
H-France Review Vol. 13 (November 2013), No. 182

Ilya Parkins, *Poiret, Dior and Schiaparelli: Fashion, Femininity and Modernity*. London and New York: Berg Publishers, 2012. xii + 193 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-85785-327-1.

Review by Mary Lynn Stewart, Simon Fraser University.

Although this slim but thickly-argued book provides basic information about three important French designers, their fashion houses and signature styles and is informed by the existing scholarship on the history of haute couture, *Poiret, Dior and Schiaparelli: Fashion, Femininity and Modernity* is not so much a work of fashion history as it is a new and promising combination of autobiographical analyses, feminist theory and philosophy. The author, Ilya Parkins, is an assistant professor in Gender and Women's Studies; the bibliography and notes cite most of the major feminist theorists and the book is dedicated to the feminist philosopher Lorraine Code. Given that Parkins interprets Schiaparelli, in her self-representation in her autobiography *Shocking Life*, as conscious of and deliberately representing her celebrity as role-playing and performance, one curious omission from the list of feminist theorists is Judith Butler.

Historians versed in the literature about Parisian fashion between 1906 and the late 1950s and/or familiar with feminist scholarship on modernity and femininity, as well as graduate students in cultural and gender history, will find much to ponder and discuss in Parkins's thesis that these three designers evoked abstract ideas about femininity in their autobiographical writing and personal publicity to bolster their claims to artistic status and thereby obscure their immersion in commerce. While previous scholars have explored individual designer's claims to higher status by aligning themselves with art over the commercial nature of couture, no one has analyzed several designers' autobiographical works so sensitively and drawn such broad conclusions.

Instead of trying to summarize this densely-argued book, this review will concentrate on a few central conceptions of special interest to historians. One such concept is time. Historians may find some new and philosophically-informed ideas about time, like time signatures and temporal registers, which may be applicable to historical subjects other than fashion. More specifically, *Poiret, Dior and Schiaparelli* addresses fashion's complex relationship to time and by extension modernity. The book demonstrates that fashion, with its stress on novelty and change, is not only constitutive of modernity, but exposes the contradictions in modernity, at least in its orientation to temporality.

Conceptually, Parkins draws heavily on Walter Benjamin's views on temporality, fashion, and the dialectical image, defined as "a visual-political flash that lays bare various truths about the social world" (p. 290). At a more empirical level, she notes the cyclical nature of fashion, wherein elements of past styles are regularly reintroduced and publicized as "new." Poiret and Dior are obvious examples, for Poiret's tubular silhouette was a return to the empire line of the early nineteenth century and Dior's "New Look" was a revival of the cinched waist and fuller skirts of the late nineteenth century. To be sure, Parkins acknowledges that Poiret's historical model was itself a revolutionary break from tradition, while Dior embraced tradition. The two substantive chapters on male designers show that both of these men acknowledged their debt to past styles, albeit in their different ways.

The case for Schiaparelli is more complicated because she is remembered primarily for collaborating with the resolutely modern Surrealist artists. However, the chapter on Schiaparelli points out that her styles varied considerably over the course of her collections and included elements like bustles that recalled Victorian styles. When this chapter focuses on Schiaparelli's autobiography, it finds very little evidence about her relationship to modernity and repeated attempts to align her with timelessness, primarily because she is evasive about her personal life and constantly hints at mystery, secrets and greater depth beyond her surface as a glamorous modern woman—and therefore her artistic genius. Having read *Shocking Life* a few years ago, this reader was surprised by Parkin's interpretation, but upon rereading *Shocking* after assimilating the chapter on Schiaparelli, I was persuaded by it. It is an intellectual pleasure to be challenged in one's assumptions, to return to previously read works, and to acquire new insights.

Another central concept in the book is femininity, considered less in the sense of autobiographical references to actual women (muses, models, customers) than in the sense of evoking old but still culturally significant constructions of femininity. These constructions vary from femininity implying frivolity and changeability, which could be and were associated with fashion and therefore modernity, to the feminine as static or ahistorical, and so needing the guidance of fashion designers. Woven through both fabrications of femininity is the persistent shibboleth about women/the feminine as irrational. Partly because Poiret and Dior's gender made it imperative for them to accommodate femininity yet not seem to be under its sway or (at least in the case of the homosexual Dior) to be subsumed into it, the two chapters on their autobiographies are the most straightforward.

Poiret's autobiographical writings clearly position women as competitors, for he considered them to be capable of fashion artistry and feared their alleged capacity for artifice, secrets, and disguise. To insert himself into and more importantly to dominate this feminine realm, Parkins asserts, Poiret "colonized" this feminine domain by posing as a rational guide through it, thereby effacing much of women's agency in setting fashion trends. And, I would add, contributing to his loss of market position and eventual bankruptcy when fashionable women did not follow his new direction after the First World War. Dior's autobiography is more informative about actual women, notably in his depiction of dress design as a collaborative process involving seamstresses, models, muses and his female entourage, but Parkins cautions that Dior always reserved the role of a benevolent director of this process for himself, the artistic genius. At the level of abstraction, she once again calls upon Walter Benjamin and other theorists, to contend that Dior conceived of feminine beauty as a means of temporal transcendence, which was linked to the all-important notion of fashion as a cultural industry.

Once again, the chapter on Schiaparelli is rather different, because Schiaparelli had to separate herself from what Parkins sometimes calls her femininity, but surely means prevailing beliefs about femininity, in order for Schiaparelli to claim the status of a professional or an artist. In *Shocking Life*, she does this by treating herself as a split self, which is reflected in the already-mentioned presentation of her public persona as a performance and also made grammatically apparent in entire sections of the autobiography that refer to her in the third person. Here Parkins deploys feminist and post-modern literary theories about the split self and the decentred subject, as well as references recent work about the nature of glamour and celebrity.

A recurring and important final conclusion of this book, is the prevalence of ambivalence in these designers' attitudes about the relationships between designers and consumers, designers and "the cultural imaginary" (p. 147) and designers and modern women. This ambivalence may be interpersonal, as evident in the autobiographies of Poiret and (to a lesser degree) Dior, or it may be internalized, as Schiaparelli distances herself from femininity in her autobiography. Parkins disagrees with feminist theorists who contend that this ambivalence opens up possibilities for modern women. She insists that it is about "the persistence of binary logic" (p.150) and reinforcing old notions of the genders as fundamentally different. When women were portrayed as modern in her sources, they were usually

denigrated, because, she hypothesizes, they reminded designers of their own dependence on industrialization, standardization, and copying. Designers could do so, she suggests, because of the culturally contradictory understandings of femininity in modernity. If this conclusion seems quite negative, it does lead to a tempting proposal about future research paying attention of the contradictory nature of femininity in this period.

Mary Lynn Stewart
Simon Fraser University
mstewart@sfu.ca

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172