

**Review: Gen Doy, *Drapery. Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2002, 288pp., 40 b/w ills, paperback, ISBN 1 86064 539 9, hardback ISBN 1 86064 538 0; conference, *Drapery in Visual Culture: Contexts, Clothing, Corporealities*, National Gallery, London, August 30-31 2002.**

Pat Simpson

This is a very engaging book. Gen Doy, Professor of the History and Theory of Visual Culture at De Montfort University, has produced a timely and readable monograph on a topic that is of multidisciplinary interest. She does not set out to offer a history of drapery but 'to explore certain aspects of it and the ways it has been used in visual culture'.<sup>1</sup> This selective exploration is broad in its scope, which means that each example is not discussed in enormous depth. What she offers is an overview of practices and discourse relating to drapery from the Renaissance to the present day, in which aspects of historical and theoretical context are given for some of the connotations that drapery has been afforded in contemporary visual culture.

Doy begins with the ideas that have enduringly linked drapery to significations of 'artness', civilisation and culture, with particular emphasis on theorisations of Classical sculpture by Winckelmann and Hegel. She moves on to look at other connotations of drapery, such as fetishism, sensuality, veiling, issues of gender and the art/craft divide, variously contextualised in relation to contemporary postmodern and feminist theories and to elements of late C19<sup>th</sup>-early C20th social history such as Orientalism, colonialism and the development of the department store display, viewed from a Marxist perspective. The structure is deliberately designed to approximate to 'the movements of cloth and drapery, curtains and folds'.<sup>2</sup> The discussion moves in and out of the historical past, juxtaposing for example Bernini's *Ecstasy of St Teresa* with C20th-C21st discourse and art practice relating to the representation of ecstasy, and C19th theorisations of hysteria in women (Ch. 4).

The book seems to treat the blurring of disciplinary boundaries – both between fine art disciplines and between these and craft and/or design, as positive aspects of contemporary postmodernism. This allows Doy to extend her purview to include not only sculpture and painting, in which discourse on the meaning and value of drapery had its origins, but also fashion, dance and news photography. The language is however mercifully free from the fashionable jargon that often renders contemporary art history and critical theory difficult to read. Partly this comes from a lifelong commitment to clarity of communication. Partly the lack of jargon derives from an antipathy to what Doy calls the 'weak'<sup>3</sup> philosophy of postmodern theory, especially that of Deleuze whose book *The Fold* is criticised heavily in chapter 3 for encouraging some recent art histories to analogise the Baroque and Postmodern eras while ignoring their contextual differences.

Doy's central thesis – most powerfully expressed in the final chapter on 'News Photography and Drapery' – is derived from Walter Benjamin's statement: 'There is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism'.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, the aesthetic manifestations of culture are

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rooted in but divert our attention from the exploitation, environmental damage, industrial greed and human misery that are the hallmarks of capitalist and colonial imperialism. For Doy, this is highlighted by instances of apparent reference to the civilising and ennobling aspect of drapery, in news photographs of grief and death taken in Algeria, Kosova and Rwanda. The barbarism is not simply a characteristic of the events depicted or alluded to by the images, but most crucially, the barbarism integral to the first world culture that can award prizes to such photographs for their aestheticisation – by reference to the traditions of drapery – of third world human experiences in which the first world is economically implicated.

Doy's book exposes the topic of drapery as both rich and problematical in relation to contemporary visual culture. It provides a stimulating springboard for thought and further enquiry. In fact the book is one of a number of such springboards in relation to the topic of drapery, that Gen Doy was instrumental in providing during 2002. For instance, she curated *Fold*, an exciting exhibition of contemporary art practices involving textiles and drapery, at Leicester City Art Gallery. In addition, together with Professor Alison Yarrington (University of Leicester), Doy organised the conference, *Drapery in Visual Culture: Contexts, Clothing, Corporealities*, held at the National Gallery, London, August 30-31 2002, to coincide with the exhibition *Fabric of Vision: Dress and Drapery in Art*, curated by Anne Hollander. While the National Gallery exhibition was conceptually disappointing, being a patchy reprise of Hollander's 1975 book, *Seeing Through Clothes*<sup>4</sup>, the conference was excellent.

The *Drapery* conference brought together an array of British and International speakers whose focused and well-researched contributions followed the theme into the realms of sculpture, painting, fashion, costume design for contemporary dance, architecture and women's art practices. It is planned to publish these papers in an anthology, a project that, I hope, will prove a valuable addition to the expanding interdisciplinary discourse on drapery.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen Doy, *Drapery. Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2002, p.15.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.9.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.157.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Thesis no. VII. Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1939), *Illuminations*, Fontana/Collins, London and Glasgow, 1972, p.258.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, (1975) 1993.