

Fashion Hero

Roland Barthes, *The Language of Fashion*. Trans. Andy Stafford. Eds. Andy Stafford and Michael Carter. Sydney: Power Publications, 2006.

By Scott Pound

In the late 1950s Roland Barthes began an ambitious study of fashion which was to preoccupy him on and off for twelve years. The project quickly and uncharacteristically turned into something of a methodological rampage with Barthes publishing hard-nosed articles taking aim at the “fundamental errors” and “methodological recklessness” of “all existing Histories of dress” (5). All that research and methodological drum-beating eventually yielded a substantial book, *Système de la mode*, published in 1967 (an English translation, *The Fashion System*, appeared in 1983). In the eyes of one critic, it is “*the most boring book ever written about fashion*” (qtd. in Stafford 2006:119).

These were the days, not just of Structuralism, but of what we might think of as high or “hard” (Rabaté 2005: 95) Structuralism — a period when theorists like Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, and Levi-Strauss were seeking variously to prove Saussure’s (1959: 16) claim that “a science that studies the life of signs in society” was possible. It was also a period when Barthes — at the time a freelance journalist, humanities researcher, and theatre critic with no permanent

academic post — was seeking academic credentials. *Système de la mode* was his doctorate, although it was never submitted as a dissertation.

Now, some four decades later, the rest of Barthes' writing on fashion is available in English as *The Language of Fashion*, and we are saved from the temptation to write off his work in this area as a ponderous exercise in structuralist pseudo-science. It is not a lot of material (about 113 pages worth), but these texts — especially the three preliminary methodological essays in which Barthes retrofits his topic with Saussurean coordinates and the early Preface to *The Fashion System* — betray a very different tone and ethos than *The Fashion System* and thus provide a new perspective on Barthes' curious conversion to the church or semiology. As perhaps the pre-eminent limit case of Structuralist method, the fashion study is an anomaly: a largely unreadable text that nonetheless conceals a great intellectual story. *The Language of Fashion* is therefore welcome news, not only because it helps round out Barthes' oeuvre in English, but also because it provides a point of access to an intellectual tale full of hubris and lofty cunning. Aside from two other short, excellent essays, "From Gemstones to Jewellery" and "Dandyism and Fashion," the rest of the material collected (transcriptions of two interviews and a round-table discussion and a non-academic piece written for *Marie Claire*) is for completists.

Knowing the academic purpose of the fashion study helps explain its *methodical* nature, but the real drama concerns the *methodological* dimension of the work. Anatole Broyard explains Barthes' turgidity in *The Fashion System* as a case of semiotic possession: "Inside the semiologist in Roland Barthes there

was a brilliant writer struggling to get out.” In fact, Roland Barthes the brilliant writer was already well known in France as the author of *Mythologies*, a work in which the writer and semiologist in Barthes both got to have their say. That no such conflict between semiologist and writer seems to have existed in *Mythologies* says a lot about the new demands placed on Barthes as he worked to enter the academy (he landed his first full-time appointment at the prestigious *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in 1960, at the age of 45) and about the structuralist zeitgeist of the late 50s and early 60s. In light of these new circumstances, Barthes renounces the lively and entertaining style of criticism of *Mythologies* to pursue a new critical mandate dictated entirely by methodological concerns. “A method functions from the first word...” he writes portentously in the opening sentence of *The Fashion System*, and then quickly adds, with even more gravitas: “this is a book of method” (1983: ix). So, in place of the lyrical, freewheeling mythologist who sees, in the face of Greta Garbo, all the way back to the tradition of Courtly Love and who waggishly hears, in the monikers of industrial plastics, the names of Greek shepherds, we get in *The Fashion System* an arid, unrelenting discourse on method. It is a stunning about face.

In *Mythologies*, Barthes’ gift for combining lyrical impressionism and methodological rigour allowed him to turn a Saussurean abstraction — the semiological sign — into a radiant node of cultural energy. The methodology at work in is no less compelling for having been synthesized after the fact. It combined aspects of aesthetics, hermeneutics, semiology, sociology, history, literary criticism, and ideology critique to reveal that not only do all forms of

culture — from soap powders and detergents to professional wrestling — have meaning, but also that such meaning is always ideologically inflected. As a journalist working in the very tight confines of the column, Barthes fused the study of meaning and the study of ideology in a way that continues to be useful and valuable. In theoretical terms, it is a straight shot from his early wizardry with the semiotics of popular culture to much of what we now call Cultural Studies.

But Barthes' use of Saussure in *Mythologies* was petty compared to what was on the horizon. In 1958, Levi-Strauss published *Structural Anthropology* in which the linguistic apparatus was brought from the wings onto centre stage. "Linguistics occupies a special place among the social sciences, to whose ranks it unquestionably belongs," wrote Levi-Strauss. "It is not merely a social science like the others, but, rather, the one in which by far the greatest progress has been made. It is probably the only one which can truly claim to be a science" (1976: 31). Here Levi-Strauss outshines Barthes' use of Saussure for hermeneutic ends and takes up the far more ambitious prospect, merely hinted at by a circumspect Saussure, that the semiological method is also a scientific method. Barthes will adjust his own claims accordingly (Levi-Strauss was already happily ensconced at the *École Pratique*).

After the publication of *Mythologies* in 1957, Barthes continues to spend a fair amount of his time reading magazines and paying attention to popular culture, but he clearly wants to up the ante in a big way. Rather than plot the meanings associated with individual items (toys, wine and milk, plastic, the new Citroën, etc.) on a diachronic axis as he did in *Mythologies*, he wants to get at

the very conditions that make the meanings of things possible. And so he turns with enormous optimism and ambition to a new methodology based in Saussure's notion of synchrony. *The Fashion System* proposes to study the complete system of fashion discourse at a moment in time in a scientific way. The object of his inquiry, Barthes tells us,

is the structural analysis of women's clothing as currently described in fashion magazines; its method was originally inspired by the general science of signs postulated by Saussure under the name of *semiology*. (1983: ix)

In 1964, the scientific ethos of this statement and the (itself fashionable) invocation of Saussure likely would have obscured the bait and switch in the first phrase. There, in very short order, a radical process of curtailment gets under way in which the real limits of fashion clothing are replaced by the intelligible limits of a popular discourse about it. And that popular discourse is held up as the putative object of scientific analysis. This gesture is itself the pretext for an even grander methodological eclipse: from fashion discourse to "the fashion system" that underlies and informs it. Thereby a momentous ontological distinction gets introduced into Barthes' method in which an actually existing corpus of objects (in this case, items of women's clothing) is displaced by a methodological construct, the fashion system.

Like Saussure, who in the name of science passes over the historical study of concrete speech acts (the diachronic study of *parole*) in favour of analyzing the underlying system of language functioning at a particular time (the

synchronic study of *langue*), Barthes homes in on fashion as a system of interrelated conventions governed by immanent and precise laws. Although the imposition of a synchronic viewpoint radically curtails (some would say eclipses) the object of analysis, it nonetheless discloses, in a truly scientific way, the principles and laws at work in the discourse. At least that's the idea.

In fact, as we can see clearly now, the complete apotheosis of method that high Structuralism enacts comes at a cost. *The Fashion System* strives mightily, and not just at the expense of Barthes' celebrated lyricism as a writer, to put fashion under arrest. Any method that works by substituting for actual clothing the discourse of fashion insiders writing about it in magazines is suspect by any standard. But the method ultimately fails because it presupposes a system that exists outside the bounds of historical change, a pure form of synchrony in which history does not intervene.

For one like Barthes who identified strongly as an historian (and who wrote a book about the great French historian Jules Michelet) the decision to forsake diachronic analysis would have been loaded with implications, and judging by the Appendix on "History and Diachrony in Fashion," he seems to have been a little haunted by it. Haunted enough to use Arthur Kroeber's earlier work on fashion as evidence for the extraordinary claim that "history does not intervene in the fashion process, except to hasten certain changes in a slight way" (1983: 295).

In the urge to minimize diachrony and naturalize synchrony, we can identify an attempt to confirm two of Saussure's juiciest propositions: 1) that

semiology has the potential to be a science, and 2) that its principles can be abstracted and used to analyze non-linguistic sign systems. We might also detect an attempt to match Levi-Strauss who similarly endeavoured to exploit linguistic method for scientific ends and adapt it to non-linguistic systems (myth and kinship). Did I mention that Levi-Strauss was already ensconced at the *École Pratique*?

Whether or not other incentives loomed for Barthes, it is clearly his faith in the putative scientificity of semiological method that underwrites the project, not his fidelity to the process or object being scrutinized. “[B]y working not on real Fashion but on written Fashion, the author believes he has ultimately respected a certain complexity and a certain order of the semiological project,” he writes in *The Fashion System* (x). In an earlier essay called “Blue is in Fashion This Year” A note on Research into Signifying Units in Fashion Clothing” originally published in *Revue Française de Sociologie* and collected in *The Language of Fashion*, Barthes’ naked faith in method is far more evident. There he writes: “I am not yet certain that clothing does carry meaning, but I am right at least to apply a linguistic method of analysis to it” (41). “It is this conformity of the method to its object,” Barthes goes on to say in the same essay, “that will *prove* to me the signifying nature of fashion clothing, rather than the consciousness of its wearers, which is to some extent an alien one” (41-2). A more complete apotheosis of method would be hard to imagine.

The early methodological essays collected in *The Language of Fashion* demonstrate a degree of methodological piety that is absent in *The Fashion*

System. Barthes was utterly captivated by structural linguistics. At the same time, the motivation to invest heavily in synchrony is the result of real methodological issues posed by diachronic method. The historian of fashion is flooded with detailed, nuanced, and constantly changing items to consider. Historical analyses of fashion groan under the sheer weight of items to be considered. Focusing on the underlying system of a cultural practice allows the semiologist to bypass history. A synchronic analysis of discourse about fashion screens out change and most of the details of the actual clothing. What remains is detail the system recognizes as meaningful.

In this sense, Barthes' critique of historicism again replays Saussure's critique of historical phonetics in the *Cours*. In order to contemplate linguistics as a science, Saussure needed a method that could bypass the biological, geographical, and historical contingencies that threaten to corrupt the scientific study of language. He created that method by implementing two foundational distinctions that could separate linguistic wheat from chaff: the distinctions between *langue* and *parole* and diachrony and synchrony. In another of the methodological essays from *The Language of Fashion* called "History and Sociology of Clothing," Barthes makes no bones about appropriating these distinctions by name. Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* becomes Barthes' distinction between *dress* and *dressing*. A section in the same essay is subtitled "Diachrony and Synchrony." Elsewhere in the methodological essays, Barthes continues the task of mapping his project onto the Saussurean paradigm, giving us cognates for Saussure's notion of *langage*, phonology, and

signifier/signified. All of this culminates in what Barthes improbably calls “a vestimentary linguistics” (30).

While there’s obviously no mistaking Saussure’s influence on Barthes, it is easy to miss the fact that Barthes actually goes much further than Saussure. Where Saussure sees theoretical distinctions (between *langue* and *parole*, diachrony and synchrony) Barthes pursues ontological distinctions and thereby commits the category mistake of positing constructs as realities. In “An Early Preface to *The Fashion System*,” Barthes argues that fashion clothing is “devoid of all practical use” and thus constitutes “a *langue* without *parole*” (78). Similarly, Barthes argues that within a given year, fashion is “absolutely stable” and thereby constitutes “a pure synchrony” (78). In 1959, as Barthes was writing *The Fashion System*, Roman Jakobson warned against just this kind of methodological reductivism, counselling those who would fetishize synchrony that “We must not hypostatize the code” (1980: 36), and cautioning further that “actual synchrony is dynamic” (1980: 35). Even Levi-Strauss (with Jakobson’s help) acknowledges that synchrony and diachrony are separate only in theoretical terms. Barthes, who certainly would have been aware of Jakobson and Levi-Strauss’ reservations, nonetheless attempts to press on toward a methodological utopia in which all the corrupting factors of variance, change, and nuance are eliminated.

In *The Fashion System* and the methodological essays that preceded it, there is a constant struggle to leverage Saussure’s methodology into an enhanced critical tool, one that can handle non-linguistic regimes of signs in a

scientific way. Part of that struggle involves suppressing diachrony so as to construct a cleansed theoretical image of the meaning production in non-linguistic realms. A critical reading of the project gets at the drama underlying these critical evasions as well as the theoretical hubris that motivated them. Consider the almost panicked tone and seeming desperation in the following passage from another of the methodological essays (“Towards a Sociology of Dress,” originally published in *Annales*):

I suggested in this journal that, if we exclude the numerous histories of clothes, the majority of which merely repeat each other, then works on clothing overall are rare; and since it is a vast subject, barely explored, and in which there is a permanent temptation toward futility, any serious attempt or claim to synthesize clothing is eagerly seized upon (33).

In allowing himself to become captivated so completely by the fool’s gold of pure methodology, Barthes became, however briefly, a living twentieth-century Causaubon, George Eliot’s searcher for “the key to all mythologies.” *The Language of Fashion* shows more clearly than *The Fashion System* Barthes’ pursuit of a formalist (and utopian) apparatus for doing theory in the guise of science. In *The Fashion System*, Barthes concealed his ambitions by playing the “apprentice semiologist” (ix). But in the methodological essays collected in *The Language of Fashion* he assumes the tone and posture of the hero. The dramatic undercurrent of these texts is historically their most interesting aspect.

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