

SPECIAL FOCUSED ISSUE:

CULTURE, GENDER AND CLOTHING

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INTRODUCTION

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Clothing provides a window through which we might look into a culture, because it visually attests to the salient ideas, concepts and categories fundamental to that culture. As Grant McCracken noted,

Clothing reveals both the themes and the formal relationships which serve a culture as orienting ideas, and the real or imagined basis according to which cultural categories are organized. Consequently, the principles of a world are found woven into the fabric of its clothing. (1988, p.60)

Gender, ethnicity and identity are made visible when cultures make dress salient, as it is in all of the articles presented in this volume. The term ‘dress’ is used in the most global sense to refer to the ways the body is used in the expression of identity. Dress is the most obvious of the many symbolic boundary markers used by cultures. This focused issue of *Paideusis, Journal for Interdisciplinary and Cross Cultural Studies* examines how the metaphors of clothing and dress are used is used to simultaneously express cultural and gendered norms.

Although the body is central to personal identity, social interaction and thus society at large, it was only in the late twentieth century that the body became the subject of serious academic investigation. Sociology of the Body is a subfield of Sociology, one that examines the body as a symbolic system (Shilling, 1993). Mary Douglas (1966, 1970) pioneered the study of the body as a symbol of the social order. Goffman (1963, 1971) followed with his examination of the management of the body in social interaction and showed the body as central to human agency. Fueled by the writings of Michel Foucault (1974, 1979, 1980), scholarship that examined the human body as a vehicle of social inquiry began to proliferate during the 1980s. Foucault (1974) saw the body as governed by political systems and focused on an epistemological view of the body as existing in discourse. Foucault noted that the soul is more than an ideological construct; it exists and has a reality in that it is produced within, around and on the body (1979). Burroughs and Erenreich (1993) showed that social systems stamp messages about the dynamics of power relationships onto individuals’ bodies as the process of the social construction of the body in turn creates culture. To use Bourdieu’s own language, “the social determinations attached to a determinate position in the social space tend, through relationship to one’s own body, to shape the dispositions constituting social identity” (1990, p. 71).

Pierre Bourdieu's (1973) theory of social reproduction has at its very heart a concern for the body as a bearer of symbolic value. The body, for Bourdieu, is an unfinished entity that develops in conjunction with various social forces and is integral to the maintenance of social inequalities. As a natural phenomenon that both constitutes and is constituted by society, analysis of the body is a necessary component of post-modern social life. The body is constantly affected by social, cultural and economic processes. Social groups adopt a particular style of dress in relation to the meanings given to alternative styles, the orientation to the body that style of dress encourages and to the relationship between the fields of fashion and other social fields (Bourdieu, 1973).

More recently, social changes have led to academics returning to the study of the body in social theory (Fraser & Greco, 2007). Bryan Turner has examined these and notes that we are experiencing the rise of the 'somatic society' which he describes as a society that uses the human body to express major issues that are social and political in nature (1996). As Fraser and Greco note, the broadest changes relate to the increased importance of consumption, economic shifts and the increased importance of leisure (2007). All of these relate to the use of clothing as an expression of identity and cultural values.

That dress is a visible manifestation of cultural values is well known. Through symbolic devices, the physical body exhibits the normative values of the social body. (Arthur, 1999). Symbols, such as dress, help delineate the social unit and visually define its boundaries because they give non-verbal information about the individual. Unique dress attached to specific cultural groups, then, can function to insulate group members from outsiders, while bonding the members to each other. Normative behavior within the culture re-affirms loyalty to the group and can be evidenced by the wearing of a uniform type of attire (Joseph, 1986).

In this special issue of *Paideusis, Journal for Interdisciplinary and Cross Cultural Studies*, a varied group of academics have taken on the task of examining and analyzing clothing as a visual marker of cultural and gendered roles. The first two articles examine clothing from a historical perspective. In their article on Orientalism, Drs. Kwon and Kim examine the fashion system and its use of inspiration from the Orient. They provide a contextual reading of the Oriental look found in western clothing, and suggest that the Oriental look reflects the arbitrary awareness of the Oriental beauty by the West and conclude that Orientalism in fashion is the Western aesthetic tradition toward the East.

Dr. Pecora examined dress reform at the turn of the twentieth century that began in England with a group of male artists, but became a specifically American women's movement. They deliberately avoided linking women's clothing with political or economic goals, and

instead treated fashion as worthy of in need of reform focused on comfort and aesthetics. This paper raises questions about the relationship between clothing and culture: changes in fashion are typically assumed to be precipitated by cultural shifts, but, in the case of late nineteenth-century dress reform, clothing itself was deliberately and carefully reformed, and cultural change followed.

Political issues are at the focus of two papers. Drs. Medvedev and Moshi examine the political, ideological, economic, and gender implications of dress in the formation and day-to-day operation of the socialist Tanzanian state and explores how embracing socialist ideology impacted people's sartorial representations in Tanzania. They discuss Nyerere's dress that was meant to reinforce the values, social practices and new political alliances of the new socialist Tanzanian regime. The meanings of the khangas, the female dress of the coastal regions of Tanzania, are examined as they became re-articulated in the new socialist context.

The intersection of political imagery and pop culture in America is examined by Dr. Kidd in her article on the use of Nazi imagery in clothing in the United States. This essay presents three areas of fashion that use Hitler's Nazi uniforms and regalia as fashion inspiration: Nazi chic, collections by fashion designers, and white power clothing. In particular, the use of Nazi inspiration in fashion is focused in the areas of punk fashion, bondage and fetish clothing, Asian Nazi chic, designer runway lines, and hate couture specifically designed for white supremacists. Also included are instances of Nazi fashion used as political statement and Nazi imagery used as an advertising tool. Implications, including ethical concerns, are presented and discussed.

The last two papers focus on the role of gender in clothing choices; one study was conducted in the US and the other in Swaziland. The American holiday of Halloween is the subject of an article by Dublin Macmillan, Lynch and Arthur. The performance of gender is explored through the images that young adults project with their choices of Halloween costumes. They drew upon a wide range of modern and historical imagery and symbols to construct alternate identities expressing a desire for social power. These constructions differed dramatically by gender. Over 80% of women presented some form of sexual imagery combined with other cultural symbols in their costume choice. Data are analyzed in terms of the agonistic or hedonic power expressed through the imagery employed in Halloween costumes.

One function of gender-typed clothing is its role in facilitating gender differentiation. However, as Dr. Khoza notes, Swazi culture has traditionally preferred androgynous dress for infants. According to this tradition the Swazi infant is dressed in a string until the third year of life. No other clothing was worn. Traditionally, the string was made out of natural beads, and more recently yarn has been used instead. Swaziland was the site of investigation for this study of cultural and historical influences of gender coding between birth and three years of age. This

study found that the color of the yarn was not a gender-related issue; boys and girls wear any color. Mothers whose children did not wear the infant string dressed their children instead in clothing such as diapers and rompers. The study attempted to explore gender as a cultural category to the extent that it interests with the cultural category of age (early childhood – birth to three years). Along these lines it was revealed that the string produced more layers of meaning for the mothers than originally anticipated. The variability in meaning associated with the string points to the ambiguity of clothing symbols – even those that are considered traditional.

While dress is commonplace, it is not ephemeral, vacuous or meaningless. We wear our identities on our bodies and our bodies are used by our cultures and sub-cultures to visually communicate identities. This focused issue shows that clothing has meanings which have resulted from both functional and discursive changes that have arisen out of cultural, economic, political and historical exigencies. The dressed body, then, is mutable; it is constantly changing; it is continually in process. To use Turner's words, the body is the most 'proximate and immediate feature of the social self' (Turner, 1996 p. 43).

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