



THE REPORT

THE DEATH OF THE BEARD

Why the buzz for facial fuzz has finally reached its peak

by Mr Mansel Fletcher (cleanly shaven)

- 1 **A** full beard, at its best, and worn in the fashion of the notorious Australian outdoorsman Mr Ned Kelly, makes a man look distinguished. "What happens when everyone's got a beard?" That was the question that a team from Australia's University of New South Wales recently set out to answer, and their unsurprising conclusion is that the appeal of beards diminishes in line with their popularity. Yet in recent months the *New York Post* broke the news that men are becoming so desperate to grow a beard that increasing numbers are having plastic surgery to remove hair follicles from their scalp and have them plugged into their face. No wonder there's often 11 beards that's incompatible with their supposed air of authenticity.
- 2 For these reasons, among others, here at MR PORTER we're beginning to ask if time's up for beards, because they're now boringly ubiquitous and their cultural *raison d'être* is becoming 12. An example of the latter: an email pinged in my inbox last weekend. It was from a New

York vendor of designer outdoor gear and was promoting some of that vendor's upcoming customer events. These workshops include "axe restoration", "heart of sourdough" and "knife sharpening". The same weekend I saw a new spring catalogue from a very middle-of-the-road British mail-order clothing company, which features a male model with a thin beard. And as an aside, once neo-Luddite hipsters are sharpening axes in a way that would excite fictional yuppie antihero Patrick Bateman, aren't these hitherto separate worlds of men's style collapsing in on themselves?

3 But let's be fair to the hipster *zeitgeist*, because while it's easy to mock the urban lumberjack, any man who spends his cosseted days in an air-conditioned office, operating an Apple computer with an ultra-fast internet connection, and a world of gourmet lunch options five minutes from his desk, can be forgiven for fantasising about the romance of real work. For dreaming of the deep satisfaction that would come from an honest day's toil in the great outdoors, chopping wood, corralling cattle, or tilling the land, and for imagining, as he queues outside the latest burger restaurant, that one day he might hunt his own food and sleep under the stars. This is the mood that has informed the trend for beards, and which combines with an understandable wish to accentuate one's masculinity in a world where it's not always clear how to positively interpret being a man. It's no coincidence that the last grooming trend was the unsavoury and emasculating craze for extreme waxing and shaving.

4 But what if, rather than revealing our connection with "real life", this urge reveals our disconnection from it? How far does the *zeitgeist's* vision of physical labour actually tally with reality? If we really want to emulate the style of our manually labouring forebears then we'll take every opportunity to enjoy the clothes that preclude the possibility of physical work, rather than dressing in the hope that we'll be mistaken for a blacksmith. It's all very well spending a weekend building your own barbecue, but I want to speak up for the guys interested in putting on a blazer and heading out to a restaurant where they can enjoy food cooked by someone else.

5 And where does 15 come into all this? Five or six years ago, when the current neo-dandy trend was new and fresh, old-fashioned beards were rare and correspondingly interesting. Now they're in danger of alternating between replacing the bow tie (and they're frequently worn by guys in bow ties) as a crude signifier of a simplistic interest in style, and as an absurd statement of intent on behalf of hipsters whose Victorian pimp-inspired grooming is at odds with their contemporary lifestyle. Let's stop this now, before there's a revival of Victorian mutton-chop sideburns, and before we forget that sporting such antiquated facial topiary will probably make you the subject of a lot of laughter.

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