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Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses

An Anthology of Fashion and Music

Edited by
Angela McRobbie

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Contributors

Juliet Ash teaches Fashion, Design History and Theory at Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication and is co-author with Lee Wright of *Components of Dress*.

Atlanta and Alexander were members of the *ZG* editorial board.

Rosetta Brooks is a writer and art critic living in New York. She created and edited *ZG* magazine.

Martin Chalmers is a journalist and translator living in London.

Stuart Cosgrove has been a Lecturer in Drama at West London Institute of Higher Education, and media editor at the *New Musical Express*. He is at present co-producer of a TV series for Channel 4.

Richard Dyer teaches Film Studies at Warwick University, is the author of *Stars* and *Heavenly Bodies* and is currently writing a book on independent lesbian and gay film.

Simon Frith is Director of the John Logie Baird Centre in Glasgow and writes about music in the *Observer* and *Village Voice*.

Marek Kohn is a freelance journalist and author of *Narcomania: On Heroin*.

Dave Laing wrote *The Sound of Our Times* in 1969. Since then he has published and edited several books on pop including *One Chord Wonders*. He is at present features editor of *Music Week*.

Janet Lee is a research student at Middlesex Polytechnic, London, working on a study of the interrelationship between post-modernist and feminist theories. She is also a part-time lecturer at St Martin's School of Art, London.

Hilary Little is a freelance journalist and regular contributor to the *New Statesman*.

Angela McRobbie lectures in Sociology at Ealing College of Higher Education. She co-edited *Feminism for Girls* and *Gender and Generation* and is author of *Teenage Girls: Subcultures, Pop Culture and Femininity*.

Greil Marcus is the author of *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music* and a columnist for the *Village Voice*.

Kobena Mercer teaches Cultural Studies at the Centre for Caribbean Studies, Goldsmiths' College. He graduated from St Martin's School of Art and is currently completing a PhD thesis in sociology at Goldsmiths' College.

Kathy Myers is the author of *Understains: The Sense and Seduction of Advertising*. She was co-producer of *The Media Show* (Channel 4) and now works for the BBC.

Paul Oldfield is a freelance contributor to *Melody Maker* and *New Statesman* and was a co-founder of *Monitor*.

Ian Penman is a freelance journalist and regular contributor to the *New Statesman*, *Arena* and *The Face*.

Simon Reynolds is a staff feature writer on *Melody Maker* and pop columnist for the *New Statesman*, and was a co-founder of *Monitor*.

Gina Rumsey is a freelance journalist currently working in London.

Jon Savage is a regular contributor to the *Observer* and the *New Statesman*, and is a consultant to Channel 4's *The Media Show*. He is currently writing *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk*

x *Contributors*

Rock, 1975–79 and is researching another book, *Teenage: A History of Postwar English Youth Culture*, with Peter York.

Dirk Scheuring is a music journalist working and living in West Germany.

David Stubbs is a staff feature writer on *Melody Maker*, and has written for *Monitor*.

Introduction

Two kinds of writing now feed into the study of youth and popular culture. These are the more conventional academic mode, and what might be called a new form of cultural journalism. Each is marked by its own history, its debates and disputes. *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses* attempts to bring these two together. In doing so, it is also concerned to highlight and explain the diverse ways in which popular culture shapes and influences everyday life around us. It is no longer accurate to pose media forms, images and representations as being on one side of an imaginary line, and lived reality on the other. The key question is how these interact, how reality is perceived through the many lenses and screens of the media. There is also the crucial question of consumerism. We don't just absorb the media, or let it determine our desires and personal fantasies, we also consume it. Buying need not necessarily follow looking or viewing. It might well be possible to read *Just Seventeen* for years and never step foot inside Miss Selfridges, or Top Shop, or the local Chelsea Girl . . . but it is unlikely.

Analytically we have got to retain the space between these various actions, but we also have to be able to perceive the connections. The systems of meaning within which these practices of looking, buying and even just day-dreaming take place, are constantly regenerating themselves. What we buy and consequently wear or display in some public fashion, in turn creates new images, new, sometimes unintended, constellations of meaning. In a sense we become media forms ourselves, the physical body is transformed into a compact portable 'walkman'.

Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses falls into four sections. In the first longer section titled *Frontiers*, there are five articles each

of which attempts to chart new ground in the study of fashion, style or music. This is followed by *Transgressions*, where a number of authors explore deviant styles, practices and their wider cultural meanings. *Interiors* considers fashion, fashion photography and images of the male body. Finally, in *Music Now* a number of young journalists upset the conventions of rock criticism and Greil Marcus adds a dissident voice to the populist clamour of Band Aid.

Many of the articles included here have already appeared in a number of journals and magazines. In the past few years these have often proved difficult to track down. Some have gone out of print altogether. A strong reason for putting a collection like this together is to make available to teachers and others as wide a range of teaching material as possible. The book was conceived, therefore, with Cultural Studies, Media Studies and the Sociology of Youth in mind. The idea was to combine a number of longer and more substantial pieces with a whole range of shorter articles which covered areas as diverse as the male pin-up, women and pop, and the Band Aid event of 1985.

This teaching function should not, however, blind us to other significant political and intellectual shifts which make it more possible now than it was ten years ago to place such diverse and eclectic material alongside each other. Serious pop journalism, for a start, has changed dramatically. Under the influence of Tom Wolfe, the best pop writing was found in the early 1970s in the *New Musical Express*. Wolfe had been given vast amounts of space in the influential American magazine *Rolling Stone*, and young British journalists followed suit by pushing for as much word-space as they could. The British music press has stood alone in this respect. There is no other media form which has allowed writers, fresh out of school or college, anything like the same freedom to develop a distinctive style or a particular set of interests. There are many reasons why this has been the case. It wasn't just the influence of *Rolling Stone*. Music itself, from the early 1970s, had become more self-consciously serious. Politics had also found its way into pop, and the music press was forced to recognise the influential way these had come together in the underground press. It was simply no longer feasible to attach a brief and breezy three-line review to albums and singles which cried out for something more substantial.

Tom Wolfe of course remains, even now, an important figure: not just for his breakneck fast prose style, and his often quoted maxim about 'getting it right', but because he wrote with conviction on objects, artefacts and events which were elsewhere considered trivial.

There were a number of other additional forces which encouraged young journalists working in this field to explore popular culture as a more general form: a recognition, for example, that pop music along with reggae, soul, rock, and everything else, could no longer be considered in isolation. These musics permeated a vast range of other media forms, as soundtrack, performance spectacle or simply as accompaniment to an endless flow of images. The star system, too, which continues to be a crucial ingredient in the day-to-day workings of the music industry, plays a much more prominent role, particularly in the tabloid newspapers. Pop stars rank alongside the Royal Family and the stars of soap as an unfailing source of gossip and news. There is more pop coverage in the quality dailies, pop is increasingly used to advertise everything from jeans to tights and office equipment, and it plays a central role both in girls' comics and on children's television. This makes it a form so deeply intertwined with other systems of meaning and communication as to be virtually inseparable from them.

Independent of where precisely the taste or preferences of the journalists fell, this continuing penetration of pop into the global media market made it difficult for them to perceive it any longer as a pure form. While the standard format of the review, interview or comment remained, many journalists none the less wanted to write about the cultural phenomena which came with the music. They were interested in the clothes, style and distinctiveness of the fans who congregated ritualistically at gigs and concerts. They wanted to know more about where these subcultural impulses came from, how they fed into the market for new consumer goods, and how they related to the world of politics. Indeed the journalists often felt better equipped to deal with these questions than the academics, who from the mid-1970s were publishing extensively on the same subject. By the late 1970s the relations between the music press and the record industry had short-circuited. The journalists were recruited, or else came forward themselves, from the sub-cultures, first from punk but then later, in the 1980s, from

the various soul club scenes. It's well documented how the vituperative writing style of Julie Burchill, Tony Parsons, Paul Morley and Ian Penman brought them as much notoriety as the bands they were writing about.

It was this connection which allowed these young writers to claim that theirs was the authentic voice of youth. While the sociologists were destined to hover nervously on the margins, they could report direct from the pubs, clubs and dressing rooms. In their weekly chunks of prose they would frequently challenge the sociological fragments which, against a backdrop of unemployment and crime, were finding their way into popular discourse. Julie Burchill was the most prominent anti-sociologist around. Writing for *New Society* she provided its readers with a kind of in-house critique, a punk-influenced sneer and opinionated anti-intellectualism which allowed her to bring together a set of views which defied rational questioning.

Back inside the music press another set of changes could be detected. Writing about the culture which surrounded the music was beginning to give way to writing about both pop and culture as consumerism. Working for magazines like *The Face* or *Blitz*, young freelance journalists suddenly found themselves arbiters of taste, lifestyle, and even home decoration. This consumerism was accompanied by a set of gestures towards aestheticism. In the 1960s, pop art had brought painting, cinema, and visual imagery to pop in a generous act of validation. Andy Warhol and Richard Hamilton both courted and honoured Elvis, Jagger and others.

Twenty years later it is the musicians who are so anxious to display their artistic credentials. Even in *Smash Hits* interviews (a magazine whose average readers are 11-year-old girls) it is not unusual to come across Simon Le Bon of Duran Duran trying to impress a bookish and intellectual image on his fans, by referring to 'montage' or to the 'lingering influence of surrealism'. For the more upmarket style glossies this produces a real dilemma. The aestheticisation of culture means that they can fill their pages with images of art-deco sofas, classic 1950s tableware and kitchen furniture, and endless video installations, but ultimately their 'light' journalistic format confines them to the epithet or descriptive comment. The enormous space in magazines like *The Face*, *Elle* and *Blitz* given over to images and illustrations means that the printed word is pushed into the sidelines. There are few sustained

reviews or critiques, though whether this is based on an assumption about what readers are looking for, or expect, is uncertain. A grounded analysis of art and design objects is abandoned in favour of a celebration of them in terms of lifestyle and consumerism. As Dick Hebdige has commented in his recent and influential article on *The Face* magazine,¹ this allows all sorts of cultural objects to be placed together on a shared, flat, postmodern surface. Ironically the outcome is a much more conventional and conservative unity, one which depends upon the reader being exhorted to display his or her taste and knowledge through old-fashioned consumption. You are what you buy, or what you aspire to buy.

The shortage of space in the style magazines for extended written articles was in part what prompted pop culture journalists back towards the more serious weekly and monthly magazines. Here it was possible to develop a more openly political profile, tackling questions like race, unemployment, sexual politics, and drug abuse, as well as issues around art and culture. Since a number of academic writers were also contributing to the same journals, much of the old antagonism began to fade. A strong overlap of interest surfaced, and this was compounded with the increasing popularisation, outside higher education, of semiology and structuralism which followed the publication of Barthes's *Image, Music, Text*,² and Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.³ Of course Peter York had already developed his own brand of instant semiology which he applied with wit and humour to London life around him. York was, and remains, primarily interested in how people carve out identities for themselves through what they consume. From this he has constructed numerous immediately recognisable social types which in turn have done away with the advertising agencies' old reliance on the drearier typologies of the Registrar General. The old As, Bs, CIs, and so on, have been replaced by any number of irritatingly zappy titled types.

Several of the contributors to this volume have followed a freelance route through the music press, the style glossies and the Sunday newspapers to the *New Statesman*, *ZG* and *Marxism Today*. Jon Savage's two pieces appeared in *The Face* ('The Age of Plunder' – one of the few depth pieces published there) and *ZG* ('Do You Know How to Pony?'). Jon Savage writes for almost all the magazines mentioned above as well as *The Observer*. He is

currently writing a book on the Sex Pistols and Britain in the 1970s. Ian Penman was one of the most admired *NME* writers in the mid to late 1970s, where he wrote at length on, among other things, torch songs, Grace Jones, Paul Schrader and Fassbinder. Here, in 'The Shattered Glass', he unpicks the fine web of postures and gestures which made Roxy Music what they were. Like Penman, Marek Kohn is a regular contributor to *The Face* and to the *New Statesman*. His piece here first appeared in *ZG* in 1983. More recently he has published a book on heroin imagery, entitled *Narcomania*. Part IV, 'Music Now', includes work by Greil Marcus (author of the seminal 'The Mystery Train', and regular contributor to *Artforum*), and that of relative newcomers like Simon Reynolds (now of the *Melody Maker*), David Stubbs (likewise) and Paul Oldfield (freelance music writer).

Of the women contributors, only Kathy Myers, Gina Rumsey and Hilary Little work in the world of media journalism. Kathy Myers is now – following an academic career and two years as *City Limits*' television editor – an assistant producer at the BBC. Gina Rumsey and Hilary Little contribute one of the most telling and poignant pieces in the book. 'Women and Pop: A Series of Lost Encounters' offers an account of the other side of pop – not just the obvious sexism and macho posturing, but the whole network of social relations which make music a different experience altogether for women.

The question for women and girls entering the music press is still whether to become one of the boys (an early 1970s proposition), or whether to proceed as a woman, with all that entails. Even at her most anti-feminist it was on these latter grounds that Julie Burchill gained her reputation. Sitting at home churning out her scathing prose, she presumably saw no reason to endear herself to the boys. It was on the gruesome pretensions of music-business masculinity that she poured her greatest scorn.

Black journalists are equally under-represented in pop culture journalism. A similar web of exclusion prevents them from knowing who is who, and who wants to commission what. The substantial number of male and female black musicians in this country is not matched in the world of journalism. Like the majority of women contributors in this volume, Kobena Mercer writes about pop culture (the Michael Jackson *Thriller* video) from within academic media studies. The other side of media expansion, particularly in

journalism, may well be that outside the feminist press or the ethnic press, 'equal opportunities' remains something generally applauded but only weakly applied.

* * *

Music journalism has evolved into a much broader kind of writing. It has explored the crossover and inter-penetration which now exists between all media forms. But where does this leave the more academic study of youth and popular culture? Have wider social changes also made their mark in this field? The answer to this is yes, for reasons we shall see in a moment. It might be said in the first instance, that while pop journalism has moved towards a more serious mode, academic writing has, to some extent, shifted towards a lighter, more essayistic, style. There are some very pragmatic reasons why this should be so. Cutbacks, under-funding and a more general hostility to the social sciences, have produced a climate hardly conducive to full-scale research, solitary study, or to the traditional pursuit of knowledge. The running-down of both the social sciences and the humanities in higher education, and the now likely overhaul of the whole system, have not, however, created only despair and inactivity. Many of those employed in the polytechnic sector have looked towards new forms of scholarship, in particular a more popular kind of *journal-ism*. The burden of heavy teaching timetables and the lack of resources for substantial research projects have undoubtedly played some role in precipitating this shift. It is one which is, more optimistically, reflected in the increasing number of journals and magazines which have grown up around Cultural Studies. Most are run on a shoestring; sometimes they have difficulty maintaining a momentum for more than five years. But this detracts neither from their importance nor from their influence. When one goes under it is usually replaced by another, springing up from some different source or institution.

At their best, journals like *Theory, Culture and Society*, *Ten 8*, *Screen*, *Formations*, *Block*, *Camerawork*, and *Feminist Review* (in the USA, *October*, *Social Text*, *Signs* and *Substance* have played a similar role) have provided a forum for work-in-progress and for short pieces ranging from replies and reviews to commentaries and critiques. This has made for interesting and stimulating

reading. Some debates have spanned different journals, starting off in one and being picked up and developed in another, a feature contributing directly to the radical intellectual culture which, despite everything, continues into the late 1980s. In this collection, for example, we reprint Rosetta Brooks's article on fashion photography, 'Sighs and Whispers in Bloomingdales'. It originally appeared in the magazine she herself edited, *ZG*. Some months later Kathy Myers replied to this in *Screen*, and indeed extended her argument into the wider feminist discussion around pornography and erotica. This also appears here. In each case the authors are writing in a kind of dialogue with a set of chosen images. This too is a mark of the new scholarship, an active engagement with the fleeting-but-lasting effect of the images around us. The result of these visual conversations is a looser, more open-ended, style of academic writing. Richard Dyer's 'Don't Look Now', also first published in *Screen*, follows a similar format. Using this more imaginative mode, it explores how men look and how they are looked at.

A number of other articles in this volume blur the line between the academic and the journalistic. These include Martin Chalmers's piece on heroin and the body, Juliet Ash's views on the Paris fashion shows, Janet Lee's interviews with three women fashion designers and Dirk Scheuring's account of the never-ending popularity of denim.

The success of academic journalism has effects beyond the publishing of radical ideas and critiques. It allows those only recently embarked on postgraduate study to think out loud and speculate in print. It also demystifies the more traditional academic 'publication', and encourages collaborative work which in turn goes some way to ending the notion of intellectual work as a painful and solitary activity. All of these were practices championed from the early 1970s, by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, in their influential Working Papers in Cultural Studies.

Standing a bit further back from the actual business of writing and publishing, two other distinct shifts in intellectual thinking can be detected. First, the lasting impact of French structuralism. It was not until the publication in English of Barthes's short essay, *The Grain of the Voice*,⁴ that the analysis of music was able to move beyond a kind of weak and unconvincing literary criticism.

Dave Laing's detailed examination of Johnny Rotten's vocal delivery draws usefully on this text. In doing so it also contributes a new dimension to the study of subcultural forms. Where in the past much has been said about the meaning of style, only very little has emerged on the meaning of the musical text itself. The contributions from both Simon Frith and Greil Marcus also add to the subcultural repertoire. Marcus chooses one spectacular pop moment to produce a subtle reading of its theme tune, 'We Are The World', and Frith produces a detailed profile of David Bowie's fleeting identities. This too marks a point of departure from the established conventions of youth culture analysis. Previously there was very little emphasis on the stars themselves, since it was assumed that they were most often self-seeking individuals and otherwise mere commodities, iconic representations of the success of capitalism. From this viewpoint great attention was paid only to the collective actions and ritualistic behaviour of working-class youth, thereby losing much of the impact of pop culture and pop stars on youth. All three of these pop pieces are evidence therefore of the kind of loosening-up and broadening out of forms mentioned earlier. Gone, thankfully, is the need to establish a theoretical purity before proceeding to say anything more. Gone too is the need to be seen to be attempting to solve some theoretical problem in the course of a short piece of writing. This has been replaced by a more exploratory mode where theoretical questions inform a piece of work without necessarily overwhelming it. Alongside this is a wariness about the dangers of seeking too-easy answers. Overarching theories of class identity or ideological positioning have in the last few years been shown to be oblivious to other crucial and equally determining factors.

What is found, hopefully, in *Zoot Suits* is a greater openness, a more speculative quality of writing, and a lingering presence of some of the best insights from the field of subcultural analysis. The opening piece by Stuart Cosgrove certainly expresses this widening-out process. It is a history of events still relatively undocumented: the experience of urban blacks and hispanics in the years running up to and including America's involvement in the Second World War. Cosgrove shows how the fine details of black style, the adoption of the bright and brassy zoot suit, prefigured a later more political consciousness of race and social difference.

xx Introduction

What of the other, second, shift in the study of youth and culture reflected here? This can be best expressed by the developing interest in the physical body (rather than the collective political body), and on how it registers social resistance. Kobena Mercer's reading of the *Thriller* video traces the fragmentation of identity, which is part of the black experience, back to its transposition on the body. In *Thriller*, Mercer sees Jackson's monster transformation as a metaphoric re-working of this theme, suggesting an instability which is defiantly asserted, and then celebrated, as the bodies – and particularly Michael Jackson's – break into dance. The body also figures strongly in Atlanta and Alexander's 'Wild Style'. Here the body in question is that of the black urban graffiti artist who dodges danger and prosecution in order to leave a trace, a signature, or simply a sign on the unwelcoming urban environment. In Martin Chalmers's piece, the body of the addict is the site for despair and a repository of power. In my own analysis of second-hand clothes, the body is the object upon which huge baggy shapes are draped as though to protect it from the world of well-fitting adult values.

ANGELA MCROBBIE

Notes

1. D. Hebdige, 'The Bottom Line on Planet One', *Ten* 8, No. 19, 1985.
2. R. Barthes, *Image–Music–Text*, London, Fontana, 1977.
3. D. Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London, Methuen, 1978.
4. R. Barthes (1977).