

Zitierhinweis

Chrisman-Campbell, Kimberly: Rezension über: Eva Flicker / Monika Seidl (eds.), *Fashionable Queens. Body - Power - Gender*, New York: Peter Lang, 2014, in: *Reviews in History*, 2015, July, DOI: 10.14296/RiH/2014/1801, heruntergeladen über Website



copyright

Dieser Beitrag kann vom Nutzer zu eigenen nicht-kommerziellen Zwecken heruntergeladen und/oder ausgedruckt werden. Darüber hinausgehende Nutzungen sind ohne weitere Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber nur im Rahmen der gesetzlichen Schrankenbestimmungen (§§ 44a-63a UrhG) zulässig.

Essay collections are always a mixed bag, and this one is more muddled than most. The warning signs are clear. The volume is part of a series ominously titled 'Austrian Studies in English'. Six of the 15 essays were papers presented at a 2010 conference of the same name at the University of Vienna. (It's easy to spot them, for they brief and are littered with subjective, conversational phrases like 'I believe' and 'as I see it'.) The contributors include professors, curators, and students in self-consciously interdisciplinary fields like 'Empirical Cultural Studies' and 'Social and Critical Histories of Art'. The book is published by controversial quasi-academic publisher Peter Lang, and it comes with an insistent disclaimer: 'This publication has been peer reviewed' (p. 4).

But peer reviewing is not the same as editing, or proofreading. Most of the essays were translated from German, and even some of those originally written in English read as if they were chewed up and spit out by Google Translate rather than a human interlocutor. The copious misspellings and malapropisms are alternately baffling and unintentionally hilarious. ('Sumptuously outwitted'?) (p. 220). Inverted quotation marks and random italics litter the pages. Large expanses of white space in the middle of essays (and even sentences) betray inattention to not just the editing but the design of the book. Illustrations are small, sparse, and in black and white.

Furthermore, the broad title seems to have been chosen to aggregate as many scholarly buzzwords as possible, rather than unite a motley assortment of subjects and themes, which remains fatally fragmented. The 'queens' of the title might be historical queens (Victoria, Marie-Antoinette), symbolic queens (Jacqueline Kennedy, Angela Merkel), queens of pop culture (Irene Castle, Marlene Dietrich, Madonna), or even fictional queen bees (Alexis Carrington, Barbie). While the editors caution that the term 'is not restricted to the embodiment of royalty or political power exclusively', describing Hollywood divas or photographer Cindy Sherman's everywoman subjects as 'queens' is a stretch (p. 11). It also raises the question of who the book's intended audience might be. To be sure, there is something here for everyone, but most readers who pick up *Fashionable Queens* will be expecting a book that is primarily concerned with royal fashion, and they will be disappointed.

Even the 'fashionable' designation is not entirely straightforward; indeed, many of these women were and are decidedly anti-fashion. We are told that 'in Queen Victoria's case, sartorial glamour, grandeur and royal attire were largely present by their absence' (p. 18). Princess Diana's wedding gown earns a 'negative fashion appraisal' today (p. 47). Empress Elizabeth made her hairdresser wear her clothes and pose as her double, for 'Sisi hated to be stared at' (p. 119). Queen Christina had a 'known disinterest in the attributes of fashioned femininity' (p. 111). Similarly, Angela Merkel 'refuses to accept any noticeable elements of feminisation', to the extent that she is never photographed carrying a handbag, 'although she always has one next to her' (p. 72). Just as fashion functions as an instrument of female power, so does the refusal to engage with fashion. It's a valid point, but perhaps not the one the editors (and readers) anticipated.

The essays range from traditional, object-based research to theoretical speculation, resulting in vertiginous shifts in tone and terminology. So many of the essays drift into film studies (particularly German-language film studies) that it's surprising '– Film' wasn't added to the catchall title. In addition to studies of *Dynasty* and the screen sirens of the 1930s and 1940s, separate essays address portrayals of Queen Louise, Queen Christina, Queen Marie-Antoinette, and Jacqueline Kennedy on film. These give the book a lopsided tilt towards cinematic queens. Empress Elizabeth, Queen Victoria, Irene Castle, and many other figures examined in the book have made their own appearances onscreen, suggesting that the editors missed an opportunity to focus on queenly self-fashioning as seen through the camera's lens and achieve their stated aim of providing 'an exploration of fashion's hybrid nature between mediality and materiality' (p. 8).

There is no denying that collaborative, cross-disciplinary, multi-national publications are inherently difficult to produce, and such efforts should be applauded, however unsatisfactory the results. But it is equally true that unscrupulous vanity publishers are eager to take advantage of scholars desperate for publication credits, and hoodwink cash-strapped university libraries (and professors) into purchasing shoddily edited hardcover copies of dissertations and anthologies. Though it contains some perfectly good essays, this book falls into the latter category. Few readers will be able to get past the typos and cheap production values to enjoy the book's hidden gems, many of which would shine in a more polished and more thematically focused publication.

Instead, the contributors – whose ranks include such respected scholars as Stella Bruzzi, Gertrud Lehnert, Patricia A. Cunningham, and Griselda Pollock – are working without a net. Many of them are not costume historians, or even historians. That is not necessarily a problem in an interdisciplinary essay collection, whose chief value lies in bringing together scholars of various specializations to shed light on the same subject from multiple angles. However, in the absence of careful editing, the gaps in their knowledge are glaring. An otherwise insightful essay on Queen Victoria describes Prince Albert wearing 'tights' in a portrait, which made him look 'feminized', indicating a profound misunderstanding of contemporary menswear and masculinity alike (p. 27). There are two essays on Marie-Antoinette, both of them riddled with factual and interpretive errors that undermine the authors' conclusions. One author misspells milliner Philip Treacy's name; another quotes a book by an 'American medical intuitive and mystic' as a scholarly source (p. 222). Yet another notes that the absence of 'crinolines' in Queen Louise of Prussia's 1793 wardrobe records is surprising, although the style did not come into vogue until the mid-1800s; the author probably meant hoop petticoats, but those, too, were well on their way out of fashion in 1793 and their omission confirms rather than contradicts this queen's fashionable reputation (p. 88). Another refers to kilts as 'Scottish skirts' (p. 138). Such mistakes cannot be explained by careless translation alone.

A few essays stand out despite these pervasive issues. Eva Flicker's generically titled 'Fashionable gender trouble in politics' proves to be a fascinating if wonky dissection of contemporary media coverage of female politicians, encompassing the pantsuit debate as well as more subtle factors like hair, height, clothing color, and placement in group photos.

Katharina Sykora's essay on Louise of Prussia and Pollock's on Christina of Sweden smoothly meld fashion, film, and history to illuminate both the historical queens and their modern feminist appropriations. Patricia A. Cunningham's 'Irene Castle: ragtime dance and fashion icon' is a useful case study of how one woman redefined femininity through dress – despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that Cunningham does not attempt to position Castle as a 'queen' of anything but fashion. Even the best essays, however, offer little in the way of new research, instead repackaging existing studies to fit the 'fashionable queens' brief. One major exception is Lara McLaws Helm's 'Krystle and Alexis: the Princess and the Queen Bitch in *Dynasty*'. Partially based on the author's interviews with costumer Nolan Miller and other behind-the-scenes players, it is as juicy and full of drama as the soap opera itself.

One has to wonder whether the general subject matter – fashion – is at least partly to blame for the book's failings. After all, everyone can claim expertise when it comes to fashion; we wear it, see it, and think about it every day. And, though there is no shortage of scholarly (and not-so-scholarly) research on the subject available to back up whatever conclusions we might choose to espouse, in this relatively new, interdisciplinary, and still-evolving field, there is no canon to turn to for guidance. For every work of serious history or criticism, there is a glossy picture book (or two). Fashion exists to change – quickly – and its volatile nature may encourage authors and publishers to rush uneven manuscripts into production, before the moment passes. Yet readers, students, educators, publishers, and booksellers remain eager for more books in this popular, accessible, and visually exhilarating category; apparently, all you have to do is put 'fashion' on the cover and no one will care what's inside.

