom*, in: P. Rabinow (ed.): *Ethics, Subjectivity and truth. Essential works of Foucault, vol. 1* New York (New Press.) 1997, pp. 281-301.

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²³ cp. Honoré de Balzac: *Traité de la vie élégante*, in: *La Mode*, october 2-9-16-23, november 6 (5 installments), 1830, chapter 2 *du sentiment de la vie élégante* [English translation: *Treatise on Elegant Living*, Cambridge MA (Wakefield) 2010].

²⁴ cp. Susan Sontag: *On Style* [1965], in: id.: *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York (Picador) 2001, pp. 15-38.

Walter Pater: *Style* [1888], in: *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, New York (Columbia University Press) 1974, pp. 103 – 124.

²⁵ cp. Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, in: *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, New York (Phaidon) 1964, p. 32sq.

²⁶ cp. Wolfgang Iser: *Walter Pater, the aesthetic moment*, Cambridge /New York (Cambridge University Press) 1987, chapter *Style* (PartII), pp. 46-60.

DECADENCE

Fashion must be decadent! As fashion studies have shown, the origin of modern fashion goes back to the time during the Second Empire of Napoleon III (1852-1870). During this time, fashion was transformed from a craft into an art. Fashion as we know it today was created in the demimonde of the second half of the 19th century with Paris as the focus. This demimonde can be described as a counterculture outside the social order with its gender and class separation.

The most important impulses for the emergence of *haute couture* and its later transformation into *prêt-à-porter de luxe* came from the figures of this demimonde: the dandy and the *grande cocotte*, the femme fatale.²⁷ The invention of new fashion styles is to be attributed to these figures. The demimonde from which modern fashion emerged is a subcultural style which is based on decadent consciousness or to be regarded as a symptom of decadent consciousness.²⁸

Specifically, the term «decadence» denotes the artistic, literary and philosophical movement in Europe at the end of the 19th century.²⁹ Camille Paglia dates the beginning of decadence to 1830.³⁰ It was ended by the First World War (1914). The decadent movement is characterized by its transgression of normative social standards (gender- and moral norms) and the decomposition of classical aesthetic ideals.

Decadence called conventional values into question through the love of experimentation and transgressive motives, e.g. the woman as femme fatale, the man as refined aesthete, the interest in sexual non-conformism such as homosexuality, androgyny, sadomasochism, narcissism and sexual obsession, a propensity to the morbid, pathological, exotic and oriental, the apotheosis of artificiality (make-up, adornment, ornament). From today's perspective, this brought about an artistic innovation and general cultural renewal: decadence led to the modern avant-garde.

«Decadence» is not a historical or political concept, but rather an aesthetic and psychological one, not to be applied to history, but to art and the subject. As Vladimir Jankélévitch has shown, decadence is nothing structural and not a historical content, but a manner, an inclination!³¹ Decadence, as Umberto Eco has put it in a nutshell, is a life model that is about redeeming all aspects of life in the light of beauty.³² Decadence

²⁷ cp. Barbara Vinken: *Fashion Zeitgeist. Trends and Cycles in the Fashion System*, Oxford/New York (Berg) 2005, chapters 1 + 2, especially pp. 7, 14, 17, 21, 54, 57

²⁸ cp. Emily Apter: *Spaces of the Demimonde/ Subcultures of Decadence: 1890-1990*, in: Liz Constable et al. (ed.): *Perennial Decay. On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, Philadelphia (University of Pennsylvania Press) 1999, p. 142-156.

²⁹ Note: Decadence (or decadentism) is often used as a collective term for different literary, artistic and social currents (Dark Romanticism, Pre-Raphaelites, Aestheticism, Renaissancism, Dandyism, Fin-de-siècle culture, Symbolism, Art Nouveau, Camp style, et al.). Examples of important representatives (artists and writers): Honoré de Balzac, Théophile Gautier, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, the Goncourt brothers, Joris Karl Huysmans, Maurice Maeterlinck, Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, Max Beerbohm, Ronald Firbank, Gabriele d'Annunzio, Richard von Schaukal, Thomas Mann, Heinrich Mann, Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Herman Bang, Edward Burne-Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Gustave Moreau, Edouard Manet, Franz von Stuck, Fernand Khnopff, Félicien Rops etc. The most important thinkers of decadence are certainly the Marquis de Sade, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Jacob Burckhardt and Walter Pater.

³⁰ cp. Camille Paglia: *Sexual Personae. Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, New York (Vintage Books) 1991, here: p. 231.

³¹ cp. Vladimir Jankélévitch: *La Décadence*, in: *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 55, 1950, pp. 337-69, here p. 365.

³² cp. Umberto Eco: *On Beauty*, London (Secker&Warburg) 2004, p. 330.

as a life model aims at refinement, nuancedness and intensity in perception and sensibility. It is about expanding the capacity for sensual and spiritual experience.

Decadence fights against betraying the materiality of signs and objects and tries to adhere to surfaces and sensations.³³ This love of the surface is a sign of profundity, as Nietzsche knew: to live means «to keep bravely to the surface, the fold and the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in forms, tones, and words, in the whole Olympus of appearance!»³⁴

Anyone who regards fashion as merely something frivolous and shallow is not very deep. Decadent style is superficial, ornamental, decorative, because decadence sets the greatest store by the superfluous, the aesthetic surplus, excess. Excess, luxury is part of human life, whose sovereignty is only made possible by it.

Fashion is under the sign of decadence. The avid and passionate quest for the new, for the present moment in life, for new sensations, Apollonian beauty, style and artificiality, the person as a work of art and the love for shine, appearance and surface are fashion's decadent roots!

OWNING FASHION AND LUXURY AS THERAPY

«Clothing», Balzac stated, «is the most immense change experienced by the social individual; it transforms existence in a profound way.»³⁵ Fashion is part of a cult of the self that is closely intertwined with the experiential quality of ownership. Luxury and fashion are about ownership! Acquiring and owning something can be an extraordinary aesthetic experience. Walter Benjamin writes of the «thrill of acquisition».³⁶ The phenomenon of ownership has not only a sociological and economic dimension, but above all a philosophical and phenomenological one.

In this sense, owning is something with which we relate to the world and to ourselves. We may experience this as something elevating. Benjamin has described it exceptionally well: The bliss of owning something can be so strong that the loss of the possession can turn us into invalids and the desire to acquire something can make us criminals. The things we love become an extension of ourselves. *Because we come alive in these things, ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to things.*³⁷

³³ cp. Charles Bernheimer: *Unknowing Decadence*, in: Liz Constable et al. (ed.): *Perennial Decay. On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, Philadelphia (University of Pennsylvania Press) 1999, pp. 50 – 64, here: p. 62.

³⁴ cp. Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Gay Science*, in: Oscar Levy (ed.): *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol.10, Edinburgh/London (1910), online: <<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/n/nietzsche/friedrich/n67j/preface2.html>>, here: preface § 4

³⁵ cp. Balzac *Traité de la vie élégante*, chapter 3 XVIII

³⁶ cp. Walter Benjamin: *Unpacking My Library. A Talk about Book Collecting*, in: Hannah Arendt (ed.): *Walter Benjamin. Illuminations*, New York (Schocken Books) 1978, pp. 59-67, here: p. 60.

³⁷ *ibid.*: p. 59, 67

This highlights an aspect of luxury that usually remains in the dark: namely shopping, luxury as therapy! Luxury is by definition a superfluous prodigal expenditure. Only beyond the realm of what is necessary and utilitarian the individual can experience themselves as sovereign. In luxury consumption, this realm is transgressed for the individual frees themselves for a moment from the instrumental rationality that dominates their life. Luxury consumption must be spontaneous, nonchalant, unreasonable, spendthrift, oriented solely towards the moment. Bataille describes sovereign transgression as a phenomenon that has the power to turn despair into joy, depression into excitement and dejection into exuberance.

Psychoanalysis has shown that luxury consumption can act as such a transformer. Karl Abraham observed in his psychoanalytic practice that many neurotic patients would have a tendency to abrupt attacks of money-wasting for unnecessary luxury so as to alleviate their anxiety and depression. These waste attacks would compensate for sexual inadequacies that the patients suffered from. Abraham outlines how the patients thus would experience a moment of liberation in which they feel sexually adequate.³⁸

Shopping, luxury consumption like purchasing beautiful clothes may be bound up with an inner quality of experience that elevates and therapizes the individual. This is liberating and vitalizing since the consumption or acquisition is experienced as a «glorious act». It is the transgressive, transformative and creative spirit of fashion that places it in the sacred social centre of human pursuits and emotions.

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