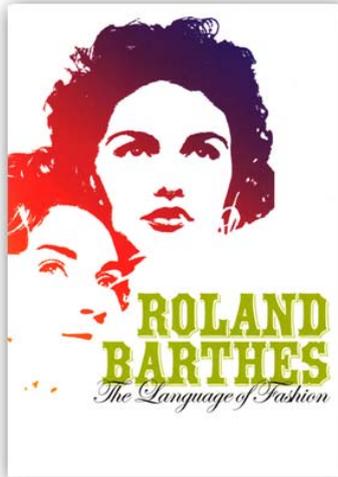


Review:

Roland Barthes, *The Language of Fashion*

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Roland Barthes: *The Language of Fashion*

Translated by Andy Stafford

Edited by Andy Stafford and Michael Carter

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The Language of Fashion consists of a series of essays, interviews and articles written by Roland Barthes before and immediately after publication of his influential *Système de la mode* (*The Fashion System*) in 1968. While the pieces in this volume were initially published between 1956 and 1969, this is the first time that they have been published in English.

While Barthes is well known among anglophones for his observations of the semiotic structures behind visual culture (*Image, Music, Text*), everyday life (*Mythologies*) and affective relations (*A Lover's Discourse*), it was really in the arena of fashion and clothing studies that he developed a complex analytical framework for clarifying the signifying structures behind the representation, consumption and circulation of meanings in the quotidian experience of contemporary society.

Well known as an academic writer, Barthes' more prosaic interventions in consumer and public culture are less known in English-speaking countries where intellectuals have a much smaller role in public life than they do in France. By assembling pieces ranging from essays published in *Marie Claire* and *Vogue* to an exchange with Henri Lefebvre and Jean Duvignaud in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (the French equivalent of *Time Magazine*), this collection manages to present Barthes' ideas in a lucid and accessible format.

This is not to call the collection 'Barthes Lite.' The long afterword essay by Andy Stafford deals extensively with the progression of Barthes' ideas on fashion as a system, and the intellectual and political contexts that informed Barthes' ideas and their reception. In situating Barthes' work in context of emerging and competing discourses of structuralism, semiotics, historical materialism, linguistics and post-structuralism, Stafford's essay offers some thought provoking reflections on some of the limitations and possibilities of various strands of philosophical and sociological inquiry into fashion, the self, the body and society.

Stafford also assembles and reflects on much of the criticism of Barthes—and particularly *The Fashion System*—that has emerged since it was published and translated into English. He also makes reference to co-editor Michael Carter's chapter on Barthes in *Fashion Classics: From Carlyle To Barthes*. In many ways, *The Language of Fashion* can be seen as a continuation of Carter's earlier work on *The Fashion System*, which provoked Carter and Stafford to collaborate on assembling, translating and editing Barthes' other writings on fashion. This collection demonstrates the significance of Barthes' approach to studying dress as a complete break with the existing disciplines of costume studies, and his significant influence on contemporary fashion theory.

The book is organised into three sections, firstly introducing Barthes' evolving ideas on the semiology of fashion as elaborated through a critique of 'clothing history.' The second section, entitled 'Systems and Structures,' contains a series of essays and interviews with Barthes as a semiotician, and offers a very clear introduction to applied semiotics that is developed further in Stafford's afterword. The third section, 'Fashion Debt and Interpretations,' has three smaller pieces showing Barthes en forme as a public intellectual, refereeing a contest between Chanel and Courrèges, and criticising hippies in appropriating the appearance of poverty as a style, thus mirroring bourgeois values, instead of challenging them.

The differing styles of essays show the development of and challenges to Barthes' ideas on clothing and fashion, but also his own reflexive and often quite self-conscious wrangling with the contradictions, limitations and possibilities of negotiating the paradox of fashion as a subject which 'at best has nothing to be said about it, and at worst invites pure tautology' (p.124). In admitting that fashion has its own internal logic, irrelevant to outside concerns such as history or utility or even aesthetics, and is completely bound up with its own representation (something is fashionable because fashion says it is), Barthes structured his

analysis on the literariness of fashion, decoding the links between image and text. This forms a crucial element of Barthes' broader writings on semiotics.

Barthes attempts to give a semiotic clarity to the slipperiness of the fashion 'form' throughout history, and his constant critiques of the formulaic determinations between the historical zeitgeist and fashion 'styles' provides one of the most engaging aspects of the collection for contemporary readers. While Stafford attempts to chart Barthes' shifts from a structuralist to a semiotic and a post-structuralist model of analysis, all of Barthes' pieces in the book engage with a complex and dynamic relationship between the individual, objects, and discourses of society and history, inviting a sympathetic post-structuralist reading. In the interview 'Fashion and the Social Sciences,' Barthes utilizes Kreuber's work on the historical fluctuations in dress to invoke a multilayered approach to time, in which dress at a particular moment can be seen as a confluence of varying time scales which he describes as situations, conjunctions and structures. Barthes' description of fashion as a meaning-making activity, at once bound up within language and yet existing beyond it, is a fascinating paradox.

The reader can share Barthes' own delight and frustration with his subject, with the visual details, the nuances and the written language of fashion. This provides compelling reading, as the slippery, alienating yet seductive nature of the subject matter drives the author to use every intellectual tool at his disposal.