IN SEARCH OF THE MODERN-DAY DANDY: MAKEOVER GAMES

OLGA VAINSHTEIN

Marres/Centrum voor Contemporaine Cultuur
Maastricht, 2006

Dandyism resembles the setting sun: like the dying luminary, it is magnificent, devoid of warmth, and full of melancholy.
Charles Baudelaire

Who in all sincerity can be called a modern-day dandy? How to describe the haughtiness of the lanceurs, of the charismatic fops, the arrogantly vulnerable heirs of Beau Brummell? A leader of society; an English gentleman; a devotee of sartorial minimalism; an aesthete interior designer; a darling of high society who sometimes plays risky games; a flaneur; a cleanliness fanatic; an aesthete; a connoisseur of perfumes – each image of the dandy has the allure of deceptive clarity. Yet despite its illusory simplicity, the question never fails to catch you off guard,

Today, a dandy is usually taken to mean simply someone who is *stylish*, or, as the English say, *cool*. But what is *style*? It can be manifested in a person's overall appearance, and in the ability to furnish a home, and in deliberate camp manoeuvres, and in the art of the complete makeover, although for the majority the most stable criterion traditionally remains the way one dresses. This was the dominant approach in the twentieth century, which made clothing the principal source of semiotic information. It is probably better to begin not by extrapolating from individuals, but by taking a close look at the ranks of the pretenders.

In the first half of the twentieth century it was still possible with little effort to identify people who continued the tradition of classical dandyism: the writers Marcel Proust, Ronald Firbank and Vladimir Nabokov, Count Boni de Castellane, the Prince of Wales (the later King Edward VIII). For a long time in England Quentin Crisp (1908-1999) was considered the number one dandy. Aesthete, writer, and journalist, he was incredibly popular, and there is a wax figure of him at Madame Tussaud's. Despite his varied interests, Quentin's principal creation was said to be his own lifestyle, which was entirely unique and consisted in an ironical dandyism with a good dose of camp. His witticisms were quoted everywhere, and the television programme *An Evening with Quentin Crisp* invariably topped the ratings.

Based on the very approximate criterion of *cool*, dandies of recent decades would include people of such disparate styles as the photographer Cecil Beaton, the dramatist Noel Coward, the writer Tom Wolfe, the musician Eric Clapton, Prince Charles, the singer Ann Lennox, David Bowie… the list goes on and on.

Contemporary dandies, if they are seriously to claim the *title*, need above all to recognize that genuine dandyism is a lifestyle. The dandy is a master at completely shaping his own life. Appreciation of this shape, however, requires a mature society; for otherwise its aesthetic potential will not be interpreted adequately.

In the nineteenth century dandyism originally implied a kind of leisure; the dandy, after all, embodies *idle elegance*. Most dandies, therefore, were aristocrats and wealthy gentlemen or representatives of the artistic professions. As it evolved in the nineteenth century, the dandy's lifestyle demanded constant training in the art of spending free time. The dandy's code of behaviour was difficult but absolutely mandatory, prescribing cold politeness and outbursts of irony, imperturbability – nil admirari: be surprised at nothing, – the art of frustrating expectations and instantly creating an impression, measured épatage, leisureliness as a style of strolling, dancing, and dressing.

Finally, we must not forget the corporal aspect of dandyism as manifested in impeccable hygiene and grooming, activeness in sports – effete aesthetes being the lone exception, – habitual gracefulness at social events, recall the scene in Proust's novel where the Countess of Guermantes elegantly takes Marcel by the arm, the art of dancing and horseback riding.

Even a simple list of these basic features of dandyism suggests that the entire complex is impossible to be reproduced today – our life has changed too much. First of all, most contemporary trendy dressers have to work and thus have limited time for elegant leisure. In the workplace it is mainly clothes that manifest he dandy's taste, whence the popular limited understanding of the dandy as imply someone who is tastefully dressed. The present post-modern age demands an accelerated pace of life and constant role switching. Contemporary dandyism is manifested perhaps most of all in the art of completely transforming external appearances, that is, the various means by which individuals change their personal style and ultimately their way of life. It is the art of the make-over in all its possible variations, the ability to change masks, poses and decors, to behave according to a given situation and desired scenario. Thus the late nineteenth-century aesthete and dandy Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac (1855-1921) liked to arrange lavish masquerade balls at which the women dressed as Marie Antoinette's shepherdesses and the host arrayed himself variously as Louis XIV, Louis of Bavaria, or Plato. Invitations were sent out on vellum paper, and the count personally saw to all the details of the menu, the house and garden decorations, the entertainment programme, and the fireworks. Montesquiou's adeptness at making striking changes in appearance is also evident in photographs, where he appears now as the Sun King, now as an oriental sheikh, now as an automobile driver in a leather jacket. These were genuine metamorphoses, journeys in time and space through skilful reincarnations. The ideology of the dandyist make-over is based on a very essential principle of nineteenth-century dandyism, namely complete *chameleonism*. The chameleonic dandy transforms his life into a self-fashioning workshop, designing not only his outer appearance and roles, but also his scenarios, situations, and material surroundings. The dandy's chameleo nic transformations are implemented through the principle of artificiality that is so characteristic of European decadence. For the aesthete, the artificial is always preferable to the natural – recall Oscar Wilde's aphorism: *The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has yet found out.* Following this logic the writers and dandies Théophile Gautier, Baudelaire, and later Sir Max Beerbohm wrote essays in praise of cosmetics. Cosmetics and outer looks function as a removable guise, a convenient mask, an occasion for an elegant theatricalized game. The experienced dandy uses the makeover to manipulate opinion, while laughing deep down at the gullible interpreters of his appearance.

The notion of chameleonism in nineteenth-century culture is connected with Romantic irony. The insightful philosopher Friedrich Schlegel regarded Romantic irony as the highest manifestation of human freedom. As he writes in his famous *Athenaeum Fragment 108*: It is the freest of all freedoms, for it enables us to rise above ourselves, and at the same time it is the most natural, for it is absolutely necessary. It is an extremely good sign that harmonious banality does not know what to think of this constant self-parody, when again and again it is necessary to believe, then not to believe, until finally its head swims and it no longer takes jokes seriously and seriousness as jokes. [1]

The dandy does not except himself from irony. For him it is a necessary part of his constant inner training in the ability to switch. In the intellectual sense it requires mastery of all registers of knowledge. As Schlegel observes: *A genuinely free and well-educated man must be able at will to tune himself philosophically or a philologically, critically or poetically, historically or rhetorically, as an ancient or a contemporary, entirely arbitrarily, like a musical instrument – at any time and in any key/to any tone.* [2]

This ideal of self-control presumes at once both a kind of instrumentality or view of oneself as an object, and the haughty self-consciousness of a subject who personally invents and plays out life-roles. Romantic irony, while it notes the inescapable contradiction between the infinite creative intentions of the subject and his limited possibility of realizing them, nonetheless sometimes allows for a view from the outside or at least for the illusion of it.

From the inside it is a mood regarding everything from above and rising infinitely above everything that is conditional, including one's own art, virtue, or genius. [3]

This *transcendental buffoonery*, as Schlegel calls it, presumes continuous self-con-

trol and organically implies a certain measure of cynicism, since in such an arrangement the ethical imperative is only one of the possible systems for the ironic chameleon. Following this logic to its conclusion the chameleonic dandy maintains a certain impersonality to guarantee future transformations and possible makeovers. Writing in the early nineteenth century, John Keats called this aesthetic principle of the *poet-chameleon's* impersonality *negative capability*. Negative capability makes it possible to identify with any point of view and create any image. At first it may seem strange – what artist suddenly and voluntarily parts with his own presumed original view of things? A closer look, however, reveals that the principle of aesthetic chameleonism and impersonality is essentially very close to the notion of Romantic irony. It was not for nothing that Schlegel also wrote about the necessity of an *empty place* (Leerstelle) in the soul.

What are the possibilities for dandyism in today's field of chameleonic transformations and sophisticated makeover games? These included the performances of contemporary conceptualist artists, experimental interior design, and risky plastic surgery dictated by the quest for the perfect body – culturally relative though it be. Yet even if we were to imagine someone intent upon being be a dandy in absolutely all respects, it is hardly reasonable to play the role 24 hours a day. For today's dandy it is more natural to undertake transformations in individual genres according to the situation by, for example, playing a nineteenth-century dandy for an evening out dressed in a tuxedo or tails and with careful attention to the entire ensemble, like a quotation from the classics in a postmodernist novel, or by demonstrating dandyist erudition in collecting antiques. Other occasions for displaying such skills might include impudent wittiness at a dinner party or avant-garde minimalist design in a country house. Finally, there is also the old dandy role of *master of ceremonies* and the possibility to think of oneself as a modern-day Alcibiades.

Virtuoso chamelonism seems to facilitate getting into the role, but it is important not to lose sight of the illusoriness of the effect. Baudelaire's aphorism about the magnificence of the setting sun is relevant here – in that perspective nineteenth-century dandyism in fact appears to be a special atmospheric effect: a condensate of colour flickering in the air, a soft, rare rainbow that melts away quickly and without a trace. We must then inevitably reconcile ourselves to the thought that given today's commercialism and brutal standardization, the dandy as a historical type is doomed to disappear. Only the viability of the cultural code of nineteenth-century dandyism makes it possible to avoid such an uncomforting conclusion. Paradoxical as it may seem, this code contains everything necessary for reproducing the dandy style.

The Technologies of Dandyism

In the discourse of nineteenth-century dandyism – including dress, way of life, and chameleonism – certain technologies were developed which assured the smooth functioning of the dandy style, even in the form of individual genre elements. The four most important such technologies were as follows.

1) Dandyism arose as the wave of Modernity swept over society, when fixed professional and social roles had broken down and upward mobility and the ability to adapt and switch had become a condition for success. The principle of chameleonism legitimized changes of masks and helped ambitious young people – the prototypes of today's yuppies – move upward, while the strategy of effective self-presentation is still the basis of any competent public relations campaign. The inner connection between dandyism and modernity is evident in the fact that today as well dandyism is inseparable from modern urban culture and all its institutions – cafes, advertising, the glossies, and shopping.

2) Another mechanism is the ability to keep a distance that emphasizes dignity. This is a fundamental characteristic of fashion leaders. The dandy is a marginal figure who can take a position in the centre but will never mix with the masses. This position finds maximum expression in the code of aristocratism. The dandy always skilfully underscores his membership in an elite minority, whether the closed circle of the aristocracy or Bohemia. This is the source of the cold politeness that can instantly change to irony. Inaccessibility, snobbery, and the strategies of refusal are the instruments for maintaining an estranging distance. De Guermantes did not immediately invite the young Marcel into their home, and Beau Brummell was a master at n*ot noticing* unsuitable people. Similarly, one must not give Derrida a *quick read* in order to show off at an intellectual gathering, but instead must begin with Husserl and Heidegger.

Connected with this is the standard criticism of vulgarity as consisting first of all in easy accessibility and second, excessively crude and direct strategies to create an impression. A liking for proverbs and loud colours in one's dress – an attribute of vulgarity according to Lord Chesterfield – are like head-on advertising, whereas in our day indirect approaches are far more effective.

3) Dandyism has mastered the strategy of objectifying the personality and transforming an individual style into marketable goods. This strategy is connected above all with a special kind of visualization: the dandy knows how to look at others and to stand up under their looks. He is even especially attuned to this objectifying look, creating *to be looked at* situations when out on a stroll, at a ball, in the parlour, sitting by the window of a club. An unhurried gait and *immobile* face are evidence of self-control and personal dignity. Dandyism is a special bodily meditation requiring a *reduced tempo* and fixed pose. The body inside the dandy's clothing is intended for *penetrating glances* and is prepared to withstand them with dignity. Here is where hygiene and sports come in. Most important of all, however, is to demonstrate an individual style, whether in clothing or in original accessories. And it is not so much a matter of the clothes themselves as the ability to wear them naturally. Oscar Wilde's dress was already halfway to the aesthetics of camp – it is a style deliberately created to be imitated.

4) Aesthetic minimalism. First described by the English dandy George Brummell as the principle of *conspicuous inconspicuousness* in dress, minimalism became a universal criterion of reserved expressiveness, in which the functional construction and geometry of the basic form stripped of superfluous embellishment come to the fore. It can initially be compared with the ascetic art of refusal and estranged distancing in high society transferred to the sphere of aesthetics. The rhetorical equivalent of minimalism is the genre of the aphorism. Minimalism triumphed in twentieth-century culture: suffice it to recall black-and-white photography, constructivism in architecture, and cubism in painting.

In conclusion let us examine an important variant of the dandy's art of the make-over consisting in the creation of a special material environment – interior design. As a rule, the nineteenth-century dandy demonstrated his taste not only in clothing but also in décor. The founder of dandyism George Brummell (1778-1840) furnished his London house with elegant boule furniture and collected rare snuff-boxes. Even in exile in France he continued to purchase boule furniture, bronze statuettes, and Sèvres china. His treasures included a rare service decorated with the portraits of the famous mistresses of Louis XIV and Louis XV. On display on a separate table were valuable knick-knacks – snuff-boxes specially ordered in Paris, a marble paperweight that once belonged to Napoleon, miniature paintings, albums, and knives.

Another famous dandy, the Count d'Orsay (1801-1852) was seriously interested in interior design. Each time he bought or rented a new house – Seymour Place, and then Gore House in London – he would take charge of the décor. His close friend Lady Blessington had acquired a large collection of antiquities during a trip to Italy, and they used these rarities to create a noble classical style. The living room and library were adorned with large Sèvres vases, magnificent chandeliers that had once belonged to Marie Antoinette, and corbels trimmed in plates of tortoise shell. Antique statues and busts adorned the niches of the living room, and lying on a table piled with books was a life-size marble copy of Lady Blessington's hand. Small

individual cabinets contained a collection of knick-knacks and curiosities. This collection was displayed in the living room of the house on Seymour Place and not only served a decorative purpose but also was a conversation piece for guests. It included a golden needle case trimmed in agates and diamonds, a rock crystal vial that had belonged to Madame de Sévigné, and Madame Maintenon's pincushion in a frame in the shape of a heart made of gold and enamel. As Lady Blessington wrote in her diary when she bought this pincushion: *it is stuck full of pins like the hearts of the Protestants with thorns after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.* The collection also contained scissors belonging to Madame du Deffan and a beauty spot box owned by Ninon de Lanclos. Through these treasured objects the Count d'Orsay and Lady Blessington not only expressed their aesthetic taste but also unambiguously declared their cultural identity. They thought of themselves as continuing the tradition of the royal court, heirs to famous beauties, courtesans, and influential figures in high society. Participation in the world of the French aristocracy is a semiotic trick that has been used more than once in European dandyism.

Dandyist enthusiasm for interior design culminated toward the end of the nineteenth century with the appearance of the decadents. The famous dandy Robert de Montesquiou, the prototype of the Baron de Charlus in Marcel Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, was known not only for his elegant grey suits, but also for the amazing décor of his homes. *Décor is a state of the soul*, he was fond of saying. He arranged each residence as a special aesthetic space subordinated to the designer's conception. For example, he had a room dedicated to the moon imbued with the spirit of night and decorated in shades of azure and silver. Montesquiou himself describes it as follows in his memoirs: *One wall of the room was dark blue in colour, and in a shaded niche was a chair upholstered in fabric of the same shade; the opposite wall was covered in grey cloth with drawings of cameos, and the wall by the fireplace was done in silvery morocco leather adorned with a branching pattern in light blue; finally, the fourth wall was covered in velvet of a charming grey shade that is usually known as 'Stevens', but in my opinion should more accurately be called 'mousy grey'. On the floor was a dark grey carpet on which played the shadows of semi-transparent gauze hung on the opposite side of the room, creating the illusion of streams of moonlight. The walls were embellished with kakemono and embroidery, and there was a purple iris in a glass vase.*[4]

In his analysis of the symbolism of décor the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard argues that avoidance of vivid colours creates a special stylishness: *Colour … is most often softened to 'shades' and 'nuances'. Gray, lilac, pomegranate, beige – all of these shades are appropriate for velvet, cloth, and atlas, well suited for decors with an abundance of fabrics, curtains, rugs, draperies, heavy materials and 'stylish' forms; the principle of such decors prescribe eschewing both colour and space, but most especially colour, which is too visual and threatens to disturb the closed ness of interior space… black, white, and grey make up not only the zero degree of colour, but also the paradigm of social worth, the displacement of desires and moral 'standing'.* [5]

Thus we see that Montesquiou displayed the same aristocratic taste in both interior design and clothing. When he decorated a room he not infrequently resorted to the language of allegory. Against a background of golden-green morocco in the library, peacock feathers were meant to signify the hundred eyes of knowledge.[6] In the living room, which was stylized as a garden, he laid carpets of a grassy hue and placed on them bronze statuettes of animals. This is a manifestation of European decadence's typical penchant for the artificial. Not for nothing was the aquarium of Des Esseintes, the protagonist of Huysmans' novel *Aganist the Grain* (1884), filled with mechanical fishes. Incidentally, the prototype of Des Esseintes was, as it is not too difficult to guess, none other than Count Robert de Montesquiou. All of the decors described in the novel originated as direct copies of Montesquiou's style.

On prominent display in the Count's room were special glass cases containing neckties in pastel shades and vests, which served both as storage and for decorative purposes as reminders of his dandyism. The owner himself would remark not without aestheticism that from a distance such a case resembled a block of delicately veined marble.

Some of his devices were far ahead of their time. Thus experimenting with the dimensions of the room, he made very innovative use of illumination. Thus instead of tritely using bits of coloured glass to create the effect of rainbow patches of light, he arranged a collection of multi-coloured perfume bottles and goblets on the windowsill as refractors. In his opinion this solution pleasantly stimulated not only sight, but also taste and smell. On another occasion he contrived to create the illusion of movement through an ornament of honeysuckle, whose vines climbed from one wall to another in a single pulsing rhythm. Dances of winding lines are characteristic of Art Nouveau, and Montesquiou's decors quite easily can be considered classics of the style.

One of the rooms in his home was dedicated to mysticism. At one time he was seriously interested in spiritualism and fervently believed in the possibility of communicating with the dead. He used objects from churches, including an oaken choir bench and even a bell. It is this room that is described almost literally in Huysmans' novel as Des Esseintes' study. The ceiling there is covered in sky-blue fabric used for ecclesiastical garments, an old-chapel reading-desk of forged iron serves as a bookstand, and the windows are draped with curtains cut from old stoles of dark and reddish gold neutralized by an almost dead russet woven in the pattern.

The mantelshelf was sumptuously draped with the remnant of a Florentine dalmatica. Between two-gilded, copper monstrances of Byzantine style, originally brought from the old Abbaye-au-Bois de Bièvre, stood a marvellous church canon divided into three separate compartments delicately wrought like lace work. [7]

Churchly objects similarly figure in Des Esseintes' bedroom, which is stylized as a monk's cell, with wax candles and an old-fashioned prayer bench serving as a night table. All of these attributes, of course, were not so much objects of religious contemplation as a decorative device, an occasion for aesthetic reflection. By all appearances, a similar attitude characterized Barbey d'Aurevilly's Catholicism.

So where are these modern-day dandies?, the weary reader is entitled to ask here toward the end. As we can see, in reality it is not so simple to find genuine dandies. Yet in virtual space, where there are far more opportunities for constructing an image of one's own, the task is feasible. Partisans of both the theory and the practice of dandyism can easily find kindred spirits on the net[8], for there are quite a few sites which endlessly refine definitions, analyze canonical texts, and discuss the latest novelties of style.[9]

In the abundance of roles offered by contemporary post-modern culture the originally clear and cold contours of the dandy, alas, are doomed to dissipate. Genuine dandyism, after all, is an ephemeral phenomenon that is slipping out of the networks and lexicons of our pragmatic age. But the game goes on, and the twenty-first century is seeking out new transformations, although it is almost impossible any more to speak without irony, and invisible inverted commas flicker around every word. It was not for nothing that Barbey d'Aurevilly once remarked that the theme of dandyism is too delicate for profound intellects and too profound for delicate natures.

Footnotes

1. F. Shlegel, *Estetika. Filosofiia.Kritika*,t. 1 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1983), p. 287.
2. Ibid., p. 283.
3. Ibidem.
4. See: Favardin, L. Bouxière. *Le dandyisme* (Paris: La Manufacture, 1988), p. 139-140.
5. Zh. Bodriiiar. *Sistema veshchei* (The System of Things) (Moscow: Rudomino, 1995), p. 25.
6. The allusion is to the hundred-eyed Argus, which traditionally symbolized knowledge.

There are the well-known ancient portrayals of Argus the astronomer constantly peering into a telescope. According to Ovid, Hera brought the eyes to Argus on peacock feathers, whence the semantics of hundred-eyed knowledge.
7. J.K. Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, Chapter 1.
8. For one excellent resource, see: www.dandy-ism.net
9. See: www.livejournal.com/communit/refinement/
www.livejournal.com/users/aubreyweirdsley/