



Alistair O'Neill. *London: After a Fashion.* London: Reaktion Books, 2007. 240 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86189-315-4.



Reviewed by Christopher Kent (Department of History, University of Saskatchewan)

Published on H-Albion (January, 2008)

Looking for the London Look

Alistair O'Neill, a Senior Research Fellow and lecturer in cultural and historical studies at London College of Fashion, is interested in the relationships among space, time, and fashion as evidenced in London between the 1880s and the present. His book takes readers on a fashion tour of the “soft city”—O'Neill adopts Jonathan Raban's fertile notion (from *Soft City* [1998])—the eye-level, experiential construct of knowledgeable urban stylists who O'Neill introduces in their distinctive spatial and temporal habitats.

O'Neill begins his study on Jermyn Street, in the heart of St. James, where the discovery that a Turkish bath and tattoo parlor occupied the same building during the 1890s gives O'Neill an opportunity to speculate on the implications of these literally exotic bodily practices co-existing in the heart of conventional masculine clubland. The author plays with various possible associations—for instance, between the steam of the baths and the decadent/aesthetic fascination with fog and mist as a stimulus of creative indeterminacy. The fin-de-siecle tattoo vogue encouraged contemporary social theorists to attempt to decipher it. Degenerationist readings associating tattoos

and criminality were prevalent, as O'Neill shows, but they did not plausibly account for the fashionableness of tattoos in certain upper-class circles. Perhaps more important in explaining the tattoo vogue is the remarkable influence of the extensively tattooed Prince of Wales, who insisted on having his sons, the Dukes of Clarence and York (the future George V), tattooed. The prince, the undisputed leader of men's fashions, seems to meet O'Neill's definition of a “stylist”—one who “possesses the ability to transform goods and ideas through the projection of fashion” (p. 12). The militaristic resonance of tattoos may also deserve greater emphasis than O'Neill allows. During the South African war, Field Marshall Lord Roberts declared that every officer should be tattooed with his regimental badge to promote esprit de corps and facilitate the identification of casualties. O'Neill interestingly chooses not to pursue the “crisis of masculinity” theme in this chapter.

With a ten minute walk and a ten year jump, O'Neill moves to 17 Hanover Square, once occupied by Mrs. Jordan, the celebrated actress and mistress of the Duke of Clarence, subsequently William IV. (O'Neill confuses

him with the tattooed Duke of Clarence who did not run to mistresses.) Here, in 1897, right next door to the Oriental Club—as O’Neill does not notice—Lady Lucy Duff Gordon opened her pioneering ladies’ fashion house, Maison Lucile. The author offers a stimulating discussion of the implications of Lucile’s claim to have invented the modern fashion model. She did so by abandoning the conventional long-sleeved black satin undergarment that made the fashion model into the simulacrum of a mannequin customers could ignore, the model’s proletarian body erased so as not to contaminate garments designed to adorn the haute bourgeoisie. Recruiting Peter Bailey’s important essay on parasexuality and glamour to contextualize Lucile’s cultural milieu, O’Neill claims that the process of “glamourisation” Bailey describes occurred between 1900 and 1914, when in fact Bailey discusses a much longer period dating back to at least the mid-nineteenth century.[1] Cultural priority apart, however, O’Neill’s discussion of Lucile’s place in fashion history is suggestive. In her mastery of the vital arts of publicity, she was clearly in the same league as her sister, the sensation novelist Elinor Glyn. The emergence of the fashion model as a celebrity in her own right—the creation of an occupation for working women with the potential to take them, literally, from rags to riches à la Cindy Crawford and Jean Shrimpton—is a topic that deserves further attention.

Another sort of female model features in O’Neill’s next site, 3 Burlington Gardens, where in June 1936 the International Surrealist Exhibition opened to the sort of press coverage surrealists were so good at attracting. Surrealism paid fashion the compliment of taking it seriously as a cultural expression through its fascination with mannequins, dislocated body parts, and dismembered bodies, as well as its mystification of the boundaries between clothing and the body. O’Neill focuses on the efforts of British surrealist women to reconcile the presentation of women as objects of male need with their own need for autonomy and self-expression. A contemporary photo confirms that these artists were every bit as “‘good looking ... elegant and dressed with panache,’” as Eileen Agar (who was one of them) stated, though she also assured that this was evidence not of “pandering to masculine demands, but rather a shared attitude to life and style” (p. 80). O’Neill pays particular attention to Agar’s hats and sightless women’s heads, and to Sheila Legge’s tableau vivant-like enactment of one of Salvador Dali’s celebrated female figures, her head completely veiled in rose blossoms “as if blinded by the notion of beauty” (p. 92). If surrealist women artists seem

to have “dressed the part” more than the men, always excepting the notably dandyish Dali, it was perhaps because surrealism cast men in the role of observer rather than the observed. For this reason, perhaps, its contribution to men’s fashions was slighter than to women’s.

Onward and eastward, in chapter 4, O’Neill moves from posh Mayfair for seedy Soho, and from the 1930s for the 1940s. We are in Bohemia, and the style is grubby. Francis Bacon is the fashion leader for the postwar age of austerity. Artists shared Soho with the conventional men who sampled Soho’s tacky pleasures in painfully rationed dress and spivs who purveyed its pleasures in snappy clothes that flouted the ration book. Not wanting to look like either of these, artists needed a look of their own and O’Neill’s Bacon is one of those stylists who provided it. As his paintings depict “a kind of contamination between character and decor” (p. 108), so did Bacon depict a kind of contamination between his art and his dress. A visitor to his studio described him taking a newly cleaned suit and laying it down on a table thick with paint so that it would be able to testify to who he was through what he did, even though he did not actually wear it while painting. It was important to him that a painter look as though he painted. And he painted himself—using makeup both to give his public face the look he wanted and to practice on his own face the brush strokes and effects he wanted to achieve for the face he was painting on canvas. O’Neill also briefly introduces another Bohemian role model, the poet Dylan Thomas, who dispensed fashion advice to a fellow artist: “‘Fucking Dandy. Flourishing that stick. Why don’t you try and look more sordid. Sordidness boy, that’s the thing’” (p. 119). This sort of postwar artistic style found international currency in the Beat look, which may have owed as much to the Left Bank and Greenwich Village as to Soho, but O’Neill, concentrating on London, does not pursue that trail. He does, however, make an interesting observation about the “code of casualness” as a sartorial aftereffect of the war, evident in the fashion for army surplus that enabled wearers to “strike the pose of a survivor” (p. 119). He also quotes the anguished voice of traditional gentlemen’s tailoring, the trade journal *Tailor and Cutter*, bemoaning the flashy vulgarity of the spiv and hinting that there was something decidedly unmanly in his tastes.

The importance of homosexual men to male dress styles is made explicit in the next two chapters that focus on the 1960s and 1970s and their iconic fashion sites: Soho’s Carnaby Street and Chelsea’s King’s Road. The chief stylist is John Stephen, who got his start catering to the gay trade and played a key role in mainstream-

ing gay styles with the mod look. O'Neill has interesting things to say about the American media's influential construction of swinging London. He also examines solidly the techniques by which retailers like Stephen overcame traditional masculine resistance to the idea of shopping, making it the acceptable social and leisure activity for men that it had long been for women, and habituating them to the fast-paced changes in fashion that had long been considered the hallmark of feminine flightiness. It may seem rather a paradox that the upbeat mod styles of the 1960s came from downmarket Soho, while the more downbeat 1970s styles, culminating in disaffected punk, came from King's Road in upmarket Chelsea. O'Neill traces some of the linkages between the two fashion centers that dominated their respective decades, such as the perennial adeptness of the English upper class at embracing interesting upstarts. He is particularly concerned with rescuing 1970s fashion from the enormous condescension of marxian structuralism, exemplified particularly by the influential work of Dick Hebdige, which continues to enforce the Marxist suspicion of consumption and detects ever more devious forces of commodification at work, draining or subverting the ideological energy of punk through its fashions—the "Prada Meinhof" principle, as it has been cheekily labeled (p. 157). O'Neill is persuasively critical of the failure of Hebdige and others to give recognition to the highly creative interiors and exteriors that stimulated consumption in the fashionable King's Road shops. He also views these cultural analysts as blinkered by a modernist aesthetic valuing originality and authenticity and suspicious of revival and pastiche because of its self-evidently retrogressive character, a condition that disables them from appreciating the

appeal of retrochic that was so central to 1970s fashions. Chelsea, with a well-established antiques trade and an upper-class population accustomed to heirloom culture, provided a climate hospitable to recycled fashion.

O'Neill's last two chapters lead into some less well trodden byways of fashion. In chapter 7, O'Neill remains in Chelsea for an ingenious riff on flowered chintz, which leads to musings on the meaning of Englishness and the possibility of originality and authenticity in a fashion culture of pastiche and historicist borrowing. Finally, in chapter 8, he makes the big jump to London's East End on the cusp of the age of cool Britannia. We are entering the territory of the business suited scatologists Gilbert and George, and massive gentrification in which avant garde artists have played a significant supporting role by conferring cultural chic on former slumlands. O'Neill shows young fashion designers using East End venues to challenge West End hegemony. He is particularly interested in how fashion photographers have tried to create an East End look based on an aesthetic that attempts to "reject unreachable visions of glamour" (p. 206), while evading suspicions of consumerism. As for the look, well, "alienated" seems a good word for it, as it does for several of this book's London looks. But looking alienated and being alienated is not necessarily the same thing, as every student of modern fashion should know.

Note

[1]. Peter Bailey, "The Victorian Barmaid as a Cultural Prototype," in *Popular Performance and Culture in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 151-174.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Christopher Kent. Review of O'Neill, Alistair, *London: After a Fashion*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13994>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.