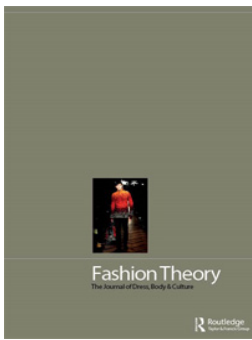


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Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists

**Reviewed by
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***Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*
edited by Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik
(I.B. Tauris, 2015)**

With their co-edited volume—*Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*—Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik make an important pedagogical contribution to the field of fashion studies. The book, developed from a course Rocamora taught as part of the MA History and Culture curriculum at London College of Fashion, aims to help students tackle the following question: How can one analyze fashion? The book's answer: by using theory. In their introduction to the volume, the

co-editors explain, “The underlying premise of *Thinking Through Fashion* is that theorists provide invaluable tools to ‘think through fashion’, and that engaging with theory is essential or order to understand and analyse fashion” (3).

The volume consists of 17 original chapters, each of which is written by a contemporary fashion studies scholar and dedicated to a social and cultural theorist whose work has proven—or might prove in the future to be—useful to the analysis of fashion. Some of the theorists covered in the book address fashion directly in their own writings: for example, Georg Simmel (Peter McNeil), Walter Benjamin (Adam Gezcy and Vicki Karaminas), and Pierre Bourdieu (Agnès Rocamora). The great majority of theorists covered in the book do not. As chapter-authors show, however, these theorists’ conceptual tools provide fruitful frameworks through which to analyze fashion. For example, in her chapter on Mikhail Bakhtin, Francesca Granata writes, “Applied to the study of fashion, the Bakhtinian grotesque can become an especially important tool for negotiating ideas of norms and deviations” (102). To evidence this point, Granata refers to her past work on designers Georgina Godley and Rei Kawakubo and performance artist Leigh Bowery—“those figures working at the juncture of fashion and the visual arts [who] have questioned normative bodies and explored bodily borders” (102). In another chapter, Joanne Entwistle draws on Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory to suggest, “We might more usefully think about fashion in terms of a range of objects and activities and extend our notions of actor and agency beyond distinctly agentic qualities to humans” (280). She gives the example of water, asking readers to consider it not “an external, inert object,” but rather “an actor within the fashion industry” (281). Entwistle concludes, “thinking about fashion as a nature–culture hybrid provides us with really productive ways to consider the environmental issues that fashion raises” (282). *Thinking Through Fashion* thus functions not only as a “guide to key theorists,” as the book’s subtitle suggests, but it also introduces students to some of the questions and concerns that animate the work of contemporary fashion studies scholars.¹

Rocamora and Smelik’s introduction makes its own contribution to the field of fashion studies. In it, the co-editors develop a historical-theoretical narrative to contextualize the work of the theorists discussed in the volume. In doing so, they provide for students a thorough account of the two interwoven intellectual traditions that have shaped cultural studies approaches to research on fashion: semiotics and (new) materialism. Referencing Barthes, Foucault and Derrida, among other theorists, Rocamora and Smelik explain, fashion can be understood as a text, the meaning of which is multiple and shifting. And yet fashion—and the fashioning of identity, in particular—is not played out solely at the level of signs and symbols. Referencing Marx, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, among others, Rocamora and Smelik continue, understanding

fashion also demands an attention to the materiality of objects and bodies. This introduction thus functions not only as a historical-theoretical context for existing social and cultural theory, but also as a framework for future research on fashion. That is, by identifying fashion as both cultural text and material culture, Rocamora and Smelik offer students broad conceptual categories through which to make sense of the many different types of data they might encounter within their research.

Thinking Through Fashion offers a very accessible guide as to how to use social and cultural theory to analyze fashion in its “many manifestations” (3). The co-editors point out the limits of the approach set out in the volume, however: specifically, its attention to “western thinkers ... Western modernity [and] Western fashion” (7). They continue, “We welcome follow-up books that would shed light on systems of thought and fashion not framed by those of Western modernity” (7). Similarly, I would look forward to follow-up books that focus on the impact of feminism, queer theory, post-colonial theory and/or race and ethnicity studies on the analysis of fashion. *Thinking Through Fashion* thus makes a strong call that demands multiple responses.

Note

1. In addition to those already mentioned, chapters include Anthony Sullivan on Karl Marx, Janice Miller on Sigmund Freud, Llewellyn Negrin on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Jobling on Roland Barthes, Efrat Tseëlon on Erving Goffman, Anneke Smelik on Gilles Deleuze, Jane Tynan on Michel Foucault, Aurélie Van de Peer on Niklas Luhmann, Efrat Tseëlon on Jean Baudrillard, Alison Gill on Jacques Derrida, and Elizabeth Wissinger on Judith Butler.