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Colleen McQuillen. *The Modernist Masquerade: Stylizing Life, Literature, and Costumes in Russia,* The University of Wisconsin Press, 2013. xiii, 282 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Paperback.

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With *The Modernist Masquerade*, Colleen McQuillen explores the phenomenon of masquerades—defined as a category of entertainment comprised of masked and costume balls—in Russia between 1872 and 1914 (3). Drawing upon works of literature, contemporary press reports, journals, memoirs, and an interesting array of visual materials (including advertisements, photographs, caricatures, and fashion illustrations), the study positions the masquerade as an important trope of Russian modernism, and offers unique insight into the richness and complexity of social life in Russia at the turn of the century. Ultimately, by illuminating the relationship between costume design and the construction of social identity, the author asserts that the masquerade "reflected the evolution of identity from an essentialist trait to a fluid construct during the final decades of tsarist Russia" (6).

The book is organized into two thematic sections. The first, entitled 'Imitation and Stylization,' investigates the use of costume in the public performance of identity within two specific contexts—the political sphere, where costume served to bolster (and indeed undermine) political legitimacy; and in the domain of gender, where sartorial experimentation and the use of cosmetics challenged existing norms. Grouped under the title 'Costume Design and Theatricality,' the chapters in the second section discuss different categories of masquerade costume design—including figurative costumes, which aimed to express particular concepts such as journalism, factory work, or the role of the legislature (127); character costumes, based on fictional, mythological, or historical figures; and the unconventional and innovative attire that characterized avant-garde costumes, which were designed to shock polite society by challenging good taste and decorum. In the final chapter, discussion moves away from vestments in order to focus on nudity as a particular form of provocation. Throughout each chapter, literary texts—from Fedor Dostoevskii, Fedor Sologub, and Andrei Belyi to Zinaida Gippius, Leonid Andreev, and works by Russian Futurists—are considered in concert with historical sources on real-life masquerades, although the former tends to dominate.

Scholars interested in the link between aesthetics and politics during the final decades of Imperial Russia will find the opening chapters to be of particular interest. Introducing the concept of masking (and unmasking) as a distinct characteristic of Russia's political tradition—one that, McQuillen notes, continued to play an important role throughout the Soviet era—costume is revealed as a significant political tool for both the ruling elites and their challengers. Examples of costumes devised to challenge authority stand out for their creativity and originality: from Dostoevskii's *Demons*, where a nihilist provocateur appears at a high society ball in a costume representing the conservative *Moscow Gazette*, and walks on his hands to highlight the newspaper's penchant for the "turning upside down of common sense" (48-53); to real-life examples of political protest through costume, in which outfits would depict the

violence of the Tsarist regime or the brutality of the ultra-nationalist Black Hundreds movement—costumes that quickly drew police attention (76).

These fascinating examples of politically-charged costumes are, however, often insufficiently contextualized, leaving even those familiar with the sociopolitical reality of this period uncertain as to the meaning and significance of these sartorial interventions. Despite the proclaimed commitment to illuminate the "changing aesthetic priorities and the political tensions that defined late Imperial Russia," (205) the work often fails to clarify any such connection. Discussion of a Duma costume sported at the 1907 Artists' Ball, for example, offers the important insight that while costume had previously functioned to disguise, by the late nineteenth century it was instead used to reveal the personal opinions and beliefs of the wearer. Unfortunately, however, this analysis is weakened by a failure to explain the (political) logic behind the Duma costume, or the slogans affixed to it (120). Similarly, while discussion of character costumes opens with the statement that costumes referring to specific historical figures had an important cultural function, "especially in the early years of the twentieth century, when Russia was on the threshold of revolutionary change," (143) the examples discussed do nothing to illuminate this statement.

Such problems of contextualization are exacerbated by a series of underdeveloped theses, undermining what is otherwise very interesting research, and limiting the potential readership of *The Modernist Masquerade*. One particularly significant absence is an explanation of the layout of the masquerade scene in Imperial Russia—the reader who seeks to understand the audience that attended different types of balls (such as those described as 'commercial' and 'domestic,' or the relationship between the 'elite' and 'mainstream' balls), or the role played by the press and censors within the masquerade scene, is left to piece this together from information scattered throughout the book. Of greatest concern is that astute analysis of the decoupling of signifier and signified in Russian Futurist attire is seriously undermined by an ill-informed gloss over the broader history of the Futurist phenomenon, revealed in the statement that Italian Futurists used the medium of collage "to voice protest against World War I" (129). How a movement known for its belligerence, its celebration of war as the world's only hygiene—and indeed, whose members were among the first to volunteer for battle upon Italy's entry into the War—became pacifist is unclear, as no evidence is offered in support of this surprising revisionism.

Yet in spite of its problems, *The Modernist Masquerade* brings to light some important research, and presents it in what is generally an engaging style. Those with an interest in better understanding Russian society at the turn of the twentieth century are offered a number of new ways to think about this period—and indeed, about the messages that we convey with our choice of attire today.