

In Defence of Style

O my language, am I what you are?
Or are you, my language, what I am?

Mahmoud Darwish¹

In the final analysis, style is art. And art is nothing more or less than various modes of stylized, dehumanized representation.

Susan Sontag²

Prologue: What is Style?

What is style? It has, quite predictably for a word so ubiquitous, multiple definitions. In the form of a noun, it refers to a rod-like object, a distinctive appearance, and a way of doing something. You find it in many different arenas. One can speak of literary style, artistic style, a style of cuisine or a style of speaking. It describes time, like Regency style white stucco facades, or place, such as Persian style rugs.

Part One: Style as a Weapon

Most commonly, however, style is a judgement. It is elegance, chicness, coolness, sophistication. It touches on every type of human expression, but of significance, it does not apply to every form of human expression. Implicit in the word is a distinctive and unique quality that exists with considerable scarcity, which makes it all the more valuable and all the more desirable.

Two interesting observations emerge when considering this notion of style. Firstly, it is discrete by nature. There is no continuum of style on which something or someone can exist. One can have good style but not bad style. The antithesis of style is stylelessness, the complete absence of style. You either have it or you don't. This binary has allowed the concept to be used as a divisive tool to sort and categorize people. There is a sense of us and others when speaking of style, two classes separated by a great chasm of dash and discernment. It has been used as a way of elevating and denigrating people and things, for profits or pleasure, not just between groups but also within groups. Hemingway, for example, criticized Faulkner for his pompous and embellished prose when he said "Poor Faulkner. Does he really think big emotions come from big words?"³ It begs the retort, "Poor Hemingway. Did he really think that big emotions came only from small words?" His objection, of course, was another writer's manner of writing, which he felt was lacking in style. But by what standard and on whose authority?

Secondly, it is usually prescriptive and not typically descriptive. In other words, some forms of human expression do not dictate style but rather style dictates some forms of human expression. This raises an interesting question as to the origin of style and whether it is driven from the top down or the bottom up? Each year, high-end fashion houses present their

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collections, which set the standard for good style. Of interest, is that these designs are either inspired, or in many cases just replicates of streetwear or other common attire. Last season, for example, Gucci, Balenciaga, and Dior all featured tracksuits, sneakers and down jackets based on clothing worn by skateboarders. This year, Louis Vuitton began selling designer facemasks. We can only wonder what to expect next year, perhaps haute couture respirators, because if you need one to live, better that you do so in style.

There is something inherently unstable here. Think of a handbag, considered the fashion item of the year, bought by someone with nine months' worth of savings, only to be deemed unstylish a week after purchase by the very people that promoted it in the first place. It is no longer in vogue until it is, which you won't know until you do. The concept is enormously fluid, irrational and contingent on temporal and spatial variables. Before engaging in a defence of style, it's worth considering whether this particular conception reflects its true meaning? If style is something which is not fixed in time or place, and if the generative properties of it are mutable and unpredictable, how is style to be understood, let alone justified? Could it be that style is something more than a tool of divisiveness? Could it be more universal, more subjective?

Part Two: Beyond Good and Evil

Of interest is that the etymology of the word comes from *stile*, an Old French word for pen.⁴ In its modern form, style, much like a pen, denotes creation or transmission. Victor Hugo suggests that: "Style is ideas. Ideas are style. Try and tear away the word: it's the idea that you lose... style is the essence of a subject, constantly called to the surface."⁵ It is not something that one effects, but rather something that one evokes. It is a matter of substance rather than form.

Arguably, style it is a way for us to understand ourselves and a way for us communicate that understanding to the world. This conceptualization, which is grounded in the origin of the word, is reflected in the intention underlying the way we dress, we speak, we write, we move and declare ourselves to the world every day. It is human expression.

To be a self is not just a process of exposing the innate and unique qualities inside each and everyone of us, but a means of construction. We are exposed to a variety of symbols, forms of art, means of expression. Style is the way each of us does this. We are, of course, always formed by cultural directives. No man is an island. These impulses often don't spring from us alone. We reach for them because they mean something we want to, consciously or not, align ourselves with. In other words, liking cowboy boots or Mahler is not benign. It represents the constellation of values, modes of expression, and beliefs we want to connect with and be seen as connected with. It is, above all else, a hopeful instinct.

While in its colloquial form, style means a good or sophisticated variant of this process, the arbitrariness of style makes this judgement seem at best futile, and at worst, arrogant. To be sure, some might be in line with prescriptive definitions which make one seem, in social terms, stylish. But without exclusively judging the term by these fluctuating collective whims, everyone has style in some form or the other. In other words, everyone has *a style*, even if it is not *the style*.

When thought of in these terms, style is both a delicate and intimate thing. I remember when I was a teenager, I once came to a realization while looking at a woman who was wearing what

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was, in my eyes, a hideous sweater. It occurred to me that she had likely stood somewhere at some moment and decided that she liked the sweater enough to put it on her body. Even if on the smallest scale, it was something that she deemed adequate to express how she wanted to be seen as in the world. *She liked the way it made her feel about herself*. In that moment there was almost unbearable vulnerability. Not only did I see some expressive and deeply human impulse, the impulse of creating oneself in the smallest of choices, something I too did, I could no longer subject her to the sterilized categorization I was conditioned to.

The Finally: In Defence of Style

Then, while style is a means of expressing social differences and organizing power, it is also much more than just judgement. Most importantly, it is our way of creating ourselves. Style is the universal process of selecting words and symbols (these slippery things!) to communicate how we see the world. The way we dress, the art we like, the expressions we use, the way we move through the world—all of this is style. It is our style, it is ours, it is us.

After all, what are we but this process of picking ideas and symbols up, turning them over, changing ourselves, having ourselves changed, leaving ourselves and then returning again and again? What am I but a marbled collection of everything I love, everything I hate, all my idealism and dreams for myself? What am I but this hopeful process of expression and representation, always fluctuating, always attempting to find a centre that I can call me? What am I but various modes of stylized representation?

Bibliography

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