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Comparative book review: On thinking through and researching fashion today

***FASHION STUDIES: RESEARCH METHODS, SITES AND PRACTICES,*
HEIKE JENSS (ED.) (2016)**

London: Bloomsbury, 248 pp.,

ISBN 9781472583161, Paperback, £21.99

ISBN 9781472583178, 256 pp., Hardback, £85.00

ISBN 9781472583192, EPUB/MOBI e-book, £21.99

***THINKING THROUGH FASHION: A GUIDE TO KEY THEORISTS, AGNÈS
ROCAMORA AND ANNEKE SMELIK (EDS) (2016)***

London: I.B. Tauris, 320 pp.,

ISBN 9781780767345, Paperback, £16.99

ISBN 9781780767338, Hardback, £69.99

This autumn has felt particularly busy. Alongside the usual frenetic activities that accompany the start of a new academic year, I have found myself swamped by meetings about potential collaborative research projects arising from a summer conference season where fashion studies seemed to have invaded the annual meetings of numerous anglophone humanities disciplines. Needless to say, the fact that fashion is fashionable has utterly delighted me. It is about time that the excellent work done by academics in the field of fashion

studies is properly recognized and celebrated. Finally, we have the opportunity to open up the important role that fashion has to play in understanding the structures that shape our societies.

But amid the excitement of exchanged e-mails and expanding disciplinary horizons, I have also been haunted by a vague sense of unease. I wonder how truly interdisciplinary many of these research projects will be; how many opportunities to develop new methodologies will actually be seized; and most troublingly, whether fashion studies will really achieve serious recognition, or will merely be seen by many as a novel new way to attract the attention of research councils.

Most of all, while the explosion of dynamic new publications and journals (including this one) speaks for a growing energy and academic confidence in the field, I am mindful that the heightened recognition of the study of fashion across academia also demands consideration of its potential futures. How might fashion studies – a field that has previously thrived through experimentation on the fringes of more established disciplines – face the future with a continuing spirit of innovation? It was to this end that I turned a critical eye to my undergraduate reading lists for the year, wondering what I could add in order to challenge my students. Which texts could I set to ensure that I was not just asking them to understand the past and present condition of fashion studies, but also to imagine how they might contribute towards its future? This prompted me to look again at two recent edited volumes – *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists* edited by Agnès Rocomora and Anneke Smelik (2016) and *Fashion Studies: Research Methods, Sites and Practices* edited by Heike Jenss (2016) – both books that are billed by their publishers as instructional ‘how to’ guides for teachers, students and researchers, but that in fact offer provocations to scholars at all levels, while also highlighting the importance of innovation and boundary-pushing for the sake of the future of fashion studies.

Both published in 2016, these books originate from two of the most significant fashion strands in academic publishing: Bloomsbury’s ‘Dress, Body, Culture’ series and the ‘Dress Cultures’ series from I.B. Tauris. Both series are run by editors and advisory boards made up of some of the most eminent names in fashion studies, and both have become increasingly prolific as their publishers recognize the revenue potential of monographs and edited collections on the subject of fashion. Yet it is this very success in marketing *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists* and *Fashion Studies: Research Methods, Sites and Practices* as profitable resources for students that obscures some of their more intellectually provocative aspects. Therefore while the carefully crafted blurbs on the dust jacket promise that each text offers an explanatory guide to help navigate readers through the complexities of research practices and social and cultural theories, this review will primarily focus on the ways in which these texts might offer a starting point for future experimental methodologies and the ongoing development of fashion studies as a discipline.

Fashion Studies: Research Methods, Sites and Practices (Fashion Studies) positions itself as a collection of research case studies that offer insight into the current state of fashion studies. However, while Heike Jenss’s introduction locates fashion studies in terms of its past, present and future, it carefully avoids making concrete statements about what fashion studies is or is not. Instead, Jenss chooses to highlight the long-term importance of innovation, flexibility and experimentation to the field, borrowing Caroline Evans’s wonderful

metaphor of the researcher as a ‘ragpicker’, selecting and combining different materials and methodologies to create something new from older pieces (2003: 11–12).

Fashion Studies offers the reader a tasting menu of different approaches to studying fashion – providing them with a rare opportunity to sample and be inspired by a mixture of methodologies that might otherwise fall outside of their usual area of expertise. The book is loosely categorized into three sections: ‘Section One: Approaching Fashion and Dress as Material Culture’, ‘Section Two: Exploring Fashion Practices Through Ethnography’ and the more broadly titled ‘Section Three: Mixed Methods’. Although these different sections aim to group similar approaches, when reading the text through as a whole it becomes apparent that, if anything, they primarily highlight how interdisciplinary approaches defy categorization and demonstrate the fluid nature of methodological boundaries.

Section one is evenly balanced between discussions of historical and contemporary material fashion cultures. It opens with Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark’s explanation of the challenges of researching the often-overlooked area of everyday fashion before moving on to Sophie Woodward’s fascinating discussion about ethnographic studies of denim. While both pieces are excellent, as a material cultures researcher I was disappointed with the relative brevity of this section as it seems to overlook many of the exciting new research methods being developed around the subject of reconstruction, memory and material knowledge (see, e.g. Rublack et al. 2015). This also highlights the general absence of historical researchers and museum curators from this volume – something that jars, considering their invaluable contributions towards the development of fashion studies and their continuing importance in developing new ways of using fashion to tell social and cultural stories. This is, of course, one of the pitfalls of creating edited collections based on the participants of a particular conference or workshop – while all contributors may offer interesting and valuable work, they are unlikely to represent the true breadth of research currently being conducted across the field simply due to the nature of the way that calls for papers are disseminated through institutional networks.

Fashion Studies is strongest in section two, which focuses on ethnographic research methods that push the boundaries of traditional ethnography by incorporating different interdisciplinary elements and interrogating what it means to conduct situated research. As an unfortunate consequence of the strength of this ethnographic section, the final chapters that follow in section three – ‘Mixed Methods’ – seem perhaps less innovative than they might in another context. While each of these chapters taken individually provides detailed accounts of some very interesting projects, they do not showcase the same level of methodological innovation as the examples presented previously in the book.

As someone who has worked across a number of different academic departments, I have long been of the opinion that one of the great strengths of fashion studies is the openness with which it embraces interdisciplinary methodologies. In *Fashion Studies*, Heike Jenss has done a commendable job of showcasing some of the breadth of the research that has resulted from this in recent years. As Jenss mentions in the book’s introduction, this publication also offers a chance to reflect on the importance of bringing theory into conversation with practice – something that forms the foundation of many of the most interesting case studies in this text, most notably in the thoughtful consideration of embedded and situated research practices demonstrated by Christina Moon’s ethnographic work within garment factories, Brent Luvaas’s

engaging reflections on style blogging and the careful interweaving of fashion theory and practice demonstrated by Francesca Granata's study of Martin Margiela. Yet I was also disappointed not to see more evidence of contributions from some of the many fashion researchers originating from disciplines such as cultural economics and geography (see, e.g. Crewe 2017; Blaszczyk and Pouillard 2018). Although this disappointment is a reflection of the bias that I have towards my own personal research interests, it once again demonstrates the inevitability that a book such as this, which aims to cater to a diverse range of readers, is simply unable to include material representing the true breadth of contemporary fashion studies.

Although it arguably has a narrower remit, *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists (Thinking Through Fashion)* is similarly concerned with promoting the benefits of diversity to fashion studies, and Agnès Rocomora and Anneke Smelik are keen to emphasize in their introduction that while this text draws on a familiar canon of cultural and social theorists, it uses these to embrace a broad understanding of what fashion is and might mean. The editors open the book with a quote from Deleuze and Guattari – 'To think is to voyage', inviting readers to see this edited collection as a starting point for a longer voyage of personal discovery.

The volume is arranged into seventeen chapters, each exploring how the work of a different well-known theorist might be applied to the field of fashion. Starting with Karl Marx and moving chronologically through time according to the subject's birth date, at first sight this book feels like a simple summary of major theoretical ideas, but in fact the chapters cover a staggeringly wide array of themes, incorporating discussions about other related theorists and the development of ideas over time. Particular attention is paid to critiquing how aspects of different theorists' work have been adapted or challenged by others, resulting in lively conversations that provoke thought and encourage the reader to engage with a wide spectrum of different opinions and voices.

While the volume is undeniably rooted in western critical traditions and the list of theorists included inevitably raises questions about the lack of more diverse perspectives within academic thought, the active presence of each contributing author's voice within their chapter adds a surprising sense of diversity. This is largely due to the gender of the majority of the book's contributors. Unlike the overwhelmingly male subjects they discuss, most of the chapters in this volume are written by women. The lack of gender diversity in fashion studies is often described as a problem, and while more research on men's relationship with fashion would of course benefit the field, this book provides an example of how fashion studies has provided a platform for many excellent female academics to develop innovative work across areas including sociology and cultural studies that have traditionally been dominated by men. Although I would certainly not wish to downplay the excellent contributions made by the male contributors towards this volume, the highly visible presence of interesting female voices is something to be celebrated.

By embedding the importance of debate and different opinions within the tight format of each chapter, the editors and contributors to *Thinking Through Fashion* have produced a highly disciplined volume that infects its readers with their enthusiasm for intellectual journeying. It is rare to find such a well-executed edited collection, and particularly one that displays such a consistently high level of academic expression throughout. If anything, the flaws of this book lie in a tendency to under-sell the scope of its ambition – the introduction discusses how the book might complement a contemporary interest in making sense of

fashion, but it seems to me that more than this, this volume demonstrates how fashion provides an invaluable tool for making sense of wider society. The way in which social and cultural theory is applied to fashion is a testament to the fresh perspective that fashion studies offers to other academic areas. By interrogating theoretical ideas through the lens of fashion, the contributors offer new insight and development of these theories that should be of interest to scholars of culture and society far beyond the field of fashion studies. In this, *Thinking Through Fashion* is a powerful reminder that interdisciplinary exchange is a two-way process and that fashion studies has much to offer other disciplines.

While celebrating the boundary-pushing successes of these books, it is important to note that both texts also provide useful critical and theoretical insights for students at both graduate and undergraduate levels. This can largely be attributed to their highly accessible writing styles. Often accessibility is used as a shorthand description for the 'dumbing down' of complex ideas or methodologies to make them more easily palatable to a broad, even non-specialist, audience but that is certainly not the case in either of these texts. Christopher Breward's introduction to *Fashion Studies* provides an excellent and concise introduction to the background from which fashion studies has emerged, charting a trajectory that gives newcomers to the subject a clear overview of its history and the present state of the field. This background perfectly sets the scene for Heike Jenss's own clear positioning of the book within current debates, and the subsequent chapters of the book are similarly straight-talking. It is perhaps worth noting that some of the most engaging writing in this volume comes from individuals with ethnographic interests, highlighting how much the written outputs of fashion studies have benefited from interdisciplinary curiosity across the humanities and social sciences.

The contributors to *Thinking Through Fashion* had arguably an even more difficult task in creating a series of succinct and accessible overviews of the relevance of some really quite challenging theoretical texts to fashion studies. In light of this, each contributor deserves high praise for ensuring that this collected volume remains not just informative but also intensely readable throughout. It is this aspect of *Thinking Through Fashion* that makes it such a valuable asset for students new to any of these theorists and for researchers looking for easily accessible inspiration. Particular credit is owed to Jane Tynan for her extremely readable chapter on Foucault, Agnès Rocomora for her dissection of the contemporary relevance of Bourdieu, and Joanne Entwistle for her persuasive examples of how fashion scholars might employ the works of Latour. As an educator, I have particularly enjoyed watching my students' positive reactions to the apt case studies employed in this volume. Often my practice-based students find reading texts by many of the theorists covered in this volume deeply frustrating. This is partly due to the complexity of the writing styles that they encounter within them – but, more fundamentally, students complain that they are irrelevant to their practice because they seem to be written by people who understand fashion as an abstract or a theoretical framework but do not know much about the realities of making, selling or wearing fashions. In contrast, *Thinking Through Fashion* shows them how theoretical ideas can be developed to make them applicable to the realities of the fashion systems that they work and live within.

Indeed, there is much to celebrate in the publication of these two books that chart the monumental journey that fashion studies has undertaken in the past few decades and show how important fashion studies is as a field for advancing social, cultural and historical understanding. While both books are

already firm favourites on my undergraduate reading lists, they are more than just study guides for students – despite how publishers might market them.

Although there is always a danger that setting down exemplary research methods or canonical lists of theorists might lead to a narrowing understanding of what counts as fashion studies, both *Thinking Through Fashion* and *Fashion Studies* offer important warnings against the construction of stricter disciplinary boundaries around the field of fashion studies as it is increasingly embraced by the academy and its liminal status, which has driven so much interdisciplinary innovation over the past few decades. Both texts inspire the reader to continue to experiment and develop new ways of thinking through, with and around purposefully broad definitions of what fashion is and could be. This is most explicit in Breward's introduction to *Fashion Studies*, where he poses a series of aphorisms drawn from questions raised by the volume and offers these as provocations for future research.

Building on these provocations, I suggest that readers looking for directional inspiration in these texts might also wish to consider some of the absences within them. Both books are overwhelmingly focused on anglophone western academic traditions and fashion systems, and it is notable that many of the featured academics work in cities with established fashionable reputations such as New York, London, Paris and Toronto. While this is openly acknowledged in the texts, it raises important questions about the role played by certain types of cultural economies in shaping the growing field of fashion studies. In particular, the methodologies described in *Fashion Studies* challenge readers to reflect on how the creative clusters, politics and institutions present in this type of urban environment encourage researchers to seek out certain types of stories about fashion, perhaps focusing unduly on narratives of creativity and access.

In response, I encourage students and researchers alike to consider how they might embrace the underlying spirit of innovation present in both of these books by asking how their contents highlight the stories not currently being told about fashion. Although the breadth and depth of knowledge contained within the texts is important and undeniably valuable, these absences might equally offer a vital source of inspiration by encouraging us to grow fashion studies through opening up even wider interdisciplinary dialogues rather than retreating into the safety of familiar ideas.

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Bethan Bide is a fashion historian interested in the social and cultural stories that we can tell through clothes. Her research focuses on the use of material fashion objects and considers the relationship between production and consumption; the development of fashion cities; the role of fashion in muse-

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