

## Fashion and War in Popular Culture

**Review Number:** 1798

**Publish date:** Thursday, 16 July, 2015

**Editor:** Denise N. Rall

**ISBN:** 9781841507514

**Date of Publication:** 2014

**Price:** £16.00

**Pages:** 200pp.

**Publisher:** Intellect Ltd

**Publisher url:** <http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/books/view-Book,id=5063/>

**Place of Publication:** Bristol

**Reviewer:** Rebecca Arnold

Book compilations can be a difficult genre. Comprised of varied essays and authorial voices, it takes a clear and well-defined theme, and a sure editorial hand to maintain focus and quality. Often, the most successful evolve from a project that has enabled the authors to discuss and develop their ideas together in some capacity, even if only in the context of a conference, and thus bring coherence to their theme, even if widely differing perspectives are represented. The current example, entitled *Fashion and War in Popular Culture*, while offering some insightful essays that open up debate on varied facets of the topic, perhaps lacks the coherence and development necessary to work as a whole.

This is not to say that it isn't a fascinating theme. While there have been many books and articles that connect these subjects, extending the time period, and geographical scope is a welcome approach. Indeed, the book, while containing several essays focused on Australia, also incorporates comment on European and America topics, and forays into colonial and postcolonial dress and conflict in South America, for example. While most concentrate on 20th-century and contemporary issues, there is a tentative foray into earlier periods. Since the book only includes nine essays, however, this admirable intention for global and transhistorical analysis is perhaps a little over-ambitious, and a larger number would have been needed to do justice to this wide area and historical timeframe.

Most existing literature on war and fashion, or more accurately, war and dress, since it is not just modish styles that have been examined, tends to examine the two World Wars. Berg (now part of Bloomsbury) has published an insightful set of volumes on the Second World War, each focused on a specific country, and the impact of war on its fashion industry, as well as the type and nature of dress worn. Another excellent example on the theme is the 2005 book, *Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain and the United States 1931-1945*, edited by Jacqueline Atkins, which accompanied the Bard Graduate Center's exhibition of the same title.<sup>(1)</sup> This latter text is itself a compilation, and provides a well-focused selection of essays that take the role of fabrics during war as their central theme, and examine the ways dress can articulate not just propagandistic values, but also contemporary emotions and the need to memorialise those on the battlefield or lost to the conflict. It covers a wide geography, including illuminating discussions of Japanese design and wearing habits, while keeping a tight period focus that enables transnational comparisons to be drawn.

Another major emphasis within texts on war and fashion and dress, has been on the role photography played in documenting their close alliance. Articles, especially on photographers, such as Cecil Beaton and Lee Miller, show the ways reality and fiction were blurred, as well as the significance of body and dress during the horror of war. The latter theme has also been explored in work on uniform <sup>(2)</sup> that considers the ways dress impacts individual and collective physicality and inculcates behavioural and belief systems in its wearers.

In the current book, it is interesting that such concerns have been connected with popular culture and this represents a potentially very rich area to investigate. Certain chapters stand out as signalling new aspects of the subject to explore, and raise important questions with respect to the ways military-inspired dress encompasses a wide range of meanings and inspires varied reactions. Jennifer Craik's introduction provides an incisive overview of the kinds of questions raised when exploring the impact of war on dress. She considers this relationship in a nuanced way, and calls for wider in-depth research in the area that would take us beyond simplistic explorations of the subject that reduce it to military uniform references on the catwalk. She expands upon the definition of war, widening the scope to include the ways it can be extended to include intersections with colonialism and imperialism, and how this connects to postmodernist theories and notions of hybridity. This highlights the ways fashion is influenced by war, but also how local clothing and body adornment trends can be impacted by cross-cultural dress elements from a dominating power, and are both consciously adopted or adapted and subconsciously absorbed into indigenous ways of dressing. Craik urges academics to consider these manifestations seriously and in complex ways, and to move beyond simplistic ideas of one-way influence (from colonizer to colonized), and automatic assumptions that the colonised are merely subservient. She calls for an assessment of the webs of meaning and, importantly, altered meanings that dress takes on in the eyes of each party. Her essay expertly deploys contemporary analysis, for example Karen Tranberg Hansen's work, to develop her discussion of the ways conflict impacts dress and to set out the compilation's suggested aims. Since, as she notes, 'the reality is that fashion is not only the most visible indicator of those processes but a remarkably agile signifier of the twists and turns – and nuances – of cultural conquest'. This, in itself is a fascinating comment, which is compounded by her argument that, 'history matters more to the understanding of fashion than to other disciplines' (p. 5). This is an important statement, which underlines the close symbiosis between fashion and its historical context. Craik also rightly emphasizes the significance of the book's address to popular culture, as this is something that usefully connects dress with the everyday and contemporary media.

Those essays that manage to encompass at least part of this brief, are enlightening. Heather Smith and Richard Gehrman's chapter 'Branding the muscled male body as military costume' is a case in point. Focused on the Australian Army, it develops a convincing study of the way a muscular body has become shorthand for masculinity and good soldiering, in line with contemporary popular culture. The authors suggest that this body represents a complex of ideas that focus on the external, rather than more cerebral military skills, but that it can encompass metrosexuality, for example in relation to the display and performance of masculinity in popular media. The discussion also hints at really interesting potential further

research in relation not just to male, but also female soldiers, who, with their increased role, may be 'masculine' in their self-image. The authors suggest the ways increasingly open and nuanced attitudes towards gender and sexual identity and ambiguity in the wider culture may be inflected within the conservative values of the military. This is a fascinating proposition, and their focus on the body and its adornment, specifically the popularity of tattoos amongst serving men, could have been developed further, using visual analysis to extend and make specific the interesting points made.

The book as a whole is clearly aimed at students, and each essay is broken up under several sub-headings. While this was presumably intended to aid clarity, it in fact makes the text rather fragmented, even in the most fluently written essays, and given that none are especially long, it seems unnecessary. Linked to this concern is the way certain terms are over-explained, while others seem to lack definition. In this instance, it means a whole subsection is devoted to outlining the meaning of branding, when it would perhaps have been more fruitful to use a pertinent quotation, applied to the example in hand to extend the analysis, rather than take up space at the expense of the case study.

A further question that becomes apparent is how the term 'fashion,' and allied definitions 'dress' and 'costume' are being used in the volume as a whole. For the majority of scholars working in the field, Joanne Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins' 1993 discussion of these phrases has become the key guide:

As we address the problems of classifying types of dress, we recognise that the dressed person is a *gestalt* that includes the body, all direct modifications of the body itself, and all three-dimensional supplements added to it. Further, we acknowledge that only through mental manipulation can we separate body modifications and supplements from the body itself – and from each other – and extract that which we call dress. Despite these limitations, we choose to focus on the concrete reality of dress that has describable properties, such as colour, shape, texture, surface design, or odour. We also take the position that the direct modifications of the body as well as the supplements added to it must be considered types of dress because they are equally effective means of human communication, and because similar meanings can be conveyed by some property, or combination of properties, of either modifications or supplements.<sup>(3)</sup>

Their description enables a subtle understanding of the ways dress impacts every aspect of bodily presentation and adaptation. Thus, 'fashion' becomes a more specific term that can relate to temporality, as well as examples produced within the industrial system. 'Costume' also becomes specific, and relates to dress that is consciously made for performance, whether a fancy dress party, film character or cosplay. While these distinctions have been widely adopted within dress history and fashion studies, they are not always clear in the current volume, and this sometimes causes confusion over exactly what is intended. Eicher's terminology also helps to move away from outdated notions of dress produced outside the industrialized world, as 'costume', something fixed and 'other', and lacking the changes and potential adaptability implied by fashion. Again, these distinctions, as Craik's introduction acknowledges, may be subtle, but they are important and reflect the ways the subject area has progressed in the last 30 years. In some cases, this more rounded understanding of the subject area and the depth and range of more recent historiography would have aided the authors in their own analysis of case studies.

Where these distinctions are clear and the research encompasses this range, the essays bring new insight, as on the soldier's body, discussed above, or in the case of Prudence Black's essay, 'The discipline of appearance: military style and Australian flight hostess uniforms 1930–1964', which considers the ways that the uniforms of flight stewardesses evolved from, and were influenced by two World Wars.

Although, as with a few of the essays, Black stretches the definition of 'fashion and war,' in her case to consider the ways uniform links to the machinery of war and therefore to planes as a machine of war, her text nonetheless provides original insight. This is in part because she also makes a connection between the

ways uniform disciplines the body, and indicates allegiance and rank, in both military and civilian versions. Her discussion of how uniforms impact behaviour and gesture is interesting, and draws on Craik's writing on the area.<sup>(4)</sup> Black discusses uniform's ability to signal power and authority, of the wearer but also of the pilot and airline, and describes how military uniform was used globally as a template in emerging airlines of the 1930s.

Amanda Laugesen's essay, 'Models, medals, and the use of military emblems in fashion', also provides illuminating discussion. She examines the uproar caused by a New Zealand fashion designer's use of replica medals in 2008, and similar controversy surrounding a US Marines' dress blouse and medals worn by a dancer on the American reality show, *So You Think You Can Dance*. These case studies are used to question the status and symbolic power of medals within contemporary culture. She discusses the significance of being awarded and therefore allowed to wear medals, and the emotional response to those perceived as wearing them fraudulently. This connects the medals to, for example, the feelings of national identity, pride and duty with which they are invested. As noted in other essays in this compilation, her examples show the ways uniform embodies values, and dictates not just appearance, but behaviour. In addition, she explores the sense that one must 'earn' the right to wear these garments and emblems, and acknowledges Craik's opening comment that they cannot be ripped from their context and histories.

In other essays, such as Davinia Gregory's, 'Dutch wax and display: London and the art of Yinka Shonibare', the book's focal theme is perhaps extended beyond its remit. Hers is an insightful text, but is really a piece of art criticism on Yinka Shonibare's work and his hybrid identity. This links, of course, to issues surrounding post-colonialism and to the ways trade leads to hybrid products, and to contested notions of identity, in this case, the artist's own personal history of Nigerian and British origins and life. It is a thoughtful and fluent piece, but is arguably out of place here. Although the violence of colonial and imperial domination is part of his work and its significance, it does not easily connect with fashion, war and popular culture. Work on colonial and imperial oppression and its impact on dress is, of course, an important subject, and perhaps a different book title could have indicated the project's intended breadth.

Overall, this compilation contains some very interesting material and makes a convincing call for more work on this area. However, it needed to consider its scope, and define its area with greater clarity throughout to realise its admirably ambitious aims. Perhaps in terms of structure and length, a less restrictive format would also have helped to give authors more space in which to extend their analysis. This may well be something the publisher needs to consider in its approach to commissioning and editing its texts.

## Notes

1. *Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain and the United States 1931–1945*, ed. Jacqueline Atkins (New Haven, CT, 2005).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See Jane Tynan, *British Army Uniform and the First World War: Men in Khaki* (London, 2013).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Joanne B. Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, 'Definition and classification of dress: implications for analysis of gender roles', in *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning*, ed. Joanne B. Eicher and Ruth Barnes (Oxford, 1993), p. 13.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression* (London, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1798>

## Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/129110>