

MIX AND MATCH

Angela McRobbie (ed.), *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses – An Anthology of Fashion and Music*, London: Macmillan, 1989; £35.00; £9.95.

Angela McRobbie begins her excellent scene-setting introduction to *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses* by drawing attention to the mixing of styles of writing which inform the book. *Zoot Suits* brings an urgent, immediate set of takes on contemporary popular culture alongside more analytical readings of particular texts or practices. Centrally *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses* engages with that most stubbornly seductive of domains – popular consumerism. The book registers significant features that mark out contemporary (youth) cultures of consumption: the post-subcultural plundering of commodities; the dynamics of entrepreneurialism; the increasing proliferation and interconnection of media forms and cultural practices; the continuing importance of the body through style and adornment and how these connect with inscriptions of ‘race’, ethnicity and gender; and the ‘utopian’ elements of consumerism.

Gone then in *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses* are the haughty dismissals of the ephemeral and quality-less nature of youth cultures of consumption, and the grand logics of incorporation which saw any interest in pop music, fashion or shopping as signs of a somnambulism induced by the anaesthetic power of the market; approaches which marked (and continue to mark) certain readings of popular culture. Instead the book takes us through some of the networks and practices of contemporary popular cultural forms, highlighting the contradictory pushes and pulls of popular cultures of consumption. The legacy of subcultural analysis is a strong presence within the book, although, as I want to point out later, many of the pieces reach beyond the limitations of a strictly subcultural analysis – instead they simply draw on ‘some of [its] best insights’, as McRobbie puts it. Centrally, however, it is structuralism and post-structuralism that are the key points of orientation for nearly all the writers. The take-up of Barthes, Foucault, and even Derrida and Baudrillard, outside the strictly defined academic context by the music journalists and within the ‘new cultural journalism’ is particularly striking. Blurring the boundaries between the ‘academic’ and ‘journalistic’, we witness here a breaking out of theoretical discourse from the academy to emerge in new circuits of the production of knowledge; what one might call, to corrupt Jameson, ‘theoretical populism’. Thus Simon Reynolds, in his assessment of ‘Indie Pop’ draws on Foucault’s theory of power, and Paul Oldfield reads a

Baudrillardian strategy of 'resistance' into current pop culture.

Stuart Cosgrove's 'Zoot Suits and Style Warfare' opens the first of the four sections which organize the book. Exemplifying McRobbie's insistence that the best insights of subcultural analysis be held onto, 'Zoot Suits and Style Warfare' is an excavation of the symbolic/stylistic forms of resistance practised by primarily dispossessed urban black and Hispanic youth in 1940s America. In a fascinating reading of the 'hidden history' of the Zoot Suit 'riots' which occurred in certain US cities during the dislocating periods of war mobilization, Cosgrove traces, as he puts it, the 'related potential of ethnicity and politics on the one hand, and the pleasures of identity and difference on the other', which were woven into the material of the flamboyant Zoot Suit. Mixing popular-press accounts of the 'riots' with accounts of the official responses and an exploration of the Zoot Suit style (both male and female), Cosgrove makes clear the charged symbolism of the Zoot Suit and its importance as an assertive and affirmative sign of identity. His reading of the clashes between the Zootsuits and enlisted servicemen brings this out well. The extravagant style of the Zoot Suit was spectacular enough in its own right, but placed within the context of the rationing of wartime civilian clothing production and the movements of enlisted servicemen, to wear a Zoot Suit was to make a profoundly oppositional gesture; next to the wartime 'streamlined suits by Uncle Sam' and the chino shirt and battledress, as Cosgrove notes, the Zoot Suit contested the iconography of US patriotism, publicly flouting the regulations of rationing.

Cosgrove is very good then on the subcultural significance of the Zoot Suit. Where he is less illuminating, and where I would have liked to have seen some attention focused, is in exploring the informal networks which produced the Zoot Suit in times of rationing and the processes of actually acquiring the commodities – essentially those initial moments of consumption. Given Cosgrove's historical point of reference this is perhaps an unreasonable demand. It is such a shift from a 'subcultural' focus, however, which Angela McRobbie usefully attempts in her chapter on 'Second-hand dresses and the role of the ragmarket'.

A strong feature of McRobbie's chapter is an emphasis on some of the practices of buying and selling which tended to be smothered by the 'subculture' emphasis on the act of transformation of already-bought commodities. She importantly lays stress on the (increasingly) intertextual embeddings of popular cultural practices, and rightly urges a consideration of 'the act of buying and the processes of looking and choosing [which] still remain relatively unexamined in the field of cultural analysis'. A concern with the time spent shopping throws up some of the issues around the pleasures of consumption and the use of public space. McRobbie convincingly argues the importance to girls and young women of shopping – particularly within the markets and second-hand stalls – in which their street activities are less curtailed than in other contexts (a comment given greater meaning in relation to Gina Rumsey and Hilary Little's later exploration of women's experience of these same restrictions in the context of the male world of music venues). If, for McRobbie, the moments of buying have been overlooked in the earlier

analyses of style, so, too, she suggests, were the mechanics of selling and the important entrepreneurial elements which serviced and underpinned the youth cultures. Offering, as she notes, alternative 'careers' (though admittedly to only a relatively small group of art and fashion graduates), the networks of second-hand clothes markets are also crucially sites to meet, organize events, and places to see and be seen. It is within these contexts that McRobbie discusses the meaning of second-hand style. Her assessment of the 'second-hand aesthetics' of youth styles avoids rubbishing it all as a regressive form of nostalgia, or as a kind of fear of the future (a view which informs Jon Savage's comments in his chapter on the widespread forms of plundering and recycling within contemporary popular culture). Instead McRobbie emphasizes, as she puts it, 'the knowingness', 'irresponsible optimism and humour' which mark out these bricolage styles, and the challenges they can offer to the norms of femininity. She is particularly good on the close connection between the emergence and mutation of these styles and the magazines which in many ways have grown up with second-hand style in the 1980s, together with the wider proliferation of media interest in style, and the borrowings by the High Street of some of the innovations of these more marginal forms of selling.

A concern with some of the more marginal practices which are part of the wider circulation of commodities within consumerism and often at the cutting edge (*sic*) of innovation is a feature of Janet Lee's interviews with three young women fashion designers who have been successful in recent years – Alison Lloyd of Ally Capellino, Claire Angel of English Eccentrics, and Pam Hogg. The interviews draw out the experiences of the women designers in a profession still dominated by men, together with the allures, and difficulties and uncertainties, of self-employment. What emerges here is a picture of the amazing adaptability and resourcefulness of the designers, particularly in the face of manufacturers' reluctance to produce for small-batch runs, and the massive importance of the style press both in terms of the recognition achieved by the designers and as the places where their designs are displayed. As Janet Lee puts it, 'today, more than ever, young designers have to furnish the media with the images they need before they clothe the public'.

The place of magazines such as *The Face*, *ID*, *Blitz*, or even *Just Seventeen*, is never addressed directly in *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses* (although McRobbie gives over quite a lot of space to them in the introduction). Such an analysis might have revealed the ways in which the mags function as exemplary points where fashion, music, video, advertising, film and TV meet and feed off one another. The magazines also penetrate the other practices of consumption, through the styles they stage for example, which crucially inform, I think, the language of looks and gestures within shopping. The mix of articles in the book however does bring out the fact that the meaning of particular cultural practices is produced through the interconnection of a range of texts. This is the real theoretical gain from a break with the 'structuralist' focus on the privileged or exemplary text; addressing the way cultural products often signify across a number of sites. Fashion photography clearly has implications beyond the immediate act of reading through the coding of the body it sets up and the forms of looking it stages, and through the ways in

which the representations are put into circulation. Thus in her chapter on Bloomingdales' mail order lingerie catalogue, Rosetta Brooks considers Guy Bourdin's work for that catalogue in the late 1970s. Is it an ad for Bloomingdales' range or a catalogue of Bourdin's work as *auteur*? Well, both, she argues, implicated within the process of the aestheticization of consumption. Kathy Myers addresses a similar process in her consideration of fashion ads, suggesting the continual drive for stylistic and technical innovation.

Pop music similarly highlights the need conceptually to grasp the intertextuality of popular cultural forms and practices. These musics, as Angela McRobbie notes in her introduction, 'permeate a vast range of other media forms, as soundtrack, performance spectacle or simply as accompaniment to an endless flow of images'. The role of the pop star remains crucial to these processes, from pin-up to victim of tabloid crucifixion. This star quality, through the figure of David Bowie, is taken to task by Simon Frith; from 'Ziggy Stardust' to 'The Thin White Duke', for Frith, Bowie is the perfect 'pop voyeur', playing with the role of rock star and foregrounding the marketing of pop and the pop process. Bowie's various visual incarnations had an enduring impact on punk and the New Pop of the early 1980s, Frith suggests, and the ambiguity of his styles put into question dominant conceptions of masculinity.

Kobena Mercer's wonderful reading of Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' video takes up this play with the constructedness of the 'star' image, as practised by Jackson, and the inscriptions of 'race' and gender within popular cultural forms. In a close and developed analysis of the narrative structure of the 'Thriller' video and its interaction with the music track, Mercer draws out the sharp parodying of Michael Jackson's own mythologized status and his sexual and racial ambiguities played on by the video. Importantly, he argues, the video and Jackson more generally, while working within the context of Afro-American traditions of popular music, contest dominant stereotypes of black masculinity and reach beyond the familiar typologies of black men. Significantly, Mercer – like the video – celebrates the thrill of Jackson's music and performance, the 'erotic materiality' of that voice.

The pleasures of the body caught in the rhythm of music and dance couldn't be further from the object of Simon Reynolds's perceptive chapter – 'Indie pop'. For Reynolds Indie bands like 'The Smiths' or 'The Jesus and Mary Chain', with their celebrated gaucheness, react against the bodily pleasures and fantastic resolutions of dance musics and rock. For him this is 'head culture', consumed in the cocoon of the bedroom, a refusal of 'adult' sexuality and sophistication. Although I think Reynolds sometimes misses the irony of the likes of Morrissey and the sexual and gender ambiguities that can be present within the trade mark 'Indie' attire, his assessment of this tradition as 'the first anti-modernist revolt in pop history' is telling.

The strength of *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses* is its important reaffirmation of the need to engage properly with what is at stake in the incitements and organizations of our pleasures, desires and identities through the consumption of contemporary popular culture, together with its sense of the ways 'we' actively make investments within these affective structures. The

book's awareness of the complexity of practices immanent within this consumption and of some of their profound interconnections comes through strongly. The importance of forms of 'resistance', the reappropriation and play with commodities, the forging of initiatives within the networks of buying and selling, makes the book alive to those moments when, for example, the discursive hegemonies of gender, sexuality, 'race' and ethnicity are disrupted. What is insufficiently dealt with, however, is some sense of the wider transformations in the sphere of contemporary consumption which underscore and set the wider terms within which youth cultures operate. Shifts within advertising, marketing and retailing in recent years – shifts from above if you like – could have been given a little more consideration. Strategies which, for example, have played up the notion of shopping as a leisure activity (within some of the newer shopping centres and through the impact of design in high street retailing more generally) address more 'banal' forms of consumption and draw in other consumer constituents than those centred on in *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses*. Similarly there is a need to address the professional knowledges and cultural competences circulating within the advertising, marketing and design industries (and a need, strategically, to begin some kind of conversation with these professionals). Clearly I'm not asking one book to do everything. These wider shifts in contemporary consumption do, though, raise questions about the relative weight given in cultural analysis to particular sites and practices.