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Late Early Moderns or, the Victorians

ADRIENNE MUNICH



What are the stakes in using “modern” as a label for either a historical period or for social conditions subtending a state of mind? Historical usage could land more heavily on difference, while social conditions might look for continuities. In attempting to combine both usages in linking up the Early Moderns with the Victorians, I am considering the question of the modern through the lens of fashion. When we look at clothed people from other eras, differences are obvious. We can characterize an era by its fashion look. Those fashion differences indicate what it might feel like to move around as recognizably part of that cultural moment. But the look does not tell us what cultural differences inform it. Some argue that very notion of fashion begins with the early moderns. Such a point of origin begins to uncover social conditions.

Once upon a time in Western history, around the mid-fourteenth century, the concept of fashion shaped a new way of viewing and evaluating human subjects. People’s vestments no longer indicated just their rank, which prescribed the color, shape, cut, and cost of what they wore, but rather clothing identified their gender and the extent to which they could be considered “up to date,” “in the know”—in other words, “modern.” Such a grandiose and contestable statement follows Gilles Lipovetsky’s often maddening, always challenging, argument that modernity can be understood as a democratizing movement defined by the rule of fashion.¹ Calling fashion the “empire of the ephemeral,” Lipovetsky celebrates the evolution of the modern human subject beginning with a time and a conceptual revolution (he calls it Late Middle Ages) that fits into the rubric of the Early Modern. The fashion change that bears the early modern label signifies enormous cultural upheavals on all levels. Fashion could not exist without technological, psychological, and philosophical conditions

that make small but constant changes in fashion looks both technologically possible and socially desirable.

The advent of fashion depends on a concept of the individual who can differentiate himself or herself from a group while remaining part of it. The individual manifests identity in fabric, yet at the same time does not deviate too far from the group, so as not to seem eccentric rather than knowledgeable. Fashion requires a consumer mentality, a system of manufacture and trade that can accommodate frequent change, modes of communication that can broadcast such changes, and a loosening, however slight, of fixed social hierarchies. It usually requires a global rather than a provincial perspective. Fashion thrives in an atmosphere that values newness and emerges from recognition of individuals' right to expression. Further, fashion includes the aesthetic as an essential component of self-presentation. Given fashion as a feature, the modern can be considered as a way of being in the world, a way that registers enormous changes in what passes as reality. In that sense, Early Modern seems useful as a term for a particular moment and does not need tweaking; rather it needs what the *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* provides: a venue for its further explorations and diverse definitions. The term itself morphs; working dynamically in disciplines, employing varied themes and variations, and undergoing transformations within the label itself.

At another moment in Western history, the Victorian period, a comparable revolution in fashion and in culture as a whole changed the way civilization looked. As in the Early Modern period, Victorian fashion change signifies class restructuring. People adorned themselves by further narrowing class hierarchies, helped by the sewing machine, a device whereby the respectable classes could copy expensive clothes in the privacy of their rooms. In the early nineteenth century, upper-class men replaced leggings with trousers, a garment originating with farmers. Captains of Industry donned the suits of working men. Somewhat later, Victorian women begin to shed pounds of garments, tight-laced corsets, steel hoops—about ninety pounds of coverings—to exchange it for draped aesthetic garb and even bloomers. Working women needed to fit the walkways. Sensible fashion began to fill the racks of ready-to-wear in the newly expanding department stores. Women's increased mobility required new clothes. Fashion change expressed not only new technologies and economics but new consciousness of gender definitions, a social revolution, in fact. Two eras in fashion history, crudely described here, uncover conditions that call forth the term "modern."

Changes in labels reflect different ways of seeing. Currently, art historians are embarked on a major renaming, reconceiving, and reapportioning of the “Victorian” visual arts. In two recent exhibits of mostly different artists, curators are using the concept of “modern” to draw attention to artists for whom the term “avant-garde” replaces something else. For example, Frederic Leighton, President of the Royal Academy (an institution preserving precisely what is not “avant”), is now celebrated as part of the aesthetic movement, enabling us to see him through the lens of the modern. In regard to analogies to the early modern period’s social changes, John Buchanan’s “Director’s Foreword” to the accompanying catalogue to *The Cult of Beauty: The Victorian Avant-Garde 1860–1900* offers his summation of the very large exhibit seeking to rename a major chunk of British Victorian art and design. Buchanan writes, “British Victorian society also fashioned a world with material comforts such as gas light, heating, plumbing, and readymade items of every kind—a world that we today can recognize as modern” (9). Buchanan elicits a picture of technological innovations, though, like the Early Modern moment, there are concurrent revolutions in psychology, gender, class structures, and economics as well.

To nail down historical connections, Buchanan draws parallels between Elizabeth I’s reign and Victoria’s: “Not since the sixteenth-century reign of Elizabeth I had an English Monarch presided over such an extended period of dynamic social change and expansion of British political and commercial power into the wider world” (9). It is no accident that in fashion, a revolution, often the subject of satire, was labeled “aesthetic” dress. Colors and shapes announced the wearer as modern. And two English queens rather than kings suggested possibilities of new world orders.

To further complicate the question of using the modern (rudely ignoring the literary period of the early twentieth century conventionally referred to as “modern”), another art exhibit lit upon the phrase “avant-garde” to signify the forefront of the modern. Pre-Raphaelite artists, who consciously hark back before the (Early Modern) painter Raphael for their aesthetic model, now have been moved to the front of the line of the avant-garde. A magisterial exhibit curated by Tim Barringer, Jason Rosenfeld, and Alison Smith enables viewers to see past subject matter in Homan Hunt’s biblical themes or Edward Burne-Jones’s angels, to view what Julian Bell calls their “modern tendencies” (12). To make their case, the curators evoke new technologies, new pigments, and a new industrial class of patrons. In arguing that the Pre-Raphaelites push their vision to make it new, Barringer and Rosenfeld recur to the contested term: “The

Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded in 1848 in a world that was recognizably modern: it was marked by dramatic technological and social change, the globalization of communications, rapid industrialization, turbulent financial markets and the unchecked expansion of cities at the growing expense of the natural world" (9). According to their evocation of the cultural conditions of the modern, we could be seeing the Early Moderns, or the Victorians, or, in line with the editorial mission of *JEMCS*, our very selves.

In using "modern," scholars imply forward-looking as a good value. At stake in renaming are respect, attention, and connection. Rather than dusty oblivion, renaming hopes for recognition as savvy in order to be able to be called on, rather than merely to be recalled, in the conversation. To be modern is to be in fashion. So where are we now? The editors of *JEMCS* pose the possibility of "a continuum" of Early Modern times with our present moment, in science, communication, globalization, and world economics. If for some, we now are "late modern," others may experience us (and that collective pronoun elides many questions about those left out) as post-modern. Fashion might support this latter label. Our genders blend. Or they sharply differentiate. Fashion quotes insistently from the past but with less respect and more violence. We are looking toward apocalypse. Living today on what seems like the brink, we could draw a different continuum and call ourselves very late medieval.

NOTES

1. Lipovetsky is not alone in linking fashion to modernity, though many would dispute a specific historical moment and location in the West to fashion's invention. Walter Benjamin in many writings and Ulrich Lehmann take up the connection while locating the linkage in the nineteenth century.

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