These boots aren't made for walking

Style, fetishism and the 'will to adorn'

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review

Style Conference

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THE STYLE CONFERENCE provided the first cross-disciplinary forum for a range of issues and ideas that fuse the traditionally discrete territories of design, art and fashion theory and history, and the more permeable fields of queer theory, gender, women's and cultural and black studies to be aired and debated where they interrogated the meanings of style.

Meanwhile, Bowling Green style; Big Boys, Buckeye Budget Inns, tractor-pulling championships, 'Elizabethan' jousting on the campus lawns all went untheorised. Bowling Green jocks hollering 'lesbians' at women delegates with an almost nostalgic unself-consciousness, as news of the Dean lost in the Puerto Rican jungle broke, provided a poignant backdrop for the proceedings.

Papers of cringing banality and searing relevance to theory were delivered by speakers who seemed either daunted or encouraged by the interconnectedness of research in disciplines remote from their own and the onus (inferred by the conference organisers in their introductory remarks) to situate their own bodies in the debates. Organisers Ellen Berry and Laura Stempel-Mumford made the bald observation that narcissism and the critique of the clothes, hair and style of other delegates are inherent in the planning and hosting of most conferences, and shared with us the fact that getting tattooed and e-mailing make-up tips had been critical in theirs.

Valerie Steele's keynote lecture was a promo for "Fetish: fashion, sex and power", and set a radical sex agenda. Her exhaustive (fetishistic?) rehearsal of the history of (male) fetishism from 'margins to mainstream' was unproblematised by any rigorous contextualising of her survey in relation to issues of class, gender politics and ethnicity. Steele asserted the Foucauldian pervasiveness of the fetish, iterated by the work of Krafft-Ebbing, Gianni Versace, second-wave feminists (in their stereotyped anathemisation/promotion of corset-wearing and high heels), through the agony pages of 19th century popular journals and the 'agency' of Emma Peel.

Foucault was also deployed by Christine Braunberger in her paper "The tattoos post-modern performance of art"; interpreting tattooing as (an appropriate) response to an 'internal panopticon'. Braunberger rejected Jameson's claim that postmodernism is all surface, acknowledging the complexity of surface play in body modifications and was at her most emphatic and earnest in her analysis of tattoos as the abject avant-garde. For Braunberger the body is a site of production where the things that cannot be said are inscribed. In a move not conclusively made, such inscriptions become art that: by-passes the gallery-system, cannot be stolen or sold, is a compensation for assimilation and that can be taken with you when you die. (Body) Art is thus within everyone's grasp. It is palpably transaesthetic—even the aesthetically literate probably cannot name a great tattoo artist. Here, the 'low brow assaults high brow' paradigm was invoked. I remained unconvinced that tattooed bodies 'play games with capitalism' and that tattoos (more than clothes, make-up and other forms of self-fashioning) are more likely to express corporeal subjectivity. My reservations were confirmed by Braunberger's 'revelation' that despite her 'conventional' appearance she too was a 'tattooed lady'. How is the low brow assaulting the high brow when corporeal transgressive art remains invisible (or its existence is called into question) and when being tattooed is merely a (further) measure of 'cultural competence' for academics? Karmen MacKendrick, although undeniably corseted for her paper "Technoflesh (or didn't that hurt?)", provoked my return to this concern when she described the frisson of excitement she experienced in an academic gathering knowing that although she 'passed' in this context, underneath she had a modified body. Neither speaker addressed the analogous ways that markers of ethnicity express corporeal subjectivity that troubles the academy. 'Race' however, may not be so easily played with or hidden. MacKendrick's paper was illustrated with many slides culled from internet new primitives/body modification sites of (white) bodies modified by various means. An image of full-face tattooing provoked a palpable audience response. Just as much popular body-modification literature tends to avoid discussions of ethnicity and 'race' preferring to restore 'otherness' as an anachronistic, anthropological well-spring or source book of the decorative, so the image of the indelibly 'coloured' face, the stigmatised face that cannot be hidden, provokes the white circus audience's response to the grotesque 'other' in the contemporary (overwhelmingly) white conference audience. The liberatory potential of the 'technologies of the body' expressed through modification ('delight in the body') were posed by MacKendrick in rather rabidly couched opposition to Andrea Dworkin. Dworkin's infamous diagram of the female body, modified by patriarchal demands, was used to raise a self-conscious, post-feminist belly-laugh from the audience. Whilst MacKendrick and others welcomed the development of 'ugliness' as a subcultural, surgically-achieved radicalism, Dworkin's 'ugliness' would seem to remain beyond recuperation (mis-read as a sign of feminist Puritanism).

MacKendrick's charges against the pathologising of modification (and her persuasive demonstration of the inextricable tension of modification with medicine) were fruitful and illuminating (e.g. hygiene/dirt dichotomy). MacKendrick correlated the body and cyber technology, suggesting that both systems are the ultimate in rejections of our mortal destinies. (i.e. Transcendental Modification).

In her paper "Highbrow/Lowbrow cosmetic surgery" Mary Thompson critiqued the relationship between Orlan and the 'living Barbie', Cindy Jackson. Jackson has Barbified herself in an ironic quest to avoid mediocrity. In a move reminiscent of Orlan's surgery documentation, Jackson has had (even more widespread) coverage of her surgical morphing in the US tabloids. In the light of Jackson's performances (and self parody), Thompson's questions 'Is Orlan a feminist? Is her work art?' seemed rather delimiting. Modifications of the body whether they are performed by Cindy Jackson or Michael Jackson, and whether they are enacted for an art or popular audience are ultimately socially, historically and culturally determined.

A number of papers were delivered that managed to fuse the methodological approaches of cultural studies and social science research, offering satisfactorily grounded readings of the body/text in specific (but contingent) contexts. Denise Witzig, in her paper, "Young and natural: California youth culture and the anti-aesthetic" demonstrated the uniformity of counter-cultural fashion, (US commodity fetishism meets counter-cultural connoisseurship), exemplified by jeans. Witzig discussed the notion of 'back-to

nature' and related fashions that produce a moral religiosity in young women's (anti) beauty regimes, and critiqued the proliferation of the mantra of real, and (consumer)' freedom' in post-war US advertising aimed at youth. Ironically, Witzig suggested that 'Heroin style' has been misread—'clammy and sweaty are what 'real' people look like'.

An 'ethnomethodological' research paper by Catherine Egley Waggoner and Lynn O'Brien Hallstein "Boys have penises and girls have party shoes: the ambivalent relationship between feminists and fashion", explored the complex relationship traversing the expressive, repressive and liberatory in the texts 'Fashion' and 'Feminism'. These were usefully theorised through research with white female academic feminists. Analysis of these 'constrained agents' resulted in the identification of four rhetorical strategies (two performative, two 'piecemealing') used by women to assert agency. Through their use of e.g. incongruity, interruption, and appropriation of the texts of fashion and feminism, women were interpreted in this study as superseding objectivity. Through a knowledge of their own subjectivity and a reworking of these historically oppositional texts, women are shown to grant themselves a kind of authorship. The limitations of this study in terms of ethnicity were accepted by the speakers. Jasmine Lambert in her paper "The relationship of women of colour to the 'exotic other' in fashion" accounted for the lack of visibility within fashion (and, historically, feminist?) texts of women of colour and detailed the pleasures for white women of supplanting the potential role of black women in such texts in their identification and performance of the fictional exotic. Further ironies of cross-identification were raised by Lambert's own identification (as a young blackwoman) with Liz Taylor's portrayal of (the black?) Cleopatra.

A further example of white Western occlusion, fanaticism for, and appropriation of, 'otherness' was provided in Bill Osgerby's paper, "Beach Bound: Exotica, Leisure Style and Popular Culture in post-war America, from 'South Pacific' to Jan and Dean" The popularity of the leisure-vogue for South Seas kitsch was read by Osgerby as both symbolic of liberatory potential (where Polynesian becomes a byword for hedonism) in the rise of the habitus of mass consumption and a widespread rejection of the (middle-class) veneration of work, embodied in the popularity of surfing counter-culture.

Given that the tastes and pleasures of (working class) women are rarely addressed at a theoretical level, Mary Anne Beecher's "Good things: the role of nostalgia and ritual in Martha Stewart's Style of Living" provided a memorable example of the richness and relevance of research in this field. Stewart's cult appeal was thoughtfully addressed in a paper that admirably eschewed a 'queer' ironising in favour of conceptualising her popularity as evidence of the importance of ritual, detail and nostalgic longing.

Equally enjoyable were two papers that focused on Dolly Parton's appeal for women. Melissa Jane Hardie's, "Camp quality: Dolly Parton's Country Style" interrogated the 'colonial' ideology of country and Parton's varied simulation, throughout her career, of the country way of life. The theme of transformation (e.g. in Parton's use of fetishised prosthetics) was identified as critical to her practice and was usefully contextualised (according to Hardie, Trump and Dallas changed the valance of big hair from low to high class 'from Jacqueline Suzanne to Onassis'). Importantly, Hardie demonstrated that 'Kitsch is always class contingent'. In her paper "Dolly-izin': Dolly Parton, singing as a woman" Jeannie Ludlow utilised Luce Iragaray's theories of disruptive laughter, irruption and disruption of femininity and Mary Russo's 'Female Grotesque', to assert that Parton is never merely subjected by her performance of feminine excess but manages to 'recover the place of her exploitation' through making sounds from underneath her encrusted femininity. 'The dumb blonde has a drag voice'.

Disruptive hair identities and the notion of 'fugitive fashion' expressed by Afro-Americans was explored in a paper entitled "Hair Dramas: bodies, style and African-American Identity". Here, Noliwe Rooks critiqued the paucity of theories and methods available in current (fashion) theory to discuss Afro-American identity other than where 'whiteness gets troubled'. Productively drawing together Zora Neale Hurston's belief in the 'the will to adorn' in Afro-American culture and Susan Bordo's conceptualisation of 'embattled bodies', Rooks asked what adorned (black) bodies mean in specific cultural contexts, resisting the tendency, that Kobena Mercer has critiqued, of essentialising black (and 'white') bodies, In her examination of recent cases where the hair identities of young black women were deemed 'unacceptable' by white school administrators, she suggested that the culturally utopian production of braided hair in the Afro-American life and literature are routinely 'misunderstood' (e.g. where hair can be correlated with gang activity) and concludes 'Hairstyles have meaning, they frighten white people'. In a context where white women can appropriate black hair identity without being read as disruptive Rooks asked what theories of fashion have to offer this contradiction? The British theorist Grace Akuba, in her paper "Coming to voice through dreadlocks: hair signification and women of African descent" usefully charted the history of theorising hair, adopting Mercer's view that 'hair is never a biological fact'. Akuba reported on her qualitative research with black British women and amongst other interesting analyses concluded that contrary to historical notions of 'good' and 'bad' hair, and the anthropological consensus that people with different hair have different ideologies, blackwomen with dreadlocks make up a heterogeneous group.

Both Penelope J Engelbrecht, and Shiva Subberraman demonstrated the appropriateness of using their own bodies as a site for interrogating style and the constructedness of our gendered and 'racialised' subjectivity (as women who have 'passed' as heterosexual/lesbian, Indian/American respectively), and expanded knowledge of the cultural performance of identity through the use of clothes.

Corey Creekmur provided further persuasive evidence that in the oft-quoted words of Ru Paul, 'We're born naked and everything else is drag' in his fascinating survey "Boots, Buckskin, Buttons, and Bows: Cowboy Drag in American Culture". The fact that the British have been just as absurdly and improbably keen to drag-up as cowboys from the 19th century was amply illustrated (e.g. by Oscar Wilde, Julian and Sandy, the Pet Shop Boys, and ubiquitous jeans and cowboy-boot wearing from the 1960s onwards) Creekmur's encyclopedic knowledge of the field was deliciously detailed but the critical relevance of the invention of the West 'where men are men' to histories of sexuality was intriguingly developed through a comparative reading of two studio portraits of Wilde and Buffalo Bill Cody taken during Wilde's first promotional tour of America. Wilde's image was created in the process of homosexuality being invented; Cody's cowboy image as heterosexuality was encoded. But as Creekmur suggested it required no 'reading against the grain' in these portraits to see that, even at this moment, the categories are unstable, as cowboy images would continue to be.

A strong contingent of black theorists based in Middlesex, (including Akuba cited above) addressed a diverse range of issues concerning 'race' and ethnicity in Black British contexts. It was exciting to see the results of large-scale empirical work (including video documentations) mapping Asian audiences tastes and cross-cultural consumption discussed by Bilkis Malek in "Hollywood meets 'Bollywood': diasporic consumer styles and the politics of identity". Elaine Pennicott is also engaged in vital work exploring the construction of the black man in the urban landscapes of Britain ("Masculinity as Masquerade"), drawing on Fanon, Baudelaire and Benjamin to construct less fixed, pathologised identifications.

The burgeoning of interdisciplinary work on British style, tastes and fashion would seem to demand a British venue for the next Style gathering—however painful this might be.

Video documentation of the above papers and those listed below were made for Glasgow School of Art, Historical and Critical Studies Department and Glasgow Women's Library.

Alex Seago, "Burning the Box of beautiful things: the origins of art school pop style in London 1959-1965"

Laura Stempel Mumford, "Drawing the Gaze"

Julie Haught, "I know who you are , but what am I?: lesbian style and lesbian identity"

Norma Coates, "Genre and Generation: rock style and the older woman"

Timothy Yap, "Transgressive style; death of the male supermodel"

Lola Young, "Thoughts on female beauty"

Joanna Frueh, "Dressing Aphrodite"

Both images:
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