

Grozny's Child

The above photograph was taken in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, in 1985. The civil war was at its height and the child has been pictured at the moment when she, and several other children, emerged from the cellar where they had been sheltering. (1) During their stay underground the children had little, or no, light and so were unable to observe how their appearances were changing.



So disturbing is the child's appearance that it is difficult to imagine how she could be related to the 'normal' person who must have entered the cellar six weeks earlier. If they are related, and we are assuming they are, then what is it that is responsible for the alarming changes made to the appearance of the figure emerging from the dark? What is it we are seeing? And what is it that the child sees as she turns to look at us in the person of the photographer?

The child's appearance is unsettling because it is part of an inescapable comparison we make between us, as *dressed* individuals, and her non-dressed condition. The 'unsettling' look of the child exists to the extent that it deviates from the image(s) we hold as to what constitutes a normal appearance. Her coverings lack the formal coherence of dress and little, or no, attention is paid to the presence of the body. There is no mutual recognition between the body and the material elements of dress, which, as a consequence, will spin spatial forms independent of the physical contours of the body. So... if it isn't dress then what is it that is covering the child?

The territory of the 'non-dressed' is somewhere that has not been extensively surveyed. We are dealing with those states where there is an absence of dress, but where an individual has 'coverings' of some sort. It could be that the child is covered by a kind of pre-dress, something consisting of a set of elementary features that have not yet metamorphosed into dress proper. This is not the condition they were in when they entered the cellar but during the six weeks of their hibernation it seems that their dress had time to regress to this rudimentary condition we might call Pre-dress. This is a condition characterised by a limited degree of differentiation. (*Embryonic* might be the best way to describe it.) We are unsettled by this pre-dress state because it shows us just how fragile and provisional, are our own dressed appearances. Pre-dress highlights the extent to which our dress, together with those who are wearing it, is really little more than a thin layer of formal coherence- always temporary- floating on a chaotic, and formless, region. Thomas Carlyle has captured this utterly alien realm of the pre-dressed.

'While I-Good Heaven-have thatched myself over with the dead fleeces of sheep, the bark of vegetables, the entrails of worms, the hides of oxen or seals, the felt of furred beasts; and walk abroad a moving Rag-screen, over heaped with shreds and tatters raked from the

Charnel-house of nature.’ (2)

Pre-dress then will favour wrappings rather than tailoring and shape. There will be a minimum of work on the raw materials out of which dress will eventually be made. This pre-dress body undergoes very little translation via the garments of dress proper.

(There is some difficulty here in distinguishing between pre-dress, and what we will, in a moment, call post-dress. They are not present on the body of the child as distinct and complete wholes. What we see more nearly resembles two entities- pre and post-dress- passing through one another and so shaping the child’s coverings in different ways. The sheepskin boots are a good example where the two forms of non-dress are manifest. On the right foot, the boot remains intact and so is able to maintain a simple pre-dress shape that closely resembles the footwear of early childhood. The boot hides the differentiation of the foot in favour of a smooth, undifferentiated shape. The left boot is starting to lose its integrity. Just a bit more wear and the foot within the boot will become visible and so the boot will enter the stage of post-dress.)

Maybe with Post-dress we are seeing the ruins that are left after the disintegration of an initial dressed state. The child looks the way she does because she has been cut off from the many and various technologies we deem necessary for maintaining the integrity of our dress, and our appearance in general. One of the first dress principles to disintegrate is the pervasive symmetry that results from the form of the body. The face, together with the way garments are wrapped around the upper body, are no longer worn with symmetry as the upper most consideration. As the force that holds the material elements of dress together starts to weaken, so previously adjacent garments start to drift apart. The child has a scarf that looks as if it has

been absorbed by the material underneath. Wear is not simply the abrading of textiles but also a ‘loosening’ of the component parts with one another. Style fades away and with it aesthetic unity. Patterns can be torn apart, textiles can come to rest in inappropriate settings and whole garments may be shuffled into unusual places.

Perhaps the most disturbing characteristic of post-dress is the glimpse it affords of the inevitable deterioration insinuated into every corner of our dress. If this relentless falling away is not attended to on a regular basis then not only will our dress degrade, a comparable threat to our existential integrity cannot be far behind

At the start of this discussion I asked what the child saw as she looked towards us. Perhaps it was ‘Don’t you recognise me?’

- (1) The absence of trousers and the presence of what appears to be a residual skirt would seem to indicate that the child is a girl.
- (2) Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, Uni. of California, 2000, p. 44.