entertainment especially, do the "cultural meanings" with which the character of Hogan is saturated come to be made operative, circulated and sustained?

Bernard Levin is right on the point that entertainment is never "mere"; from the beginning of the nineteenth century when entertainment first began to be consolidated as both a mass and politically strategic phenomenon, the notion of "character" in both popular and "high" forms of culture has been enormously important as a location of forms of moral and political training and persuasion. In popular fiction, forms of melodrama and music hall, the representation of character, and, more recently, of "personalities" in television and the Hollywood star system, has never been "merely" concerned with a straight depiction of interesting "types"; rather, there has been an insistent concern with making concrete, popular and acceptable an array of character traits and, at the same time, making unacceptable other qualities and inclinations.

The questions we need insistently to ask of this process is what precisely is it that makes up this preferred image of the national character, and what qualities have been excluded? How far, for example, does the character of Hogan cue in the features of the "New Nationalism" and to what effect? Is this character merely a manipulative construct as some seem to suggest, or is it the case that Hogan's populist and popular style manages to secure, at various levels, contact and consent with his various audiences? If this latter is the case, as I suspect it is, then it would seem that we need to take Mick Dundee, Paul Hogan and public response more seriously than we are accustomed to do in our critical left perspectives.

Colin Mercer

COLIN MERCER teaches in Humanities at Griffith University in Queensland, and is a member of the Communist Party.

Style Revisited

It's not hard to understand the sense of bewilderment that has settled on a good number of people who thought their many years in politics might have given them some idea what the left's political agenda really was. Now it seems they're wrong. Not about substantive issues (or not on the face of it); but more about a tone, a preoccupation.

I'm talking here about the curious preoccupation with fashion. ALR took it on board last issue, and Tribune has given it a run a couple of times in the last few years. But its real home is in Britain, particularly in the Labour Party's New Socialist. There, among other things, a bond seems to have been forged with the pinnacle of young radical sophistication - the magazine the Face. Those in Australia without subscriptions or cosmopolitan newsagents will have seen it briefly in (one of my favourite) ads for a product which escapes me, but which lists the world's "coolest" items.

New Socialist has been redesigned by the designer of the Face. In fact, it has forced the Communist Party's Marxism Today to follow suit with its own redesign. New Socialist has also included in its substantial list of articles on fashion at least one by the Face's associate editor, Robert Elms. The article - "Ditching the Drabbies" - was one of the most facile contributions to the debate so far, but it shows just how strong the nexus between the young left (a term I'd generously interpret to include my own peers) and the arbiters of radical fashion has become.

Now to come clean. I should say that if the question is simply, "should we care about clothes, design and so on; should we debate it and champion it?", then my answer is a definite "yes". Bewildering or not, there's something vital at stake here, as William Morris could have told us. But that's not the only question. First, we should try to say why, in terms which do a good deal more than accuse previous generations of the left of being drab or boring - personally and, by implication, politically. It's not a very good tactic. But it's also wrong.

But then we should try to draw some distinctions. One fairly obvious one is between "appearance", "pleasure", or "style" and "fashion". I'll say how I think these should be distinguished in a moment.

I'd like to think this was a confusion. But really I don't think it is. The champions of fashion are clearer than I've given them credit for about their attack. You see, if the charge was that the left has ignored style, the response would be obvious. The 'sixties, which is a particular target, was obsessed about style and clothing. But the real charge is not that the 'sixties was not style conscious, but that it was drab. Worse, that it was earnest - that its choice of styles was hedged around with external values which determined what was rejected or accepted, and which implicitly set them as a new orthodoxy.

This, in fact, is the complaint against the unconverted left - that they refuse to change; that they don't dress because it's fun, but because the clothing represents some virtue. In another sense, the complaint is that
they are unsophisticated, precisely because the codes are so laboriously literal.

This is the real heart of the matter. The charge that the left has been drab, which is often run together with this point — that it denied itself the pleasure of style — is patent nonsense. What is not nonsense is the claim that the left believed it could take charge of the meanings of its codes. As shown by all the irresolvable debates over whether nudity, make-up, army shirts, or overalls reproduce or subvert ruling values, this is not true.

But does this mean that there are no rules? Nothing that marks radical style from other style in fact, from "Fashion". I'd suggest that there are at least three criteria: the extent to which it is a commodity; the way it relates to bodies; and the way it marks out social groupings.

Before explaining this, let me just gesture at why we should (as well as do) take personal style, particularly clothing, seriously. Let's begin with a counter proposition. That is, that clothes have a "use value" — what they're really about before they're mucked about with by the market which is to protect bodies. This is completely wrong.

It's true that they do this, sometimes (and that this can be useful). But this emphasis is profoundly blind to the real issue — bodies. It assumes that bodies are both given and, hence, unimportant. Neither is true. But what does this matter? Is there a politics of bodies? Well, most contemporary feminist theory thinks so, although it's too large a subject to go into here. But the other point is that, self-evidently, an enormous amount of what we do is determined by our bodies, and that we work very hard to transform our bodies to both materially and symbolically intervene in these capacities.

This, in large measure, is what clothes are. Clothes are not things done to bodies, but done with bodies. All of this is rather glib. But it's also usually forgotten.

But what does this mean about a left fashion? Two things, I think. If bodies are a site of political activity, then, like all such sites, there's a contest. The feminist point that our relationship to our bodies can be profoundly subverted doesn't go away when we also realise that the crude objection to treating bodies as "objects" misunderstands the way we use our bodies publicly. It also means that the uses of clothing which deny the body (and of all things "fashion" — the reification of clothes — is the main offender) is unacceptable.

It's also always remarked that subcultures define themselves through their clothes. If we on the left consider social diversity a good thing, then that use of clothes is good too. But I think we miss a useful distinction. Descriptively rather than prescriptively, I'd suggest that we can mark off an oppositional sub-culture from a co-opted one by asking whether the dress style is used to include or exclude. Is our main aim to be like each other, or different from the rest?

This is where "fashion" comes in again. "Fashion" styles are always inclusive. They have to be, they're after a market.

And so, of course, we come to commodities. It may be just tokenistic to buy your clothes second-hand. But that's not the point. This way of making your style out of something else subverts the market; subverts the commodification of clothing. This is the point. Who takes control of the richness of clothing's use its richness and its significance? If clothing is left, then we do.

And again, that's why I cringe when I hear people talking about left "fashion". I don't believe there can be one. But thank heavens we can once again talk about radical style.

Adam Farrar

ADAM FARRAR is editor of the ACOSS journal Impact in Sydney, and a member of the Communist Party.