Model Commodities: Gender and Value in Contemporary Couture

By

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Abstract

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Every January and June, the most exclusive and influential sector of the global apparel industry stages a series of runway shows in the high fashion, or, couture capitals of New York, Milan, London and Paris. This dissertation explores the production of material goods and cultural ideals in contemporary couture, drawing on scholarly and anecdotal accounts of the business of couture clothes as well as the business of couture models to understand the disquieting success of marketing luxury goods through bodies that appear to signify both extreme wealth and extreme privation. This dissertation argues that the contemporary couture industry idealizes a mode of violence that is unique in couture’s history. The industry’s shift of emphasis toward the mass market in the late 20th-century entailed divestments in the integrity of garment production and modeling employment. Contemporary couture clothes and models are promoted as high-value objects, belying however a material impoverishment that can be read from the models’ physiques and miens.
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Introduction

It is a rainy afternoon on the Via Fogazzaro, one of the trendiest streets in Milan, Italy. Fashion Week – a biannual series of runway shows held across the four high fashion capitals of the world – has just concluded in New York and descended on this center of Italian commerce and culture. An ongoing circus of photographers are snapping celebrities, models, editors and bloggers as they enter the show venue only to be greeted by more photographers inside. Small talk, air kisses, and, with a sudden dimming of lights and blast of music, the first look emerges: a wraith-like figure in a Prussian-blue pantsuit. The model approaches at a jerky yet fluid gait, pauses at the end of the runway, pivots and heads back. The next model sports the same hair, make-up, mien, strut.

Following show convention, daywear progresses into eveningwear, from embellished masculine tailoring to coattresses. The Plexi-and-sequin lapels of a cropped blazer for Look 12 elicit appreciative murmurs from the crowd; Look 35, a severely cut jacquard-print skirt, stuns. The show is being live-streamed to maximize publicity even as individual images and commentary begin to circulate on myriad media channels within seconds. Fashion fans around the world can access the latest styles and hottest models of Fashion Week with a click of the keyboard. A less avid general public can read reviews of the shows the following day in all major international newspapers and, more likely, encounter numerous interpretations of the runway’s wares the following retail season at all major retail stores. The clothes displayed on the runways of the four fashion capitals of the world comprise the most exclusive and influential sector of the global apparel industry. The models who display them are promoted as aesthetic archetypes throughout contemporary culture more broadly. In effect, both the clothes and models shown in New York, Milan, London and Paris are commodities of a niche industry that at once produces material goods and cultural ideals.

How are these clothes and models produced on a material and cultural level and what is the character of their appeal? The biannual runway shows foreground four paradoxes in the production and reception of what are called haute couture and ready-to-wear clothes and the models employed to market them. First, haute couture and ready-to-wear clothes represent the epitome of quality and craftsmanship in apparel production. The tradition of haute couture dates back to mid-19th century Paris, when shops custom-made dresses from the richest fabrics, embroidered and accessorized by artisans specializing in feathers, buttons, millinery and the like. Ready-to-wear began later in the 20th century as a cheaper division of haute couture that then spread to Italy, England and the United States and came to surpass haute couture in sartorial innovation and relevance. Today, haute couture and ready-to-wear together lead the global apparel industry in crucial part through the clothes shown on the runway. The quality of these clothes have declined in inverse proportion to their prestige, however (Thomas 2007). Their precipitous retail values increasingly reflect the success of branding and marketing over production integrity. Clothes and models are styled to appear expensive and aspirational, belying their disquieting material impoverishment.

A second paradox of the haute couture and ready-to-wear industry, then, lies with its models. The models on the runway embody wealth and glamour, but their often extreme physiques and blank miens can be understood to convey physical and psychological privation as well (Seltzer 1997). Are these modes of privation merely aesthetic or do they point to real conditions of psychophysical injury that are aestheticized? If such privation is merely aesthetic, then what is the rationale behind its production, and if it is real, then what are the conditions of
modeling labor that yield this incongruous aesthetic? Haute couture and ready-to-wear models appear to earn incomes comparable to the prices of the clothes they display; most are paid little to nothing for runway work and live in debt to modeling agencies (Mears 2011). The models market women’s clothing though the majority are teenagers who entered the profession years earlier, scouted from Eastern Eurasia and trained to project attitudes of sexual confidence and affluent indifference alien to their age and class (Soley-Beltran in Entwistle and Wissinger eds 2011). In performing the charmed lifestyles of ‘supermodels’ who walk the runways in four-figure dresses and otherwise party with the rich and beautiful, these models can be easily elided with the glamorous clothes they display rather than recognized as workers in an intensely competitive and opaque labor market. The third paradox rests on this cultural oversight.

While high fashion modeling is commonly seen to be a privileged occupation, routine media controversy over the unrealistic physical specifications of modeling work suggest that the public is aware of at least one dimension of modeling’s potential hazards. The bodies that file down the runways of New York, Milan, London and Paris comprise the most elite and extreme corps of this labor pool, prompting adulation as well as repulsion (De Perthus 2009), even among its propagators (Clements 2013). The allure of haute couture and ready-to-wear models is, then, an uneasy one, produced by a kind of labor that performs glamour through physical and possibly other modes of privation. And yet these models remain aesthetic ideals that propel the global apparel industry, dissociated in the public eye from the models’ own conditions of production. Consumer movements advocating fair labor standards in the apparel industry have only focused on the conditions of apparel production (J. Collins 2003; Salzinger 2003). The models occupying the top of the industry’s aesthetic hierarchy continue their invisible work, unhindered but, like their spectators it would seem, also ensnared.

These three paradoxes of the haute couture and ready-to-wear industry illuminate both the guiding role of its clothes and models in culture and commerce and why this role is problematic. A fourth and final paradox arises from responses within the industry that appeared to issue this precise challenge. Known as experimental fashion, the designers spearheading the movement staged shows that radically contravened the runway’s glamour (Evans 2003). Barefaced or defaced models dressed in seeming rags or caricatures of mass-produced apparel could be read as direct critiques of the industry’s treatment of its models and its loss of sartorial integrity. Off the runways however, experimental designers relied on the same production and hiring strategies utilized by their mainstream counterparts. Experimental designers hewed to business models that would secure their commercial competitiveness. Indeed, many fashion critics interpreted the iconoclasm of experimental shows as marketing ploys, and experimental fashion achieved commercial success through cultivating an edgy, quirky aesthetic possessing little critical value.

This dissertation examines each paradox through interpretive frameworks that address different dimensions of the industry’s material and cultural productions. Each framework, in turn, draws on a different combination of disciplinary approaches and theories. The first is a primarily political economic analysis of haute couture and ready-to-wear clothes throughout their history. What do haute couture and ready-to-wear clothes through different stages of the industry’s development illuminate about the clothes made today, and in what important ways has the labor of its models changed? Recounting the trajectory of the industry’s production and marketing of its clothes demonstrates how new markets for haute couture and ready-to-wear
clothes transformed both the quality of the clothes’ production and the kinds of labor involved in their presentation.

The second framework is social psychological in the effort to unravel the cultural appeal of the models who display haute couture and ready-to-wear clothes today. I use theories of female embodiment and psychological injury to explore the models’ own attachments to an industry that equally glamorizes and wounds them. In what ways do these models express a psychological dependency on the industry’s malpractices? Why do consumers underwrite and, indeed, exalt this dependency through recognizing these models as aspirational figures in contemporary culture? Feminist approaches to the body interrogate the cultural acceptance of the female body’s manipulability (Young 2005; Bordo 2003; Irigaray 1985); a central premise of the dissertation is, in turn, that the haute couture and ready-to-wear industry is able to produce both clothes and models as commodities because the majority of its models are teenage girls (Mears 2011). Analyzing the models through a feminist lens thus elucidates the culturally invisible elements of the models’ labor in contrast to the spectacular visibility of their glamorization on the runway. Theories of melancholic attachment (Abraham and Torok 1994; Freud 1956) then explain the models’ seeming acquiescence to an industry in which the models circulate as exchangeable units of largely underage, foreign labor bereft of formal workers’ rights and informal support networks. These psychological theories understand such acquiescence as individual pathologies, and, when placed in a feminist context, reflective of pathological attitudes toward female bodies on a broader cultural level.

The third and final framework is psychaesthetic, using theories of psychological trauma and female sexuality to read the critical aesthetics of experimental runway shows. What were the dramatic mechanisms through which experimental designers seemed to articulate the violence of the industry’s mass-production of clothes and models? What alternatives did these designers appear to suggest and to what extent were they merely sensational performances to capture market share? Applying trauma theory to experimental tableaus and enactments of banal and outrageous brutalization builds on the psychological theories used in the second framework to explain the models’ seeming attachments to glamorized abuse. Trauma theory also offers means of severing injurious attachments (Caruth 1996), as do feminist theories endorsing the recreative powers of female sexuality that can counter the reductive, instrumental tendencies of male sexuality organizing social life (Schaeffer 2011; Grosz 1995; Cixous and Clement 1986). Theories of female sexuality are especially apt for understanding experimental clothes that refused the polished aesthetics of haute couture and ready-to-wear for an aesthetics of the abject. The so-called ‘anti-fashion’ statements on the experimental runways nonetheless demand a political economic analysis as well that can make sense of the experimental movement’s surprising commercial success.

In developing the frameworks, I have relied little on the fashion studies literature for two main reasons. First, the literature on fashion tends to treat fashion as visual artifacts and bodily practices dissociated from the material conditions of fashion’s production and presentation (Edwards 2011; Lynch and Strauss 2007; Bruzzi and Gibson eds 2001; Arnold 2001). By contrast, I situate fashion in a specific industry that uses specific forms of labor for its display and marketing. While I have found certain fashion studies works helpful for conceptualizing these forms of labor as, for instance, ‘aesthetic labor’ in service of fashion’s ‘aesthetic commodities’ (Entwistle and Wissinger eds 2011; Tu 2011; Entwistle 2009), my focus on haute couture and ready-to-wear necessitates more precise formulations of value production and subject formation within the particularities of this niche industry.
Second, then, where the literature on haute couture and ready-to-wear is scant and largely fashion historical rather than critical (Seeling 2012; Koda and Martin 1995; Jacobs and Skrebneski 1995), I have had to theorize from documentary film narratives, news media sources and popular literature on the niche industry’s clothes and models. Dana Thomas’ survey of the transformations of the Euro-American luxury industry in the late 20th-century (2007) and A. F. Collins’ history of haute couture were foundational material for my interpretive frameworks, as were Ashley Mears’ study of the Euro-American fashion modeling market (2009) and David Redmon and Ashley Sabin’s documentary of fashion modeling in Japan (2011). In fashion studies, Caroline Evans’ cultural reading of 1990s experimental fashion (2003) was most relevant for my own readings of the movement as well as of the haute couture and ready-to-wear industry as a whole. Though I did not find Evans’ theoretical lens of specifically modernist alienation, decadence and decay convincing, I did borrow her insight regarding the pathological cast of the themes articulated in 90s experimental fashion shows. A key argument of the dissertation is that the uneasy glamour of the haute couture and ready-to-wear industry lies in its idealization of a psychaesthetics of violence. By a psychaesthetics of violence, I mean a mode of violence that is expressed aesthetically and that operates on a psychological level. The success of an industry built on such a mode of violence poses a cultural puzzle that demands a cultural explanation.

The dissertation begins in the present moment of the haute couture and ready-to-wear industry and reaches back in its history to illuminate the distinctiveness of its paradoxes today. Chapter one conceptualizes these paradoxes as three types of incoherences – political economic, social psychological and psychaesthetic, which the interpretive frameworks discussed above seek to resolve. The chapter first analyzes the business strategies guiding the contemporary industry’s production of clothes and models in turn to establish the political economic incoherence at issue. On the one hand, the similarities today between a haute couture or ready-to-wear garment and a mass-market garment in terms of quality and production model increasingly outweigh customary differences in price and prestige. On the other, the effects of the industry’s overwhelming drive toward corporate profitability are likewise felt in the labor conditions of its models. The industry’s models and clothes are promoted as glamorous high-value objects, but the models’ wasted bodies and wan faces point, on the contrary, to real conditions of physical as well psychological impoverishment. Chapter one then develops the social psychological and psychaesthetic incoherences that emerge from the industry’s contemporary political economy, providing the full context in which chapter two’s historical investigations take place.

Chapter two traces the 150-year-long course of the haute couture and ready-to-wear industry, again addressing its clothes and models in turn to identify continuities and ruptures in modes of production and presentation between past and present. The chapter divides the industry’s development into discrete stages that explain how the industry came to acquire the prestige it enjoys today while servicing luxury as well as mass markets at every stage. What becomes clear in the late-20th century is the industry’s shift of emphasis toward the mass market, resulting in significant, disquieting changes in the quality of what I call the industry’s dual model commodities. Divestment in the integrity of garment production and of modeling employment were manifest in the newfound gaudiness of runway shows that used freelance rather than tenured corps of models, per the industry decades prior. The question left at the chapter’s conclusion is why these business strategies have met with such success, and why, in particular,
the success of the industry’s human signifiers of luxury when they can provoke at the same time anxiety and disgust.

Chapters three and four thus return to the present time, offering psychological explanations for the increased allure of haute couture and ready-to-wear clothes and models despite their material impoverishment. Chapter three focuses on the models, building a social psychological framework to read recent studies and film portrayals of fashion modeling work. The chapter first examines the individual psychological behavior of models in the two main tiers of fashion modeling, mass as well as haute couture and ready-to-wear, and finds both categories of models to display an ambivalent but impassioned relationship with their work that is, however, particularly intensified for models of the latter category. A consideration of the cultural norms maintaining the models’ dependency on a dynamic of adulation and injury then illuminates the models’ popular appeal, setting the stage for the critiques issued on experimental runways discussed in chapter four.

The dissertation’s final chapter develops a psychaesthetic framework to read experimental shows that dramatized the violence intrinsic to the mass-production of clothes and models. Focusing on a handful of experimental designers, the chapter first accounts for the critical value of their experimental shows. Some designers appeared to challenge industry conventions through new techniques of garment-making alone while others relied more heavily on bizarre or terrifying performances. Chapter four then investigates the commercial appeal of these dramatizations, which drew on the same models and production strategies as their mainstream counterparts despite the shows’ subversive rhetoric. The chapter concludes that experimental shows offered merely a different brand of glamor – one that is perhaps more reprehensible than mainstream couture for acknowledging the industry’s abuses and yet practicing the same. The allure of the industry’s glamour and prestige is such that it can aestheticize and assimilate the beautiful, strange and abject alike.

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In the dissertation, I use the single term ‘couture’ to describe haute couture and ready-to-wear. While the term usually appears as a shorthand for haute couture alone in the fashion studies literature (Wilcox 2009; Troy 2003; Milbank 1985), the rival influence of haute couture and ready-to-wear in the global apparel industry today compels a synthetic category that highlights their functional equivalence. Haute couture remains technically distinct from ready-to-wear – a difference I complicate in chapters one and two, but both are presented in the same biannual show cycle by the same corps of models. I should also note my emphasis throughout the dissertation on the typical couture model. While the labor conditions of couture modeling have experienced a steady decline through the late-20th century, counter-trends do surface as does the appearance of individual couture models who depart from the industry’s alarmingly thin, Eastern Eurasian teenage norm. I discuss the movement among couture models in New York to unionize their profession in the dissertation’s conclusion. Here, I would like to acknowledge that certain couture designers do, on occasion, cast older or fuller-figured models for runway shows, and that a handful of couture models are paid significantly more than the rest. As I explain in chapter two, however, these so-called ‘supermodels’ are only able to attain incomes that correspond with their fame through modeling assignments off the runway for, say, couture print campaigns or endorsing products such as perfumes and cosmetics. The use of older or so-called ‘plus-size’ couture models on the runways, on the other hand, can be read through
the same commercial logic as experimental show techniques. This diversity has remained a novel aesthetic at the industry’s margins that has neither translated to improved labor practices nor to new aesthetic archetypes.
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I. The enigma of couture

1. The business of the clothes
   i. The retail market
   ii. The suppliers

2. The business of the models
   i. The labor demand
   ii. The labor supply

3. Incoherences: Political economic – Social psychological – Psychaesthetic

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Fig. 1 Couture models closing the Herve Leger Fall 2011 show in New York. Image © FABtv.
In the business of dressing women, couture appears to be a commercial enigma. The clothes displayed on the runways of New York, Milan, Paris and London are mostly modeled by young, thin, towering figures. The prices of the clothes are precipitous and their designs often outlandishly improper. Who would pay $4,000 for a sleeveless cape or wear silk boxers in public? Are sheer harem pants paired with a tiny bandeau top flattering on anyone besides the models? And yet couture brands comprise the core business of two of the three conglomerates that dominate the global luxury industry today. How is this possible?

Runway shows are the premier marketing vehicle for a couture brand’s entire range of goods, from apparel to what are known as subsidiary good such as accessories and fragrances. The shows offer previews of what a brand will purvey in the upcoming retail season; more specifically, the clothes displayed on couture’s runways articulate the aesthetic concepts informing both the clothes that are actually put into production and a brand’s cheaper, subsidiary goods. Couture customers wear diluted, more practical versions of runway clothes. The majority of a brand’s profits derive, however, from its subsidiary goods (Thomas 2007).

An enigma remains nonetheless. How do the couture clothes modeled on the runway succeed in selling items as disparate as six-figure evening dresses and votive candles? How do the clothes generate a sense of luxury that is then sustained across so many price points? The clothes are, strikingly, modeled by veritable production lines of human hangers. The models are glamorized as highly paid ideal types in popular culture; the clothes, hyped for their consummate richness of material and craftsmanship. Yet the average model works for little to nothing in an unregulated, highly exploitative labor market, and the quality of the labor and materials that source the production of the clothes are increasingly shortchanged for the sake of maximal profitability.

In this chapter, I argue that the disjuncture between both the quality and price of couture clothes and the appearance and the conditions of couture modeling work is crucial to understanding what I call the incoherences of couture today. I identify three types of incoherences – political economic, social psychological and psychoaesthetic, demonstrating the importance of examining couture clothes together with the models used to display them in order to understand the industry’s tremendous influence despite its malpractices. The models are human figures that animate the runways’ tableaus of luxury even as these same figures evidence physical and psychological damage. I first introduce the business strategies behind the production of couture clothes and the production of the models in turn. I then examine the different modes of couture’s contemporary incoherence.

1. The business of the clothes

The clothes presented on the runways of the four Euro-American high fashion capitals fall into two technical categories, haute couture and ready-to-wear. National fashion syndicates regulate this classification but only haute couture is strictly stipulated. Founded in 1858, haute couture must be made and shown in Paris, finished by hand and involve a minimum of three fittings per garment. Ready-to-wear, born almost a century later, can be entirely machine-made and is therefore cheaper than haute couture. Historically, ready-to-wear was significantly cheaper than haute couture, selling at three- to four-figure price points in contrast to five- and six-figure haute couture dresses. Today, ready-to-wear clothes can reach the five-figure mark while the new category of demi-couture signals the shift of haute couture to online retail platforms: demi-couture clothes are haute couture clothes that eschew the haute couture’s custom-fitted
stipulations, ostensibly allowing customers to purchase, in the words of fashion journalist Nicole Phelps, ‘[haute] couture quality at the speed of the Internet’ (Phelps 2012).

The immediate availability of clothes that require a team of seamstresses an average of 150 hours per piece to produce underscores, however, the contradictions at play in the couture industry’s attempt to bring an expensive niche good to a global middle-market. The luxury conglomerates that bought out the industry in the late 20th-century draw on haute couture’s artisanal heritage to promote ready-to-wear clothes and six-pack underwear alike. But the pressure to create profit margins large enough to finance global expansion is felt throughout the corporations’ hierarchy of goods3. The increasing volume of haute couture sales in new markets suggests the extent to which the industry exploits haute couture’s loophole of being hand-finished rather than fully hand-made in Paris. Meanwhile, exponentially rising prices belie the extensive cost-cutting measures that characterize the production of ready-to-wear4. Insofar as corporations aim for couture to compete in the same market as mass-retailed ‘fast fashion,’ whose retail stock completely changes as rapidly as every 11 days, product integrity must be sacrificed. Marketing works to generate an impression of luxury in place of continued investments in labor and materials.

i. The retail market

Couture’s trendsetting strength far outweighs its material impoverishment for its customers and fans. The clothes on the runway determine the styles of clothes that will be retailed across the various segments of the women’s apparel industry at large in the months ahead. The couture clothes translated for ease of wearability retain the runway’s glamorous cachet, as does a brand’s subsidiary goods. This is why, despite the declining quality of couture clothes, the number of couture customers grows apace with a secondary, aspirational customer base whose accessory-heavy purchases play into corporate strategies for grooming new generations of luxury clotheshorses. Couture, once the exclusive terrain of the older Euro-American elite, has acquired a younger, global middle-class audience that seeks to purchase from the brands themselves rather than merely their fast fashion facsimiles.

Since the late 20th-century, the clientele for couture has become increasingly diverse. First, an old guard that patronizes haute couture alone remains. Haute couture clothes are designed to retain this specific contingent of customers and are thus more formal and opulent than ready-to-wear. The BBC documentary The Secret World of Haute Couture (2007) attempted to penetrate precisely this clique of Euro-American patrons who range from newer inductees in their 50s to octogenarians such as wife of department store magnate Alfred S. Bloomingdale Betsy Bloomingdale. Susan Gutfreund speculates that it was her recent appointment as a trustee of a major New York charity organization that earned her an invitation to the January haute couture shows – wealth alone does not suffice. Beyond the Euro-American circuit, it is wealth and titles that grant entrance to shows as well as private viewings and fittings. Middle Eastern royalty purchase haute couture by the plane full. In his account of the key figures and forces in the couture industry, Nicholas Coleridge vividly describes, for instance, a Kuwaiti dry cleaner he came across in his research travels: over a million dollars’ worth of haute couture gowns languished in the back room, unclaimed for years (Coleridge 1989). This situation could not contrast more sharply with Bloomingdale’s meticulous accounting of her collection, each garment affixed with labels specifying the event to and year in which it was worn. Where haute
couture’s Euro-American customers regard it as collector’s items in the sense of wearable art, haute couture is simply a status symbol to its newest members. 

Ready-to-wear is also considered an emblem of wealth in the Russian and East Asian markets into which luxury corporations are aggressively expanding. Haute couture may be more exclusive in practice, with a French name to enhance its repute, but corporations tout the heritage value of ready-to-wear and haute couture labels alike. The European conglomerates point to the traditions of British tailoring, French embellishing and Italian leatherworking underpinning their clothes. American companies play up the country’s historic strength in luxury sportswear. As brands turn to narrative film shorts to build awareness about brand history, the nouveau riche from developing countries are emptying entire stores at home in single shopping excursions and traveling abroad for the exclusive purpose of buying couture. Ready-to-wear is targeted at a younger clientele. The clothes tend to be racier and theatrically bizarre, the point being to build brand loyalty among an urban, international youth who seek to signal their Western high fashion know-how. Those who cannot yet afford the clothes purchase cheaper accessories; this marks the first stage of entry into the ranks of Euro-American socialites, celebrities, fashion editors and fashion bloggers.

ii. The suppliers

The global presence of what was until the late 20th-century a boutique niche economy attests to the prioritization of marketing and management over production in the couture industry today. The publicly listed corporations that own most couture labels have quietly moved away from costly investments in the exceptional materials and craftsmanship that once defined couture. These corporate giants have set the parameters of competition for the entire industry, compelling privately-owned couture brands to transition from production- to marketing-driven business strategies to survive. The two largest privately-owned brands opt to maintain the quality of their goods – Hermes claims to reject any kind of mechanized production and in 2002 Chanel bought six specialist workshops that have historically serviced haute couture businesses in order to ensure their solvency. As of 2010, Hermes is nonetheless 36% publicly-owned, and smaller, especially fledgling independent brands pin their hopes on attracting corporate investment. The designer exchanges full creative control for realizing, it is presumed, her brand’s full potential.

The structure of the contemporary couture industry crystallized in 1990, when the industrialist Bernard Arnault took over luxury giant Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton (LVMH). Henry Racamier, the son-in-law of the Louis Vuitton family, had single-handedly transformed the two-store luxury fashion and leather goods business into a publicly traded success only to be out-wiled by Arnault. In the 1980s, through cutting out the middleman and directly taking control of Louis Vuitton’s sales and manufacturing (a business strategy known as vertical integration), Racamier boosted profits, expanded production and marketed aggressively. He then acquired the champagne and perfume group Veuve Clicquot, merged with another champagne and perfume group – Moet-Hennessy – and topped off what had become the sixth largest company listed on the French stock market with the couture label Givenchy.

Meanwhile, Arnault had begun to build his own luxury group centered on a number of high-profile but struggling couture brands. His tactic was to buy as many such brands as possible to take advantage of economies of scale, and to revive each individual brands’ market appeal. The difference between Recamier and Arnault was Recamier’s devotion to product integrity as a member of the Vuitton family (Thomas 2007). When Arnault seized control of LVMH therefore,
the luxury industry as a whole and the couture industry by extension came under a new paradigm. Arnault integrated production among different brands (what is known as horizontal integration), and, for his couture holdings, appointed new casts of young and irreverent designers to lend shock value; he streamlined brand names for increasing ease of recognition and contemporized their logos. For the first time, runway shows were publicized. Arnault set the blueprint for his rivals then and continued to lead the field in expanding LVMH to emerging markets.

What Arnault proved was that couture clothes could function foremost as conceptual lodestars for a brand’s cheaper goods, obviating the need to ensure its material superiority per se. Under parent corporations, a brand’s design and production teams are separated, often by large swaths of ocean rather than a floor or a few city blocks per couture for the first hundred plus years of its existence. The chief designer of each brand takes on the title and role of ‘creative director.’ At a brand’s headquarters in New York, London, Paris or Milan, this creative director guides a brand’s aesthetic from retail season to retail season, overseeing product design as well as marketing strategy while the rest of the design team more concretely drafts the clothes and accessories. The parent corporation possesses absolute veto power, however, and oversees production, selecting raw material suppliers and manufacturers that suit its cost constraints. Haute couture clothes must, again, be finished by hand in Paris; ready-to-wear prototypes shown on the runway are usually adjusted by the design team but are otherwise mechanically produced and distributed far from the high fashion capitals. Design teams at smaller independent brands vet each garment at the least. Even so, the creative focus has, overall, shifted from innovating on the niche good itself to marketing to a mass audience.

2. The business of the models

Marketing begins with runway shows each retail season. Twice a year, the industry gathers in the four Euro-American high fashion capitals for their respective Fashion Week. Parent corporations spend up to millions of dollars per show: planning and set design commence months in advance, and, as show week approaches, invitations are sent; seating plans are meticulously arranged for maximum press attention (front-row seats are reserved for celebrities and the most powerful fashion editors); elaborate gift bags are arranged; models are cast; hair and make-up teams are chosen; and finally, the dozen-minute show itself. The shows are purposely arresting, a necessary extravagance. Corporations are happy to underwrite the myriad costs that go into achieving a creative director’s vision because, in the words of Chanel CEO Bruno Pavlovsky, “the show is the starting point for all of our stories – for everything [that will be sold]” (Pavlovsky in Amed 2012).

The majority of models that bring the garment to vivid life, however, for a pittance. Faces painted, hair teased and limbs adorned, the models appear to be elite specimens of women whose figures denote expensive and intensive regimens of grooming and training (diet, exercise, training in speech and manners) yet, at the same time, exhibit signs of considerable physical and psychological stress. The first half of the 20th-century had witnessed the modeling profession’s increasing formalization: modeling agencies and training programs were established, and couture models in particular secured long tenures and respectable incomes. Today, couture models work freelance and typically do not earn a living wage. Couture brands cast new models for every runway show, providing little to no monetary compensation. The models have become
radically disposable instruments for displaying equally disposable clothes. They are the life-force of couture brands who, in enriching the industry, deplete themselves.

i. The labor demand

Contemporary couture models are employed as independent contractors in a two-tiered labor market. Where couture models perform what is known as editorial work, commercial modeling is defined by so-called catalogue work. Catalogue work, in which models explicitly promote everyday products from clothes to cars and appliances, pays consistently high rates (Mears 2011). Editorial work issues sporadic and meager earnings but more renown: couture models circulate in the high-glamour spaces of the New York, Milan, Paris and London runways, the showrooms of couture brands, the photography studios and sets of high fashion photographers. Modeling agencies manage both types of models and profit in two main ways. Charging 20 percent agency fees to the model’s client and taking 20 percent from a model’s commission, the bulk of an agency’s profit derives from commercial modeling work. Couture modeling is a high-risk venture for both the agency and the couture model, but it is the model who shoulders the far greater share.

Like the clothes they display, couture models are emblems of wealth for an industry that harnesses the power of marketing to bridge the growing disparity between production costs and product quality on the one hand and retail price and cultural prestige on the other. In the couture industry, editorial jobs are valued for their artistic character in contrast to the banal aesthetics of commercial work. Couture clients thus book couture models for their ‘edgy’ looks (ibid). This look is significantly younger and thinner than that of commercial models and additionally involves the projection of a particular insouciant attitude and participation in ‘forms of nightlife consumption [that]…promote the image of the industry as a center of glamor and ‘cool’ (Entwistle in Entwistle and Wissinger eds 2012). The core physique must be androgynous while the particular shade of edgy varies unpredictably season to season. What this means for a modeling agency is that it must keep a stock of edgy candidates from which clients can choose. The dilemma is that hiring couture candidates are expensive for the agency because clients only offer significant compensation for what is known as ‘exclusive’ editorial work, and few models among all the agencies in the industry are ever chosen. For up to six-figure sums, for instance, a couture label may book a model to walk in its runway show alone and/or, for up to seven-figure sums, contract the model for its high-profile advertising campaign; the rest of the label’s runway models are paid in little else besides prestige. Most couture modeling candidates will attend thousands of castings a year and land just a handful of editorial assignments. The costs of setting up and transporting candidates to and from castings quickly add up – costs that are transferred from clients to agencies to models.

ii. The labor supply

Couture models are iconized as ideals of beauty and beauty in turn ‘associated with socioeconomic power and high self-esteem’ (Soley-Beltran in Entwistle and Wissinger eds, 2012, 108-109), but the majority of models owe their agencies anywhere from hundreds to tens of thousands of dollars. The agencies do not always recuperate these costs, hence their share of the risk (Mears 2011). Models, however, assume costs that extend far beyond financial debt. The model also faces a physical dilemma of maintaining a prepubescent physique as she ages. This
effects a psychological burden that is then compounded by two distinct tensions: one between the radical uncertainty of finding work in a situation of debt while constantly exuding easy affluence in the formal as well as informal venues of the industry, and the other between performing sexual hauteur despite her sexual inexperience.

The typical couture model does not earn a living wage. At runway shows, she is attended to by veritable armies of make-up artists, hairstylists and production assistants and adulated by hoards of paparazzi and couture fans; finding her way back to her 5th-story walk-up in Crown Heights, New York or Croyden, London at dawn, she knows neither where her next assignment will take her nor when that assignment will ever arrive. As freelance labor, she is on call at any time, attending fittings for shows well through the night during runway season and flying off to Lithuanian forests or the North African desert for photoshoots at a moment’s notice. Such assignments sound glamorous but the model pays for all expenses incurred herself. Her agency keeps an undisclosed charge account running for the extensive start-up and maintenance costs of her job, billing them against her prospective earnings. ‘What looks like indentured servitude is a routine part of [her] independent contractor agreement,’ sociologist Ashley Mears concludes (Mears 2011, 65). In model Sara Ziff’s documentary of the couture modeling industry, Picture Me (2009), her model friend Siena curses the racket that is the industry for leading her deeper and deeper into debt. Siena finally gathers the will to leave the industry. She is 23 years old.

Couture models age out much earlier than do commercial models in large part because of the stringent physical specifications of the industry. The industry standard is known as ‘Paris thin’. Preteen girls are scouted for their height and extreme thinness but to stay the same weight as their bodies mature, common practices range from eating tissues to deflect hunger to receiving nutrients through hospital drips. In the Hollywood film Gia (1998) based on the real-life career of 1980s supermodel Gia Carangi, the modeling agent advises Gia to take laxatives, diuretics and prescription drugs prior to castings. Gia, still a 15-year-old small town girl, is reluctant but eventually adopts the practice as a matter of course. As the film proceeds, Gia then acquires the fatal heroin habit common to expediting weight loss in the industry. We see set members arranging her unconscious body into desired poses at photoshoots and – this being prior to photoshopping technology – finding ways to conceal the track marks littering her inner arms. Model contracts stipulate a model’s weight and are rendered conditional on a model’s adherence to those measurement. Moreover, as depicted in Gia and described in numerous firsthand accounts (Clements 2013; Porizkova 2007), agents continually push models to lose more weight. Gia dies from heroin overdose at age 26. But her story is well-known because she was a supermodel in the era of supermodels. Today, the labor market for couture modeling has become incomparably more competitive. Some models lose their life savings to their agencies while others lose their lives (Ziff 2012; Sauers 2010).

Following a spate of suicides among couture models in 2008 and 2009, incipient research on the mental health of models shows that they ‘suffer from an acute sense of exposure and fragility’ (Soley-Beltran in Entwistle and Wissinger eds 2012, 108). ‘Young models…often report feeling unreal and empty,’ writes former model Patricia Soley-Beltran. One reason is that they ‘have little control over their lives…I’m managing you, everybody clearly understands that it is total control, you don’t even visit your boyfriend without telling me [italics added],’ a model agent whom Soley-Beltran interviews acknowledges (ibid). A 2011 documentary that tracks a rural Siberian girl’s foray into the commercial modeling circuit in Japan shows her being shuttled from casting to casting and otherwise idly sitting in what is known as a model apartment: a tiny bare room on the outskirts of Tokyo that her modeling agency rents out to her, shared with a
Russian girl contracted to the same agency. The Russian girl Madlen comes from a middle-class family and leaves the industry in debt only a few weeks into the job, homesick and fed up with the monotony, loneliness, and relentless scrutiny over her weight. The Siberian girl Nadya is shown sobbing on the phone to her mother but determined to land more assignments. For a jewelry commercial, 13-year-old Nadya dons a body-hugging black dress with a plunging neckline; heavily made up, she parts her lips, swiveling her torso this way and that before the camera. She performs a sexual confidence and attitude of haughty indifference that is wholly alien to her age and upbringing. This distance from not only family and friends but also from the experiences that inform her sense of self and self-value becomes even more acute among couture models.

Couture models must radiate sexual allure and affluence in the presence of ceaseless press attention, intensifying feelings of alienation, falsity and, according to recent studies, trauma. Through the numerous social events that agencies urge models to attend and behind the thousand camera flashes at the end of the runway, backstage and on the street, couture models are known to struggle with eating disorders, substance dependencies, stress, anxiety and depression (Sauers 2010). Sexual harassment and abuse are rampant. It is telling that while Ziff herself was a highly successful couture model who secured multiple advertising contracts with major couture labels, she leaves the industry at age 22. Picture Me is in part autobiographical, capturing Ziff in her most private moments, at home, in hotels, at her agency, following the trajectory of both her professional ascension and psychological deterioration. Ziff is not only rare among couture models for her success but for her privileged background – she is native to New York City and often sees her professor parents – but, even so, finds herself trapped between the promise of greater success and the stresses of the physical and psychological injuries sustained at work. The typical couture model is foreign to her work site and managed by agents who seek to profit in the same manner as the couture labels that peddle the clothes. In the couture industry, couture clothes and models alike are, in other words, model commodities sold for a killing.

What is distinctive about the political economy of couture clothes today? In what important ways does the labor of couture models differ from other kinds of contemporary wage labor? The aim of the preceding sections has been to show that these questions must be addressed together. The retail value of couture clothes reflects in part the belief in the hand-worked, artisanal labor that goes into their creation and in part the aspiration to look as edgy and sophisticated as the model wearing the clothes on the runway. Marketing underscores each of these human elements, but the presentation of the clothes on bodies that appear to evidence the excision of human individuality and female sexual difference is unique in the history of couture. This is a constitutive incoherence of the contemporary couture industry.

One way to address this incoherence is to begin with the history of the political economy of couture clothes and interrogate the effects of the overwhelming drive toward corporate profitability that began in the 1980s. Adopting this approach in chapter two, I argue that the growing rift between the price and quality of couture clothes is likewise enacted in the couture modeling sub-market between the model’s apparent affluence and actual labor conditions. While divestment in the career of couture models is characteristic to wage labor across industries today, couture modeling is nonetheless conspicuous for its disquieting glamorization of figures that
suggest certain types of physical and psychological damage. It is, then, this specific psychophysicality that is used to market the couture garment. I discuss below the social psychological and psychaesthetic modes in which this incoherence operates.

i. Social psychological incoherences

On couture’s runways, clothes are displayed on standardized psychophysicalities that recall not humans so much as automatons and not women so much as teenage boys. Given this ideal, the incoherence is twofold: on the one hand, the success of this psychophysicality as a marketing mechanism; on the other, couture models’ own acquiescence to attaining and maintaining the industry standard. Despite high rates of mental health illness\(^2\), narrative accounts of commercial as well as couture modeling relate the difficulty for models to move past the industry. In *Girl Model* (2011), Nadya finishes her tenure in Tokyo owing her agency thousands of dollars but returns a few months later to try her hand again. In *Picture Me* (2009), Siena is aware that she has been in debt for years but unable to leave a haphazard career spanning dozens of model apartments in different cities and work injuries that include sexual abuse. Those who can no longer model return as recruiters, stylists, editors, less out of financial necessity than, it appears, psychological dependency. The question is thus how the industry seems to forge a psychological attachment to a psychaesthetics of violence on the part of models as well as spectators. It is an ideal for which both parties pay, I hope to show, a terrible price.

Narratives of the modeling profession routinely juxtapose its pleasures with its muted horrors. The thrill of even seeing her face entirely obscured in a wig in a Japanese fashion magazine seems to carry Nadya through long stretches of fruitless castings (*Girl Model* 2011). In *Picture Me* (2009), Ziff is captured excitedly looking for her Tommy Hilfiger billboard over a Manhattan warehouse; attending a big-name casting; tearing open an envelope that yields a check for over $80,000 for a recent assignment—a moment of silence and then, in a tone approaching awe, Ziff whispers that she has never held so much money in her hands. The camera pans over the slip of paper, resting on the five-figure sum, and then up to Ziff’s glowing countenance. ‘I’m rich,’ Ziff grins. A few scenes later, however, Ziff comments on commercial footage of her 17-year-old self working a runway show in a tiny bikini: ‘I wasn’t sure how what I did differed from being a prostitute.’ The runway show camera zooms in on her lower back and the movement of her buttocks as strides back down the catwalk. The viewer is reminded that a technician is handling the camera. As Ziff goes on to tell, cameramen swarm around models as they change backstage. Stripping on stage during pre-show rehearsals is an accepted practice; stripping at castings and on photoshoots, expected when asked.

Mears argues that editorial work confers a ‘non-rational symbolic capital’ that sustains couture models through extreme physical regimens, relentless exposure and scrutiny, precarious financial circumstances and repeated sexual harassment (2011). Symbolic capital stands in contrast to economic capital, or, monetary gain; in editorial work, the two are mutually exclusive for all but a handful of couture models, and yet the promise of editorial stardom and financial success seems enough to secure the ill-compensated labor of the rest of the corps. As a former model, Mears herself recounts ‘the familiar jolt of excitement that would keep [her] in the field for the next two and half years, that promise of possibility’ despite the ‘fairly bleak world of…unpredictability, floating norms, self-discipline, rejection, and emotional labor’ (Mears 2011, 71-72 and 115). The heyday of supermodeldom had long passed—the high editorial fees of the 1980s and 1990s plummeted with the entrance of a vast pool of aspiring models, among other
structural changes in the couture modeling market. In 2009, the couture model-turned-mogul Gisele Bundchen earned $25 million; median income for commercial and couture models barely cleared $27,000. Each class of models faces its own predicament: commercial models are able to find relatively steady but only moderately remunerated employment; editorial work is erratic with the possibility of industry recognition and financial success but couture models cannot crossover into the commercial circuit if they hope to remain competitive. For couture models, the competition is winner-takes-all. But dreams of fame and fortune are only the most apparent variables in the model’s calculus to stay.

Narratives such as Ziff’s or simply Siena’s brief statements also suggest a more pernicious psychological impasse rooted in both the couture industry’s specific practices of subjectivation and broader cultural norms condoning the injurious instrumentalizing of the female body. Models are recruited at a young age and generally work far from family and friends; these are crucial factors in seeking to understand the psychological dependency that models appear to demonstrate for continuing careers that physically and psychologically injure as much as reward with the ‘promise of possibility.’ Recalling her early couture modeling years after 25 years of taciturn silence, model-turned mogul Kate Moss admits, ‘I see a 16-year-old now and to ask her to take her clothes off would feel really weird. But they were like, if you don’t do it, then we’re not going to book you again.’ The young Moss really wanted the job; ‘they’ made it conditional on her nudity. So Moss ‘locked herself in a lavatory and cried’ and then went ahead with the shoot (Fisher 2012). 3 years after this formative assignment, Moss is topless again, now instructed to straddle a topless male model. She suffers a nervous breakdown (‘It didn’t feel like me at all,’ Moss recounts. ‘I felt really bad about [the assignment]. I didn’t like it. I couldn’t get out of bed for two weeks. I thought I was going to die’ (ibid)). The couture industry trades on edginess and sexual provocation to attract a younger and thus broader customer base, and the question chapter three addresses is not only how models can become subjectivated by such practices but also how spectators can become conditioned to desire figures appearing to equivocate between privilege and abuse.

ii. Psychoaesthetic incoherences

If contemporary couture appears to endorse a psychoaesthetics of violence to which models as well as spectators risk attachment, the incoherence here lies in the dynamic of appeal and disgust that couture’s ideal inspires (Clements 2013; Entwistle and Wissinger eds 2012; De Perthus 2003). The figures on the runway are pared to a minimum so that the clothes may fall unimpeded. More specifically, the couture industry appears to demand from its models a mode of impoverishment that both naturalizes female objecthood and figures physical signs of female sexual maturity as abject through its pronounced absence. A movement within contemporary couture known as experimental couture articulated this precise mode of impoverishment. Through sartorial strategies such as shrouding the body in unhemmed sheaths and warping fabric to create strangely lumpen forms, experimental designers were understood to interrogate the sexualization and standardization of couture’s ruthless ideal (English 2011). The designers’ championing of what was considered an ‘anti-fashion’ aesthetic also drew attention to fashion’s historical disrepute. Below, I address European audiences’ longstanding ambivalence toward fashion before turning to experimental couture.

Fashion has been associated with the ‘monstrous feminine’ since the term came into usage during Elizabethan England to denote rapid changes in styles of dress (Steele 2012);
dressmaking was specifically subordinate to tailoring, which was considered a male craft form. Popular texts and imagery condemned fashion for encouraging venal behavior – ‘prodigality, lasciviousness, vanity [and] foolishness,’ writes Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider of the reputation that surrounded female embroiderers and lacemakers who produced the luxury fashions of 17th-century Holland (1989, 242). While the extravagance of men’s fashion in fact surpassed that of women’s fashion in this period, it was women who performed the decorative work considered fashion proper. Tailors created and innovated sartorial forms that women then embellished. It was tailors who constructed, for instance, women’s corsets on the basis of which dressmakers realized increasingly spectacular ‘visual fantasies’ (Hollander 1994, 70). The dressmakers of 18th-century France attained new heights of reprehensible lavishness; the moral elision of fashion and female frivolity crested with the story and fate of French Queen Marie Antoinette.

While fashion remained, relative to art, a lesser craft form identified with women’s labor, bodies and tastes, the fin-de-siecle Parisian dressmakers who aspired to elevate dressmaking into a recognized art form nonetheless effected a distinction within fashion that has carried through the present. The practice of haute couture differed from previous modes of luxury dressmaking on a number of registers, technical, commercial as well as cultural. Bringing his British tailoring skills to bear on the excessively ornamental designs of French womenswear, the Englishman Charles Worth opened a dress shop in Paris in 1858 with a line of simpler but flattering gowns. He labeled his gowns as artists sign their artworks, outfitting himself in the garb of Rembrandt and claiming to ‘create’ women through dictating the styles that best suited each individual client. He staged the first fashion shows, turning out seasonal collections on live models. In the process, Worth gave rise to the profession of the couturier, or, dress designer.

The haute couture business was not lucrative, but, through various marketing strategies, couturiers gained a degree of cultural visibility heretofore unknown to the anonymous dressmakers of past centuries. On the one hand, the Worth label ensured that the dazzling confections commissioned by and immortalized in court portraits of clients such as Empress Elisabeth of Austria and Empress Eugenie of France were attributed to Worth. This brought publicity to Worth and the couturiers who followed in his footsteps not only among European royalty but also abroad, where a growing fashion industry in the United States purchased reproduction rights to the Parisian designs. On the other hand, then, haute couture became the source of sartorial authority in the mass-retail fashion market. Haute couture was a model of elegance and sophistication. As the 20th-century commenced, haute couture also acquired a titillating dose of distinctively modernist transgression.

Early 20th-century couturiers were heavily influenced by modernist art principles. ‘To understand the fundamental changes in fashion that occurred between about 1908 and about 1925,’ Richard Martin argues, one must look to Cubism (1998). Cubist flattening and fragmentation of the pictorial plane galvanized couturiers to reimagine the relationship between female dress and body: where dress once mimicked and multiplied the proportions of the female body, the body now dematerialized beneath sleek sheaths of fabric.
The paradox of modernist dress was that it exposed the body in order to accentuate a femininity and sex appeal that appeared prepubescent. Bias-cut, body-skimming shifts and chemises were designed to reveal slender physiques that, by the 1960s, had dwindled to the proportions of a child. Thereon, the figure in couture would become increasingly eviscerated of signs of female sexual maturity but hypersexualized nonetheless (Breward 2003). This was the relationship between gender and body, body and dress in couture specifically addressed by the late 20th-century movement known as experimental couture. Runway shows featuring bare-faced models in disheveled-looking clothes problematized the industry’s co-production of clothes and models. What if couture refused to sexualize the female body and rendered irrelevant its gender? How, in an industry of high glamor and accelerated production, could customers be compelled to care about the discreet material details of natural rather than synthetic dye, or the hundred-plus hours of high-skilled labor that go into a fully hand-stitched rather than hand-finished garment? How viable are the economics of small-batch production, investing in a brand’s employees and building meaningful relationships with customers when global corporations dictate the terms of the trade?

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I have argued that the incoherences of contemporary couture are threefold. The high-volume production of staggeringly expensive couture clothes designed for a sexualized prepubescent ideal is a political economic incoherence that can be further analyzed along social psychological and psychaesthetic lines. Considered from a social psychological angle, the question is, again, why we as a culture exalt these figures as aesthetic ideals, and, relatedly, why couture models pursue this ideal at so great a risk to their financial, physical and psychological well-being. Insofar as couture’s ideal provokes both desire and disquiet, however, the inquiry then turns to the ambivalent cultural regard toward couture as a feminine craft servicing female bodies and tastes. The couture industry promotes two model commodities, setting, as per couture’s inception, cultural standards for female dress and body.
II. Model commodities: A history

1. The clothes
   i. 1850-1910s: The art of the trade
   ii. 1920-1950s: Re(de)fining luxury
   iii. 1960-1980s: The new category of couture
   iv. 2000-2010s: A question of (abs)traction

2. The models
   i. 1850-1950s: Cultivating the ‘cabine’
   ii. 1960-2010s: The exquisite corps(e) of couture

Fig. 2. The production team of Christian Dior’s haute couture division in front of the label’s headquarters in Paris, with model Natalia Vodianova, October 2008. Photograph by Patrick Demarchelier. © Vogue.
Its name implies its provenance: haute couture commenced in France with the establishment of the House of Worth in 1858. Worth was an Englishman who integrated British tailoring techniques with dressmaking, but he chose to base production in Paris because France had long reigned as the capital of European luxury. France’s royal courts had ‘set the standard for lavish living’ and especially for extravagant fashion:

In the [17th]-century, French king Henri IV’s second wife, Marie de Medicis, wore for the baptism of one of her children a gown embroidered with thirty-two thousand pearls and three thousand diamonds. Louis XIV dressed in satin suits with velvet sashes and frilly blouses…and wigs of flowing curls topped with ostrich-plumed chapeaux…Madame de Pompadour, the mistress of Louis XV, personally encouraged and supported the luxury artisans. Louis XVI’s wife, Marie-Antoinette, overran her annual clothing budget of $3.6 million by buying gowns encrusted with sapphires, diamonds, silver, and gold…Napoleon’s wife, the empress Josephine, spent half of the $15 million France earned selling the five-hundred-million-acre Louisiana territory to the United States in 1803 on clothes in ten years. (Thomas 2007, 21-22)

It was under the reign of Louis XIV that finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert enacted a series of measures to promote domestic manufacturing of luxury goods; thereafter, French royalty lent, per de Pompadour, a personal hand in cultivating its native luxury industry. Through her association with Marie-Antoinette, Rose Bertin ran a dressmaking business that grew to become a significant player in the French luxury export market (Collins 2009). Worth’s reputation likewise soared when Empress Eugenie, wife of Napoleon’s nephew Louis Napoleon, signed on as a client and muse. Her patronage encouraged his constant use of rich fabrics, which in turn, almost exclusively sponsored the silk manufacturers of Lyon.

This tradition of wealthy and titled women patronizing couturiers who patronized luxury manufacturers continued, with a brief interruption during the Nazi Occupation of Paris in the 1940s, through to the 1950s. Legendary fashion editor Diana Vreeland’s description of her prewar Chanel dress is no less bedazzling than accounts of its Bourbon and Bonaparte forbears: ‘The huge skirt was of silver lame, quilted in pearls…then the bolero was lace entirely encrusted with pearls and diamante, then underneath the bolero was the most beautiful shirt of linen lace’ (Vreeland 1984, 68).

Contrary to customary conceptions of the early haute couture industry however, the business was not profitable. For centuries, luxury had been a matter of humble, anonymous artisans crafting small quantities of objects of unparalleled beauty and durability; in the 19th-century, couture companies were uniformly small, family-run and privately-held affairs that cared foremost about creating products of the finest quality (Thomas 2007). The earliest couturiers used fortunes gained from investments in areas such as art and real estate to fund their couture enterprises. At the same time, these couturiers laid the foundations of haute couture’s eventual profitability in the 20th-century. Worth produced standardized models of dresses that he would then individualize for clients (Troy 2003). These models, known as models-for-copy, were sold to department stores at home and abroad for widespread distribution under the department stores’ name. Sales of mass-market reproduction rights rather than custom-fitted clothes propelled revenues, prefiguring the perfume and underwear licenses that would come to underwrite the success of later couturiers.

This chapter traces the political economy of the couture industry through its 150-year-long history. Addressing first the history of the production and sales of couture clothes, I then...
consider the history of couture models understood as commodities that are similarly produced and sold by the industry. The accounts of couture clothes and couture models are each divided into discrete periods of development. Each stage of development in the political economy of couture clothes shapes, in turn, a demand for a specific economic class and physical type of couture model. I will argue that as sartorial luxury was excised of its material foundations, leaving all but the name, so too the models became increasingly empty signifiers of a brand’s luxury cachet.

1. The clothes

The trajectory of the history of couture’s political economy begins from couture’s dual presence in the luxury fashion and mass fashion markets of the 19th-century. While couture’s formal integration with mass fashion did not occur until the 1980s, the balance between luxury and mass fashion interests had begun shifting toward the latter decades earlier. In this section, I track, then, the changes in the production and sales of couture clothes through three discrete periods: the rise of haute couture from the mid-19th to early 20th-century; its flourishing from the early to mid-20th century alongside the industry’s first forays into ready-to-wear; and the ascendance of ready-to-wear over haute couture in the mid to late 20th-century. For each period, I examine the models of production used, on the one hand, and the forms of marketing and merchandising directed at consumers, on the other. Broadly stated, all of these factors varied with couture’s target audience and couture’s aesthetic as well as commercial relationship to mass fashion. So long as the couture industry serviced an older generation of wealthy, often titled Euro-American woman, it needed to define luxury by way of commercial discreetness and integrity of material and design. The industry’s gradual assimilation into a global, youthful mass fashion market exploded the discretionary imperatives on which it was built; more and more, luxury became fully correlative to a price range alone rather than to a garment’s quality.

i.1850-1910s: The art of the trade

When Worth opened his eponymous haute couture ‘house’ on Paris’ Rue de la Paix in 1858, a mass market for fashion – as distinct from apparel – had already emerged. Mechanized modes of production rendered fashion affordable to the middle and working classes where fashion had previously been an elite prerogative. Fashion journalism for women and tailoring guides for men stimulated popular interest in sartorial detail. The rise of department stores and mail-order companies further accelerated the pace of fashion’s production and consumption. Worth discerned an untapped market for luxury women’s fashion as well as demand for its mass reproductions. Haute couture would cater to both classes of goods by drawing on the French tradition of luxury fashion, using sumptuous materials to produce standardized models of dresses. Each season yielded a new ‘collection’, or, set of models that was customized for a client but also sold for mass-reproduction. In its first decades, the new haute couture industry would navigate the exclusivity and discretion required by the former and the commercial promotion necessary for the latter with admirable dexterity but not yet great profitability.

The two-pronged business strategy that the earliest couturiers followed corresponded to a trans-Atlantic division: in Europe, haute couture’s elite reputation was fastidiously safeguarded but, in America, haute couture was peddled to a broader middle-class market (Troy 2003). Paris was the center of haute couture for European and wealthy American clients. There, the couturiers promoted haute couture as a fine art; Worth, in particular, was keen to underscore the
‘imaginative vision’ that yielded each client’s purchase (Hollander 1982). Where dressmakers such as Bertin once journeyed to their clients’ homes to negotiate styles, colors and embellishments, Worth’s clients appeared at his door to submit to his discerning eye. American heiresses traveled over by private steamship and ‘spen[t] months in European spots, the Riviera or the Alps, patiently waiting for fittings in Paris’ (Lacroix quoted in A.F. Collins 2009). ‘The highest titled women [permitted him to] robe them, unrobe them, and make them turn backward and forward,’ marveled Charles Dickens at his fellow countryman (Dickens quoted in Collins 2009). Worth did not disappoint. He used dozens of yards of richly woven textiles worked over for hundreds of hours by vast teams of seamstresses to create gowns that imparted drama and presence to the wearer (Hollander 1982). He displayed them in showrooms where models under the ambient glow of gaslights walked and posed among the clients. His contemporaries such as Jacques Doucet, Jeanne Paquin and Paul Poiret were likewise known for their extravagant creations and presentations. Poiret’s fashion shows were, for instance, informed by theater – invitees from the fashion as well as art worlds attended the spectacles, feting thereafter each new collection at highly publicized costume parties.

In Europe, then, the first couturiers categorically effected a cool distance from the image of the enterprising industrialist through marketing and merchandising strategies that emphasized the artistic value of haute couture. But the most successful couturiers such as Worth ran their businesses according to an industrial model of production and on a near-industrial scale. While haute couture gowns involved specialized, labor-intensive sewing techniques, they were hand-finished, not fully handmade. Worth’s business had expanded within a dozen years from less than twenty to over 1,200 employees who used sewing machines to turn out gowns based on standardized patterns and interchangeable parts. Different fabrics, colors and trimmings distinguished customized models, which were documented under filing systems (who bought which model for what occasion) to prevent the social gaffe of appearing in similar designs at the same functions (Troy 2003). The models were, moreover, sold to French and foreign dress shops for the mass fashion market. The shops reproduced the models ‘in association with’ the haute couture house, thereby acknowledging the provenance of the design but explicitly marketing the clothes as their own wares.

American dry-goods and department stores were the largest commercial buyers of haute couture. While couturiers eschewed large-scale commercial advertising in Europe, they felt free to pursue an American mass audience. Again, Poiret was especially zealous, undertaking a spectacular public relations campaign throughout the American Northeast and Midwest. For weeks beginning in September 1913, he delivered lectures, met with major department store executives and endorsed their advertisements, reports, photographs and drawings of his Minaret collection – a set of costumes that he had designed for the Parisian play, Le Minaret. In America, Poiret maintained his aloofly artistic Parisian persona but his commercial endeavors spoke otherwise (ibid). One could say that the ‘imaginative vision’ of the earliest couturiers applied as much to their sartorial designs and displays as to their business practices.

And yet haute couture, whether in the form of customized or standardized models, did not generate substantial revenues. On the one hand, labor costs were low28, clients were plentiful29, the customized models sold for enormous sums and American haute couture clients were charged even higher prices than their European counterparts. The standardized models too sold at price points commensurate with the size of the commercial buyer. On the other hand, however, the materials were expensive and overhead costs steep: haute couture houses occupied expensive Parisian real estate and their showrooms were lavishly appointed. Licensing the haute couture
name to a variety of goods in the following decades would begin to shift the stakes of the business toward greater profitability. For the time being, haute couture remained primarily a dressmaking business – and ‘it must not be thought,’ as Worth’s son Jean-Philippe noted, ‘that fortunes are made in a single business, particularly in that of making dresses’ (in Troy 2003, 22).

ii.1920-1950s: Re(de)fining luxury

Paris remained the capital of luxury women’s fashion through the first half of the 20th-century. The haute couture industry was increasingly formalized and the etiquette of buying and selling the clothes more and more intricate. At the same time, the new category of ready-to-wear – initially a cheaper division of haute couture but, by the 1930s, the specialty of American designers – began to make inroads into haute couture’s reign over high fashion. Wartime disruptions of the haute couture industry and American anti-trade policies following the stock market crash of 1929 created demand for Paris-influenced but no longer Paris-made high fashion. High fashion’s incorporation of cheaper fabrics alongside an aesthetic reflecting the greater social mobility of women and as the popularity of leisure activities among the rising Euro-American middle class also enabled the emergence of other geographic centers of sartorial influence. None wished, however, to supplant the revered ‘traditions of smart dress’ specific to France; ‘[the] art and…sympathies [of American designers] are strongly French…There is, we hope, no such thing as an American fashion,’ declared the participants of the first high fashion show held in New York in November 1914, for instance (Troy 2003, 276). Haute couture only reached its golden age in the 1950s. Through the mid-20th century, haute couture was regarded with the utmost reverence even as couturiers took up licensing and paved the way for the industry’s structural integration with the mass market.

Haute couture’s formalization spanned three main areas of activity: legal regulation, design training and the organization of the production and sales units. The groundwork for each area was laid in the early 20th-century, enabling the industry’s spectacular resurgence after major halts in production during the Second World War. Haute couture had first become a strictly regulated business in 1868, and ‘haute couture’, a trademarked name (one of the many measures that Colbert had devised two centuries earlier to bolster the French luxury industry). The Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne founded that year was a trade association encompassing haute couture as well as other businesses in the womenswear industry. Poiret thus pushed for an exclusive haute couture association. Co-run by Poiret and third-generation Worth couturier Jacques Worth, the syndicate only lasted from 1914 to 1916; its emphasis on protecting haute couture from increasingly extensive piracy practices nonetheless yielded what became known as a patronage system in which rights to reproduce dress models were licensed to outside firms and department stores. Haute couture houses charged foreign department stores and manufacturers entrance fees to fashion shows, which were then deducted from the latter’s purchases. Purchases included rights to unfinished dress models and/or entire collections of finished samples. Sales of these reproduction rights sustained the haute couture industry through the 1960s (A.F. Collin 2009).

The Chambre Syndicale created the first fashion design school in Paris in 1927; a technical training program that directly served the needs of the haute couture industry was realized. Early 20th-century couturiers had by and large entered the profession through pitching sketches of dress designs to haute couture houses and, upon acceptance, apprenticing there (Troy 2003). The very first couturières simply began as salesmen – Worth, for a fashionable London
dry-goods firm, Doucet, for his family’s well-established business in shirt making and lingerie and lace production. Graduates of the Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne began to find success in the 1950s, though, understandably, many would make their name in later decades as the program matured.

None of the famous couturiers of haute couture’s golden age undertook formal training in the trade, but the processes of production and sales were organized with extreme technical precision as well as ceremony, and the result was clothes that acquired cultural renown. Haute couture clothes were produced and sold in-house, in Paris (the Chambre Syndicale established this geographic stricture in 1945). Whether the house maintained a staff of 15 or an army of 1,500, it operated according to a rigid hierarchy. On the production end, couturiers designed the clothes, and from there, the clothes were produced over the course of several stages. First, a prototype was crafted from muslin. Known as a toile, the prototype was then delegated to the appropriate department/s: ‘[t]he workrooms were divided into cells: one for the flou (soft dresses and blouses) and one for the tailleur (suits). A premiere and a seconde presided over each workroom’s [seamstresses]’ (A.F. Collins 2009). Final embellishing – beading, feathers, stones, belts, buttons, flowers, shoes – was outsourced to specialty firms in Paris. The finished prototypes constituted a season’s collection, at which point elaborate protocols of marketing and merchandising commenced.

The biannual fashion shows staged by each haute couture house involved gold-embossed invitations sent to industry elites (top-tier retailers, magazine editors, reporters) and glamorous clients, who gathered in the house’s main salon for hours-long viewings of the collection. All forms of publicity were banned both to ensure the event’s intimacy and to prevent piracy. At their immediate conclusion, individual clients who had already decided on their purchases could view their preferred dress models and begin the fitting process. On the day after, the houses offered daily or tri-weekly viewings of the collection at the same appointed hour for a period of approximately one month. The entire collection of anywhere from 125 to 400 dress models was shown once per viewing, but clients could request repeated viewings of individual models (Bonney and Bonney in Welters and Lillethun eds 2011).

The sales team was organized as meticulously as the production crew. A haute couture house’s directrice, or, manageress, who vetted its clients, rivaled a couturier in importance. The reputation of a house depended as much on the bearing of the clients as on the beauty of the clothes because the clients were the primary means of advertising the latter. Thus would Christian Dior’s directrice, Suzanne Luling, decline even duchesses ‘for being too dowdy,’ or, per Cristobal Balenciaga’s directrice, Mademoiselle Renee, advise ladies to return in a few months after they had ostensibly shaped up (A.F. Collins 2009). The accepted client was however ‘cosseted within an inch of her life’:

The directrice greeted you. The vendeuse (saleswoman), with her assistant, was there for the fittings. They brought tea. The premiere came down, too, with assistants. You felt very important, and at the same time cozy and nice. You talked to everybody about everything. It was a big organization to make you feel very happy. (ibid)

The vendeuses were divided into vendeuses mondaines – titled ladies with important social connections – and vendeuses, and each serviced the appropriate class of clients. With their assistants, the vendeuses ensured that the steady stream of clients to whom the directrice had granted entry always left ‘in complete self-confidence’ (Thomas 2007, 31). And when the
garment was completed, it was packaged with the kind of finesse that the client herself had received in the salon:

[It] arrived at [her] door in an enormous handmade box, fastidiously packed with mounds of tissue paper. So exquisite were the delivery cartons themselves that clotheshorse Nan Kempner said she hoped to be buried in one. (A.F. Collins 2009)

The entire sales operation thus ran on an intimate, word-of-mouth basis. Commercial advertising was considered bad form; the society beauty dressed in haute couture, photographed and talked about, served as the consummate marketing mechanism. This is why the process of choosing clients became increasingly stringent through the first half of the 20th-century. Worth had received all who could afford his clothes, equally empresses and prostitutes (Hollander 1982). A shopping guide from the 1920s advises the American woman eager to purchase haute couture to ‘know the name of a vendeuse or of a friend who has purchased there’ before approaching the haute couture house; ‘[i]f you do not [know], ask the directrice to be assigned one’ (Bonney and Bonney in Welters and Lillethun eds 2011, 445). By the 1950s, only those with referrals could – with the directrice’s approval – become clients (A.F. Collins 2009).

Haute couture’s postwar revival seemed to reflect a rigorous commitment to luxury’s craft heritage; the industry also continued to reach toward the wider audience that it had set upon at its inception, however. Decades of formalization yielded a golden age of titled ladies conferring with one another in chandelier-lit, gardenia-scented Paris salons under the watchful gazes of couturier, premier and assistants alike. But the prestige generated by the small-scale production of luxury goods was more and more used to promote low-quality kitsch mass-produced under the names of haute couture houses themselves. Consumers could no longer distinguish between goods that were made in-house from goods manufactured by outside firms who had merely purchased rights to a haute couture business’s name. The same Dior who personally fitted his client in Paris, for instance, licensed his name to leading hat and eyeglass manufacturers to produce Dior accessories across 24 countries. Haute couture’s nascent integration of the materials, aesthetics and business practices amenable to the mass fashion market with those designed for the luxury market would transform the understanding of haute couture as a luxury good strictly distinct from its mass-manufactured subsidiary products.

* When couturiere Coco Chanel returned to Paris to re-open her house after the Second World War, she assessed haute couture’s revival under Dior – he of the 1947 ‘New Look’ that launched a thousand ‘curving, floriated, feminine’ silhouettes throughout the next decade – in scathing terms: ‘Look at how ridiculous these women are, wearing clothes by a man who doesn’t know women, never had one, and dreams of being one!’ (A.F. Collins 2009). For Chanel, haute couture’s golden age was a step back for bourgeois women who had gained increasing independence from the confines of the home and, more so, traditional sartorial codes since the late 19th-century. The number of women in the Euro-American workforce had dramatically risen during the 1890s; they wore two-piece suits to the office, and, at their leisure, donned casual outfits for recreational activities (Cooper in Welters and Lillethun eds 2011). Women’s blouses followed the style of men’s shirts. Straight-cut, body-skimming tunics that allowed for greater ease of movement replaced the structured S-curves of earlier Edwardian dresses. The guiding design principle behind mass fashion for women had become comfort and adaptability.
Couturiers such as Poiret and Paquin first popularized corsetless gowns around 1909; Chanel took their lead but more radically spearheaded the incorporation of the sportswear- and menswear-inspired styles as well as the fabrics of mass fashion in haute couture. She blended jersey, tweed and other cheaper, knitted fabrics with satin and silk, piled costume jewelry onto precious jewelry, and reinvented one lover’s polo gear and another’s fisherman’s sweater for her target customer – ‘the modern garçonne’. By the early 1920s, her young, androgynous look had come to define women’s high as well as mass fashion (De Perthus 2003). Chanel’s singular influence across so large a terrain derives from a commercial sensibility that corresponded to her class-, gender- and genre-crossing aesthetics. Where earlier couturiers had exclusively designed for an elite clientele, selling reproduction rights and at best marketing those designs to a mass audience across the Atlantic, Chanel sought to appeal to all classes of Euro-American women through simple yet tasteful ensembles. Her little black dress was hailed ‘The Chanel “Ford”’, an industrial commodity that equally suited, as it were, the haute couture and the so-called ready-to-wear market within mass fashion.

Ready-to-wear was originally a 17th-century term for mass-manufactured apparel that took on, by way of its gradual association with haute couture through the early to mid 20th-century, a more glamorous inflection. What Chanel’s Fordist aesthetic offered was the possibility of a market for a type of ready-to-wear that constituted a middle category between haute couture clothes and the haute couture reproductions that department stores sold on the mass fashion market. Haute couture houses would manufacture and retail ready-to-wear collections themselves. They could thereby guarantee the quality of clothes affiliated with their name while also accessing new sources of revenue from their expanded customer base. This strategy risked undermining haute couture’s exclusivity but the aim was to appeal to a broader range of clients and lifestyles. The idea of the Chanel ‘Ford’ had created a niche in the haute couture industry for cheaper clothes that nonetheless retained haute couture’s luxury cachet.

Several factors facilitated the swift ascent of ready-to-wear within the haute couture industry. Most haute couture houses closed during the First and Second World Wars, prompting demand for new production sites of high fashion. The first wave of closures emboldened American designers in particular. They remained deferential to haute couture but the success of their first high fashion show in New York in 1914 indicated that American designers possessed the ability to turn out sought-after womenswear. When the U.S. government then instituted severe import restrictions to reduce trade imbalances in the wake of the 1929 stock market crash, American designers became known at home for their sportswear – therein the emergence of a distinctive American style that dovetailed with Chanel’s signature sporty look of a decade earlier. American retailers and politicians alike endorsed the casual elegance of buttoned dress shirts worn with khaki slacks or beach pajamas for women and men (Webber in Welters and Lillethun eds 2011). The second wave of haute couture closures secured the transatlantic reputation of American design; New York City was considered the sportswear fashion capital on either side of the Atlantic by the time haute couture’s golden age arrived (ibid).

A structural transformation of the haute couture industry was therefore implicit in its postwar resurgence. On the one hand, the extent of its legal regulation, the organization and training of its workforce and the sophistication of its marketing strategies all reached an apogee in the 1950s, producing the unprecedented resplendence of the haute couture of that era. Fabric and workmanship, fashion shows and retail service, worked in concert to yield the final effect of the client at, say, the Duchess of Windsor’s New Year’s Eve party. On the other hand, the casual silhouettes and materials that Chanel introduced to the haute couture industry pointed toward
new modes of production and sales across a wider range of geographical sites. American, British and Italian designers embraced the trend toward ready-to-wear in haute couture with growing acclaim. The pace of production in the haute couture industry soared as the age of the target customer plummeted. Socialites dressed in haute couture or ready-to-wear equally exuded an enviable cool, the boyish edginess of the street rather than the womanly elegance of the salon. Though haute couture and ready-to-wear remained distinct modes of production, the marketing and merchandising strategies for each became integrated under the same luxury corporations; therein, the phenomenon of couture.

iii. 1960-1980s: The new category of couture

The opening of couturier Yves Saint Laurent’s ready-to-wear boutique on Paris’ Left Bank in 1966 consolidated the status of ready-to-wear within the haute couture industry: Saint Laurent was the industry’s brightest star and his decision to divide his creative energies equally between haute couture and ready-to-wear set the precedent for a new generation of ‘couture designers’ as distinct from ‘couturiers’. Of the venerated old guard, some accepted the shift while others vehemently refused to lower their standards. For haute couture houses that opted to produce ready-to-wear in addition to haute couture clothes, the production of the latter and the selling of both began to move outside the houses toward cheaper sites of labor and hence higher profit margins. As the parameters of competition expanded to include the mass fashion market, the importance of marketing and merchandising eclipsed fidelity to maintaining the quality of the clothes. 1973 witnessed the emergence of the Fédération Française de la Couture, du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode, which regulated both haute couture and ready-to-wear, expediting the latter’s formalization across major Euro-American fashion centers. Each center – Paris, New York, London and Milan – developed, in turn, an industry syndicate and training programs. And in support of their respective industry’s global expansion, all the syndicates shared organizational strategies increasingly oriented toward producing the effect in place of the material quality of luxury clothes.

As with haute couture, ready-to-wear’s formalization did not preclude aspirations for securing a broader customer base. If the founding of regulatory agencies and the refining of highly skilled training programs seemed appropriate to a niche market, the collective aim was, nonetheless, to appeal to the mass fashion market. Italy was the first of the new high fashion capitals to establish a syndicate in 1958 that promoted haute couture and ready-to-wear (the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana); America did the same in 1962 (the Council of Fashion Designers of America); England, in 1983 (the British Fashion Council). The syndicates worked to synchronize their respective biannual haute couture and ready-to-wear presentation schedules and attract public and private funding and recognition. Prominent designers began to emerge from schools across the ‘Big Four’ of high fashion (London’s Central Saint Martins and New York’s Parsons School of Fashion became hotbeds of talent), which provided technical as well as, however, business training. In addition to teaching traditional couture skills of how to drape, make patterns, sew and tailor, design school curricula included how to present a ‘signature vision’ to industry experts, how to analyze a range of markets and how to thrive among competitors. Commercial acumen was crucial to surviving, much less succeeding under, the industry’s rapid permutations.

By the late 1970s, innovative design combined with the use of cheaper, globally sourced materials and labor enabled ready-to-wear to overtake haute couture as the arbiter of high fashion. Relative to mass fashion, ready-to-wear was ‘high-quality off-the-rack merchandise for
one-tenth the cost of [haute] couture’ (A.F. Collins 2009). Its appeal was that of the free-spirited young ‘garçonne’ in pedestrian silhouettes with, however, a more classy and expensive edge. Ready-to-wear incorporated the entire lexicon of popular styles and fabrics – peasant garb, laborer’s uniforms and military gear, vinyl, jeans and spandex; divided the production of the clothes into cost-efficient stages to be carried out at home and abroad; and mostly sold them wholesale to high-end department stores and boutiques. The presentation of the clothes followed the biannual rhythms of haute couture, but were staged on runway strips erected in hip neighborhoods around New York, Milan and London as well as Paris in place of the gilt interiors of 30 Avenue Montaigne or 10 Avenue George V. Like haute couture shows, they were invitation-only. Unlike haute couture shows up to the 1980s, they were spectacular media events. Ready-to-wear shows were live commercials fed to a voracious press. They served as the primary mode of advertising not only the clothes but also the increasing variety of mass-produced goods that bore a brand’s name.

The concept of a luxury ‘couture’ brand that evolved from ready-to-wear’s formalization signaled the integration of haute couture and ready-to-wear under larger parent corporations. As discussed in chapter one, luxury conglomerates emerged in the 1980s in part through acquiring multiple couture businesses, some of which produced haute couture and ready-to-wear clothes, others, ready-to-wear clothes alone. Branding these businesses was the conglomerates’ foremost concern, which bore significant consequences for the quality of couture clothes. The imperative to achieve quarterly growth earnings dictated investments in distribution and image communications rather than in production facilities. Million-dollar runway shows and print advertisement campaigns became standard, while superior packaging and store design ‘help[ed] create the magic and theatrical ambience needed to present an impression of luxury’ (Jackson in Bruce et al eds 2004). Celebrity architects were hired to design flashy flagship stores in tony locations. Clothes were individually displayed rather than stacked, and stores carried little stock to emphasize the uniqueness of each item. Bodyguards stationed at the door heightened the sense of exclusivity. Luxury was created less through the crafting of the garment than ‘managing...customer experience at the point of sale’ (ibid), though this managing involved less the human interaction of customer and salesperson than the ambience of the shopping site. For most customers at the turn of the 21st-century, both ready-to-wear and haute couture thus recalled a contemporized European craft heritage.

iv. 2000-2010s: A question of (abs)traction

What distinguishes a luxury, hand-worked garment from a mass-produced, machine-made garment if both effect the same impression of luxury today? An account of couture’s history demonstrates that its contemporary prestige crucially derives from the labor and intimate interactions involved in each stage of its production and sales, from the premières and secondes’ direction of seamstresses in the workrooms to the careful consultations between clients and sales staff in the fitting rooms. In this sense, the couture garment is understood to be imbued with a constitutive human element that has, however, been abstracted from its human bearers and reified into an image of artisanal intimacy today. If the collaborative handiwork and customized attention that is supposed to yield the couture garment lends the garment its unique, captivating aura, then what defines contemporary couture as an object shorn of these modes of human interactions? What sustains the production of couture’s aura, or, prestige today?
A critical constant through the various stages of the industry’s development is the couture model. Despite the increasing mechanization and anonymity of the clothes’ production and sales, the couture industry has always used models to display and lend the clothes their human immediacy and appeal. Contemporary couture primarily functions as an image, articulating the concepts behind the clothes that are actually produced and sold, but it nonetheless functions as an embodied image. What has changed is the mode of the clothes’ embodiment. Contrary to models earlier in couture’s history, the typical couture model today evidences the excision of the material foundations of traditional couture clothes: the models themselves have, too, become mass-produced commodities, idealized as aspirational objects but only deluxe in name.

2. The models

Beginning in the late 20th-century, the models who walked couture’s runways reflected in body as well as bearing the industry’s formal integration with the mass fashion market. Where models in the first hundred years of couture’s history were hired for their resemblance to haute couture clients, reflecting the elite intimacy of the production and sales of haute couture clothes, models thereafter spoke to a younger, broader customer base. This section thus examines the demographic characteristics, physical type and labor conditions of couture models over two discrete periods: the rise of tenured, mature house mannequins from the mid-19th to mid-20th century, and their gradual replacement by freelance corps of prepubescent waifs from the mid- to late 20th-century. The couture industry still drew on this latter breed of models to convey the privilege of the intimate production and sales of haute couture, now, however, to a global middle-income audience of consumers. Labor conditions plummeted. Each season’s corps of couture models would become, like each season’s collection of couture clothes, radically replaceable.

i. 1850-1950s: Cultivating the ‘cabine’
One of Worth’s many contributions to the new business of haute couture was the practice of using so-called ‘moving mannequins’ to display haute couture clothes. ‘Models’ designated dress designs at the time. The eventual semantic shift from mannequins to human models reflects the phasing out of the industry’s patronage system39 and the attendant assimilation of haute couture into mass fashion through the course of the following century. Just as the production and sales of haute couture clothes was increasingly formalized, however, gaining cultural prestige and allure, the work of couture modeling transcended its disreputable provenance to become a highly-regarded and -coveted profession. Tenured teams of ‘house mannequins’, or, ‘cabines’ emerged by the 1950s, rendering the labor conditions of couture modeling congruent with its glamour for a single, fleeting period.

The earliest mannequins were drawn from a haute couture house’s own workshop floor and trained there, much like the on-site production of haute couture clothes of that era. At the House of Worth, Worth’s wife played the part of mannequin as well as mannequin scout and instructress. Though her father was only a provincial tax clerk, she possessed enough elegance to impress both the clients at the seasonal fashion shows that Worth initiated and the rest of high society at elite events such as the Longchamps horse races. Madame Worth selected her mannequins to approximate the house’s clients. Known as sosies (doubles), the mannequins were ‘neither tall or necessarily beautiful [sic]’40 but taught to be graceful, svelte and modest. Most of all, they were a novelty that attracted clients and voyeurs. In the salons, the mannequins walked and posed before seated viewers while the couturier discussed the details of each garment. These
shows, soon standard among other haute couture houses, became much-anticipated high society events.

Modeling was considered a working class occupation. ‘Pay was on par with a salesgirl, and the [mannequin’s] reputation was little better than that of a slut’ (Quick 1997, 29). Shows aside, she worked long shifts – twelve hour days on her feet, infers Karen de Perthuis based on the working conditions of salesgirls at high-end dress shops. The mannequins of certain couture houses further acquired the ability to act – the ‘four graces’ or ‘exotic sylphs’ of Poiret and British couturiere Lucile, respectively, were cast in extravagant fashion plays or taken along on publicity tours. But, in this early period, a house’s most distinctive mannequins were found among a couturier’s family and willing clients. Madame Worth was Worth’s premier mannequin and Poiret’s wife his; Chanel’s first mannequins were her young aunt and cousin. Famous dancers, actresses and the occasional society swan, on the other hand, modeled for magazines and were given the clothes in exchange. The informal and variable mixture of house assistants, muses and glamorous clients lent the couture modeling business an air of intimate, albeit sordid, familiarity.

The professionalization of couture modeling did not undermine this intimacy at first. Modeling agencies opened across Europe and America throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The agencies provided job contacts in as well as beyond the haute couture industry and coached the girls in the technical skills and social subtleties of the trade. Lucy Clayton’s London ‘charm school’ offered, for instance,

[a] curriculum that…include[ed] classes on applying make-up, dress sense, making entrances and exits, social graces, deportment, haircare and styling, shoe selection, professional manicure, medical problems, personal hygiene and depilatories, photography and television advertisements. (Craik 1994, 79)

John Robert Power’s New York operations paid its employees $66 per hour on average. Some mannequins worked for haute couture houses but most were hired freelance for wholesale or retail fashion, modeling in department store fashion shows and otherwise dressing windows, selling clothes and cleaning up the shop floor. Chanel was one of the first couturieres to offer mannequins full-time employment. Rejecting the convention of selecting models for their likeness to clients, she chose models who resembled herself – lean, confident and haughty, and trained them herself as well. They were paid ‘notoriously low wages’ for long hours of standing, posing and, more so, simply waiting, ‘perfectly groomed at all times, ready to show dresses the moment a customer called and then [idle] until the next customer appeared’. Nonetheless, the precedent of ‘house’ mannequins who communicated each haute couture house’s particular aesthetic ideals had been set.

Work conditions for this emerging breed of mannequins took a sharp upward turn during haute couture’s postwar resurgence. To begin with, the establishment of the Ford Models agency in 1946 lay the foundations for stable modeling careers. The founder Eileen Ford, a former model (and perhaps for this reason), nurtured her employees – ‘offered [them] beds in her family home, groomed, packaged and [placed] them [with] the right client at the right time’ (65). If the client was a haute couture house and if the Ford model suited the house’s aesthetic and succeeded in attracting high numbers of orders for clothes, then she would become a permanent member of the house’s close-knit cabine. She would clock in with the house’s other employees at 9 am, change into white housecoats and begin work (Dawnay 1956); by the 1950s, even Chanel
paid her mannequins upwards of $4,000 per month. Beautiful and impeccably mannered, house mannequins were soon embraced by polite society regardless of their background. Whether the daughters of lords or bus drivers, their names were known to haute couture patrons: Alla at Dior, Cap at Givenchy, Marina at Balmain.

Each haute couture house in the 1950s cultivated a distinctive type of house mannequin but each individual mannequin also possessed distinctive traits. The only common requirements were that mannequins possess well-proportioned bodies and a sense of movement attuned to the strengths and weakness of each garment. Dior preferred languid women with ‘Egyptian shoulders’ for his exotic and ever-changing flights of fancy, Balmain, drama queens suited to his furs and lavish embellishments, Givenchy, gamine girls who channeled his muse, Audrey Hepburn. These **cabines** walked the seasonal shows and, in accord with their own fame, modeled the most elaborate designs for a house’s celebrity clients. A rank below, so-called ‘bread and butter’ mannequins displayed simpler clothes for conservative clients (80).

This hierarchy prepared the way for supermodels whose names would become familiar far beyond the haute couture industry in subsequent decades. But supermodels acquired fame precisely because they left couture modeling for more lucrative and secure commercial modeling work, endorsing products from lipsticks to soft drinks. The highest paid supermodels of the 1970s could earn up to $6,600 per runway show, for instance, but, of that elite corps, Lauren Hutton made history by securing a $1 million contract with cosmetics giant Revlon in 1974. As the influence of ready-to-wear exceeded that of haute couture and both grew into global, publicly-owned corporate brands – as haute couture and ready-to-wear came to primarily serve as showpieces, and the production as well as sales of clothes moved off-site and off-shore, the need to employ full-time house mannequins thus disappeared. Freelance modeling replaced the tenure system for house mannequins in the same decade that extensive licensing supplanted the patronage system for haute couture clothes. While the formalization of couture modeling initially yielded a more specialized workforce and improved work conditions, the haute couture industry’s strategic orientation toward a younger, global consumer base reversed this trend. Formalization became standardization: conforming to a single psychophysical archetype, couture models in the late 20th-century, like couture garments, would also become single-use objects.

**ii. 1960-2010s: The exquisite corps(e) of couture**

Consider, again, contemporary couture clothes: increasingly dirempt from intimate, human modes of sales and production, the garments become abstract status symbols. Likewise, couture modeling, once an intimate exchange between a tenured Euro-American mannequin walking before familiar clients, magazine editors and admirers seated close at hand, becomes the mass-circulated image of anonymous corps of Eastern European waifs, replaced every show season, human but also specter. With the tenure system of house mannequins traded for freelance modeling, modeling agencies gained a monopoly in the couture modeling industry. They serviced international corporations and became cutthroat international businesses themselves. The entire corporate complex now included a host of other satellite industries: make-up, hairstyling, show production, outside corporate sponsors, and, not least, prescription drugs (recreational drugs were widely disseminated as well though they do not constitute, of course, a formal market).

And yet the modeling industry remains unregulated today, enabling the increasingly extensive employment of the underage girls who are sought for their extreme physiques and naïveté. The girls are made into blank units on whom each segment of the corporate complex inscribes its sign – this season, for Fendi, lacquered lips, sleek ponytails, each girl follows the
line of flashing neon lights to the end of walkway A, swivel left, then down walkway B, swivel right. They do not perform the gaits of house mannequins that were distinctive to each house and each individual mannequin; they perform, rather, the rapid, machinic rituals that equally yield luxury-branded clothes and sexualized dolls.

*  

In contemporary couture, clothes and models together comprise an image of enviable luxury. What an analysis of the history of their political economy shows, however, is a movement away from integrity of material and design in couture clothes and the consequent divestment in the work conditions of couture models. While this shift, on the one hand, merely instances changes in production and management strategies throughout the global luxury industry in recent decades, the couture industry is, on the other hand, distinctive today in its capacity to idealize the human products of this shift for the cultures in which they circulate. Couture models are central to generating the impression of a mode of luxury that no longer possesses a solid material basis, but their marketed value in service of couture clothes scarce corresponds to their market value in fact. This discrepancy can be read, I argue next, through psychophysicalities that signal extreme wealth as much as, however, extreme privation.
III. Coming of age in couture

1. The models’ symptoms
   i. Normalizing injury
   ii. Precarious pleasures

2. Commodity culture
   i. Valuing objects
   ii. Model commodities

Fig. 3. Girls waiting at a model casting. Photograph by Benjamin Kanarek. © 2011.
What is the appeal of the assembly lines of wraith-like models in identical makeup, hair and mien who display couture clothes today? Why are they exalted in contemporary culture as female ideals? While the economic rationale of disbanding small groups of tenured models for vast pools of freelance labor discussed in chapter two is straightforward, the psychaesthetic manifestation of this shift is anything but. The shapely Euro-American salesgirls and, later, elegant married women who were hired for their resemblance to haute couture clients have given way to corps of rigorously glamorized figures that also convey physical and psychological damage. Here, I aim to show that such damage is often real and, more disturbingly, that such damage is experienced for both models and spectators as intransigently alluring.

This chapter examines the pathological forms of attachment to injury and abuse that couture models risk developing in the contemporary couture industry. Where the idealization of couture models and of fashion models more broadly have been studied in terms of unhealthy body image alone (Heywood 1996; Bordo 2003; De Perthuis 2003), I focus on the material and psychological conditions of couture modeling work that create the psychophysical archetypes promoted in popular culture. I argue that the industry wounds and glamorizes couture models in equal part; this particular mode of violence is articulated through an aesthetic whose glamour is pathological. The contemporary couture industry produces, in other words, a psychaesthetics of violence whose cultural appeal can be uniquely analyzed through the models’ ambivalent but impassioned relationship with the industry. I consider more broadly the cultural values that maintain this appeal later in the chapter. Thus do couture models become model subjects in both senses of the term.

1. The models’ symptoms

In chapter one, I specified three kinds of costs couture models incur in the couture industry today. These costs are financial, physical and psychological. Here, I would like to emphasize the unexpected and often hidden nature of these costs, in part because the couture industry relies on opaque employment practices to profit from the models and in part because of the models’ backgrounds, which I describe below in greater detail using the phenomenological concept of an individual’s ‘situation’50. Couture models are typically foreign preteen girls who find themselves, within mere months of working in the industry, in significant debt to their agencies. Paid little to nothing for sporadic modeling assignments while accruing travel, housing and living expenses in the world’s high fashion capitals, the models struggle to appear as effortlessly glamorous and wealthy as the industry demands of them. They are asked, too, to display an attitude of sexual confidence to heighten the desirability of couture clothes even as their physical requirements explicitly prohibit signs of female sexual maturity. The physical, psychological and financial stresses of the job can thus be severe51, but couture models are known to linger in the industry in various capacities, trying their luck at jobs from recruiting to styling and editorial assistance once their modeling careers wane in their early twenties. Why and how, then, do couture models become attached to the couture industry, and in what ways can we consider this attachment pathological? How do couture models model for contemporary culture an objectification and instrumentalization of female bodies from which they nonetheless appear to derive some form of pleasure?

This section tracks the process through which couture models can develop a pathological form of attachment to the couture industry. I draw extensively on the documentary *Girl Model* (2011), which employs a parallel narrative structure to depict the fleeting thrills and unwitting
pitfalls of entering and remaining in the modeling world. Nadya is a shy 13-year-old recruit from rural Siberia who has never seen a fashion magazine and only hopes to make enough money to help her family build a new bungalow. Ashley is the seasoned American model-turned-recruiter who offers Nadya the opportunity to become a star in Tokyo. Ashley and Nadya cross paths exactly twice in the film – Nadya is one of countless recruits on Ashley’s radar, their lives and fortunes seem pathetically disparate. And yet, on a psychoanalytic reading, it is clear that Ashley demonstrates late-stage versions of the attachment to injury Nadya already exhibits in her first three months of modeling, which I explicate below.\(^5\)

While *Girl Model* takes place in the commercial modeling circuit, the differences between commercial and couture modeling are a matter of degree rather than kind, as discussed in chapter one. Couture models are required to meet more stringent physical measurements, and to additionally project affluent and sexually confident attitudes that comport with the couture industry’s self-image (Entwistle in Entwistle and Wissinger eds 2012). Commercial modeling in Tokyo is, however, most similar to the couture modeling circuit because of Japanese preferences for girls significantly younger and thinner than the commercial modeling standard (Mears 2011). The pleasures and perils of modeling for regional brands, clothing catalogues and magazines may seem a far cry from working in the high-glamour world of couture. But the banal vagaries experienced by commercial models offer insight into the extreme volatilities of couture modeling. The forms of attachment witnessed in the film’s portrayal of commercial modeling point to the chilling severity of the pathologies cultivated in couture today.

i. Normalizing injury

One way to approach the forms of attachments common among couture models is to account for their typical ‘situation’ at each stage of their passage from naïve recruits to model subjects. The concept of an individual’s situation derives from existentialist philosophy (Aho 2013; Reynolds 2006; Kruks 1990); Iris Marion Young, drawing on de Beauvoir and Sartre, offers this definition: ‘the way that the facts of embodiment, social and physical environment, appear in light of the projects a person has’ (2005, 16). For Young, these ‘facts’ include the material, sexual characteristics of bodies, which are always understood within specific cultural parameters, positioned, that is, ‘in systems of evaluation and expectations’ that differ for men and for women (17). Applying this framework to recruits and models helpfully distinguishes between their bodies’ sexual facticity and the influence of what Young calls ‘gender structures’ on processes of subject formation. To what extent do the girls choose or at least allow the industry’s injuries to occur, and to what extent are they haplessly constituted in these injuries? Young identifies three types of gender structures in particular: the sexual division of labor, normative heterosexuality and gendered hierarchies of power. The difference between the categories of gender and of sex fundamentally depend on how a person is socially positioned however: ‘Experience and social structure often make the difference between [sexed and gendered experience] undecidable’ (6).

The aim here is to elucidate how girls are socially positioned as they progress from recruits to models and to understand the psychophysical effects of this shift in situation first for commercial models and subsequently for couture models.

a. Commercial model-subjects

It is important to recognize that the typical commercial model is recruited on account of relatively innate traits: her striking height at a young age lends her a natural thinness, and the
combination of thinness and girlhood yields a figure of extreme prepubescent proportions. Commercial model scouts thus look for minimal curves – signs of physical sexual maturation are thought to detract from the presentation of the clothes. As Rachel Blais, a model who starred in and consulted for the filmmakers of *Girl Model*, remarks however, ‘agents cannot be sure how the girl’s body will develop. If her body doesn’t develop the way it is expected to, it can lead to drastic measures [to achieve the desired physique]’ (in Phelan 2012). Removed from networks of social support in a foreign country as teenagers and placed under the nominal supervision of modeling agencies, recruits risk becoming identified with the labor-commodity that is their body alone.

Young offers a more detailed framework for analyzing the situations at hand:

[H]er size, age, health, and training make her capable of strength and movement in relation to her environment in specific ways…Her specific body lives in a specific context – crowded by other people…surrounded by buildings and streets with a unique history, hearing particular languages, having food or shelter available, or not, as a result of culturally specific social processes that make specific requirements on her to access them. (2005, 16)

To this, Young adds that ‘the specific physical facts of [her body] includ[e] sexual and reproductive differentiation’ (ibid). The situation that yields the typical recruit resembles her situation as model insofar as both her family and native culture as well as the international modeling market recognize her body’s marketability. On the one hand, her family allows, perhaps encourages her to leave home and school at a young age to pursue a profession that peddles a set of physical traits dependent on extreme youth. On the other, modeling agencies feed on these batches of lithe young figures imported by the week, snapping for each a head shot, printing at the bottom of the photograph her first name, agency name and measurements and so acknowledging for the moment another face posted on their wall to be circulated among clients.

What differs for the situations of recruit and of model is the extent to which the marketability of her body determines her social value and self-worth. It is reasonable to suppose that at home, where the typically poor, Eastern European recruit resides in an intimate social network of immediate and extended family and small local community, the marketability of her body only partly defines her value. Her family may well need her to contribute work and income, and modeling is sold to them as a fantastic opportunity for both money and fame, but, before entering the modeling profession, the recruit plays multiple social roles. Take Nadya, the 13-year-old recruit from *Girl Model*. At home, Nadya is shown helping her grandmother pick berries in their garden, making traditional Siberian dessert dumplings, playing with her newborn kitten; Nadya is the baby of the family and closest to her grandmother, with whom she shared a bed until the previous year. Nadya has qualified, however, for a beauty pageant sponsored by a Tokyo modeling agency, which requires her to assume a new character. We see Nadya’s mother fretting over Nadya’s hair for an entire afternoon. At the end of the makeover session, Nadya, sporting dark eye shadow, rouge and curls, looks at herself in the mirror, skeptical of her model potential but also excited.

As a model, a girl becomes a unit of freelance, foreign labor whose social value entirely turns on her ability to suppress physical signs of sexual maturity and to appear sexually experienced in the clothes *at the same time*. ‘A lot of girls [undergo plastic surgery] when they’re not even 18 years old...Agencies will actually advance [money for surgeries such as liposuction and nose jobs], but then the models are even more in debt and there’s even more pressure for...
them to keep up a certain physical appearance,’ Blais relates (in Phelan 2012). It is important to recall here that these pressures and practices occur in a context far from not only family and friends but also, on a psychological level, fellow girl models: ‘The agents foster this competitive climate, so models are also reluctant to talk about their experiences with one another,’ Blais continues (ibid). In such situations, a model’s compliant body can easily become her sole source of social value and self-worth.

Competition and isolation begin at scouting sessions, where the paradoxical demand for a prepubescent and likely sexually inexperienced girl to play the part of a sexualized object is made explicit in two ways. Following a general exhibition and assessment of bodies, select candidates are then subject to prolonged individual appraisals. Again, take Nadya in her passage into the commercial modeling circuit. Among the hundreds of girls in attendance, Nadya is one of the youngest and thinnest. She attends her first scouting session free of makeup, clad in a tiny string bikini and heels per request. She does not know how to pose yet; she simply follows the instructions of her American recruiter Ashley once Ashley has decided that Nadya is a promising case: ‘Nadya, look into the camera’; ‘Nadya, walk toward me’; ‘…now turn around’; ‘say, “Hello, my name is Nadya”…’ Here, the viewer already gains a sense of the micro-hierarchies operating inside the scouting studio that ‘position individuals in relations of labor and production, power and subordination, desire and sexuality, prestige and status,’ in Young’s words (2005, 20). More crucial is the cultivation of a desire for subordination beginning in the scouting studio that develops into the psychological attachment to injury to which I shortly turn. ‘I want for things to be good at home,’ Nadya tells us softly; her family expects her to comply with whatever demands Ashley may make of her, given the substantial financial rewards advertised (a minimum of $8,000 at the end of a first modeling contract). When Nadya wins the beauty pageant that secures her a contract, then, the win is a family affair. Her mother laughs and cries. Her grandmother says nothing. Nadya seems elated, and, in a swift succession of scenes – a boisterous send-off dinner in the living room, bus ride to the airport, Tokyo arrival – she is at her first casting.

As the film progresses, the psychological stresses that girl models are subjected to become apparent. Nadya’s roommate in Tokyo, Madlen, is another 13-year-old recruit from Russia. The girls are shown poring over subway maps in search of casting locales, struggling to decipher clients’ instructions (a jumble of Japanese and English), scrutinized and dismissed by these clients time and again. Neither understands the full terms of her contract; their agents have highlighted a single line in the multi-page English document – their physical measurements, which they know they are not allowed to exceed. Girl models are, then, from the start of their careers, self-guided. They are also, unbeknownst to themselves and their families, self-financed. These pressures at a young age together compound the professional imperative known as ‘vocational anorexia’, a term suggesting that models can practice anorexia at will for professional purposes rather than anorexia becoming a persistent, psychosomatic condition. But ‘vocational anorexia’ is one of the principal means by which girl models develop their sense of self. Sexual objectification is another. For a jewelry commercial, Nadya dons a figure-hugging black dress with a plunging neckline; heavily made-up, she parts her lips, swiveling her torso this way and that before the camera. She performs a sexual confidence and attitude of haughty entitlement that is wholly alien to her age and social class.

Indeed, at the film’s conclusion, Nadya leaves at the end of her 3-month contract owing money to Madlen and to her agency, the $8,000 minimum Ashley had promised nowhere in sight. And yet a postscript tells us that Nadya returns to Tokyo to try her hand again. What
compels her to return, what is the appeal? The supposed ability to help her family? The glamor of appearing in catalogues and commercials and the promise of fame? In a review of Girl Model, Autumn Whitefield-Madrano tells us of a tweet Nadya recently sent to her Twitter followers: ‘#beforeidieiwanna be a professional model’ (2013). Whitefield-Madrano questions whether it is Nadya or her agency who tweeted this because, Whitefield-Madrano contends, Nadya ‘is now 17 – a child, still, in many ways’ (ibid). The implicit assumption is how a child could wish to subject herself to a pursuit that pays nothing and exacts so much. One possibility is familial pressures. The explanation I will pursue is the development of a psychological dependency on a remote but tenacious form of control and corresponding organization of desire that modeling agencies wield to their profit alone.

b. Couture model-subjects

Like Nadya in Tokyo, couture recruits are preteens. The couture industry, while located in similar metropolitan sites, nonetheless poses a more demanding and predatory work environment. Work life and personal life for couture models are less distinct than for commercial models as work-related socializing events are considered critical avenues for securing contacts and assignments, often specifically through sexual favors. Diet and recreational drug use is not only encouraged but expected. Compensation is more sporadic and the turnover rate among couture models higher57. Faced with these unexpected stresses on the one hand and the couture industry’s powerful allure on the other, the young recruit risks developing an attachment to a bewildering dynamic of adulation and injury.

A key difference between the typical situations of couture and commercial models lies in couture modeling’s frequent sexual demands. Unlike the commercial modeling market, the couture world is imbricated with the lives of the extremely wealthy for whom the sexual services of ‘fabulous’ girls is standard58. The models are often compelled to perform a kind of high-end prostitution in which neither money nor professional advancement is guaranteed however. Work-related socializing at dinners and night clubs often end in sexual assault as modeling agencies ‘effectively act as an escort service’ for both influential men in the couture industry (Odell 2010) and simply ‘rich guys with jets trying to get laid’ (Neumann 2010). Formal modeling assignments are similar sites of predation and abuse59. Blais views sexual favors in commercial modeling as an inevitable consequence of both the typical situation from which models enter the industry and the situation in which they then find themselves: ‘Through having these young girls traveling the world unsupervised…you’re putting them in danger and there is of course going to be some bad people who will take advantage of that’ (in Phelan 2012). Likewise, for couture models, the expectation that they are young, poor girls desperate to succeed in an ‘impossible profession’ far from home render them easy bait for anyone with greater power in the industry. Couture model Sara Ziff, co-producer of the couture modeling documentary discussed in chapter one (Picture Me, 2009), describes a casting at age 14, for instance:

We had to go in one by one. The photographer said he wanted to see me without my shirt on. Then he told me that it was still hard to imagine me for the story so could I take my trousers off. I was standing there in a pair of Mickey Mouse knickers and a sports bra. I didn’t even have breasts yet. ‘We might need to see you without your bra,’ he told me. It was like he was shark circling me, walking around and around, looking me up and down
without saying anything. I did what he told me to. I was just eager to be liked and get the job. I didn’t know any better.60

The teenage Ziff registers the sexual nature of the photographer’s advances but has, at her age, neither developed sexually mature physical traits nor sensibilities. She follows instructions but with unease – which is not dissimilar to the sentiment invoked in viewers upon seeing, say, enormous advertisements featuring the then-painfully young supermodel Kate Moss in a string bikini, or naked and prostrate on a divan, while waiting for the subway in New York61. The object rendered desirable is clear and yet the desire seems illicit given Moss’ youth, her at once coquettish and naïve gaze, the ambiguous stance of her body, a teenager lounging casually but sexually exposed.

In her essay on the use and value of women in the marketplace, Luce Irigaray argues that ‘men make commerce of [women], but they do not enter into exchanges with them’62; couture model risk understanding themselves, then, as sexual instruments, developing senses of self-worth based on their commercial value, which they, again, seldom redeem themselves. ‘When women are exchanged, woman’s body must be treated as an abstraction. The exchange operation cannot take place in terms of some intrinsic, immanent value of [her body]…but as women reduced to some common [quantitative] feature,’ Irigaray continues (1985, 175). What this insight suggests for couture modeling is that in offering their bodies on the market, couture models can easily fail to develop a sense of their bodies’ value independent of their bodies’ value for the couture industry.

The compulsory absence of sexually mature physical trait and yet the sexualization of girls in a glamorous but predatory environment thus define the typical couture model’s situation. The recruit becomes a model subject through a process that subjects her to injurious objectification as well as seductive idolization in other words. Seemingly exalted before the camera and on the runway, she appears, as Whitefield-Madrano observes of Nadya, unable to reconcile the thrills of modeling with feelings of alienation, shame and fear. We see for instance Corinne Day’s famous photograph of the then-teenage supermodel Kate Moss, naked on the beach in Camber Sands, England: Moss uses a large straw hat to shield her pubis, her hands covering her breasts, body curled inward, protective, face scrunched into a smile tinged at the same time with something like pain (Moss would later recount her extreme reluctance toward stripping for the photoshoot (Fox 2012)). Thereafter, her signature expression would become routinely blank and remote. Only after 25 years of modeling, as Alice Fisher comments, ‘the woman who has never once criticised the fashion industry…comment[s] negatively on two photographers – Corinne Day and Herb Ritts – who are both dead. It might be a coincidence or it might be very clever’ (Fisher 2012).

In what follows, I will draw on psychoanalytic theory to argue that the couture industry cultivates in the typical couture model a perverse psychic situation which Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok describe as encrypted (1994). Encryption involves the denial of experiences characterized by pain and shame. Such experiences are buried in the psyche, transformed into a fantasy of unambiguous love, rather, the injurious experiences given a ‘name…not identical with prohibition [but with]…orgasmic delight’ (158). I argue that the psychic redescription of injury as love characterizes the kind of attachment girls tend to develop through couture modeling.

ii. Precarious pleasures
What is the precise nature of the typical couture model’s attachment to the couture industry, that is, to experiences that appear to wound and woo her with equal intensity? Financial exigencies notwithstanding, in what other ways can models become psychologically dependent on their agencies’ support and abuse? How does the couture industry more broadly manage to cultivate an attachment that maintains models’ subjection to its injuries, an attachment that is therefore pathological?

Just as Nadya returns to Tokyo, Moss and any number of couture models are, again, known to return to the industry so long as they can find work, if not for modeling then in the capacity of stylist, show producer, recruiter. Girl Model’s Ashley illustrates the case of a model turned recruiter; here, I turn to the film’s scrupulous treatment of Ashley’s bizarre behaviors to approach the pathological attachments to the couture industry common among couture models. These attachments can be expressed through various symptoms. Ashley appears to exhibit a psychosomatic symptom. Melancholia is another possibility. Both derive from a failed form of ego-growth that Abraham and Torok call the fantasy of psychic ‘incorporation’. I focus on variations of incorporation other than melancholy because, where melancholy is recognizable by the verbalization of what Freud describes as shameless self-reproach (‘[The patient] abases himself before everyone’ (1956); Abraham and Torok: ‘[T]he ego begins the public display of an interminable process of mourning’ (1994, 136)), other variations prohibit communication. Psychosomatic illnesses at most ‘speak to the subject only and not to others,’ for instance (Freud 1956, 155). Following a discussion of a number of symptoms and their interrelations in the context of couture modeling, I then turn to Ashley’s particular form of psychosomatic illness: a large ovarian cyst. ‘I hated this industry more than anybody but now I’m 15 years into it,’ she says with a rueful half-smile (in Girl Model 2009). The aim is to explore why.

a. Reformulations of melancholy

According to Freud, melancholy is similar to normal psychic processes of mourning insofar as melancholy is a reaction to the loss of what he calls a love-object. Mourning and melancholia are reactions that can be broadly characterized as ‘loss of interest in the outside world’ and ‘inhibition of all activity’ (Freud 1956, 244). Melancholy becomes pathological where the subject experiences a radical ‘lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings’ (ibid). This occurs because the libido, in lieu of re-attaching to a new love-object, withdraws into the ego and establishes a narcissistic identification between the ego and the lost love-object; the love-object is lost but the love for the object, or, the love relation, is preserved. And this preservation is problematic because, in most cases of melancholy, the love-object’s loss is not occasioned by ‘the clear [instance] of…death’ but by the love-object having wounded the subject. The subject thus harbors ambivalent feelings of love and hate for the love-object that are however turned against herself: ‘the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object [(that is, the ego)], making it suffer’ (251).

The pathological conflict crucially takes place in the unconscious, hindered ‘from proceeding along the normal path through the preconscious to consciousness’ due to ‘repressed material’ (257). Here, Abraham and Torok part ways from Freud in a manner that is illuminating for the kind of melancholy that the couture industry appears to engender in its models. The authors shift the defining feature of melancholia away from the ‘constitutional ambivalence’ of the unconscious to the establishment of a psychic crypt located in the preconscious-conscious system. The “love” for the love-object is moreover free of ambivalence: ‘We find it crucial to
affirm the prior existence of [an unequivocal] love, to insist on the undisclosable character of this love, and finally to show that a real and therefore traumatic cause had put an end to it’ (Abraham and Torok 1994, 136); thereafter, this love is psychically interred. It becomes transmuted in the psyche into an incommunicable fantasy of incorporation, in other words, which may or may not yield melancholia in the Freudian sense and psychosomatic illnesses.

Abraham and Torok distinguish psychic incorporation from normal processes of what is called psychic introjection, in which the ego extends autoerotic interests into the outside world so that those interests become named desires free to ‘unfold in the objectal sphere’ – free, that is, to circulate among objects without becoming dependent on them. In introjection, objects act as mediators for desires whereas in incorporation, specifically the traumatic loss of an object compels the ego to fantasize an imaginary object in which desires for the object become trapped. Normal processes of introjection gradually broaden and enrich the ego; incorporation, by contrast, ‘instantaneously’ and ‘magically’ petrifies and stunts the ego around this ‘imaginary tie,’ or, ‘hallucinatory fulfillment’. The paradigmatic example of introjection is the replacement of food and breast with language during infancy, and it is only with the mother’s constant assistance that the introjection can occur64.

Consider, then, the incorporation of the object that is the couture industry common among couture models: ‘[t]he abrupt loss of a narcissistically indispensable object of love has occurred, yet the loss is of a type that prohibits its being communicated’; and again, ‘[i]ncorporation results from those losses that for some reason cannot be acknowledged as such…we are debarred from providing any indication whatsoever that we are inconsolable’ (Abraham and Torok 1994, 129-130). The entire process is covert because the ‘objectal experience [is] tainted with shame [italics added].’ The question is, as Abraham and Torok pose, whose shame? For couture models, experiencing a sense of ‘abrupt loss’ in their attachment to the couture industry may proceed as follows: the models first perceive their agency as glamorous foster families, and the industry as a site of incomparable opportunities; then, the models undergo ‘shameful’ experiences that they are discouraged from acknowledging65 and that they therefore transform, by psychic necessity, into a fantasy of unequivocal love. In order to retain their jobs and to satisfy certain indispensable narcissistic needs, in other words, models who experience the loss attendant to the couture industry’s shameful behavior are likely to absolve the industry of blame, transforming the injuries into an ‘intrapsychic secret’ (‘Crypts are constructed only when the shameful secret is the love object’s doing and when that object also functions for the subject as an ego ideal. It is therefore the object’s secret that needs to be kept, his shame covered up.’ (131)). Because the industry’s wounding ‘d[oes] not admit of any form of verbal communication,’ incorporation is, for injured couture models, the ‘only viable means of narcissistic reparation’ (ibid).

Couture models who experience the financial, physical or psychological stresses of modeling as shameful66 risk establishing what Abraham and Torok call an ‘endocryptic identification’ with the couture industry, in which the industry’s ‘life’ is substituted for their own identities. The industry’s life is ‘fantasmic’ because these models have abandoned the industry as a love-object on account of its injuries but install an imago of ‘total innocence’ in its place. The models may believe that they have abandoned the industry ‘not…because of [its] infidelity but owing to hostile external forces’ (136). The industry as such becomes dissociated from its injurious actions just as the ‘cherished’ content of the crypt is built with but unmarred by ‘bricks of hate and aggression’ (ibid). In this ‘fantasy of identifying empathy,’ the industry’s love for the models that it has shamed is ‘pure,’ hence providing them with ‘narcissistic bliss at having
received the object’s love despite dangerous transgressions’ (137). Models may maintain this narcissistic fantasy so long as the walls of the crypt are not disturbed. But if the loss of a secondary love-object who had buttressed the walls occurs – a close model friend’s disavowal of the industry perhaps or her suicide – melancholia can set in.

Alternately, psychosomatic illnesses can prevail. There, so-called endocryptic subjects are for some reason unable to establish endocryptic identification and so exchange their own body for the love-object’s ‘life.’ It is an ‘internal conversion’ in which symptoms are neither manifested through melancholic affects nor words but rather through a physical object that acts as a substitute for the lost love-object. An ulcer, for instance, may be understood as a psychosomatic illness in which a person constructs the fantasy that his love-object is ‘unable to digest the loss of his beloved subject, [and so] must die’ (163); the subject then preserves this proof of the love-object’s love for him in his body. But, as Abraham and Torok argue, ‘the reasons for the specific location of the necrosis need to be elucidated in each case’ (ibid). What then might Ashley’s ovarian cyst intimate about the specifically female fantasies that the couture industry incurs? We see Ashley cradling the womb that holds a cyst as she would one that holds a child; at home in Connecticut, two plastic babies always await her return, propped on a dark grey love seat.

b. Reproducing illness

Most couture models are neither permitted to show signs of physical sexual maturity nor to disclose the experiences that produce its stunting; they risk being sexually objectified not only through dress and makeup but modes of sexual assault that must be rerouted in the psyche, transforming sexual injury into a ‘consummation of desire’ that is ‘buried – equally incapable of rising or of disintegrating’ (159). It is dangerous to disrupt this fantasy, which aims at ‘narcissistic restoration.’ And, by virtue of their typical situation, couture models often lack the means to reclaim ‘the libidinal resources the object had hitherto retained’ (151); they are likely unable to face the consequences of mourning and to undertake ‘the painful process of [psychic] reorganization’ (127). A stalwart fidelity to the encrypted love-object that is the couture industry preserves a ‘life’ whose self-deceit corrodes and, in some cases, destroys. This life, nourished by the illusion of the love-object’s presence (that is, carried inside) rather than by the cognizance of the object’s necessary absence (necessary, that is, for normal processes of ego-growth to occur), produces in turn not life but sickness, not a baby but a cyst with blonde hair.

Ashley is the main recruiter featured in Girl Model. She freelances for both Russia’s largest scouting agency and the Japanese modeling agency that contracts Nadya and Madlen. We see her vet, question, cajole the girls at the scouting sessions, her voice gentle but her speech clipped, her lips upturned but her eyes unsmiling. She is tall, thin and flat-chested like her recruits but, as the film unfolds, Ashley’s waist expands because of a growth in her uterus. Interspersed among scenes of Nadya and Madlen’s experience in Tokyo is video footage from Ashley’s own teenage years abroad as a model. She records herself in front of a hotel bathroom mirror, sitting against a blank wall in bed, on trains and planes, bitter, sad, tired, wistful. She vaguely gestures toward leaving the industry, becoming a writer, becoming, it would seem, free. ‘I’m not happy here,’ she manages to say once. Most of the time, she describes her location and assignment; she speaks slowly with long periods of silent gazing into the camera, direct but absent, an ironic smile frozen across her visage. Now, as a recruiter, she does not express any grievances against her job but, when asked, hesitates and again slowly answers that ‘it pays well
and allows me the freedom to travel.’ In exchange, she gives the agencies what they want: young girls whose families believe her promises of financial reward and agree to send their children abroad. Girls whom she inducts into the gradual process of attachment to adulation and injury that she had – and continues to experience herself.

In the film, Ashley does not relate any specific personal stories of modeling work; they have to be inferred from her present symptoms and how she interacts with her recruits. We see her check on Nadya and Madlen once during their stay in Tokyo. She navigates their neighborhood with ease and when she enters their apartment she regards the bunk bed, bare walls, and the girls’ brooding silence and slumped postures with a look of recognition and something approaching glee. It is clear that she identifies with the girls in a way that explains her familiar elation at their plight as sadistic but also masochistic. This is the perversity of the preserved love-relation that Freud elucidates and that Abraham and Torok fail to discuss in their theory of psychic incorporation. Writes Freud: ‘The self-torment in melancholia…is without doubt enjoyable, signifies…a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned round upon the subject’s own self’ (1956, 251). This is also one of the ways in which modeling may be pleasurable for couture models, pleasure becoming, that is, a satisfaction of masochistic tendencies because injuries have been given, again, a ‘name…not identical with prohibition [but with]…orgasmic delight’ (Abraham and Torok 1994, 158).

Ashley’s cyst appears to exemplify the incommunicable, ‘internal conversion’ of psychosomatic illnesses rather than the public self-bereavement characteristic of melancholia, but both are forms of psychic identification that invert the positions of self and love-object and take the self as the object of loss and hate. Again, in the ‘fantasy of identifying empathy’ characteristic of endocryptic identification, the love-object’s love for the subject it has wounded is ‘pure’ and provides the subject with ‘narcissistic bliss at having received the object’s love despite dangerous transgressions [italics added]’ (137). Ashley relishes, then, a cyst that causes her stomach to stiffen and distend – delights in, in other words, the lost love-object she is literally preserving in the crypt that is her womb. Rather than being alarmed by the illness, she only wishes that the cyst was a baby. In fact, she appears to fantasize that the cyst is her baby: she offers to show on camera the cyst in its plastic baggie after it has been removed. ‘The doctors said they had never seen such an enormous one!’ she proudly proclaims with neither irony nor any discernable awareness of its strangeness, ‘And look! It has blonde hair!’ She assimilates this operation to the process of childbirth: ‘I want a baby because that's what I am born to do…So when I go to have a baby I will…decide which date and just go and have the same operation that I just had.’

How, then, to understand the riddle implicit in Ashley’s testimony, ‘I hated this industry more than anybody but now I’m 15 years into it’? Critical here is the transition from hostility directed toward an (external) object to hostility directed toward oneself. The subject becomes ambivalent about the object but is unable to sever her attachment to it because she preserves that attachment in what Abraham and Torok call, again, a psychic crypt. A crypt, while built with ‘bricks of hate and aggression’, untainted inside. Ashley is glad for the income and lifestyle the industry now offers her but appears only able to express genuine delight at and tenderness for an ovarian cyst. As Ella Taylor writes about the conclusion of Girl Model, ‘when a postscript tells us [that Nadya returns to Tokyo to try her luck again], we're filled with dread’ (2012). Thus can we read Girl Model as a double haunting, Ashley adumbrating Nadya’s future and Nadya an apparition of Ashley’s past, the film as a portrait of commercial modeling offering the viewer a
first sense of the alluring but treacherous world of couture modeling, for models as well as, I argue below, for the viewers themselves.

2. Commodity culture

Both the typical commercial and couture recruit enter modeling from situations that render them radically dependent on their agencies’ directives; in lieu of the recruits’ families, modeling agencies often become the recruits’ sense and reference, imparting to recruits an awareness of their value as objects of display and often abuse. From a phenomenological perspective, then, couture modeling in particular is an extreme instance of ‘feminine existence [that] experiences the body as a mere thing…a thing that exists as looked at and acted upon’ (Young 2005, 39). What does couture modeling communicate on a cultural level? Couture models supply the couture industry’s demand for a sexualized female ideal that is nonetheless prohibited from showing physical signs of female sexual maturity; why is this kind of figure idealized in culture today and how might its macabre contradictions express certain pathological preferences specific to contemporary culture?

To be clear, I am not interested in directly interrogating cultural idealizations of the ‘slender body’ – the typical couture model’s emaciated frame as part of what Susan Bordo calls the psychopathology of anorexia in *Unbearable Weight*⁶⁹. I am rather conceptualizing couture models’ bodies in terms of their paradoxically sexualized objecthood. This section considers couture models’ attachments to the industry in the context of broader cultural norms that not only enable such attachments but recognize their psychaesthetic manifestation as ideal. I address the status of couture models as model commodities in contemporary culture: in what specific ways girls and women have been historically valued as commodities and their relevance for couture models as cultural ideals today.

i. Valuing objects

Feminist discussions of the slender female ideal typically converge around cultural diagnoses of eating disorders⁷⁰. Bordo’s study of anorexia as a characteristic expression of culture has been especially influential. She identifies anorexia as a psychopathology that propagates a ubiquitous, normalizing mode of female body management⁷¹. ‘Female bodies have historically been significantly more vulnerable than male bodies to extremes in [the]…cultural manipulation of the body,’ argues Bordo (2003, 143). What Bordo calls the dualist ‘axis,’ which derives from a historical denigration of the brute materiality of the flesh in favor of the soul or will, and the control ‘axis,’ which she attributes to anxieties regarding the contemporary body’s ‘special sort of vulnerability and dependency’⁷², disproportionately affect girls and women. Hence the third gender/power ‘axis’: the ‘male side’ of the self triumphs over ‘the self of the uncontrollable appetites, the impurities and taints, the flabby will and tendency to mental torpor’ that the female body traditionally represents (155). Hence too the contemporary slender female body’s association with social mobility – the ability to ‘shape [one’s] life’ seen as coextensive with the ability to shape one’s body – and with freedom from a ‘domestic, reproductive destiny’ (195 and 206).

The focus on the specific proportions of the female ideal, while illuminating, misses a crucial dimension of the female body’s commodification however. Inquiries into the cultural centrality of female slenderness presume the human status of women. The individual experiences of anorexics are accorded primary significance; indeed, Bordo’s three ‘axes of continuity’ are
constructed from the imagery and language of anorexic women whom she interviewed. Couture models are however foremost objects of display. The couture industry uses them as mere objects, which is not, as Young distinguishes, ‘the same phenomenon as the objectification by the Other that is a condition of self-consciousness’ (2005, 44 fn 24). This mode of female objectification differs from objectification as the condition of being recognized in other words. I will draw on Irigaray’s account of women’s use and value as goods in the capitalist market economy to think through the alluring but injurious attachments that models as well as spectators risk in couture.

Two characteristics of objects are germane to a discussion of women’s circulation in the marketplace. In Young’s words, an object is, ontologically speaking, ‘what can be handled, manipulated, constructed, built up and broken down, with clear accountability of matter gained and lost; on a practical level, it is ‘what is had, owned, with clear boundaries of right’73. An object is thus ‘essentially’ a quantitative entity: witness couture models’ bodies, valued, tracked and managed by way of height, weight and age. Couture models are pieces of property who ‘attain their full weight as...objects of exchange on the market,’ namely, as commodities (Young 2005, 78). But the value of a commodity does not turn on its ‘determinate and definable’ material features. The relation between its value and its material composition is, according to Marx’s analysis of commodities, an enigma. A commodity is always valued against an external standard, another commodity to which it is rendered equivalent. What is the equalizing force? Man’s labor-power, itself reduced to homogenous units. And what enables this abstraction? ‘Some transcendental element,’ which Irigaray ascribes to the ‘needs/desires of [men]’ specifically: ‘women bring to light [these needs/desires] although men do not recognize them in that form’ (1985, 182).

Irigaray argues that it is in part the needs/desires of masculine sexuality which compel men to treat women’s bodies as abstractions, masculine sexuality being an ‘essentially economic pleasure’, that is, rapacious, reductive and conservative74. The female body becomes the raw material for his activity: his speculation; his determination of her social use, which is only social insofar as it concerns men’s collective exigencies. How are couture models masculine constructions, then, in Irigaray’s sense? In what ways are couture models projections of masculine needs/desires that value them for their economic utility alone, in other words, and why might this convention be injurious for not only couture models but also the cultures in which couture models circulate as glamorous ideals?

ii. Model commodities

From girlhood on, the typical couture model is conditioned to value herself according to a paradoxical ability to suppress physical signs of sexual maturity while performing the role of a sexualized object; the psychophysical expression of this is what I have called a psychaesthetics of violence to which spectators respond and risk becoming attached themselves. The female figure that is the couture industry’s ‘raw material’ is, in one sense, hardly novel. In the public sphere that is coterminous with market and commerce, Bordo argues that women must assume male bodies in order to succeed: the professional female body must not signify maternal power in any way, hence the ‘lean body of the career businesswoman’ (2003, 206-211). What is distinctive about contemporary couture’s female figure, however, is the extremes to which this demand has been carried today, both in its glamorized appearance and in its psychophysical production. The glamour of this figure is apparent to all, its ruthless psychophysical production is
not, and yet girls who experience firsthand the precipitous financial, physical and psychological costs of couture modeling are known to stay in the industry for as long as they can.

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This has been the present chapter’s guiding puzzle, which, as I proposed at the chapter’s outset, offers an alternative approach to understanding couture models’ cultural appeal. The typical couture model’s attachment to a dynamic of adulation and injury is suggested psychophysically to spectators, that is, through identical physiques and miens on the runway articulating the incongruous demands of a perverse economy. Couture clothes are given a sexual gloss by bodies that evidence however the absence of sexual maturity. Bodies and clothes figure an ideal that is at once desirable and violent, expressing a psychic fantasy of pleasure underwritten as much by delight as by shame, by affirmation as by denial. Thus can we understand contemporary couture as underwriting a pathological culture that is upheld but also, I will demonstrate, challenged on couture’s runways.
IV. The experimental turn

1. Radical visions
   
   i. Staging trauma
   
   ii. Designing subversion

2. Marketing the macabre

   i. The business of the clothes

   ii. The business of the models

Fig. 4. A model enacting ‘Flies Trapped Inside a Jacket,’ Andrew Groves’ Spring/Summer 1998 show. Photograph by Niall McInerney. © Evans (2003).
In the late 20th-century, a contingent of designers stunned the industry by featuring couture’s violences as dramatic themes in their runway shows. Models with disheveled hair and bruised faces filed out manacled to metal frames, donning tattered shrouds. Dress and body were purposely mortified, one displayed in its most abject, secondhand state, the other, in its battered evisceration. Termed experimental couture, the movement was seen by some reviewers to critique the couture industry’s brisk translation of fabric and female bodies into sexualized spectacles (Evans 2003; Granata 2010). Other commentators read experimental designers as merely offering novel marketing strategies, provocative but ultimately bereft of substance (Blanchard 1997).

This chapter develops each reading in turn. I argue first that experimental couture shows can be understood to directly reference the violent production of clothes as well as models in mainstream couture. To the extent that experimental couture brands utilized production strategies similar to mainstream couture brands off the runway, however, I then argue that experimental couture deepens the problematic of violence in couture. The same corps of underpaid, largely foreign girl models that walk the runways of mainstream couture are used to sell experimental couture clothes and subsidiary goods produced and sold in the manner of mainstream couture goods. Considered thus, experimental couture can be seen to register the industry’s violences while propagating them.

1. Radical visions

In chapter three, I used the concept of psychic incorporation to interrogate the attachments to injury and adulation common among couture models. The couture industry glamorizes an objectification and instrumentalization of the models’ bodies that often involve their sexual assault. Encouraged, on the one hand, to pursue professional advancement through sexual favors, and discouraged, on the other, from speaking about the sexual predation rampant within the industry, couture models risk experiencing the assaults as their own shameful behavior. Where the industry has become what Abraham and Torok describe as ‘a narcissistically indispensable object of love’ for a couture model, the assaults compel an ‘abrupt loss of [the love object]’ that, in incorporation, ‘for some reason cannot be acknowledged as [a loss]’ (1994, 129-130). My focus here lies with the specifically traumatic nature of this loss75, which is expressed in the very configuration of couture shows. The repetition that structures trauma perfectly describes couture’s meticulous processions of identical physiques and miens. By casting repetition as a central subject of their runway shows, experimental designers foregrounded the formal violence of mainstream couture shows; by reiterating the defiling of both models and clothes, experimental designers also explicated the material violence of mainstream couture shows.

This section considers a number of the most controversial experimental couture designers and their shows76. I first draw on trauma theory to examine experimental dramatizations of the industry’s violence toward couture models. Following Cathy Caruth’s claim that trauma is a wound that is always missed but that nonetheless demands recognition (1996), I read the traumatic choreography of experimental couture shows as effecting recognition of the industry’s injurious treatment of couture models among models as well as spectators. Subsequently, I apply theories of female sexuality to experimental runway clothes. Experimental designers’ emphasis on handmade and secondhand-appearing garments that contravened uniform standards of industrial production can be understood through the discrepancy between a male sexuality that operates according to the same ‘models, ideals, goals…[and] circuits’ organizing industrial production (Grosz 1995, 183), and a female sexuality that ‘distributes in its own way, without
model or norm’ (Cixous 1976, 91). Experimental designers’ rejection of techniques of cutting and construction central to mainstream couture’s lascivious advertising of the female body can be seen to further underwrite such a female sexuality. Against the principles of instrumentality that govern male sexuality, the unexpected proportions and combinations on experimental couture’s runways demonstrated instead what Jacqueline Schaeffer describes as a ‘de-sphincterized…de-frigidified’ desire that ‘roam[s] far and wide…knowing no frontier’ (2011).

i. Staging trauma

When models sporting ‘dirty unkempt hair [and]…pasty white faces’ first stomped down the runway in a decade that idolized lustrous bouffants and smoldering makeup (English 2011, 39), couture critics were variously appalled, perplexed and euphoric. The French press excoriated the 1981 shows of experimental designers Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto as asexual and anti-aesthetic. American Vogue lumped Kawakubo and Yamamoto with other Japanese designers, unable to conceptualize Kawakubo and Yamamoto’s ‘somber and bizarre’ approach to couture within couture’s Euro-American heritage. Among ‘the art crowd and chic bohemians’ who immediately took to experimental couture, however, the macabre models dressed in monochrome, perforated garments were seen to signal ‘mourning…subcultural rebellion…emotional dissonance…artistic distemper’. Wearing the clothes felt, in the words of journalist Alice Rawsthorn, ‘super uncompromising, super radical and super feminist – like waving a very elegant two-fingered salute at the establishment’. But what did experimental runway shows communicate about the models who displayed the clothes? Why the made-up bruises and burns? Why, in the following decade during which experimental couture was most critically acclaimed, did the performances of couture models seem to take precedence over couture clothes?

The machinic standardization of couture models constituted a central dramatic theme in the shows of design teams Viktor & Rolf and Maison Martin Margiela (MMM). Designers Alexander McQueen and Andrew Groves were notable for staging scenes of alarming physical cruelty as well as psychological insanity and melancholy. Critics failed to read the shows as direct commentary against the couture industry’s treatment of its models; couture models were seen to enact historical and cultural norms and practices toward girls and women more generally. In this respect, the critics themselves were complicit in regarding couture models as representational objects rather than girls embedded in historically and culturally specific ‘relations of labor and production, power and subordination, desire and sexuality, prestige and status,’ to draw on Young’s problematization of female embodiment discussed in chapter three. Below, then, I read first Viktor & Rolf and MMM’s shows and subsequently McQueen and Groves’ shows in the context of the couture industry’s contemporaneous violences toward its models.

a. Duplicate dolls

Viktor & Rolf and MMM enacted the repetition intrinsic to the mass production of both couture clothes and models in a number of ingenious ways throughout the 1990s and 2000s. At MMM’s shows, the genericism of mass-produced couture clothes found its reflection in couture models whose faces were often obscured to accentuate the eerie similitude between the bodies. Viktor &
Rolf emphasized the elision of anonymous bodies and dolls. The spectacle of uniform female bodies was not new in itself:

The image [of endlessly repeatable women] finds an echo in the Tiller Girls of, for example, the Weimar period in Berlin and the Rockettes of New York’s Radio City Music Hall in the 1930s, whose identical heights, synchronised dance routines and uniform costumes denied the material difference of sixty-four female bodies. (Evans 2003, 171)

Hollywood chorus girls and touring dance troupes popular in the immediate postwar decades also matched in height, weight and countenance (Evans 2013). And just as these performers recalled ‘uninterrupted chain[s] of autos gliding from the factories into the world’ (De Perthuis 2003, 115), the phalanxes of models filing down mainstream couture’s runways in the late 20th-century resembled impeccably assembled machines. What the earlier ‘mechanical ideals’ of women did not share with contemporary couture models, however, was features suggesting physical and psychological damage. I have argued that the violences of objectifying and instrumentalizing women’s bodies are intensified for couture models whose typical situations as young, underpaid foreign labor render them particularly vulnerable to injury. In staging the iterated production of identical bodies, then, Viktor & Rolf and MMM’s shows foregrounded the traumatic structure of mainstream couture shows for spectators and models alike.

According to Caruth, it is the nature of trauma to repeatedly return to the subject in an attempt to disclose, first, the fact that what is always a missed traumatic event had occurred, and, second, the full magnitude of the event’s violence (1996). The event always eludes consciousness at the time of its occurrence because it is too dangerous for the psyche to grasp. The event of the injury, in other words, is always experienced in what Caruth terms the ‘fantasmatic’ register of reality. One reason for the psyche’s habitual denial of a traumatic event returns us, again, to chapter three’s discussion of psychic incorporation. In incorporation, an object of love is abruptly lost as love-object because it has wounded the subject. The love-object is, however, ‘narcissistically indispensable’; this compels the love for the love-object – the love-relation – to be maintained. The ‘objectal experience [is] tainted with shame’ but the experience cannot be acknowledged as such. This can create in the subject a state of love and hate toward the love-object that is turned inward against the subject herself, ‘making [the ego] suffer’83. Caruth argues that the repetitions of trauma are precisely the ‘repetition of [muted] suffering’ (1996, 9). The intrinsic purpose of these repetitions is to push the subject toward ‘a new mode of reading and listening’ to the missed event: each repetition is a re-confronting with the event that urges the subject ‘to awaken to the Real’ (99-105). In what ways did Viktor & Rolf and MMM’s shows stage ‘the Real’ of mainstream couture?

MMM shows were known for featuring faceless models. Massive visors or nude stocking pulled over the head on bodies dressed in monochrome basics eliminated any hint of affective difference between similar gaunt physiques84. Both MMM and Viktor & Rolf further dramatized the extreme and disquieting uniformity of mainstream couture models by replacing models with dummies. Puppeteers operated life-size wooden puppets in MMM’s 1999 Fall/Winter show, for instance. Viktor & Rolf presented their 1996 Fall/Winter collection of clothes on porcelain dolls with wigs, however, of real hair. Experimental couture’s runways displayed, then, dolls with human proportions or features while models became assimilated to interchangeable dolls. ‘Working around the theme of dolls is a recurrent theme for us,’ the designers stated (2008).
They dramatized the inversion of anthropomorphized dolls and petrified models with particular acuity in a widely-reviews pair of shows staged a decade apart. Alternately casting a single model as toy ballerina and spectral mannequin, each model spun on a dais as the designers dressed her before the audience. Layering each successive garment of the seasons’ collections on top of the next, Viktor & Rolf in effect mummified the model. The models’ waxen faces and blank, unblinking expressions heightened the sense of the macabre.

Couture critics praised Viktor & Rolf for their provocative showmanship, and art curators exhorted that MMM’s works ‘should always be read as critical and partly radical comments on the world of fashion’. The exaggerated anonymity of MMM’s models were thought, for instance, to challenge the industry’s ceaseless narcissism. Viktor & Rolf’s dolls, real and figurative, were understood to signal the fashion industry’s endorsing of the commodification of women’s bodies in culture at large and, more broadly, the alienation of labor in capitalist production (Evans 2003, 165-183). But as much as these experimental shows possessed relevance for girls, women and the ab/use of bodies beyond the couture industry, the shows must also be read in relation to the actual laboring bodies and situations of couture models. Chapter three described the ways in which couture’s girl models are appraised as sexualized bodies alone from their first scouting sessions to subsequent castings and shows. While ‘[a great] personality [in a model] goes a long way,’ attest casting agents in Picture Me, even seasoned models interviewed throughout the documentary express shock and indignation at their being scrutinized and dismissed as indiscriminate ‘flesh’, ‘herded like cattle’ (Picture Me 2009). The models in Viktor & Rolf shows miming dolls or, in MMM shows, whose heads are smothered by stockings, explicitly articulated the couture industry’s effacement and affective silencing of its models. Models wheeled out on trolleys donning half-finished garments held together by ‘CAUTION’ tape may be reviewed as ‘a strange sort of fashion construction site’ (Mower 2005), but the strangeness extended past the aesthetics of the clothes to encompass the routine eliding of models and inanimate objects, and, equally, the eliding of models and routine inanimate objects.

The strangeness or sense of the macabre that haunted experimental couture’s runways also lay with the psychophysical damage that typified the look of these model-objects. The same decade in which experimental couture garnered the most critical attention saw the rise of couture industry’s waif ideal, which demanded the paring of already-stringent physical specifications to a fatal minimum. Substance abuse became as prevalent as the eating disorders typical among couture models in the 1980s. Experimental couture shows thus enacted the industry’s systematized repertoire of violences toward its models. Turning, next, to McQueen and Groves’ shows, I consider their articulations of both these violences and their psychophysical effects on couture models. The repetition of scenes of couture models’ physical mutilation and psychological unraveling can be seen to ‘demand [from spectators as well as the models themselves their] witness while defying [their] understanding’ (Caruth 1996, 3). This is one specific way in which experimental couture shows haunt entertainers and the entertained: ‘trauma…returns to haunt the survivor’ and, when staged and circulated, all those for whom couture serves as an ideal.

b. Brutalized beauties

Like Viktor & Rolf and MMM, McQueen was known for dramatizing the industry’s homogenization of its models, but, more so, he shared a reputation with Groves for graphic
displays of death and decay. In stark contrast to shows featuring models styled after cyborgs monotonously filing up and down the runways, McQueen often cast models in clothes, makeup and choreographies signaling varying degrees of brutalization. Groves confronted the audience with similarly terrifying spectacles. Critics again read these shows to critique the couture industry’s propagation of destructive gender norms or violence toward women more generally (Evans 2003). Again, the argument here is that the models in experimental couture shows performed violences that were also specific to their profession. Following Caruth, this repertoire of violences defies understanding insofar as the spectators who witness one faceless model after the next, the mute ‘doll’ buried again and again, or blood-splattered wraiths staggering out in torn clothing may be alerted to some kind of wrongdoing to the models themselves but are able to identify neither injury nor aggressor. The models who may have suffered these violences may be confounded in the same way insofar as trauma’s presence is necessarily deflected in the psyche. Trauma’s repeated enactment, however, effects what Caruth describes as a recognition of the difference between experiencing trauma in the fantasmatic register of reality and then in the Real register of the dream. Below, I draw on Freud’s dream of the burning child to understand McQueen and Groves’ shows as the staging of this difference.

The first reports of McQueen’s 1993 runway debut stated, ‘McQueen…has a view that speaks of battered women, of violent lives, of grinding daily existences offset by wild, drug-enhanced nocturnal dives into clubs where the dress-code is semi-naked’ (Evans 2003, 141) – the show, then, as social commentary rather than as an explicit performance of the publicized lifestyles of many couture models in the 1990s. McQueen instructed his models to appear distraught or deathly on runways that became a ring of fire, a bed of nails, a deadly jungle. There, models were contorted by body jewelry, drowned in rain, hung in the air, and assaulted by robots. ‘I want people to be afraid of the women I dress,’ McQueen claimed. Critics diverged in interpreting the scenes of torture and hysteria as a condoning or condemning of the abuse of women everywhere. Fierce accusations of misogyny early in McQueen’s couture career gave way to the estimation that McQueen ‘all[ied] glamour with fear rather than allure’ in designing for women who, as he was known to assert, ‘look so fabulous [men] wouldn’t dare lay a hand on [them]’ (149). The general consensus, however, settled at his shows being expressions of ‘cultural anxieties and uncertainties’ on the part of a ‘Romantic…hero-artist’. And if the consensus missed the mark in any way, it was that McQueen shows enacted, as Caroline Evans argues, the ‘political trauma’ of, say, England’s ‘rape’ of Scotland or religious wars (141-61). The models merely helped to channel McQueen’s ‘wider vision of the cruelty of the world’ (ibid).

Critics interpreted Groves’ shows in the same manner, though Groves tended to work more directly with themes drawn from the couture industry. A model’s apparent self-immolation at his 1998 show was understandably read in light of the show’s title “Sinn Fein”, the name for the main Northern Irish republican party. But shows called “Cocaine Nights” featuring models in dresses stitched from razor blades, toeing trails of white powder, or “Status”, where a towering, morose-looking model flung open her jacket to release hundreds of flies on the audience, pointed toward the actual experiences of couture models as well as the resultant psychological symptoms discussed in chapter three. Models navigating Groves’ runways in razor-blade dresses conveyed, as argued in chapter one, the care with which they had to traverse the financial, physical as well as psychological risks of their profession. Models in McQueen’s shows enacting historical rape victims or positioned like dissected dolls could also be seen to perform injuries personally suffered. When McQueen shut his models inside a large, reflective-surveillance-glass box,
therefore, forcing the audience to first watch their own reflections and then watch the models watch the models’ own reflections, both models and audience were compelled to take on ‘an intense and paranoid self-consciousness’, however simulated the setting (93-99). The audience confronted the objectifying gazes they habitually trained on models, followed by a performance in which their objectifying gazes were intensified by the models’ inability to see the audience. The models were instructed to strut about the box admiring their own reflections, but their bandaged heads suggested their subsequent descent into apparent states of psychosis. What about these reflections might drive the models into psychosis? Why might the reflections be so distressing for the models and so unsettling for the audience?

To return to the earlier discussion of trauma, the psyche deflects traumatic events because such events are too dangerous to acknowledge. When a ‘narcissistically indispensable’ love-object is abruptly lost, for example, the ego is driven to maintain the love-relation by identifying with the love-object. Again, maintaining the love-relation is problematic because in most cases the love-object has wounded the subject, occasioning feelings of both love and hate toward the love-object that become directed at the subject herself. I argued in chapter three that the couture industry is the wounding love-object for couture models who appear to demonstrate symptoms of such a loss. Acknowledging the industry’s injurious actions thus imperils the ego: as McQueen’s glass box show can be understood to illustrate, the models see in their reflections their own glamorous objectification, displayed to an invisible but present audience, as well as, however, a crucial sign of psychological damage – their bandaged heads; the recognition precipitates a mental breakdown. The audience recognizes, in turn, their role in the models’ collapse. The show does not alert the audience to the full extent of the violences they are endorsing – does the models’ objectification alone drive the models insane? – but the audience’s complicity is starkly foregrounded and rendered problematic.

Might a traumatized subject grasp the injurious event without, however, incurring further injury? If the repetitions of trauma ‘demand our witness’ in order to effect, as discussed earlier, ‘a new mode of reading and listening [italics added]’ to the necessarily missed traumatic event, can McQueen and Groves’ dramatizations of the models’ brutalization be read as stagings of such a demand? A demand, that is, to witness and therefore depart from the fantasmatic reality in which the truths of the event cannot be accessed, toward what Caruth terms ‘the Real of otherness’ (1996, 106)? One way that trauma returns to haunt the traumatized subject is through dreams. Caruth uses Freud’s dream of the burning child to demonstrate a re-encounter with trauma that rouses the subject from the dream and so makes him re-experience the violence of the trauma in, however, a new register of reality that Caruth calls survival. What this mode of survival might look like and mean for the subject is a question I discuss thereafter.

In the dream of the burning child, a father has just lost his child to fever after days of watching the child at the child’s sick-bed. The father instructs an old man to keep vigil by his child’s corpse, now lain out surrounded by burning candles, while the father goes to sleep in the adjoining room, the door, however, ajar. As he sleeps, the father dreams that his child claps his arm, asking reproachfully, ‘Father, don’t you see that I am burning?’ The father startles awake, and, noticing an unusually bright glare emanating from the child’s room, rushes over to find the old man asleep and the child’s covers and one of the child’s arms burnt by a fallen candle. Caruth argues that the purpose of the dream was to ‘push’ the father out of a fantasmatic reality in which he fails to grasp the truth of his child’s death, because it is the child’s reproach that awakens the father. The child appears alive in the dream so that, upon awakening, the father is forced to re-experience the child’s death and therefore confront it. Through the Real register of
the dream, in other words, the father awakens to the shock of the dead child’s ‘otherness’ that is also the ‘Real of otherness’ that describes a different kind of reality. Trauma is a wound issuing forth a ‘plea by an other asking to be seen and heard,’ writes Caruth (9). And just as the child in the dream effectively urges the father to see and hear the child in the child’s dead state in reality, the repeated enactments of the models’ wounding on McQueen and Groves’ runways demand for models and spectators to awaken to the otherness of those violences – the otherness of the Real of the losses occasioned by those violences – and to the imperative of their survival.

Survival is, according to Caruth,

[an] oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival. (7)

Death here includes the literal death of, say, the child in the dream of the burning child, as well as the loss of, say, a narcissistically indispensable but wounding love-object. McQueen and Groves’ shows can be understood to ask its models and spectators to come to terms with the models’ loss, which is to acknowledge the industry’s violences toward its models. This mode of survival is itself, following Caruth, a crisis for the survivor, but it is a crisis that promotes the models’ ego-growth rather than the development of psychic symptoms discussed in chapter three, and that urges models and spectators alike to contest the industry’s injurious practices.

ii. Designing subversion

If experimental couture shows garnered more attention for the models’ performances than for the clothes at the height of its critical popularity, emphasis decidedly lay with clothes in experimental couture’s early years. The movement’s founders, Kawakubo and Yamamoto, were seen to counter mainstream couture’s trends toward the mass-producing of clothes, on the one hand, and the hypersexualizing of girl models, on the other, through pioneering new techniques of garment construction and utilizing unusual fabrics and dyes. Their first shows in 1981 featuring models who appeared as defiled as the clothes stunned the industry on both counts, but the choreographies were standard. It was Kawakubo and Yamamoto’s clothes that most forcefully critiqued the violences intrinsic to the polished homogeneity of mainstream couture clothes and the relentlessly bared, painfully pared bodies that displayed them on the runways.

Many critics initially found experimental runway clothes to be ugly and clumsy92, expressing a ‘poor’ aesthetic that ‘transform[ed] abject materials into designer fashion’ with only questionable success (English 2011, 134). The experimental legacy that Kawakubo and Yamamoto bequeathed to subsequent generations of designers was, however, later considered visionary and courageous for offering conceptions of female beauty resistant to easy consumption and categorization. Below, I develop this understanding of experimental couture in terms of its challenge to the violences of male sexuality articulated in mainstream couture. I first discuss key characteristics of Kawakubo and Yamamoto’s runway clothes and then assess the ways in which MMM, one of Kawakubo’s most famous disciples93, continued and complicated their strategies.

a. Kawakubo and Yamamoto: The decade of refusal

Trained in Western and Japanese design, Kawakubo and Yamamoto deconstructed the craft of couture along three axes – tailoring, textiles and color palette – to produce what appeared to be at
best inky shrouds and at worst garbage bags in a period when couture’s runways glittered with holographic sequins on exaggerated shoulders and wasp waists. Throughout the 1980s, the runways featured notably younger and thinner figures and increasingly low-cut and low-cost clothes; Kawakubo and Yamamoto seemed, then, to confront the industry with the impoverishment that lay behind its façades of luxury. What critics coined the designers’ ‘poor’ aesthetic in fact described, however, meticulous experimentations with textiles and construction techniques. What critics deemed formless and asexual spoke to industry preferences for expanses of skin organized in customary proportions and combinations rather than to Kawakubo and Yamamoto’s submissions of the peculiar beauties of unhemmed caftans and hole-ridden sweaters. ‘[My clothes are] a gift to oneself, not something to appeal or attract the opposite sex,’ Kawakubo explained (Vogue 1995). From its inaugural shows forward, the clothes on experimental couture’s runways can thus be read to articulate a mode of sexuality alien to and, indeed, repudiated by the masculine sexual economy underwriting mainstream couture.

Male sexuality operates according to a set of techniques aimed at achieving specific goals, argues Elizabeth Grosz (1995). These goals are, in turn, organized around ideals of ‘depth, latency, interiority…identity’ – expressed in mainstream couture through the distinctive hourglass silhouette of the female form that is, however, artificially projected on couture models’ prepubescent physiques by way of the clothes’ cut and construction. Skin-tight, cinched-waist sheaths paired with stilettos are designed to exhibit maximal amounts of long, oiled limbs that incite masculine desire in spectators. Female sexuality, by contrast, eschews goals and norms for ‘surface [and] surface effects…br[ought] into play’ (198) – demonstrated in experimental couture by clothes made for, as Kawakubo’s asserted, ‘actual’ bodies rather than so-called ‘natural’ bodies (English 2011, 72). Drop-crotch pants and drapey tee shirts refused the distinction between genders while Kawakubo in particular refrained from sizing her collections. ‘[Design’s] purpose is to allow a person to be what they are [italics added],’ according to Kawakubo (ibid). The aim of Kawakubo and Yamamoto’s clothes was to experiment and to upend the governing conventions of mainstream couture.

Kawakubo and Yamamoto explored the properties of textiles without standard figures and genders in mind. They blended and acid-treated the warps and wefts of natural and polyamide fibers to create blistered textures that approximated skin or crumpled paper. Yamamoto then cut the cloth along asymmetric lines, Kawakubo preferred to layer, wrap, twist and tie, and both created voluminous dimensions and multiple possibilities of arrangement for facilitating the wearer’s self-expression. Black was their color of the decade: black signaled refusal, Kawakubo asserted, black embodied a simultaneous modesty and arrogance, offered Yamamoto. The dark creations, bearing ‘loose flaps, queer trains, and…perplexing extrusions’ (Thurman 2005), compelled their wearers to improvise and experiment in turn. This is the sense in which Kawakubo and Yamamoto’s clothes ‘re-mark[ed] [the body’s] orifices, glands, sinews, muscles’ to, again, bring into play ‘surfaces, intensities, energies, practices, moments’ (Grosz 1995, 198), rather than reduce bodies to instruments of gratification. Put another way, the strangely lumpen figures on Kawakubo and Yamamoto’s runways articulated an excess characteristic of female sexuality. Female sexuality is excessive from, in Schaeffer’s words, ‘an economic point of view’ because it resists organization and reduction. The subject practicing female sexuality ‘does not flee extremes [nor]…tr[ies] to “recover her expenses”’ (Cixous and Clement 1986). Couture models ‘bundle[d]…up in [muted colors and threadbare woollens with frayed edges] like Balkan refugees from a phantasmic Eastern Europe’ (Evan 2003, 249) were incomprehensible within a male sexual economy conditioned to reject this excess.
Building on Freud, Schaeffer argues that men and women’s refusal of the great and constant pressure of sexual drives characterizing female sexual flows forms the very ‘bedrock’ of the psyche (2011). The standard subject in psychoanalysis is constituted through her repudiation of female sexual excess, which is regarded by the ego to be disruptive, and, more importantly, regressive for what Freud called the civilization process (23). This excess is specifically registered as ‘other’ in the psyche: it remains unrepresented though controlled in the manner of an ‘internal foreign body’. Kawakubo and Yamamoto’s clothes, inscrutably excessive in not only their amorphous shapes and significations but also their apparent poverty, foregrounded, then, the specifically abject character of excess in the psyche. Textiles were purposely baked under the sun, boiled to look nappy, faded, scrubbed, bled, and picked at in the effort to approximate the ‘commodity with the lowest exchange value in the fashion system’ – used clothing (Evans 2003, 249); hence the models’ oft-remarked resemblances to refugees or prisoners of war. Likewise, female sexual excess, incomprehensible in its boundless intensities, poses a terrifying threat to the ego’s stability. It triggers anxiety upon entering the ego and typically activates two ego-solutions, neurotic or suppressive (7). In the first, the ego accepts a portion of the intrusion while attempting to ‘negotiate’ the remainder; in the second, the ego refuses to accept female sexual excess altogether. Schaeffer proposes, however, a third possibility. The ego submits to this excess, relinquishing its habitual defenses and allowing itself to be nourished. Fear transforms into wonder and ecstasy through, foremost, an ‘act of mentalization’ of the unrepresented other.

When Kawakubo sent down the runway in 1982 hand-knit black sweaters cratered with what appeared to be moth holes, she called it ‘Comme des Garçons lace’; this re-conceptualizing of the apparently abject eventually prompted critics to recognize Kawakubo’s explorations of textiles and construction as ‘sublimely sorry-looking’ (Thurman 2005). Kawakubo was thought to have created ‘new terms of femininity’, at once cerebral and sensuous. Kawakubo and Yamamoto together were praised for the complexity and inventiveness of their ‘shapeless shapes’. Below, I consider MMM’s further experimentations with notions of disuse and reuse within an industry fueled by the rapid production and disposal of clothes and models alike. ‘Cultural refuse [is recovered] for exchange value’ (Evans 2003, 249), again relying on neither the gaudy palettes nor hypersexualizing silhouettes of mainstream couture.

b. MMM: Revitalizing refuse

In the late 1980s, MMM came into prominence for drawing on familiar experimental couture tropes of oversize, monochrome, secondhand-seeming clothing and rendering them more dynamic through establishing serial narratives between runway shows.

‘His first show…had models…walking through red paint which left their footprints on long sheets of white paper. This paper was used to make his next collection. In subsequent shows, he wrapped bright blue garbage bags around recycled, throwaway clothing, made coats out of synthetic wigs…[and] waistcoats out of broken crockery.’ (English 2011, 134)

Distinctions between used and new, clothing and other everyday disposable objects were also, then, rendered fluid and ambiguous. Such irreverent play on the norms of mainstream couture led critics to regard MMM as ‘avant-garde fashion pushed to its most extreme limits’ (Mower 2007). The conceptualism of MMM clothes was thought bizarre but often ‘mesmerizingly beautiful’ (Blanks 2014). Other times, their effect was one of ‘beauty and horror’ alike – glittering face-
masks and gold-foil split-toe boots evoked menacing, biomorphic aliens dressed in, however, poetic assemblages of vintage fabrics and rusty trinkets (ibid). Read through the lens of female sexuality, MMM clothes advanced the pleasures of a boundless ‘interfacing’ of surfaces and surface effects for its own sake (Grosz 1995, 198).

For MMM, a central design tenet is the displaying of a garment’s construction process on clothes that purposely appear unfinished. The earliest demonstrations of this experimental strategy can be seen, again, in MMM’s first two shows. The material for the second show is created over the course of the first. In seasons thereafter, exposed linings, darts and basting threads became design motifs; models carried fabric rolls still attached to their skirts; leather and chiffon were Velcro-ed to each other as if an accident or afterthought. Each show was a permanent gesture toward the incomplete (Evans 2003, 250), underscored by materials whose use was, as Helen Cixous and Catherine Clement write of female sexuality, ‘infinite and mobile’ (1986, 94). Rare tapestries and old rescue blankets were repurposed into dresses and jackets while detritus such as soda-can pulls were reimagined as sequins. The aim of MMM clothes was not to achieve the gratification of desire so much as to open new channels through which desire could distribute and wander.

Critics called, then, the members of the design team alchemists and scribes of ‘crazy intellectual essays’. ‘Fundamental transformation is clearly [their] philosophical key’ (Blanks 2013), it was claimed, for as much as MMM expanded the range of clothing material and construction techniques, it dissolved standard couture conventions to leave spectators in a continuous state of disorientation. Zippers and belts shed their utilitarian function to serve as decoration. Models walking down the runway in wigs worn backward over their faces gave the impression of receding figures that were somehow advancing. In MMM’s clothes, experimental couture’s founding challenge to the standardization and sexualization of clothes and models in mainstream couture took on a dimension of conceptualism that can be understood to exceed a critical relationship to mainstream couture entirely. Critique through conceptual play became play for the sake of play, which attests to the very success of experimental couture in expressing, as Cixous and Clement further claim of female sexuality, ‘not the being-of-the-end, but…how-far-being-reaches’ (1986).

2. Marketing the macabre

While experimental couture seemed to evidence the viability of small-batch production models of clothes that reformulated the pathological ideals of its mainstream counterpart, the disparity between what was envisioned on its runways and what was in fact retailed suggested otherwise. As in mainstream couture, the garments displayed in experimental couture shows articulated the aesthetic concepts guiding the clothes as well as subsidiary goods to be sold in the upcoming retail season. The concepts in experimental couture shows highlighted and interrogated the violences of mainstream practices – the ruthless homogenization of couture clothes and models, rendered desirable through numerous techniques of hypersexualization. Off the runway, however, experimental designers differed little from mainstream designers in relying on mass-produced clothing and lucrative licensing agreements for accessories and fragrances to build their brands. Experimental designers drew, as well, from the same pools of poorly remunerated, highly disposable foreign girls to model their couture garments.

This section places experimental couture shows in the context of experimental couture business strategies. I turn first to the production and sales of experimental couture clothes and
subsidiary goods, and then to its distinctive use of couture models to augment the readings of experimental couture shows offered above. Experimental couture’s expansions into the mass fashion market demonstrated the extent to which the same corporate imperatives underlying mainstream couture overrode the critical commitments experimental couture shows seemed to convey. Experimental couture’s dramatizing of mainstream violences while practicing those violences undercut the integrity of its shows as critique.

i. The business of the clothes

How did variations of monastic black garments on bare-faced, crop-haired models translate in a customer’s closet? What did practical versions of sweaters and tee shirts, baggy and bunched in strange places, look like – through what sleights of hand were experimental designers able to render clothes that so radically contravened the glamour of mainstream couture appealing enough to turn a profit? Among couture patrons, experimental couture brands became coveted for selling edgy versions of mainstream couture clothes in place of their ungainly-appearing subversion. Likewise, in the mass fashion market that experimental brands increasingly targeted, the brands were embraced for modishly eccentric accessories and fragrances rather than for the critical messages their runway clothes bore. Some experimental brands remained privately-held while others joined major luxury conglomerates, but all ran multiple diffusion clothing lines and more and more joined the mainstream couture trend of collaborating with fast fashion retailers to increase their mass-market presence. It is for these reasons that the late 20th-century movement of experimental couture is, today, considered a branch of the mainstream couture industry defined by a set of aesthetic characteristics alone.

The luxury conglomerate Diesel acquired MMM in 2002 and Viktor & Rolf in 2008; when asked her opinion on the ever-expanding reach of such conglomerates in the couture industry, Kawakubo responded: ‘It’s just business’99. Yamamoto and Kawakubo are still known to work with the same textile manufacturers that sourced their earliest couture collections, but their numerous product lines now range from mass-produced apparel to furniture. In this light, the models on the runway sporting smudged black lipstick and dressed in what reviewers called ‘knitted monstrosities’100 or Quasimodo costumes101 can be understood as savvy signals of experimental couture brands’ subculture cachet. This is the value packaged and sold in the form of wildly popular ‘anti-perfume’ perfume bottles, canvas shoes emblazoned with cross-eyed hearts, black wallets, black baseball caps, and black bags, rather than the value of industry critique. Retail strategies used to heighten the edgy effect include, in Kawakubo’s case, ‘guerilla stores’ that open for a few months at a time and ‘in-door marketplaces’ located in low-traffic urban areas whose layouts are designed to be purposely confusing. Dover Street Market, an instance of the latter, is heralded as having ‘rewritten the conventional rules of luxury retail’102. But the retailed items are produced according to the very production models that Kawakubo and Yamamoto’s couture shows are thought to oppose. Yamamoto’s partnership with mass market giant Adidas and Kawakubo, MMM and Viktor & Rolf’s collections for fast-fashion retailer H&M have yielded great publicity for each experimental brand – as well as, however, vast batches of cheaply made goods. Understood as part of their brands’ global growth strategies, the strange, thought-provoking designs displayed on experimental couture’s runways attest to the abiding necessity of selling ‘a bunch of jackets…and some very pretty frocks’ (Blanchard 1997) through new techniques of marketing.
ii. The business of the models

One of the most compelling legacies of experimental couture is its models’ performances of brutality and trauma, some banal, others outrageous; why, however, would such dramatizations help to sell its clothes? How does the slow and steady mummification of a frail girl or contorting limbs through restrictive body jewelry and, thus disabled, having models wade through pools of icy water succeed in moving inventory on the retail floor? Here, contextualizing experimental stagings of violence toward models within revenue and growth forecasts seems less straightforward. I argued earlier, however, that experimental couture shows were seen to enact the horrors of violence toward girls and women more broadly rather than critique actual violence toward models. And while many shows elicited discomfort and even disgust in spectators, their overall effect was one of sensationalistic diversion from mainstream couture’s predictable processions of glossy bodies in sheer dresses and precipitous stilettos. The models’ performances offered, as did experimental shows exhibiting clothes alien to mainstream couture’s polished conventions, edgy entertainment that drew on feminist critique as but a novel aesthetic. This was, again, the value marketed to couture and mass market consumers alike. In so doing, experimental designers executed the very practices their shows can be understood to challenge.

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Perhaps the disparity between conduct and theoretical commitment in experimental couture was clear from its inception: though the garments first shown on Kawakubo and Yamamoto’s runways could accommodate a refreshing range of figures, the couture models they cast conformed to the industry standard season after season. Likewise, the experimental designers who explicitly dramatized couture models’ standardization and sexualization used the same models to display their clothes. McQueen and Groves often chose to cast the most extreme incarnations of the mainstream ideal to heighten the terror of their shows, moreover (Evans 2003, 145). Visions of spectral girls in slashed dresses, breasts and butts exposed, conveyed the cruel, morbid sensibility translated, in McQueen’s case, into mass-produced scarves imprinted with skulls and pendants in the shape and color of human hearts. Most consumers came to know Viktor & Rolf for their blockbuster perfumes in various shades of doll-pink and MMM for their ‘Replica’ series of fragrances – themes articulated with complexity and acuity in couture shows only to be reduced to an adored color and motif.

Today, experimental brands no longer stage shows that confront spectators with the couture industry’s uncomfortable contradictions – luxury clothes produced at mass-market rates, modeled by girls whose psychophysicalities suggest both the glamorous advantages as well as brutal costs of their profession. The conceptual rigor of some experimental brands’ clothes notwithstanding, the question remains how a movement that defined itself through addressing and redressing the problematic of violence in couture nonetheless effects those same violences.
Conclusion

Before live crowds of hundreds and vast virtual audiences, corps of freakishly tall, rail-thin bodies file down the New York, London, Milan and Paris runways in heavy makeup, precipitous heels and revealing outfits. The clothes are arbiters of trends throughout the apparel industry. The models who display them are aesthetic archetypes. Both are also broader emblems of wealth to which consumers are urged to aspire – models commodities, as this dissertation has argued, promoting a psychaesthetics of violence that is pathological in its appeal. The exceptional growth of the global luxury corporations that own couture brands today indicates, in turn, the expanding ambit of this problematic. Working-class couples in Vietnam, *The Economist* observes, pose in front of couture store windows for their wedding portraits, declaiming their desire to one day become customers. The middle classes in these new markets cannot yet afford the four-figure items featured in couture store windows either, but they can and do buy cheaper incarnations of, say, the iconic Burberry trench via Burberry perfumes and accessories, which comprise the majority of the company’s business. Old wealth continues to patronize the most expensive items that couture brands have to offer while the nouveau riche, in China in particular, consume indiscriminately – the logos lead and the money follows.

The fashion studies literature, for the most part, understands fashion as a cultural category of visual expression, representation, and embodied practices (Arnold 2009; McDowell 2003; Entwistle and Wilson eds 2001); the slim portion that specifically addresses couture consists of historical, often pictorial narratives of individual designers (Bolton et al 2011; Foley 2004; Sudjic 1990; Milbank 1985). This dissertation has taken a different approach by both focusing on couture and theorizing couture’s cultural and commercial significance. The couture industry has been my primary object, considered in terms of couture clothes on the one hand and couture models on the other. Through developing frameworks around what I have identified as the industry’s political economic, social psychological and psychaesthetic incoherences, my analysis of couture clothes and models has yielded three main insights.

First, the status of contemporary couture commodities increasingly relies on an impression of luxury that leverages couture’s artisanal past in place of integrity of production and employment. Chapter two demonstrated that while elite patronage and mass-market sales of dress reproduction rights were equally critical components of the first couturiers’ business strategies, the industry did not directly produce for the mass market until the postwar decades of the 20th century. Runway shows became the central means to building brand image and an ever more diverse customer base. For the first time in couture’s history, youth and sex were incorporated as explicit elements of couture’s appeal, underwriting shows featuring younger and younger models in sensational outfits – or, at times, the lack thereof.

Why, however, did this form of marketing work? How did the industry manage to increase its prestige through what I have called a psychaesthetics of violence? The dissertation’s second finding lies with the pathological character of the couture industry’s allure. Chapter three argued that this pathological appeal is first produced in couture models who are glamorized but also wounded in the industry. The financial, physical as well psychological privations of their glamorized labor is suggested psychophysically, and it is the idealization of these physiques and miens which enables the cultural condoning of the industry’s malpractices.

And yet a movement within couture critiquing the industry’s violent co-productions of clothes and models met with great commercial success. Chapter four offered an affirmative appraisal of experimental couture’s critical aesthetics only to conclude that this aesthetic was
used to effect a different but equally lucrative kind of notoriety. Experimental couture shows appearing to disrupt and reconfigure the industry’s disquieting conventions in fact marketed the same mass-produced subsidiary goods and employed the same teenage, freelance foreign labor as their mainstream counterparts. The dissertation ends, then, on an even darker note than it began, leaving its inquiry with the suggestion of experimental couture’s greater complicity for seeming to problematize but nonetheless following the industry’s ruthless path to profit.

The question of complicity in and beyond the couture industry at large is one that I would like to address here. If the couture industry produces a psychaesthetics of violence to which new swaths of the income scale across new regions of the world are drawn, to what extent is the industry responsible and to what extent its vast consumer base? Who are the key actors in this global market among its producers and consumers, what has been done to recognize if not remedy the industry’s violences, and what more might be done? Below I discuss recent developments within couture to institute sustainable garment production and retailing as well as ethical model employment practices. I then outline further sites and avenues of change.

Ethical production encompasses the sourcing of production materials and the conditions of production. Ethical merchandising is the disclosure of ethical manufacturing practices to customers. Both types of practices began in the larger fashion and apparel industry before making headway in the couture industry in the last decade. Fashion critics remain skeptical about the trendsetting capacity of sustainable couture brands, which, by and large, lack the retailing and marketing budgets that underpin the profitability of the rest of the couture industry. But ethical production and merchandising continue to gain ground if only because increasing numbers of consumers are demanding from luxury goods businesses such as couture, ‘knowledge, appreciation, craft and heritage – something with a story’ rather than ‘show for its own sake’. The challenge is whether sustainable couture brands can grow their business while maintaining their commitment to ethical business practices, and, conversely, whether the rest of the couture industry is willing to leverage its profitability in service of ethical ends.

Launched in 2004 on the New York runways, Organic by John Patrick was one of the first fair-trade, fair-labor couture brands to gain critical attention. The embroidered jackets and leather wrap skirts of brands that followed such as Edun (est. 2005) were stylish enough to lure LVMH. Today, LVMH’s archrival Kering heavily promotes its sustainability targets (Daveu 2014). One goal of the new sustainability movement in couture is to redefine luxury, bringing the concept back to its artisanal, small-batch production roots while contemporizing traditional materials, skills and business infrastructure. Community-building through supporting local apparel manufacturing is another ambition, be it hand-crafting denim in in Nashville, Tennessee or silk-weaving textiles on the historic looms of Varanasi, India. Certain couture brands are especially involved in training women in the emerging nations where couture production is increasingly taking place. Smaller brands such as Maiyet may work with nonprofit organizations to customize short- and long-term training and development programs for their craftswomen. Global brands like Monsoon, which outsources production to 180 suppliers in nearly 300 manufacturing sites throughout 15 emerging nations, ensure fair labor practices by way of third-party auditors and might also underwrite nonprofit women’s organizations, as with Monsoon and India’s Stree Shakti quilting cooperative. Few couture brands that practice ethical manufacturing have yet begun to institute the ethical retailing conventions pioneered in the broader fashion industry in the last five years. But the Bangladeshi garment factory explosions of 2012 have
compelled consumers to push for transparency throughout the fashion and apparel industry – a pressure to which the couture industry has not been immune.

‘It is essential that we place sustainability at the core of what we do and hold ourselves accountable,’ urges Kering sustainability chief Marie-Claire Daveu in a 2014 op-ed piece to the fashion industry (2014). Daveau defines luxury’s particular claim to sustainability in terms of the quality-driven endurance of a luxury good. This gestures toward without directly addressing, however, the size of the global luxury market, or, the fantastic rate of its growth today. The quality and quantity of luxury goods are not intuitively compatible. As narrated in chapters one and two, couture’s particular history demonstrates the forsaking of one for the other as soon as profitability became the dominating concern of couture brands in the late-20th century. How, then, can sustainable couture brands contemporize the infrastructure of traditional luxury businesses, which were *not* profitable (Thomas 2007)? *The Economist* report discussed earlier offers one answer: ‘Luxury, ironically, benefits from economies of scale’111. Large corporations have the financial wherewithal to invest in the costly resources required to produce high-quality goods, on the one hand, and market them effectively, on the other. According to this logic, sustainable couture may face formidable difficulties attempting to grow their business, but their ownership by conglomerates such as Kering and LVMH would allow them to thrive. Edun took this route in joining LVMH in 2009, four years after its founding; the company mission to source all production in Africa gave way to partial sourcing in China under LVMH management (Dodes 2010). Maiyet may present an alternative solution. A group of powerful investors who “all wanted venture-capital-style returns but who were also compelled by the vision of what we wanted to do,” according to co-founder Paul van Zyl, back the brand112. Ethical profitability is the goal but its success remains to be seen113. At the time of writing, Maiyet is just three years old.

Sustainable couture brands such as Maiyet and Edun seek to adhere to rigorous standards for the ethical production and manufacturing of couture clothes, but they are strangely silent on the ethics of couture modeling work. What of the labor conditions of the models who display sustainable couture clothes on the runways? Are sustainable couture models paid fair wages and do they work in the better, safer sites that the makers of sustainable couture clothes now enjoy? What kinds of training and support do sustainable couture models receive, if any? The answer here, from sustainable and mainstream couture employers alike, is resounding silence. Maiyet uses one of the most prestigious publicity firms in the industry to promote its wares – the brand shows in Paris, and stages lavish presentations with the same corps of models cycling through a given Fashion Week. LVMH, again, manages Edun, whose New York shows are every bit as glamorous and disconcerting as the next one across town. A small contingent of couture models themselves, however, came together in 2012 to support the New York-based fair-labor advocacy group Model Alliance. The organization has since garnered attention from liberal, feminist-leaning news sites such as *Huffington Post* and *Jezebel*, and secured the cooperation of the U.S. fashion industry syndicate, the Council of Fashion Designers of America. On couture’s runways, improvements are not yet apparent, but the stories are finally being told and heard.

Though Model Alliance currently provides support and guidance to American models alone, it is the first of its kind to appear in the industry since the dismantling of the tenure system of couture modeling in the 1960s; as such, the organization also sets forth a template for similar associations in Europe114. Model Alliance services speak to the often hidden financial, physical as well as psychological costs of couture modeling discussed in chapters one and three115. Its services include helping models obtain medical insurance and access financial and legal aid.
Discreet grievance reporting is encouraged, and the organization’s website additionally fosters a virtual community in which not only models but other industry figures such as makeup artists and photographers can share and learn from one another’s experiences. Working to unionize the industry is not an option because models are hired as independent contractors, but Model Alliance members campaign for other kinds of regulation. Securing child-model legislation in New York State in October 2013 was a major victory for the organization and its partners.

The directors of the documentary *Girl Model* (2011) analyzed in chapter three are Model Alliance partners who have drawn on the organization’s resources to campaign for models’ rights. Reviewed by niche as well as major news publications from *The New Inquiry* to the *New York Times*, *Girl Model* (2011) has aired in a variety of research and educational venues, accompanied by the directors’ PBS-sponsored ‘Community Engagement and Education Discussion Guide.’ Model Alliance founder Sara Ziff’s own documentary *Picture Me* (2009) had sparked media interest in couture modeling conditions as well (Catsoulis 2010; France 2009). The challenge, however, remains how activists can generate enough sustained press attention to mobilize broader popular protests against industry malpractices in the manner of recent public outcry over the Bangladeshi garment factory disasters. ‘When you saw the horror of Rana Plaza, you knew that the rules of the game had to be changed, right now,’ general secretary of UNI Global Union Philip Jennings explains of major fashion and apparel corporations’ signing of the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. The horrors of couture modeling are, as charted in chapter three, more subtle and banal than burning carnage and mountains of rubble. Its injuries are dealt through a gradual physical and psychological process of subjection to a love-object that exalts and eviscerates at the same time. As chapter three also demonstrated, however, these injuries are no less fatal for couture models, and toxic for the cultures in which the models circulate as ideals.

It is important to recognize that the couture industry’s production of material goods and cultural ideals is made possible by many more actors than the couture companies themselves, the models they hire and the consumers who buy into the industry’s aura of prestige and glamour. The industry is also a cultural institution whose allure is produced through the admiring efforts of fashion bloggers, critics, historians and curators, the extreme aesthetics of fashion editors and casting agents, and a global public little aware of the industry’s influence, the spectral models on the Paris runways as seemingly removed from daily life as the four-figure bags aglow in heavily-securitized store windows are, for most, beyond immediate attainment. From the first runway reviews that bloggers post on the web to the lavish editorials featured in the following month’s high fashion magazines, however, from blockbuster designer retrospectives at national museums to paparazzi shots of celebrities in couture, the industry’s presence can be understood to extend far beyond the marketing efforts of couture brands and the racks of apparel at discount retailers mimicking the runway’s striking styles. The couture industry’s ability to continue – and profit from – its malpractices turns on each of these endorsements. One way to challenge the industry’s psychaesethics of violence and begin dismantling its injurious conventions is thus to draw attention to these systems of support.

This dissertation has sought to illuminate the problematic material conditions of couture’s glamorous productions; in considering, then, the full reach and disquieting significance of couture as a cultural institution, further analysis is needed on the kinds of labor that underlie couture’s myriad cultural manifestations. Neither the bloggers and critics reviewing couture shows nor the historians and curators organizing couture exhibits relate the aesthetics of couture
clothes to their political economy. The periodic media controversy that does arise over couture’s extreme demands on models’ bodies cycles through the involved parties – model agents answering to couture brands’ casting directors aiming to please the fashion editors who most effectively bring the runway to a compliant mass audience – without resolution (Clements 2013). But as the couture industry’s commercial and cultural clout grows today, a recognition of its mechanisms of influence must counterbalance its mystique. Shares of couture brands’ parent companies have outperformed those of other companies by a significant margin for a solid decade, ‘creating billionaires at a rate that Silicon Valley might envy’¹²⁰. Couture has also experienced a steep cultural ascent in recent years, past and present designers the subject of ever greater numbers of fine art museum shows, and couture brands, now highly-publicized sponsors of new and historic fine art foundations and museums¹²¹.

I am not denying that couture deserves the cultural accolades it receives; the creativity of its practitioners throughout its 150-year history has been phenomenal, and remains inspiring. Nor am I arguing that couture’s growing customer base is necessarily misled by buying into couture’s artisanal heritage; luxury is above all a concept rather than a material fact, an aura rather than an object per se. My final point is to highlight the need to build critical awareness around what has become one of the most powerful aspirational commodities being sold today in commerce and in culture. An understanding of the ways in which couture clothes and models are produced and valued does not yet accompany their uncontested glamour in contemporary culture. My hope is to begin a conversation that remedies this discrepancy.
References


Fox, James. 2012. “Kate Moss on Her “Years of Crying” Over Johnny Depp and How She’s Still a Total “Hell-Raiser” Behind Closed Doors.” *Vanity Fair*, October 31.


*Secret World of Haute Couture*. 2007. Directed by Margy Kinmouth. BBC.


1 These are French corporations Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton (LVMH) and Kering, and the Swiss-based Richemont Group.
2 All sums are present-day USD equivalents.
3 See, for instance, Levine (2013). The new CEO of luxury giant Kering intends to triple company revenues within 6 years; while Francois-Henri Pinault’s growth strategies undoubtedly apply to holdings aside from couture, couture is central to overall profitability.
4 Ready-to-wear dresses in particular have risen 200% in the last decade (Phelps 2012). The author compares this jump to the percentage change in the cost of other consumer goods ranging from the Big Mac (68.7%) to breast implants (66.7%).
5 See, for instance, Clark (2014). While China is the world’s fastest growing luxury market, almost 60% of Chinese luxury purchases are made abroad. Couture brands are especially popular.
6 In her investigative narrative of the luxury industry, Dana Thomas argues that corporations have ‘sacrificed [luxury’s] integrity, undermined its products, tarnished its history, and hoodwinked its consumers’ (2007, 13).
7 These workshops include the oldest embroidery workshop in Paris, the House of Lesage; the milliner Michel; the shoemaker Massaro; the button and costume jewelry maker Desrues; the goldsmith and silversmith Goosens; and the feather and decorative flower expert Lemarié.
88 Liz Claiborne was the first high fashion company to move production abroad on a large scale. Though it is not a couture label, the tremendous profitability and growth it experienced producing high quality clothing in Taiwan and Hong Kong set an important industry precedent. The company went public in 1981 and by 1999 had acquired signed licensing agreements with firms that included couture labels such as Donna Karan. See Collins (2003), 104-125.
9 Indeed, by the 1950s, each haute couture brand maintained a suite, or, cabine, of seven to fifteen ‘house mannequins’. The models earned approximately $4,300 per month9 plus a fraction of dress sales, and stayed up to ten years (Quick 1997).
10 Models are often paid in what is known as ‘trade,’ or, leftover clothes and accessories from previous retail seasons (Mears 2011, 51-53).
11 As Mears describes, ‘Commercial women range from size 2 to size 6, while editorial “girls” range from size zero to size 4...[The girls] range from age thirteen to twenty-two’ (Mears 2011, 41).
12 New designers especially may pay models in ‘trade,’ that is, in leftover clothes from previous retail seasons (Mears 2011, 51-53).
14 ‘At Metro [Agency], foreign models can be as much as $10,000 in debt before they even begin castings in New York,’ Mears writes (Mears 2011, 65-67).
15 See “Former Vogue Editor Exposes Fashion’s Dark Side,” Yahoo! Shine April 4 2013. Contrary to the belief that models are airbrushed to look thinner, today’s editors routinely alter images to ‘get rid of bones’ that attest to the models’ emaciation.
16 Mears attributes this seachange to factors ranging from the proliferation of digital technology allowing model scouts to access ever-expanding pools of candidates around the world, to the 2008 economic crisis, which cut high fashion advertising demand. ‘Models’ rates absorbed the economic shock, and bookers have had difficulty raising them since,’ writes Mears (Mears 2011, 36).
17 See David Redmon and Ashley Sabin, dirs, Girl Model (2011).
18 See, for instance, mental health statistics gathered on the website of the organization, the Model Alliance, spearheaded by Ziff.
19 Edwards-Jones and Anonymous’ expose describes couture models discussing among one another the ubiquity of undergoing multiple abortions per year. See also statistics gathered by the Model Alliance.
20 The viewer’s sense of intimacy is heightened by the fact that Ziff’s then-boyfriend was the documentary’s co-director and main cameraman.
21 See Model Alliance statistics at http://modelalliance.org/industry-analysis.
22 See fn 17.
24 By the late 18th-century, copyright laws as distinct from patent laws protected French art (Troy 2003).
25 With, that is, the sole exception of Marie Antoinette’s dressmaker Rose Bertin.
26 See Jackson (2004). Colbert’s measures included protecting French luxury exports and increasing the pay and working conditions of French artisans.
27 At its inception in the mid-14th century, special, public events held in Europe’s urban centers required new outfits for the ruling classes. Fashion remained a small-scale industry until the late 18th-century (Welters in Welters and Lillethun eds 2011).
28 Troy writes that the ‘needleworkers [employed by haute couture houses] constituted a notoriously underpaid labor force’ (Troy 2003, 22).
29 ‘[Worth’s] dresses were so popular that he could have a team of thirty seamstresses working full-time for one client all year long’ (Thomas 2007, 24).
30 Dior desired to study art or architecture but was pressured to pursue a degree in political science; Jean Desses and Marcel Rochas both practiced law before turning to design. Early 20th-century designers typically shared a talent for the fine and applied arts but trained in more respectable, bourgeois professions.
31 The couturier Madeleine Vionnet’s six-story, 1,200-strong factory on the Avenue Montaigne offered dental, daycare and podiatric services for its staff (A. F. Collins 2009).
32 As discussed in chapter one, the couture brand Chanel owns many of these firms today in the effort to maintain the traditions of haute couture.
33 Dior related haute couture to the broader European legacy of ‘luxury…[deriving from] its steady stream of megalomaniacal kings and popes, who, over the centuries, commissioned the construction of sumptuous palaces and cathedrals’ (Thomas 2007, 8). The couturier and his team of tailors and seamstresses were their descendants; together with a phalanx of discerning saleswomen, haute couture serviced, in effect, the royalty of their day.
34 In the 17th-century, the ready-to-wear industry serviced soldiers and sailors, growing to encompass general work apparel for working-class men in the 18th-century and then middle-class men and women in the 19th-century.
35 The three-day-long fashion show displayed a total of 125 American dress models. The most respected editorial team as well as prominent socialites in American high fashion – Vogue and the Astors and Vanderbilts, respectively – were patrons of haute couture but, in this instance, helped to promote domestic talent. See Troy (2003): 275-77.
36 The locations of Dior and Balenciaga’s haute couture houses, respectively.
37 No haute couture ‘houses’ – that is, businesses solely producing haute couture clothes – survived the corporate takeovers of the 1980s, though a handful of new houses have emerged in recent decades.
38 Advertising budgets occupied 6 to 12 percent of sales; compare this to at most 2 or 3 percent among mass-market fashion retailers (Jackson in Bruce et al eds 2004, 165).
Again, where haute couture houses sold the rights to reproduce dress models to outside businesses rather than selling reproductions themselves.


De Perthus (2003), 66.

Quick (1997), 64. All sums are present-day equivalents.

‘[L]et them take lovers’ was Chanel’s reply to objections to her low wages (in Quick 1997, 32).

Craik (1994), 78. ‘They are beautiful, that’s why they can get these jobs. If they were intelligent they’d given them up [sic],’ Chanel further remarked of her models (ibid). Mannequins were known to marry wealthy attendees of these shows, however, to become haute couture clients themselves.

A. F. Collins (2009).

Other supermodels quickly followed in Hutton’s wake, trading couture for commercial modeling: Margaux Hemingway signed a $1 million deal with heritage jewelry firm Faberge only one year after Hutton’s contract.

A few ‘Oriental’ exceptions notwithstanding. They included half-Manchurian Alla at Dior, China Machado at Givenchy and Hiroko Matsumoto at Cardin.

Different nationalities of models come into vogue every few seasons – East Africans, Brazilians, East Asians, but Eastern Europe has been supplying the standard couture model since the 1970s.

That is, in the sense of girl models being female ideals in contemporary culture, and in the sense of girl models developing senses of subjecthood largely predicated on their modeling experiences.

The phenomenological tradition of thought from which this concept arises posits an embodied subject who is, more specifically, a body living in social and historical sites and relations.

See Model Alliance’s study of depression rate among couture models at http://modelalliance.org/industry-analysis.

In the synopsis offered on the film’s official website, the filmmakers posit that Ashley has ‘learned the tricks of the labyrinth [that is modeling] but [is] unable to escape its lure,’ and ask whether Nadya, too, will meet the same fate (see http://girlmodelthemovie.com/about-the-film/). This question guides, indeed, haunts, the film as the film weaves between the two protagonists’ lives.

Again, commercial models typically range from size 2 to size 6 at an average height of 5’9” while couture models average size zero to 4 at an height of 5’10” (Mears 2011, 51-53).

Agents promise outright financial rewards that they will in most cases never deliver. I discuss this shortly when I discuss Girl Model in greater detail.

Nose jobs are the most common form of plastic surgery couture models receive. See Dockterman (2013).

The term was coined in the 1980s, when modeling agencies began to stipulate more precise physical specifications relative to earlier decades: ‘Agencies imposed strict weight limitations, usually below a model’s ‘natural’ weight…dieting and eating disorders [became] the norm [and models became, in turn,]…’vocational anorexics’ whose condition [was] directly related to the requirements of their jobs’ (Craik 1994, 80-84).

Numerous sources from film documentaries to journalistic exposes discuss these practices. See especially Edwards-Jones and Anonymous (2006).

See, for instance, “Behind Claude’s Doors,” Vanity Fair September 2014 on France’s most exclusive pimp Madame Claude, who was known to specialize in models and actresses who had ‘just missed the cut.’

See the many testimonies from models in the documentary Picture Me (2009) and from recent statistical surveys of couture models at http://modelalliance.org/industry-analysis.


I am referring to the series of Calvin Klein ads in the early 1990s that made Moss’ career.

1985, 172. For Irigaray, the patriarchal systems of exchange that describe the capitalist market economy are founded on the ‘use, consumption and circulation [of women’s bodies]’ among men only. While this is clearly dated as a general claim, it remains useful for understanding the specific gender dynamics that characterize the contemporary couture industry’s treatment of its models.

Here, I again use commercial modeling experiences to explain couture’s pathologies.

‘Introjecting a desire, a pain, a situation means channeling them through language into a communion of empty mouths’ (Abraham and Torok 1994, 128). This emptiness becomes acceptable as the nature of desire; incorporation refuses this insight.

See Phelan (2012). Phelan notes that since speaking about her own and other commercial models’ experiences, Blais has received much fewer modeling assignments.

Again, these experiences range from financial insecurity and vocational anorexia to isolation, sexual objectification and exploitation.
A number of suicides in 2008 and 2009 among couture models were documented in the popular media. See for instance, “Ruslana Korshunova, No Longer Anonymous,” *Jezebel* June 30 2008.

See again Model Alliance’s mental health statistics.

See Bordo (2003). While Bordo’s book is a comprehensive treatment of discourses and representations of the slender Western female body, the chapter on anorexia (“Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture”) stands out for its argument of anorexia as a symptom of long-held cultural anxieties rather than a personal pathology. I briefly review the argument below.

See for instance Bordo (2003) and Heywood (1996). Heywood uses the logic of anorexia to examine the aesthetic principles governing high modernist literature in particular. Like Bordo, she relates cultural representations of the body back to the ways in which the body is actually experienced. The scope of her argument is severely limited however to those who partake in ‘high culture.’ Bordo’s argument is similarly circumscribed insofar as her focus on eating disorders by and large apply to white, middle- and upper-class women in advanced economies.

Bordo (2003), passim. While few girls and women are actually anorexic in other words, the preoccupation with anorexic norms is widespread.

153. For Bordo, the contemporary body is not only highly reliant on sophisticated medical technology but also exposed to the ‘structural contradictions’ of a consumer culture that encourage boundless consumption alongside rigid self-management. She uses as an example fashion magazines that juxtapose advertisements for sumptuous-looking desserts with advertisements for diet and fitness regimens.

Young (2005), 78. Here, Young is discussing the object in the specific context of the objectification of women’s breasts.

For similar accounts of masculine sexuality, see also Schaeffer (2011), Grosz (1995), Cixous and Clement (1986) and Cixous (1976).

‘We find it crucial to affirm the prior existence of [an unequivocal] love [for the love object], to insist on the undisclosable character of this love, and finally to show that a real and therefore traumatic cause had put an end to it’ (Abraham and Torok 1994: 136). I will explicate the relation between trauma and the ‘real’ in what follows.

For a comprehensive analysis of experimental couture shows, see Evans (2003).


Ibid.

In “Rei Kawakubo in Her Own Words,” *AnOther Magazine* October 3 2013.

The experimental shows of the 90s were considered a form of performance art to many critics (Evans 2003).

Alison Bancroft’s analysis of McQueen’s shows, for instance, as expressing ‘a brutality of feminine experience…and the contradictions and splits of feminine sexuation’ rather than critiquing real acts of violence toward models in the couture industry is a typical reading of experimental couture performances. See Bancroft (2012), 95-101.

The question of whether the designers intended to critique the industry’s violences is, I believe, separate from whether their shows can be understood as such.

This is the psychic condition that Freud describes as melancholy. Melancholy is, however, only one of several pathologies that can result from psychic incorporation. See chapter three.

See *Maison Martin Margiela: ‘20’ The Exhibition* for descriptions and analyses of MMM shows (2008).


See Haus der Kunst’s 2009 exhibition page on MMM. The same exhibit traveled to London’s Somerset House.

Ibid.

See Evans (2003), 175 on substance abuse and Craik (1994), 80-84 on eating disorders among couture models.

Eating disorders and substance abuse among couture models were well-known (Evans 2003, 175). Fashion photographers such as Corinne Day further documented the squalor in which couture models lived. The sexual abuse of models was not disclosed until recently however. See chapters one and three for more detailed discussions of sexual injuries.

See the ‘About the Exhibition’ section of the Metropolitan Museum’s 2011 McQueen retrospective, ‘Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty’.

Freud himself analyzes the dream as a mode of wish-fulfillment on the part of the father to fantasmatically prolong the child’s life – see “VII. The Psychology of Dream Activities” in *Freud* (1913). Caruth builds on and complicates this interpretation.


Though none in the design team actually trained in Kawakubo’s studio, MMM and Kawakubo presented a joint show in 1997 to acknowledge the latter’s influence on the former.
Runway clothes are typically ‘sample size,’ which is significantly smaller than the sizes produced for the retail market.

Schaeffer calls this response a ‘faecal hatred’ of the otherness of the drives (2011, 7).

Comme des Garçons is the name of Kawakubo’s couture brand.

See MOCAD’s 2008 exhibition page on Kawakubo.


‘[M]onstrous shapes…envelop[ed] the models with their oversize frames, knitted cages, and multiple arms,’ wrote Jo-Ann Furniss of Kawakubo’s Fall 2014 couture collection (2014).

Kawakubo incorporated into her Spring 1997 dresses huge lumps that critics thought resembled cancerous contusions.


See, for instance, “Designer John Patrick’s Organic Label Answers the Question, Is Sustainability Still Possible,” thefashionspot.com.

LVMH offered to buy Edun in 2009, and has scouted for designers to head an ethical fashion brand. See, for instance, Blanchard (2013).

The fashion e-commerce site Zady, for instance, uses different icons to identify the source and quality of a given garment’s raw materials as well as the product’s mode and location of labor. See Neilson and Mistry (2013).

Maiyet’s investors include Virgin Group founder Richard Branson, president of the Schmidt Family Foundation Wendy Schmidt, and Walt Disney grandniece Abigail Disney. See Givhan (2014).

Whether Maiyet possesses ‘the potential to become a business of real scale’ is still debated in the couture industry. See, for instance, “The Luxurious Goodness of Maiyet,” businessoffashion.com April 9 2013.

Equity, a UK performers’ union, is currently working with a number of organizations to establish better labor conditions at London Fashion Week, for instance. See http://www.equity.org.uk/about-us/.

To recapitulate in the words of Model Alliance founder Sara Ziff, the industry is characterized by ‘a disregard for child-labor laws, a lack of financial transparency, the encouragement of eating disorders, and instances of sexual abuse.’ See Arter (2014).

See http://modelalliance.org/category/forum.

Until that time, child models were the only category of child performers in New York State not protected by the Department of Labor.

The outcry prompted companies including Phillips-Van Heusen, which owns couture brands Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger, to commit to ensuring garment worker safety. See again Neilson and Mistry (2013).

UNI Global is a federation of retail and service workers. See Alderman (2013).


At over half a million visitors, for instance, the 2011 Alexander McQueen retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art became the first fashion exhibit to make the museum’s top ten most popular exhibits, immediately trailing its 2010 Picasso show. Couture brands that have become notable fine arts patrons, on the other hand, include Prada’s Prada Art Foundation in Milan and Louis Vuitton’s Fondation Louise Vuitton in Paris.