

**Patricia A. CUNNINGHAM and Susan VOSO LAB (eds.), *Dress and Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991, pp. 165, ISBN0-87972-508-7).**

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Patricia A. CUNNINGHAM and Susan VOSO LAB (eds.),  
*Dress and Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, Bowling  
Green State University Popular Press, 1991, pp. 165,  
ISBN0-87972-508-7).

This collection of nine case studies is decidedly uneven in quality. In the introduction, the editors argue that dress has much to tell us about popular culture, but we must learn to understand the symbolic meaning being transmitted from wearer to viewer. Clothing serves to identify an individual's age, gender, class, and nationality, as well as reflect broader cultural values. This is a useful starting point, with one significant exception: objects of material culture must be produced and the manner in which we organize this production — be it through domestic labour or a highly monopolistic fashion industry — mediates the relationship between dress and culture.

Three papers in the collection border upon the banal. The Barbie doll's persistent popularity — despite the recent ambivalence expressed about Ken — is attributed to her "intrinsic play value" (S. Dickey); a romp through 100 years of costume in "American-Anglo" popular music — running the gamut from John Phillip Sousa, Elvis Presley and Cab Calloway, to Bruce Springsteen and Madonna — yields the uninspired conclusion is that performers dress to "define a persona" (A. LeBlanc); and we are offered the less-than-novel observation that the dress of punk rockers is "a symbol of their separation from and rejection by normal society" (B. Nordquist). Three papers, more scholarly in nature, fail to place the study of dress in a constructive analytical framework. An examination of the "quasi-uniforms" of black fraternities/sonorities makes little reference to the particular socio-economic status of black university students (L. Holloman); a discussion of the popular image of the witch only superficially explores the role of patriarchy (P. Trautman); and an exhaustive account of the predilection of Indiana high school seniors to paint their cords and skirts marshals a wealth of minutia but no interpretation (P. Schlick and K. Rowold). In all of the above-cited studies, the reader is largely unrewarded for slogging through the overwhelming detail; "nuances" of the symbolism go unexplained and we are left with, at best, vague metaphors.

There are three notable exceptions. A. Palmer's account of the rise and fall of paper clothing (actually non-woven cellulose tissue strengthened with rayon) is an enlightening and entertaining reflection upon social values of the mid-1960s. Originally conceived by Scott Paper as a gimmick to introduce a new line of products, paper clothes captured a societal obsession with novelty and modern technology. And despite the exaggerated hazards of fire, spills and too-rapid depreciation (a dress might not last the evening)

the public was not to be dissuaded until the advent of "hippie styles" in the latter 1960s. Second, B. Gordon traces the evolution of denim jeans from their production by Levi Strauss (San Francisco, 1851) to the present. Functional, unisex jeans bespoke of the American work ethic and were adopted as an anti-fashion statement during the 1920s. This central message underwent only subtle modification until jeans, in their pre-washed and designer styles, were absorbed into the mainstream by the fashion industry. Finally, S. Sim's examination of the role of the bicycle in women's dress reform provides a "revealing slice of social history". The phenomenon of women bicyclists called into question the restrictive corsets and long dresses of the 1890s. Bloomers consequently reappeared as a subversive statement of female independence, only to be condemned as "unwomanly" and "unaesthetic". Shortened skirts and the modified, more flexible corset thus emerged as a compromise in response to this social pressure.

There is little question that clothing is an important form of cultural expression; but studies of clothing must similarly take account of the cultural setting in which they reside. When done well, such studies tell us much about the symbolism of particular items of dress and the relationship between dress and popular culture; when done poorly, we learn only that Barbie has play value, musicians dress to define a persona, and punk rockers feel alienated.

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K.S. TOM, *Echoes from Old China : Life, Legends and Lore of the Middle Kingdom* (Honolulu, Hawaii Chinese History Center, 1989, pp. x+160, ISBN 0-8248-1285-9).

K.S. Tom has attempted to do too much in this book; in addition to the life, legends and lore indicated by the sub-title, he tried to cover Chinese ways, origins and names, lunar-solar calendar, gods and religious beliefs, traditional medicine, marriage, birth and death, hells, discoveries and inventions, bamboo and jade, food, the civil service examination, education, couplets and toasts. The writer hardly touched on most other folklore genres such as folktales, folk life, proverbs, myths, and folksongs, and on the social life, village and community institutions of Old China. Neither did he deal much with the historical, political and economic contexts essential for a bet-