

### When Fashion Becomes Art

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## When Fashion Becomes Art: Medial Aspects of the Body in Fashion 패션이 예술이 될 때: 유행에서 몸의 매체적 측면

Yvonne Förster-Beuthan\*

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### 국문제요 🛮

이 논문은 패션에 대한 인류학적 입장을 논의하는 것이다. 필자는 신체 장식의 기원이 패션에 대한 토대로 고려될 수 있다는 것을 주장한다. 그 토대로서 패션은 자기 반영적이며 따라서 예술로 전환되는 것이다. 패션은, 신체의 평균적 측면을 고찰하는 과정에서, 인간의 특성과 가능성 및 한계 그리고 미래로의 발전을 반영한다. 따라서 필자는인간을 그 토대와 전망에서 반영하는 철학적 문화로서 탈인간주의뿐 아니라 인간주의에 초점을 둔다. 필자의 핵심 주장은, 패션이 인간에 대한 반성적이고 비판적인 전망을예술적인 방식으로 실현하는 수단임을 강조하는 것이다. 다시 말해 반영과 지각이 예술로서 패션에 함께 있다는 것이다.

▶ **주제어**: 철학, 패션이론, 장식, 체현, 인간주의, 탈인간주의, 인간학

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It might come as a surprise to associate fashion with the topics of Humanism and Posthumanism. Humanism you might think deals with the nature and essence of the human, while Posthumanism seeks to go beyond the boundaries of the human in order to improve or enhance its nature. Fashion, on the contrary, is about surface as well as about covering the natural body and to create an image of its wearer. However, that is often seen as opposed to the human essence and nature. Let me explain why I think that fashion can tell us something important about human nature.

I would like to tell a short story of fashion that shows that fashion is as an essential human practice which might also have shaped what we consider to be human nature today. What I am going to tackle here, is the issue of nature versus culture and humanism versus posthumanism. My thesis is that this aesthetic practice belongs at the same time to and transcends human nature. Seen from a wider perspective transcending the human nature (the project of Posthumanism) belongs to human nature itself (which Humanism wants to describe).

# I. An Evolutionary Perspective on Body Decoration and Clothing

-The Evolution of the Aesthetic Sense

Under the force of sexual selection or during a global climate change (a dispute that is not settled yet) the hair of early humans grew shorter and shorter until it became nearly invisible. What was left of it was soft and tiny hair on a smooth skin. It is still a curiosity in evolution why the hair on the head remained and did not even stop to grow. While the fur of animals only grows to a certain length, human hair can grow endlessly. This growth capacity can be an indicator that the loss of hair was the result of sexual selection.

Darwin already regarded sexual selection as the second driving force in evolution besides natural selection: "[...] sexual selection has played an important part in the history of the organic world. It is certain that amongst almost all animals there is a struggle between the males for the possession of the female."(Darwin 2004, 246.) Most theories on sexual evolution (e.g. Darwin, Dawkins, Welsch) argue that the sense of beauty, the aesthetic estimation as a cognitive capacity sui generis, has coevolved with the sexual arms race. The results of this process are mainly aesthetic forms, such as the peacock's tail that has no direct use for survival nor can it be considered as a sign of fitness. However, it developped because it increased mating chances. The peacocks tail is not useful for any other purpose than mating and to make it worse: it is close to danger for its owner because it makes his movements slow. Hence, there is only a thin line between pleasing the peahenns eves and falling prey to other animals because of a beautiful tail. Nevertheless, the estimation of beauty is not only an indirect way of evaluating fitness; if that would not be the case, small changes in colour or structure of aesthetic elements would only lead to a slight de- or increase of mating chances. But since it has been observed that they can lead to huge differences in chances, it is supposedly the aesthetic character itself that is estimated and not the indirect signalling of fitness.

What goes along with the loss of mammalian fur is the need to protect the body against the whether. In the beginning there must have been nothing but a natural need for some kind of wearable shelter for the human body. But what was the reason why humans lost their hair? As Jablonski convincingly shows, the loss of hair is not a consequence of the ability to make fire, shelter and cloths: "Clothing and shelter are fairly recent inventions in human history. [...] Hairlessness was almost certainly the original or ancestral state for modern humans, and its origins had nothing to do with reducing ectoparasite loads by wearing cloths. The only explanation for the evolution of hairlessness that is consistent with available fossil, anatomical, and environmental evidence centers on the importance of sweat. For an active primate living in a hot environment, having a functionally naked and actively sweating skin is the best way to maintain a steady body temperature and - literally - to keep a cool head." (Jablonski, 42) The ectoparasites hypothesis put forward by Pagel and Bodmer (comp. Dawkins 2004, 266 f.) argues that the loss of body hair had the advantage of reducing lice and other parasites. It also suggests that the loss of hair was only possible because humans started to make clothes. However, this seems not plausible given the hot climate to which the first humans were exposed to

With regard to the origin of clothing, the topic of lice can provide insightful information: According to Kittler, a.o. around 72000 B.C. body lice evolved as a species. According to this theory, by then humans must have developed the habit of wearing clothes, because

body lice live in clothes that cover human bodies: 'A molecular clock analysis indicates that body lice originated not more than about 72,000-42,000 years ago; the mtDNA sequences also indicate a demographic expansion of body lice that correlates with the spread of modern humans out of Africa. These results suggest that clothing was a surprisingly recent innovation of human evolution." (Kittler a.o., 1414) Independently of each other, Jablonski, Kittler a.o. suggest that the habit of producing and wearing clothes is a recent phenomenon in human evolution and, therefore, cannot be regarded as the cause of hairlessness. In contrast, they suggest that hairlessness presumably has its roots in sexual evolution and climate adaption.

The habit of wearing clothes might also have started earlier than 72000 B.C., but certainly not before humans have lost their hair. We simply do not know exactly when human started to cover themselves with any kind of natural materials because these materials are not solid and just vanish in a much shorter time than human bones.

It should have become clear that the usage of clothing was a consequence of hairlessness, not the other way round. But hairlessness itself might be a result of sexual selection which has an aesthetic dimension. The habit of covering the skin again with color or clothes was not only for pragmatic reasons but also a form of an aesthetic shaping of the body. The use of colors on the body requires imagination regardless for which purpose the decoration served, be it a signal for mating, a tribal sign or anything else. The body became a medium for aesthetically shaped signals. Thus, it became cultural: An ornamented body is both a natural and a cultural object. One can say

that nature turns into culture, because the body transports some sort of meaning. Meaning can be aimed at natural acts like mating, nevertheless, the message takes an aesthetic form. And even more important: The development of aesthetic body parts in animals or intentionally created ornamentation is not only about messages. It usually is estimated according to its appearance; for its beauty: "Aesthetic judgment is essentially a judgment based on pleasure - not on a concept or on objective analysis. The appearance as such must be experienced as pleasurable - without any need for knowledge of why this is so. When the peahen is excited by the peacock's display of his beautiful plumes she takes delight in the beauty of his ornament and performance and nothing else. She performs an aesthetic judgment. This judgment by itself leads to choice. Aesthetic judgment is inherently evaluative and comparative: it assesses the intensity of pleasure. Therefore, when several competitors display their charms, no additional calculation and decision-making is needed. The female will go for the most beautiful male, the one who stimulated the most pleasure." (Welsch 2004)

From an evolutionary perspective, beauty and ornamentation have developed in the same process as the aesthetic sense that gives value to them. Sexual evolution has led to aesthetic practices and it is very likely that the hairless human body (itself being presumably a result of sexual selection) was not only covered out of pure need, but that the covering itself became a subject of aesthetic creation. This has happened long before one would dare to talk about the fashion system of Paris.

The development of the aesthetic sense closely connects sexual evolution to cultural evolution and the latter is still at force in humankind today. Cultural evolution has two main characteristics: the intersubjective capacity to share and accumulate knowledge According to Merlin Donald (2001) the use of symbols and the development of culture requires a "cognitive community" (253), which means: "Collectivity has become the essence of human reality. Although we may have the feeling that we do our cognitive work in isolation, we do our most important intellectual work as connected members of cultural networks." (298) and the capacity of creating artefacts, such as tools or wall paintings. Both aspects have been driving forces that shaped the human nature. After having lost bodyhair, humans started to decorate the body by using earth colors such as red iron oxide to attract mating partners or frighten enemies. The earliest evidences for this date back to 75000 B.C., which coincides with the development of clothes (72000 B.C.). These decorations (e.g. bodypainting) were artefacts that have been created on purpose, for others to see them. A necessary condition for producing such artificial signs is the capacity of intention reading (see Tomasello 2003, 3). Thus, there must have been a form of cultural intersubjectivity.

If body decorations are created to signal personal states to others, then the aesthetic sense in its early human form involves intention reading; the creator of the decoration knows that there is someone who understands the signals. In the case of animals there was no consciouss production of such signals, they were genetically inherited results of a selection process. But in early human history the body was already intentionally used as medium to signal internal states, body decoration therefore already exceeded pure needs for protection.

Cultural practices that involve creating artefacts and processes of sharing knowledge and using signs have been the most powerful forces in the development of humans. To use and understand symbols be it linguistic symbols or any other kind of symbols, such as bodypaintings, requires the capacity of intention reading which is an essential capacity in humans. Intention reading is the ability to perceive the other as having intentions and to *share and direct attention*. In the animal kingdom, this is a rare capacity only some primates who have been trained by humans show it, but in wildlife it does not seem to exist.

Now we have arrived at the point of essential human capacities. Humans are able to transcend their own minds and regard others as having a mind and intentions, too. Further, to understand and use these symbols intersubjectivity is required as well as some kind of tradition that forms conventions about how to create and read the symbols. Let us return to the subject of bodypainting. I have said that it originated after humans had become hairless, which was a result of sexual selection. The same applies to the following practices of body decoration: It is very likely that body decoration was not a mere practice of signalling ones mating interests, it, rather, had (like all the results of this kind of evolution) an aesthetic aspect. This is crucial, because the aesthetic character can be read as a form of transcendence: Once there was something in the world that became subject of aesthetic estimation; the body with its aesthetic traits is not a mere natural object

but a subject of evaluation. Its objective nature is transcended towards the realm of quality. The body can become subject of contemplation, of 'theoria' in the old Greek sense. The reason why the body is worth to be contemplated (if not for its own beauty) lies in the fact that it works as a medium

## II. The Body as Medium: From Signals to Concepts

The body's surface can be decorated and shaped to display inner states or intentions -but not only: Let us make a big jump throughout human history from the beginning of culture to our days and look what has become of body-decoration. At first it became clothing, clothing became a means of expressing social ranks. Eventually, in western societies clothing has now become a question of fashion, taste and self expression. It is used in a very free manner and, although there are still conventions about clothing, it tells nearly nothing about social ranks anymore. It has become fashion and occasionally fashion becomes art. This is a dimension of fashion that has evolved only within the last fifty years - fashion as art performance. (That does not mean that old artfully crafted dresses exhibited in museums are not a kind of art, but in their times they were neither intended nor perceived as such.) Couture or ready-to-wear presentations can be performances of art in their own right, since they not merely show clothes but also refer to (philosophical) concepts, reflect on processes in fashion and its role in

culture and, even more abstract, reflect on issues such as the *conditio* humana. I call this art, because these reflections are realized as aesthetic creations, which means that they are open for interpretation.

Seen from an evolutionary perspective, this is a real runaway-process, but, nevertheless, a continuous one: The body still functions as a medium. But in *fashion as art* the body is not a medium for intentions anymore but for *concepts*. Hence, it is not the individual person wearing clothes who expresses something in doing so, rather it is the designer who uses the body as medium to animate his art. *Fashion as art can express concepts*. When fashion becomes art, it is not only a means of expressing individual intentions of the wearer. What is made intelligible, are more or less abstract concepts expressed by means of aesthetic forms.

Fashion as art still bears the traces of its roots: It is an artefact that covers the body and transforms it into a medium and it is subject to aesthetic estimation. However, it is not sexual selection that drives the development of fashion, but a far more abstract quest. Since fashion has become a form of art, that is bound to the human body, it is more than anything else apt to reflect human nature in the realm of cultural practices.

## III. An Example of Fashion as Art: Viktor&Rolf - Long Live the Immaterial (Bluescreen)

The Fall/Winter Collection 2002 by the designer-duo Viktor&Rolf with the title Long Live the Immaterial (Bluescreen) represents both: a readywear collection and an art performance. The double charakter is not a singularity in the world of fashion. It reflects the nature of clothing which originated out of the need to protect the body. From this perspective, the human body is the focal point of all activities. However, protection of the body turned out to be more than that: It is also the sphere of decoration, symbolization and creation, of turning the body into a medium for signs made up of colors and textile shapes. Fashion, nowadays, can be seen as a kind of language to express oneself within culture. The realm of dress codes as well as the defiance of such codes has become a highly dynamic way of creating individual. group and brand identities. When fashion becomes art, its possibilities of expression transcend the personal needs of the consumer. I will not repeat the various sociologic theories on the fashion system and the mutual dependencies between designer, producer and consumer. For a brilliant summary see Kawamura 2005. My concern is to show, that fashion can be about concepts that reflect the notion of the human. Its origins already used the creation of body decoration as means of transcending the individual immanence towards intersubjectivity.

Viktor&Rolf themselves started out as artists and then turned to fashion not only in order to create a worldwide selling brand but also

to explore the borders of fashion. They say that they start every season with an idea for a show and then design the clothes according to that. The clothes are not the focal point of their work; they are results of an idea: "The clothes are a way of dressing the performance. They are going to be animated by the performance."(Interview) That means it is neither the consumer nor the clothes but the idea or concept that is important for these designers. Also, it is not only the body that gives meaning/significance to the clothes, the performance as a whole reveals the idea or concept. The clothes themselves are not more than clothes but within the performance they are matched into a sensemaking process.

I will give interpretation In the next step. an show/performance Long Live the Immaterial (Bluescreen) (the shown is to be seen on the designers' homepage www.viktor-rolf.com, for images of the show see Evans, Frankel (2008), 126-131). The term bluescreen refers to a film-making-technique. A blue-coloured screen is used as a background for shooting foreground-action. The blue screen makes it easy to project any other backround. This technique is used for example in TV-weather forecasts. In Viktor&Rolf's fashion show the apparel works as bluescreen. The clothes either have blue details or are entirely blue. In the clip V&R use media techniques very consciously. They are the first designers to present their collection via internet live stream (Spring/Summer 09), the models wear clothes that turn into a screen.

A brief description of the show: The models walking down the catwalk wear either entirely blue clothes or blue details. During their walk they are being filmed and their images are simutaneously

projected onto 2 screens on top of the stage. The blue parts of the clothing become a screen for the projection of different video projections (e.g. movie scenes from Solaris by Stanley Kubrick). The clothing itself seems to vanish in this process. As for my interpretation two perspectives are especially important: a formal one and a substancial one. From the formal perspective, the setup of the show is cruial: the various forms of projection. The clip of the show presented on the homepage is even more interesting than the actual show, because of the way the clip is cut the models walking on stage are displayed with the video projections on their bodies. Hence, in the clip the projections from the screen are being reflected back on the stage; a second order projection so to say. This multilayered projection thematizes the dependence of fashion on media. Since V&R started out making singular Haute-Couture-Shows without selling the presented clothes on fashion market, their brand existed only as a virtual one. They sold their clothes to museums; hence they were pieces of art, but not fashion. As a fashion brand, they existed only because they presented themselves to the media as such. Not until 2000, after having done a virtual en miniature launch of their brand as art peformance in 1996, they turned to prêt-a-porter and really sold clothes. Long Live the Immaterial (Bluescreen) reflects this essential virtuality of fashion: Fashion exists only if it is present in media and media can make it disappear or render it immortal: Long live the Immaterial! This is what happens in the show: The clothes disappear, they turn into a screen. But they do not vanish completely. Before vanishing behind the projections, they are shown on stage. Their visibility is not destroyed

but transcended towards a second virtual visibility. The material itself carries virtuality – a virtuality that is animated by the body. The reflexive potential of fashion cannot be merely abstract, it is bound to objects, to material: "[···] it is not the complexity of fashion in the abstract that will reveal cultural processes to us. We need to concentrate further on its objectification" (Lehmann 2000, 299) It is a living screen, a moving body that itself is part of the process of projection. The body itself has a virtual side, since, it is shaped by fashion and made visible by being invisible, because clothes reveal the body by covering it. Fashion reveals not the body as a natural being but as an idea – it shapes the body according to ideas of an ideal shape. The formal characteristics of the show reflect the conditions and limitations of fashion.

This kind of reflection on limitation and its transcending is taken over by the show's substancial part, namelythe significance of the projections and sounds: The videos show either landscapes or cityscapes and machines. The only displayed human being is an astronaut (presumably a scene from Kubriks 2001: A Space Odyssey, a movie about transcending the human sphere by technical means towards a new form of existence, the so-called 'starbaby'). Most of the time images of nature and culture are projected. Citations of the movie 2001 frame the loose succession of images. There are several important images: First the opposition of land- and cityscapes. Most of these images have been shot from bird's-eye-perspective – a perspective that is not possible without technical equipment, the human body alone does not enable us to adopt this perspective. There is also the opposite

perspective: the frog's-eye and closeups, which also do not belong to our natural way of perceiving. Some of the landscapes (birds-eye-view) are taken also from the movie 2001.

The astronaut stands for the main theme of the performance: to transcend borders. The lyrics of the music in the beginning also evoke the picture of the astronaut: "Walking upside down in the sky [...]" This image stands for transcending gravity and exploring uninhabited space. The view from space is connected to the image of a comet taking course onto the planet earth. The next scene shows a crater -a destroyed earth, the image of earth as a hostile place where life is extinguished. Another image of destruction are the twin towers (one year after 9/11). This might allud to the global threat of terror that destroyed a symbol of western civilization. The twin towers themselves have been a screen for projection of our values. Another image of transcending borders is a short scene of a departing train - the symbol for exploring the far west, the birth of America and the source of western values such as democracy and freedom of the individual.

## IV. The Reflexive Potential of Fashion

As you can see from the examples given above, fashion can be both: clothmaking and reflection on the concept of projection. In this case, it is not only a reflection on fashion but also on human nature which is the central theme in the content of projections - the images of transcending borders and opening up new perspectives. I argued that it is essential to

humans to transcend themselves, this way we developed the capacity of interactive learning, of language and to build social systems. In the first part of the essay, I briefly outlined an evolutionary perspective on the development of the aesthetic sense and the signaling of inner states. One way to project inner states to the outside world and to others was body decoration that soon functioned as symbol that could be read by others. In the V&R's show transcendence is a central issue. We are presented with images of nature that can only be perceived when we use technical devices. The perspectives mostly require planes or even aerospace techniques for being shot. Accordingly, the only human being presented is an astronaut and, in addition to that, we see humans using technical devices, such as cars, helicopters or aerospacesuits. The animals that are shown are birds or wales and fish. Both species made humanity dream: The dream to fly or explore the depth of the see. Wales belong to the oldest species still living on earth; they breathe air but roam the deepest parts of the sea. On the one hand, all these species represent images of freedom (a freedom that comes naturally, without any technical devices), however, on the other hand, they exhibit the limitations of the human body and make us dream of enhancements that enable us to fly like birds or swim like fish. It is interesting that the first devices invented to make humans fly (e.g. by Leornardo) were not things to sit in but body extension that imitated birdwings.

Viktor&Rolf tell us a tale about the crossing of borders. The view from the outer space onto earth and the departure of the train alludes to the exploitation of the far west. Both images are images of transcendence, of expansion into new and foreign dimensions and they

are contrasted with the dangers that go along with it. The beautiful view of the blue planet is quickly disturbed by a comet, fire and devasted landscape. The optimistic departure of the train is contrasted by reminding the audience of 9/11. Another figure of transcendence are the various refernces to 2001: A Space Odyssey. The lyrics of the show's musical theme center on the loss of human identity: "No colours, no shapes. No sand in my hand. I don't know who I am, when I am with you". Followed by: "I am superbrain. That's how they made me." This alludes to cyborgs or androids - artificial beings whose identity consists only in the purpose they have been made for. The story that the short and fragmented film tells is about the loss of identity in relation to different forms of projections and acts of transcendance. Here the posthuman aspect comes into play, because this performance shows transformations of the body into a screen which makes the body and the covering material invisible and gives rise to a new visibility. The new visibility is a potential one and since, it is virtual it can be everything: landscape, city or even the whole planet.

To sum up: When we consider what fashion tells us about humanity, I think it can tell us a lot more than we might have expected. The surfaces it creates are not inessential in comparism to a human nature. The human mind has become what it is only because we have developped the ability to transcend the immanence. This is what made us human. Once we step out into the world we find other human beings whose minds can only be read when they talk, gesture or look at us. Their minds can only be grasped through perception, which is projected onto the surface of the other. One cannot see what it is that

concerns others; we only see how the mind animates the body, therefore, it has to transcend its immanence and make itself visible. This is what fashion does or at least can do: It makes ideas and concepts visible. And it does so in a very human way: It uses the body as a medium and this medium is in no way arbitrary to the meaning that is communicated. Fashion portrays the *conditio humana*, because it is essentially a cultural practice that focuses on the human body and mirrors its situation within culture. From the beginning, fashion has been creating images of the human which always were guided by cultural concepts and imaginations of how our bodies should be and which moral laws it obeys. The human body often functions as a material to be shaped and not only the standard for tailoring. The posthumanistic thought of radical freedom, in terms of defining what should count as human is already at work in fashion as art. Fashion is not merely a temporary standard according to which we form our dressing habits. On the contrary, it creates images not only of stars and wannabees but of human nature. The way we shape our appearance is a way of making our minds visible and of applying a form of rationality and reflexivity to a material and clothes. When fashion becomes art, the reflexive potential of the interplay between body and material comes to a point of radical freedom: Human nature can be reflected and even shaped or modulated in a radical free manner - this is the point where humanistic and posthumanistic ambitions converge.

► Key words: Philosophy, Theory of Fashion, Embodiment, Humanism/ posthumanism, Anthropology

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