Dressing For Austerity: Aspiration, Leisure and Fashion in Postwar Britain., by Geraldine Biddle Perry, London, IB Tauris, 2017, 214pp. £49.90 (hardcover), ISBN: 978178076628 7

Geraldine Biddle Perry’s ‘Dressing For Austerity: Aspiration, Leisure and Fashion in Postwar Britain’ (2017) examines the culture, manufacturing, leisure and citizenship of a war-weary Britain in the late 1940s through the lens of fashionable dress and its representations. It makes a powerful case and that the exercise of discipline, particularly in the consumption and display of clothing, during Second World War and into the postwar period was a political strategy, the aim of which was to forge a new Britsh identity in peacetime. The author asserts that postwar austerity measures were ‘both a curb and a stimulus to popular postwar consumer desire’ (p3) for well designed, affordable goods and indeed the stepping stone towards future affluence.

Beginning her study in the context of rationing and restriction and ending it prior to the advent of the ‘baby boom’, Biddle Perry opens up a period which is little discussed in fashion history beyond a focus on the launch in 1947 of Christian Dior’s ‘New Look’ as the moment at which austerity transformed into freedom in dress. The author acknowledges that the New Look was ‘a distinctive and recognisable form on which the idea of peace culd be hung’ (p111) but reminds us that fashion is not solely the domain of womenswear. She presents the reader with an anlysis of the highly gendered strategies of military demobilisation and civilian consumer remobilsation that contributed to the many new *looks* and lines available to a new generation of postwar British consumers, arguing that ‘affordable fashions and style trends, access to leisure and the time and money to enjoy it, combined to funtion as totemic symbols of change that impelled new stratgeies of government intervention and consumer agancy’ (p4).

Chapter one examines the Utility clothing scheme introduced by the Board of Trade in 1941 both as a pragmatic strategy to deal with material and labour shortages and a response to highly politicised attitudes to consumer desires. The scheme is positioned as a form of state control that it was believed could work together with personal and collectiove self-control to build a better Britain ‘by design’. Utilty clothing, the blueprint for which was designed by Britisg couturiers, aspired to democratise clothing allocation in the face of strictures, whilst ‘improving’ consumers’ tastes, resulting in a national preference for practicality in design, high quality fabrics, skilled craft production and a minimalist aesthetic that was to be branded as quintessentially British.

Chapter two goes on to examine the ‘demob suit’ in this context, in which the continuation of austerity measures on women’s clothing allowed the completion of a propagandist project that included the suit as part of the ‘square deal’ promised to returning male veterans. In chapter three, the successes and failures of the demob suit in embodying a socialist vision of a new society are evaluated with reference to primary material. Here the author draws attention to the absence of any similar such suit for female service personnel, hardly ameliorated by the small cash sum they received instead when considered against the cut in coupons and the scarcity of available clothing in the shops.

Biddle Perry goes on in chapter four to consider the range of visual propaganda and representational forms that provided a template for idealised citizenship and its obverse, embodied here as ‘the spiv’. Dressed in falshy clothes and dealing in black market goods, the spiv was identified as lacking in patriotism by his poor taste as much as his criminal activity, in contrast to the aspirant consumer of the mostly unnattainable goods at the *Britain Can Make It* exhibition of 1946, the model of upstanding consumer and aesthetic restraint.

Chapter five, ‘New Look Britain’ explores the postwar effects of the work of the Incorporated Soceity of British Couturiers or ‘IncSoc’towards establishing a distictly British style. The chapter establishes that wartime advances in production including the introduction of inexpensive high performing fabrics such as Rayon resulted in improvements in the quality of civilian clothing postwar and affordable fashion change for almost all. The machine aesthetic of womenswear during the conflict gave way by degrees to a softer style as clothing consumption gathered pace, resulting , Biddle Perry argues, in a blurred boundary between austerity and freedom in deisgn, rather than an abrupt change swept in by Dior’s full skirts with the New Look.

The final chapter examines the establishment of a technocracy in the late 1940s in which new patterns of consumption and leisure destabilised the systems of status recognition that existed in the prewar period. Correlated to the widespread adoption of the New Look, Biddle Perry discusses the ‘multivalent forms and work and leisure clothing for a generation of men and women in the thir 20s anxious to “get on”’ (p158) that found their way onto the High Street in the ‘interregnum’ between wartime privations and the consumer boom enjoyed by the postwar generation.

A careful analysis of the political and personal uses of fashion in this under-researched period, ‘Dressing For Austerity’ is an excellent contribution to the history of fashion and to the wider history of the 1940s.

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