

Dress, Dreams & Desire: A History of Fashion and Psychoanalysis, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2025

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At first glance, fashion appears to be surface deep — of spectacle, self-invention and apparent frivolity — while psychoanalysis investigates the hidden architecture of the mind. Yet despite their apparent opposition, the two disciplines are closely intertwined. Both are fundamentally concerned with identity, desire, perception and the human impulse to construct and communicate a sense of self. Beneath the silhouettes, textures and performances that define fashion lies a dense network of psychological drives, shaping not only how we dress, but how we imagine ourselves and wish to be seen by others.

No contemporary thinker has done more to illuminate these connections than Dr. Valerie Steele, a theorist and academic whose work has become foundational to the study of fashion theory. In her role as director and chief curator of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, Steele has consistently explored the dissonance of inhabiting a body that feels at odds with itself within a culture that turns to fashion as a means of mediation and repair. In earlier works such as *Fashion and Eroticism* (1985) and *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power* (1996), she argued that the body is inseparable from identity, shame, desire, fantasy, memory, social judgment and the longing for recognition. Here, Steele suggests that the analyst's role is not merely to reassure individuals about bodily insecurity, but to uncover the deeper psychic conflicts and meanings attached to bodily unease and the fragmented self.

The book suggests that psychoanalytic readings of fashion often understand dress as a form of sublimation or wish-fulfilment, in which garments become imbued with fantasies of desirability, power, control and acceptance. For many fashion theorists, clothing participates in the construction of the self through image and performance, allowing the subject to move closer to an idealised version of themselves that temporarily reconciles the gap between inner feeling and outward appearance. Object-relations theorists, meanwhile, interpret fashion as an emotional tool through which fabrics, rituals of dress and cultivated appearance help maintain psychic coherence while rendering the self socially legible.

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The book opens with “Freud and Fashion”, where Steele examines Sigmund Freud’s view of bodily anxiety as an expression of unconscious desire, repression, sexuality and childhood experience. In the following chapter, “The Naked Dreamer”, she explores how Freud interpreted fashion as psychologically revealing, reading his female patients’ sartorial choices as signs of repression, exhibitionism, narcissism and inner conflict.

In “The Masquerade”, Steele revisits the work of pioneering psychoanalyst Joan Riviere and her influential essay “Womanliness as a Masquerade” (1929), questioning the relationship between identity, gender, and self-expression. She situates these ideas within debates around dress reform and changing gender norms, before turning to Coco Chanel, whose adaptation of menswear became both a reinvention of femininity and a means of constructing strength and independence after a childhood spent in an orphanage.

In “The Mirror and the Fragmented Body”, Steele turns to Jacques Lacan and his claim that bodily wholeness is partly illusory, first formed through the “mirror stage”. She connects this idea to fashion through Elsa Schiaparelli’s “Hall of Mirrors” jacket (Autumn/Winter 1938–39), before using Lacanian theories of desire and sexual difference to interpret the work of John Galiano, Jean Paul Gaultier, Alexander McQueen and Thierry Mugler, whose designs often merge eroticism and body consciousness with suggestions of violence, castration and bodily fragmentation.

Steele draws on the work of French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu, particularly his concept of the “Skin Ego”, to suggest that identity is shaped through attempts to create psychic coherence and bodily boundaries. Combined with Jacques Lacan’s theories of self-image, fashion emerges as a way of negotiating the divide between the imagined self and embodied experience while projecting identity outward for the gaze of others.

Steele draws on object-relations theorists such as Donald Winnicott and Melanie Klein, who viewed feelings about the body as shaped through early relationships and emotional affirmation. From this perspective, fashion mediates between the inner self and the exposed body, providing a means of negotiating anxiety, vulnerability and fragmentation. Clothing does not simply conceal the body but protects, transforms and narrates it, making the “mask” of fashion psychologically meaningful rather than merely superficial.

While Steele identifies a fundamental ambiguity at the heart of fashion, she argues that it can both soothe bodily alienation and reinforce the belief that the body must be continually corrected, stylised or perfected. Fashion emerges, then, as both remedy and symptom: a creative attempt to negotiate the discomforts of embodiment while simultaneously revealing the fragility of our relationship to the body itself. In Steele’s reading, dress becomes much more than ornament or disguise; it is evidence of how profoundly mediated our experience of who we are has become.

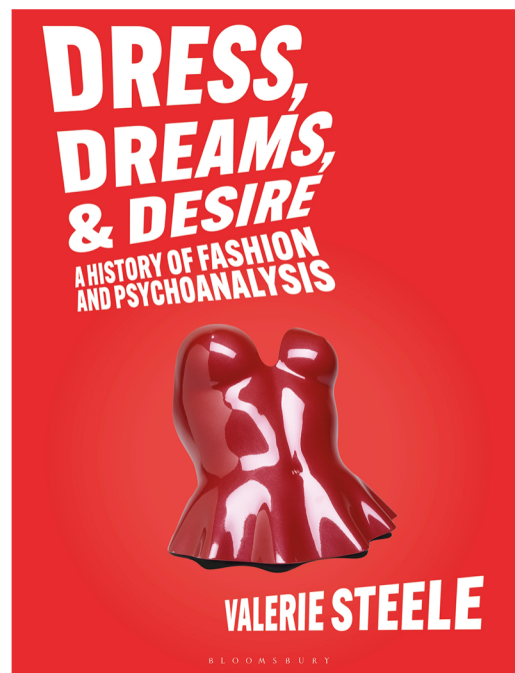


Figure 1: Book Cover



Figure 2: Chanel, Cruise 2009, shoes



Figure 3: Artist: Alisha Gorshenina. Photographer: Elizaveta Porodina



Figure 4: Bach Mai, Spring 2023. Photographer: Amber Gray



Figure 5: Anouk Wipprecht, Spider Dress 2.o. Photographer: Jason Perry



Figure 6: John Galliano for Dior A/W 2000. © Robert Fairer



Figure 7: John Galliano for Christian Dior, hat, Fall 2000



Figure 8: Viktor&Rolf, A/W 2020. Photographer: Casper Kofi