

## On Dressing Up or Down

It was back in my childhood days that I first heard the expression: “The cowl does not make the monk.” Nowadays one does not hear it often repeated; perhaps because very few monks are walking about dressed in cowls. On the other hand, one does hear expressions that seem to contradict its timeless folk wisdom, such as “Clothes make the man” and “Dressed to kill”. These latter aphorisms express quite accurately the *Zeitgeist* when it comes to dress etiquette. Today, all VIP’s walking the red carpet before entering the Dolby Theatre for the Oscars, as well as their predatory paparazzi, seem to care more about displaying their *Dolce Gabbana* gowns or *Tom Ford* tuxedos than about who gets the coveted statuette.

Coming back briefly to monk-wear, today one never sees the highest religious authorities dressing down to emulate their prophets. Has the Pope ever down anything resembling what Saint Peter wore as a humble fisherman in Galilee? Or the Dalai Lama ever appear in public dressed in Gautama’s saffron-tinted rag-patchwork robes?

Though somewhat more muted, the same applies to the political plane. Whether at the G-20 or at Davos summits, the leaders of our ragged planet dare not dress down even as it concerns their silken pajamas. Aware that a picture is worth a thousand words, they put considerably more effort on their wardrobe than into the content of their treaties and speeches.

Many dictators of the last two centuries learned the lesson well and literally dress to kill in their culturally-sensitive apparel (e.g., the late Muammar Gaddafi) or in their be-medaled uniforms. (The best-dressed military man awards would undoubtedly go to the officers of the *Waffen-SS*.) Of course, a criminal who’s dressed to kill can literally get away with murder.

By the way, exemplifying the mesmerizing power of military uniforms, Wikipedia defines “Dressing down” as: *“An especially severe, highly formalized, and often public form of military discipline incident to reduction in rank or, in extreme cases, complete dismissal via the ceremony of degradation. To amplify the already-severe punishment inherent in a reduction in rank, the authorities imposing it may confirm it in a ceremony whose form is analogous to that of a promotion ceremony in that its participants remove the uniform's existing rank insignia and replace that insignia with the insignia of the soldier's new, lesser/lower rank; the degradation ceremony has traditionally involved stripping both rank insignia and all other military insignia from the uniform.”*

Who now remembers Hans Christian Andersen’s tale “The Emperor’s new Clothes” – a warning to vain kings never to forget their fundamental underlying nakedness?

This lesson was at the very core of my generation's policy of thoroughly dressing down. We were trying to be radically honest about who we were... "What you see is what you get" was one of our mottos. As Bob Dylan then sang: "Even the President of the United States sometimes must have to stand naked." The youth of the so-called "sixties" –which only really lasted from 1963 to 1969– rejected many of the values of earlier generations, among them the prevailing rigid bourgeois dress codes. Our revolution went even as far down as the underwear level; believing that the best underwear is no underwear whatsoever. (My personal hero was Mahatma Gandhi who dared to visit the Lord Viceroy of India wearing nothing but a dhoti loincloth.) Women threw away their girdles and burnt their bras. Blue jeans became de rigueur; and tie-dyed T-shirts replaced the official white shirt and necktie. We bought our clothes at the Army Surplus store –hence the bell-bottom pants discarded by the Navy.

Public nudity was the inevitable result, as witnessed by the Woodstock hippies dancing in the mud footage we've all seen ad nauseam. Alas! By the seventies, the all-mighty Market had all but assimilated our minimalist dress culture, feeding it back to all posers in the form of glam rock regalia or pre-ripped jeans.

Of course, you'll say all this is not new: This cyclical dialectic of dressing up and dressing down has been a recurrent fact of fashion life for many centuries. To mention just one example, witness what happened to the aristocrat's flamboyant wardrobe after the French Revolution and the rise of the Tiers-État, when pants replaced silken culottes. Indeed, what the well-dressed man wears today is a derivation of what the French working man wore in 1800 –the necktie being nothing but an inefficient scarf.

How far back do you want to go? Could Cleopatra have seduced Mark Anthony or Julius Caesar had she not saunter about in perfumed diaphanous robes and precious jewels? Could Fidel Castro's revolution have succeeded had he entered Havana in 1959 appareled in an eggshell-white *Drill 100* linen suit and wearing a Panama hat like some banana republic presidente wannabe?

As we slowly approach the third decade of this millennium, the complex layering of this dressing-up / dressing-down oscillation requires a fashion anthro-geologist to decipher the meaning of all these strata, depositing arrogance over rebellion and masquerade over brutal honesty. Today, descendants of former slaves wear expensive gangsta rapper bling-bling, while lily-white retro-feminists wrap their heads in Palestinian scarves like improvised hijabs.

Postmodernist ideologues would probably say that we can never go back to a simpler time of honest dress, and that those that try to dress down deserve a good dressing down by their contemporaries. As for me, I caution everyone I meet to beware of wolves in sheep's clothing, and not to let him or herself be taken in by the lifestyle of the rich and famous. As Diogenes said to Alexander the Great when the well-dressed emperor asked him what he wanted: "Step aside: you're blocking the sun."