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differently, where a human need exists the market will come up with products to meet it. Modern electronic technology enables us to keep afloat the illusion that we live in societies recognizably like our ancestors'. Hour after hour, day after day, year after year, they promulgate delusions of a densely interactive, conflictive, "plotted" humanity capable of significant choice and action. They accomplish brilliantly that insane task Karl Marx thought religion had a corner on, of "realizing in fantasy the essence of man, because the essence of man does not possess any true [existential] reality."

## BOOKS AND ISSUES

*Accounting for Fashion*

ANNE HOLLANDER

*Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, by Fred Davis, University of Chicago Press, \$24.95.

ACCOUNTING for fashion has become much steadier work. The hunt for meaning in cultural trends focuses on clothes more than ever these self-conscious days, and current clothes are now found to be emotionally loaded in ways that only stage and screen costumes once were. Role-playing is now an acknowledged common game, with clothing a chief medium. Though novelists and poets have always considered the resonant meaning in everyday dress, only lately have ordinary journalists dwelt on it and ordinary people referred to it in everyday speech, much the way they now make common use of psychoanalytic terms. The looks of clothes were once conventionally thought of as trivial phenomena that were essentially the same even while they changed, so that the changes had no serious meaning. Now, appearances and their variation are generally assumed to be profoundly important in everyone's life. More column-inches have been devoted to the shifting hemline of the new Japanese princess than would have been remotely possible fifty years ago.

Dress, while being essential to human life and commanding equal status with food and shelter, has always persisted in being uncomfortably significant instead of reassuringly natural or practical. The myth of Adam and Eve shows how long people have understood that there is no natural dress, not even any naturally protective dress; there is only meaningful dress. Animals, smart as they are, simply don't have it; dress requires opposable thumbs and some kind of cosmology. I would say it looks very much like art, but

clothing has lately been much more often compared to language, since language also depends on the symbolizing impulse and varies enormously among cultures. We are in fact generally invited to consider the linguistic model in thinking of anything cultural, even though language itself is fundamentally nonmaterial and nonvisual, and doesn't really make its symbolic connections the same way visual art does.

Consequently, the belief that all we ever do is read clothes or listen to their statements, and that we only wear them in order to deliver messages, has dulled the desire to understand them by really looking at them, and has stunted the capacity to grasp the way responses to clothes really work, in both wearer and viewer—the thing Balzac and Baudelaire knew how to convey. Just as with other modern visual art, such responses include feeling the inner echo of visual memory and unconscious fantasy, the vibrations set in motion by clothing's actual forms, whatever other functions it is serving.

Modern fashion, which was invented by Western civilization in the late Middle Ages along with courtly love, perspective, the sonnet, and many other great imaginative devices (aptly including the accurate mirror made with silvered glass), has served to confirm the relation of Western dress to the other developing Western arts. It has lifted clothing out of its earlier condition as first-order, unconscious symbolic art, and made it into an imaginative and self-reflective visual medium. Fashion has allowed clothing to detach itself from the task of being the stable (and often stabilizing) visual projection of social custom and common belief, and allowed it to become a wayward representational art, something essentially fictional like painting or movies. In life, it has a basically subversive purpose: Fashion keeps present to the public eye the fact that normative human arrangements are always under unexpected threat from unstable human impulses, sexual expression being the main one appropriate for an art using bodies as its constant theme.

With the development of fashion, the look of clothing could be used mainly to refer to itself and to mock itself, to explore the expressive possibilities of the medium, not just of its primary useful-

ness or primitive meaning. Clothes could suggest things quite different from what was conveyed by their wearers' speech and actions, or from what was true of their social sphere and ethnic stamp, or from their practical uses. While still generally defining the wearer's current social place, dress could be the conductor of the most intimate and personal dispositions, not only feelings but esthetic choices with personal historical significance—not only the wearer's immediate surrounding world, but the style of his self-perceptions within it. At the same time, such meaning in clothing, just as in art, could in part consist of the responses of spectators, who could each contribute personal imaginative and emotional material, perhaps unspoken or even unconscious, to the sum of significance in any person's clothed appearance.

Ever since modern fashion began to offer everybody a vast array of constantly varying mass-produced garments and adornments to play with, it has in fact been possible for many of the suggestions and satisfactions of clothing to be aimed mainly at the self, not the viewer. Inward convictions about the appropriateness of personal gear are what is primary, not the desire to communicate. Choices can now largely include inwardly significant rejections, the host of visual options not taken up—and those negative choices are of course invisible. When you observe people on the subway, you can often be certain that some of them don't really know or perhaps much care how they look; but you do know that they decided on their effects and must be satisfied with the result. And often you can't begin to imagine what lay behind their decisions and produced their satisfaction. Obviously, many choices made by modern consumers are unintelligible to most spectators, who respond to them only with their own quite different associations and assumptions.

There are moreover now so many vital modes of fashionable dress simultaneously in flux and on view that the intentional social displays made in any one of them must reach only a limited audience. Out in public space nobody has to be responsible for rightly perceiving the modes he doesn't know or care about, but everybody

nevertheless responds to what he sees. The ordinary result is that the famous messages allegedly sent by clothes are not always the same ones as those received by the unaccountable and inventive eyes of others. One might call them gestures of reassurance made toward the private consciousness, while quite different unconscious material is being perceived by viewers, also largely unconsciously. Fashion, while binding modern people together in its dynamic and competitive visual orbit, nevertheless draws on individual personality for the power of its effects. Fashion is essentially created in the use made of it by each person, wearer and viewer, even if many are similarly dressed and watching each other dance in concert on the same stage.

The systematic modern study of clothing was undertaken as part of the study of custom spurred by the post-Enlightenment desire to notate and classify human culture from a scientific point of view. Costume is of course the most vivid custom of all, the first to be perceived in any direct study of living beings; and it was clear that such visual displays were linked to other significant cultural behavior, sometimes very closely. The great voyages of discovery in the sixteenth century had produced pictures of distant modes of dress no less exotic than accompanying descriptions of modes of cookery and worship, all of it utterly remote from known habits in Europe. All such phenomena looked equally amazing; nobody was as yet trying to discover exactly what it all meant to the participants, and crude conclusions were often drawn. The impulse to say, "This strip is worn around the head to keep off evil spirits," and to let it go at that, came into existence quite early and still persists.

The trappings worn in tribal societies could often have very elaborate and quite varied embellishments, and it came to be assumed that each detail existed mainly to have a clear and simple meaning comprehensible to the group, all the more because it wasn't very clear to outsiders. Later, it was easy to assume that the same sort of orderly meanings must apply to fashionable trappings in the modern world, especially since fashion produced such bizarre visual effects.

The first French and Italian costume books illustrating how clothes looked in different European countries in fact date from the same sixteenth century, well after the quirky movements of fashion had begun to take over European elegance. But like those who drew the pictures for the explorers, the costume illustrators were eager to give an exact social function to each outfit—an Antwerp bourgeoisie dressed for church, an Andalusian peasant dressed for dancing—as if to suggest that persons in neighboring lands were somewhat like exotic natives who wore clothing with a primitive meaning that was assumed to reflect specific and fixed custom. In other words, these books give the impression that all Antwerp ladies in the sixteenth century always wore exactly the same thing to church, to display their proper awareness of proper tribal behavior and thus to send the right message. This would accord with the way outsiders thought the rules ought to work, but it would not allow for any play of the imagination in Antwerp.

Sociologists are still trying to treat fashion as if it were costume, a visual variant of custom, a complex game of which the obvious symbolic content can be given an intelligible structure by (and for) people who aren't playing. Some of this effort has produced enlightening results, and Fred Davis's new book *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* has much to offer. He follows the methods for studying the mechanisms of symbolic exchange devised by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, here concerning himself with how these might work in the domain of modern fashion. Early in the book he approvingly quotes Blumer to the effect that clothes may "speak," but they certainly don't listen and they never converse—so much for the language model. Davis is refreshingly impatient with the linguistics-inspired effort to decode dress codes with too much precision.

Davis has rightly decided that ambivalence plays a large role in fashion—although such a term is inadequate to the delicate perversities that have always been built into it. Most important is his theory that fashion provides the means of creating a social identity for each participant that is not a sign of class or status, and that can

be communicated in both directions, inward and outward. According to this view, it is a fundamental ambivalence about the constantly-to-be-recreated self that gives fashion its dynamic character and keeps it on the move. This idea seems to me basically right, and it has the welcome quality of recognizing the personal dimension in fashion, the thing that makes it not simply tribal custom let loose in a market economy.

Another very important thing Davis has discovered is that fashion has no critical tradition, as art and literature and theater have, and as cinema now has. There have never been writers trained in art history and fashion history who have steadily commented on its current condition for current publication. The result is that the largest body of serious writing on fashion has in fact been the work of sociologists of one flavor or another. Most of the huge amount of fashion journalism is done by people who took it up by chance and might well move on to something else, not by people who began to write about it out of deep interest in the subject, or even a strong love for it. He has also discovered that fashion designers have no more refined or profound conceptions of fashion than do fashion journalists — designers often like to say they have nothing to do with fashion at all. Fashion historians don't have much to offer about the present state of things, nor often anything very satisfactory about the true action and cultural character of fashion in the past. For current research, the people with hard information have clearly been the most helpful — the ones who run the fashion business in all its manifold aspects, who can describe their jobs and provide sales figures.

Davis has naturally found himself most comfortable basing his book on the work of other sociologists, briskly disposing of their ideas or partially approving of them as his own argument proceeds. But it is very noticeable that quite a few of the thinkers he quotes (Veblen, Simmel, Kroeber, et al.) have worked hard to account for fashion without looking at it very closely or liking it very much. Blumer, the "symbolic interaction" man to whose memory the book is dedicated, is an exception in having studied fashion at first hand

in Paris in the 30s, Davis tells us — but we are not told how he got started or how he responded, only his conclusions. The required posture of detachment in this whole mode of inquiry usually produces, when it comes to fashion, an unmistakable tone of amused condescension that insufficiently veils a fastidious disapproval, in the manner of a Renaissance European surveying the habits of antipodean natives. Davis, for all his protestations about how others think it's silly whereas he thinks it's serious, is not exempt. This author is once again not a player, and he wants us to know it.

He has for the most part ignored the real visual material in fashionable clothes of all kinds, the richly suggestive and compelling looks of all the fashions as they constantly unfold, perhaps so as not to be led astray and made a fool of by what he still seems to think is fashion's essential harlotry, at worst, or ridiculousness at best. This is the old view, the idea that fashion is really the seductive destroyer of true value, a view Davis's mentors seem to have imparted to him without his realizing it. He is willing to link fashion to art, but in the wrong way; he wants to compare modern designers to modern painters. This won't really work at present, since the most important creation in fashion is not accomplished on the drawing boards of Christian Lacroix and Jean-Paul Gaultier, who may want to speak of painters in the same breath with themselves, but whose efforts have little to do with the workings of the public imagination about its clothes.

Davis describes fashion as if every new idea in it always starts with a famous couturier, and then spreads out through the fashion business, gradually losing its force through much copying until it is finally extinguished. He fails sufficiently to emphasize that most fashion designers are largely unsung but gifted professionals whose original work for ready-to-wear manufacturers provides the basic means by which the art of fashion can be practiced by everyone, whether or not they are impinged on by the inventions of famous designers. Lacroix and the others burst theatrically on the scene at prescribed intervals and cause much talk, but most of their ideas die immediately. The ones that catch on are often improved, not de-

based, by the infamous designers who modify them for the public. Great couturiers still do create great garments for their private clients, now smaller in number than ever; and then the client, as always, has a large contribution to make. But the loudest pulse of modern fashion does not beat in that rarefied ambience.

In a certain way it never did; the designers of fashion for the very rich were always accompanied by designers of fashion for everybody else—at least everybody but the destitute and most isolated. Since it started, fashion can be shown to have mattered to persons in all ranks of ordinary society, certainly in towns and cities, where garments were made by hosts of tailors and dressmakers, or at home by women, or sold second-hand and remodelled, in a constantly changing stylistic flux similar to but not directly dependent on the changing modes in high life. You can see them in popular prints illustrating ordinary life, which can be dated by the clothes even if nobody elegant is in the picture.

New shifts of overall emphasis or bodily style, here also attributed to designers, usually take a long time to arise and dominate the scene; premonitory stylistic movements are visible at many levels at once—wide shoulders, low waists—before a particular designer does something that garners him all future credit for the shift. In earlier centuries, no credit was ever awarded to tailors or dressmakers for brilliant fashionable inspiration—it was the king or the financier, the courtesan or the queen who was believed to have thought it up. Meanwhile the general sense that shoulders should start to slope, for example, always seems to have struck the public eye all at once, and nobody ever tried to name a source for such shifts—except fashion itself, of course.

An awareness that fashion is an art created by its wearers thus has a long history—our sense of this primary fact has only lately been obfuscated by the famous fame of designers. An overview of fashion reaching back into predesigner times suggests that present designers are following rather than leading the public taste. At any one period their works resemble each other, just as elegant outfits have always done, more than they differ. Designers have in fact

made the great, democratic ready-to-wear version of fashion possible; but the ones who have really done it are similar to the ones who are designing all the wonderful commercial packaging, the differing styles of lamp and drinking glass, or indeed the ones who design the many kinds of vivid athletic shoe and vivid fetishistic shoe, the baggy or skin-tight skirts and pants, and the endless varieties of blouse, shirt, jacket, vest, sweater, belt, and bag with which the diverse performances of modern fashion may be undertaken. Most low-priced modes are independent designs aimed at various markets, not crude imitations of expensive ones.

It is not actually true that fashion has speeded up in the last half-century. It is public awareness of fashion that has done so, and the number of players and would-be players, which has quickly increased to cover the globe. The well-publicized thrice-yearly efforts of named designers make them also seem to be whipping us along; but fashion itself has had much the same rhythm ever since it started. You can date elegant dress by the half-decade in the Flemish paintings of the fifteenth century—though not farm clothes, I'll allow; those tend to take a generation. But once changeability of form becomes the main visual proposition for clothes, the rate at which forms change remains similar, even allowing for a range of differing rates for differing forms. Where fashion is in motion at all, the same temporal rules seem to apply, whether it's in one high school, a few Italian ducal courts, or in a whole modern nation. Visual rhythms of delight, indifference, and distaste are apparently like certain other fairly stable human rhythms, the ones based on how long a baby takes to be born or on how the alternations of night and day and season must be managed. Fashion has not existed everywhere or always; but once in existence, it shows its pulsations to be fairly basic. People's eyes get interested and then get bored at about the same rate, once they've taken up the habit of doing so at all.

Davis stresses invention and dissemination, but he hasn't sufficiently emphasized the large role of lag and inertia in fashion, the staying power of some elements, both small and large, in a medium

so famous for quick change. The more enduring motifs, of course, are not predictable—they are not always the same ones. New things produce an effect on the ones that stay around without extinguishing them, creating a new visual relation that promotes the ambiguity Davis has seized on as one keynote of fashion. The process stresses what I would call its subversive character: the requirement that no meaning stay the same, that no rule remain in force, that nothing ever become too comfortable to look at or too easy to grasp. Fashion has made itself into the image of the questing modern psyche in its permanently discontented state; the fashion cycle can never be a circle.

Consequently I think it's confusing to propose a firm opposition party called *antifashion*, as Davis allows himself to do here, and to see it as forever going up against the powerful force of fashion. It's in fact quite clear that fashion itself is *antifashion*, and always produces its own necessary border skirmishes. Davis admits that antifashion movements are perhaps better described as simply fashion movements of one kind, and he has obligingly outlined their principle characteristics—Utilitarian Outrage, Health and Fitness Naturalism, Feminist Protest, and so forth. The sartorial expression of such ideas has been part of fashion itself since the eighteenth century; before that, there were various attempts at sumptuary legislation that even temporarily produced official anti-fashion fashion.

Modern fashion is now laden with allusion and suggestion of a purely pictorial kind, playing constantly with the imagery of the clothed figure that has become our common legacy through all our pervasive visual media. Shapes of collar and sleeve are no longer symbolic in themselves; they chiefly carry strands of reference to the figural traditions in film, television, and advertising photography, which in turn draw on the whole ancient figural tradition of Western art. That tradition, which began with frescoes and manuscripts but eventually continued into posters and illustrations, first became available to the general public with the dissemination of printed pictures in the Renaissance. Ever since then, stylized visual

standards of bodily attitude and clothed appearance could be taken personally by many different people at once. Thus Renaissance ladies and would-be ladies could learn to stick out their stomachs and hold up the folds of their gowns, eighteenth century men to dispose their legs with dash, and modern people of both sexes to square their shoulders and hold their stomachs in.

The real interaction occurs between that figural tradition and the actual creation and wearing of clothes. The image-making character of modern fashion-bound dress forever keeps its details from having direct symbolic social meanings that can be satisfactorily determined. It is always a representation of another representation, altered by fragmentary material from still others. Each of these defies exact symbolic definition, although their visual sources could certainly be traced; but that seems not to be a sociological sort of enterprise. The real meanings both offered and seized in the social world of clothes can be found in the mesh of visual reference itself; it seems to me most profitable to study that, the way movies may be studied along with paintings and engravings and commercial illustration, as part of a history of connected imagery that has its own emotional force, borrowing only ephemeral, incidental, and often contradictory social significance along the way.

The best general thing about Davis's book is that he admits finding the material really intractable. In order to arrive at such an admission, moreover, he has worked very hard to make sense of the scrambled ways in which fashion works, and he has made an excellent synthesis of the best available theories, all of which he gives us in very clear précis. His approach to the subject is fresh, sane, and intelligent, if lacking in the sort of visceral sympathy that I seek. He makes too much of dealing seriously with a conventionally frivolous subject, and therefore seems to be apologizing. I am convinced that an emotionally driven imaginative commitment, a truly poetic and erotic sensibility about clothes, would be the best foil to sociological detachment and the best aid to an enlarged understanding of fashion. Davis quotes the Herrick lyric about "Sweet disorder," and elsewhere mentions Italo Calvino; but he seems to

keep a strategic distance from the greatest literary illuminations of fashion, and he also seems never to look carefully at pictures at all, or to seek in them any broad avenues of enlightenment for his subject. But he has read an enormous amount about clothes, pondered the results, and offers his interesting conclusions with suitable modesty and clarity.

#### BOOKS AND ISSUES

### *Database, for Example*

ROSALIND KRAUSS

*Illustration*, by J. Hillis Miller, Harvard University Press,  
\$35.00.

J. HILLIS MILLER takes his leave of the reader of this nonbook with the insouciant thought that if this conglomeration of fragments and set-pieces has not added up to "a continuous argument" this is because it is, in its very formlessness, anticipating the brave new world of "large digitized databases." It is not for *him* to build a discursive structure that will unfold between the covers of a book; instead, he writes: "One can imagine a computerized version of my essay in which each section would have a 'button' leading out to the large context of which my citations are a part and in which a much larger set of illustrations (in the sense of both pictures and texts) would be available through computer links."

Indeed, one of the first illustrations in *Illustration* is of a computer screen demonstrating "The Thoreau Workstation Project"—an example of the digitized databases research hyperspace in which windows superimposed on windows superimposed on windows "open" the text of, say, *Walden* to a dizzying backward fall through its "genesis" in the form of all the editions and manuscript versions of a given passage, while other windows project sideways into the historical context—including pictures, for example, of the various birds Thoreau mentions along with their birdcalls—and still others telescope forward into the slipstream of the (almost) complete secondary literature. This fragmented, multimedia space of insets and sidebars and buttons and menus, somewhere, visually, between a cubist collage and a pinball machine lightboard, allows a workstation user to browse through a heterogeneity of material, none of it