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Heiko Ernst

Style: the signature of personality

Individuality is a major value in our culture. In order to be distinctive, unique and perhaps even original as a person, we must construct our identity. In so doing, we draw on the rich repertoire of styles and style elements available to us. We develop our own style and are thus able to live out the values and attitudes that are important to us.

Style is the form of self-expression that embraces the whole human being, 'how you come across'. Style is the sum total of one's way of speaking, one's appearance, manner, clothing and accessories, but also of one's preferred tastes and consumer habits. A person's style is the distillation of their visible lifestyle. There is no greater praise than the comment: "He/she's got style!" And what could be worse than the verdict "No style!" or "That's bad style."? What is meant in such cases is always the deviation from one's *own* judgements on values and taste, from one's own way of life or sense of refinement. Yet the negation of style consciousness or the will to pursue a particular style is also a statement: everyone has, whether they like it or not, their own style, even those who supposedly lack style or taste, and even the deliberate style eclectics. Their style is a declaration of intent as well: this is me, this is my philosophy of life. Whether it be with nonchalance or defiance, they too are showing who they belong to, who they want to please.

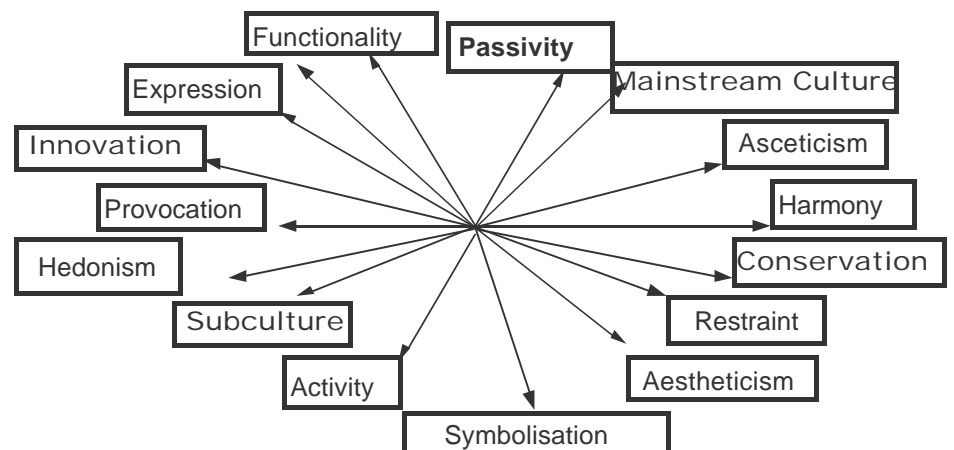
Style is for instance the *fashion statement* one makes: one's choice

one's choice of clothes signals desired or actual membership of a social group. The business management student wears a suit and tie, the managing director's assistant a Jil Sander suit, and the ageing hippy (or someone who always wanted to be a hippy) still wears baggy jeans and long hair at the age of 50. The pensioner wears beige and sand-coloured poplin jackets – a sartorial look, typical of the age group, which stands for inconspicuousness and conformity.

Style is to varying degrees the careful, conscious design of one's own environment: the way the home is furnished – Ikea, a style mix of inherited pieces and hyper-modern items, austerity, rustic homeliness; style also applies to the car: a sporty little number, a large family saloon, jeep, mini; or one's taste in music – Heavy Metal or Mozart, Abba or jazz.

A person's style is expressed not least via their philosophy of life: ascetic or

The fundamental style dimensions





In Pursuit of one's own style

**A guide to tracking down your form of self-expression.
This is based on the questionnaire for the style biography research**

1. Home Living

Where would you most like to live? Why?

What's important to you when choosing a residential area?

How is your home structured? (Strict separation of rooms or open-plan?)

Which rooms and objects are particularly important to you?

How would you characterise the way your home is furnished and the principles behind the way it is laid out? (Functional, homely, expressive...)

What would you organise differently if circumstances allowed (structural limitations, landlord's stipulations, finances, etc.)?

What would your ideal home look like?

How has your style of home living developed? (Earlier dwellings, starting with the parental home.)

The influences: who or what influenced the layout? Where do you get your ideas?

2. Technology

How technically advanced is the various equipment in your household? (Entertainment electronics, kitchen equipment, computer, etc.)

How significant is this technology for you? (Necessary evil, hobby, toy, comfort...)

How do you deal with technical progress? (Biographical development with regard to technology, renewal of equipment, usual ways of obtaining information...)

3. The car

What type of car do you drive – and why this one in particular?

What does the car mean to you?

What is your notion of the ideal car – and what compromises are you making at the moment?

What is your 'car biography' like? (Developments in your choice of car type and your taste. How are things likely to continue: what type of car would you like to drive?)

4. THE MEDIA

Where do you get your information?

Which media do you use for entertainment purposes?

Where do you get your information from and which topics interest you?

How has the biography of your media behaviour developed – i.e. your habits as an adolescent/when studying, subscriptions, gradual fading out of certain information, etc.?

5. WORK

What is your work situation at the moment? (Satisfied/unsatisfied? The profession of your choice? Job merely as a source of income? Where does work rank in your life? Further ambitions?...)

How has your work biography developed? (Training, goals and wishes of one's youth, coincidences and setting the course, change of direction...)

6. LEISURE

What do you do in your leisure time? (Passive and/or active, alone and/or with others, switching off and/or discovering something new, improving your mind and/or fun...)

Why? What is your motivation?

What else would you like to do?

What is the ratio of leisure time to work?

7. CLOTHES

What are you wearing at the moment? It is typical for you?

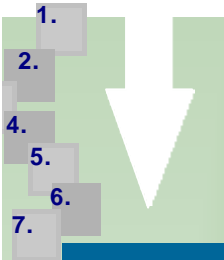
What are your favourite items of clothing, and what is it about them that you particularly like?

What would you never wear?

What role do clothes and fashion play in your life? Do you bother with fashions and trends?

Have you found your style – or are you still experimenting?

How do you get information and where do you shop?



8. THE SYNOPSIS:

How was your style created?

What do the different style areas have in common, and how do they differ?

What areas are particularly important and interesting for you?

In what area have you found your style? Where are you still experimenting?

How would you characterise your style? What do you vehemently reject? (Functionality vs. decoration; individuality vs. conformity or neutrality; emotionality vs. rationality; retro, timeless or futuristic elements; uniform style or a style mix...)

Are there any subcultures that you found particularly interesting or that shaped you in any way?

Who influenced your style and how: parents, siblings, friends, colleagues, partner, children...?

What phases in your style development can you identify? When did you find your own style? Which aspects of it are temporary, and which are timeless? What is variable and what is invariable?

If you could live in a different era, which would you choose to live in? Why?

What was the last trend that you followed? In what area?

How do you rate the style conduct of other people, above all younger people?

hedonistic, stoic or pragmatic, existentialist or rigorous.

Is personal style a product of coincidences, is it shaped by the zeitgeist, or is it a purely subjective matter of taste for which there is no accounting? How does it come about, this thing we identify as a person's style? And how changeable or stable is it within the course of a lifetime? *Psychologie Heute* commissioned the Mannheim **Institute of market and trend research Sommer Research** to examine these questions.

Under the working title 'Style Biographies: The Development of Personal Taste', the Institute, supervised by **Carlo Michael Sommer, a professor of psychology, and Sabine Hildebrandt, a graduate in social science**, conducted a qualitative study in which it surveyed a broad spread of people in Berlin and Mannheim by means of in-depth interviews. Prior to the interviews, each of the respondents had prepared a collage which was intended to gather together the

elements of their own respective style composition. Here we present the major findings and observations from this piece of research.

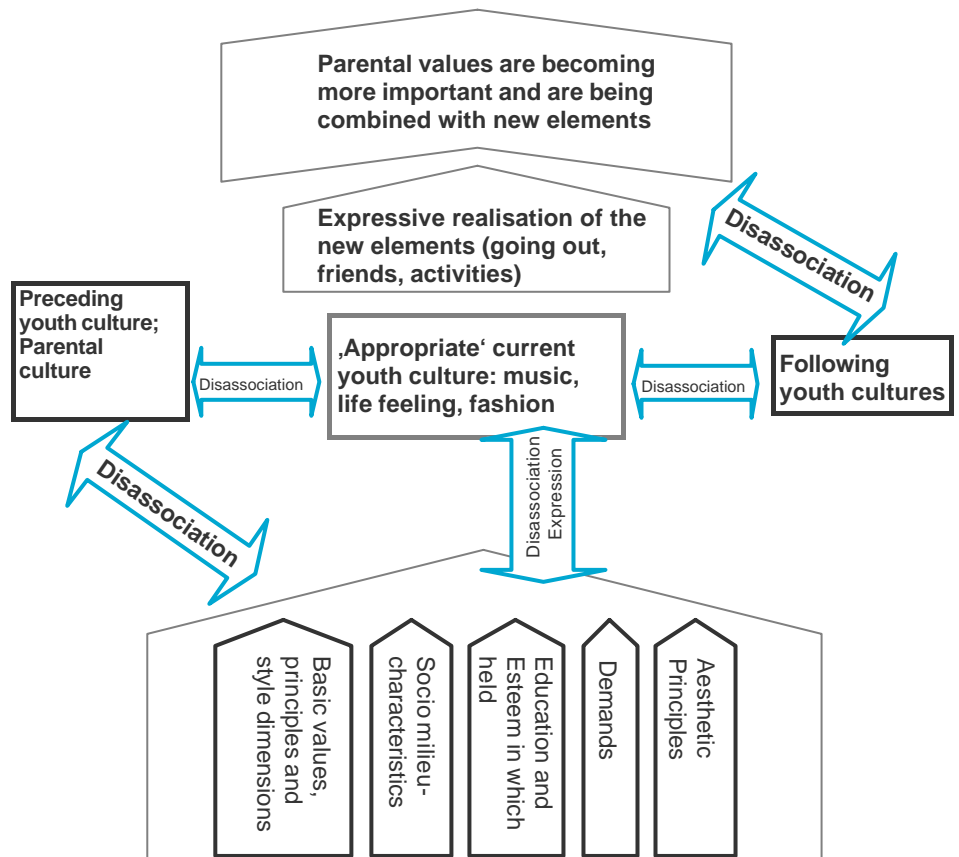
THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE:

"I want to make something of my own out of what's on offer"

Analysis of the style biography concentrated on the four main fields of expression in which a personal style comes about:

- Fashion and music: a person's choice of clothes and music generally represents their earliest opportunity to symbolise in a readily identifiable way their allegiance to a particular lifestyle group. Both style of dress and musical preferences can be *tried out* and *consumed* without any obligation to internalise certain principles and attitudes. The choice of a rock band or a fashion label is demonstrative and yet can be rescinded.
- 'Home living' creates a stylistic world of symbolism in which others can partake. From their style of home

Development of personal style





The interior design of a flat says much about the values of the owner

living it is possible on the one hand to tell a person's values and principles (such as security, domesticity, modernity or functionality); on the other hand it is less expressive or 'missionary' than, say, one's political commitment or artistic self-expression. Home living is the non-public or only semi-public part of stylistic expression, and is naturally only revealed to relatively few, selected individuals.

- Attitudes to work and leisure: basic attitudes to life are expressed in these areas. One's own degree of self-determination becomes apparent – where does someone become committed, and with what principles? Two of the respondents described their situation in the following terms: "I want to belong to the decision-makers, I want to make things happen." Or: "For a long time I indulged in the luxury of ignoring the

material side of things. Now at long last want to live and have fun, I've been living from hand to mouth for long enough." By going to certain places and undertaking certain leisure activities one expresses a sense of belonging – gyms, clubs, bars, restaurants and so forth. And in this way, lifestyle communities are created which one can 'plug into' by means of a chosen style.

- Artistic and/or political self-expression is the part of personal style that goes beyond the demonstration of taste, preferences and lifestyle. It is the most deeply rooted and 'long-term' part of individuality and occasionally stands in distinct contrast to the aesthetic/harmonious celebration of styles.

It is one's own conviction that is the yardstick for value judgements and according to which the environment is often organised or changed with missionary zeal.

THE PHASES OF STYLE FORMATION „Punk. das war endlich was anderes als dieser Pink-Floyd-Kram!“

The research showed: individual style comes about through direct confrontation with the lifestyle led by the family of origin, and secondly through absorption of zeitgeist influences which tend more to be imparted. In this process what is important is one's experience of the way in which one's parents, the previous generation and peer groups deal with

this zeitgeist. The formation of style takes place in five phases :

- In the initial, fundamental phase (up to the age of ten), one's own person is defined ("I was always the princess/ the Cinderella") and the values and principles of the more immediate environment (parents, siblings, teachers) are taken on board subconsciously – i.e. fundamental view of the world, values of one's social milieu, basic dimensions of style. These formative influences provide the framework for one's further style biography and it is subsequently almost impossible to revise them.

- As youngsters in the reorientation phase (lasting from the age of ten into one's teens), we seek new orientations that we predominantly find in our own age group, a new 'value community'; this group is more in touch with the zeitgeist and they pay more attention to it. There may well be certain superficial discontinuities here, but the basic orientation remains stable. A gradual disassociation from one's parents now begins to take place ("Things were always untidy in our home. I knew early on that I didn't like that."). Adolescents not only disassociate themselves from their parents, but also from the preceding youth culture. These years mark the so-called 'formative experience of an age cohort' (see illustration on page 23).

- The individualisation phase extends from one's teens into one's early twenties: the significance of parents is now severely diminished; new friends and acquaintances influence the formation of one's individual style, and there is a range of different youth (sub) cultures which offer opportunities for identification – although this individualisation also comes about through disassociating oneself from these new peer groups: "My friends and I listen to very different music. I wouldn't want it any other way."

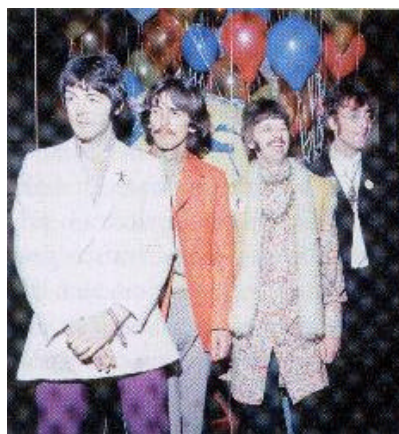
Why we like listening to Oldies so much:

„They're playing our song!“

Anyone who grew up in the Fifties can still recall the hits of that period: those escapist songs about an idealised world of faraway places (whose prototype is *Caprifischer / Fishermen of Capri*) which provided incidental music for our parents' generation as they worked away on the 'economic miracle'. But then a constant stream of new musical styles and trends appeared, from the Anglo-Saxon world in particular, and they shaped the way post-war generations felt about being alive: from Elvis Presley and Bill Haley via the Beatles, Stones and their imitators to BAP, Abba, Michael Jackson and Peter Maffay. Within a short space of time, a piece of popular music was relegated to the status of an oldie, and this is still happening; the mass of recyclable music is increasing every decade. Radio programmes full of oldies and oldie events (the 'revivals' genre) have meanwhile become part of what's routinely on offer. What constitutes the special appeal of 'golden oldies'? Why do people want to hear 'their' hits again and again? The 'oldies aesthetic' comprises the following components:



- When they were still fresh, oldies accompanied the transition of a certain age group from adolescence to adulthood. They offered opportunities for identification in the sensitive phases when one was developing one's own style.
- Oldies are forever linked with the specific historical situation in which they were heard for the first time: they mark the beginning of a listener's personal identity; the music reminds him or her of how they developed a feeling for places and times in their biography.
- Oldies, as 'inner classics', embrace an established repertoire of texts, characters, melodies, and reminiscences. They provide the soundtrack to our life because they preserve important emotional moments and leitmotifs from our most restless period – youth.
- Oldies are essentially mini-operas: using words which are sung, hits and pop songs tackle, with almost cliched exaggeration, the important movements and feelings of a period and combine them with catchy music. Purely instrumental hits hardly ever become oldies. It is the essence of oldies that they are inextricably tied to a certain time: my oldie isn't your oldie. Anyone who was aged between 15 and 25 when *Yesterday*, *all my troubles seemed so far away* was sung, along with *Liebeskummer lohnt sich nicht (It's not worth worrying about love)* or *I can't get no satisfaction* is part of this. Those who came before or afterwards don't share this special feeling.



Oldies are the product of the mass media; they link the lives of millions and thus delineate a generation's style and the way they feel about being alive.

The most important forms of personal expression – especially in fashion and music – are now recognisable in a nutshell and are gradually taking shape

- In the expressive phase, which roughly continues until one's late twenties, the individual style elements become fixed to form one's own distinctive expression: the first home of one's own is usually furnished during this period, and the process of breaking away from the parental home is concluded: "I've drifted further and further to the left, much to the annoyance of my father." Lifestyle groups are very important now, and they are the almost exclusive source of important influences. A new language develops – cutting links with the preceding generation. This is the most expressive and intensive phase, and one's newly found style is lived out in a demonstrative manner.

- Between the late twenties and mid-thirties, the expressive phase gradually gives way to the establishing phase. With the assumption of responsibility, one's style life becomes more inwardly oriented; young adults are predominantly concerned about getting on in their profession, and they retire 'within their own four walls'. Deciding what to wear and the public display of one's own convictions and tastes duly become less important than, for instance, equipping one's home and nurturing an intimate social life within one's circle of friends and acquaintances: "I don't have to go wild any more. Nowadays I prefer being with people you can have a proper conversation with." In this phase, the now 'stylistically assured' already frequently manifest an uncomprehending attitude towards the new wave of youth cultures. People who defined themselves via the Punk or Gothic movements merely shake their heads about "brainless ravers"; any identification with younger people is no longer possible. New influences from outside are only assimilated if they fit one's own style. And, almost imperceptibly, one's lifestyle once again becomes closer to that of one's parents...

THE TYPOLOGY OF STYLES

"As a matter of principle I don't watch films which are interrupted by advertising!"

Five clearly distinguishable style types emerged during the investigation of areas of style and the development of style:

The Fashion-Oriented. This style essentially consists in remaining open – or at any rate more open than the other types – to new things in individual areas of style (fashion, furniture, and music). This openness has already been internalised as an important value in the fundamental phase of style formation. This type of person is, for example, what marketing-speak refers to as an *early adopter*: always ready to test innovative products, for instance in the fields of communications or entertainment electronics. New products and accessories are integrated into one's own sense of style, so long as they are compatible with more deeply rooted values and principles. However, even among the Fashion-Oriented the 'window' for influences stemming from new youth cultures is closed – what's taken on board are the new ideas and products offered by the 'adult' market: "I get information about fashion, hairstyles and furnishing ideas from *Brigitte*. The décor changes every once in a while."

The Ego-expressives. This group's will to pursue a certain style has one objective above all others: to highlight their own individuality and identity. Ego-expressives are almost unremittently concerned about positive or negative disassociation. They would like to be regarded as original or 'unusual' personalities. For this reason, elements reflecting the zeitgeist are used only in order to position oneself even more clearly as authentic and distinctive. This profiling of one's own style can above all be observed in clothing, the living out of artistic and aesthetic interests, or also in the way one arranges one's home: "I love

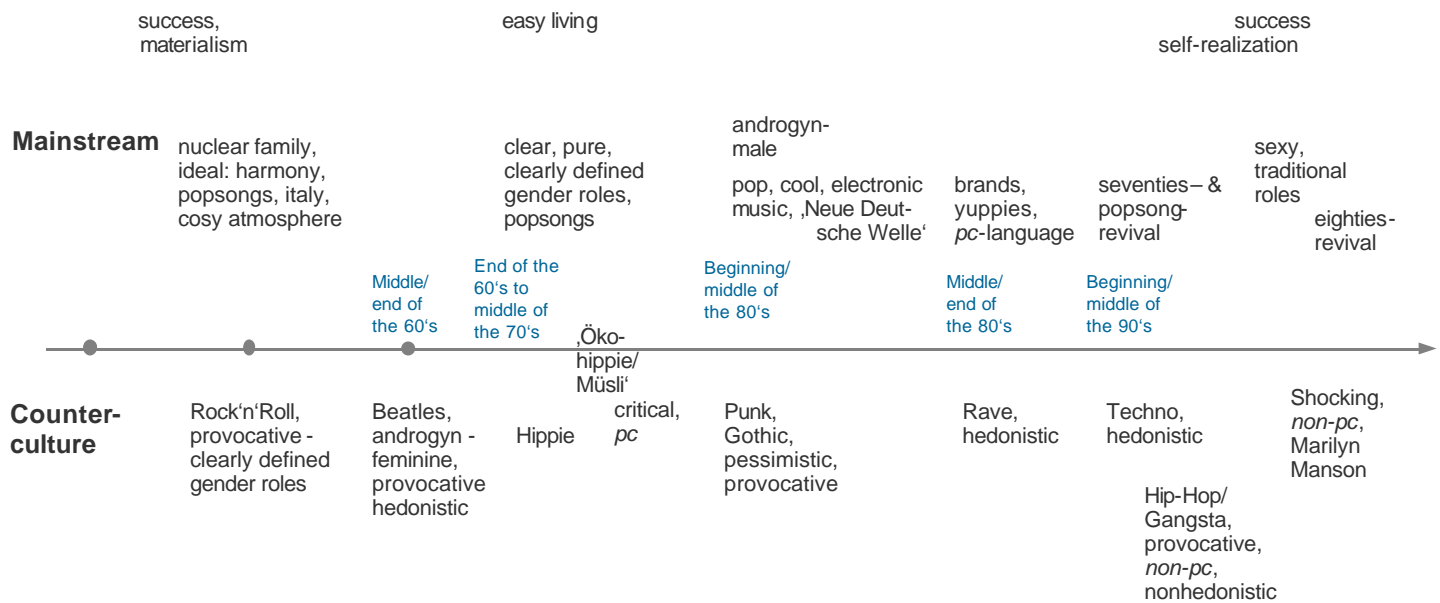


**At the age of
35 one has
found one's own style — definitely**

Africa...they're my colours"; "I like beautiful fragrances. It's important that people should recognise me by my fragrance." Ego-expressives themselves often become trend-setters and trail-blazers for others.

The Keepers of the Zeitgeist. Anyone with a tendency towards this expression of style has adopted the style elements and zeitgeist of the expressive phase as their own style, and they preserve it for the rest of their life. This group has a fair amount of difficulty finding its style: it is recognised as being an important task in personal self-stylising, and a great deal of time and effort is duly devoted to acquiring style. More than is the case with the other groups, for the *Keepers* style signals adherence to a specific lifestyle group and its 'philosophy': "Everything I still think is good and important today, right down to my clothing, has stuck with me from my

Social influences on style formation



my twenties: protecting the environment, solidarity with others, and so forth..." Keepers are fairly immune to the influences of the new zeitgeist.

The Functionally Oriented. Sensible, practical, good – the style motto of this group might thus be reduced to its lowest common denominator. Its members make style-related decisions based on considerations of usefulness and functionality, and they reject any excess of design and fashion as superfluous. This in no way means that *Functionals* are joyless, frugal or abstemious; they simply derive nothing from pretentious and status-oriented superficiality: "Trends and fashions have no role to play in my choice of clothes – the most important thing is that they should be comfortable and last well."

Functionally Orienteds demonstrate and communicate their rationality as the core of their identity – for example, via inconspicuous, classic clothes, via the purchase of 'sensible' cars and useful objects, but also via the deliberate use of new technologies such as computers, e-mail and fax, so long as they satisfy the criterion of being 'practical'.

The Ascetics. They dispense with the manifold outward opportunities of profiling or projecting oneself; for them, fashion, clothes and consumption are more of a necessary evil: "I'd never buy myself a new television. I find technology too much of a strain. After all, plain or second-hand sets do the job too." Quite simply, the game of devising a positive image for oneself using aesthetic means give them no pleasure: "Style is when you don't do something in the most conspicuous way possible". Their self-expression tends to occur in activities: for example, in writing, work, or involvement in politics. Their system of personal values revolves around modesty, simplicity, seriousness and security. These five types represent the fundamental style dimensions upon which we position ourselves. Individual style is a key value in a person's life – something that is established and defended with energy and inner conviction. No matter how many influences play a role in the emergence of a style, and no matter how extremely different and diverse the individual end-forms of the styles may appear, there are obviously some hidden basic patterns and laws in accordance with which each formation of style runs its course:

- Personal style is an amalgam of the values that are shaped and the lifestyles that are experienced in the parental home, together with later influences that we 'open ourselves up to' or search out in the phase of cutting ties with the parental home. Only those elements that do not contradict the deeply rooted values system are fused into the individual style amalgam.
- Style is also a question of generations: only at specific times are we particularly receptive to the influences of the zeitgeist. Style is decisively shaped in the 'sensitive phases' of re-orientation and individualisation. The windows subsequently close forever, and new fashions and trends are only further 'admitted' very selectively and in small doses.
- For each of the five style types that have been identified, this shaping process runs its course with remarkable consistency alongside the biographic phases.
- Just one zeitgeist in every case, which means: a youth culture can have a lasting influence on style. This culture 'ages' along with its devotees; at first it becomes more expressive, then it establishes itself in a watered-down and milder form and becomes 'my style'.