

PSEUDO-CONCRETE IDEALS OF A GOOD LIFE

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Abstract: What has happened in the late and concluding stages of postmodern culture is that concrete ideas of a good life have been reduced to pseudo-concrete ideals. With the aid of simulacra, the experience of everyday life is turning into a show, into narcissistic emptiness and single bodily pleasures.

Keywords: postmodern culture; body; pleasure; beauty.

Life in Pseudo-concreteness

Humans are active beings. However, in everyday life, in routine activities, people do not consider themselves as individuals, as subjects separated from the world, because people focus their consciousness on the external world. The creative management of an individual's own activity is also limited, because the activity, its goals and methods are not reflected upon. Once consciousness, which is concentrated on the goal, becomes aware of itself (as the subject of activity)—then it starts to go beyond its subjective (i. e. spiritual and physical) limits and begins to create, that is perform actively, and it is only then that human action begins.

K. Wojtyła distinguished strictly between the two components of human action: an action, where a person is active as a free being ('a person acts', a person is active, a person controls his/her actions: this is the dynamic characteristic of humans); and the passivity of a person when something happens to him/her, something external, where the creativity of man as an individual is not present (according to K. Wojtyła 1969). When active, humans go beyond their limits: if they really control their actions and behaviour, then they are not simply the driving force, but they are also the creators of their actions. By passively accepting the world as a place where "something happens to someone", humans are not masters of their own actions but simply accept that which comes from outside. It is the difference between inner stimuli and motives on the one hand and external pressures on the other; between activity and passivity, action and event. Only in the former do humans behave as full-value persons, as individuals and only then is the individual a truly dynamic system: the source of their own dynamics.

Before launching into creative human action, before entering into the creative configuration of human action, before becoming aware of the self as a subject, man lives in a pseudo-world, in a world of unconscious appearance, in an unreflected stream of perceptions and feelings stimulated from outside. The only activity of an individual in such a situation is the unconscious and unreflective selection of activities (it is difficult to call them free creative actions) aimed at securing survival. Humans as conscious beings with a psyche rarely act like animals, purely by instinct—but in everyday activities, humans do not realize the mental

background of their activities and do not act creatively as the subject of action. S/he acts “passively”.

Humans then live in a world of pseudo-concreteness. This world consists of:

- a world of external phenomena that exists on the surface of real substantial processes;
- a world of acquisition and manipulation, i.e. the fetishized practices of people (which is not identical with the revolutionary-critical practice of humankind);
- a world of common ideas, which is the projection of external phenomena onto human consciousness and the production of fetishized practice, the ideological forms of its motion;
- a world of fixed objects creating an impression of natural conditions and not immediately recognizable as the results of the social activities of man (Kosík 1965, 11).

It is a life played out on the surface of phenomena, a life content with simple survival (i.e. with physiological survival, and not emotional experiences). It is the “chiaroscuro of truth and lies” (ibid.), in which we do not discriminate between truth and deceit, we do not recognize different levels of depth; humans often have no idea that beyond the surface of the phenomena, hidden depths may lie—“the phenomenon both reveals and simultaneously obscures the essence” (ibid.). Humans perceive the immediate environment; they are not interested in overcoming that which they register, as it is sufficient for the survival of the physical element of their senses. The term “physical element of the senses” can be seen as a metaphor for expressing the attitude of people whose minds have been reduced to perceiving and registering outer stimuli, whose critical thinking and critical selection of stimuli for independent, free creative activity has atrophied (or has not even developed). It expresses a life where humans do not use their mental abilities to move beyond the limits of their individual and mundane existence. These people use their consciousness to gain new pleasures again and again, to satisfy their needs and their simple life cycles: earning money for consumption (work; job), gaining objects of consumption (i.e. purchase), consumption (i.e. food, bodily pleasures; sex for pleasure, and not for establishing shared experiences or as part of a deeper relationship; a sufficient stimulation of the senses, which gives the illusion of a spiritual life...), release (waste disposal, changing clothes...) and again earning money for further consumption...

This is a closed cycle, from which there is no escape: for the expenditure of limited means on consumer goods leads once more to the need to gain new means, the consumption of certain objects in turn leads to the need for new objects, after a thorough expulsion of the remnants, a need to fulfil the physical element arises, pleasure is followed by emptiness, which leads to the demand for new pleasure, and so on. This process of physical survival consists of accumulation, consumption, and release.

Fetishes have a role to play here; they should symbolize intellectual or other properties of a consumer of pseudo-concreteness; however, they in fact symbolize only empty and single-use pleasures—powerful large cars in city traffic, coloured and sweetened champagne, top of the market sportswear and ski outfits worn by an average or poor skier, a pearl necklace worn while shopping in a supermarket, porno videos or DVDs, or collections of books and CDs offered by the media, etc.

Brand names and trademarks that operate as part of ‘snobbish pomposity, the attempt to shine and dazzle... a narcissist joy at the feeling that I differ from the average person’ (Lipovetsky 2007).

This closed cycle of consumption that does not transcend the limits of the everyday existence of people is based on fixed and fetishized ideas: the higher the level of consumption, the greater the stimulation of the body and the senses; and lavish manifestations of material comforts reflect the higher values of humans and a better quality of life. These ideas do not

emerge in the consumers' consciousness as their own creative work but they are forced on them through the media and the market manipulation of the producers of consumer goods.

They come from the outside, then, they do not spring from the interior, from the needs of the people: they create these needs in order that people repeatedly demand new consumer goods.

People do not know the origins of the objects and things that become their representatives and they do not need to know; what is important is that they bring pleasure. Objects simply appear, media products are simply offered, there is no need to think about them, it is enough simply to take the pleasures offered. It is not necessary to dig deep for pleasure: it is offered at the first moment thus facilitating direct access to pleasure and increasing the distance from concerns about the cultural, media, economic or other background of these things. People perceive these needs as a natural precondition to their consumption. To people, they are part of the natural environment, which has always been here and always will. Objects have no past or present, there are no other regional or cultural forms of consumer supply; it simply exists. It is an invariable, unchanging world of things: although in fact they are changing continuously. The market and media continually offer new versions, however, their structure does not change, their cultural value does not change, their meanings do not change; neither the means of acquisition nor the means of consumption changes. Therefore, consumers can regard them as part of a natural, indubitable world. It is good for them, because, if they had any doubts about them, it would turn their consumer lifestyles upside down—thus, if they are offered to the consumer as something to be taken-for-granted, then they are in harmony with the consumer's lifestyle.

It is consumption that rules in this world of pseudo-concreteness and not the creative activity of an individual: the individual has been reduced to consumer and consumption to something that 'happens' to the consumer. The male or female consumer does not create his/her needs; they are created by others. Consumers are a passive element of the market; they are its functions. They do not operate as sovereign, independent, self-aware and responsible subjects but rather as a set of reactions stimulated by the market.

The consumer who does not reflect upon what is happening in his/her consumption-oriented life feels special, unique. The consumer realizes that s/he wants to show that her/his "good taste" is similar to others, that s/he wants to own and consume fashionable objects and wants to be "in"—yet s/he does not realize that his/her reactions are spontaneous, occurring without his or her decision-making. S/he has a feeling that s/he differs from the "masses", who are unable to acquire these "supreme" objects and pleasures. S/he wants to be one of the "cool" consumers because s/he regards them as more valuable and sees their life as richer or of higher quality. His/her assessment is superficial; s/he does not see the necessity of producing reasoning for his/her choice and for his/her evaluation of the consumer goods or pleasures. The crucial and only reasoning derives either from pleasure or the need "to be in".

Life in pseudo-concreteness has a major impact on the ideas humans have about the world around them. The world is not a vehicle for the implementation of an individual's plans, nor is it a goal to aim for, or a space that would enable people to go beyond the limits currently in existence to some unknown place. It is a tool for providing pleasures: it is a space where pleasures occur and whence they come; it is an inexhaustible source of new objects and situations in the provision of pleasures. In its inexhaustibility (which is particularly valid for the consumer capitalist economy of contemporary Euro-Atlantic civilization), it provides people with continual confirmation of the truth of their lives. If the goal of life is to repeatedly achieve new pleasures or objects, and the objects are able to provide pleasure, then the world shows the individual that s/he is correct in his/her life aim—because it continually provides these objects and pleasures; in fact it is aimed at enabling humans to enjoy them again and again.

In this situation, the consumer employs the worst, simplified version of the pragmatic outlook on the world. According to W. James:

'Reality' is in general what truths have to take account of; and the first part of reality from this point of view is the flux of our sensations. Sensations are forced upon us, coming we know not whence. Over their nature, order, and quantity we have as good as no control. They are neither true nor false; they simply are (James 1981, 117).

Consumers do not know where their pleasures come from; they only know that they gain them through the objects of mundane consumption. They act "passively". Consumers do not care about their value, they do not ask this question and they do not need to raise such a question, they probably do not even know that such a question could be posed.

The *second* part of reality, which our convictions also have to obediently explain are the relations between our perceptions or their copies in our minds (James 1981, 118). For a consumer, these relations are relations of sequences. Consumer goods are their incentives and relations between perceptions have no depth because their only depth is the depth of the relationship object-pleasure. To a critically thinking person, relations between perceptions can only be explained by the inner character of reality and the inner character of our mind: within these contexts, the truth of perceptions is born. The truth of perceptions is clear to consumers—it is inside each particular perception. The fact that perception brings pleasure is a human truth; this fact itself is a sufficient justification of the existence of perception.

The *third* part of reality that approaches these perceptions is constituted by the earlier truths (James, *ibid.*). A critically thinking person is able to search and construct far-reaching connections between perception, environment, his/her life story, cultural history, geography, and so forth. Consumers defend their perceptions and pleasures in terms of the past—by the past confirmation of pleasant experience. If it was pleasant in the past, there is no reason why it should not be sought again.

According to James, new truths are thus the result of combining new experiences with old truths, which then modify one another. For pragmatist philosophy it means a continuing accumulation of human cultural tradition and an amendment of the current view of the world on this basis or at least with its help. To a consumer, a new experience is modified according to the old truths in a very simple manner—pleasant past experiences justify the current ones. The point at issue is not a mutual modification of the present and the past but a joint confirmation of the present state; the current confirmation of the current pleasure.

The contemporary consumer obeys another important idea that is a vulgarization of the original idea of pragmatism. Let us turn now to the words of W. James and his famous contemplation on a squirrel:

Some years ago, being with a camping party in the mountains, I returned from a solitary ramble to find everyone engaged in a ferocious metaphysical dispute. The corpus of the dispute was a squirrel—a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree's opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: *Does the man go round the squirrel or not?* He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel? In the unlimited leisure of the wilderness, discussion had been worn threadbare. Everyone had taken sides, and was obstinate;

and the numbers on both sides were even. Each side, when I appeared, therefore appealed to me to make it a majority. Mindful of the scholastic adage that whenever you meet a contradiction you must make a distinction, I immediately sought and found one, as follows: „Which party is right,“ I said, „depends on what you *practically mean* by ‚going round‘ the squirrel (James 1981, 27).

Further James writes that “the rival views mean practically the same thing, and meaning, other than practical, there is for us none” (*ibid.*, 29).

For a consumer whose ideal and aim is the repeated acquisition of new pleasures, this stance means only one thing: My truth is my truth and nobody can disprove it. My pleasures continually justify my efforts because they always bring pleasant feelings. The consumer goods I am trying to gain offer me new and pleasant moments. My job provides me with the means for experiencing further pleasant moments (these, of course, I enjoy in privacy, not at work). If there is no other meaning than the practical one and I define the standpoint myself, then I can rely on my experiences. These experiences are part of my daily life, they are not thought out theoretically or in fantasy, I actually feel them. They exist in practice and they are pleasant—I can thus declare them to be the truth of my life.

The practicality and relativity of truth, which pragmatism construed to be much deeper, based on in-depth analyses of standpoints, on arguments, on the analyses of concepts, on in-depth analyses of situations and traditions, is simply a vehicle for confirming and justifying individual consumption patterns in the ideals of the contemporary consumer.

W. Welsch (1994) points out that postmodern relativism is a breeding ground for similar perspectives—the practice of real postmodernity then is under threat from at least two dangers: arbitrariness and superficiality (Welsch 1994). Postmodern plurality deprives people of the duty to shape more profound arguments focused mainly on assumptions (*ibid.*) that would explain why people take a particular stand and would show the deeper rooted truth of their standpoints. Plurality, therefore, according to Welsch’s metaphor, is a comfortable sofa with superficial, stubborn behaviour spread out over it. Superficiality is accompanied with arbitrariness, i.e. thoughtless acceptance of anything.

In his contemplations, W. James gives reasons for why he thinks there should be a serious background to pragmatist philosophy; one, which does not look for truth in simple personal reason. He argues that pragmatist philosophy is able to explain the problem of the use of truth by looking at relations between reality, humans, the environment and consciousness. Here we have used the words of W. James to show that consumers think in similar categories—mainly in the category of pragmatism. Their way of life is practical and appropriate (truthful) because it constantly confirms that their life is pleasant. They do not need to be concerned about the fact that between particular pleasures there is emptiness and boredom because they immediately fill the vacuum (aided by the media and the market) with new pleasures.

Superficiality, consumption, thoughtlessness, passivity and a lack of activity, pleasures, spontaneity without considering the consequences, pseudo-concreteness, fetishizing ideas, routine, the nature of the consumer environment—all these are the current prerequisites for creating an ideal of a good life. Since the consumer (a person in a developed capitalist consumer society) does not use keen perception and critical thinking to permeate the deeper meanings and connections that lie beyond, these are not simply the assumptions from which a person’s consumption and lifestyle grow they are an integral part of his/her consumption and lifestyle.

These processes affect all spheres of life of people today. They help create norms of human behaviour, influencing human value orientations; when they change, so too do human interests.

Being the passive executor of the will of the market is not only a specific part of human life (although such an individual strategy and individual fate are both possible). “Passivity” and a lack of activity are usually interconnected with the overall background of the particular person and, as such, occur in all or at least in many domains of human life, though, they can have different forms in different life cycles. Although it is a strictly individual approach to life, the processes mentioned above occur throughout the Euro-Atlantic civilization of the last decades, and from the last quarter of the twentieth century onwards, on a global basis as well.

Pseudo-concreteness and Non-concealment of the Body

Using a concrete example, we shall now try to demonstrate how life is presented in pseudo-concreteness. We will try to show how contemporary lifestyles, the basis from which ideas of a good life can be derived, manifest themselves in activity. We shall use leisure time for this purpose.

We have chosen leisure because people are not limited in their free time by their work regimes or by the more or less formal structure of the institution where they work, or by their duties, which can significantly influence their perceptions of what a good life is in the work process. During their leisure time people can regenerate their mental and physical strength, they can study, amuse themselves, etc. We are not concerned with the area of leisure devoted to studying, since this time is largely determined by something beyond the individual (their job, their educational institution, etc.). We will focus on that area of leisure which people determine exclusively according to their own needs. That is, the segment of free time used to regenerate physical and mental strength; it is the space reserved for relaxation. We will take into account complex regeneration, both physical and mental as we do not simply wish to show the ideals of a good life as existing only either in physical or mental comfort but to show the individual as a complex human being.

Free time and relaxation are the areas of human life where people can feel free and be themselves. They can structure their lives according to their own imaginings.

Let us use bathing as a model and manifestation of a lifestyle. That is, bathing in public, i.e. bathing in the company of people, not in private. While a person is also in possession of their whole culture in private, it is only when going into the sea or river to swim with other people of either the same sex or of both sexes that they act fully and consciously as social beings. They have to be careful about what they wear because of the presence of other people. Clothes have always had a highly expressive value; but, in such an intimate—and yet public—situation like bathing in the company of others, the expressive value is even stronger: our focus on public bathing will be on swimwear as an external manifestation of the way in which people imagine spending their leisure time. Swimwear is an external and clear expression of the ideas people have about themselves and their relation to themselves, their ideas about the community where they live and about their relation to the community, about the values professed by themselves and by their community. They are a symbol of people. According to Kybalová et al., clothes represent a symbol close to hand. They are the exterior, sufficiently eloquent to be able to shout loudly the secret ideas of a silent walker (Kybalová, Herbenová, Lamarová 1973). Swimsuits therefore not only denote the individual self-expression of the wearer but they are also a sign of the group an individual belongs to; wearing a certain type of swimsuit indicates the reference group of the wearer.

Swimwear, like other clothing is not merely a piece of fabric to be worn. In contrast to other clothes, swimsuits reveal the body, reflecting the relationship a person has with their

body. Other clothes usually cover the body and thus such a close relationship may not exist. In (modern) swimming costumes the body is visible and people cannot hide their “body defects”: they have to choose swimsuits more carefully than other clothes, that is, they are more careful when thinking about their relationship to their body than when wearing other clothes. With other clothes, people can also take into account their social position, the values they wish to present, and the occasions for which they dress; swimwear reflects the shape of the body more. They are closer to themselves than when wearing other clothes. We can therefore count on the fact that swimming costumes uncover a lot of the attitudes and value orientations people have.

Bathing in public has always been an important part of European culture; therefore, current perceptions of the culture of bathing and swimsuits will stand out more against the background of their history within the European culture space. The nature of bathing and swimming, the types of swimming costumes worn and the places used, clearly reflected not only the approach to hygiene within a particular society, but were also closely connected to other areas of culture and clearly expressed the relationships people had with nature, with their bodies, and the relationships between men and women. Furthermore, they expressed the position of women within society and were allied with the technology of the period.

In contemporary Euro-Atlantic civilization, however, swimsuits are worn not only to cover “sensitive areas”, nor are they simply practical, functional clothing to be worn for swimming. In contrast to the past, although they manifest themselves as “clothes”, they now have an entirely different meaning.

People in ancient and medieval cultures wore clothes while bathing to hide their nakedness from the opposite sex. If people bathed unclothed, the negative reaction of the church authorities to nudity confirmed that the appropriate use of clothing when bathing had only one meaning—to conceal nudity and preserve chastity. Clothes—if used—denoted chastity. The practical meaning of clothing (negative—through its impracticality) was also highlighted by the fact that clothing was simply removed before the water was entered because it was not practical to wear such clothes for swimming.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries men and particularly women were so covered up that it was actually impossible to go swimming. Fear of uncovering even the smallest piece of skin forced people to add new items of clothing (e.g. the use of gowns by women to prevent skirts from lifting up). Clothes unambiguously represented chastity (even prudery). In addition, the function of clothing was to follow fashion: they were tailored according to the fashions of the time, and the complicated, heavy clothing worn for swimming has been continually evolving with the changing vogue, throughout the last two centuries. This clothing did not merely point to the chastity of the wearer (at that time in keeping with the morals of the time, and predominantly affecting women), it also signalled the social status, social success and standard of living of the women who wore it. Clothes were far more a way of life, as Baudot (2001) wrote, than a means of clothing, and even then only figuratively. A woman living “a respectable life” was moral, meaning chaste: her behaviour was subjected to far more rigorous moral criteria than that of a man. That is why women had to cover up more while swimming; bathing fully clothed reflected the high moral standards of the women concerned. (If people were aware that some women swam naked at remote places, they were usually denoted as women “of loose morals”.)

The twentieth century saw a change in swimwear fashion that focused on liberating the body to allow for free movement in the water, under the sun and a general move towards revealing more of the body. At first, men led in this trend, because European society displayed greater tolerance towards them; later, women forged ahead, but towards the end of the century, men caught up with them again. In spite of this trend towards uncovering the body, swimwear

retained the same basic meaning until the end of the 1960s: clothes worn for swimming had to cover those parts of the body regarded as intimate by Europeans, that meant they should show and support chastity. They are clothes and they cannot defend themselves. At the same time, they follow current fashion.

From the 1930s onwards, social and gender differences disappeared from both European and American fashion, and from the 1950s on, except for a small group of people (involved in haute-couture), equalitarian fashion has generally been pushed forward—universal for all social classes, differing only in use (work clothes, day clothes, evening clothes, sportswear, etc.). Clothes ceased to reflect the social background of the wearer and that was also transferred to swimwear fashion. Since the beginning of the century, swimwear has undergone thorough democratization and now it can be worn by members of all social strata; what is important is that it is appropriate for people to enjoy swimming and the sun.

In the 1960s, clothes designed for swimming ceased to be merely functional. Although the first bikini of 1946 was intentionally provocative, it was mainly a functional liberation of a woman's body so that she might feel free when going swimming or sunbathing. At that time, however, society had not yet realized that the first bikini also represented the gradual liberation of women from their inferior status within European society. It showed self-confident women who were not afraid to manipulate their bodies freely. This paved the way for the monokini and further developments.

Once the first monokini had appeared, swimming costumes ceased to be merely functional garments. They became—and this has continued to be the case—a means of presenting the women who wore them. (This was how women's swimwear developed at the beginning; from the 1990s onwards, men's swimwear has also begun to pursue the same route, which in addition to functionality also focuses on the presentation of the wearer.) With the advent of the monokini, swimming costumes no longer sought to, and nor could they, simply represent social status: high-quality textiles and colours were widely available, and so the quality did not denote higher social status within society. Instead of indicating social status, the swimsuit began presenting the body of its wearer. Gradually, it evolved from simply showing and highlighting the body shape in bikinis and thongs to the openly provocative microkini. The function of the swimsuit then changed from being an item of chastity, covering up and beautifying the body to one revealing, displaying, titillating and seducing.

Men's swimwear joined the same trend towards the end of the century. By that stage women had gradually freed their bodies from the bondage of men, as part of the universal liberation of women. They became the rightful owners of their own bodies, which they could make up, enjoy and use according to their own free will. A wide range of tools were made available for that purpose (from cosmetics and high-quality underwear to contraception and abortion). Men suddenly discovered that the women by their side took care of their bodies systematically and purposefully. They began to realize that they had neglected their bodies, since they had been focused on performance and spiritual values. The appeal of men has not been regarded in terms of their systematic body care. It has been assumed that it was men's seriousness that boosted their sex appeal (Wolf 2000). It was therefore unnecessary for them to take care of their bodies. Towards the end of the twentieth century, they realized, under the influence of women, that the male body also has its own specificities. Once the specificities of the female body had been clearly defined in Euro-Atlantic culture, attention turned to the presentation of the specificities of the male body: up until then the male body had been regarded as the norm and the female body as a deviation from the norm (e.g. menstruating women were regarded as impure even in the modern age).

Men became aware of their bodies and started to express an interest in taking care of them, provoking, seducing and exciting. They did not want to lag behind women in presenting their bodies. Bathing and the beach were ideal places for showing off this male trend just as the female trend towards the liberation of the body was mirrored in women's swimwear. Efforts to expose their bodies were the same for both women and men. The erotic function of this clothing prevailed. Ultimately, swimwear fashion has been focused on, drawing attention to the human body. The function of men's and women's swimwear merged and swimwear fashion can now be referred to as 'unisex'.

Swimwear followed the general tendency of the postmodern world: that of seduction. According to G. Lipovetsky, seduction in the postmodern world depends on the fact that in a consumer society the range of products available expands radically. Today's seduction is not simply an indiscriminate glance at the luxury of accumulation, rather, it resides in the excessive amount of choices available (Lipovetsky 2003). Seduction with the aid of the previous forms of swimwear consisted in concealment and in the inconspicuous revealing of parts of the body and/or in hinting that under the swimsuit lie provocative areas of the body. Contemporary swimwear provides a number of opportunities for seducing—the monokini, the microkini, those with transparent uppers, etc.—and it is difficult to make a choice in this prevalence of freedom. All this is offered in an infinite number of forms. In the past, swimwear offered only one thing—chastity, concealment, shyness and behind that nudity. The current all-revealing swimwear (it does not reveal all, yet is revealing in its suggestivity) is close to pornographic seductiveness: What if pornography itself is only one form of seduction? What else does it do if it does not simply remove ancient laws and prohibitions, abolish orders of Censorship and Repression and introduce the freedom to see anything, do anything, and say anything (Lipovetsky 2003). The revealing swimsuits of today break all the rules and mores of chastity and moral censorship of Christian Europe—they openly seduce by breaking all boundaries. It is almost as if they are simply concerned with showing which boundaries are left to break, which hurdles have yet to be taken. They keep tempting spectators: you have not yet seen this part of my body in public, come and have a look, I will show you more... They have crossed the critical limit of provocation. All those engaged in fashion, the human body or sex know that forbidden fruit is desirable (Uzel 2004). Humans long for things that are forbidden and concealed from them. The swimsuits worn today not only violate the norms of Christian Europe they have even ceased to function as vehicles of provocation. It is not long ago that they wanted to seek a reaction but they do not provoke any more, they only openly seduce. It is evident in advertising, or in a number of in-store signs, trying to persuade customers that every third item is a bargain. Humans need not look for excitement and "struggle" for it, or for an object, or for quality—we can have anything effortlessly and immediately.

Contemporary swimwear does not conceal, it shows us where we should look for excitement. It does it openly and to such an extent that it is no longer exciting. If we consider it necessary to cover something up, but then at the same time, we reveal it, then there is nothing left that will excite. What is exciting is that which is semi-revealed, for it promises and indicates that there is something remaining hidden. The microkini or transparent swimsuit do not cover anything more. They just act as if they do. As if they were ashamed but they are not shy at all. They do not denote chastity and they themselves are not chaste in the slightest. They are a sign that has lost its denotation. The reality they should have denoted (chastity, covering part of the body that should not have been seen by others) does not exist any more: they have revealed it. Swimwear has lost its relation to reality and it only denotes itself—it has become "its own pure simulacrum" (Baudillard 1993, 196).

An Ideal in Time

The ideal of a good life is being shaped in transformation, it is no *status quo* because such are the specificities of the human mind—self-reflection and self-awareness help people to perceive their past and their future. The present is merely a short moment between them. Postmodern and narcissistic hedonism, removing the signs of ageing, pseudo-concreteness without depth would, however, seem to disturb this specificity of human self-perception. A swimsuit can show the body only here and now. It cannot show it in the past—that is already over; it cannot show it in the future either—who knows how the skin will become wrinkled by age, how it will crack in the sun, how cellulite will develop, how breast-feeding will affect the shape of a woman's breasts. How the belly will grow after regular beer drinking, how the backbone will be damaged by working on a computer. The pure beauty of the body is reserved for the current moment. Its past is merely a process of beauty care but it is not beauty itself. Its future is an unwanted deformation into the process of ageing. If I want to seduce, I have to and want to do it at this particular moment, which will never appear again. I seduce by the surface which is available here and now.

The corporealization of pleasure (Lipovetsky)—the transformation of mental pleasures into physical pleasures is part of this process. Lipovetsky's hyperconsumer sees pleasure, joy, value, hedonism only in the body and in body care, the pseudo-concreteness of contemporary life is based on corporeality: a depleted, single epicurean corporeality without a past or future.

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