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Designing the Self: Fashion and the Body

The modern (embodied) self was produced by an internalization of the disciplining force of civilization. Fashion around 1800 constructs a complicated celebration of “naturalness” revealing the “natural” body while, at the same time, pointing to the cultural “constructedness” of the seemingly natural. Unlike high culture, the fashion discourse does not seek to hide, veil, and internalize its “constructedness” but instead draws attention to the “natural” as the culturally constructed product of modern self-discipline.

The Enlightenment with its concept of progress began to regard conditions and people as changeable and individualistic. In the dynamic modern world, the self was no longer firmly grounded in a fixed order of things with its predetermined hierarchies but was called on to take an active role in shaping the self. As Norbert Elias argued, the modern (embodied) self was produced by an internalization of the disciplining force of civilization. In the process of directing the disciplining force on itself, the self became self-reflexive and began to function as both subject and object. As the target of the disciplining force, the body plays a complex role. As we will see, this cultural production of the body (embodiment) has to be seen as a process of continually creating new kinds of bodies. Fashion renders this tension between the myth of the body as a “natural” phenomenon and its cultural “constructedness” visible. Fashion around 1800 constructs a complicated celebration of “naturalness” revealing the “natural” body while, at the same time, pointing to the cultural “constructedness” of the seemingly natural, as the motto suggests. Like classicist philosophy and aesthetics, the fashion discourse – under which I subsume the material objects themselves and the discussion of fashion – is concerned with the status of the aesthetic experience in the formation of the self. Unlike its pendant in high culture – in particular, Friedrich Schiller’s aesthetic treatises and his followers in the idealist tradition and in Geschichtsphilosophie, which argued

1 As the complete original of the monthly, Journal des Luxus und der Moden, has become rare, I will use the modern (abridged) reprint to make the references more accessible. Friedrich Justin Bertuch and Georg Melchior Kraus (eds.): Journal des Luxus und der Moden. Ed. by Werner Schmidt. 4. vols. Rpt. Hanau 1967-70. As the Journal includes many anonymous articles and contributions identified by initials, only their titles will be provided unless the contributor is well known. The Roman numerals refer to the volume number and the Arabic numbers to the page numbers.
that the evils of civilization depriving man could also bring an paradisiacal state back on a higher level of self-conscious perfection in the work of art – the fashion discourse does not seek to hide, veil, and internalize its “constructedness” but instead draws attention to it.\(^2\)

After a brief discussion on the relationship between body and fashion, this article discusses the role of the classical vision of the body in the construction of middle-class (autonomous and individualistic) identity. In particular, this study explores the historical moment in fashion that was influenced by the classicist celebration of a seemingly “natural” concept of the beautiful (clothed) body, which was in effect created by fashion. With this constellation we are reminded of the underlying telos of Schiller’s aesthetic education, in which he sees culture, on the path of reason, leading back to nature by offering an integrated image of (wo)man in the work of art. “Art’s sensual fullness allows the subject to find a reflection of himself in an imaginary whole that provides him with a sense of completion and wholeness”.\(^3\)

The source for this discussion is the first and foremost fashion journal of its day, Johann Friedrich Justin Bertuch’s *Journal des Luxus und der Moden* (1786-1827). By its very nature as a fashion primer (i.e., as a manual teaching the art of fashion), it draws attention to the disciplining force – the integration of the rational and the sensual – that was required for the creation of the seemingly natural beautiful body. The didactic moment raised doubts as to whether the civilizational discipline could be successfully naturalized, as aestheticians like Schiller hoped. After all, classicist aesthetics anchored the graceful natural body – and with it bourgeois autonomy and individuality – “on a level where it was not conscious of itself”.\(^4\) Paul de Man has pointed to both the seductive and deluded aspects of this construct:

> The idea of innocence recovered at the far side and by the way of experience, of paradise consciously regained after the fall into consciousness, the idea, in other words,


\(^4\) Schneider. P. 211.