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The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy (New French Thought Series)

Gilles Lipovetsky

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In a book full of playful irony and striking insights, the controversial social philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky draws on the history of fashion to demonstrate that the modern cult of appearance and superficiality actually serves the common good. Focusing on clothing, bodily deportment, sex roles, sexual practices, and political rhetoric as forms of "fashion," Lipovetsky bounds across two thousand years of history, showing how the evolution of fashion from an upper-class privilege into a vehicle of popular expression closely follows the rise of democratic values. Whereas Tocqueville feared that mass culture would create passive citizens incapable of political reasoning, Lipovetsky argues that today's mass-produced fashion offers many choices, which in turn enable consumers to become complex individuals within a consolidated, democratically educated society.

Superficiality fosters tolerance among different groups within a society, claims Lipovetsky. To analyze fashion's role in smoothing over social conflict, he abandons class analysis in favor of an inquiry into the symbolism of everyday life and the creation of ephemeral desire. Lipovetsky examines the malaise experienced by people who, because they can fulfill so many desires, lose their sense of identity. His conclusions raise disturbing questions about personal joy and anguish in modern democracy.

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