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Accessorizing the Body.

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REFERENCES

Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. Pp.288. ISBN:
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- 1 *Accessorizing the Body* is the first out of the four-volume series, entitled *Habits of Being*, which hosts a selection of essays from the ongoing research project *Abito e Identità: Ricerche di Storia Letteraria e culturale*. This vigorous study, edited by Cristina Giorcelli and Paula Rabinowitz, invites the reader, student or researcher to start a journey from the European capitals to the American continent during the riotous era of the First and the Second World War in order to investigate the representational potentials of clothing garments and accessories and their power for self-narration. It also seeks to prove fashion's transgressive nature by creating a dialogue between clothing and the construction of the self at the intersecting point where psychology, politics and the arts meet. Throughout the study the essentiality of accessories is sustained. For Micol Fontana, fashion designer and director of the Fontana Foundation in Rome, "the accessory comes *with* the dress, not *before* the dress" (20). Based on Immanuel Kant's categorization of picture frames, the columns of building constructions and the clothes of Greek statues as *parerga*, Jacques Derrida's analogy between the "parergon" and the "ergon" is borrowed in order to explain how the first defines the second while at the same time exposing its lack (3, 4). The "parergon," that is the accessory, gives meaning to the "ergon," in other words the body; it is the "paratext" that defines the "text" and vice versa.

- 2 The book commences as a psychological investigation of the meanings attached to clothing by exploring Otherness and the playfulness of the gaze. This game takes the form of a search for meaning, self-definition and canonization through the gaze of the Other. Either when looking at a lifeless model body or when discerning the individuality of the wearer's body hidden underneath, clothes have the power to fragment as well as present a reassembled image of the body. In a second thematic thread, fashion and clothing are seen as having the power to express the individuality and singularity of the subject within social constructions. After accepting the truth in Claude Lévi-Strauss's argument that clothing plays an essential role in the construction of social hierarchy (7), its role in *maintaining* social order is implied as well. When used as a medium to express political ideologies and support social movements, clothing has held the power to oppress individual voices and drive them to conformity to social totalitarian institutions. By building a bridge between fashion, art and life, the essays go on to explore modernist clothing and accessories in tandem with popular art and the politics of consumerism in an emergent capitalist society during the first half of the twentieth century.
- 3 Manuela Fraire's "No Frills, No-Body, Nobody" addresses the construction of the "I" and the acquisition of its meaning in relation to that important Other as a dual process of undressing and redressing through juxtaposition and surrender, identification and disidentification. This "*dismantlement of the self*" (9) against the bareness of the maternal body and its re-construction in the gaze of the Other reveals the unique individuality of the self through a double process of openness to and protection from the world, that is the Other.
- 4 Rather than seek for the Other's gaze for meaning, Paola Colaiacomo speaks of a fashion which can express the body and which is closely linked to art and life. Contrasted with the belief in Renaissance and the Baroque style that clothing and body were one, early modern dress initiates a dialogue with the body. In her investigation of the genealogy of fashionable wear, dress reveals a desire for emancipation as well as a break from tradition. The relation of art with fashion as expressed in works and essays by Oscar Wilde, Henry James and Walter Pater suggests not only looking at the clothes in relation to the body in lifeless paintings but also looking through the dress and the body in an art that is closely connected to life.
- 5 After the appearance of professional model bodies in the second half of the nineteenth century, the advent of the new visual technologies, such as photography, photomontage and film in the twentieth century marks a more instrumental role of the model bodies in western consumer culture until the ultimate dissociation of the body from sensibility due to their "heavy narcissistic quality" (30). The individual essence of the model is lost while wearer and wear become one again in commercial advertising. The gradual movement of the body in theatrical and performative settings draws the human body with its jerky movements closer to the machine, reminding one of "the cinematic freeze-frame effect" (31).
- 6 As contrasted to the lifelessness of the body that wears, in Cristina Giorcelli's "Wearing the Body over the Dress," clothing constitutes the language that expresses a body in context rather than a naked body in anonymity. Clothes become the signs that structure our culture and give it its meaning. By drawing attention more to themselves than to the lifeless brittle bodies of the models and their hollow eyes, they reveal economic, social status as well as ethnic and religious origin. From the Birth to the Fall and the death of the body they have marked man's disobedience to dictatorial power despite man's

ultimate submission to the powerful dictatorship of the capital. Within the context of mechanical reproduction of art and the “hellish repetition” (36) in fashion, proposed by Walter Benjamin, Giorcelli revisits Martin Margiela’s deconstruction of garments and bodies until models are reduced to lifeless puppets. By contrast, for Sonia Delaunay fashion becomes an expression of art while playing with color, lines and the geometry of shapes against an industrial background. Towards a celebration of the technicalities of tailoring which bring the body back to life and art in fashion, Giorcelli investigates Delaunay’s fashion as a “synesthesia of the arts” (41), an intricate game of life and death, art and commerce, human nature and mechanical artificiality.

- 7 Against the creation of a new unitary space, where all artistic activities can intersect, the male Futurist trends in fashion come to express male chauvinism of the Futurist regime and Italian imperialism in the 1930s. Fashion is seen as a tool to channel the regime’s ideological overload. In accord with *The Futurist Reconstruction of Universe*, the mechanical revolution and the Fascist regime in Italy, Futurist fashion comes against bourgeois mentality, uniformity, tradition and the mass production of the German Bauhaus. Franca Zoccoli focuses on the semantic value of men’s accessories, concentrating on the tie, the hat, the shawls and vests, made of metal or other lightweight materials in bright colors and asymmetrical shapes.
- 8 Martha Banta discusses female emancipation in a male world through clothing as well as “the feminization of the masculine” (83) within an uproarious early twentieth century in Europe and the United States. She investigates Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel’s advancement in the male world of fashion in France and the changes in mores and mentality as penned by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*. The attire suggested by Chanel breaks all bonds with the belle epoch, suggesting classlessness and femininity, “independence of moneyed relations with men” (87), freedom of movement and emancipation for women of the 20s who find their way in the world through men and not against them, as put by Fitzgerald (89). The Chanel woman coincides with the Flapper in the United States and they both resist the morbid nature of the war. Her “charming tomboyishness” signals “female power” (92) and marks the erasure of gender roles and lines, also influencing men’s wear intended to seduce a Chanel woman (93). Through the examples of Gerald and Sara Murphy and Fitzgerald’s Divers in *Tender is the Night*, Banta manages to show how consumption follows mass production of the times while art, marketing and consumption become inseparable.
- 9 Becky Peterson’s literary and political reading of Laura Riding’s use of accessories and jewelry in her poetry and life examines her self-objectification strategies as a female muse within Petrarchan tradition – before she renounces poetic writing altogether. Her agonizing efforts to define Otherness are traced in the visual representation of her gold tiara with the name Laura engraved on it. The tiara, evoking Petrarch’s muse Laura, tries to engulf her whole essence and puns with “laurels” to crown the poet (111). Her necklace, a scarf and a nun’s headdress are all articles of clothing which serve as a way to position herself in the literary canon. Simultaneously, they mark her status as an “outsider” (111) within modernist tradition and initiate a discussion of the female poet-muse until her ultimate rejection of both. Her self-objectification is regarded as part of a more general struggle against the market in wear and poetry and reveals a tendency to resist tradition while at the same time trying to secure “a place for her in poetic memory” (113). Ornamentation stands both for confinement and liberation and the contrast between the image of a trivial “needle” in her poem “Because of Clothes” and the gold

“tiara” that accompanies her poetry and life symbolizes another struggle between mind and body. It is proposed as an explanation for her double nature as a Jewish daughter of parents working in the garment industry and a poet acquiring status in the Anglo-American literary world with her double role as the idealized muse of the male poet and the female writer still not settled (121-22).

- 10 Freedom and oppression as expressed through clothing are the issues around which the following essays evolve. In “Spanish Women’s Clothing during the Long Post-Civil War Period,” clothing poses as “the mirror of the soul” (128) within Catholic tradition, supported by the autarchic regime of Francisco Franco, which fights against Republican emancipation and the influences coming from post WWII France and North America. Alternatively, it signals a return to arms on the Republican front. Thus the female body of the Spanish woman becomes the contested ground in a battle against foreign intrusion until the early 40s, when the advent of Modernity and the influences from abroad, the movies and the magazines mark a more timid reconciliation between the idea of female modesty and manly habits.
- 11 By drawing a parallel with Nathaniel Hawthorn’s *The Scarlet Letter* Zsófia Bán hopes to explain for the accessorization of the Yellow Star by people in concentration camps. In her analysis of the ironic discourse in *Fatelessness* by Imre Kertész as well as in Ernő Szép’s Holocaust writing, acceptance of the star is seen as a way of self-identification within an oppressive system. In a total state of “unreflectiveness” (154), identifying with the star and the letters or numbers embroidered on it marks a process of self-definition and acceptance of the given system by the wearer, posing as a natural process within a totally unnatural situation. The star works as a signal of both oppression and homogenization while its acceptance informs the mind and the language of the incamps, creating its own reality. In *Fatelessness*, the boy begins to assimilate with the reality in the camp and the star from very early on, appropriating his language accordingly. The star in the shop offering items for a labor camp even looks “attractive”: “As best as I could make out, it was their innovative twist to have the material stretched over some cardboard base, so that way, of course, it looked more attractive, plus the arms of the stars weren’t cut in such a ludicrously clumsy fashion as some of the homemade ones that were to be seen” (10). A similar process of “naturalization” and familiarization is traced in Szép’s *The Smell of Humans*, where the star becomes an object of adoration for the incamps with the ironic use of detailed descriptions of rituals and the contrasts between colors and textiles: “All summer long I had watched how those yellow stars were cared for; washed and ironed, cleaned with spot remover if stained, then reversed and sewn back on. And some ladies and gentlemen used lemon yellow, some yellow ochre, depending on what went well with the coat. And certainly finicky dames and dandies wore yellow silk, much more elegant than the linen or cotton ones” (50).
- 12 While in the Holocaust stories language serves as a means of rationalization and naturalization of a depleted mentality and a hateful state of oppression on the verge between life and death, Jeffrey C. Stewart proposes “the politics of hatdom” (172), expressed by black female novelist Zora Neale Hurston as her way to tackle oppression and segregation. By refusing verbal confrontation with White violence, the setting of Zora’s hat at a particular turned angle signifies the “tightrope act” (172) of the blacks making their way into the segregated white world.
- 13 Last but not least, the ambiguous nature of the shoe is taken up by Paula Rabinowitz through representations of sexuality and death in film noir, novels and popular culture,

focusing on contradictions between freedom and constraint, vulnerability and menace, magic and lowliness. The female shoe is placed in sharp contrast with Van Gogh's working boots, Samuel Beckett's torn out boots in *Waiting for Godot* and images of shoes in Holocaust narratives. She explores the lowliness of the garment and its connection to images of death and birth, the creation of sexual desire, the pursuit of freedom and the ultimate return to death. At the same time, its "magical" nature, which transforms its use-value into exchange-value and distances it from the labor and the laborer is revealed (191).

- 14 By taking into consideration political beliefs, artistic tendencies and marketing policies, this vigorous collection manages to capture the reader's attention from the very beginning. All essays seem to imply that clothes, which have proven to oscillate between consumerism and political activism, can only acquire meaning in relation to place, time and person. Eventually, they become the skin that covers and protects the body or questions its integrity and have the power to turn from mere objects into magical fetishes which reveal the truth of the wearing subject and its life story within a social context.

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