

## A PLACE IN THE SHADES:

SUNGLASSES AS A PHILOSOPHICAL BY - PRODUCT.

by Robert Bodrog

It is an interesting observation that the notion of freedom in Western society has traditionally been tied to advancing the separation of the individual from the state, thus securing the singular One from the mass they. Indeed, with the emergence of the modernist movement of the past century, what one sees is a reaction to mass collectivization in society as it continues to fragment and externalize the life of the individual, making one feel more a component of a mass rather than a significant integral "I" among other I's.

And in the present age which many now call post-modern, we indeed remained tied to the post, bound by rules, routines, and responsibilities which we often feel are completely beyond our control or comprehension. We feel constraint and limitation everywhere in our day to day lives. Frequently we are not even aware of this, since these routines have become so familiar and internalized. And just as it is possible to do something without necessarily understanding all it entails, so too is it possible to react against a set of circumstances without being fully conscious of such a rebellion. This is exemplified by examining how and why sunglasses have become so popular an item in Western society. Sunglasses, you might say? Granted, this may seem somewhat unusual at first glance; however, if one explores what sunglasses achieve, and the means by which this is accomplished, it becomes evident that there is actually more transpiring here from

a philosophical perspective than meets the eye.

As mentioned earlier, the individual in today's society must confront the feeling of insignificance and alienation of mass culture on a daily basis. By growing up in such a culture, the groundwork is not laid for one to develop a cohesive sense of belonging and high self-esteem. Furthermore, the mass media neither instills nor nurtures a sense of pride in individuals, but rather merely allots anonymous status, allowing them to be privy to the day's sensory events as relayed by that media. However, in "real-life" the only way to retain this detached voyeuristic perspective is to literally hide behind dark shades which cloak our identity. In addition, by hiding one's face as such, essentially what one is doing is simultaneously forsaking and alienating one's personal identity in favor of the chance to perceive and observe "privately" without being recognized as an I, but rather, if anything, a mere Other.

What becomes interesting at this point is the sort of interplay among individuals which comes into effect. By wearing sunglasses in a large anonymous mass with other such individuals, whether at concerts, malls, or simply in public, it's almost as if a sort of secret membership and bonding is formed with others who are wearing their shades, simply by virtue of their respective wearings. This establishes the foundation of membership to a pseudo-group, and thus allows those collective people to feel a sense

of belonging, simply because they can feel secure in the knowledge that they are among others who share (supposedly) similar tastes, styles and natures. I think it also noteworthy at this time to mention that in wearing mirrored shades, one can observe at once the fragmented reflection of the surrounding world while perceiving one's faceless presence within it. Also, and perhaps most significantly, shades prevent visual confrontation of the individual with himself should he perceive his reflection in any mirror or window.

Furthermore, as the shade movement evolves and becomes more sophisticated, the sheer diversity of frames, colors, and styles is at once shocking and appalling at times. Even the most respected of today's fashion designing elite have deeded if anonymity and sanctuary have their price in society, such is the case with sunglasses; the prices of some designer shades now topping upwards of the \$150 U.S. mark.

So; in the final analysis where does this leave us you may ask? Stated in the simplest terms, it is difficult to say with any certainty exactly what this all means. However I do think it's fair to say that there is something going on here which transcends a mere attempt at a simple fashion statement. For example, why do people continue to wear sunglasses at night, in the winter, or while indoors? All of which behaviors I have observed in many major North American cities. If nothing else I think it is clear that however unconscious it might be, there is definitely a philosophical basis of some sort underlying this form of mass behavior, which has somehow found an outlet for its expression by utilizing these means. And if truth is now being defined by the Law of Large Numbers as intellectuals such as Kierkegaard, Riesman, and Whyte have told us, it is quite possible that a part of the new reality has already arrived. And (at least for the moment) it rests comfortably and anonymously-right in front of our faces. ■

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