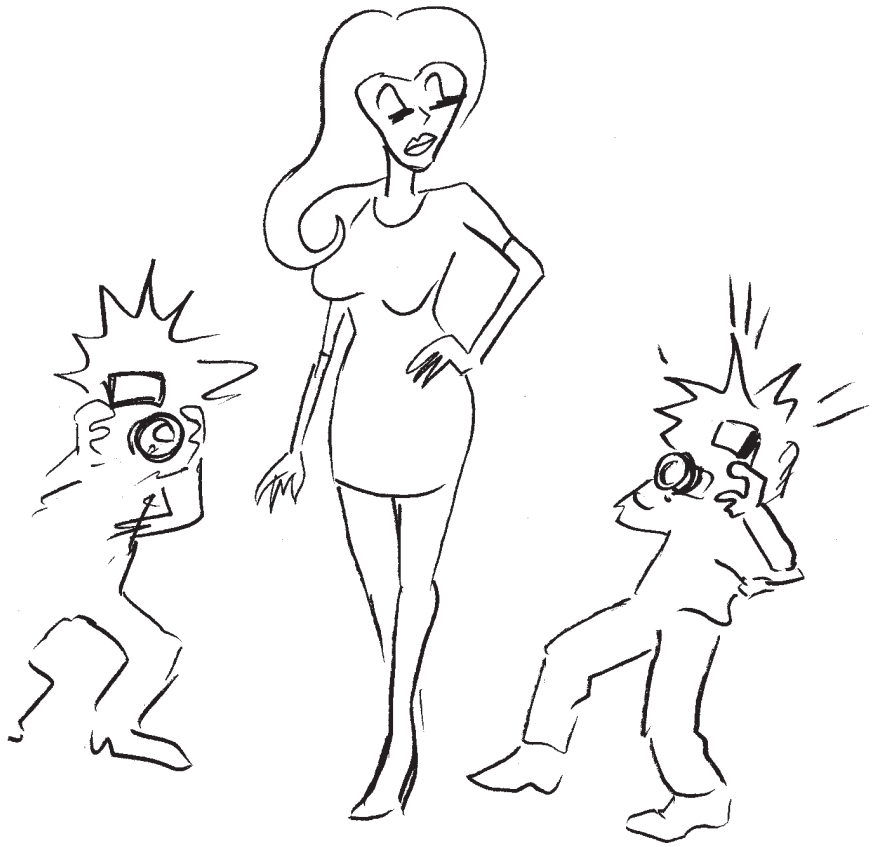


The Rituals of Fashion

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& Otto von Busch





Fashion is a ritual which draws attention to itself. It puts the world in a special light.

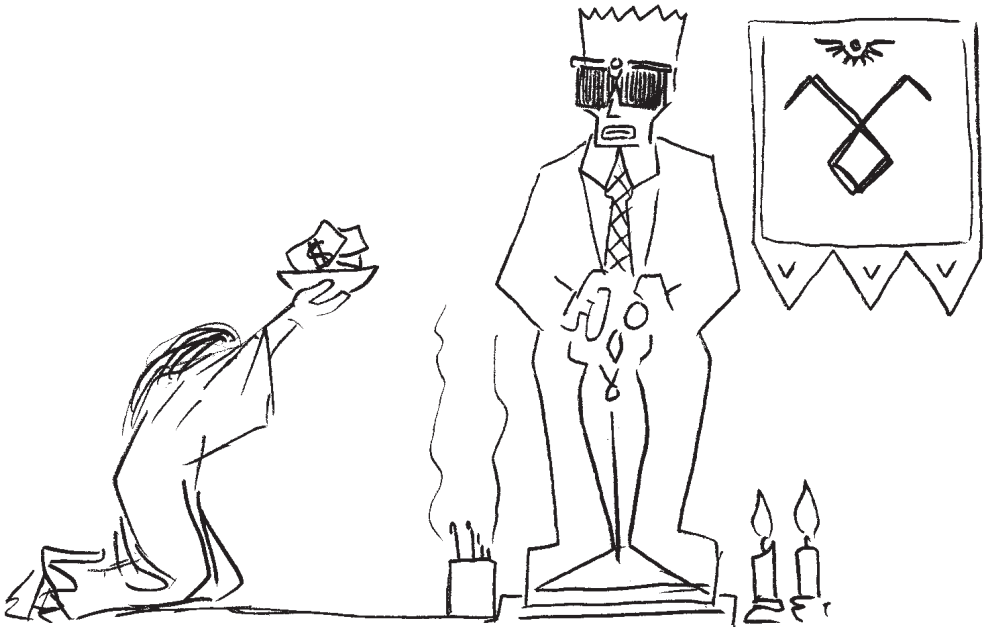




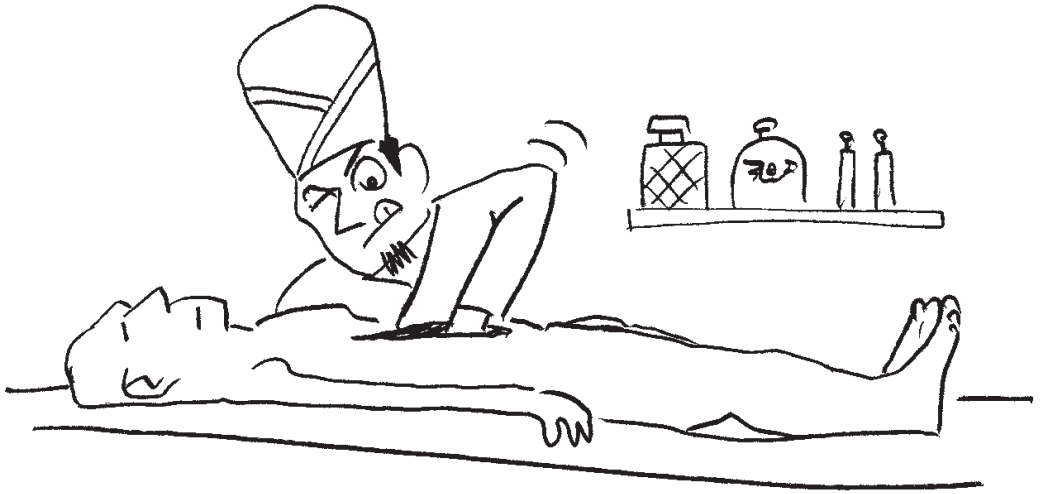
It seems as those who dress fashionably
are always loved and popular.



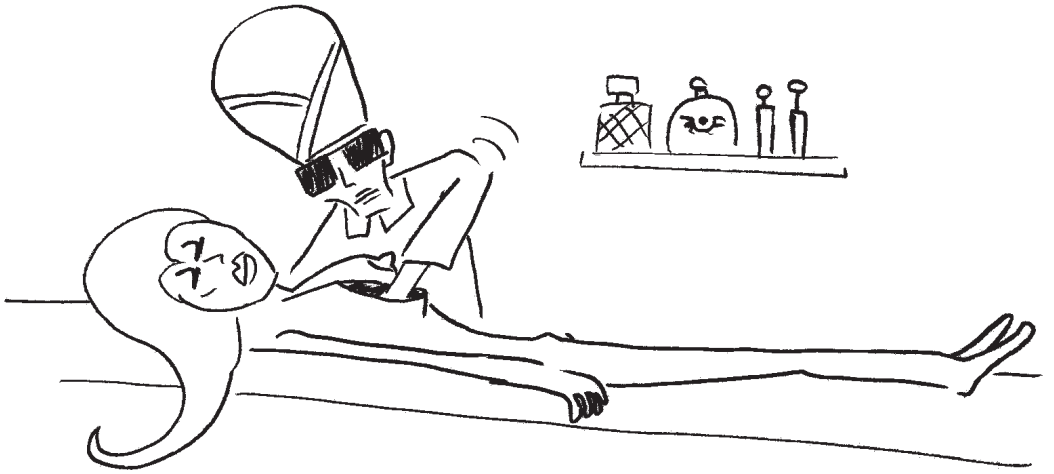
As we search for the same blessing, we go for pilgrimages to the temples of fashion.



There, like in the ancient religious rites,
we sacrifice to the Gods of Beauty
as they promise us eternal social life.



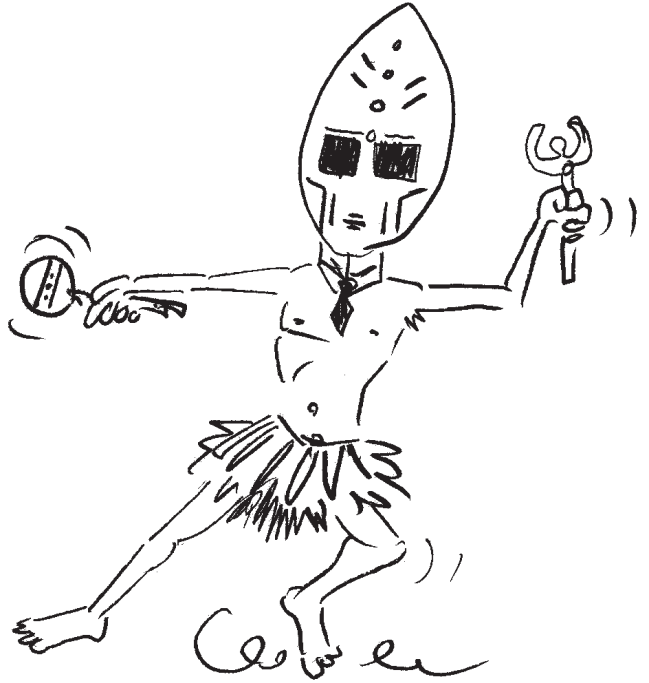
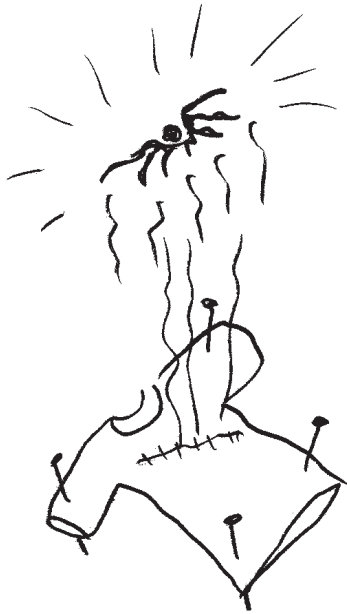
This is nothing new. Already the old Egyptians knew the divine secrets of embalment and immortality.



Today we use the same techniques to prolong our social life span, and today's spiritual thrill of being popular.



Fashion has always had its chosen priesthood.
They transform the everyday into fashion
with their special magic handiwork.



Like most religions, the magic is performed through various mystical rituals, rigorous fasting, ascetic training and alluring fetishes.



The magic of fashion empowers us and we feel as if guided by a mystic light when the social spotlight of attention shines on us.



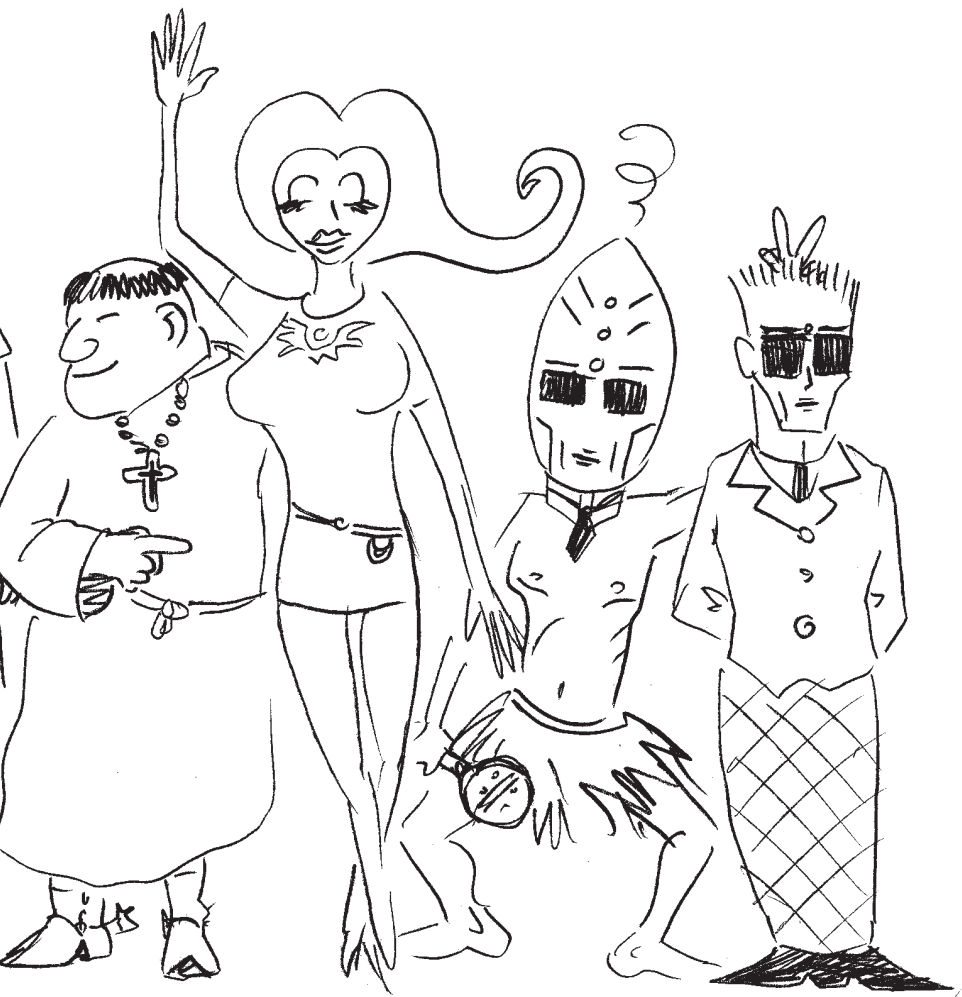
The designer we chose to associate with is like a friend who has known us for long. How else could he know what I like?





In the light of fashion, we gravitate towards
the beautiful, popular, and creative.
Here life seems like an endless party.





Fashion is where we have our *real* friends,
for they see us how we *really* want to be.
The rituals of fashion make our wishes true.

Imagine a masquerade, the ritual of identity play. Everyone attending wears a mask and can thus perform to be "someone else" than his or her everyday selves. People might express things they usually can't say. Anonymity helps us reveal other sides of ourselves. Who do we become behind the mask, and who do we perform to be - is it a false image of ourselves, or our true selves?

The sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) used the world of theatre as a metaphor to understand how we perform our identities in everyday life. According to Goffman we act out different roles depending on what audience we have for the moment. Sometimes we need time and rehearsals to prepare ourselves for a new scene or character, to work on our appearance and manner. We are at the same time both actors and audience as we interact with people, and we use clothes to front, accentuate and amplify our performance.

Rituals help form a public character or "face", which is "an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (Goffman 1967: 5) Even though we live through many rituals in a lifetime, they maintain and present an internally consistent image, that of "me". We feel more secure in some clothes and among friends - they help us perform well and amplify our self-respect. Rituals and social accessories help us build a consistent "face" which we are obliged to live up to, otherwise we loose this social

credibility and standing (9). "One's face (...) is a sacred thing, and the expressive order required to sustain it is therefore a ritual one."(19)

Courtesy and politeness in daily life are modes of ritual action. They are physical actions in the world, creative enactments of social "as if" worlds where we invite others to share a symbolic universe within which we understand our actions. Rituals offer "own capacities for human realization and fulfilment." (Seligman et al 2008: 7) They are not empty or irrelevant, but create complementary performances to the social, where we can enact new social bonds and re-create a social imaginary. In a fractured and discontinuous world, ritual allows "us to live in it by creating temporary order through the construction of a performative, subjunctive world." (11) Rituals of fashion functions to create a civil cohesion in a world of social mobility, a complementary world where commodities enacts "as if" they express agency and social meaning among participants and it acts out civil recognition of ambitions. Everyday rituals, such as courtesy and politeness, are illusionary, but not lies. They enact a social shared reality. They are "not true yet not deceptive", as they are "the joint entrance into an illusionary world" (22).

Clothing and rituals have always been intricately connected. Clothing follows us through life whether we want it or not, marking various social segments, stages and transitions through

rituals. In societies where reality and myth are closely interwoven, shape shifting through the adorning of skins or totemic dress is everyday practice. Here, ancestors, spirits and ghosts are not opposed to the living, but exists just as other stages in the continuum of life. A rite of passage, for example from adolescent to adult, is just one phase transition on the continuum, shedding one skin for another, like birth once was and death will be. To dress and live temporary as spirit is part of the shaman's transcendent practice. At rites of passage the Everyman experiences these spiritual and social skin-shedding, and are guided by the shaman on the journey to the other side. (Harpur 2002:13ff)

For anthropologist Jane Schneider (2006), to understand societies we can examine their clothes. We are clothed in the cradle, we swaddle the newborn, we dress up in most phases of personal and professional life, and we become enshrouded by clothes in the grave. (204) Clothing and its rituals help us "dressing well to accrue prestige, the respect of others, a sense of worthiness or empowerment" (203).

Nevertheless, fashion also recreates imitative behaviour similar to what French philosopher Rene Girard calls "mimetic desire" (1961). As social beings we desire the objects, skills and positions of others. We are never happy with what we have, as someone else always seems to have more coveted things. According to Girard, rituals arise to moderate our social desire,

and the task of religion is to disarm some of this desire by organized sacrifice. Religion exists as a ceremonial mediator to regulate our excess of desire. But the more egalitarian a society is, the closer the mediator comes to the subjects, and the greater the rivalry becomes between equals. In a liberal society which promotes social mobility, the competition becomes fierce. One way to ritually enact this competition is through fashion and consumerism. Similar to the ideas of Georges Bataille (1949), it is the excess of energy of human societies that needs to be ritually sacrificed through luxury or social strife and war. In our times we use fashion to dispel this excess, as it is a ritual of vitalism and later ceremonial sacrifice and offering.

In his book *The Death of Fashion*, theorist Harald Gruendl means that the Greek gods, who guaranteed stability and meaning in their world, have in our contemporary society been replaced by the order of the "commodity cosmos" in which our main service is the ritual of shopping. Malls, or the "temples of consumerism", have become the sites of offerings and worship.

Like ancient rituals before, fashion serve the purpose of transferring basic human needs from the social dimension into that of the community, which is now the responsibility of consumer culture (47). But there are always questions of power related to the exercise of rituals.

Primitive agrarian societies anxiously awaited the return of vegetation in spring. Consumer societies, in contrast, worry about the periodical advent of the new trend. Like our ancestors we, too, create rites in order to exert control over nature. Rituals create power; they do not give form to power. (45)

Rituals manifest the power over symbolic communication and elites within every system of belief wields this power. To Gruendl, the fashion system, as a belief system, serves as such a power echelon, deeply embedded in our everyday life.

The "reality" of fashion is betokened by ritual. As noted by science theorist Paul Feyerabend, reality exists on a continuum, from the solidness of the table, to the elusiveness of clouds and rainbows (Feyerabend 1999). In a similar vein, we must distinguish between the belief systems of the imaginary. In his writings, psychoanalyst Robert Pfaller distinguishes between cultures of belief and cultures of faith (Pfaller 2002). Faith is the judeo-christian heritage of absolutism, either in One God or in One Science, and a certainty in the word to even die for. Belief is something everyday, and a "lighter" version of conviction, as the magic rituals of the everyday where we speak to the car that won't start, or the opinions and identities build upon culture, like football or fashion. Rituals form the manifestations along this continuum from real to imaginary to fuse belief into our social everyday.

Rituals and our understanding of them have been the victims of secular modernism. Identified as quasi-religious acts, they have been considered mythical and as tools of inequality and not only abolished, but also slightly overseen. According to sociologist Richard Sennett "breaking down ritual's power, its binding spell, was indeed how modern society has sought to root out the hold of inequality over people's sense of themselves: treat inequality as a blunt fact, not as a performance." (Sennett 2003: 214) For Sennett, this move against ritual has weakened our self-confidence, social honour and mutual respect, forces that stabilize social and community identity.

For fashion, the main attribute of ritual is the social formation of shared imagination. We celebrate the arrival of the new and we feel energized by the promise that things can change, just as we can change. There is a promise in the constant flow of becoming of fashion, if we manage to align with fashion and enchant our collective imagination. Here, imagination is at the core of human existence, as also mentioned by philosopher Jean Paul Sartre;

Imagination is an activity in which human individuals create and recreate the essence of their being, making themselves what they were, are and will become. (Sartre 1972: xx)

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Is fashion, as many theorists say, a dilusion? Or is it simply the religion of today's consumer society? How could we understand fashion differently?



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