

Aesthetic prejudices and politics

We don't talk about it very much but most of us have a strong prejudice in favor of attractive people. More specifically, we feel happier and more secure seeing good-looking, well-dressed, and presumably well-off people in the places we occupy or visit. (I am constantly reminded of this by my wife, who insists that I change my clothes to something a little more decent when driving to town for groceries- "what do you want people to think, you're a *morto di fame**?")

The TV networks are well aware our preference, and their news readers are mostly pretty young women and well groomed, nice looking men, rarely old, but far enough past youth to project a reassuring respectability and presumed maturity. Lots of satire and criticism has been devoted to the current obsession with appearance over substance, but the networks got it right. We really do prefer to see and hear people who make us feel good. This fact, violently contested by a whole generation during the 60's, keeps the cosmetics and clothing industries booming. As the importance of appearance becomes more deeply embedded in the culture, cosmetic surgery seems to be the new big growth industry.

We confront the other side of the coin when we happen upon bums and beggars, sometimes aggressive and rude, frequently filthy. Our compassion with their plight has to fight against our general sense of repulsion. (Just look at what they've let themselves turn into- what a shame!) It has probably always been so. In many historic periods, well-dressed nobles have been admired by the scruffy masses whose miserable lives served to sustain the leisure and wealth of that admired ruling class. Never mind Dickens' England; just think of London's punks of the 70's and 80's and the universally worshipped and ever stylish Princess Di.

At this dramatic turning point in history, the fixation with appearance has grown apace with the gap in incomes between the very rich and everyone else. Given that the past century brought a growth of the middle class and a general well being of the entire population in both the United States and western Europe, unprecedented in history, it seems surprising that the current radical retransformation of society is being greeted mostly with silence. One hears some feeble protests about the environment, the conduct of the war, the destruction of New Orleans and lately, growing outcries about the rising price of gasoline**, but nobody seems to take note of the fact that we're racing headlong back to a neo-medieval society consisting of a diminishing circle of ruling nobility (or Owner Class in current parlance) and the ever more struggling masses. I realize that this portrait may be overdrawn for the moment, as the social structures built up over the past century have not yet all crumbled.

Among our personal blessings that remain, we have satellite TV, and having lots of free time and nowhere to go, I've watched a number of Congressional hearings in the past couple of years. Two things have impressed me most. First: what a bunch of remarkably inane drivel springs from Congressional mouths. Second: what incredible haircuts! Taking one's eyes off the picture, one can't help wondering how did some of these well-coifed empty heads get to represent us. But of course most Americans don't have the time to follow these hearings. They receive only carefully selected sound bites on the evening news, along with the pictures of the Senators and Congressmen in their elegant suits and leading man haircuts. It's easy to imagine the viewers thinking "What a fine, distinguished and decent man!" while the suave Congressman is voting yet more perks for the industry that pays him, more pork for his district, or voting to reduce veterans' benefits.***

Chances are, the sick and the homeless and the growing number of Americans without health insurance don't look especially good (and their very existence may make us feel uncomfortable), so while they may get our attention, they may elude our sympathy. Among the few Republicans I know, there doesn't seem to be much awareness that such people exist, except on the TV news, but then pretty much everybody inside the gates of their communities has the same matching blue eyes and hair. I've noticed their tendency to blame the least fortunate members of society for their own level of discomfort at the way the country is going, while they seem to experience no sense of revulsion at the sleekly groomed leaders marching their country and their class into decline and bankruptcy. Maybe we should stop assigning all of the responsibility to the President for the country's ills. Surely those clever DC hair stylists have to shoulder some of the blame.

* literally, one who's starving to death

** \$6.47/gallon here in Italy at latest calculation (early May 2006) but we're ahead of the curve.

*** I refer to the representatives as male, since most of them are, but Hillary is just as vacuous on the war as Biden or the others, and Sen. Hutchison is every bit as hypocritical and brain-dead as the male representatives of her region, and surely they devote no less time to their hair.