

Black Magic

Robert S Silver October © Copyright.

In the beginning was the word and the word was 'black'. It was there before the stars formed out of collapsing clouds of gas. It is here now in the darkness that wraps the galaxies. It is in the black holes formed out of vast imploding stars, structures of zero volume and infinite density from which not even white light can escape.

'Black was, is now and ever shall be'. That is the timeless doctrine of the style gurus. It is tattooed on their consciousness, encoded in their genomes; 'Black is sexy'. No need to 90s girl Liz Hurley, sporting a Versace dress held together with - favourite '70s accessory - safety pins, to know that Coco Chanel knew all about the power of the little black number and Marlon Brando discovered in *The Wild Ones* what black leather could do for his box office. Yes, make no mistake, black has pulling power.

It is a power that comes from its deep seriousness, from its no-messing authority. Liz knows it instinctively, as do other exponents of the sartorial style. Would anyone have taken the grandfather of earnest Modernism, Le Corbusier, seriously had he dressed like a peacock rather than a crow? It is not that Norman Foster's utterances acquire the gravitas of the meteorite floating in the opening frames of *2001 a Space Odyssey* because they are underpinned by a black polo neck?

Then what of Henry - 'they can have any colour they want so long as it's black' - Ford? He understood all too well that there is really only one colour for something as essentially serious and functional as engineering, because that, when all is said and done, is all that cars are. The public and the marketing departments, however, would have it different. They wanted their expensive toys and lifestyle accessories, they wanted colours - so rainbow-hued Model Ts rolled off the production lines. After his death in 1947, Ford must have turned in his grave as millions of people, the kind who dyed their hair blond and their poodles baby blue, spent the '60s driving round in Mustangs that always seemed to be sprayed the colours of M&M or sun-bleached

surfboards.

It was a battle lost to the harbingers of popular taste, to those who would not place themselves in thrall to the dictates of engineers. Nonetheless, black still wields its authority. It is the colour of uniforms, of dominatrix and Dominicans alike. It is also the colour of the great classics of modernist furniture and product design. Black was like a statement of fact. It proclaimed objects as forms designed solely to fulfil the demands of function.

Go back to the late '20s and early '30s when modernism was sweeping everything before it with its optimism. Cutting edge furniture was black and chrome or tubular steel. There was Eileen Gray's curiously asymmetrical Nonconformists chair of 1926. There was Le Corbusier's Grand Confort of 1928 (some say this stack of black leather cushions held in a chrome frame fails to live up to its name) and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's cantilevered chair from 1930.

Wind forward through the century and the style may change but the colour, of lack of, never does. Charles and Ray Eames's swivelling chairs of the '50's, Richard Sapper's executive seating range of '78/9, Roy Fleetwood's wing sofa of 10 years later that used the construction techniques of high-tech buildings, and onwards through any number of little and not so little black chairs that genuflect to style and occasionally nod in the direction of ergonomics. All are classics. Now Valvomo's Netsurfer is following in that tradition. The Netsurfer's seat is black, the computer equipment it supports is grey. Suddenly the makers of PCs look inept.

As far back as 1958, Mies had erected the Seagram Building in New York. The ultimate in black box corporate power. But of course, he had form where black is concerned - does Hans Gugolot with his 1962 design of the Braun electric razor. It was Braun which first made a corporate policy of wanting timeless design. And that, as the gurus always knew, means black - the alpha and omega of style.