

***Fashion Stylists: History, Meaning and Practice***  
 Edited by Ane Lynge-Jorén.

**Bloomsbury (2020)**  
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**Reviewed by Alex Esculapio**

*Fashion Stylists*, edited by Ane Lynge-Jorén, is the first academic volume dedicated entirely to the study of fashion styling. A welcome addition to a small but growing area of interest in the field of fashion studies, the book includes eight research chapters and eight semi-structured interviews with stylists working in Europe and the US. By including scholarly work, perspectives from insiders and a strong selection of compelling images, the volume moves the needle forward in terms of academic format and lays solid foundations for future research. After finishing the volume, I certainly had a clearer idea of what fashion stylists *do* and, to an extent, of *how* they do it. But I was also left wanting more. Given that this is the first systematic study of the work of stylists, I am still wondering: does it ask enough of fashion, and of fashion studies as a field?

As Ane Lynge-Jorén mentions in the introduction, style and styling in fashion studies have largely been examined in relation to subcultures and dress prac-

tices, often in explicit opposition to the capricious ephemerality of fashion. Fashion stylists, however, have become increasingly powerful players in the industry. Much like curating and “the curatorial,” though it usually occupies more explicitly commercial spaces, styling has known an extraordinary proliferation in the past decade. Today stylists are responsible for creating, co-creating and choreographing global taste regimes, be it through dressing celebrities, working alongside the creative directors of luxury brands or setting trends and sharing looks on Instagram. A more systematic theoretical examination of fashion styling is, then, long overdue.

*Fashion Stylists* is structured in three sections. Each section includes



both scholarly contributions and semi-structured interviews. The first section, “History and Profession of the Stylist within and beyond Magazines,” examines the professionalisation of stylists in twentieth century Western Europe. Philip Clarke’s chapter provides useful etymological reflections on the term “stylist” and a solid overview of the emergence and legitimisation of stylists as distinct professional figures in the British context. Specifically, it emphasises the paradoxical role of 1980s British style magazines in establishing stylists as legitimate fashion professionals while discursively maintaining and re-producing style as “anti-fashion” and *cool*. While style was presented as antithetical to “mainstream” fashion, creatives like Ray Petri, Sheila Rock and Simon Foxton developed signature aesthetics and skills that would become increasingly in demand in an image-driven industry. Marie Riegels Melchior’s chapter on the Danish fashion industry between 1900 and 1965 offers an interesting counter-perspective. Melchior examines styling as a consumer-focused practice informed by “bourgeois norms” and an aspirational desire to be “properly and fashionably dressed”<sup>01</sup> that was promulgated by leading department stores and commercial publications in Copenhagen. This chapter, alongside Paolo Volonté’s study of styling in Milan from the third section of the book, are the only two which deal more explicitly with styling’s rela-

tion to power and consumption: Both examine styling as a top-down set of rules and as a practice of fitting into socially acceptable norms of good taste, which is in stark opposition to counter cultural understandings of style which seem to dominate the Anglosphere.

The interviews in the first section discuss how individual stylists establish themselves professionally and balance a variety of roles. Particularly interesting in this sense is the interview with New York-based Akeem Smith, who partly grew up in Jamaica and learned his craft on the job by working in different capacities for an eclectic range of clients which include ex club kid turned costume designer Zaldy, brands like Hood By Air, Helmut Lang and The Row and reality TV celebrity Kim Kardashian. Smith speaks eloquently about his interest in referencing “unpopular knowledge,”<sup>02</sup> the term he uses to describe history. His references are unusual for a fashion stylist—documents, books and images about lesser known histories, particularly black histories—and it translates into images that are dynamic, politically nuanced and never literal. The interview illuminates his creative process, characterised by an intuitive, category-defying approach to casting, careful location choices, sense of humour and a symbolic use of visual and textural contrasts. Throughout the conversation it becomes clear that Smith’s styling is more than a process

<sup>01</sup> Marie Riegels Melchior, “In the Changing Room: A Study of the Act of Styling before ‘Styling’ in Danish Fashion, 1900-1965,” in Ane Lynge-Jorén (ed.) *Fashion Stylists*, 42.

<sup>02</sup> Smith quoted in Jeppe Ugelvig, “Styling Unpopular Knowledge: An Interview with Akeem Smith,” in Ane Lynge-Jorén (ed.) *Fashion Stylists*, 110.

of selection or bricolage: it is a tool to create a new vocabulary of fashion and a visual archive that centers marginalised histories.

The interview with Smith anticipates some of the themes explored in the second section of the book, "Identity, Gender, Ethnicity and Style Narratives," which looks at how fashion styling is mobilised to construct visual identities. Alice Beard's chapter on the work of British stylist and editor Caroline Baker combines a wonderful analysis of editorials from independent women's magazine *Nova* (1965-1975) with oral history interviews with Baker herself. Beard examines the creative strategies adopted by Baker in construction of the "natural" woman, which included DIY, functional layering and the use of military clothing, workwear and menswear. The relationship between styling, magazines and gender is also explored by Shaun Cole in his chapter on the work of stylist Ray Petri and the Buffalo collective for British style magazines *i-D*, *The Face* and *Arena* during the 1980s. Cole shows how Petri's styling juxtaposed traditional masculine signifiers and innovative elements to articulate modern masculinities while also pioneering diverse casting, a multicultural sensibility to dressing and gender-creative approaches to styling. Finally, Rachel Lifter's chapter looks at the role of stylists June Ambrose and Misa Hylton in the creation of American hip-hop artists Missy Elliott and Lil' Kim's images in the 1990s, and in doing so it addresses the historically overlooked contributions of black women to hip-hop style.

What is perhaps missing in these chapters is a consideration of how,

in the process of materialising these subversive identities, styling simultaneously reduces them to signifiers or flattens them so that they can be more easily reused and re-appropriated. In doing so, fashion history and fashion studies have perhaps underestimated the role of styling in supporting the cyclical nature of fashion and its tendency to decontextualise and re-contextualise objects, attitudes and signifiers.

Lotta Volkova's work as a stylist and key member of Demna Gvasalia's team at Vetements and, more recently, Balenciaga is especially interesting to consider in this sense, especially through the lens of globalised media. In her interview, which is included in the third section, "Global Fashion Media and Geographies of Styling Practices," she rightfully challenges the reception of her work as being concerned with juxtaposing good and bad taste, stating instead that the Russian subcultures and movements she references are only "crowned as bad taste in the Western world."<sup>03</sup> However, what the interview does not touch on is the fact that in the span of just a few years her styling work for Gvasalia or Gosha Rubchinskiy has contributed to the creation of a desirable, globalised post-Soviet aesthetic that has contributed to a shift towards a maximalist approach to layering and to the revival of so-called Y2K style.

The interviews in this second section also tend to be more self-aware and they also happen to contain the most poetic and insightful definitions of fashion styling in the book. Benjamin Kirchoff, for instance, defines

<sup>03</sup> Volkova quoted in Susanne Madsen, "Twisting References: An Interview with Lotta Volkova," in Ane Lyng-Jørlén (ed.) *Fashion Stylists*, 238.

Balenciaga, S/S 2017. Photography: Harley Weir. Styling: Lotta Volkova. Courtesy of Harley Weir. Featured in *Fashion Stylists*, edited by Ane Lyng-Jørlén and published by Bloomsbury



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styling as the act of dressing someone "because you see it as relevant within their context."<sup>04</sup> He also expresses frustration at some fashion brand's

<sup>04</sup> Kirchoff quoted in Susanne Madsen, "Questioning Fashion's Parameters: An Interview with Benjamin Kirchoff," in Ane Lyng-Jørlén (ed.) *Fashion Stylists*, 173.

requirement that menswear be photographed on male models and womenswear be photographed on female models, which disregards the wearer and goes against his insistence on dressing "people in the clothes the models feel are more appropriate to

them.”<sup>05</sup> Roxane Danset similarly emphasises the importance of context in relation to the value of things and explains that “everything - whether it’s an expensive dress, something found on the street or a piece of cloth - has worth.”<sup>06</sup> In keeping with her emphasis on value, Danset later describes her approach to styling as a “kind of homage to garment-making”<sup>07</sup> Finally, Vanessa Reid talks about her interest in creating images that show fashion’s behind the scenes, which she beautifully describes as “a glimpse of the ‘becoming.’”<sup>08</sup> These interviews provide some much-needed firsthand perspectives on how stylists develop and negotiate their vision, which often happens by creating entirely new spaces within the industry—be it through co-founding fashion labels, producing independent, non-commercial publications or nourishing long-term collaborative relationships. They also suggest that we may need to examine the work of stylists through material and affective approaches in the future, which may help to illuminate styling as a process of working with the *stuff* of fashion to create specific *feelings, atmospheres* and *attitudes*.

<sup>05</sup> Kirchoff quoted in Susanne Madsen, “Questioning Fashion’s Parameters: An Interview with Benjamin Kirchoff,” in Ane Lyng-Jorlén (ed.) *Fashion Stylists*, 179.

<sup>06</sup> Danset quoted in Francesca Granata, “Exploring the Female Gaze: An Interview with Roxane Danset,” in Ane Lyng-Jorlén (ed.) *Fashion Stylists*, 183.

<sup>07</sup> Danset quoted in Francesca Granata, “Exploring the Female Gaze: An Interview with Roxane Danset,” in Ane Lyng-Jorlén (ed.) *Fashion Stylists*, 184.

<sup>08</sup> Reid quoted in Susanne Madsen, “Building Little Sculptures: An Interview with Vanessa Reid,” in Ane Lyng-Jorlén (ed.) *Fashion Stylists*, 190.

Overall, this is a book that has plenty to offer. First, it provides some much needed historical perspectives into the practice of styling, albeit limited to Northern Europe. It also presents excellent insights into editorial styling from the mid-1960s to today. In addition, the volume features interviews that shed light on how contemporary stylists work, which will no doubt be useful as research and teaching materials as well. Finally, it includes a section with forty-eight photographs printed on glossy paper that showcase the work of the stylists interviewed. These images allow for the opportunity to properly appreciate colours, textures and light—elements that are essential to understand the contributions of stylists to the creation of fashion images. When considered together, not only do the illustrations show the development of each stylist’s aesthetic, but they also provide a rare documentation of current directions in editorial styling. Visually compelling books are still relatively rare in academic publishing, which makes *Fashion Stylists* a very welcome exception to the rule.

Overall *Fashion Stylists* is a timely book that fills a gap in modern fashion history and it successfully establishes styling as a worthy and valuable area of research. However, many of the reasons why styling needs to be examined more closely—its privileged relation to branding, its ability to reduce identities to style signifiers, its close ties with modern celebrity culture, its power and cultural capital on social media, its links to precarious forms of labour and creative work—could have been considered in more depth in this volume, which tends to be descriptive. Significantly, I feel like I understood

Arena Homme +, Interior w/ Wardrobe Extension, FW 2017. Photography: Charlotte Wales. Styling: Akeem Smith. Courtesy of Charlotte Wales. Featured in *Fashion Stylists*, edited by Ane Lyng-Jorlén and published by Bloomsbury.



more about what styling is and what stylists do through the interviews rather than the research chapters. While the publication certainly succeeds in providing some indications of what styling, especially editorial styling, is, some fundamental questions remain unanswered: how have stylists con-

tributed to our understanding of the very idea of fashion, especially since the 1980s? What do stylists and styling look like in non-Western contexts? What does styling, as both a practice and a concept, have to offer in a world that is oversaturated with stuff and drowning in images? ✂