Style

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Dear Readers,

Philip Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield, recommended to his son that he read people like books. Why? Because he felt that only those who closely observe the circles in which they move can understand the prevailing customs – and adopt them. In this issue of CREDO, Ijoma Mangold reports that the Earl was only moderately successful in his attempts to initiate his son into the fine art of being a gentleman. This is by no means attributable to the quality of the English statesman’s letters, and was more likely the result of a generation gap: in our Portfolio article, you can learn more about how young people have always developed their own style to differentiate themselves from their elders.

Others keep traditions alive unknowingly. In our Report, we accompany four young Kenyans through Kibera. When they decided they would start dressing in a new and original way, the friends hadn’t been aware that they were actually following in the footsteps of the sapeurs. In an interview, Barbara Vinken explains what fashion means for the individual and above all for society. The subject of our cover story, Shigeru Ban, also has the big picture in mind: whether luxury homes, emergency shelters or museums – with his elegant, environmentally friendly style, the Japanese star architect is considered the good conscience of his profession. Hanspeter Vochezer is also an important figure in his field. The business etiquette expert launched the first butler training at a state-accredited Swiss institute. In the Carte blanche section, he describes how mindset determines one’s personality.

Douglas Murray looks to the future with muted optimism: in an essay about the internet’s influence on the culture of debate, he predicts a new shift towards content. I share this view – and hope that our broad range of content on the subject of style provides you with some thought-provoking insights.

H.S.H. Prince Philipp von und zu Liechtenstein
Chairman LGT
Environmentally friendly, socially exemplary and seductively stylish – the Japanese architect Shigeru Ban is considered the conscience of modern international architecture. His luxury homes, emergency shelters, flagship stores and museums often have one thing in common: cardboard tubes that serve as the supporting structure.

Every few minutes, the bells go off and the barriers go down at Higashi-Matsubara station in Tokyo, almost like a model train set. Then the rail cars clatter past, wedged between wooden houses and concrete office buildings. They shake the surrounding foundations like earthquakes that no one hears or feels anymore – unless things start to sway again like they did in Fukushima, where the shock waves in the capital 350 kilometers away were so strong that refrigerators and bookshelves tipped over.

When the railway barriers are raised, we cross the tracks and stand in front of a two-story building with huge glass panes. A Japanese woman looks up, walks towards us, and asks us to wait in the conference room. She serves cold green tea on a patch of black fabric. “Sensei sugi kimasu” – the master will be with you shortly – she whispers, and we thank her just as quietly saying “arigato”. A steep wooden staircase disappears into the curved ceiling above us. Posters from past Shigeru Ban exhibitions hang on the bare concrete walls, and on the desk is a book featuring the architect’s work – it’s as thick and heavy as a Bible. Then the high priest of style scurries in, wearing a flowing shirt, dressed in black from head to toe. He is a bit rushed, and gets straight to the point. “Six months after the 1995 earthquake in Kobe, many victims were still living in shabby tents. And that in Japan – my rich homeland. 6000 people died. I was shocked!” That disaster made Ban what he is today, 25 years later: a star architect who is drawn to disaster areas such as refugee camps in Congo, villages that have been washed away in Sri Lanka, or...
The magic of bricks and cardboard
the wreckage in Haiti. There, the 63-year-old and his support-
ers construct emergency shelters that meet three criteria: easy
construction, recyclable materials and prudent design. But no
metal containers or dreary plastic barracks that would further
aggravate the situation of the people, who have already suffered
enough psychologically. And if plastic must be used, then plastic
that is already available, and playful, like the colorful Coca Cola
crates he used in the devastated municipality of Daanbantayan,
in the Philippines – filled with sand. Just like that, they provided
a foundation. Among Ban’s role models is the legendary American
architect Louis Kahn. “Listen to the brick!” was his credo, or
in other words, good building material becomes useless if used
where it shouldn’t be. Ban chose this warning as his motto.

An underestimated building material
The architect cautiously lifts the glass bowl from the black fabric
coaster and takes a sip. For those who don’t know the Japanese
architect, their first impression is that of a shy introvert who
likes to study things in detail, a brooder who watches what goes
on in the world with some suspicion. It comes as a surprise,
then, when the master unexpectedly smiles, chuckles, even
laughs: “Who would ever have thought that tent poles could
serve as currency?” After the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, the
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) sent
thousands of tent sets to Congo. Metal is valuable there, and
the poles became a means of barter. Nobody used them to build
shelters, and they took wood from nearby forests instead, re-
sulting in serious environmental damage. “My suggestion was
to use cardboard tubes. And the shelters were then built with
the tools provided,” Ban recalls. “People should have listened to
the brick right away!”

The idea of using PTS (paper tube structure), an often
underestimated building material, came to Ban 35 years ago,
when he ran out of fax paper. He held the empty roll in his
hand. It was almost impossible to bend. Ban rummaged around
for longer and thicker pieces in the waste discarded by textile
shops and carpet dealers. He calculated their load capacity and
came to the conclusion that they could also be used to build
multi-story houses – in a cheaper, lighter, more environmentally
friendly way. Five years later, in 1990, paper tubes were ap-
proved as a building material in Japan – thanks to Ban. Many of
his temporary and permanent constructions made of pressboard
have become classics: Paper Church in Kobe, Paper Gallery in
Tokyo for fashion designer Issey Miyake or the Japanese pavilion
at Expo 2000 in Hanover.
A global mission
Ban receives support in his humanitarian activities – from 1995 to 1999 he was a consultant of the UNHCR – from students and volunteers who often know him from lifestyle magazines. But what they admire him for is far from glossy: he exposes himself to danger, gets his hands dirty and shows compassion. Although he has been pushed against his will into the role of a guru, the only label he truly dislikes is that of “green architect”. “When I started out, few people were interested in humanitarian emergency architecture or building in an environmentally friendly way. It wasn’t sexy enough back then. Today, many colleagues call themselves ‘green’, but only because they’re always jumping from one trend to another!”

Inspiration on the path to architecture
Ban's path to architecture was inspired by various factors. First, there was his mother, who, as a designer, often traveled to Paris. When she returned, little Shigeru would rummage through her suitcase looking for souvenirs. This awakened a yearning to see distant places, a strong desire to travel and a thirst for adventure. “Corona is tragic for me because I no longer travel to Europe every two weeks. On the plane, alone, undisturbed, with a glass of wine – that’s when I get my best ideas!” Cabinetmakers and master carpenters – members of a guild that enjoys the highest level of prestige in Japan – also influenced him in his youth. In contrast to the West, architecture was not a profession in the Land of the Rising Sun: temples, shrines and houses were built by carpenters. And for the Bans, they made and repaired furniture and enlarged rooms. This aroused the school-aged Shigeru’s interest in designing, shaping and building things.

China, took over its second-place ranking as a global economic power ten years ago. “In my New York days, the Asian portion of the student body consisted mainly of Japanese students,” recalls Ban, who graduated in 1984 from the Cooper Union School of Architecture, where he later taught. “Today, the Chinese and Koreans dominate.”
Bob Dylan performed at the opening of Shigeru Ban’s concert hall La Seine Musicale in Paris.
himself. His favorite subject in elementary school was arts and crafts, where he learned quickly and glued with precision: model houses, chairs, shelves.

Is there an incident in his youth that he attributes his helper syndrome to? "No, not at all," says Ban. "Even the fact that I spent many years in America, where volunteering is a tradition, didn’t play a big role. I was just tired of always building for the privileged. I was, of course, at first concerned about how to reconcile the day-to-day business of my job as an architect with providing help in crisis areas, which doesn’t bring in any money. But as it turned out, there was no need to worry. Necessity and passion have come together wonderfully in my life and give me balance."

A life in parallel worlds

The big opportunity for his philanthropic heart came in 2014, when he received the Pritzker Prize, which is often called the “Nobel Prize for Architecture”. Ban donated the 100 000 US dollars prize money to his Voluntary Architects’ Network. “We could finally breathe easier. And suddenly, I no longer felt any envy: from then on, I didn’t care if this person or that person had received a prize, won a competition or landed a TV ad. What a relief! Building also became easier because clients were more willing to listen to a Pritzker Prize winner.” That newfound lightness can still be seen in Ban today, for example, in his amusement when he thinks back to a misunderstanding with a big client like Swatch. The boss had come from Switzerland for the opening of the company’s Japanese headquarters in the upscale Tokyo district of Ginza. “There’s something missing,” she had said. “I can’t take over the headquarters like this!” Ban was at a loss. “I’m talking about the giraffe!” Years earlier, when he submitted the project, he had inserted the animal into his model to better illustrate the proportions, and thought nothing more of it. In the end, he had no choice but to actually build a life-sized giraffe – at his own expense.

Ban lives in parallel worlds. One consists of slums and refugee camps. The other of upscale museums, sleek houses and flagship stores, from which he re-directs his stream of ideas to hardship – always keeping one ear to the brick. In Sri Lanka it had whispered to him: “No beer crates this time. Stick to the brick. There’s enough mud and earth there. Create jobs!” 16 years later, the community centers are still standing – and being used, cared for, appreciated. Function and practicability influence Ban’s style and aesthetics, and these of course influence the well-being of those who live there. Once function and practicability have reached the highest level of efficiency, then
In China, they are worn by rice farmers and laborers, housewives and hikers. Ban wondered why the pattern used for the weaving had remained the same for centuries. Apparently, there was nothing left to improve. He noticed that only two parts ever touched at the intersections, not three or four. Nevertheless, the hat was stable and had the same perfect form and shape as the geometry of an arabesque. Ban took inspiration from the hat’s structure for the wooden frame of the Centre Pompidou-Metz, one of his most striking designs.

When Ban was designing for the Parisian fashion house Hermès, the opposite happened in terms of chance and inspiration. This time, he already knew which connecting elements he wanted to use for the construction: simple four-legged interlocking modules. Lo and behold, when assembled, they suddenly formed a pattern featuring the letter H, representing the Hermès brand.

Still on the topic of the unexpected, but returning to the prestigious Pritzker award: Ban was actually a jury member in the late noughties. “At that time, decisions were not left to chance: the award was given to the great ‘ones who remained’ – those who should have already received the award long ago: beautiful design, as Ban sees it, automatically follows. When thousands of families sought refuge in school gymnasiums in the aftermath of the tsunami in Fukushima, the Japanese architect developed curtain partitions made of cardboard tubes. He felt that creating privacy was the first phase of reconstruction – not only of the houses that had been washed away, but also of self-confidence. The partitioned spaces looked like minimalist art installations; they were intended to relieve the mind and distract from what they actually were: the emergency management of despair. There is no doubt that crisis manager Ban took inspiration for this from two of his earlier buildings in the “privileged world”: the Curtain Wall House in Tokyo, where he installed white fabric curtains over two floors instead of exterior walls. And the Wall-less House in Nagano Prefecture, which also has no walls. Both houses were built in the mid-1990s.

**Inspiration and chance**

During his arduous day-to-day work and unruly creative process, Ban also makes room for coincidences, welcomes them, just like he did the souvenirs in his mother’s suitcase. He once bought an old, traditionally woven Chinese bamboo hat in Paris. In China, they are worn by rice farmers and laborers, housewives and hikers. Ban wondered why the pattern used for the weaving had remained the same for centuries. Apparently, there was nothing left to improve. He noticed that only two parts ever touched at the intersections, not three or four. Nevertheless, the hat was stable and had the same perfect form and shape as the geometry of an arabesque. Ban took inspiration from the hat’s structure for the wooden frame of the roof of the Centre Pompidou-Metz, one of his most striking designs. When Ban was designing for the Parisian fashion house Hermès, the opposite happened in terms of chance and inspiration. This time, he already knew which connecting elements he wanted to use for the construction: simple four-legged interlocking modules. Lo and behold, when assembled, they suddenly formed a pattern featuring the letter H, representing the Hermès brand.

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Richard Rogers, Jean Nouvel and Peter Zumthor. After that, a new era began. The spotlight shifted to social aspects and experiments. That’s how I came into the game and happened to get lucky.”

Architectural foresight
The day after our conversation in the building behind the Higashi-Matsubara railway station, we fly to the southern Japanese city of Oita, which is known for its hot springs. Five years ago, Ban built the Oita Prefectural Art Museum and was also responsible for the interior design, as he is for most of his buildings. The city is honoring him with an extensive exhibition of his work. Admirers, students, clients and journalists have come to listen to what the man in black has to say and to ask him questions. But first, temperatures have to be taken and addresses jotted down, hands disinfected and seats allocated, naturally with a large distance between them. Many know him personally, and those who at first think he is a detail oriented, brooding design theorist, quickly learn otherwise when he steps onto the stage. “Will corona change your architecture?” someone asks. Ban thinks about it. For the first time, it’s not he who has rushed to a crisis – the crisis has come to him. “Honestly, I don’t know yet.” A heavy pause follows, during which the audience’s sympathy is palpable. “But I thought ahead for this museum, and built this wide room here with sliding doors,” Ban says. “The curators have thanked me for my foresight, because implementing the social-distancing requirements is easy!” The audience laughs. Someone wants to know if he loves rock music. After all, Bob Dylan performed at the opening of the La Seine Musicale arts center near Paris in 2017, which Ban co-designed. Ban responds objectively, saying that he played the violin as a child, but had no talent. “That’s why I build concert halls. They are my musical instruments. I never had any rock idols. And as for Bob Dylan, he muttered more than he sang.” 

Roland Hagenberg grew up in Vienna and has been living in Tokyo as a freelance writer, artist and photographer for over 25 years. His travel reports, essays, interviews and photos have been published in Architectural Digest, NZZ, Vogue, Wallpaper and other international publications.
Things will change

Young people have little experience and all the more passion for life, which often gives rise to creativity and disruption. In order to find themselves, adolescents have always formed into groups, thus creating a new identity, a new style – and embodying the essence of their time and culture.

Text: Laura Gianesi

Jeunesse dorée: from the guillotine back to life
During “La Grande Terreur”, the reign of terror period of the French Revolution, over 2500 people were sentenced to death by guillotine. But the execution of Maximilien Robespierre, one of the revolution’s principal figures, ushered in a period of change. The terror came to an end, the old social hierarchies returned, the citizens sought pleasure and entertainment in the streets of Paris. This new lightness was savored above all by the jeunesse dorée, the young people of the upper class, or the “Incroyables et Merveilleuses” (in English: the incredible and wonderful), as they called themselves. Their apolitical hedonism stemmed from a weariness of political violence. The men sported colorful waistcoats; the ladies wore blonde wigs and revealing dresses.

Swing: dancing instead of reporting for duty
The swing youth started to become a thorn in the side of the National Socialists in the early thirties. Their way of dancing, which could be observed in the large German cities, was condemned by the Nazis as “monkey dancing”. For their part, the young people provoked the establishment in any way they could: “Sieg Heil” became “Swing Heil”; instead of using the German word for crazy, they used the Yiddish word meschugge. But this rebelliousness should not be mistaken for activism. These youths were deliberately apolitical. Their defying of norms was youthful provocation. With time, however, the bans on swing and jazz increased, raids forced the rebellious parties into small apartments. The Nazi regime began to arrest more and more dance enthusiasts and put them in labor camps – to be re-educated.

Hippies: the gentle revolution
The flower children sprouted out of the ground in the 1960s, first in San Francisco, then throughout the US and finally, around the globe. Initially, their credo revolved around ending the Vietnam War, but soon became more universal: love and peace. Curlers gave way to flowing manes and dreadlocks, leather shoes were exchanged for sandals, alcohol for LSD, marriage for free love, consumerism for a closer relationship with nature. This revolution was a gentle one, based on the civil disobedience of Thoreau, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, among others. What most shocked parents at the time was that these barefoot, long-haired, guitar-playing, good-for-nothing kids were from the American middle class. Their parents probably thought that if they just went back home, they could cut their hair right away and finish their studies.
**Punks: frustration and rage**

Their ideal of beauty? Brash ugliness. They pierced their faces with safety pins, their clothes were torn to shreds, guitarists boasted that they only had to master three chords. A song was considered good when it got your pulse racing out of pure rage. Punk is rooted in New York’s garage rock, but the movement really took off in London in the seventies. It wasn’t just the result of pubescent hormones; the economic crisis, the English class system and the Cold War concerned many adolescents. Former hippies had become civil servants; most young people were making their careers and consumerism their main goals in life. Not so the punks. But at the beginning of the nineties the inevitable happened: their style was incorporated into pop culture and thus became appealing to the many. Homeless street punks, however, continued to resolutely pursue their ideal of self-determination beyond the norms.

**Hip-hop: out of the Bronx and into the world**

The Bronx in the mid-1970s: in the northernmost borough of New York, the unemployment rate among young people was around 40 percent, Republicans were making cuts to the welfare system and drug cartels dominated everyday life. For lack of alternatives, young people celebrated their block parties in the streets. This is where rap – originally a competition among DJs – was born. Its roots lie in the oral story-telling traditions of West Africa, which were brought to the US by slaves. The lyrics address the everyday life of young people and rising up against discrimination and political injustice. Hip-hop became the teenage diary of an entire social group. Gangsta rap, on the other hand, with its glorification of violence, is a product of later times – as is the commercialization of the music and fashion through which hip-hop found its way off the streets and into the mainstream.

**Visual kei: different together**

Bright wigs, heavy eyeliner, clothes that are somewhere between a school uniform and a fantasy costume. The name itself is a tip-off: visual kei – next to manga, the most famous manifestation of Japanese popular culture around the world – is all about appearance. In the 1980s, Western artists like David Bowie and Kiss reached the Japanese rock scene. Not long thereafter, visual kei bands celebrated their greatest successes to date, and fans imitated their clothing and make-up style. Today, the visual aspect is the only common denominator of these bands and fans. The criticism? The uniform appearance of the followers of visual kei contradicts the pride in one’s own uniqueness that is typical for the movement. For many young Japanese, however, the costumes are above all about escapism: an escape from the very well-ordered everyday life in Japan, which is not particularly tolerant of non-conformity. ✪
“Style is the elegance of the heart”

Interview: Sacha Batthyany

Why do German moms wear leggings? And why are people who like outdoor clothing narcissists? We talk to Barbara Vinken, a German literary scholar and fashion theorist, about style and the lack thereof.

CREDO: Ms. Vinken, style is a word we use every day, and we categorize a whole range of things according to whether they are stylish – or not. What exactly is style and how does a person go about getting it?

It might help to think about the distinction between language as a system of rules, and speaking as a concrete instance of the use of language, or what in French is referred to as: langue and parole. The linguist Ferdinand de Saussure came up with this distinction. We all use words to express ourselves in different ways, but when we do so, we move within given norms, a system of rules that we call language. The same is true of style: we move within a system of rules, in other words fashion, that we have to master in order to break these rules or express them a bit differently. Style is like words in the sense of parole – it is individual expression within a system.

Style is often treated as an accolade. You either have it – or you don’t.

This perception does indeed exist, but it’s not something I can really work with. The scientist Comte de Buffon defined style wonderfully: “Le style, c’est l’homme même.” Which means that style is a reflection of a person’s character, expressed in different areas: language, clothing, furnishings, food, the way they live. Just as you can’t escape the way you speak, you are born into a style and absorb it naturally from the time you come into the world. If you really want to discuss the matter in normative terms, then I prefer this definition: style is the elegance of the heart.

Style is identity.

I don’t like words like identity, but I would say that our style makes us instantly recognizable. Fashion serves to make you feel part of a class, a group. Style, however, allows you to express yourself differently within that group. When it comes to style, that difference is more important than identity. The same can be said for language, which is why the analogy I mentioned earlier is fitting: the French dramatist Jean Racine’s style was different than that of his contemporary Pierre Corneille. It’s the same with, say, Versace and Chanel: style is what makes the difference.

Some people don’t differentiate or don’t perceive these differences.

Such people do indeed exist, but they aren’t really looking. Or they follow the ideology that form has no intrinsic value and that it would be better if aesthetics did not exist.

If style is something that is absorbed from infancy, does that mean that a person never changes their style?

No, they do. Sometimes you conform more, sometimes less, depending on which stage of your life you find yourself in. There are moments when you want to experiment, change things completely, moments of recklessness, of resistance – and then there might be a few years during which you return to your roots or find yourself under greater pressure to conform. For example, like many teenagers, I went through a punk phase.

And yet, having a style protects us from following whatever fashion dictates. A personal, established style makes us independent.

Style gives you a certain nonchalance with regard to the latest fad. You don’t have to chase after every trend; that can give you the courage to, for example, break ranks in an extravagant way, to not conform, and perhaps even be shocking. Although style doesn’t protect us from the all too familiar “bad buy” – we are all vulnerable to seduction – it can protect us from ending up as a fashion victim and from losing the pleasure found in self-fashioning.
Barbara Vinken is Professor of Literature and French Literature at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich and has taught in New York, Paris and Chicago. She is a columnist for various newspapers and the author of many essays and books on literature and fashion. Her book about the evolution of fashion over time, "Angezogen. Das Geheimnis der Mode", was nominated for the Leipzig Book Fair Prize in 2014.
Some people say that while style is inherent, fashion can be bought. That is absolutely true. Style means not being afraid of breaking character every once in a while. What is dictated by fashion is reshaped – and perhaps even contorted at times – through individual appropriation.

Have you ever found something nice in a shop and only realized that it doesn’t suit you when you’ve returned home? Yes, of course. But not often, because I can always hear my son’s voice in my head saying: “Um, Mom, do you really think that’s a good idea?”

During the corona pandemic, there has been an increase in the number of online purchases. The fact that everything can be bought at the click of a mouse probably means that the number of bad buys has increased.

I think so too. I read somewhere that 70 percent of the clothes that are ordered are returned. That’s crazy – just think about how many packages have been sent around in circles over the last several months. In the US, unlike here, most stores have a 14-day exchange policy. People get into a veritable frenzy and buy lots of clothes, which they then exchange again to buy new ones, etc. A bit dizzying, really.

It’s a reflection of our overheated consumer culture. It is the inability to take ownership of an object, to invest love in it. Objects are exchanged arbitrarily, the only thing that matters to people is that they are consuming. And that is, in keeping with the theme, literally unstylish: people no longer have a feeling of what’s good for them, what feels good to wear, what they truly need to have. It’s an expression of disorientation.

And yet the guides and websites that tell us what to wear and how to dress are hugely popular. According to some of these, wearing shorts after the age of forty is no longer allowed, and from sixty onwards, you shouldn’t wear skirts – never mind short-sleeved shirts! What do you think of the so-called fashion police?

Let’s put it this way: age is not a category in fashion, although many people think it is. In earlier times, hierarchies within society had rules relating to status and age, but these clear definitions overrode fashion. The flexibility of the boundary is more important than a person’s age, as Coco Chanel put it. In other words: some women can wear tight patent leather jeans with platform shoes in their old age and look fantastic, while others can’t even pull that off in their twenties. And as far as all the unspeakable rules that are dictated by fashion experts go: I find them far too timid. Style has a lot to do with pleasure and inclination. If it gives you pleasure, it’s allowed.

A lot of things are, of course, allowed. Having said that, a man who decides to wear a colorful suit instead of standard gray is often judged as being vain, a dandy. It depends on the culture you live in. In Romance-speaking cultures, men are also allowed to be vain, even beautiful. Unlike in northern Protestant cultures such as Germany and Switzerland, there is no total ban on fashion for men.

But the dandy is an invention of the British. Yes, but the style was a big hit in France. And this also has to do with culture. In France, the upper classes took their cues from the aristocracy. In England, the bourgeoisie also adopted aristocratic values and thus a weakness for extravagance. When it comes to culture, it’s also important to know who embodies authority in a society. Friedrich Nietzsche noted that in Germany, this was the intellectual in the suit, who has more important things to do than waste time on thinking about what to wear. Unlike in Italy, for example, this thought pattern can still be seen today, especially in intellectual circles, where people act as if they have more important things on their minds than worrying about something as frivolously superficial as their own appearance.

Which isn’t the case. Let’s put it this way: it takes a lot of effort to express with your clothes that you don’t give them much thought – and that if you do put thought into them, it’s only to ensure you look decent. In fact, expressing that you don’t care about aesthetics is a rather complicated form of aesthetics. To then deny that is a bit hypocritical.

When you travel from Milan to Switzerland and compare how people dress, you often get the feeling that aesthetics have practically been condemned in cities like Zurich. That’s true. You’re immediately considered a renegade if you are interested in superficial frivolity. Most people pretend it’s a waste of time. But gray can be a wonderful color.

You spoke of Nietzsche’s influence in Germany. Who influenced the style in countries like France or Italy? Nietzsche analyzed and propagated the bourgeois Protestant aesthetic. For a long time, the aristocratic man was considered not only the stronger, but also the more beautiful and ostentatious sex. A trip to a museum is all it takes to confirm this.
Before the French Revolution, men not only dressed in colorful, sumptuous clothes, they also wore shimmering silk stockings that showed off beautiful legs and often their buttocks, they wore shoes with red soles, bows and heels, and during the Renaissance they sometimes even wore clothes with a décolleté. The erotic parts of the aristocratic man were transferred to women’s fashion in the 20th century: women began to show some leg, sometimes wearing leggings that went all the way up to the groin, like men during the Renaissance. They started to wear heels, bows and red soles, like the French male nobility during the Age of Absolutism.

Speaking of leggings. Some say that functional wear has triumphed. Sneakers are now worn in the office, even in combination with a suit. What does that say about the times we live in?

Many people think that sneakers represent a rejection of strict dress codes. A relaxation of the overly rigid business look. But the opposite is true. Not attaching importance to the aesthetic dimension of clothes, and instead dressing in a purely functional way, is an escalation of the modern speech act par excellence: form follows function! In this respect, outdoor and sports fashion are an extension of the credo of modernity. Functional clothing, such as outdoor jackets with all kinds of Velcro fastenings, are a peculiarly narcissistic rejection of one’s fellow man. And a rejection of all aspects of life that relate to aesthetics. Clothing no longer has to be beautiful or bizarre, but purely functional: breathable and water-repellent.

“Like many teenagers, I went through a punk phase.”

What does that have to do with narcissism?

People think of themselves now when it comes to clothing – and negate and deny the fact that others will see them. With their fluorescent biker short and helmet combinations, some of today’s cyclists are reminiscent of locusts zipping around the city. And you have to be careful not to get in their way. They are on a higher mission to realize their inner self. In reality, they want to ostentatiously demonstrate that they move through life as aerodynamically as possible, without breaking a sweat, while remaining untouchable.
You have written a book about German mothers, in which you also address aesthetics. Functional clothes are omnipresent on German playgrounds.

It doesn’t matter if you’re in Berlin or Zurich, young mothers like to wear parkas, satchels, sneakers and skinny jeans. I don’t find these mothers, working in the service of their families, a very pretty sight.

Is looking pretty on the playground really all that important? Of course, it’s always important. You can always wear some lipstick to brighten up a rainy day. Mothers wearing parkas transmit to us that they are on duty, that they are in a challenging situation, which they have to overcome. Now is not the time to be thinking about superficial matters such as fashion; there are more important things than lipstick to think about in the morning.

Are the young mothers in Paris any different?

Take a look around, next time you’re there! French mothers wear nail polish and often still bring their children to daycare in heels, just because they can. As mothers, they are erotic beings, perhaps more erotic than ever before. But not so in Germany, where they wear Birkenstocks. That too can be explained by culture.

The aristocracy in Germany wanted to reform itself in the spirit of the Enlightenment, as the educated middle class had done. The mother was to become the antithesis of female seduction. Femininity meant danger, confusion; the mother, on the other

“In order for a text to sit right, I need clothes that fit properly.”
you’re unwell, you seek proximity to others and comfort. Now you have to avoid that proximity and learn to read eyes instead of lips. A new semiotic system of consolation, a new way of flirting has to emerge. Because when you’re no longer allowed to be physically close, you start to write letters to each other again and slip each other little notes.

Some say that in times when people no longer encounter each other on the street, the casual look will prevail. The other day there was a photo of Vogue’s Anna Wintour wearing red sweatpants – but she was, of course, still wearing her sunglasses. I’m not sure if that will really prevail, because it begs the question of who it is that we are actually dressing for.

And who are we dressing for?
The French writer Michel Houellebecq says that we dress to use our erotic potential as a career booster. Others claim that people resign themselves to social constraints and always wear suits to the office because that’s what everyone else does.

So the question is: do you dress for yourself or for others?

First, I dress for myself. To ground myself inwardly. If I have to finish writing a text, I have to have finished getting dressed. In order for a text to sit right, I need clothes that fit properly. But at the same time, I do, of course, also dress for others. Some people are simply a feast for the eyes. I find it very interesting that we are rediscovering the value of attention during the corona pandemic – and have come to appreciate outdoor public spaces as a stage, as a theater of looks and flirtation.

How do you mean?
In Paris, for weeks you were only allowed to go outside for a bit of fresh air. And the result was that people dressed much more extravagantly than before the pandemic. If they were able to go out into the streets, they said to themselves, then they wanted to defy the gloomy times in an exceptional way. We were locked up in our own four walls for so long that we missed those treasured looks we received from other people. In other words, fashion can restore sociality. Just as in Milan, opera singers reshaped the missing commonality of shared public spaces from their balconies.

Did previous pandemics have an impact on the way people expressed themselves through clothing?

During the plague, pall bearers wore clothes of a certain color. It was a signal to avoid them. Colors became signals of danger. The mask is not just a signal of danger, indicating that a person could be dangerous, it also serves as protective clothing. Fashion is truly a seismograph. For example, Walter Van Beirendonck’s apocalyptically grotesque collections already featured masks in 2018. And at the last fashion shows to be attended in person in Milan in February 2020, masks had already become the accessory of the season. The pandemic has accelerated something that was latent and now appears to have become terribly real.

Namely?
The need to protect yourself by means of what you wear not only from the heat and cold, but also from your neighbor. When you had a crystal ball, how much of an impact would you say the corona pandemic will have on style?

I think we will be wearing masks for a while. At least in large public spaces like airports and train stations. I dream of the day when a mask will again be a symbol of seduction rather than hygiene. I also find the suggestion of returning to the voluminous hoop skirts and the giant hats of the Ancien Régime quite funny – they would help with the distancing.

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Sacha Batthyany is a journalist and author. After spending several years in the US, where he worked as a US correspondent for Tages-Anzeiger, Das Magazin and Süddeutsche Zeitung, he is now an editor for the “Hintergrund” section of NZZ am Sonntag, a role he assumed in 2018.
Composure
in any situation
Nobody would talk about the painter Anton Hickel (1745–1798) today – even though he and his brother Joseph became portraitists of note during the period of Joseph II, a pivotal era for Vienna – were it not for his most important work. This monumental and unparalleled painting of a debate in the British House of Commons features 96 life-sized portraits and was created between 1793 and 1795, shortly before his death. But there is perhaps another reason that people still talk about him today: his portrait of Princess Marie-Thérèse-Louise de Lamballe.

Anton received his initial training at his father’s atelier in Česká Lípa together with his brother Joseph. Anton’s love of travel, curiosity or perhaps simply his search for new horizons – we will never know for sure which – took him out into the world early on: in 1779 to Bavaria, from 1779 to 1782 to southern Germany and Switzerland. In 1783, he probably returned briefly to Vienna with the idea of applying to collaborate on the cycles of paintings that were to adorn the walls of the academy in St. Petersburg. In 1786, he returned to Switzerland, where he received the news of his appointment as an imperial royal court painter.

His close ties – and above all those of his brother – to the House of Habsburg in Vienna and to Emperor Joseph II appear to have helped establish his contacts at the court in Paris: he went there in the fall of 1786 and, thanks to the patronage of Queen Marie Antoinette, the Emperor’s sister, gained access to the most exclusive circles of Parisian society.

It was in Paris in 1788 that he painted “Portrait of Marie-Thérèse-Louise Princess of Lamballe (1749–1792)”, which is now held in the Princely Collections. This piece is a society portrait of the very highest order, in which the sitter presents herself as a style icon of her time, embedded in an atmosphere that displays and documents for all time and with artistic refinement her position at the French court and the elegance cultivated there. The sumptuous, timeless elegance of the Louis XVI furniture, the bust in the background, probably of Voltaire, and the carpet with its floral pattern, frame with great clarity the room in which the superintendent of the French Queen’s household is captured. She is composed and graceful, she appears to be pausing for a moment while writing a letter and faces towards the viewer. Her voluminous white satin dress is in keeping with the very latest fashion at court, the only accent of color is a blue sash; the shoe, which she rests on a taboret, mirrors this color.

Nothing of all that is presented here so calmly, naturally and with such clear-sightedness gives any indication of the destiny of the sitter. She was born the daughter of Luigi Vittorio di Savoia-Carignano and Christine Henriette von Hesse-Rheinfels-Rothenburg, and married Prince Lamballe in 1767. She became a widow only one year later, at the age of 18. In 1770, she met Marie Antoinette during the wedding celebrations for the dauphin. Marie-Thérèse-Louise quickly became her companion and confidante, and a short time after Louis XVI’s accession to the throne, she became the superintendent of the Queen’s household in 1777.

After the outbreak of the revolution in 1791, she succeeded in leaving France and went to England, where she negotiated for help for the royal family. However, she returned to Paris and looked after the Queen, who was imprisoned in the Tuileries, until 10 August 1792. On 19 August, she was transferred to La Force prison and on 3 September she was handed over to an angry mob after refusing to take an oath against the monarchy. She was maltreated and murdered, her head was impaled on a pike and presented by the “revolutionaries” to the Queen outside her prison cell window.

Marie-Thérèse-Louise de Lamballe kept her composure until the end, a composure that for those familiar with her story, is the only thing that calls to mind her fate in the scene so expertly and beautifully captured by Hickel. Incidentally, Hickel himself also held fast to his concept of life: in 1797, the restless painter traveled on to Hamburg. He died there the next year. •

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“Vintage Empire”: the fantastic four from Kibera.
Dressed in stylish suits, colorful ties, hats and leather shoes, four young men have made the Kenyan slum Kibera their stage. But their unconventional appearance is not just meant to attract attention: each of the four friends has their own reasons for being part of “Vintage Empire”, a group they have formed. The fact that they are continuing the tradition of the sapeurs of Central Africa, was at first unknown to them.
As Moses Osore turns the corner, a number of women pause their work and look up from the heads of the clients whose hair they are braiding. Osore is wearing a long, dark blue coat over delicately striped gray and white dress pants and a matching shirt. Gray socks, black leather shoes, a leather briefcase, a blue scarf and his dreadlocks complete the look. The women are wearing tank tops, skirts and flip-flops. Osore, who is 22, would likely also attract attention in downtown Nairobi, but not as much as here in Kibera, one of the largest slums in the Kenyan capital. The square where the women have set up their ad hoc hair salon at a low wooden table is paved with red clay, and is muddy following the heavy rains that have fallen over the last few days. Simple stands made of corrugated iron or wood are scattered around the square, from which tomatoes, onions and Maggi bouillon cubes, chapatis and hard boiled eggs are being sold. For a few shillings, you can charge your mobile phone, because many people here do not have electricity at home.

“The others will be here soon,” says Osore and chats a bit with the hairdressers, who are his neighbors: he lives in the row of shacks just behind the square. Although Osore is a familiar face here, he always attracts attention. As do his three friends who then turn up: Sylvester Ochieng in a suit jacket, hat and tie. Dennis Juma wearing a cap and suit jacket. Allan Omondi, who has paired a colorful shirt with a bold pattern, two different-colored socks and sneakers with his jacket. Together, the four are Vintage Empire, a group they formed just over five months ago.

Osore leads the way to his shack, where he will explain what their vintage style is all about. The narrow and sloping path is full of garbage, around which streams of waste water snake. Keeping polished shoes clean, even after just a few minutes, requires some skill, which is something the four friends have – every step is a confident one. “We grew up here, after all,” says Osore. He only wears rubber shoes during the particularly heavy rainy season. “But they don’t look like rubber.”

**Following in the footsteps of unknown role models**

Osore pushes the door to his little corrugated tin shack open and invites his guests in. Inside, the bed leaves just enough room for a metal chest containing Osore’s clothes and two chairs. One of these serves as a shelf for some books, a bottle containing disinfectant, a glass and a toothbrush. There is also a tiny storage room, where well-worn books are piled up on a shelf, as are a few aluminum pots and plates, and quite a number of pairs of shoes. The music being played by several neighbors penetrates through the thin walls.

A few months ago, they had sat down and, as usual, discussed everything imaginable, says Osore, whom his friends call “Maestro” because he is the playmaker during their soccer games. “We noticed that most people from our generation are constantly trying to keep up with the latest fashions.” So they came up with the idea of doing the opposite, “in other words, dressing in a way that others think is old-fashioned”: in suits and ties, hats and leather shoes. “We want to attract attention and be unique.” Osore opens the blue metal chest and spreads out his vintage treasures: pinstriped shirts, pleated trousers and suit pants, a sweater vest. He stores his soccer clothes separately, in a big bag.
It was only after they had found their style that they learned they were following in the footsteps of the sapeurs in the two Congos, who also take great interest in the way they dress. These central African dandies embrace elegance and individuality, and enjoy putting on a big show in public. They invest a significant amount of time and money in a wardrobe that far exceeds their financial means: their style is borrowed from the upper social classes, but is at the same time markedly extravagant and flamboyant.

Applause for good ideas
The flamboyant aspect is secondary for the four Kenyans, although they do want to be original and stand out. Each of the four friends has his own reasons for being fascinated by having fun with “old-fashioned” clothes. For Osore, it is above all the joy of being different. He also loves the performance aspect that comes with this – as do his friends. The alleyways of Kibera are their stage, the sunbeams their spotlights. The neighbors love to watch them, are entertained by the unusual ideas of Vintage Empire. Nobody takes offence, nobody makes fun of them. “If someone in Kibera has a good idea and is original, they get applause,” says Osore.

That is why it’s not important to wear particularly expensive clothes – none of the four friends can afford them anyway. Especially not now, during the corona pandemic. The measures to mitigate the spread of the virus have, like in many countries, triggered an economic crisis in Kenya. The inhabitants of informal settlements such as Kibera have been particularly hard hit. Most of them have neither permanent jobs nor social security, they earn their money as day laborers or in the informal sector. Many of them, including Vintage Empire, have lost their livelihoods as a result. Before the corona crisis, Osore made a living on what foreign tourists paid for a tour of Kibera. But tourists
have not been coming for months now; Kenya closed its borders at the end of March and has halted international flights. Osore is living on his savings, which will probably last until mid-August, “then it’s over”. He has learned to be thrifty. Money has always been a sensitive topic for him; Osore’s mother supported him and his eight siblings by doing odd jobs. She earned enough to survive and to send her children to school, but not to pay for higher education. Osore had to quit college, he would have liked to become a web designer.

A spontaneous show
Osore invests more time than money in his vintage wardrobe. Before the outbreak of the corona crisis, the four friends met once a week to visit one of Nairobi’s many used clothing markets, known as mitumba markets. Mitumba is the Swahili word for bundles, and the markets were named as such because the used clothing from Europe is delivered in bundles. They would spend hours rummaging around for clothes that matched their style. “I was always the last to leave the market,” says Osore, laughing because he dedicates so much time and gives so much thought to his clothes. He would spend around five US dollars during these trips, a total of 20 dollars a month – more than most other slum dwellers, he believes.

But the group is not interested in using their clothes to feign prosperity or to arouse envy. “Most people here know that we shop as cheaply as possible,” says Osore. The topic of the price of their clothes does sometimes come up, however. “Every now and then, someone approaches us and says, for example: this coat must have been very expensive, what did it cost – 20 dollars?” But the four friends never spend that much money on an item of clothing, and the coat only cost five dollars, a bargain.

While Osore has been giving a tour of his shack, his friends have passed the time by putting on a spontaneous show in the square: Omondi sits on a pink chair for children that belongs to
On a good day, he earns two US dollars, but since the beginning of the corona crisis, times have been tough for him too. He would have liked to become a lawyer, had also started his studies, but had to drop out. “It doesn’t matter how smart you are, when you come home to Kibera in the evening, there are a lot of problems waiting for you,” he says. “Your siblings look at you, they want money, food – the family needs your help.” Since then, he has been dreaming of finding a way of making money that does not involve selling hard-boiled eggs as snacks. On a good day, he earns two US dollars, but since the beginning of the corona crisis, times have been tough for him too. He would have liked to become a lawyer, had also started his studies, but had to drop out. “It doesn’t matter how smart you are, when you come home to Kibera in the evening, there are a lot of problems waiting for you,” he says. “Your siblings look at you, they want money, food – the family needs your help.” Since then, he has been dreaming of finding a way of making money that does not involve selling hard-boiled eggs as snacks.

Clothing as a political statement

Then it is on to Dennis Juma’s shack. Laundry hangs everywhere in the narrow alleyways, even in front of his entrance. He bends down to slip under it. Three beds take up almost all the space in the shack, Juma lives with two of his seven siblings. Behind the door is the trolley he uses to make a living: the 23-year-old is a street vendor, and sells hot sausages and hard-boiled eggs as snacks. On a good day, he earns two US dollars, but since the beginning of the corona crisis, times have been tough for him too. He would have liked to become a lawyer, had also started his studies, but had to drop out. “It doesn’t matter how smart you are, when you come home to Kibera in the evening, there are a lot of problems waiting for you,” he says. “Your siblings look at you, they want money, food – the family needs your help.” Since then, he has been dreaming of finding a way of making money that does not involve selling hard-boiled eggs. Something to do with art, for example. The fact that he can at least live out some of his creativity through his clothing is a small consolation to him.
Juma also stores his clothes in metal chests. He opens the first one and takes out one pair of pants after the other. For him, the vintage style is also a political and social statement, a reminder of the times of Nelson Mandela and other African freedom fighters. “They looked reality in the eye and tried to really solve problems.” Back then, corruption had not reached its current level. “Today, politics is more about appearances, not about really improving conditions.” Juma is happy when people ask him about his eye-catching clothes because that gives him an opportunity to discuss politics and the situation in Kenya.

Coming to terms with the past
The next stop is Allan Omondi’s home. At 21 years of age, he is the youngest in the circle of friends. The entrance to his shack is located in a maze of narrow, covered alleys. He always asks his guests to take their shoes off at the front door. Inside, the room opens up, a rare experience in Kibera. Omondi’s shack is unusually large, perhaps twelve square meters, and has been lovingly decorated: the floor is carpeted, he sleeps in a kind of four-poster bed, and, using a chain of lights, he has adorned a chest of drawers with a computer and some books on it like an altar. Omondi would like to be an interior designer, and is also fascinated by fashion and design. But above all he loves creativity and playing around. “We’re all comedians,” he says. For him, fancy clothes and pranks are also an attempt to reinvent himself. “My style helps me forget the Allan of my childhood.” When he was five years old, his parents died, one shortly after the other. An aunt took him and his siblings home with her to Kibera. “We hung around all the time, she didn’t send us to school.” When she started beating the children, he fled and survived alone on the streets for several years. He earned money for food as a dancer and rapper; he sometimes got a few shillings for his short performances. He had neither the time nor the money to go to school, and he could not even afford clothes. “I had black shorts back then that shone with dirt. And a ripped t-shirt.” Now he has more clothes than he can count. And he is the only member of Vintage Empire with a proper closet made of wood.

Before talking about his current style, he pays tribute to his three friends: “They took me off the street, they make me feel safe and appreciated.” Thanks to them, he has gained enough stability to be able to live in a shack in Kibera. Until the outbreak of the corona crisis, he made a living selling used clothing. But at the end of March, the Kenyan government temporarily banned the import of second-hand clothes and the mitumba markets as part of the fight against the pandemic. These measures were explained as being in the interest of protecting people’s health,
while at the same time being of possible benefit for the Kenyan textile manufacturing industry. It is not clear how great the risk of infection from textiles is. As a rule, second-hand clothing is disinfected before being imported.

Since the closing of the mitumba markets, Omondi has been earning his money doing odd jobs on a construction site or whatever work he is offered. He continues to attach great importance to having a smart and original outward appearance. “It makes me proud. My family always said that I would never make anything of myself. I’m proving them wrong.”

**Embodying and exemplifying creativity**

Sylvester Ochieng lives in the better area of Kibera, where simple stone houses have been built. At 25, he is the oldest member of the group, but he still lives with his parents. Living together in their two rooms saves everyone money. His father is a lifeguard at one of the universities in Nairobi, and Ochieng has inherited his passion for sports: he is a swimming instructor, but is currently unemployed because the pools, like the markets, have been closed for hygienic reasons. Since then, he has also been working in construction or doing odd jobs. “As for my style, I get a lot of inspiration from my father,” he says. “In his day, it wasn’t so much about brand names as it was about creativity. We want to encourage young people to find their own style instead of always wearing the same designer clothes.”

The afternoon sun is now low on the horizon, the colors are glowing in Kibera, and before night falls, Vintage Empire sets off for a last performance on their outdoor stage.

You can find a video about this Report at lg.com/credo

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Bettina Rühl has been a freelance journalist since 1988 and writes mainly about Africa. She has been living in the Kenyan capital Nairobi since 2011. Prior to this, she would travel to the African continent for several weeks at a time to do research for her writing.
Sapeurs

The term is derived from sape, the French word for clothes. It was later declared a backronym for Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes, or in English: Society of Ambiance-makers and Elegant People. This refers to people in Africa who dress in a way that is conspicuously stylish and whose sophisticated appearance does not actually correspond to their financial situation. The movement dates back to the early years of colonialism. The French believed it was their "mission" to "civilize" the African population. As they saw it, this included wearing second-hand European clothing that the colonial masters had brought from overseas. Today the sapeurs and sapeuses in the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo use fancy and extravagant European clothing as an expression of a mixture of self-irony and self-confidence, and as a sociopolitical statement.
The category *je ne sais quoi* has existed in aesthetics since the 17th century. In English, this translates into “I don’t know what.” And what does it mean, exactly? That there is an indeterminable quality to beauty, that it is something you cannot define. This *je ne sais quoi* applies even more to style than to beauty: it is very difficult to describe, but you immediately sense when someone possesses it. People who have style would look elegant if they went out for a walk dressed in a plastic bag, while others look awkward even if they are wearing the most expensive designer bag on their arm.

Style is not something you can define, which makes it open to attack. At the same time, it is under moral suspicion: for being only superficial, something for phonies, external and feigned, superfuous, even cynical, considering all the suffering in the world. And yet, we know that a world without style would be dismal. Many difficulties can be borne better with the right attitude, and this too is a question of style.

So style is a secret science, not because someone wants to conceal crucial knowledge from the masses, but because there is no formula for reproducing it, no style algorithm whose rules we simply have to follow. Although it is not entirely without rules, style is something that goes beyond knowing the rules.

**Attentiveness: a cardinal virtue**

So can style never be learned? It can, absolutely! Namely through role models. When it comes to the European tradition of style and good manners, Philip Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield, has always been the quintessential role model for the gentleman. The statesman, diplomat and author wrote letters to his son over the course of many years, in which he instructed him on what a gentleman should bear in mind.

For Chesterfield, attentiveness was crucial. It was the gentleman’s cardinal virtue. But like everything with Chesterfield, this had two sides to it: on the one hand, it was an expression of politeness towards others, because it showed that a person was attentive enough to know their preferences. On the other hand, however, it was also an expression of political acumen, because only those who notice everything that is happening around them could behave intelligently at both the tactical and strategic level.
As a statesman and diplomat, Chesterfield spent half of his life at the European courts. These were places where extreme social control prevailed, people had to make a *bella figura* and under no circumstances show anyone their cards while orchestrating an elaborate intrigue. Anyone who made a fool of themselves was committing social suicide.

A gentleman’s attentiveness was therefore both a survival strategy and a pleasing character trait; it was a form of kindness and of calculation, because being pleasant to people paid off in the courtly world – and beyond.

“There is no surer sign in the world of a little, weak mind than inattention.” Chesterfield wrote to his son, “… It is the sure answer of a fool, when you ask him about anything that was said or done when he was present, that ‘truly he did not mind it.’ And why did not the fool mind it? What else had he to do there but to mind what he was doing?”

**Relying on intellect**

On another occasion, Chesterfield explained that people should be read like books. That was his most important message in his letters to his son: they do not prescribe any etiquette but recommend that people should closely observe the circles in which they move in order to adopt their customs. Because what was in fashion at court in London was not the same as at court in Versailles. And in Turin things were more elegant than in Berlin. According to Chesterfield, a person had to adapt to this, and should neither be a fop and attempt to dress more stylishly than the others, nor should they be careless and dress in a manner that was inferior to the accepted standard.

He advised that people should observe the social circles in which they find themselves, but keep their thoughts to themselves: “Have a real reserve with almost everybody, and have a seeming reserve with almost nobody; for it is very disagreeable to seem reserved, and very dangerous not to be so.”

Chesterfield was a child of the Enlightenment, and repeatedly told his son to mistrust all dogmas and to instead think for himself. He felt that although this could also often lead a person astray, there was nevertheless no better advisor than a person’s own intellect. But he was also a child of the 18th century: candor was not a value that he absolutized. He believed a person’s thoughts were better kept to themselves.

Chesterfield hated “superficial knowledge” of everything, as he believed it was the sign of a person who gives themselves airs. Referencing Caesar, he told his son not to consider anything complete if something still remained to be done. Moreover, he felt that a true gentleman had so much self-control that he could refrain from self-love and never speak of himself in conversation, much less praise his own merits, for self-praise was a sure sign that something was amiss.

**Cool restraint instead of heated arguments**

In contrast, Chesterfield believed that during a conversation, a person should quickly discover the hobbies of the other person in order to specifically praise their achievements in this area. By way of example, he wrote that Cardinal Richelieu was undoubtedly one of the most important statesmen of his time and that flattering him on this matter was pointless, for he already knew that, and did not need any affirmation. However, if a person praised Richelieu’s hobby, writing, they could wrap him around their finger much more successfully.

The scholar and critic Samuel Johnson accused the “letters” of teaching “the morals of a whore and the manners of a dancing master”. But that is just sour-faced moralizing: Chesterfield had principles. And he recommended that his son have principles, but that on the other hand, he should also not be stupid.

However, for Chesterfield, what hovered above everything were the “Graces”, or in other words, the gift of grace. He used the Duke of Marlborough as an example thereof, stating that although he possessed many extraordinary merits, he owed his real power over people to his grace: “he could refuse more gracefully than other people could grant.”

The world of today, where one shitstorm follows the other and society is deeply polarized, could benefit from heeding the composed spirit of the 4th Earl of Chesterfield: “Never maintain an argument with heat and clamor, though you think or know yourself to be in the right; but give your opinion modestly and coolly, which is the only way to convince; and, if that does not do, try to change the conversation, by saying, with good humor, ‘We shall hardly convince one another, nor is it necessary that we should, so let us talk of something else.’”

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The end of the identity hype
“The effect of technological change is consistently over-stated in the short term and under-estimated in the long term.” A number of people have been credited with this observation. Whoever said it can be credited with remarkable insight when it comes to the realm of ideas and public debate. In the last two decades the way in which ideas are battled-over and had-out in public has altered enormously.

Not all of this is for the bad. As a species we tend to focus on the downside of things and bank any upsides as though they were always meant to be. As a participant in many public debate forums over the last two decades I have seen the positives first-hand. Having debated ideas in endless university chambers, national Parliaments and even at the O2 Arena in London, I feel like I have had a good ringside seat – as well as played a small part – in the way in which the public debating style has altered in our time.

I would sum up the positives by saying this: today, wherever you are in the world, if you are young, smart, ambitious and have an internet connection you can be at the forefront of the issues of your time as much as anybody living in a megacity. On a recent book tour to Iceland I was stopped by a young man in a street in Reykjavik. He had just watched a recent debate of mine on YouTube and I was struck again in the subsequent discussion by the fact that there was nothing about his location in Iceland that hampered this young man’s knowledge or ideas. He was at exactly the same stage as he would have been had we had the

Text: Douglas Murray | Illustration: Markus Roost

The British journalist and speaker Douglas Murray believes the internet age can also have a positive influence on our culture of debate. Provided we find our way back to a public debating style that is more concerned with ideas and their content than with the people involved.
conversation in Oxford or Harvard. That is a remarkable thing, and if we could only learn to harness this better and concentrate our attention accordingly then the good we could do for our planet is almost limitless.

YouTube-isation of politics
But of course there are downsides too. The platform that has perhaps most transformed the way in which ideas are exchanged today is YouTube. The advantages of that platform are obvious. Everybody in the world has the potential to watch long-form debates and discussions of a quality that is world-class, with a historic, archive element that is seriously enriching. Numerous intellectuals and politicians have become famous simply by dint of even just one of their exchanges appearing on this platform and going viral. But the celebrity that can be accrued this way also has its disadvantages. At the start of this decade one effect was already visible, summed up in the phrase “The YouTube-isation of politics”.

Almost every adult to have grown up in the internet age has probably noted this. Up until this era, most debate and discussion at least pretended to seek for consensus. Debating ideas was not just a game as it often is for ambitious university students. It was also a method for trying ideas out against one another. In this way the best ideas were expected to emerge victorious, tested as they were against the finest arguments of the opposite side. But YouTube had an effect on political and television debate which is seriously deleterious to the skillful exchange of ideas. That is what happens when one or all participants in a debate are not engaged in the debate in order to arrive at a consensus but rather to speak to a non-present audience who they regard as their base.

What the internet wants
The change has been visible and calamitous. Even in Parliament people would increasingly give strangely over-the-top speeches and then sit down to a slightly baffled chamber. It could happen from all political sides. Nobody is immune to it. In television studios, a guest would treat a fellow guest as though they were a child-killer and then launch into a screed of denunciation, turned-up lip and all. And the cause was that the guilty participant was not really speaking in order to influence the other real people in the room. Often not even for the majority of the people watching. Instead they were performing so that somebody (often from their own office) would post the excerpt on YouTube with a click-bait headline such as “X destroys Y” or “Y annihilates Z”. All to satisfy and further embed the prejudices of their particular audience. To say that this development has been negative is to greatly understate things. It has reduced almost all debate to excerptable campaign auditions.

To some extent there has now been a reaction against this. The television networks have seen the results in the massive shortfall of viewers for the major political debate programmes. Today in the UK the BBC’s flagship political discussion Newsnight is down to a couple of hundred thousand viewers a night. This is a pitiful fall-off for a show that used to dominate the political agenda in Britain. But it is also a consequence of the networks making a mistake. As the internet got more and more traction for gobbet-sized debate-chunks, so television repackaged itself to ape what it thought the internet wanted: short, sharp, 3–5 minute Punch-and-Judy ding-dongs. Ironically it is YouTube and other platforms that remind us how recent a development it is. Because on these platforms we can see what debate looked like until recent years. Political opponents used to be able to sit across a table from each other to engage in long-form conversation and debate for an hour, easily. Shows like Bill Buckley’s “Firing Line” remind us of the quality of long-form discussion before the internet itself suggested such discussion was dead.

It’s all a matter of tone
So the television producers aped the internet, only for the internet to be the thing that showed them up for what they were doing. Because today the most striking development in the free exchange of ideas does not happen in the world’s parliaments but online. Today the major podcasts like Joe Rogan have a far greater reach not only than the legacy networks, but far more than almost any politician is able to muster. And what is striking about these podcasts is that they can sustain political debate for up to three or four hours. Exhausting as it might sound to some: there is a vast audience of people who are very happy – indeed eager – to hear long-form debate about the big ideas of their time.

Almost certainly this is a reaction to the reductive effects that the internet first brought about. There is an intuition that the big issues of the age – whether to do with the environment, capitalism, inequality or anything else – are more complex than was first suggested. They cannot simply be answered by one loudmouth from the left debating one loudmouth from the right. They cannot be solved by one person “destroying” another for the edification of their base. They are serious and complex questions that deserve serious and complex attention.
Of course there are tonal issues which have also changed in this era. At the start of the internet era there appeared for a time to be something to gain by being the loudest or most outrageous voice in the room. To be able to say the provocative thing that sent something viral. Today the downsides of going viral are at least as obvious as the upsides. Not all publicity is good publicity. Not all attention is useful. For at the same time that the benefits of online debate can stretch individuals, so it can also encourage herd behaviour. Especially against people perceived to have caused offence.

Public versus private language
This has serious repercussions. As Jaron Lanier has observed, platforms like Twitter have a business model that relies on people working for free to correct the behaviour and thoughts of everyone else on the planet. Every day there is a new target for the online mob’s correction. And one consequence is what I have referred to as the disappearance of public as opposed to private language.

Right up until this age it was accepted that there was speech that was intended for a specific audience and speech that was intended (or aimed for) the attention of the widest possible audience. Today that line has almost completely disappeared. Private in-group discussions can at any moment be discovered by the out-group, and subjected to – among other things – what is known as “context collapse”. At this moment the ideas and even jokes of an in-group are exposed to the widest possible audience, and it is perhaps inevitable that at such points the out-group scours remorselessly through the in-group’s errors.

In some cases, exposing truly reprehensible behaviour, this can be edifying. More often it is not, because plenty of ideas need to be tried out in private before being tried out in public. For instance, a first year philosophy class might discuss the old question of why eating babies is wrong. Everybody involved knows the game that is being played. But to any outsiders listening in, or shown a transcript of this debate without knowing the context, the whole thing may well seem utterly reprehensible. What sort of people are these, to even think that you should eat babies? The headline writers could have a field day. But the exposure has not done any good, merely exacerbated an already existing problem. Which is that just as the internet can reward individuals who think outside from the herd, so it can remorselessly flatten the landscape of ideas, making the participants in the great debates of our time fearful lest they should attract the attention of the online mob.

The value of ideas
A final challenge we have to face up to is the dilemma of “the speaker not the speech”, where the identity traits of a speaker matter more than the content of their words. This always existed to some extent, for understandable reasons. But in the internet age the tendency has metastasized so that we seem to have all in some version accepted the idea that there are things that one person can say but another cannot: all depending on the sex, race or other characteristics of the people involved. My own prediction is that this too will break down, and that we have been leaning over-heavily on this in the second stage of the internet. All the signs are that audiences are moving beyond such identitarianism and onto a more serious interest in the value of ideas, whoever voices them and wherever they come from.

We hear so much about the negative side of technological progress. But if we could harness this, and encourage engagement with the real content of people’s words then we could concentrate the attention and thoughts of billions of people towards addressing serious problems. And instead of making them worse (as the internet first encouraged us to do) we might actually stand a chance of solving something.

Douglas Murray, born in London in 1979, studied at Magdalen College at the University of Oxford. At the age of 20, he made a name for himself as England’s youngest biographer with a book about the poet Lord Alfred Douglas. Murray is Co-editor of the weekly magazine The Spectator and takes a stand on current events in journals such as The Sunday Times, The Guardian and The Wall Street Journal. In 2019, he published the international bestseller “Madness of the Masses. How Opinion Making and Hysteria Poison our Society”, in which he pleads for freedom of speech and rational discussion.
“Style is a lifelong process”

Recorded by: Stephan Lehmann-Maldonado

Butlers don’t need to be called Jeeves nor do they have to wear a black tailcoat. But they must have one thing: good style. This has nothing to do with arrogance and everything to do with respect. Business etiquette expert and renowned Swiss butler Hanspeter Vochezer explains why he is convinced of this.

“It doesn’t take me long to determine if someone has style. A gardener can be standing in a potato field covered in earth and have stylish conversations, while some top executives dressed in bespoke Brioni suits behave like boors. Style can, of course, be developed – but it can never be bought. Style begins with how you interact with other people. Style is a mindset.

It was my day-to-day work during my 25-year career in the luxury hotel business and as a butler that in particular trained my eye for style. At a luxury hotel, you witness the entire cycle of life from birth to death. Baptisms have to be organized, as do funeral banquets. While a couple celebrates their wedding night in one room, the people next door are having a physical altercation – and their next step will be divorce. All of this means that I have gotten to know people pretty well – and personally experienced situations that could be used as inspiration for countless dramas: corpses in hotel rooms, suicide attempts, a cyclone, hiring and firing, the founding and liquidation of companies and glittering parties.

In my professional life, I often cater to the ‘rich and powerful’. But I am also acquainted with the needs of the poorest people in the world. In the slums of the Indian port city of Mumbai, for example, I have noticed that the inhabitants – in contrast to those of New Delhi – show a great deal of style in the few possessions they have and in their dealings with visitors. They embody generosity, friendliness and good taste.

Unfortunately, some candidates who in the wake of the corona crisis are now applying for a job with my recruitment company Swiss Butlers, lack this gift. We are looking for high-quality personnel for private households. If you want to meet their demands, you not only have to master many roles – from property manager to event organizer – but also have virtues such as discretion, loyalty and a willingness to serve. I repeatedly find that even people who have worked in chic hotels do not meet the requirements of private households.

Of course, money makes it easier for people to live beautifully and to dress appropriately regardless of the occasion. But style generally costs very little. For example, even if I don’t have much money, I can be charming at the supermarket checkout by thanking the person across from me and wishing them a nice day. Or I can spontaneously help an older person across the street. My motto, whatever the situation, is: c’est le ton qui fait la musique; manners make the man. It’s these ‘little things’ that make the big difference. They can open doors around the world. Because if you treat others with respect, you will also receive respect.

One of the foundations of style is upbringing. I think one of the biggest challenges in life is raising children. I grew up by Lake Zurich, and come from a family where both parents worked hard to provide for me and my siblings. But I am forever grateful to them for the values they instilled in me along the way. I was fascinated by the luxury hotel business, even as a child. And my dream came true: I made it to the top of some of the best luxury hotels such as Paradise Koh Yao in Thailand and the five-star Park Gstaad. Then, one day, an opportunity presented itself through my personal network: to work for Gunter Sachs as a private butler on his estate in Palm Springs. I accepted – and have never regretted it. Sachs remains a great role model for me. He was one of those people who always had style.

As a butler you are not the stiff guy in the black tails, but a private hoteller. The setting is the same as at a luxury hotel: you manage several properties, guest rooms, a fleet of vehicles, a swimming pool and other staff. You are on duty almost around the clock. But a butler gains insights into some of the more intimate aspects of life and often has the highest level of responsibility.
Where do I see some of the biggest faux pas when it comes to style? Watching an executive order an ‘Entrecôte Café de Paris’ while the guest is choosing a vegetarian menu makes me want to intervene. The rules for how to behave at the table are, of course, challenging in our globalized day and age. But there is a key to success: pay court to the person opposite you. If the choice of menu and beverages is not adjusted to the person opposite you at the table, that is a faux pas.

I also think it is unfortunate that we adopt some American customs that do not fit with our culture. This happens, for example, when a large corporation pushes through an informal culture for all employees at all levels by doing away with the use of last names when addressing someone. Surveys show that the majority of people does not welcome this. You cannot instill a sense of team spirit by using the one-size-fits-all principle. When a waitress in a restaurant addresses me informally saying ‘Hi, how are you doing?’, for me that borders on disrespect. It makes me ask myself, ‘How do we know each other?’

Last but not least, it hurts me when I witness the naivety with which people get a tattoo. I’m sorry, but we do not have to be a slave to every trend. Especially not if it is considered completely ‘out’ in the world of international business and is almost impossible to reverse on your skin.

Style is a lifelong process of developing your personality.”
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