



BLOOMSBURY  
REVELATIONS

# ROLAND BARTHES

THE LANGUAGE  
OF FASHION

BLOOMSBURY

# Chapter 10

## On *The Fashion System*<sup>1</sup>

**F. Gaussen:** *The Fashion System* presents itself as a 'book on method' with reference to semiology. Could you tell us what semiology is?

**Roland Barthes:** It was Saussure who first postulated the existence of a general science of signs, which he had called semiology. He thought that linguistics would be only a part of this science. This semiological project was then taken up thanks to the development of linguistics and of the social sciences. People came to the conclusion that many cultural objects used by humans constituted systems of communication and therefore of meaning. One could say that all of culture, in the widest sense of the word, is beholden to a science of meaning. The most seemingly utilitarian of objects—food, clothes, shelter—and especially those which are based on language such as literature (whether good or bad literature), press stories, advertising etc., invite semiological analysis.

**FG:** *Is it possible to distinguish signs that are totally independent of language?*

**RB:** Obviously we could mention very elementary systems such as the highway code or aircraft landing signs. But, in my view, I'm certain that the study of non-linguistic signs is an abstraction, a utopia. Real culture contains only objects which are full of human language, whether it be in description, commentary, or conversation... Our civilization is a civilization of the written word as much as it is one of the image. Written language has very precise functions of abstraction, of knowledge, of choice of meanings. To live in a civilization purely of the image would

create a certain anxiety because the image always has several meanings. It is for this reason that photos in newspapers are always captioned: to reduce the risk engendered by a multiplicity of meanings.

**FG:** *Your study seems to rest on a certain paradox. That is, though fashion deploys very varied systems of expression, especially the image, you have chosen to limit your research to the written description of clothes, as found in magazines such as Elle or Jardin des Modes. Why?*

**RB:** Originally I had planned to study real clothing, worn by everyone in the street. I gave up. The reason for this is that fashion clothing is complex in that it deploys a number of 'substances': the material, photography, language... Now, there has not been any applied semiological work carried out as yet. It was necessary to give priority to problems of method. Because of this I preferred to choose an object as 'pure' as possible to analyse, that is one which rests on a single 'substance'. I studied fashion clothing as it is refracted through the written language of specialist magazines. All I retained was the description, that is the transformation of an object into language.

Originally this work was meant to be in some way the start of a general programme of semiology which would have covered all the cultural systems in our civilization: clothes, food, the city... But, inspired by new research, this semiological project itself is evolving and it is starting to encounter the specific problems generated by the objects it is trying to analyse: are we right to constitute food for example as a system of signs? However limited this book on fashion may be, it poses the problem of knowing if there really is an object that we call fashion clothing.

**FG:** *This 'Fashion System' breaks down into two systems.*

**RB:** Indeed. It is all about detecting in one simple message—the description of a fashionable dress—the overlaying of a number of systems of meaning: on the one hand, what we might call the 'vestimentary code' which controls a certain number of different usages, and on the other the rhetoric, that is the way in which the magazine expresses this code and which itself reflects a certain vision of the world, an ideology. Semiological analysis allows us to situate the place of ideology within the general system of meanings, without, of

course, being able to go any further, since the description of particular ideologies belongs to another science.

**FG:** *What guarantee of objectivity does the semiologist have in the analysis he makes of this rhetoric?*

**RB:** Obviously the analysis of rhetoric requires the researcher to rely on their own feeling as a reader, something which might shock the positivist procedures associated with experimentation. As soon as we study language, we come up against this obstacle. There is no 'proof' of language other than its readability, its immediate understanding. In order to prove the analysis of a language being made you have always to come back to the 'linguistic sentiment' of the person who is speaking. In any case, my exteriority to the language that I am analysing is only provisional. Indeed, my own description itself could in turn be taken up by another wider and more coherent system of explanation. I think that semiology is an accurate method, but this accuracy can itself become the object of other languages. I do not have a positivist feeling with regard to semiology; rather a historical one.

**FG:** *Your study presents itself as a kind of syntax of semiology. It works hard to create units, rules, categories. Do you think that this method has a universal value and could be applied to any object?*

**RB:** This way of researching, which by the way is not original and comes from linguistics, may provisionally have a universal value as a method of discovery. It involves breaking things down into units, classifying them and examining their rules of combination, like a grammarian. Obviously, if the object changes, the method itself must be modified. Classifications will turn out differently.

**FG:** *What image of fashion have you kept from your analysis?*

**RB:** The title of my book, *The Fashion System*, is pure provocation. For me fashion is indeed a system. Contrary to the myth of improvisation, of caprice, of fantasy, of free creativity, we can see that fashion is strongly coded. It is ruled by combination in which there is a finite reserve of elements and certain rules of change. The whole set of fashion features for each year is found in the collection of features which has its own rules and limits, like grammar. These are purely formal rules. For example, there are some elements of clothing that can be put together, but others

which are not allowed. If fashion appears to us to be unpredictable this is because we are using only a small human memory. As soon as we widen it to its historical dimension we find a very marked regularity.

The second image of fashion that I have taken from my analysis is a more ethical one, more a part of my own preoccupations. It seemed to me that there were two fashions. On the one hand, fashion tries hard to make the written item of clothing correspond to uses, characters, seasons, functions: '*A dress for evening wear, for shopping, for spring, for the student, for the carefree young girl . . .*'. Here the arbitrary nature of fashion is sidestepped, hidden beneath this rationalized, naturalist lexicon. Fashion is lying. It is hiding behind social and psychological alibis.

On the other hand there is another vision of fashion which rejects this system of equivalences and sets up a truly abstract and poetic function. This is a fashion of idleness, of luxury, but which has the merit of declaring itself as pure form. In this way it becomes part of literature. A fascinating example of this literary connection is supplied by Mallarmé who wrote, just for himself, a little fashion magazine: *La Dernière Mode*. This was a real fashion magazine, with descriptions of dresses such as you might find, minus the talent, in *Elle*. But, at the same time, these descriptions are, for the author, a deeply important, almost metaphysical, exercise using the Mallarméan themes of nothingness, of the trinket, of inanity. It is an emptiness which is not absurd, a nothingness which is constructed as a meaning.

**FG:** *You indicate in your preface that your research is 'already dated'. What do you mean?*

**RB:** This study uses operational concepts—'sign, signifier, signified'—which if not challenged have been at least considerably remodelled by research these past few years, by people such as Lévi-Strauss and Lacan. This vocabulary is being somewhat questioned at the moment. Thinking about meaning has become enriched but also divided, with antagonisms appearing. From this point of view, my research looks a little naive. It is an 'untamed' semiology. But I will say in my defence that these rather fixed concepts are in fact applied to an object which is a profound part of mass culture, part of a certain alienation. Mass society always tends to get stuck on defined, named, separated meanings. This is why the fixed concepts that I use are those which go the best

with fashion. They may be simplistic in the way they describe what is going on in the depths of the human psyche, but they retain all their pertinence when it comes to analysing our society.

## Note

- 1 Interview with F. Gaussen, published in *Le Monde*, 19 April 1967; *Oeuvres complètes* vol. 2, 462–4.