

FASHION ETHICS: A PATH TOWARDS HUMAN PROGRESS AND WELLBEING

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Abstract: Impacting all people, because we all wear clothes, depending on the personal, social or professional context of our lives, fashion is today a phenomenon and as well a global industry that moves the world economy and creativity, having a huge number of world-wide workers. In the last decades, under the auspices of the growing impact of the fashion industry on individuals and society at global level, stakeholders of the field are involving not only in the promotion of objects resulting from the fashion industry's production process, but also in the widespread transmission of the values and virtues by which the fashion system can become a consistently ethical creative field. The core of this paper consists in a plea for the *fashion ethics* as path to human progress, a concept that shapes our aspirations through common values and motivates our actions for the wellbeing of the next generations.

Keywords: fashion ethics, sustainable fashion, wellbeing, human progress, education for moral values

Fashion is a central focus of creative industries, a field of advertising, architecture, art, crafts, design, film, music, stage arts, publishing, research and development, software, television or radio.

Fashion is today a phenomenon and as well a global industry that moves the world economy, trades and transactions of goods, the labor market, having a huge number of workers around the world.

In the field of fashion, it is included a great variety of professions; a network of industries from the production of materials, clothing, distribution, to the marketing and the advertising of an impressive range of fashion products is involved. Fashion designers, fashion houses and fashion brands are part of the industry's main actor who today creates and launches new fashion trends. In addition, to those making clothing and accessories, fashion stakeholders with a strong social impact are involved

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in the dissemination of fashion trends such as event organizers, ‘fashion weeks’, magazines and specialty publications, etc. All of them are involved not only in the promotion of objects resulting from the fashion industry’s production process, but also in the interpretation of the semiotic language of the garments, of the art that embraces our body and, implicitly, the soul.

Fashion is an intrinsic part of human society and culture. It proved to be an ever-revolutionary socio-cultural phenomenon over time, by its ability to impose, restructure and reorganize paradigms, norms, principles relating to the aesthetic spectrum of the human body, and to the social and moral construction of the self. The phenomenon of fashion is characterized by a dynamic force of change, the establishment and propagation of new aesthetic styles of different aspects of life in different parts of the world. Clothes were and have remained a basic level of social identification, providing clues about religious differentiation, class, age, profession, social status, ideological orientations as defining elements of individual personality.

The historical analysis of the clothing shows that the symbolic function of the garments predominated vehemently in the face of their protection function:

Along with a Spirit of the Laws, practically a Spirit of the Customs, we also have a Spirit of Costumes. (...) The cuts reflect Intellect and Trends, the Color reveals Character and Heart¹.

An art close with man is the art of clothing, by which modern man becomes a daily creator of his own image. “Fashion has always had cultural significance, implications and associations, but in the 21st century it managed to conquer more than ever with its fascinating and extensive mechanisms”². Even in the contemporaneity, people are often judged by the way they look after the outward image displayed.

Especially during the last decades, under the auspices of the growing impact of the fashion industry on individuals, society, the economic background and environment at global level, there has been a need to move from a state of facts to a projected one, in which what it *is* moves to what it *ought* to be. Thus, the *fashion ethics* was born, a concept around

¹ Thomas Carlyle (1831). *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*. Romanian translation (1998): *Sartor Resartus. Filosofia vestimentației*, 2nd ed. Iași: European Institute Publishing House, p.45.

² Marnie Fogg (2013). *Fashion: The Whole Story*. Romanian translation (2015): *Moda. Istoria completă*. Bucharest: RAO Publishing House, p.13.

which co-exist a number of values, such as: responsibility, respect, honor, dignity, wisdom, justice, care, etc.

An increasing number of protagonists in fashion (such as non-governmental organizations, designers, companies, institutions) rely on the principles and norms proposed by the fashion ethics by setting, assuming and promoting mutual rights and obligations, in which *ought to be* becomes the common aspiration, in order to obtain sustainable results, beneficial for both the protagonist and for humanity in general.

Fashion ethics is a form of moral reasoning that acts on several main axes to properly resolve ethical conflicts.

An axis of the fashion ethics refers to the harmful effects of raw materials, the production of fashion items and the way they are recycled, and takes into account lines of action such as environmental protection, animal welfare, workers, consumers. This axis of fashion ethics is usually named eco fashion, sustainable fashion or ethical fashion.

Another axis of fashion ethics addresses the issue of deontology and the proper exercise of the professions that highlight the trends of fashion: events organizer, designer, mannequin, make-up artist, photographer, and so on. Another axis of fashion ethics approaches the norms and principles necessary for the professional organization of activities through fashion trends are made known to the public such as fashion week, fashion shows, magazines, TV shows, ceremonies etc. These parts of fashion ethics are less well known or approached. The cause of this scientific gap lies in the fact that the professions that are directly involved in promoting fashion trends, mannequins and events organizers, have been regulated by relatively recent law.

Herein we refer to that part of fashion ethics that approaches the eco fashion or sustainable fashion.

The notion of *sustainable fashion* has been established and accepted as a stand-alone concept, a division of *fashion ethics*, in turn it is a division of applied ethics. Sustainable fashion was born around the 1990's, a slow evolution, especially after 2000, in a context of a recognized global moral crisis. Sustainable fashion is often presented as a process that describes the ethical approach to fashion production, sale and purchase, covering a range of ethical, fair and moral aspects such as fair trade, clothing production showing respect for the environment, resource productivity through the sustainable use of energy and raw materials, consumer safety - responsibility to people and the environment, responsible water use, reduction of harmful emissions into the air, health, occupational safety and improvement of working conditions for workers.

Fashion ethics - as well as business ethics, bioethics, ethics of information technology, medical ethics, environmental ethics, etc. - falls in a revival movement of engaging moral reflection in a diversity of scientific research, with relevance and ethic potential in the social field, with reverberations on the whole existential. Fashion ethics proposes to approach the objectives according to values, to orient the means of action according to rational decisions and moral appraisals. Fashion ethics means attitudes and actions in this respect, with a view to correcting individual and group behaviors, objectively judging the facts, finding and implementing solutions to optimize the state of affairs, applying moral principles in all social human phenomena - economic, ecological and cultural ones that are directly related to the complex field of fashion.

The success of a fashion brand, as a rule, is assessed on the market according to the volume of sales of the branded products. Designers, great brands and fashion houses have developed an increased interest in promoting and selling their products to target groups. But the cycle of production, sale, wearing and, last but not least, disposal of clothes has major implications for society. The concept of sustainable fashion proposes “an approach to design, supply and fabrication of clothing that maximizes benefits for people and communities while reducing the impact on the environment”³.

Fashion ethics is based on the principle of being morally correct or morally acceptable. The significance of sustainable fashion goes beyond the imperative of doing what does not harm, representing an approach that also seeks to play an active role in reducing poverty, creating sustainable livelihoods, minimizing and counteracting adverse environmental and social impacts.

In fashion ethics, the time factor is important by referring to the present, but especially to the future. Its purpose is not to describe an itinerary of reprehensible facts in the past, or the drawing of guidelines to be followed by necessity after a certain pattern, but rather the recommendation, the prescription of what the protagonists should do, the daily moral effort recommended to be undertaken and putting into practice the duty that they assume in the name of the moral ideal, in order to achieve the intended purpose for the future. For fashion ethics, the future becomes a privileged time, because “the future is the time of excellence of

³ *Ethical Fashion Forum* <https://www.ethicalfashionforum.com/the-issues/ethical-fashion> [accessed:19.06.2017]

morality”⁴, not because it is a future, but because it is moral. Thus, the action of debt involves the future and the attainment of the moral ideals proposed by the fashion ethics is based on a progressive orientation, in order to ensure a better future for the succeeding generations through duty, will and responsibility.

An important concept in the discussion of ethical fashion is *sustainable design*. The term implies “the production of clothing so that the environmental impact is minimal and the working conditions are maximized”⁵.

Other key terms related to sustainable design and ethical style are: *eco-designer, articles (clothing and accessories) from recycled materials*. Eco-designers are fashion designers concerned with the negative impact of fashion on the environment, trying to find and implement solutions to build an ethical lifestyle of a fashion item.

Corporate responsibility in fashion is another ethics-related concept. Fashion brands that pursue corporate responsibility in their practices often focus on a responsible supply chain, sustainable production processes and operations, sustainable products, and engagement in community development.

More and more, programs and activities to promote the sustainable fashion become widespread at the global level, being felt as a necessity.

Although there is a high level of ignorance, professionals from all the world are launching mass awareness and sustain campaigns at the individual level. By blending the standards of ethics with moral comprehension, some civic actions of non-governmental organizations contribute to influence the companies decision making to change their unethical activities that cause serious problems, often irreversible for humans and nonhumans alike, for the entire environment, and to rethink and develop a new conduct, an ethical one, being aware of its real value for the wellbeing on long term.

By consequence, a proper education for ethical values is claimed to be realized, starting with the main actors implied in the fashion industry. For that, studies in events organising, clothes design, history and philosophy of clothes, professional ethics, fashion ethics, etc. are required. The central purpose is highlighted by the real human need of knowing, understanding and practising moral and ethical values and

⁴ Vladimir Jankélévitch (1962-1963 / 2006). *Cours de philosophie morale*. Romanian translation (2011): *Curs de filosofie morală*. Iași: Polirom Publishing House, p.118.

⁵ Marnie Fogg, *op.cit.*, p.486.

principles around the wisdom in life, finally, that can be learned from a long evolution of ethics in general aiming to the human wellbeing. Fashion is to be considered – among other aspects – as „a basic factor in the evolution of civilization, effectively contributing to the maintaining and protection of social rules”⁶.

In conclusion, working for and achieving the goals of *fashion ethics* represent a path to human progress and common wellbeing. The *fashion ethics* is to be(come) a form of dialogue and action in society through which we can manifest our respect for human dignity, kindness and care for the common good, our commitment to wisdom, justice, courage, temperance, responsibility, integrity, by unceasingly exercising the virtue and the moral rectitude, respectively the values on which the human wellbeing is grounded.

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⁶ See *Kasta Morrely Fashion Week Journal* (2017), No. III. Iași: StudIS Publishing House, p.6.