

## ***Eyewash no. 1124*** January 21, 2005

Prince Harry went to a (private) fancy-dress party dressed as a member of Rommel's Afrika Korps. He added a swastika armband and a Wehrmacht badge. One of the fellow-guests sold a photograph to *The Sun*, which ran a front-page picture captioned "HARRY THE NAZI". An international furore ensued, and the future of the British Monarchy was brought in question. *Le Monde* thought the dress scandalous and a Japanese newspaper asked whether the Prince is stark staring mad. *The Times* [London] pointed out that the Afrika Korps was "responsible for the death of thousands of British soldiers" and that the party took place "three weeks after the Queen's carefully modulated speech about racial diversity, and shortly before the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz". [Information from *The Week*, 22 January 2005] The Prince had his defenders along the lines of "we have all done silly things in youth" and "Harry has been a bit of a fool". One pro-monarchist letter to *The Independent* began with a clause about "Prince Harry's undisputed folly". He has, also, had a difficult childhood and lost his mother when he was twelve—which did not wash with *The Observer*: Harry is now 20 years old, old enough to know better. Nobody to our knowledge stated the obvious truth that no offence had been committed, that there was no lapse of taste except by *The Sun*, and nothing to apologize for.

*The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* appear not to understand fancy dress. You go to a fancy-dress party dressed as somebody other than yourself, perhaps the further from your usual self the better. If you go as the Pope it does not follow that you are a Roman Catholic. If you go as Stalin it does not follow that you have any Stalinist sympathies. People go dressed as the Devil, which a Satanist would hardly do. Perhaps some characters are ruled out by good taste. A concentration-camp guard carrying dismembered limbs, for instance. Or God Almighty. But what on earth is supposed to be wrong with dressing up as a member of a courageous and honourable army? Rommel paid with his life for his opposition to Hitler and was never accused of war crimes. Not that there would be anything wrong with going to a fancy-dress party dressed as Adolph Hitler. Charlie Chaplin made a very good film out of imitating Hitler, *The Great Dictator*. Nor was there anything wrong with the party's reported "colonial" theme. The guests who blacked their faces in fact got off lightly. The only possibly reasonable objection would be of an extreme puritan kind we do not associate with *The Sun*, that all impersonation is wicked and we should be ourselves, and that would apply to all "dressing up" whatever.

What we had was purely and simply a bout of press hysteria about nothing, surely a suitable target for satire. It all started with the death of Princess Diana—about which the *Eye* did its duty—and there have been milder outbreaks ever since. What should the satirical magazine have done? The *Eye* got the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* for inconsistency, and the *Mail* for having been in Lord Rothermere's day a supporter of fascism. All well and good, and some targets hit. The cover, with Hitler (though in his usual dress) announcing that he was Prince Harry was rather benign, but all right. But what about the absurdity of the whole episode? There wasn't anything about that! nothing at all!

Then the simultaneous *Celebrity Big Brother*. The *Eye*'s television column at best has the relentlessness required. This one was suitably scathing about the programme schedules for the New Year. But about the participation of "Professor Germaine Greer"? "Remote Controller" swallowed Ms Greer's line. She had as a

*bona fide* celebrity appeared on the show but left after a few days. According to “Remote Controller”, “the attraction to the producers was presumably that she might bring some intellectual credibility to a genre regarded as television’s trash can. By joining the household, Germs would clean up the show.” There is no glimpse of recognition of any absurdity in this valuation of Ms Greer, which is naturally her own. Interviewed (of course on television) after she had left the show, she said she had only her “credibility” and was in danger of losing it, so left. How comes a sharp satirical magazine to grant this “credibility”? Is anybody who thinks “credibility” an adequate substitute for “reputation” credible? Germaine Greer got into the public eye more than thirty years ago with a very bad book, *The Female Eunuch*, which inspired one columnist at age twelve to think her “the cleverest, wittiest, most compassionate woman in the world”. Ms Greer has been in the public eye ever since, for things such as noticing that lesbian experiences are rather a bore. What work of any intellectual or moral substance has she ever done to merit “credibility”? If *Private Eye* is so easily taken in, is it a satirical magazine?

The *Eye* has become a mild and benign old eye. It has gone soft, and soapy.

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### ***Jerry Springer the Opera***

The *Eye* had six separate pieces on four different pages on the show, which might make you think there was something—or other—it wanted to say about it. But if you thought that, you thought wrong. This was another of those cases where the *Eyehacks* have a good crow over what others think, without giving away what they might think themselves, without—as far as you can tell—thinking *anything* themselves, except what a pleasure it is to crow. It’s as if the first rule of the house is: “Don’t give anything away.”

The first piece, “News”, wasn’t about the show but about something easier to write about without giving anything away: protests against the BBC’s broadcasting the show. The *Eyehack* could crow against the protest without, exactly, crowing for the show or even its broadcasting.

And what, for him, made the protesters crowable-over wasn’t anything particular in the grounds of their protest—which might have led to us getting a sight of what he did, or didn’t himself believe—but things in their background: they weren’t just religious—decently, quietly, moderately—they evangelized and tried to interfere with the neighbours. They were “led by a little-known evangelical group ... led by an ex-builder” who thought he had been “called by God” (not observations meant to bring to mind any earlier parallel involving an ex-carpenter, but routine hack snobbery).

But what *really* made a hack crow in triumph was not just that these people thought it an objection to a political party that it was “transparently godless” or took seriously the idea of “Satan’s forces” or “the soon-to-be-abolished blasphemy laws” or “the common law offence of conspiracy to corrupt public morals” but that they had previously shown themselves to be *anti-homosexual*: they had protested against Bournenouth Council making the town a “homosexual mecca”, against the lowering of the gay age of consent, and against Princess Diana “promoting a homosexual agenda”.

How could anyone take seriously people like that?

Which was, after all, a kind of avowal, I suppose. And sincere enough too. But as

for what the *Eyehack* thought of *Jerry Springer* or of the BBC broadcasting it, who knows?

The second piece, in “TV Eye”, was no more about the show than the first. It was about “the row about” it too. And what “Remote Controller” thought about *that* was that it was “unusually complicated by normal TV standards”. He did, in passing, work in a sneer at “the huffing and puffing [of] Christian groups” but otherwise saw the issue, from the point of view of the judicious insider, as merely a bureaucratic one. The whole trouble “was simply a quirk of scheduling”. The “sensible thing” to have done, the “commonsense approach” to have taken, was to “guage reaction” by putting the sbow on BBC 4 not BBC 2—when there would have been, presumably, nothing for anyone to row about.

He did, also in passing, observe that Melanie Phillips in the *Daily Mail* had written a coherent and intelligent defence of the show as a satire but saw no need to express any view of his own about such a matter. What mattered to him was not whether she was right or not but that she had been unpredicable, which only went to show just how complicated, by normal TV standards, the whole row had been.

Then there were three pieces in “Media News”, none of which risked any judgement of the show or of the row about it either. All three stuck to the safer ground of jeering (quite rightly) at the unscrupulousness, inconsistency and hypocrisy of other newspapers on the subject: the *Daily Express* protesting against the indecency, coarseness and vulgarity of much tv but not that of the tv run by its owner Richard Desmond; the *Sun* astonished that the BBC could put on such a show but not that its own “sister TV channel, Sky” should have for a long time generously sponsored it; the *Sun* citing audience figures suggesting the show wasn’t so very popular after all but ignoring other, more compelling figures suggesting it was pretty popular for all that.

The final dish was a “Letters to the Editor”, from “(not as disgusted as I had hoped), Sir Herbert Gusset, The Old Rectory, Yoghurt St Yvel, Dorset.” [*Take away this pudding. It has no theme.* Ed.]