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Andy Stafford, translator and editor, and Michael Carter, editor, *Roland Barthes: The Language of Fashion*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, Revelations series, 2013. xv + 173 pp. Notes, preface and afterword, bibliography and glossary of names. \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 1-4725-0542-5.

Review by Ann Rosalind Jones, Smith College.

The discipline of Fashion Studies is taking off everywhere: in books such as Angela McCracken's *The Beauty Trade: Youth, Gender and Fashion Globalization* (2014), in anthologies such as *The Handbook of Fashion Studies* (2013) edited by Sandy Black and others, in journals such as *Fashion Theory*, and in academic settings such as the CUNY Graduate School, where an interdisciplinary doctoral concentration in fashion theory is now offered. In the context of this rapidly expanding field, a backward look can be highly revealing. This is the case with Andy Stafford and Michael Carter's useful and lucid *Roland Barthes: The Language of Fashion*, a set of new English translations of thirteen of Barthes's essays on clothing and fashion.

It is now almost fifty years since Barthes's *Système de la mode* was published in Paris in 1967. In this collection, Stafford and Carter, the writer of an earlier book, *Fashion Classics from Carlyle to Barthes* (Berg, 2003), bring together a fascinating set of texts written between 1957 and 1969. From theoretical expositions of the methods of semiology to journalistic reflections on costume jewelry and the dandy, the volume shows that Barthes remained interested in fashion throughout his career. His great theoretical contribution was to apply the synchronic techniques of linguistic structuralism to fashion, to analyze the codes whereby a social formation, such as French haute couture in the 1960s, generates hundreds of apparently random details that can be distilled into basic parallels and oppositions, which in turn can be interpreted to reveal how a society's communicative practices reveal its beliefs, fantasies, and orchestrated illusions.

One of the many strengths of Stafford and Carter's book is that they attend to Barthes's political judgments of the sartorial systems he studied, for example the coercive strategies underlying advertising copy for haute couture. By systematically studying a year's issues of the fashion magazine *Elle*, its links between images and texts, photographs and descriptions of dress, he found a rich field for ideological analysis of "utopian" forms of dress actually produced for planned obsolescence and accessible only to the wealthiest consumers. One of his pithiest takes on *la mode* was his recognition that the fashion industry aggressively denies time; it is a breathlessly accelerated assembly line that tosses the garments of the previous year or season onto the rubbish heap of the *démodé*.

From "Myth Today" at the end of *Mythologies* (1957) to his abridgement of the final section of *The Fashion System*, "Showing How Rhetoric Works," for the radical journal *Change* (1969), Barthes remained a sharp-eyed critic of codes that made the practices of mass culture seem timeless and inevitable. In his preface to the 1970 republication of *Mythologies*, he remarks that he would not write the book in the same way now, given the increased sophistication of ideological and semiological analysis. Although he seems to give both approaches equal weight, he frames his last paragraph with a firm assertion of the critical purpose of such study: "What remains, however, beside the essential enemy (the bourgeois norm), is the necessary conjunction of these two enterprises: no denunciation without an

appropriate method of detailed analysis, no semiology which cannot, in the last analysis, be acknowledged as *semioclasm*."<sup>[1]</sup>

In his lengthy and stimulating Afterword to the essays, Andy Stafford sums up this double practice: "Barthes was acutely aware of the power, responsibility but also aesthetic choices of the critic/writer.... But what did this mean when it came to the critic confronted with fashion and clothing? This is precisely the essayist's...wager: to systematize the world in a form that is aesthetic yet responsible, playful yet grown-up, questioning but mindful of closure ..., distant but still political."<sup>[2]</sup> Stafford supports this double characterization by explaining two stages in the genesis of Barthes's engagement with fashion. In the late 1940's he was introduced to the structuralist work of A.J. Greimas, whose doctoral thesis had been a study of the French language of fashion in the 1830's; in 1955 he was invited by the Communist sociologist Georges Friedmann to begin a study of work clothes (pp. 120-21).

Stafford also considers Barthes's involvement with the Annales group, in whose journal he published his first essay on dress, "History and Sociology of Clothing" (1957). Barthes begins this by scathingly criticizing previous methodologies in the study of dress: mere inventories of garments, dubious links between specific historical events and longer-lasting styles of clothing, focus only on royal and aristocratic costume, and most of all, the inability to conceptualize a specific system of dress in its simultaneous "constraints, prohibitions, tolerances, aberrations, fantasies, congruences and exclusions"—that is, its composition as "a vestimentary system."<sup>[3]</sup> He proposes an alternative procedure based on a distinction between clothing and costume: *l'habillement*, dress consisting of practical *vêtements* that cover the body, versus *le costume*, an ensemble of garments that communicates the wearer's participation in a particular community. High fashion, *la mode*, is a new invention by a couturier, aimed at a public; it becomes *costume* when a particular group or sub-group adopts it. He concludes with a thoughtful framing of the relation between historical time and the forms of dress in a particular system in a particular present: "The garment ... is at every moment a moving equilibrium, both produced and undermined by determinations of nature, function and amplitude, some internal, others external to the system itself" (p. 14).

In his preface, Stafford emphasizes the breadth of Barthes's interest in fashion by pointing out the diverse media in which the essays in this collection appeared. Barthes wrote for scholarly periodicals from *Annales* to *Critique*, for the radical journal *Change*, for fashion magazines from *Elle* to the more expensive *Jardin des Modes* and *Vogue*; he gave newspaper interviews to *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*. This variety of outlets, Stafford points out, demonstrates the radical interdisciplinarity of structuralism.<sup>[4]</sup> In Barthes's early essays in this collection, he refers to writers in ten fields: linguists such as Saussure and Greimas, whose thesis on fashion in 1830 he read in typescript; historians such as Fernand Braudel and Lucien Febvre; anthropologists such as Lévi-Strauss and Rudolf Broby-Johansen; costume historians including Jules Quicherat and René Colas; Hegel on dress throughout his *Aesthetics*; the British psychologist John Carl Flügel; the sociologist Georges Gurvitch; the historian of science Gilles-Gaston Granger; the biologist George Darwin, the nephew of the author of *The Origin of Species*; the artist Nevil Truman; and the poet Mallarmé—who wrote, Barthes says in a 1967 interview in *Le Monde*, "just for himself, a little fashion magazine: *La Dernière Mode*."<sup>[5]</sup> One of the most valuable sections of Stafford and Carter's collection is their richly researched glossary identifying such writers. Equally useful are their footnotes to each essay, which include dates of their first publication and summarize the writings Barthes cites.

Other essays in the collection show Barthes at his adventurous best. Stafford and Carter were excited to find in a special issue of the Swiss literary journal *VWA*, "Le Cabinet des manuscrits," what they believe is an early preface (written about 1963) to *The Fashion System*. Barthes opens by apologizing for the unfamiliar method he is defining—"not a sociology, or a psychology, nor an aesthetics, and even less so a philosophy of Fashion, but something, unfortunately, much drier."<sup>[6]</sup> As he goes on, however, to lay out the method of his "attempt at applied semiology," he arrives at a useful distinction and an ambitious

claim: "The sociology of fashion is tuned entirely to a sociology of real clothing, the semiology of fashion to a sociology of representations; semiology's horizon is not real clothing but ideology in general and within this horizon the Fashion object slowly dissolves to reveal a global phenomenon par excellence: the human *intelligible*" (p. 71). Here, too, is a clear explanation of his choice to focus on the language of fashion rather than fashion photographs alone: "we decided to opt for the system of verbalized clothing because in this system the verbalized utterance of the Fashion signified constitutes an irreplaceable methodological advantage" (p. 75).

Other essays in the collection reveal a more playful side to the theoretician. Barthes was joyously adventurous in the topics he chose; he describes even extreme changes in fashion not with horror but with pleased objectivity. An example is "The Contest between Chanel and Courrèges," published in the fashion magazine *Marie Claire* in September 1967 to which, Stafford notes, the magazine added the amusing addition "Refereed by a Philosopher." [7] Contrasting "chic," the classical style typified by Chanel, to "the absolute new" invoked in Courrèges's fashions, he defines the designers according to contrasting tenses. In Chanel, the retention of a basic style for the woman's suit signifies that the wearer "has lived," in contrast to the future tense in Courrèges's fashion for the young, its "obstinate brand-newness," which signifies that the wearer "is going to live." [8] At the same time, the distinction (a term, Stafford points out, that Barthes explored well before Bourdieu) signified in Chanel's long-lasting styles for the few contrasts to the conditional tense of Courrèges's accessibility: his new colors and body-skimming cuts, which allude to the body rather than exposing it, bring the viewer close and raise the possibility that "we could strike up a friendship with these young people" (p. 102).

But in an essay for the journal *Communications*, "A Case of Cultural Criticism," Barthes came to a darker conclusion, applying his formidable semiological intelligence to the clothing of the hippies he observed in town squares in Morocco. In the context of the United States, American hippies' scruffy clothing (the tattered nomad's bag, the bare feet or worn-out sandals, the Christ-like long hair and beard), an imitation of poverty, signifies a critique of bourgeois comfort, a refusal of American prosperity. But performed in the context of actual poverty in North Africa, this refusal turns the hippy's choice into an irresponsible "caricature of economic alienation." [9] He argues that these sartorial "symbols become not a *game*, or a higher form of symbolic activity, but a disguise, a lower form of cultural narcissism: as is demonstrated by linguistics, the context overturns the meaning, and the context here is that of economics" (p. 107).

Understandably, Stafford and Carter's appreciation for Barthes's thought about fashion means that they downplay the fact that he was sometimes simply wrong. One of his wilder claims was that fashion changes in *longue-durée* cycles without reference to immediate social events; in his system, short skirts become short because skirts have previously been long. (He even holds on to previous estimates that such cycles last fifty years.) This is to ignore the material effects of history on fashion. An example: the tiny hats and narrow skirts women wore to conserve fabric during the Depression and the Second World War were quickly replaced by Dior's New Look, in which the luxury of the full skirt and wide-brimmed hat of the 1950s signified new prosperity—a change that occurred over only twenty years. Though in "Fashion and the Social Sciences," Barthes briefly alludes to "the time of micro-fashions" [10], he more typically overlooked the speeded-up change in ready-to-wear clothing. He also underestimated the social meaning of men's long hair, which for him arose not from the Beatles but from the fact that it had previously been worn short (p. 89), whereas we might read it as a persistent protest against the strict gender decorum re-established in the age of Eisenhower. French high fashion of the 60's was a semiologically manageable language, but historical crises, subcultures, hand-made one-offs, and now global fashion are producing a world more transitory and less legible than the Parisian couturier's showroom and the fashion magazine's decrees.

One less understandable element in *The Language of Fashion* is the sometimes mistaken and often awkward translation. Stafford justifies this problem in relation to Barthes's style as "a skillful and

sometimes startling essayist....The reader will hopefully appreciate then that any rendering into English of Barthes's formulation may sometimes sound awkward" because he as translator has "traded awkwardness against precision." [11] But Barthes, even in his densest theoretical mode, wrote with elegant precision, and he has been elegantly translated. No translator of a passage in the early preface to *The Fashion System* about the evolution from structuralism to needs to write such a Franglais sentence as "The lateness with which our work here is appearing cannot fail to be augmented paradoxically by an esoteric element: that is both its banality and its provocative nature, such is the uncomfortable situation in relation to the historical moment in which this work finds itself." Why not, more concisely, "This study's apparent belatedness is, by necessity, increased by an element external to it; this is why it is paradoxically too familiar but also challenging; such is the uneasy historical-theoretical position such work occupies"?

Awkwardness also arises from misunderstandings of fashion terms: "slinkiness" for *souplesse* (why not "suppleness" or "fluidity"?); the "profiles" of fashion history for *la silhouette*, which pertains to the shape of a garment seen from the front and the back as well as from the side; an odd explanation of the "car coat" as "a woman's coat worn ... across the shoulders, rather like a trench coat" [53, note 19]. Aren't all coats worn across the shoulders? In fact, the car coat was a three-quarter-length, full-cut coat with more swing and heavier fabric than the trench coat.

But no one can claim that translating Barthes is easy. Nor is it easy to assemble, as Stafford and Carter have done, such a chronologically revealing series of essays, to footnote their French sources and explain the citations in them so fully, to provide a glossary of writers to help explain the evolution of Barthes's thought, and to frame the whole with a theoretically acute history of twentieth-century social theory, dress history, and his assessment by friends and foes. *The Language of Fashion* is paradoxically (as Barthes would say) reader-friendly but also respectful of the difficulties of his thought, an excellent advanced introduction to his writing on *la mode*.

## NOTES

[1] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 9.

[2] Andy Stafford, "Clothes, Fashion and System in the Writings of Roland Barthes: 'Something out of Nothing,'" in ed. Andy Stafford and Michael Carter, *Roland Barthes: The Language of Fashion* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 116-17.

[3] Roland Barthes, "History and Sociology of Clothing," *Annales* 3 (1957), trans. Andy Stafford in *The Language of Fashion*, p. 4.

[4] Andy Stafford, "Preface," in *The Language of Fashion*, p. x.

[5] Roland Barthes, "On *The Fashion System*," an interview with F. Gaussen, *Le Monde*, April 19, 1967, trans. Andy Stafford, in *The Language of Fashion*, p. 95.

[6] Roland Barthes, "[An Early Preface to] *The Fashion System*," trans. Andy Stafford, in *The Language of Fashion*, p. 65.

[7] Andy Stafford, "Preface," *The Language of Fashion*, p. xiv.

[8] Roland Barthes, "The Contest between Chanel and Courrèges," *Marie Claire*, September 1967, trans. Andy Stafford, in *The Language of Fashion*, p. 101.

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[9] Roland Barthes, "A Case of Cultural Criticism," *Communications* 14 (November 1969), p. 556, trans. Andy Stafford, in *The Language of Fashion*, p. 106.

[10] Roland Barthes, "Fashion and the Social Sciences," interview published in *Echanges*, 1966, trans. Andy Stafford, in *The Language of Fashion*, p. 88.

[11] Andy Stafford, "Editor's Note," *The Language of Fashion*, pp. 159-60.

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