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Book Review: The Dressed Society: Clothing, the Body and Some Meanings of the World

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The Dressed Society: Clothing, the Body and Some Meanings of the World. Peter Corrigan. 2008. London: Sage Publications Ltd. 208 pages. No illustrations or photographs, references and index included. \$39.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Karen McLaughlin¹

The back flap of Peter Corrigan's ***The Dressed Society: Clothing, the Body and Some Other Meanings of the World*** offers this synopsis:

This exhaustive book demonstrates how dress shapes, and is shaped by, social processes and phenomena such as beauty, time, the body, gift exchange, class, gender and religion. It does this through an analysis of topics like the Islamic clothing controversy in state schools, the multitude of identities associated with dress, the Dress Reform Movement, the construction of the body in fashion magazines and the role of the internet in fashion.

This is a commendable, albeit, ambitious agenda in one hundred sixty-two pages. Corrigan writes as a sociologist for other sociologists. That is, he writes towards establishing a basis of quantitative analysis and categorization re dress as a marker in society. Corrigan regards dress primarily as an object of exchange or consumption (cf. Marx and Engels). His analysis has strong market implications. Corrigan acknowledges that "the visual aspect of clothing . . . is fundamental to knowing where we are in the world, who we are in the world, and what the world seems to be" (7). Yet he distinguishes his study from semiotics or even serious consideration of "mere appearance." Corrigan's methodology draws from quantifying data and field observation (see especially Chapters 5 and 6, "Gift, Circulation and Exchange I: Clothing in the Family," and "Gift, Circulation and Exchange II: Clothing and Fashion in Cyberspace"), and theoretical textual critique. Indeed, his book lacks any photographs or pictures to illustrate his points. He states:

Although the visual side of clothing is intrinsically open to instant readings and although we cannot navigate the world without doing this, we cannot either, as analysts, afford to content ourselves with such instant semi-wisdom. Reluctantly or no, we may have to don Descartes' winter dressing gown and think long and hard by the fire (10).

Some of us may decline (the fit of) Descartes' garb to practice our own high-heeled poised erudition. But that metaphoric difference is telling. How we clothe or describe our ways of finding ourselves in the world may determine what we discover or allow ourselves to see or understand. If "fashion is the most widespread medium for women's self expression (Wilson 1985: 66)," how does Corrigan's ***Dressed Society*** contribute to our understanding of that phenomenon?

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One of the challenges of considering dress in society is its sheer immensity and changeability according to place or time, social actor(s) or culture. Noah's feat counting off and loading each species two by two, though monumental, had at least its paired order and finite number. Still, what ark could hold it all? The observation of dress in society is messier and more compelling often than the disciplinary questions imposed. Indeed, there appears a real tension between the fluidity and changeability of dress or fashion and Corrigan's desire for categorization that can theoretically capture it. Nonetheless I think there is value in considering Corrigan's call for a "sensual sociology" that lays the basis for a "hermeneutics of dress."

The Dressed Society is a collection of essays including: "The Dangers of Dress; Utopian Critiques," "Dress and Temporality," "The Fabricated Body" "Gift, Circulation and Exchange I: Clothing in the Family," and "Gift, Circulation and Exchange II: Clothing and Fashion in Cyberspace." Chapter Five on "Clothing in the Family" is a more straightforward anthropological study in field observation (11). Looking at clothing circulation in six "'respectable' working class" Dublin families, Corrigan examines wardrobe contents, holds interviews, and talks about family photographs (110). He posits that the clothing circulation (this includes gifting, borrowing or "stealing," or how an object of clothing travels in usage from one person to another) appears to take place almost exclusively within the family (119). I found this study fascinating. Though I could not determine the year of the study, the methodological constraints of examination (e.g., six Dublin working-class families) made Corrigan's arguments and range of speculation more understandable to the reader. The disciplinary writing was accessible and the situation comprehensible with its family and gender issues. Also, there was less of a tendency to conflate "dress" and "fashion," nor to observe "society" as a whole.²

With Chapter Six, "Clothing and Fashion in Cyberspace," Corrigan's disciplinary objective and, at times, the relevance of the data gathered for the general reader seem less compelling than the Dublin study in Chapter Five. Acknowledging the difficulties that framing a virtual fashion community for sociological study must hold, I could not make the leap why this "cyber-ethnography" of the site, "alt.fashion," was important to understand (129). The site was founded on 26 May 1992 for the chartered purposes of:

the discussion of the art and business of fashion including design, illustration, marketing, alterations, marketing, tailoring, consulting, manufacturing . . . textiles and fabrics . . . history of costume, target markets . . . famous designers and their collections, etc. (130)

The cyber-dialogue since has devolved to a group of "young(ish) adult women located in the USA" (DS 135). Their chat primarily concerns makeup and what they buy:

² This begs more specifically toward what society or societies does Corrigan direct his theoretical assumptions, and on what grounds does he make these distinctions? For instance, how do we apply Veblen's nineteenth century observation, that "one's honour rises in proportion to one's clothing-induced physical incapacities," to dress coding within present-day Los Angeles street gangs or a rural village in Cameroon (160)? One could apply Veblen's argument, for instance, to certain examples of French couture and its audience today. Yet, Veblen's premise of class status through "clothing-induced physical incapacities" cannot as simply explain the cross-class, cross-use ubiquity of sports and fitness clothing in contemporary life in the U.S.

*What I *bought today + what did you *buy today?*
What Fragrance Did you Wear Today + today's fragrance
*What I got in the *mail today*
*What are *you wearing today?*
*What *lipstick are you wearing today?*
*What *makeup are you wearing today*
*What nail polish are you wearing today? + Your *nail polish.*³

Beyond possible interest here for market researchers, I found Corrigan's argument, that "the group uses the products of commodity society as a means to accomplish social solidaristic ends," anemic at best (153). This seems a far stretch from theorizing a "hermeneutics of dress."

I would have welcomed Corrigan opening up more deeply the perceived threat of female Islamic head covering (the veil) in French state schools. Though addressed briefly in the introduction, this represents the core of Corrigan's argument that the spectacle of clothing is fundamental to social order. This also draws from Foucauldian concerns re disciplinary mechanisms and the body. Taking this issue further and cross-examining it against his examples of the idealized body of the Dress Reform movement in England, the Workshop of Contemporary Dress during Soviet constructivism, and the new world premises of his utopian critiques could have provoked invigorating discussion.

Banning the Islamic veil from the French public school system reveals the state's disciplinary power; yet wearing the Islamic veil in school also reveals a cogent means of political resistance. In effect, the veil worn by these young Muslim women in public school theatricalizes or disrupts the state school norms and the French principle of *laïcité*. That is, the veil "speaks" publicly against the Debré report where, presumably, the young women's words fail to be heard.⁴ However Corrigan writes toward a "hermeneutics of dress," this cross-disciplinary dialogue must address how the above "veiled" example works as a means of resistance. This necessarily includes a subtler regard and investigation of "appearance" and how we present ourselves in public. For women and

³ Table 6.9 on page 141.

⁴ Corrigan cites that on 15 March 2004, the French Republic banned conspicuous religious signs in the French public schools. The state's legal action responded primarily to the perceived political unrest due to the wearing of traditional religious head covering by female Muslim students in the French public schools (the "affaire du voile"). Preceding the law was a two volume 2003 parliamentary report on the question of the wearing of religious signs at school, which Corrigan refers to as the "Debré report," after its chair and *rapporteur*. Corrigan states that the key to understanding the French political readings of such dress is found in the notion of *laïcité*. Usually meaning secularity, *laïcité*, from the French law of 9 December 1905, means that "the role of the state is to be neutral with respect to religions and, by extension, to ensure that public places under its control—such as state schools—are also sites of religious neutrality." From Corrigan's reading of the Debré report (2003:13), *laïcité* draws from "the Rousseauist notion of the *volonté generale* This means that specific rules cannot be granted to particular groups because that would lead to the breakdown of society." The report states that "when faced with a pluralist and diversified civil society, a principle of unity is required" (Debré, 2003:47). From Corrigan's understanding of the Debré report, "it is the principle of *laïcité* that provides a guarantee of social cohesion in such circumstances" (7-8).

others less established as publicly speaking citizens, dress offers itself as a powerful, playful, and subversive communicator when words fail.⁵

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⁵ Corrigan's *The Sociology of Consumption* may provide more straightforward theoretical analysis to the reader. For the interested scholar, I recommend also Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Paul Connerton's *How Societies Remember*, and Anne Hollander's *Sex and Suits* and *Feeding the Eye: Essays* as excellent means of entry into this discussion.