Dying To Be Born Again

Mortality, Immortality and the Fashion Model

Vol 1 of 2

Karen de Perthuis

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Art History and Theory
University of Sydney
June 2003

© Karen de Perthuis 2003
Abstract

The primary focus of this thesis is limited to the relationship between sartorial fashion and the fashion model within the world of representation. This includes the forms of fashion display and dissemination that existed prior to the establishment of the modern fashion system—fashion dolls, fashion plates and illustration and the *mannequin de monde*—as well as the fields where the fashion model as a modern phenomenon came into being—fashion photography and the fashion parade. While the portrait of feminine beauty and ideals in the fashion image betrays the imprint of the representation of the female body in art, pornography and the entertainment industries, this thesis argues for a reading of the fashion image and the fashion model specifically through the prism of fashion which, as a quasi-autonomous system, operates according to its own rules and has its own mode of being.

Since its inception, fashion has frustrated its critics and delighted its proponents with a nonchalant rejection of the creations it had hitherto enthroned as essential. This dedication to perpetual change and the ephemeral—the ‘death-wish’ that ensures the continuation of fashion as a structure even as individual fashions are discarded—has fascinated both those who have seriously contemplated fashion and those who document the vicissitudes of fashion’s creations. For its critics, the sin fashion commits in refusing to manifest itself in a permanent form of beauty is compounded by its perceived attacks upon the body, cloaking it in a layer of artifice that distorts it into ‘unnatural’ forms. This imposition by fashion on the body made from flesh and blood is never fully realised. Rather it is only on the body in representation that fashion can begin to escape the limitations imposed upon it by the human form and give full reign to its creative impulse.

In the fashion image the fundamental principles of fashion—change and artifice—are metaphorically expressed by the interplay of mortality and immortality on the body of the model which, ultimately, serves as the blank canvas where fashion is free to invent its imaginary self.
Acknowledgments

My thanks go out to those who helped and supported me throughout the writing of this thesis. Associate Professor Paul Redding spent several long sessions patiently explaining aesthetic philosophy to me; Dr George Kouvaros gently persisted in reminding me I had to stop enjoying myself and write and Blair French shared my frustration and, with great humour, whinged with me about everything. John Spencer and Peter Wright at The Schaeffer Fine Arts Library were extremely generous with their time and help, chasing up obscure references and even tracking down sources from outside their own four walls; Angela Milec and Sarah Ivens provided invaluable help with images and Indigo Blue cheerfully sorted through the maze of administration with exceptional skill. Thanks also to Dr Laleen Jayamanne, Professor Virginia Spate, Professor Terry Smith, Dr Julian Pefanis, Dr Alan Cholodenko and all the staff and my fellow graduate students in the Department of Art History and Theory. The staff and students at The Department of Film and Theatre at the University of New South Wales provided a second intellectual home and I thank them for treating me as one of their own.

Without my friends and family I would never have finished—they pretended to listen and understand when I needed it most and ignored me when I decided to quit. Special thanks to Ginger Briggs who, along with everything else, allowed me to mercilessly exploit her editing skills. Gideon Warhaft provided technical help and Sally Warhaft, whose doctoral timeline and crises mirrored my own, made the last crucial months seem less lonely. My gratitude also to Caroline Warne and Don Miller Robinson for always being there and my mother, Genevieve, who I can’t even begin to thank enough for all she has done.

Most of all my thanks go to my supervisor, Dr Michael Carter, whose thoughtful, encouraging and amusing guidance inspired me to follow a path where I had no idea what I would find. His ideas and suggestions are so much a part of this text that I have no doubt it would have been a different—and lesser—work without him.

The research and writing of this thesis was facilitated by the financial support provided by an Australian Postgraduate Award.
This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father who never judged but encouraged me always.
Contents

Acknowledgments iii
Dedication iv
List of Illustrations vii
Introduction 1

I.1 The Fashion Image
I.2 The Fashion Model
I.3 Icons of Femininity
I.4 Symbols of decay and desire
I.5 Parading Identity
I.6 Fashion’s Identity

Section I: The Pre-History of the Fashion Model

Chapter One: Pre-Industrial Fashion 30
1.1 The First Fashion Model
1.2 Fashion and Power
1.3 The Early Fashion Designer
1.4 Arbiters of Elegance
1.5 The Amateur Model
1.6 The Living Mannequin

Chapter Two: The Dissemination and Display of Fashion Ideas 60
2.1 Fashion Dolls
2.2 Fashion Plates and Fashion Illustration
2.3 The Illustrated Ideal
2.4 Early Fashion Photography
2.5 The Professional Model

Section II: The Aesthetic of Thinness

Chapter Three: The Modern Ideal 95
3.1 The Changing Feminine Ideal
3.2 The Mechanical Ideal
3.3 Modernism and Mobility
3.4 Art Deco Fashion Plates
3.5 Emerging Fashion Photography
3.6 The Modern Body
Chapter Four: From Consumptive Chic to Junkie Chic

4.1 The Prototype Model
4.2 The Fashionable Body
4.3 Heroic flesh, saintly bones
4.4 Consumptive chic
4.5 Junkie Chic

Section III: Fashion's Transformations

Introduction to Section III: Image/Clothing/Body

III.1 Image-clothing
III.2 Image-body
III.3 Counterimage

Chapter Five: The Shadow Side of Style

5.1 Endlessly New
5.2 The Dialogue Between Fashion and Death
5.3 Deathrow
5.4 *Moments Mortis*
5.5 Fleeting Eternity
5.6 Eternal Fleetingness

Chapter Six: The Struggle Between Fashion and Nature

6.1 Fashionable Beauty
6.2 Fashion as Divine Artist
6.3 The Fashion/Body Split
6.4 An Artificial Humanity
6.5 Taking off the Body

Chapter Seven: The Synthetic Ideal

7.1 Artificial Nature
7.2 Immortal Beauty
7.3 Body as Garment
7.4 Fashion’s Imaginary

Bibliography
List of Illustrations

Chapter One

1.1 Marie Worth. Hulton Getty Picture Collection.
1.3 Titian. *Isabella of Portugal, Wife of Charles V.* c1535. Prado, Madrid.
1.6 Pisanello. *Designs for Court Costumes.* Early fifteenth century. Musée Condé, Chantilly.
1.9 François Boucher (attrib.). *La Marchande de Modes.* 1746. The Wallace Collection, London.

Chapter Two

2.1 English fashion doll in wood. c1750.
2.2 Fashion doll’s court dress. 1770s. Museum of Costume, Bath.
2.3 French doll with biscuit head dressed in the fashion of 1870.
2.4 Carved wooden doll, possibly of French origin. c 1580.
2.5 Albrecht Durer. *Venetian Woman.* c 1495-1510. Albertina, Vienna.
2.16 London and Paris fashions. 1864.
2.18 Friedrich Seidenstucker. Untitled photograph. 1930.
2.21 *La Mode Pratique*. Photo engraving. 1894.
2.28 The Duchess de Gramont costumed by Vionnet for the Chinese Bal de l’Opéra in Paris 1923. British *Vogue*.
2.31 Paul Poiret in London with his ‘four graces’.

**Chapter Three**

3.2 Lillian Russell, British Music Hall star. Archive Photos.
3.4 Gabrielle Chanel. 1929. Hulton Deutsch Collection.
3.5 Chanel’s dress in black crepella as shown in British *Vogue*. 1926.
3.7 Chanel with a group of mannequins, 1930’s. Roger Schall.
3.8 Fashion parade. Photo by Chris Moore.
3.15 Mlle Lantelme in a peignoir by Madeleine Vionnet. 1908. Photo Collection Union Francaise des Arts du Costume.
3.29 Cecil Beaton. The three stages of retouching.

Chapter Four

4.2 Stella Tenant in Chanel.

Introduction to Section Three

III.5 Francisco de Goya. The Clothed Maya. c1798. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Chapter Five

5.2 Ulrike Ottinger. Freak Orlando. 1981. Photo: Anthology Film Archives.
5.3 Cornelia Tollens. ‘States’. c1998.
5.15 Guy Bourdin. Bourdin personal archives.

Chapter Six

6.3 Grandville. ‘The marine life collection, showing that underwater plants and animals are based in forms invented by man—fans, wigs, combs, brushes, etc.’ Un Autre Monde. 1844.
6.4 Grandville. ‘Flowers and fruit rejoice the coming of spring.’ Un Autre Monde. 1844.
6.5 Grandville. ‘An interplanetary bridge; Saturn’s ring is an iron balcony.’ Un Autre Monde. 1844.

6.7 Grandville. ‘Fashionable people represented in public by their accoutrements.’ *Un Autre Monde*. 1844.


**Chapter Seven**


7.6 Katerina Jebb. *Fashion Images de Mode*, # 5.


7.18 Pierre Molinier.


Introduction

The pervasive presence of the fashion model is inescapable in the modern, urban landscape. Even the person who never opens a fashion magazine is confronted by her appearance on billboards, bus-sides, shopfronts and screensavers. For those who do take an interest in fashion (however reluctantly), sartorial fashion and the fashion model are often inseparable elements, linked in a symbiotic relationship that creates the multitude of fashion images that accompany our daily lives. Within the last decade, the body has become a site of intense scholarly interest. More recently, the long-ignored field of fashion has also achieved academic respectability. It is surprising then that the fashion model—conveniently combining in one entity these two areas of investigation—so far remains under-theorised.

What unfolds in the following chapters cannot possibly attempt to redress this oversight by exploring widely such a relatively unmarked terrain. The focus of interest here is not the relationship between the image and the spectator, that is to say, between the fashion model and the fashion consumer. Instead its range is restricted only to that area where fashion and the body intersect within the image. Inside these borders its investigation is guided by a series of questions: Why do fashion models look the way they do? How is the system of representation specific to fashion articulated in the fashion image? What makes it a fashion image and not an image of something else, for instance, a girl in a dress? Why does fashion continue beyond the edges of its material objects? In endeavouring to provide answers to these questions,
this thesis starts its investigation long before the fashion model as such makes her first appearance. Rather than limiting its search to the modern period, it winds a peripatetic way through an eclectic storehouse of fashion imagery, weaving together the disparate threads that have left a lasting impression upon the body of the fashion model. This somewhat unorthodox methodological approach is, in part, imposed by the lack of any sustained research into the area. But, more fundamentally, it is an approach guided by a belief in the importance to the present study of determining and analysing that which is specific to the fashion image.

With this in mind, Chapter One sketches an outline of fashion from its emergence in Western Europe in the mid-fourteenth century up to the mid-nineteenth century when the era of industrial fashion began. From the beginning, fashion is associated with artistry, spectacular display and individual distinction, elements that would come to characterise fashion marketing in the era of the designer. But it was only in the Paris, ruled over by the gilt-encrusted court of Napoleon III, that economic, technological and social conditions combined to create the need for fashion’s innovations to be paraded by a person other than the owner.

However, long before the first mannequin walked, turned and smiled on a shop floor in the rue de Richelieu, the dissemination of fashion ideas had been an essential element in maintaining French cultural supremacy as well as supporting an industry said to have fed twenty times as many backs as it clothed. Chapter Two traces the methods by which this was achieved and finds in the graphic arts, especially, a discrepancy between the accuracy in the representation of fashionable dress and the
figure on which it was displayed. This points to an early tendency in fashion imagery to subordinate the integrity of the body to that of sartorial fashion.

This discrepancy continues into the early decades of the twentieth century when the stylistic tendencies of modernism shaped the cut of fashionable dress. Chapter Three examines its impact on the modern body, which begins to imitate the smooth, fleshless and invulnerable ideal of its illustrated counterpart. In the following chapter the aesthetic origins of the extreme of this physical ideal are traced from the thin, etiolated nudes of the Gothic tradition in the late Middle Ages to the wraith-like body of the model in fashion images at the end of the twentieth century. In a discussion of the aesthetic labelled ‘heroin chic’ and its antecedents I argue against views that simplistically explain such images in terms of exploitation and commercialism and introduce a central premise of this thesis: that modern fashion’s obsession with thinness and images of morbidity can be read through fashion’s prism of mutability and change, that the appearance of the model is determined by fashion and operates within fashion.

In saying this I am not claiming that the aesthetic governing the fashion model functions independently of the visual culture and economy in which it appears nor am I denying that, (at least) at its cutting edge, fashion acts as a powerful sign of culture. But rather than opting to explore this relationship, my analysis remains within the realm of the image, where the model is considered as not simply reflecting or representing cultural or ideological norms, but as a body already shaped by fashion. This relationship between fashion and the fashion model is explored in the final section of the thesis via a more theoretical and speculative approach. Taking as a starting point the categories of clothing identified by Roland Barthes in The Fashion
System, the tendency for fashion to divest itself of the demands and requirements of the physical body are explored. In Chapter Five, the presence of death at the heart of fashion, identified by writers such as Walter Benjamin and René König, is glimpsed in the fleeting expressions of fashion—on the catwalk and in fashion photography.

This transient, ephemeral quality of fashion was eulogised by Charles Baudelaire as reflecting the everyday experience of modern life, an idea which echoes through the writing of Georg Simmel, as well as Benjamin. But in Baudelaire’s famous essay, ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, fashion—with its devotion not only to perpetual and irrational change but also to artifice—is characterised as an antidote to ‘vile’ nature. In Chapter Six the struggle between fashion and nature is examined—against a backdrop provided by these three thinkers—in terms of how it might play out on the human form.

The final chapter turns to images of the model in the age of computer manipulation. Here the notion of a ‘synthetic ideal’ is introduced. This is an aesthetic where fashion gives full reign to its obsession with mutability, alteration and artifice, finally resolving, on the body of the model, its ongoing dialectic between mortality and immortality. If the youth, beauty and vulnerability of the model can be said to reflect the death that is at the heart of fashion’s ephemeral appearances, then the creation of an inorganic ideal—immune to the imprint of time—might be said to represent the unique sleight-of-hand that allows fashion as a system to survive, to be perpetually born anew. Crucially, however, this synthetic ideal is a supreme manifestation of the artifice fashion has always imposed upon the natural body. It is here that I consider
the notion of ‘fashion’s imaginary’—a site where the ontology of fashion finds visual representation in the body of the model.

I.1 The Fashion Image

The novelist, Jay McInerney, has called the fashion model ‘the muse of consumption, the angel of late 20th century capitalism’, a description that succinctly identifies the role she plays in proclaiming ‘the simple message: you want this’. Even though this thesis does not pretend to uncover the many layers of the model’s function as a ‘muse of consumption’, neither is it my intention to ignore the industrial base of modern fashion. By this I mean that the material objects of fashion come into being and play their part in the world in a fashion system comprised of three essential stages—production, distribution and consumption—with each stage requiring the contribution of any number of people. However, at the heart of this thesis is an idea of fashion as following an aesthetic logic independent of the action of any individual or group of individuals. In other words, it is a ‘social fact’ in the sense meant by Emile Durkheim who emphasised the effect of human association upon the creation of new experiences and new levels of experience which, in the absence of human society, would not exist. It is in this sense also that I consider fashion as a quasi-autonomous system, operating as its own creative agent, imagining an ideal self irrespective of the human clay it has to work with. These imaginings of fashion, however, can only ever hope to be realised in the realm of representation.

2 ‘A social fact…is a cultural or structural characteristic of a social system which we experience as external to us. It has an influence and authority that amount to more than the sum of the intentions and
In her essay, ‘Yesterday’s Emblems and Tomorrow’s Commodities’, fashion historian, Caroline Evans quotes the Dutch designers, Viktor & Rolf as saying, ‘fashion doesn’t have to be something people wear, fashion is also an image’. In an interview elsewhere the duo reveals that when they started doing couture their clients were ‘the museums’. In bypassing the consumer—the episode in the fashion garment’s life where it is worn—these garments could be considered then as only image. But, as Evans suggests, with the commercial imperatives of a changing global market-place, the mutation of the fashion object into image had, by the end of the twentieth century, already been achieved. In the mid-1960s, the long-standing policy of a thirty-day embargo on the publishing of photos from the couture parades was challenged by Pierre Cardin who resigned from the Chambre syndicale de la couture francaise in protest. In the current situation, the collections can now be broadcast internationally on T.V. and satellite, experienced live over the internet or even transmitted by mobile phone. Expensive trade magazines cover every item of every show, and a profusion of bigger, glossier, edgier fashion magazines have inspired art publishers to produce coffee table books defining—and preserving—the year in


Caroline Evans, ‘The Enchanted Spectacle’, Fashion Theory, Vol. 5, Issue 3, 2001: 304. The embargo was a policy that favoured magazines but, as Evans points out, Cardin’s world-wide licensing deals required the instant publicity brought by newspapers.

In addition to the numerous websites associated with the collections, at Sydney Fashion Week 2003, fashion editors were using their mobile phones to record and send images.

For example, Collezioni, Book Moda, and Passarerela di Donna.

Vogue (Italy) regularly runs to over 700 pages; V Magazine measures 29cm x 41cm and, at a time when established titles are struggling (Elle Australia folded in 2002) many independent titles have emerged as desk-top publishing obviates the need for large economies of scale. For example, in Australia and New Zealand, doingbird and Processed, Cream and Pavement; in Europe, Purple, Dutch, Tank and Visionnaire and, in the United States, Wish You Were Here xxx.
fashion photography. The shows themselves, which Evans describes as having become more ‘graphic’ from the early 1960s when Mary Quant began to use photographic models on the catwalk, have, in the last decade, become increasingly spectacular, taking on the appearance of theatrical events or performance art, thus ensuring for fashion a spot on prime-time news and a regular guest appearance in art media. In response to this widening of interest, past and present fashions now tour the world in blockbuster or boutique exhibitions inevitably accompanied by a catalogue that recycles images from the catwalk or the gallery space. It is against the backdrop of this saturation of the global visual culture then that the fashion model is construed as image—both in visual and electronic media and in the arena of the ‘live’ fashion show. The focus on the fashion model as image is crucial though in another regard—it is not that fashion is considered simply as image but that fashion is image.

I.2 The Fashion Model

As detailed below, scholarly work on the female fashion model is still in its nascent stage; this is even more so the case with the male fashion model. The gender bias of fashion, which for so long seemed happy to promulgate the fiction of fashion as a

---

9 Art publishers, Scalo, released *Fashion: Photography of the Nineties* in 1996. In the same year, Steidl began publishing the annual, *Fashion Images de Mode*.

10 Evans, ‘The Enchanted Spectacle’, 304. With some exceptions, up until the 1970s a distinction was made between parade or runway models and photographic models.


12 Most broad-ranging studies of body image, however, include empirical research that incorporates the male fashion image and Jennifer Craik includes some analysis of the male fashion model image in *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).
‘world without men’\(^{13}\), was reflected in fashion and costume studies, which remained pre-occupied with questions of female dress, femininity and the female image.\(^{14}\) In recent years the work of writers such as Christopher Breward, Shaun Cole, Anne Hollander, Peter McNeill and Bill Osgerby among others has gone some way to redressing the imbalance. This realignment of male dress, masculinity and the male image from the status of an afterthought to the focus of attention coincides with a growing recognition by both the clothing and publishing industries of the importance of the male consumer. Most major labels now have male as well as female lines that are shown either concurrently or at Men’s Fashion Week in Milan. Glossy magazines aimed primarily at men, such as *Arena*, *G.Q.*, and *loaded*, have joined the ‘style’ magazines, *i-D* and *The Face*, in taking seriously male interest in clothes and fashion. The growth in men’s fashion (and men’s interest in fashion) can, however, be overstated; the female consumer and female fashion remain paramount, a fact recognised by two major menswear labels, Hugo Boss and Paul Smith who, unable to ignore the immensity of the female market have, in recent years, introduced womenswear to their range.\(^{15}\)

The discrepancy in volume between the market for women’s and men’s fashion and fashion images has inevitably led to the dominance of the female model. Historically, there was little call for the professional male model before the 1960s when the first ready-to-wear men’s collections appeared and, almost forty years later, the economic,


\(^{14}\) A notable exception to this general rule was in the study of sub-cultures which, it could be argued, implicitly defined sub-cultural style as predominantly male. The classic text here is Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London & New York: Routledge, 1979). Hebdige, in turn, was criticised by Angela McRobbie for having occluded girls and women from his analysis.

\(^{15}\) While the reverse is also true, it remains the case that womenswear ranges continue to dominate the market.
cultural and iconic status of the male model remains a fraction of that accorded his female counterpart. However (aside from practical considerations of scope), these factors only partly account for the almost absolute exclusion of the male model from the present study. This decision was also motivated by the impression that the male model possibly exists only as a version of the female model. More research remains to be done to establish the differences between the male and female model and how these differences register, but I would tentatively argue that the aesthetic standards and visual codes of modelling are set by the female model with notions of fashionable beauty and theories of objectification, sexualisation and commodification applicable to the male model primarily from the platform of a feminine paradigm. In other words, this is a world without men after all.

1.3 Icons of Femininity

As noted above, scholarly attention to the model is a relatively unmapped landscape. Nonetheless, this thesis has not been written in a vacuum and a short survey on what has been written on the topic and how others have considered the fashion model usefully serves to provide a framework against which the particular concerns and interests of the present study are defined.

Fashion models have drawn the curious attention of on-lookers as icons of feminine beauty for over a century. Consequently, there has never been any lack of awe-struck, prurient, censorious or—occasionally—thoughtful items in the popular and fashion press on the appearance and lifestyle of models, either as a class or as individuals. At
times this interest has centred on controversial issues, engendering debate in the mass media that reflects broader social and cultural concerns—female body image, exploitation of (schoolgirl-age) models by a powerful global industry, the representation of women and the cult of the celebrity. From the late eighties the phenomenon of the supermodel, which incorporates three out of four of the above concerns, in particular garnered a level of interest that had previously been the reserve of Hollywood stars. However, this fascination (or the phenomenon of this fascination) has not as yet translated into a sociological or semiotic study analogous to Richard Dyer’s canonical text on cinema actors, *Stars*. Neither have scholars employed alternative methodologies to critically analyse the fashion model in any format longer than the essay, the article or the book chapter. Longer works devoted exclusively to the model consist of memoirs by fashion models, guides on how-to-be-a-model and a few mainstream books that combine history with industry analysis and insider gossip. The fashion model also regularly appears as a bit player in biographies and autobiographies of fashion industry leaders—designers, photographers and editors, in histories of fashion magazines and fashion

---

16 Christy Turlington, Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell, Claudia Schiffer and Cindy Crawford were not the only supermodels of the period but they are the names most commonly cited. Harriet Quick dates the term ‘supermodel’ from the late Eighties. Their fame and the fees they charged were unheard-of. Catwalk models in the 1970s, she writes, were paid £50 per show, by 1991, employed as an ensemble, this team were reported to have been paid up to £30,000 each. Harriet Quick, *Catwalking: a History of the Fashion Model* (London: Hamlyn, 1997), 148-157.


photography\textsuperscript{23} and in television documentaries on the fashion industry.\textsuperscript{24} While few of these could be said to approach their subject from an academic perspective, they have mostly proved to be an invaluable source of information to the current project, often combining incisive commentary with historical insights enabling the piecing together of a more comprehensive history of the model in the absence of even one coherent, authoritative text.\textsuperscript{25}

Although the intention of this thesis was not to redress this imbalance and write a historical account of the model, the historical circumstances surrounding the first appearance and subsequent ascent of the model was, nonetheless, essential to constructing a clear understanding of the nature of the model. In addition to the building of an empirico-historical framework from these sources, in some their value was accentuated by an acute understanding of fashion and how it operates. It would be a mistake to presume that those whose daily lives are intimately involved in the


\textsuperscript{24} The Look, BBC, Masters of Style, CBC.

\textsuperscript{25} As part of the Fashion and Modernity project, a collaboration between the London College of Fashion and Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, Caroline Evans is redressing this large gap in fashion studies with her book, \textit{Living Dolls: A History of the Fashion Model 1850-2000} (publisher to be confirmed 2005). The reader interested in the history of fashion models is emphatically encouraged to seek out this work upon publication.
fashion industry are incapable of reflecting upon that industry and the phenomenon that drives it. In particular, those who are at the centre of the creation of fashion’s manifestations and imagery—the designers, photographers and editors—are instinctively aware that they operating within an economy of transience, change and accelerated obsolescence. The most thoughtful have been unable to avoid the observation that the fashion model embodies the fragility that is essential to fashion’s on-going survival. Without overstating the contribution of such comments to the development of the ideas that inform this thesis, nonetheless, this view coincides with my own and is elaborated upon in Section III of *Dying to Be Born Again*.

At the conception of this thesis, the serious contemplation of the figure of the fashion model was also a glaring omission from the, admittedly fledgling, field of fashion studies. Writers on fashion had, for decades, tended to focus on the leading edge of fashion—*haute couture* (or fashion as art) and its creators—or, conversely, the practices of sub-cultural (or cultural) minorities at the expense of considering the clothes that made up the wardrobes of the majority of the fashion-wearing public in the West. In an almost antithetical move, when the relationship between the body and fashion (or clothing and dress) attracted long-overdue critical attention, the focus was not on the tiny minority of women whose existence was entirely predicated upon the fact of fashion but on the rest of us—how we looked at, consumed, wore and embodied fashion and, in turn, how fashion and clothing contributed to the construction of individual, gendered, cultural, social and ethnic identities.

More recently, writers in fashion studies have begun to focus upon the model. Below I look at two writers, Hilary Radner and Caroline Evans, who engage more thoroughly
with how the appearance of the fashion model is informed by fashion but before turning to them I would like to consider some earlier academic treatments of the fashion model that emerged out of the disciplines of sociology and visual culture. These approaches could be characterised as being informed by theories of spectatorship, desire and consumption and working from within either a feminist or postmodern paradigm. Broadly speaking, they fall into the following categories:

- The role of the fashion model in constructing a feminine ideal.
- The fashion model as one of the elements in a narrative that reflects a wider social, political and cultural landscape. With this comes the implication that the model occupies a territory where new sexual and social identities can be forged.
- The model as a symbol of the machinations of desire and consumption operating under techno-capitalism.

In her book, *The Face of Fashion*, Jennifer Craik devotes a chapter to the fashion model, considering her in relation to her role as an icon of femininity, practices of female consumption, the formation of female gendered identity and the objectification of the female body. She writes:

Modelling came to epitomise dominant characteristics of western femininity: the importance of appearance; fetishisation of the body; manipulation and moulding of the body; the discipline and labour associated with ‘beauty’ and body maintenance; the equation of youth with femininity; and feminine lifestyles.²⁶
This association of the fashion model with techniques of femininity and a changing feminine ideal adapted to the criteria of beauty and fashion to the exclusion of other attributes is a theme that serves as the undercurrent running through books such as Marianne Thesander’s *The Feminine Ideal* as well as surfacing, albeit haphazardly, in discussions of body image, advertising, consumerism and fashion.

It is not my intention to deny the impact of visual culture (which would also include film-stars, pop-singers and celebrities) upon our daily appearances, insecurities and aspirations. Historically, representations of an idealised female body in art have also played their role in constructing femininity. Common to most criticisms of such idealised representations is the impossibility of imitating the image and setting an unattainable goal. However, because the creation of the gap between image and spectator (and its simultaneous promise of closure) is the specific strategy of advertising, the fashion model can easily (and not necessarily incorrectly) be targeted as the dominant symbol of the feminine ideal. What such arguments do not take into account, however, is that the feminine ideal cannot be simplistically conflated with the fashionable ideal. The distinction between these two ideals is addressed more closely in Chapter Two but as far as the argument of the thesis as a whole is concerned, the notion of a fashionable ideal serves to delineate between a mainstream ideal of feminine beauty and an aesthetic that operates outside of these rather rigid parameters. One of the questions then that is addressed in the following chapters concerns fashion imagery which, more often than not, is unappealing and uncommercial. On the other hand, also considered are fashion images where any relation to ‘us’ is refuted. It is a premise of this thesis that in such imagery—where, I

26 Jennifer Craik, ‘Fashion Models: Female Bodies and Icons of Femininity’ in, *The Face of Fashion,*
argue, fashion most successfully imposes its aesthetic upon the human body—it might be possible to speculate upon what is specific to the fashion image and thus how the fashion model operates in the visual economy of fashion.

Although this thesis does not engage with the fashion model from a sociological-cultural perspective, Margaret Maynard, in her history of Australian fashion, *Out of Line*, points to how alternative readings of the fashion model might be carried out in the light of more recent feminist accounts of the relationship women have with fashion and fashion images. She writes, for example, of the fashion parades held in the Aboriginal communities of Australia in the 1980s which aimed to ‘foster indigenous cooperation and to raise the self-esteem of Koori women’. Maynard devotes a chapter of her book to the fashion model, providing an excellent historical account of the fashion parade, the fashion film and the relationship between the image and the consumer in the Australian context. While not diverging far from the line of the model as providing an ‘ideal visual exemplar’, her account does consider that readers and consumers are now often characterised as having digested but no longer internalised the concept of ‘the male gaze’, and see their relationship with clothing, fashion, fashion images and fashion consumption as more complex than such theories—grounded in the reification of a ubiquitous capitalist patriarchal system—would allow. More research in this area—with a specific focus trained on the

---

70. See also Craik, ‘Soft Focus: Techniques of Fashion Photography’ in the same volume.
79 Craik’s theoretical framework is underpinned by feminist theories of representation that focus on (male) voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia and (female) narcissistic identification with the sexualised object. Although she acknowledges that this theory has been resisted by some critics she remains unconvinced, writing that, ‘no comprehensive alternative account has been offered, apart from the idea of subversive readings “against the grain”. At best, women construct feminine pleasures and points of view not based on voyeurism.’ Craik, *The Face of Fashion*, 112. Later in this introduction I discuss two
model—remains to be done. Such a project would incorporate not only the
ambivalence experienced by many in their relationship and attitude toward fashion but
also the extensive work published in feminist studies on the rehabilitation of fashion
(which, of course, is often underwritten by this ambivalence) that preceded the more
recent acceptance by the academy of fashion and clothing studies as a legitimate field
of scholarly pursuit. 30

I.4 Symbols of decay and desire

At the commencement of this thesis, the discrete chapters on the model of Craik and
Maynard’s books were notable for being virtually unique, suggesting that academic
interest in and writing on the fashion model per se was minimal. This was less the
case with a closely related field—fashion photography. However, as Val Williams
writes in the catalogue essay accompanying the exhibition, Look At Me: Fashion and
Photography in Britain 1960 to the Present, the reputation of fashion photography
suffered from both its association with the fashion industry and comparison with the
work of photographers working in the fine art tradition. 31 The rejection of fashion
photography by the artworld, she implies, is imitated by the avant-garde fashion
photographer whose point of reference is from outside fashion, namely, the work of

essays by Caroline Evans whose research—both empirical-historical and theoretical—re-evaluates the
relationship that might be thought to exist between the fashion image, the fashion model and various
notions of ‘the spectacle’ and spectatorship. Hilary Radner, also discussed below, focuses on the
complexities of the use of the model to simultaneously promote a feminist, feminine and fashionable
ideal. In regard to the implications of an ‘anti-fashion’, ‘anti-beauty’ fashionable ideal see Elliott
Smedley, Escaping to Reality: Fashion Photography in the 1990s in Bruzzi and Church Gibson, eds,
Fashion Cultures.

30 For a concise analysis of the points of intersection between fashion and feminist discourse see,
Pamela Church Gibson, ‘Redressing the Balance: Patriarchy, postmodernism and feminism’ in Bruzzi
and Church Gibson, eds, Fashion Cultures.
documentarists whose influence Williams dates from the late-Fifties in Britain but
which art historian, Martin Harrison, in *Appearances*, traces to pictures by those such
as Walker Evans in the 1930s. Their influence is such that, ‘Close investigation of
contemporary fashion photography suggests that it does not really exist.’ Williams’
curious denial of a genre which is the subject of both her essay and the exhibition she
has co-curated deserves closer attention. On the surface, it points to the unresolved
tension in the debate concerning ‘fashion-as-commerce’ or ‘fashion-as-art’, which has
historical precedents tracing back to the rise of large-scale production of fashionable
clothing and couture in the nineteenth century. There is, however, no value judgement
in her statement—whether fashion photography is art or not is only of relevance in
that its questionable status has meant that it has been over-looked by canonical texts
on photography. Rather than entering into the debate, in her statement she is
identifying a trend in avant-garde fashion photography that is consciously ‘anti-
fashion’—a trend she readily concedes inevitably fails to live up to its name as
anything ‘subversive’ is immediately taken up by the mainstream and propelled ‘into
fashionability’.

However, it is in the context of this style of fashion photography, antagonistic not
only to the conventions but the idea of fashion, that Williams’ essay exemplifies a
common outcome when the figure of the fashion model is pulled into focus; although
cast as the central figure, the model becomes eclipsed by other factors, ending up as

31 Val Williams, *Look At Me: Fashion and Photography in Britain 1960 to the Present* (London: The
32 Williams’ dates may well be influenced by the parameters of the exhibition.
33 Williams, *Look At Me*, 100.
34 Wolfgang Tillmans quoted in Williams, 115.
only a minor character in a much wider narrative.\textsuperscript{35} Referring to the Punks and New Romantics photographed by Derek Ridgers in the late Seventies and early Eighties, Williams describes them as, ‘highly attractive and radical figures moving around the city landscape.’\textsuperscript{36} Drawing an aesthetic and thematic lineage (based around an interest in street fashions) between these images and the series, ‘Chaos Couture’ (1990) by fashion photographer Nick Knight she writes, ‘Models wander a desolate landscape, stylish survivors of some mysterious disaster, athletic, bold and unbowed.’\textsuperscript{37} These images are representative of a tendency in British fashion photography that is said to be reflecting or reacting to the ‘onslaught of Thatcherism’ (or its after-effects) and hence acknowledge ‘the existence of a political debate around ethnicity, sexuality and consumption, while also announcing, albeit tangentially, the collapse of industrialised Britain.’\textsuperscript{38} The characterising of fashion as a weather-vane of the times or as a visual expression of the \textit{zeitgeist} has a long tradition that can be traced back to costume historian, James Laver and Williams extends this idea by positing fashion imagery as replete with symbolic and cultural meanings. Relevant to the present study, however, is the historical identification of a type of fashion imagery that underlines the distinction between the feminine and fashionable ideal. By positing itself against mainstream ideas of what is considered aesthetically pleasing, the (alternative) fashionable ideal serves to challenge that mainstream and, albeit briefly, distance itself from the commercial domain. In addition, the practice of using ‘real’ people as models wearing their own clothes (as in the idea of the ‘straight-up’ featured in \textit{iD} magazine) complicates the notion that the fashion image is necessarily implicated in an economy of consumerism and aspiration.

\textsuperscript{35} In Williams’ essay, the exception to this is a reference to the relationship between Kate Moss and Corinne Day in a quotation from Hilton Als.
\textsuperscript{36} Williams, 101.
\textsuperscript{37} Williams, 101.
If, in the images described by Williams, the wider narrative is the effects of late twentieth century capitalism, for those whose theoretical framework is built upon the ideas of certain postmodern thinkers, the fashion image is a portrait of capitalism itself—replete with all its internal contradictions. The notion of fashion as the postmodern exemplar par excellence is extended to the fashion photograph and, hence, the fashion model. This is the approach taken by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe in his essay, ‘A Thigh-Length History of the Fashion Photograph – An Abbreviated Theory of the Body’. In this, the model is positioned at the nexus of advertising, capitalism and desire. In such a paradigm, the body in the fashion photograph serves, on the one hand, to display and apprehend the surface apparatus of capitalism and, on the other, to unveil its repressed desires even as the idea of desire is antagonistic to capitalism.\(^{39}\)

Being ‘both central to capitalism and hostile to it’, fashion photography then is ‘an anti-capitalism at the heart of capitalism’.\(^{40}\) Gilbert-Rolfe pits the modern fashion body—which, in the age of the mini-skirt, announces disclosure—against the fashion body of the nineteenth century, which the power structures of industrial capitalism were determined to hide. The short skirt, as an item of clothing, always ‘threatens to disappear’\(^{41}\); Victorian dress hid the body under multiple layers made from materials that became increasingly sensuous as they approached the skin, preserving ‘maximum shock value for nudity’.\(^{42}\) One embodies concentration, mobility, the end of displacement and the irrelevance of exposure; the other, dispersal, quiescence,

---

\(^{38}\) Williams, 102.
\(^{41}\) Gilbert-Rolfe, 263.
\(^{42}\) Gilbert-Rolfe, 256.
fetishism and mystery. By aggressively displaying the distance between itself and that which has been left behind the fashion photo is transgressive. He writes:

The fashion photograph, the short skirt, the model who inhabits both, are historical demonstrations of our desire to be reassured that there’s nothing there, and that we can deal with that. What this means is not that there’s no thing there, on the contrary, but rather that we can deal with things being present rather than deferred, with access rather than promise, with excitement rather than memory: in short with the thing itself rather than its dispersal into a fetish. The twentieth century believes itself to be free of fetish, and celebrates this belief in the fashion photograph.  

In place of the fetish are all the forms of desire—the idea of desire, an image of desire, desire objectified.

The object of desire, as construed by Gilbert-Rolfe, is not the product, not the clothing, not the fashion but the model whose beauty, whose ‘completeness’ most likely creates a gap between the model and the spectator (i.e., advertising’s strategy of aspiration). But, more importantly, beauty operates with a certain off-handedness to dismiss itself and therein lies its power. Elsewhere, Gilbert-Rolfe has written that beauty, ‘in being frivolous, and in that trivial and irrelevant, is always subversive because it’s always a distraction from the worthwhile, which lets us know it’s worthwhile by not being beautiful.’ He continues:

As such, beauty stands in opposition to the idea of productive thought and perhaps to the idea of production itself. This may be why advertising—technocapitalism’s human face—is so dependent on

---

43 Gilbert-Rolfe, 258. It may be the case that, rather than the twentieth century being free of the fetish, advanced capitalism has learnt how to live with it in the open; the fetish is now packaged and commodified, possibly most effectively in the fashion image.
beauty. It has to associate products with that which they implicitly cannot be and which is implicitly indifferent to them.\textsuperscript{45}

In the ‘Thigh-High’ essay, Gilbert-Rolfe draws (not altogether successfully) on Gilles Deleuze’s taxonomy of the face to reveal how the model in the fashion photograph exercises power: by refusing expression, she refuses power. But the model, he confidently asserts, does not have the effect of ‘a deflecting machine’ that returns one’s gaze to the clothes it advertises. On the contrary,

It deflects nothing but rather concentrates the gaze on itself, offering, having deflected nothing, to lead to nothing. The promise of the fashion photograph is the promise of emptiness, of complete irresponsibility, a total absence of consequence, of expressions which \textit{mean nothing}.\textsuperscript{46}

Given this conclusion, it is difficult to avoid the impression that Gilbert-Rolfe views both fashion and the fashion model as playthings, useful only as a means to illustrate the pervasiveness of free-floating signifiers in a postmodern world. His approach, at times, offers up valid insights and tantalising possibilities for discussing the model; his description, for example, of the fashion photograph as simulating ‘vitality in a ghost culture, which buys longevity at the price of its own life’\textsuperscript{47} is as good as any description of the fashion cycle but, ultimately, he is uninterested in the object. Like the fashion photograph on a billboard, which is only ‘grasped in passing’\textsuperscript{48}, the model

\textsuperscript{44}The model face is ‘a completeness atop and within a completeness’, Gilbert-Rolfe, 267. See also Gilbert-Rolfe, ‘Moist Attraction – Observations on an Advertisement which appeared in \textit{Vogue (US)}’ in the same volume, pp 293-301.
\textsuperscript{47}Gilbert-Rolfe, 270.
\textsuperscript{48}Gilbert-Rolfe, 258.
suffers from lack of attention—brought into focus only briefly, her image becomes blurred before disappearing from the frame altogether.

I.5 Parading Identity

Within the last couple of years, the fashion model has begun to move closer to centre stage in discussions of fashion photography. In the volume edited by Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, *Fashion Cultures*, Hilary Radner writes on the image represented by the model in the 1960s and Elliott Smedley reflects upon the realist aesthetic that dominates the memory of the 1990s. While both write interesting essays, Radner’s coincides more closely with the concerns of my own thesis by offering an interpretation of the fashion photograph that goes some way to incorporating fashion itself into the critical discourse. In ‘On the Move: Fashion Photography and the Single Girl’, Radner documents the emergence of a new feminine ideal—the ‘Single Girl’—and the inherent paradoxes of an image that effectively encourages new patterns of feminine consumption by invoking feminism (then at the nascent stages of its second-wave). Underlying her argument is the belief that the fashion photograph does not passively reflect an era but helps construct behaviour, attitudes and notions of self. In the period under discussion, the model—a sort of ubiquitous Helen Gurley Brown—is posited as the representative of the waif-like, adolescent-but-glamourous woman whose financial independence and sexual freedom defined her against a predecessor whose goals and appearance conformed to

---

a traditional patriarchal construction. The new ideal is young, active, single and wears clothes (casual *prêt-a-porter* instead of *haute couture*) that simultaneously reflect this lifestyle and produce the new ‘self’.

Incorporated in the notion of the ‘active’ subject of the fashion photograph was the idea of an active body, namely, a body rigorously delineated by diet and exercise. Radner’s insight is to view this idea not simply as a cultural construct (of which the fashion and beauty industry are the most pernicious advocates) but rather to view the fashionable ideal filtered through the veil of the clothes, particularly clothes produced by an industry that relies on planned obsolescence. In short, the purpose of the model is, first and foremost, to display clothes. To this end, she describes a photograph from a 1927 *Vogue* by Edward Steichen where the (anonymous) model stands amidst a furnished interior in posed, lady-like immobility, allowing for every detail of the clothes to be clearly viewed. She writes, ‘The body takes its identity from the clothes…. Rather than asserting its independence, the body is subsumed, rendered abstract, by the clothes that cover it.’ This is contrasted with a shot from 1933 by the Hungarian sports photographer, Martin Munkacsi, who was recruited to *Harper’s Bazaar* by Carmel Snow. In this the model is clearly in movement, running along a beach in a swimming costume, cape and sneakers although, as Radner points out, the details of each item are not entirely clear. Referring to the conditions in which the ‘historic image’ came about (the client instructed her to run, her action is ‘staged’ rather than ‘taken’) Radner points to the model as selling the ‘sports-wear’ look as

---

50 Whether fashion images had ever presented an ideal wrapped up in maternity, as Radner suggests, is debatable. Rather, it could be argued that fashion photography had, long before the 1960s, presented an image of a single, independent woman that was in stark contrast to the dominant feminine ideal in other forms of advertising.

well as the clothes themselves. ‘She is not an athlete or soldier performing a
designated task with an external goal. She represents something other than her “self”,
even as she offers a model of this “self” for the woman reader.’ And yet, she argues,
the structural attributes and details of the model’s outfit are overwhelmed by the
specific physical attributes of her body. Even as her activity is entirely motivated by
what she is wearing, what she is selling, the display of the clothes is no longer
paramount.

It is in the spirit of this second image that fashion photography in the 1960s
establishes the new woman, or the ‘working girl’, a figure who is both the designated
consumer and the model herself, the identity of both able to be conflated because of
an underlying narrative of ordinariness. It is in this era that the model emerges as a
‘significant author in fashion discourse’ and develops ‘an independent identity, a
signature’. In her discussion of three of the most successful models of the era—
Twiggy, Wilhelmina and Jean Shrimpton—Radner demonstrates how this ‘model
identity’ incorporates the demands of the individual—who the model is—with the job
that she is ostensibly getting paid for—displaying clothes. Twiggy, whose ‘look’ was
inscribed in the name given her by Justin de Villeneuve, was unable, argues Radner,
to overcome the persona that shot her to fame; lacking flexibility, ‘she could only sell
her “self”’. The less well-known but more financially successful, Wilhelmina, was
the antithesis of Twiggy—more couture than ‘youthquake’—but ‘her image remained

---

32 Radner, 133.
33 Radner, 131. The image (as well as the comparison with Steichen’s) is discussed by Harrison in 
Appearances where Munkacs is quoted as describing it as making ‘photographic history’. (Harrison,
33.) Nancy Hall-Duncan offers a slightly different account—it was Munkacs, not the client, who
wanted the model, Lucile Brokaw, to run. (Hall-Duncan, 72). The relationship between mobility,
modernity and the fashion image are discussed in greater length in Chapter Three of this thesis.
34 Radner, 136. Twiggy retired at 19. ‘Justin de Villeneuve’ was the name adopted by Nigel John
Davies as part of his own reinvention of the self.
of less importance than the clothes she wore’.  
Shrimpton, on the other hand, successfully straddled the divide between fame and anonymity, projecting a recognisable and defined ‘self’ as ‘star’ combined with a capacity to transform ‘her “looks” in order to conform to the demands of the continually “new”’.  

In her brief analysis of a few fashion images from the period, Radner draws together the themes introduced at the beginning of the essay—the new feminine ideal that (superficially) indexes feminism and a new sartorial ideal that implicitly indexes the ephemerality of fashion, effectively producing a consumer for whom a fashionable ideal and a feminist ideal are intertwined. In an editorial sequence for British Vogue, ‘New York, Young Idea Goes West’, photographed by David Bailey and featuring Shrimpton, the model exists as a figure in an urban landscape but her status as an independent, young woman ‘on the move’ is tempered by her immobility (‘trapped’ inside a phone booth, stationary at a ‘WALK’ traffic light) and the teddy-bear that chaperones her everywhere. Unlike the Steichen image though, argues Radner, she is not demure and apologetic about the role she is playing but aggressively draws our attention to her role as ‘model’, the purpose of which, Radner writes, is to ‘sell clothes, and then more clothes—clothes that will go with a woman/girl wherever she chooses, but clothes that none the less must be constantly renovated “on the move” themselves.’  

In an earlier image, photographed by William Klein, models Simone d’Aillencourt and Nina Devos are framed and enclosed by the horizontal lines of a pedestrian  

---

55 Radner, 136. ‘Wilhelmina’ (b. Gertrude Behmenberg) is described by Michael Gross as being ‘the last star of the couture era’. She appeared on 255 magazine covers and, at the time of her death in 1980, held the record for Vogue (U.S.) covers (28). She opened the agency, Wilhelmina Models, in 1967.  
56 Radner, 136. The only one of the three who used her own name.
crossing, active figures in a world ‘in movement’. The models are showing two versions of an almost identical outfit—one is black with white detailing and accessories, the other is white with black and halter-necked instead of short-sleeved. But unlike the much earlier image by Munkacsi, their mobility does not impede a clear view of every aspect of the outfit—hat, shoes and front and back details of the dresses are clearly shown. In the intervening years, the fashion image has formalised movement, activity (and what this represents) in a manner that displays the clothes as clearly as in the Steichen photograph but also embodies the modern ideal. Crucially, Radner places the ‘model’ at the centre of her analysis of the multiple discourses that function in the fashion photograph, pin-pointing her identity as being primarily constructed by the demands of the clothes she is wearing. As Radner puts it: ‘She may be independent but she knows her job.’

In the same edited collection as Radner’s ‘On the Move’, appear two essays that address that other arena in which the fashion model exists—the catwalk. In her introduction to a special issue of *Fashion Theory*, editor Ginger Gregg Duggan comments upon the common dismissal (in which she had included herself) of the fashion parade as superficial. It was an essay by Caroline Evans, ‘Masks, Mirrors and Mannequins: Elsa Schiaparelli and the Decentred Subject’, that suggested to her the possibility of the fashion show ‘as a conveyor of deeper meaning’. In the two different forums, *Fashion Cultures* and *Fashion Theory*, these possibilities are explored by Nathalie Khan, Gregg Duggan and Evans. However, whereas Khan

---

37 Radner, 139.
38 Radner, 139.
emphasises the infiltration of political discourse into the fashion performance and Gregg Duggan the various influences of performance art on the catwalk show, Evans is the only writer to give any substantial attention to the role played by the model in this performance. In ‘The Enchanted Spectacle’, she observes,

As the ‘theatricalisation of fashion marketing’ par excellence the fashion show also has a relationship to art, theater and film; to consumerism; and to the commodification and eroticisation of the female form in mass culture; in short, to the wider formations of gender, image, desire and commerce in the twentieth century.61

Against the backdrop of a historical account of the fashion show, she unravels the complex relationship that exists between the fashion show, capitalist spectacle and the spectacle of women. This latter applies not only to the models (or ‘mannequins’ as they were known) who displayed the clothes but also to the female consumers who, ostensibly the subjects of the society of the spectacle, became ‘simultaneously, its object and image’ upon wearing their purchases.62 The legacy of the nineteenth century, when ambiguity (real or imagined) arose around exactly what the model was offering for sale, continues to the present and yet, argues Evans, the commodification of sexuality and the sexual objectification of the model as an invitation to sexual fantasy do not fully encompass the ‘fluid and theatrical space’ of the catwalk.63 In addition to functioning ‘commercially as spectacle in an increasingly visualised global market’ the fashion show can also be understood as ‘a form of theatricalisation of

---

62 Evans, 272. Here she is referring specifically to the middle and upper-class women of the nineteenth century.
63 Evans, 273.
social reality and of the self.”\textsuperscript{64} By invoking the figure of the dandy, with its principle of an aestheticised ‘self’, and notions of ‘performativity’ (exemplified in the art and music arena by, respectively, Cindy Sherman and Madonna), she identifies the fashion show as a platform upon which the cultural construction of gendered (and other) identities can be displayed.\textsuperscript{65}

I.6 Fashion’s Identity

The importance of fashion, clothing and practices of dress in the formation of identity, both in the old-fashioned idea of ‘personality’ and in the fluid postmodern ‘self’, underpins much of the current writing in the field of fashion studies. For example, the influential journal, \textit{Fashion Theory}, takes as ‘its starting point a definition of ‘fashion’ as the cultural construction of the embodied identity.’\textsuperscript{66} However, underlying the fundamental argument of this thesis is a premise that relies on an inversion of this definition, or perhaps, more correctly, a shift in emphasis; namely, that the fashion model could be construed as embodying the identity of \textit{fashion}.

Elsewhere, Evans interprets the defining characteristics of fashion—instability and alteration—via an analysis of the work of several contemporary fashion designers. The historical referencing of designers such as John Galliano, Alexander McQueen and (one could add) Vivienne Westwood does not function simply at the level of a

\textsuperscript{64} Evans, 306.
\textsuperscript{65} This ‘switching station of (post)-modern identites’ is encapsulated in the film \textit{Paris is Burning}, where marginalised male transvestites and transsexuals perform class, race and gender etc. by ‘Vogueing’, that is, imitating, among others, the catwalk model.
nostalgic recreation of the past, rather it ‘jolts’ the past into the present, enabling an interpenetration between the old and new that exposes a ‘truth’ about both eras, creating two images that come together ‘in a “critical constellation”’ that traces ‘a previously concealed connection.’ An evocation of the passage of time can also be conjured up by ageing, decaying, deteriorating or destroying new clothes, thus giving them a texture of patina or the idea of a past life. Hussein Chalayan buried his fabric with iron filings to stain it with rust, Martin Margiela cultivated mould on an entire collection and Viktor & Rolf experimented with subjecting twenty versions of the same white dress to various disasters. In Evans’ analysis, the reverberation of the past in the present that is woven into the fabric of contemporary fashion design provides an image of the ‘society of the spectacle in transition’ of both capitalist excess and its flipside, ‘melancholy dereliction’.

But, I would suggest, the temporal connections overtly suggested by these material objects of fashion can also be considered as inherent to the structure of fashion itself which, with its peculiarly cyclical time, fast-tracks the shift between past and present, present and future, collapsing all temporality into a constantly changing present. From the moment of its first appearance, fashion carries a trace of its future obsolescence and replacement. The seasonal fashion parade, as well as daily, weekly and monthly fashion reportage acts out a charade of ‘the latest’ as filling an absence. What it replaces is conveniently forgotten except in the occasional roll-call of births and obituaries that is the ‘in’ and ‘out’ list. However, in fashion, what is new is not a ‘birth’ as construed in the natural world. The only way that a fashion can be ‘born’ (and fashion perpetually renewed) is via its ‘death’. It is in this economy of perpetual

---

67 Evans, ‘Yesterday’s Emblems’, 103.
transience, instability and mutability that fashion courts mortality to achieve immortality—constantly dying, only to be born again.

68 Evans, 102.
69 Evans, 106.
Section I

The Pre-History of the Fashion Model
Chapter One

Pre-Industrial Fashion

The eternal is in any case far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea.

— Walter Benjamin

1.1 The First Fashion Model

The first fashion model whose name is known to us is Marie Vernet, a salesgirl at the renowned silk mercers, Gagelin, whose shop on the rue de Richelieu near the Palais Royal sold mantles, cloaks and shawls which would be displayed to customers by Marie or whoever else happened to be at hand. This development, in the mid-nineteenth century, of using ‘moving mannequins’ has been described as ‘a major innovation in sales technique’ but Marie was not the first young woman to parade before discerning eyes and neither was Gagelin the only business to use a method which had arisen spontaneously out of the relatively novel practice of selling ready-made garments alongside uncut bolts of cloth. Marie Vernet would have been simply another anonymous grisette if it had not been for her marriage to a salesman on the premises. But as Marie Worth, wife of the legendary couturier, Charles Frederick Worth, her destiny was altered and her place in fashion history assured (plate 1.1).

As the dress-making department that Worth begun in a corner of his employer’s shop grew into an empire which dictated the way fashionable women dressed on both sides of the Atlantic, he and his wife came to represent a revolution in the way new fashions were both created and displayed. Before Worth, the role of ‘designer’ and ‘model’ had been embodied by one person alone; for centuries, the fashionable woman (or man) had paraded through society receiving accolades as both artist and executor of her (or his) individual style. However, once the credit for the creation of new fashions was charged to an individual other than the wearer, a need developed that had not previously existed and the responsibility for launching new styles was draped upon the shoulders of the model. This need for a physical or quasi-physical mediation between the wearer and fashion represents a crucial shift in their relationship, with the figure of the model separating the individual from both the maker and the fashion garment. As such, she is emblematic of the abstractions of the market-place—the alienation of the individual and the development of commodity fetishism—that would define the modern economy. But remnants of the pre-industrial era remained, continuing to contribute to the idea of the model in the modern fashion system.

1.2  Fashion and Power

Fashion is not common to all ages and all civilisations; rather it originated in the West with the emergence of metropolitan life toward the end of the Middle Ages and has remained, since that time, a primarily Western phenomenon. Dress and adornment

73 Anne Hollander has written: ‘If fashion in dress means constant perceptible fluctuations of visual design, created out of the combined forms of tailored dress and body, then many early civilizations and
of pre-modern and non-Western cultures are classified as being outside of the fashion system because of their adherence to tradition and resistance to frivolous change. In contrast, fashion arises out of an autonomous aesthetic logic that devalues the past and consecrates novelty, individual fancy and human originality. The innovation of differentiated dress for men and women in the early to mid-fourteenth century is generally cited as the origin of fashion. Before this time both men and women wore a long, flowing, tunic type garment. For women, this evolved into a gown with a closer, more revealing fit, while men adopted a shorter version which was worn with hose (plate 1.2). These costumes were to provide the basis for evolution in masculine and feminine dress into the twentieth century. There is controversy over where this radical change in dress styles first appeared but it is known that the innovations spread very rapidly throughout the elites of Western Europe between 1340 and 1350. By the end of the century, fluctuations in fashion became a familiar pleasure of high society and ‘sudden shifts in tastes, fancies, and novelties’ have proliferated rapidly and served as a mark of sophistication ever since.\textsuperscript{74}

The circumstances that enabled the birth of fashion at this time were made possible by certain economic and social factors that have been widely discussed elsewhere and will be only briefly touched upon here.\textsuperscript{75} After the year 1000 Europeans, despite much of the eastern hemisphere have not experienced ‘fashion’ as we know it...The changes in true fashion ongoing in the West since about 1300, demand reshaping of the body-and-clothes unit, so that some areas of the body are compressed, others padded, some kinds of movement are restricted, others liberated, and later perhaps all these reversed.’ Anne Hollander, \textit{Seeing Through Clothes} (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1975), 90. This orthodoxy has been contested by some writers. See for example, Jennifer Craik, \textit{The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion} (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). Nonetheless, Craik does acknowledge the European tradition’s unique investment in fashion.

\textsuperscript{74} Lipovetsky, \textit{The Empire of Fashion}, 21.

continuing to wage bloody internal wars as well as battling (in the East) outside
incursions, experienced a long period of cultural stability. The resultant economic
growth saw agricultural and technological revolutions, the growth of commerce and
the development of cities as major centres of trade. Under these circumstances
conditions were established which encouraged a high degree of specialisation and
innovation in trades associated with the manufacture of clothing.\textsuperscript{76} The progress of
material civilisation enriched first the noble and then the bourgeois classes who, eager
to display the signs of its new power, adopted aristocratic habits of magnificence.
From the beginning, fashion was emblematic of the hierarchical social order with
sartorial splendour radiating down from the pinnacle of society according to prestige,
rank and power. However, as the widespread failure of sumptuary regulations attests,
it was not easy to prevent costume from blurring social boundaries. In the event,
privileges of birth were rivalled by privileges of wealth and, in an attempt to maintain
their status and position, the aristocracy fuelled the fashion process by increasing
gratuitous expenditure on luxurious items which they would then discard as they were
taken up by the bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{77}

The classic sociological model of fashion describes this process in terms of
conspicuous consumption and class competition. One of the most sophisticated
versions of this explanation appears in Thorstein Veblen’s text, \textit{The Theory of the
Leisure Class}, which was written at the turn of the twentieth century against a

\textit{Fashion: a Concise History} (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969, 1982); \textit{Elizabeth Wilson, Adorned in
\textsuperscript{76} Economic growth, as Lipovetsky points out, was not uniform during this period with periods of
economic crisis and individual financial ruin.
\textsuperscript{77} However, Fernand Braudel writes that the game of fashion was enjoyed by only a very small number
of people (the majority of the population excluded entirely) and, until about 1700, the pace of change
was relatively slow.
backdrop of Marx and Engels. Veblen’s theory is a seductive one and has been extremely influential but although it does emphasise important aspects of fashion it has been criticised as not satisfactorily explaining what is at the core of fashion and its vicissitudes. Although fashion is clearly implicated in strategies of distinction, in *The Empire of Fashion*, Gilles Lipovetsky argues that the mechanistic model of class rivalry fails to take into account that the instigators of change were, from the beginning, the most highly placed individuals in the social hierarchy, ‘people who, precisely by virtue of their prominent position, were immune to class anxieties and competition for social status.’ Furthermore, the very rapidity with which new styles and fancies emerged—often replaced much faster than they were popularised—also contradicts this thesis.

For those whose view of the phenomenon of fashion is fundamentally antagonistic, the speed with which fashions change is ascribed to a never-ending quest for escape from the tyranny of something that is, in Veblen’s view, intrinsically ugly. His attitude has been echoed by Jean Baudrillard, who, in his Marxist phase, denies fashion any aesthetic value, asserting that ‘truly beautiful, definitively beautiful clothing would put an end to fashion.’ Much of the intensity with which fashion is attacked by its critics is fuelled by the impression that escape from such a mercurial tyrant is impossible. In a later work, Baudrillard writes:

> Fashion is immoral… There was a time…when a society could only be revolutionised through its vices, that it is its immorality that gives it its dynamism. Fashion still holds to this immorality: it knows

---

78 A more nuanced version of this model appears in the ‘The Philosophy of Fashion’, written by Veblen’s contemporary, Georg Simmel. Simmel’s contribution is considered in detail in Chapter Six of this thesis.

79 Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion*, 42.
nothing of value-systems, nor of criteria of judgement: good and evil, beauty and ugliness, the rational/irrational—it plays within and beyond these, it acts therefore as the subversion of all order, including revolutionary rationality… [T]here is no possible subversion of fashion since it has no system of reference to contradict (it is its own system of reference). We cannot escape fashion (since fashion itself makes the refusal of fashion into a fashion feature…).81

Beyond this, for many, fashion’s domain does not stop at the outer shell with which we clothe ourselves or dress our lives but extends beyond flesh and bone, imposing its distorting ideal upon the body and seeping into the very core of what makes us human.

In contrast to such attitudes that disallow autonomy and aesthetic pleasure in the game of fashion is a view that the ‘eternal metamorphoses’ of fashion are caused by an ‘unwavering passion for novelty’; fashion does not correspond to despotism but democratic freedom of choice. Of course claims, such as those made by Lipovetsky, on behalf of fashion as ‘an agent of democratic revolution’82 can be exaggerated (or, as we have seen, denied) but, for him, it is significant that the protean logic of fashion comes into play with a paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of the self from one that is socially embedded and immobile to an exaltation of the unique individual. ‘By the end of the Middle Ages’ he writes, ‘the individualisation of appearances had been legitimised: to be unlike others, to be unique, to attract attention by displaying signs of difference—these became legitimate aspirations and passions in the world of courts.’83 This grounding of fashion in individualism, while accepting the role attributed to fashion by the economic theorists of signifying rank, arousing admiration

and displaying social status, shifts the emphasis away from the desire for distinction being located purely in a *class* struggle to that of distinction as a value in itself. This does not preclude the dynamism of fashion being related to social power and status but, significantly, it shifts the emphasis to the social power and differentiation of the individual *within* the class.

Notwithstanding fashion’s investment in uniqueness is its paradoxical co-existence with an essential trait of the fashion system, conformism, or, to use Lipovetsky’s terminology, mimesis. Another way of looking at the model of class competition is that the imitation of those ranked higher on the social scale by those lower down ensures the diffusion of fashion. In Veblen’s discussion, there is a sense that the mimetic process is resented by the fashion arbiter when, in fact, fashion only succeeds if it is copied. My point here is not to ignore contrivances to maintain exclusivity of dress—whether official in the form of sumptuary laws or market driven by rarity and cost—but rather to indicate that the display and dissemination of fashion ideas were used as an instrument of power.

The historical correlation between fashion and power is not unproblematic. That for many centuries fashion was hierarchical and associated with aristocratic splendour disguises the fact that the extravagances of fashion emerged at a time when the prestige and the political power of state sovereigns and the nobility were diminishing. In France, for example, the political reorganisation undertaken by Richelieu stripped the nobility of many of its powers, instituting them at the court of Versailles under the rule of an absolute monarchy. Lipovetsky writes, ‘Far from emblematising the

---

supremacy of the nobility, fashion attests much more to its continuing weakening since the Middle Ages, to its progressive metamorphosis into a “spectacular” class that has self-advancement by sumptuary expense for display purposes as one of its major obligations. Nonetheless, in conjunction with political and economic imperatives, dominance in fashion came to represent cultural supremacy. Consequently, sartorial imperialism, in the guise of the dissemination of fashion ideas to other courts, was essential.

Throughout its history, the motivation for change in fashion has come from a multitude of sources—politics, the visual arts, literature, poetry, philosophy, foreign and exotic influences, current affairs and events, technological advances or simply upon the whim of an individual. Before the institution of seasonal collections in the twentieth century where designers revealed the latest trends to fashion buyers and the fashion press, change in fashion, states Lipovetsky, was ‘a random phenomenon, driven somewhat chaotically by one variable arbiter of elegance or another.’ In the first half of the fifteenth century, the main influences on fashion came from the Italian states, and the courts of Burgundy and France. In the Italian states, silk weaving reached a high level of sumptuousness and the pivotal location of Venice, situated between East and West ensured that fashions spread along the trade connections. Silk and cloth manufacture were also important industries in Burgundy where the textile industry was promoted to international markets via an annual trade fair held in Antwerp and introduced Burgundian fashions to England. Fashion influences also spread through alternative forms of international relations such as war and

---

83 Lipovetsky, 47.
intermarriage. The distinctive mode of ‘slashing’, which revealed layers of luxurious fabrics through gratuitous slits in the outer layer, for example, is said to have arisen out of the Swiss defeat of the Duke of Burgundy in 1476 and spread across Europe and hence to England with the marriage of Henry VII’s sister to Louis XII of France. (See plates 1.3 & 1.4).  

Influence in fashion followed economic and political power. From 1525 Spain was the most important state in Europe and, consequently, for the next century Spanish costume dictated European fashion. When the French finally defeated the Spanish in a decisive battle at Rocroi in 1643, dress had become emblematic of the power struggles in the economic and military battle fields and the ensuing period of growing French dominance and supremacy over her neighbours was visually demonstrated by the magnificence of French modes (plate 1.5). During the reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715), the development of luxury industries, especially textiles, became a significant underpinning of the French economy and, under the direction of his minister, Colbert, the production and dissemination of French styles were made functions of the state.

Colbert’s innovations ensured that every aspect of French fashion was tightly controlled, with textile manufacturers, tailors, dressmakers, milliners and craftspeople, including artists and engravers, all operating on behalf of the king. The dress of the nobility was also regulated according to strict court etiquette. As Alice Mackrell puts it, ‘Dress at the court of Louis XIV was more than a matter of frivolity. It was

84 Lipovetsky, 29.
85 Lipovetsky, 58.
86 On the other hand, sometimes the trajectory of a fashion (like its origin) can never be determined. Boucher writes that although archaeological excavations prove that fashions that are known to have been worn in France at the time of Charles the Bold were also worn in Greenland in the same period, it is nearly impossible to know how this occurred. Boucher, A History of Costume, 192.
government policy.87 In the second half of the seventeenth century, French mode (which, as a word, dates from this period) spread across Europe, definitively replacing the outmoded Spanish styles which, by 1700, had even been discarded by the Spanish. The French court successfully exploited fashion’s association with supremacy to the point where it represented a form of cultural dominance independent of political or economic factors. It developed and maintained the prestige of French fashion by carefully cultivating not only superiority in luxury industries but also an image of French superiority. The legacy created by this court was so successful that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Paris, despite many incursions in the field of ready-to-wear and the decreasing participation of the French themselves, maintains an exclusive hold on haute couture (and its associated highly lucrative perfume and cosmetic industry), contributing to French prestige and cultural identity as well as its export receipts.88

1.3 The Early Fashion Designer

The fashion system that predominated in the eighteenth (and well into the nineteenth) century, was a necessarily collaborative process that relied on the creative input and

88 Of course, in England and across Europe, individual countries or states made contributions to fashion but, in this very abridged discussion, the focus is primarily on the French as they were the most influential. See Valerie Steele, Paris Fashion (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) for an argument on Paris as being ‘the capital of style’. It should be noted, however, that since Steele’s book was published, European designers have experimented with showing in New York. Helmut Lang showed his 1998-99 collection in New York and also mused upon the possibilities of foregoing the live show completely and replacing it with a virtual parade on the internet. Alexander McQueen also showed one collection in New York. This notwithstanding, only Paris has haute couture and, at present, seems to have returned to favour with designers. For an argument that pits the supremacy of Paris against the might of the American clothing industry see Terri Agins, The End of Fashion: the Mass Marketing of the Clothing Business (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1999).
authority of the individual customer who worked with a variety of experts. Renowned arbiters of elegance invariably came from the highest rank of society but this is not to say that the talent and artistry of fashion and costume professionals went unrecognised. An early prototype of the fashion designer made an appearance in Renaissance Italy where the artists Antonio Pisanello, Pollaiuolo, and Jacopo Bellini designed textile patterns and created models for court costumes (plate 1.6). In portraits, dress and physiognomy were of equal importance; for the court artist the skill with which he transfigured silk into painted canvas was often extended to designing all aspects of the members of a court’s appearance, including uniforms, costumes and dress for pageants. Lucas Cranach, for example, was responsible for the design of ceremonial and military clothes worn at the German courts in the sixteenth century. In France, at the coronation of Louis XVI, the painter, Louis-René Boquet designed all the suits worn by the King, the princes, the court dignitaries and other noblemen taking part in the ceremony. The court costumes designed and executed by the court tailor, Sarrazin, in the style of Henri IV had a brief vogue from 1774 to 1776 and the celebrated court hairdresser Legros was so successful he founded an Academie de Coiffure in 1769.89 (See plates 1.7 & 1.8.)

However, individual initiative was limited by two important factors. First, the patterns in use were obligatory and, second, a highly regulated system of artisan and merchant corporations restricted production and selling to specific categories of dress and its components. Only tailors had the privilege of making outer garments, full gowns and corsets; tailoresses were responsible for undergarments and the clothing of young

---

89 After the fall of the old regime, French fashion and textile industries fell into temporary disarray as they were considered to be counter-revolutionary but in 1793, the painter, Jacques-Louis David, was asked to design a typically revolutionary costume. Based on archaic dress it was universally ignored except by a few of his younger pupils.
children. Statutes existed against the selling of cloth by those who shaped it, who, in turn, played no part in the decoration of the final garment. No individual was authorised to change the silhouette, decide a complete outfit, or even make a complete dress.

But in an era described as being one where fashions changed ‘every week, every day, almost every hour’\(^\text{90}\), it was not the architecture of the gown that mattered but the surface trimmings and embellishments, the countless frills, gewgaws and furbelows that decorated a dress or bonnet. These were the responsibility of a category of artisans that had obtained the right to form an independent corporation in 1776. The *marchandes de mode*, or haberdashers, were drawn from the category of mercers and drapers and were legally entitled to sell and work all the accessories applied to clothing and headdresses (plate 1.9). They soon went beyond the limits of their trade, exercising an absolute power over appearance. Their success is reflected in an item from the *Magasin des Modes nouvelles* in 1787 which declared that a ‘frivoliste’ could provide a living for 10,000 people.\(^\text{91}\) They were mentioned in letters, memoirs and gazettes of the period, immortalised in poems as great artists and in prose as charging accordingly.

The most famous of all the *marchandes de mode* was Rose Bertin who dressed the Queen, Marie-Antoinette from 1772, and was honoured with the title of *Ministre de la Mode*. Bertin was responsible for changing the Queen’s sartorial style from one of legendary simplicity to fatal extravagance. Bertin herself became celebrated across Western Europe as much for her aloof and imperious manner as her imagination and

\(^{90}\) Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion*, 21.
talent. An enterprising businesswoman on a grand scale, Bertin was adept at self-promotion, sending a large carriage of almost life-size fashion dolls across Europe, an event that anticipates the fashion spectacles that eventually became inseparable from the fashion system. However, she was not without rivals, nor was her influence absolute. When the Creole inspired dress that Marie-Antoinette wore in the portrait painted by the artist Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun scandalised French society upon its appearance at the Salon of 1783, Bertin was informed that, in future, the style would no longer be worn by the Queen (plate 1.10). Vigée-Lebrun, the daughter of an artist and hairdresser and the most important artist at court was herself an inspired stylist, launching several fashions in the portraits of her fashionable subjects in the years preceding the Revolution.

The acknowledgment of Bertin and her contemporaries as artists heralded their social ascension, but even after the abolition of the corporations by the Constituent Assembly in 1791, which allowed the possibility of unfettered and absolute creativity, dress remained, if only nominally, a collaboration between couturier and client.

91 Boucher, History of Costume, 318.
92 As if to emphasise the diminishing authority of the reign, the decision by the Queen had little impact on what was worn in society. However, the continuing reliance of Marie-Antoinette on Bertin is exemplified by her inclusion (along with that of the Queen’s hairdresser, Léonard) in the attempt to flee to Varennes in 1790.
93 In her Mémoires she wrote, ‘As I despised the costume then worn by women I tried in every way to make it more picturesque and I was delighted when I obtained the confidence of my sitters, who allowed me to drape them as I pleased. Shawls were not yet the fashion but I made use of large scarves lightly woven about the body and over the arms with which I attempted to imitate the beautiful style of Raphael and Domenichino.’ Quoted in Simon Schama, Citizens: a Chronicle of the French Revolution (New York: Penguin, 1989), 220.
1.4 Arbiters of Elegance

In the years preceding the downfall of the monarchy in France, the sartorial style of the Queen, vacillating between aristocratic prodigality and ostentatious simplicity, symbolised the dissipation of morals at the heart of the throne. In the popular press and gutter literature salacious tales were told and bawdy songs sung of a consort whose dissolute sex life rivalled that of the most famous libertine and whose love of finery could almost single-handedly be held responsible for the empty coffers of the state and the hungry eyes of peasant children. In the shifting intellectual fashions of the countdown to revolution and in the subsequent apotheosis of the Natural, a love of finery and sartorial formality appeared frivolous, trivial and—more dangerously—anti-democratic.

The association of excessive attention to appearance with loose morals and venal corruption is a constant throughout the history of dress but for much of the two and a half centuries prior to the French Revolution, the humanist spirit of the Renaissance had presented an opposing view, one which combined the classical concept of ideal beauty and perfection with an interest in the individual and the particular. In such a climate the human form came to embody perfection and this was translated by both men and women into a search for formal beauty in costume which, writes Francois Boucher, satisfied ‘their taste for elegance, their passion for colour harmony and their

---

94 In 1785 a confidence trick that became known as The Diamond Necklace Affair involved the Queen in a scandal that was presented as symbolising the corruption and venality of the aristocracy with the Queen at its heart. Public opinion turned violently against her allowing an atmosphere where the illustrated pornographic satire, Essai Historique sur la vie de Marie-Antoinette, found a wide and credulous audience.

95 The ‘uniform’ of the Third estate was brown fustian, a political statement intended to emphasise the redundancy of the silk-clad monarchists.
aspirations towards a greater distinction.\textsuperscript{96} Artistry in dress was highly regarded and it is not difficult to imagine court life as a continuous fashion parade with the individuals responsible for innovative styles performing the dual role of fashion designer and fashion model.

This analogy between the parade of the court and the parade of the catwalk does not only apply to the display of dress but also to the manner affected by these Renaissance ‘models’. In the sixteenth century an interest in the philosophy of fashion and its ancillary subject, deportment, had developed and the most successful way to carry oneself and wear one’s clothes became the topic of conversation and books. According to Baldesar Castiglione in his treatise, \textit{Il Libro de Cortegenio (The Book of the Courtier)}, the goal was \textit{sprezzatura}, or a ‘careful and graceful off-handedness’.\textsuperscript{97} This rendering of dress and deportment as an art form is echoed in the treatises of Balzac and Baudelaire who both wrote extensively on the importance of elegance in the nineteenth century. There is also an element of this sentiment in the word \textit{chic} which, although originally associated with ‘hurried, uncontrolled stylishness’, came to denote taste, distinction, fashion and elegance ‘all rolled into one’.\textsuperscript{98} This identification of the artistry of dress gave a further nuance to the social power of fashion, encouraging an elevated association between knowledge of the infinitesimal shifts in fashion with the highest sensibility.

However, fashion has always attracted its critics so honours could be equally shared with condemnation. During the reign of Charles VII, Agnes Sorel, the King’s mistress between 1444 and 1450, was severely judged by a contemporary chronicler for her

\textsuperscript{96} Boucher, \textit{History of Costume}, 191.
extravagant headdresses and trains but this did nothing to prevent the widespread adoption of the styles she introduced (plate 1.11). In the court of Louis XIV, proximity to the throne was usually a pre-requisite for an innovative style to be taken up as the latest fashion. While sumptuary laws attempted to dictate the manner of dress adopted by commoners, courtiers were under the nominal dominion of an official ‘arbiter of elegance’. Usually this position was occupied by a favourite of the King and the name of the arbiter would become attached to their innovation. Boucher provides a roll call of names that are forever linked with the peculiarities of an individual’s sartorial style. Thus, Seigneur de Brantes gave his name to elongated pearl earrings, his brother, Sieur de Cadenet is responsible for the *coiffure en cadenettes*, and the way of wearing cloaks, the shape of spurs, what style of shoes to wear and the adoption of less puffy breeches were all fashions invented and decreed essential by the arbiter at court.

For the male members of the nobility, distinction at court could be displayed by the wearing of the *justaucorps à brevets*. This was a coat similar to that of the King, the wearing of which limited to only those who were granted a special patent. But for both sexes, distinction at court could be achieved by individuality in dress and elegant men vied with women to create new fashions which, occasionally, bestowed immortality upon the creator. The casual tying of an old fur around her neck by the Princess Palatine in the extreme winter of 1676 was an innovation quickly taken up by her contemporaries and her name is still used to describe a small fur stole. Outsiders could also have their impact; in 1644, a merchant in the Temple district of Paris discovered a new way of colouring glass that imitated precious stones and

---

‘Temple diamonds’ became all the rage; and, in 1672, the famous merchant who supplied the court, Perdrigeon, launched the fashion for Chinese silk stockings. But these styles only changed the way people dressed if they were first adopted by courtiers. Nonetheless, despite the role fashion played in changing the details of dress, the strict ceremonial established in the court of Le Roi Soleil restricted individual capriciousness and influenced fashion in general.

With the ageing of the King, competition for courtly style came from new milieux less encumbered with the protocol and etiquette of Versailles. These were people from the worlds of finance and commerce, beneficiaries of the mercantile system and protectionist policies instituted in the seventeenth century by ministers such as Colbert. Far from being outside the world of privileged nobility, in the socially fluid reign of the Bourbon dynasty, this class was upwardly mobile, with the amassing of capital frequently paving a path through the magistracy to ennoblement, via a stint as royal secretary. By the eighteenth century the hereditary nobility had combined with the aristocracy of wealth to generate a social revolution which weakened the link that had formerly bound the courtier to the Crown. In the grand salons of Paris a new social entity—‘Society’—emerged, devoted to pleasure, refinement and taste. In this atmosphere, women occupied an increasingly important role, exerting a strong intellectual, cultural and political influence. Correspondingly, female costume began to rival and surpass that of men in splendour.

Impetus for change in the form of fashion, as opposed to the minutiae of trimmings and accessories, emanated from vast and elegant drawing rooms presided over by

---

99 Boucher, History of Costume, 258.
women. In July 1715, a contemporary reported that the Duchesse de Berry hosted a meeting to which had been summoned the most skilful tailors and tailoresses and the renowned Opera designer, Bertin, the sole purpose of which was to change the fashion. The approval of the King was still required but, at the end of his long reign and not far from death, he was disinclined to care. On being presented with these novelties by the Duchesse d’Orleans and the Prince de Conti, Louis XIV is reported to have told them ‘they might dress as they pleased…it was all one to him.’ The new style heralded the separation of court and Society. Despite predictions that few would take it up, the ‘sack gown’ soon became widespread and, although court costume or grand habit changed little from the previous century, throughout the Enlightenment it was the elegant women of Society who dictated fashionable dress.

One of the greatest of these grande dames was the Marquise de Pompadour, mistress to Louis XV, who stood at the epicentre of French and therefore European cultural life. For even in the midst of crazes for Oriental styles and the enduring Anglomania that can be discerned from the beginning of the century, the universality of French modes and manners, French taste in art and costume, and even the French language was apparent in all cultured circles in Eastern and Western Europe. The seductions of costume were no longer launched or disseminated by courts or courtiers but by women such as Mme de Pompadour whose image is familiar today through the countless reproductions of her portraits painted by Boucher (plate 1.12).

---

100 Boucher, 260.
1.7 The Amateur Model

In her history of the fashion model, Harriet Quick makes a case for the artist’s model as being the ‘natural antecedent’ of the fashion model.\textsuperscript{102} They are both described as having overcome a common history of humble beginnings—typified by anonymity, base pay, poor conditions and a low, if not disreputable, social position—to emerge as celebrated icons of feminine beauty. However, the similarities that the artist’s model and the fashion model share of eventual recognition as a feminine ideal are more superficial than intrinsic. Not only are there pitfalls in conflating fashion unproblematically with art but, implicit in this parallel, is the assumption that the model is always young, pretty and female. While this is more often than not the case with the fashion model, it is a stereotype of the artist’s model which conveniently overlooks two and a half thousand years of painting and sculpture portraying figures of every age, type and sex.\textsuperscript{103} More importantly, however, is the crucial role that the fashion model plays in the display and dissemination of fashion ideas. Although some artists were known to possess a stock of gowns from which their professional models would be dressed, the resemblance of this practice to that of the designer or stylist dressing the fashion model is only incidental.

The more likely prototype of the fashion model is the society woman or celebrated \textit{demi-mondaine} who, as the subject of portraits, broadcast fashion to a select audience. These women were thought to possess innate qualities of elegance and were much

\textsuperscript{101} Boucher, 294.  
\textsuperscript{102} Quick, \textit{Catwalking}, 9.  
\textsuperscript{103} Fashion’s desire for difference occasionally overrides the stereotype. A recent trend has seen the use of older former models (eg. Carmen Dell’Orifice, Lauren Hutton) as well as models the age of grandmothers. Another twist is the use of drag queens like Candy Darling and Ru Paul as ‘female’ models.
admired and slavishly imitated. In the realm of portraiture, current fashions had been displayed by the great beauties and power brokers of the day since the Renaissance. In the highly stratified society of the Renaissance, the highly born were considered, along with their wealth and power, to be blessed with an innate grace that gratified the prevailing idealising aesthetic. Hence the subjects of the great portrait painters of the day were from the highest ranks of society and a chasm existed between the amateur model whose name was as important as her beauty and elegance and the professional artist’s model who was inevitably anonymous.\textsuperscript{104} The gap, however, was not always insurmountable, many of the favourite subjects of artists were courtesans and the enduring place of the artist’s model in the erotic imagination is largely the result of several hundred years’ worth of attempts by artists to perfect Venus. For the portrait sitter though clothing was not only \textit{de rigueur} as an issue of modesty but also as an indicator of character and the idealisation of beauty and perfection of the human form that preoccupied artists was an aesthetic reflected in the dress and deportment of fashionable men and women.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries artists such as Watteau, Boucher, Reynolds, Gainsborough, Ingres, Winterhalter, Tissot and Sargent were renowned for their knowledge and meticulous rendering of contemporary fashions and their portraits of the women who embodied the ‘fleeting expression of fashion’ provide an unrivalled catalogue of elegance. An added source of fashion images was provided by the

\textsuperscript{104} In Renaissance Italy, the art theorist and diarist, Georgio Vasari reveals a prurient interest in the relationships of artists and their models, considering only those stories which have an air of scandal or humour worth recording in his voluminous work, \textit{Lives of Painters, Sculptors and Architects}. Mostly, however, models were ignored, possessed of only a transparent presence with no existence beyond the edges of the canvas. But in 1865, the identity of the model, Victorine Meurent, in Edouard Manet’s \textit{L’Olympia} was public knowledge at the time of its hanging at the Salon. This was considered a radical development which overturned the centuries old convention of the professional artist’s model as anonymous and recognised her as an individual.
fashion engravings of prominent figures at court which had begun to be produced and distributed by print-sellers from the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Away from court, society paraded its finery in the parks, promenades, theatre boxes, salons and ballrooms, affecting the studied nonchalance, the *sprezzatura*, of the catwalk model. With the subsequent advent of an established fashion press, elegant society women continued to act as *ex officio* mannequins, there being no professionals to fill this capacity. Or, more specifically, no capacity for professionals to fill. Until the appearance of a creative individual responsible for a complete gown or, at the very least, a single ready made garment, there was nothing to advertise, nothing to sell and, therefore, no need for a model. The fashionable lady may have provided the aesthetic spectacle that is associated with the model but there was no commercial element. If she was on display it was her own artistry and elegance that was admired and copied, not that of an absent creator.

1.8 The Living Mannequin

The revolution in the process of creating fashion began with a little white dress. When Worth joined Gagelin in 1847, the practice of using a model to display and sell garments on a moving figure was already in place. Worth’s contribution was to design a specific garment that would act as a complimentary background to the untailored garments the models were selling. His design, made to throw the wraps and shawls into relief without detracting from their fine material, was a simple white dress which

105 There are exceptions to this absence of a ready-made commodity. Boucher notes that a tailor by the name of Dartigalongue announced in 1770 the availability of ready-made garments in all sizes which could be sent to the provinces or abroad (Boucher, *History of Costume*, 312). Ready-to-wear as such
attracted attention due to what would become his legendary cut and perfect fit. Customer demand forced the owners to eventually allow Worth to set up a dressmaking shop within Gagelin. Clients ordered a gown from a selection of prototypes prepared in advance and presented by Vernet who was Worth’s ‘inspiration, his model, his pattern.’ It would then be made-to-measure for the client. There was no precedence for Worth’s idea of advance collections and it would become the basis of haute couture and transform the fashion system.

The risk paid off for Gagelin with Worth’s designs winning awards at Britain’s Great Exhibition in 1851 and the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1855. Despite these successes the owners were not interested in his request to become part of the business and at this point he left to set up his own salon in partnership with a fellow salesman, Otto Bobergh on what was the then unfashionable address of rue de la Paix in 1858. The success of Worth & Bobergh became finally guaranteed with the patronage of the Empress Eugenie and Worth went on to supply thousands of dresses each season to the bon ton of France, every court in Europe and every fashionable capital throughout the world. The monopoly he held on dressing elegant society, or anyone who could afford his toilettes (as he called a complete ensemble), is unique, having no equivalent in history and none since.

Worth’s economic, artistic and social triumph was indebted to the economic and social infrastructure created by the Second Empire as much as to his own indisputable talents. He had opportunities that didn’t exist in the epoch of the ancien régime when Rose Bertin was Ministre de la Mode. Napoleon III’s determination to outshine the

developed rapidly in the next century but standard measures for women’s wear were not in place until 1870.
bourgeois court of the Bourbons successfully transformed Paris into a dazzling capital of imperial display and ceremony that attracted royalty and *nouveau riche* alike to a playground of extravagance. The reconstruction that had been undertaken of the city by Baron Haussmann was paralleled by an intensive program of modernisation of French industry, agriculture, finance, communications, public works and transport which impacted positively on the fashion industry. Technological advances in the textile and fashion manufacturing industries provided obvious progress (not the least being the sewing machine) while modernised railways, steamships and mass communications also benefited Worth whose far-flung markets in Russia and America ensured his survival even after the fall of the empire in 1870 forced the closure of Worth & Bobergh.

At the rue de la Paix, Worth continued with his idea of advance collections which were paraded by the young girls trained by Marie Worth. These mannequins were called *sosies*, or ‘doubles’. Models at Worth were apparently chosen for their resemblance to customers, and although not necessarily great beauties, they were schooled in elegance, young and, as remarked upon by the novelist Goncourt, possessed of ‘svelte bodies’. As they paraded the salon, lit to resemble a ballroom, they provided a pageant which attracted rumours of the couturier’s salon being a front for a brothel. Although this was obviously malicious gossip, comments such as Goncourt’s reveal that there was an inescapable element of voyeurism involved in a visit to Maison Worth, which was not an exclusively female territory. What is significant in this, however, is not that the mannequin replaced the humble fashion worker, or *grisette*, in the erotic imaginings of contemporaries but that she represented

---

fashion’s evolution into an enterprise that combined creativity with advertising spectacle. In short, her elevated status as an object of desire is intricately woven into her position as salesgirl.

When Marie Worth was employed at Gagelin, she was on her feet twelve hours a day and there is no reason to presume that models at Worth (who could not be described as an enlightened employer) enjoyed any better conditions. Marie was the only model to receive deferential treatment. Other dressmakers had models on the premises but Marie Worth was the first to set foot outside the shop, launching many of Worth’s innovations, including the ankle-length skirt and the wearing of a rakish hat in place of the demure bonnet. Marie’s appearance at the racecourse at Longchamps and other social events was always noted and, with the growth of Worth’s fame, she became an accepted figure in society, invited to the most fashionable weddings and balls. Her social standing, however, was unique for a model and came only from being Mme Worth, wife of the man that dressed all of the sophisticated world.

Despite Marie Worth’s exceptional facility for showing the gowns to their best advantage she was, nonetheless, the daughter of a provincial tax clerk who often resisted her husband’s attempts to break sartorial conventions. Fashionable dressmakers had always required the patronage of at least one leader of society who could ensure the admiration of her clothes in the highest circles. Worth was no exception. His grand lady was Princess von Metternich, the wife (and niece) of the Austrian ambassador, who would become as close a friend to Worth as to the Emperor and was responsible for the designer’s introduction to the Empress Eugenie and hence his success. Possessing one of the most famous names in Europe, she was in a
position to care little for social censure. It was her bravado that launched his flat-fronted skirt sans crinoline and (in tandem with a reluctant Marie) she was also the first to appear at Longchamps without a shawl or cloak. This accessory gave women—dressed in a crinoline and bonnet—the silhouette of a triangle and, in Worth’s view, hid his crafted tailoring; he thus determined it be discarded. At the time, respectable women did not appear in daylight without a wrap that hid the contours of their body. The sartorial authority of Worth, endorsed by the Princess von Metternich, successfully shattered convention and two weeks later shawls and mantles had vanished.

Princess von Metternich and the Empress Eugenie were the arbiters of elegance that launched Worth’s career but in doing so they altered the landscape of fashion. Worth was to become the supreme authority on matters of dress across the sophisticated world; the most regal heads of state were joined by the wealthiest women in following, without question, his word. This was to be particularly the case after the fall of the Empire and the exile of the Empress created a vacancy at the throne of fashion. By the end of the century an important shift had occurred. The individual client had relinquished initiative over her appearance and the position of fashion arbiter would henceforth be occupied by the designer who, ultimately, was joined by other fashion professionals, most markedly the fashion editor, in dictating style. Consequently, although there are similarities between the former arbiter of elegance and the fashion model there was no seamless transition. Just as the society woman as arbiter was not essentially a tool of marketing neither was the professional fashion model allocated any creative control. Separated by a social gulf, their common ground lay in their role of displaying fashion, of providing fashion with a dimension of
spectacle. However, in the era of the arbiter-designer the division between displaying and advertising is collapsed; at this point the amateur model (and, increasingly, this included actresses and demi-mondaines) may be advertising her own charms or elegance but she is doing so in the service of another.

It would be misleading to suggest that a complete shift in power had occurred with the emergence of the fashion professional as arbiter. Even Worth, who occupied a unique position in fashion history, could not impose an unwanted style. Everything about the launching of his new designs reveals a careful contemplation of what would be acceptable aesthetically and socially to his clients. His introduction of the flat-fronted crinoline, for example, was a compromise step towards his goal of discarding the crinoline all together. This careful engineering of the feminine silhouette in stages was a corollary to being guided by the principles of business. The House of Worth was motivated by profit and, unlike art, could not be critical of prevailing values. Nonetheless, it is the artistry of haute couture, the inspired genius of Worth, that is most often emphasised. During the course of his career, Worth altered his image from one of a respectable businessman to that of an artist, swapping his conservative dark suit for aesthetic dress. Taking his cue from Rembrandt and Wagner, he dressed in a velvet beret, a flowing coat with a fur collar and a floppy silk scarf knotted at his throat in place of a cravat. He was acclaimed as an artist and charged prices that would satisfy the greatest painter, giving him an income the equivalent of his wealthiest clients. But, it was not the cost of a gown from Worth that gave it the aura of exclusivity but its status as a work of art.
The association of fashion and art has, as we have seen, an historical precedent. But in the nineteenth century, fashion had become industrialised with mass-production of garments making it available to a much wider audience. In this environment, it became imperative for \textit{haute couture} to appear not only exclusive and distinct from the cheaper copy but, like Worth himself, it had to divest itself of any trace of a commercial image. This is not the appropriate place to rehearse all the arguments in the debate of whether or not fashion is art (or vice versa). Nonetheless, it needs to be said that during Worth’s lifetime, \textit{haute couture} was already organised along bureaucratic lines with the pyramidal structure of an oil company. From the beginning he developed a close alliance with Lyons silk manufacturers and promoted French textiles and fashion to the government as a source of revenue and prestige. He initiated the practice of licensing agreements and, after his death in 1895, the House of Worth, run by his sons, launched a Worth perfume. It is in these areas, rather than in the creative field of clothes design that \textit{haute couture} makes its profit.

\footnote{The first version of the sewing machine appeared in 1825 in France and was subsequently improved by firms in Europe and The United States before Singer patented a perfected version in 1851. Industrialisation had already reached the textile industry; among other developments, Cartwright’s power loom had revolutionised the production and output of cotton, the Jacquard loom did the same for lace-making and embroidery was mechanised in 1834 by Heilman in Mulhouse. An early form of the department store opened in Paris in 1838 with several traders operating under one roof. The failure of this particular enterprise did not halt the idea and, in 1852, the famous department store, \textit{Au Bon Marché}, opened in Paris, adding to the more than four hundred stores in the capital that had, by the middle of the century, adapted the idea of servicing multiple consumer needs. These large shops commissioned, made and bought mass-produced, ready-to-wear garments for men, women and children, offering well-made, elegant clothing as cheaply as possible. And, in the last quarter of the century, the latest fashions were increasingly available through mail order, thus facilitating the spread of fashions to the provinces.}

\footnote{While there is no denying that commercialism exists in the disciplines of painting and sculpture, the aesthetic and commercial aspects have not always been so tightly interwoven as they have been with fashion. This illusory separation of art and ‘trade’ was successfully achieved by artists under the auspices of officially sanctioned and sponsored institutions. For example, in eighteenth century England, a campaign by the members of the newly established Royal Academy, lead by Joshua Reynolds, eventually ensured that living artists gained an elite status by becoming authorities on art as well as practitioners, wresting the title from a group of gentlemen connoisseurs. See John Brewer, \textit{The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century} (London: HarperCollins, 1997).}

\footnote{Jean Paul Gaultier, who launched his first couture collection in Spring/Summer, 1997, was told that there were only 200 couture customers in the world and they were ‘mostly old’. He was pleasantly}
During the present time, the couture collections provide an aesthetic spectacle to market the mass produced and mass consumed products of perfume, cosmetics and cheaper ready-to-wear labels. The clothes may be art but they also exist as a ‘display window for advertising pure prestige’\textsuperscript{110}, hence, it is publicity masquerading as art. In \textit{haute couture}, the aesthetic and commercial tensions are never reconciled because the spectacle of advertising is never successfully sublimated by the spectacle of the parade. This produces an identity crisis at the centre of which stands the model. Rather than seeing this as divergent to the operation of \textit{haute couture} under Worth, whose primary source of income was individually made garments, it should be seen as his legacy. The model has always functioned as advertisement, as a tool of marketing, but with the ideal model this function is suppressed and she becomes a surface where desire and fantasy perform.

This reluctance on the part of fashion to concede that it is ‘an uneasy mix of art and commerce’\textsuperscript{111} has determined the subsequent career of the fashion model. Seventy years after developments in the fashion industry produced the need for the professional mannequin, modelling itself became an industry with the opening of the first model agency by John Robert Powers in 1923. In the intervening years, however, \textit{couturiers} would struggle with the concept of using professional models as vehicles of display. This theme is taken up in the next chapter but at this point I would like to suggest that this was so because the professional model served as a reminder of the unholy commercial aspects of fashion. At a time when the artist’s model was imbued

\textsuperscript{110} Lipovetsky, \textit{The Empire of Fashion}, 90.

with the aura that was attached to art, couture, keen to disassociate itself from its more industrialised counterparts, attached itself to women who could enhance its cachet.\textsuperscript{112} The economic power, the social impact of the fashion model as feminine ideal then did not evolve with her ascendancy; rather, they were pre-requisites demanded by a fashion industry reluctant to rely upon its own powers of transformation.


\textsuperscript{112} A parallel stratagem today is the removal of any human figure—including the fashion model—in the advertising of designers attempting to promote a more artistic, less commercial image.
Chapter Two

The Dissemination and Display of Fashion Ideas

Women are most alarmingly plastic. Their very physique seems to change from age to age.

— James Laver

The intention in this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive history of the methods used to disseminate and propagate fashion ideals before the model became an entrenched feature of the fashion industry. Rather, its purpose is to identify traits that have now become associated with the fashion model and the part she plays, not only in the fashion industry, but also in our visual culture. Historically, various methods have fulfilled the function of displaying and disseminating fashion ideas—fashion dolls, mannequins, fashion plates and illustration and fashion photography have each served as ‘arch persuaders’. Some have continued to be an essential part of the industry while others have become quaint reminders of the past. But all have left their trace upon our understanding, perception and expectations of the modern fashion model.

2.1 Fashion Dolls

During the reign of Louis XIV, the dissemination of French styles was precisely organised under a system whereby poupées, or fashion dolls, called La Grande
Pandora and La Petite Pandora, were dressed in miniature replicas of, respectively, the grande toilette (court dress) and negligée (fashionable dress) by the leading Parisian dressmakers and milliners.\(^{114}\) These were sent to London and, later, to other European centres every month. The idea of dolls as ambassadors of fashion was not a French innovation. They had existed since at least the late fifteenth century, with the earliest known example being sent from the court of Burgundy by Queen Isabel of Bavaria to the Queen of England in 1476. These earlier versions are thought to have been the product of curiosity, as women, unlike men, were not in a position to travel to other courts and see the fashions. Thus, although the interest men showed in fashionable dress was on a level with that of women, they were their own ambassadors of fashion and this could explain the rarity of male fashion dolls. However, during the reign of the Bourbons, they became an invaluable method of propagating the French fashion ideal. The three-dimensional form clearly showed cut and all the details of trimming in order to make copying simple, thus creating demand for the lucrative textile industry. (See plates 2.1 and 2.2.) By directly encouraging demand for the textile industry, fashion dolls served a commercial purpose but, in their uniqueness and exquisite quality, they served a less easily definable purpose of reinstating cultural supremacy.

During the 18\(^{th}\) century, women’s clothes began to equal and outdo men’s for splendour and French supremacy in the Enlightenment is connected to the privileged position of women in the salons and courts of Europe. François Boucher credits the universality of French costume as being largely the work of women: ‘In France they

\(^{113}\) *A Letter to a Girl on the Future of Clothes*. (London: Collins, 1946)

controlled everything, King and country, the royal will and public opinion.'\textsuperscript{115} But most of all they were mistresses of their own homes and across Europe, the arrival of ‘the doll from Rue St Honoré’ was awaited impatiently. At first the dolls were about 90 cm high, but by the time of Louis XVI, Rose Bertin was sending dolls of almost life-size proportions to the capitals of Europe. These fashion emissaries were dressed in replicas of the gowns she produced each week for Marie-Antoinette. Although operating under a \textit{Privilège du Roy}, Bertin was an independent businesswoman and the prestige involved in such a spectacle served her interests first and, only indirectly, those of France.

The French Revolution interrupted the distribution of the fashion dolls but they reappeared in the nineteenth century. The finest came from France where their production became a major industry. The social upheaval which had established the dominance of the bourgeoisie and new industrial developments now meant that following the latest fashions was not exclusive to the most privileged classes and the dolls were used to exhibit the latest styles to a large and devoted fashion clientele. These dolls were beautifully made with glass eyes, human or animal hair and biscuit (unglazed porcelain) faces and were between 30 and 75 cm high (plate 2.3). Although the dolls were primarily for women, according to Mariane Thesander, some were also produced specifically as children’s toys and came with catalogues which allowed their clothes to be regularly updated in accordance with fashion, anticipating the Mattel Barbie doll concept by a hundred years.\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{116} Thesander, \textit{The Feminine Ideal}, 71.
The popularity of fashion dolls as mannequins waned during the 19th century as they became superseded by other methods of displaying and disseminating fashion ideas. But the second half of the nineteenth century had also seen the appearance of life-size ‘dolls’, or store mannequins, which were used to display pre-made garments in the shop windows of the streets and arcades that were now a part of commercial life. The earliest forms were really nothing more than headless, limbless tailor’s dummies made from wicker or cane but they were perfectly adequate for displaying underwear and corsetry, which were commonly available ready-made items. By the 1870s the mannequins had become more lifelike and naturalistic looking. They were made from wax with wigs of real hair, had glass eyes and articulated limbs with the most expensive versions even providing a kinetic spectacle as they rotated on a motorised or hand-operated turntable. The figures themselves were moulded according to the demands of the current fashions but, in turn, they gave form to the clothes they displayed, inspiring images of a double life as focus switched from their outer layers to the undressed form that lay beneath. By day the mannequins lured customers off the street and into the shop, saving the shop keeper from the indignity of ‘kidnapping’ passersby to come in and look at the wares. But by night, in the half-light of the gas lamp, they could take on the quality of a shadowy humanity that inspired poets from Baudelaire to Sylvia Plath to imagine their cold, barren,

117 However, towards the end of the Second World War, the French revived the practice with the intent of imitating the success of the earlier prototypes. In an attempt to regain the position of fashion supremacy that it had lost to America and, to a lesser extent, Britain, during the war, the President of L’Entraide Francaise, in association with forty-one French couture houses, held an exhibition called Théâtre de la Mode in March, 1945. This consisted of 237 miniature figures dressed in outfits made, writes Colin McDowell, ‘to the most precise standards of couture’. Not so much actual dolls as elegant wire sculptures with moulded heads, they displayed the total ‘look’—clothing, shoes, jewellery, gloves and hats. The initial exhibition was held in the Louvre and then travelled across Europe, visiting Vienna, Barcelona, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Leeds and London before crossing the Atlantic to New York. In each city it attracted enormous crowds who were treated to a complete French aesthetic experience with the figures displayed on thirteen sets designed by leading French artists. Even though the exhibition was essentially a gimmick, coming as it did decades after the photographic and catwalk model had become common-place, it was extremely successful as a publicity coup ensuring, as in
unfulfilled lives of morbid perfection. There is an echo of this in Jay McInerney’s novel *Bright Lights, Big City* where the protagonist is unable to escape the presence of his fashion model ex-wife whose omnipresent image in magazines and on billboards is joined by her three-dimensional form, a consequence of the current practice of producing mannequins from the casts of real life models.

In her book, *The Feminine Ideal*, Thesander attributes fashion dolls and store mannequins with a function and characteristic similar to that of fashion models in two important aspects. First, they were ‘messengers of new styles’ and, second, they also ‘represented changing beauty and body ideals’. In support of this claim she points to the fact that ‘the surviving or documented dolls all have the coveted slender waist and other characteristics that represent the ideal of the feminine.’ Thesander sees the dolls as being associated with the socialisation of young girls and women into ‘fashion victims’, preparing them for the importance of making oneself beautiful ‘in order to succeed on the marriage market’. Equally, the store dummy not only showed off the clothes to much better advantage than if they had been displayed on a coathanger, but also encouraged the window shopper ‘to identify with the model’, creating ‘the impression that she could look like that, too, if she bought those clothes.’ A dilemma arises though as the shopper can never imitate the dummy, which is ‘an idealised version, more perfect than any human being could ever be.’

---


*119 Thesander, 71.*

*120 Thesander, 72-3.*

*121 Thesander, 74.*
Such concerns reiterate those of the strand of feminism that associates fashion—and fashion models—with practices that are physically and/or socially injurious to women, particularly, desiring slimness to the point of succumbing to eating disorders. But in one of the earliest surviving fashion dolls there is an indication that fashion’s apparent unwillingness to engage with ‘realistic’ portrayals of the human body can be attributed to something more complicated than a simple acquiescence to a feminine ideal: less important than conforming to societal or cultural demands is the invention of an ideal that is more immediately determined by the clothes themselves. The doll, from about 1580 and thought to be of French origin is carved from wood, she has a face with expressive features and the desirable high forehead but is completely bald, presumably to facilitate the work of the hairdresser and milliner (plate 2.4). More striking, however, is what happens below her waist for, although she has articulated arms, instead of a pelvis and legs she fans out into a fluted cone of solid wood, her primary function of displaying full-length, structured skirts having made the need for legs redundant. While in art, the rendering of the undressed feminine form often paid lavish attention to limbs that in life were entirely invisible, the fashionable ideal can disregard the natural form of the body and concentrate only on those parts that serve its purposes.

It can, of course, be argued that the invisibility of women’s legs was due to reasons related to a culturally constructed requirement for feminine modesty and it is this, and not fashion, that determined the universal wearing of long skirts. My point, however, is to emphasise the impact that fashionable clothing had on the representation of the fashionable ideal which was, to some extent, independent of the representation of the feminine ideal. The theme of the *representation* of the ideal fashionable body and its
complicated relationship with the propagation of the prevailing feminine ideal permeates this entire project and is taken up in the following discussion on fashion illustration and fashion plates. In this medium, the fashionable body starts to become exaggerated according to the aesthetic demands of the clothes and, significantly, unlike store mannequins and fashion dolls, the drawn body is more capable of hiding its associations with commerce and it is here that fashion can begin to imagine its ideal self.

2.2 Fashion Plates and Fashion Illustration

Fashion plate illustration was the most widespread method of the dissemination of fashion ideas from the late eighteenth century until the end of the nineteenth when it was temporarily superseded by photography. In the early decades of the twentieth century, fashion illustration was rejuvenated with the fashion plates of Paul Iribe, Georges Lepape and others working under the patronage of some of the greatest names of twentieth century fashion. Fashion illustration then can be divided into two eras with two distinct styles—pre and post photography. The former is discussed in this section while the latter is discussed in the following chapter in conjunction with fashion photography and the consolidation, in the modern era of fashion, of the fashion model and the fashion model silhouette.

In his quaint history, *Hand Coloured Fashion Plates*, Vyvyan Holland distinguishes between the costume plate which was a record of fashions from the past (or from
other nations) and the ‘true’ fashion plate which is intended to be ‘a guide to ladies and their dressmakers’ as to what to wear in the future.  

A specialised fashion press did not become firmly established until the last decades before the French Revolution when the economic interests of both publishers and the clothing and textile industries coincided with public curiosity and demand for knowledge of the accelerating changes in fashion. However, a fascination with the history of costume and a desire to record the vicissitudes of fashion had existed for centuries and these costume plates are the forerunners of the fashion plate.

In the late fifteenth century, Albrecht Durer used the techniques of woodcut and line engraving to record the forms of fashions, with both front and back views, and these were disseminated throughout Europe (plate 2.5). In the second half of the sixteenth century, printed costume books were published in several editions and translations. These illustrated current fashions in major cities and also contained a section on the dress of the peoples of the newly discovered colonies. In his Omnum Fere’ Gentium Nostrae Aetatis Habitus, Ferdinando Bertelli included the costume engravings of Enea Vico, which were much copied. In ‘A Lady of France’ from 1556 (plates 2.6 and 2.7) the drawn figure seems to be even more restricted by the stiff-boned corset and cone-shaped skirt than the wooden fashion doll from 1580 discussed above (plate 2.4), possibly as a consequence of the shift in fashionable styles to more freely flowing dress. This development is apparent in both the clothing and gestures of the figures in one of the rarest and most accomplished of the costume books from this period, Jean-Jacques Boissard’s Habitus Variarum Orbis Gentium

---

which was published in 1581. In this book, groups of elegantly dressed noblemen and noblewomen are shown in sumptuous detail in a manner that was to later appear in ‘conversation piece’ fashion plates. Another step towards the concept of the fashion plate occurred in 1590 with Cesare Vecellio’s encyclopaedic work, *De gli Habiti antichi et moderni di diverse Parti del Mondo*, which was not only the first of its kind to portray the styles of previous periods but also named individual drapers where fabrics, such as those depicted in the illustrations, might be found.\(^\text{125}\)

At the court of Louis XIII a high standard of fashion engraving had been achieved by engravers and this practice continued during the reign of Louis XIV where it reached its peak. Large quantities of exquisitely hand-coloured prints were produced and avidly collected by influential people at courts across Europe thus acting as a systematic form of advertising for the French fashion industry. In 1672, Jean Donneau de Vise abandoned his ambitions as a playwright and published the first magazine to appeal directly to fashionable women, *Le Mercure galant*. It featured news of the social world of the court, balls, masquerades, feasts and weddings as well as theatre and music reviews and articles on fashion, with certain editions accompanied by fashion illustrations. By 1677 it was officially recognised by the French court, publishing with a *Privilège du Roy* under the new title of *Le Nouveau mercure galant* and joined fashion dolls as an indispensable tool in the dissemination of information and images of French modes across Europe.

For nearly a century, *Le Nouveau mercure galant* remained the only magazine to have combined illustrations and features on fashion. This changed in the middle of the

eighteenth century when the English periodical, *The Lady’s Magazine*, published a full-page black and white engraving, considered to be the first fashion-plate, in 1759. It was the French, however, who turned the fashion-plate into an art form and the fashion magazine into a respected journal which would not only profit the editors but encourage demand for fashionable clothes and accessories. Just as French fashions could not be rivalled for style and elegance, neither could the artistic and technological skill portrayed in the French fashion plates be surpassed and they were often copied—or pirated—by foreign publications. Either way, the supremacy of Parisian *tailleurs* and *marchandes des modes* was assured, as was France’s cultural superiority.  

In the atmosphere of growing commercial independence and influence of fashion’s creators and the widening audience for fashion that existed in the last decades of the *ancien régime*, the journal devoted to fashion flourished. An early success was published by two businessmen, Jean Esnauts and Michael Rapilly from 1778. Each edition of their journal, titled descriptively (if somewhat laboriously), *La Gallerie des modes et costumes françois dessinés d’après nature gravés par les plus Célèbre Artistes en ce genre, et colorés avec le plus grand soin*, contained six exquisitely hand-coloured engravings of the latest women’s fashions and hairstyles. It included men’s and children’s fashions as well as theatrical and operatic costumes. After a hiatus in production of French fashion magazines from Spring 1793 to the Summer of 1797, journals reappeared in the new social and political environment of the *Directoire* where the lively sartorial habits of the *élégants* and *élégantes* saw greater

---

126 This is not to ignore the influences from other countries on French fashion, most notably, the infatuation with all things English, labelled, *anglomanie*, which had already started to appear. Also
changes in fashion occurring in one week than in several decades under the ancien régime. Publications of journals also proliferated and new titles appeared regularly with one of the most influential and long running being *Le Journal des dames et des modes* which was published by the priest and Professor of Philosophy, Pierre de la Mesangère, from 1797 until 1839 with at first one and then two fashion plates per week. The high demand for news about French fashions lead to the publication of foreign editions of *Le journal* as well as the reproduction of its fashion plates, which were either legitimately or, due to lack of enforcement of copyright laws, illegally copied.

The nineteenth century is characterised as the era when men ‘renounced’ fashion, leaving its vicissitudes to women who, under the new social order dominated by the *nouveaux riches* middle class, carried the dual burden of decoration and consumption. Accordingly, fashion journals became primarily directed at women, although the idea that men were unconcerned about fashion is somewhat refuted by the fact that men’s fashions continued to appear both in the women’s periodicals and in those devoted solely to menswear. As participation in the whirl of fashion flourished, the fashion publishing industry continued to grow throughout the century in response to demand created by an enormously expanding readership. This was combined with technological developments which enabled increased print runs and plates with exceptionally high artistic and production values. Despite competition from English and European journals, the French continued to dominate the field throughout the century. However, after the Franco-Prussian War, the use of photography on one front and the appearance of the American journals, *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Vogue*, on the

---

high quality English and Austrian-German fashion publications were published in the nineteenth century, but the French journals were the most consistently dominant.
other would have an impact on French hegemony that would be fully realised in the twentieth century.

2.3 The Illustrated Ideal

Fashion plates have long been valued by costume historians as a reliable source for the representation of bygone fashions. The elevated position fashion held in the cultural imagination resulted in this work often being executed with great artistry and not only are surviving plates sought after by antiquarians, contemporaries also recognised their merits, framing and hanging them as works of art. The overriding concern that was given attention to detail and accuracy of elegant fashions is commonly remarked upon. This accuracy, however, does not extend to the representation of the figure wearing the fashions. Just as fashion models today are hardly representative of the average woman, so it is the case with the figures in many fashion plates.

As has been touched upon in the discussion of fashion dolls, the ideal body of fashion has been attributed with influencing society’s view of how women should appear. This mechanism is also said to operate in reverse. However, in the studying of fashion plates and illustration, it becomes apparent that there is not always a straightforward correlation between the feminine ideal and the fashionable ideal. The former is subject to a variety of societal and cultural influences; the latter, on the other hand, I have suggested, is primarily at the service of, and determined by, fashion. This should not

127 Mackrell, An Illustrated History of Fashion, 84.
be surprising but with the representation of a figure whose role, first and foremost, is to display fashion, we see the prototype of the perfect mannequin. It is with the representation of ‘fashion-on-a-figure’ then that the idea of the fashion model, if not her actual presence, emerges. She is an imaginative creation, born out of absence, a form which is the perfect vehicle for the display of fashion. More than a feminine ideal she is a fashionable ideal, subservient to the demands of dress, cut not to the measure of physical desire but to the pattern of sartorial display.

This is a consequence not only of the dress ‘commissioning’, so to speak, the ‘portrait’ but also of the freedom experienced by fashion plate artists who mostly worked without the constraints imposed by an actual body. From what is known of their working methods it seems that professional models were rarely used. Rather, artists sketched from life, moving in the best circles and copying what was worn at the theatre, the opera, at balls and wherever Society gathered. A fashion plate from The Lady’s Journal of June, 1775 is captioned with the information that the dresses are ‘from drawings taken from Ranelagh’. Further evidence of this practice is provided by La Mesangère who, responding to a suggestion from a reader that the fashion plates of Le Journal des dames et des modes were caricatures, wrote,

We dare to protest that our figures are all taken from life and that we take trouble to select our models from highly considered balls, the most respectable society, in short from gatherings where no [sic] is admitted whose dress arouses suspicion of her morality. ¹²⁸

The reference to ‘models’ here is conveniently ambiguous to the modern reader.

Although it refers to the gowns, the method of selection could as equally apply to the
wearer, thus supporting the notion that society figures (only the most elegant woman would have been copied) were early fashion models. There was a precedent to this practice in the final quarter of the seventeenth century when a group of print sellers published fashion engravings of prominent figures at the Court of Louis XIV and in Parisian society. In his book, *La Gravure de Mode Féminine en France*, Raymond Gaudriault references Eugène Rouir’s description of the ‘*dames de Qualité*’ depicted in these plates as being a ‘*défilé de mannequins*’, indicating the similarity between the role played by these early eighteenth century style queens and the modern fashion model.\textsuperscript{129} But the similarity also extends to the women of the same era with, as Gaudriault points out, the figure and the clothes in individual fashion plates often being absolutely identical to each other in every detail. Thus in two such engravings, one of the Archduchess, Marie-Elisabeth of Austria, the other of the Princess Marie-Gabrielle of Savoy, the fashionable person’s fear of appearing in public wearing the same dress as someone else is taken to the extreme. (See plates 2.8 and 2.9.)

After the Franco-Prussian War photography began to make an impact on fashion illustration. The artist Adolphe Sandoz, whose work appeared in *La Revue de Mode* in the late 1870s and 1880s and in *The Queen* in the 1890s, is assumed to have drawn his conversation piece plates from photographic records of the *maisons de couture*.\textsuperscript{130} But for the most part, artists commonly copied costumes from those supplied to them by tailors, *marchandes des modes* and, later, dressmakers. Hence, the salient feature of fashion illustration is that artists were working without a model, from the dress alone. Consequently this allowed fashion to dictate the ideal figure. One of the popular

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{128} Mackrell, 85.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
motifs is an exaggeratedly thin and elongated waist. This can be seen in the plates contributed by Augustin de Saint-Aubin in 1786 and 1787 for *La Gallerie des Modes* (plate 2.10) and reappears in plates throughout the following century until, by its end, the waist barely exists. Madeleine Ginsberg writes that the popular illustrator Georges Pilotelle was credited with the invention of the ‘seven foot beauty with the ten inch waist’ but his contemporaries seemed to think even this measurement excessive. (See plates 2.11 and 2.12)

This re-designing of the body to satisfy fashion was not a development unique to the graphic arts. In *Seeing Through Clothes*, Anne Hollander argues that the nude in history follows the contours of fashion, of the dressed body. Furthermore, representations of the body are also deformed beyond the demands of fashion with leg-torso ratios, for example, distorted for aesthetic or other purposes. However, with fashion illustration these distortions become standardised so that the silhouette of the fashionable figure that is associated with fashion models and fashion illustration in the twentieth century can be traced back to the late eighteenth century—one hundred and thirty years before this fashionable ideal corresponded with the feminine ideal. François-Louis-Joseph Watteau, who was a member of the famous family of artists, became a regular contributor to the *Gallerie des Modes* from 1783 and his style is in sharp contrast to the highly mannered work of his predecessors. It is primarily characterised by his figures being remarkably disproportionate, consisting of one-tenth head, two-tenths body and seven-tenths leg. Despite this lack of proportion, the

---

131 Ginsberg, 11.
effect, as Vyvyan Holland remarks is ‘by no means unpleasing’. While it is not the
case that this Enlightenment incarnation of Nadia Auermann was standard practice,
elongation of the silhouette became a feature of certain of the most highly regarded
artists (plates 2.13 and 2.14).

The appearance of height was also copied by the Countess de Castiglione when she
attempted to imitate the appearance of the fashion plate figure for her private
collection. Castiglione was an Italian *arriviste* whose extraordinary beauty did not fail
to impress the court of Napoleon III where only her excessive narcissism halted her
social ascendancy. This narcissism found an outlet in a lifetime preoccupation of
having herself immortalised in hundreds of studio photographs many of which,
although not fashion plates as such, were painted to imitate the look of fashion plates.
Accordingly it is instructive to see the process by which this end is achieved. In plate
2.15 she can be seen standing on a chair which is not entirely hidden by her skirt, the
volume of which also achieved the desirable small hands and face of the fashion plate
figure, a trick used by fashion illustrators to focus attention on the clothing and not the
woman (plates 2.16).

Like Watteau, Horace Vernet also came from an illustrious family of fashion artists.
His inherited genius for the medium is displayed in his work for *Le Journal des
dames et des modes* and also in the individual series of fashionable Paris, *Incroyables
et Merveilleuses*, commissioned by La Mesangère, and in the fashion plate series *Le
Bon Genre*, of which there were three editions, the first appearing in 1817. Vernet’s
draughtsmanship is typified by wit, attention to detail and, most importantly, ‘the

---

elongation and stylisation of the silhouette to set off the fashions to the best advantage.\(^{134}\) According to Mackrell, he continued the convention of representing society figures from the *beau monde*, which he portrayed against a mainly white void with only a mere suggestion of context. Although in some plates he wittily exaggerates the stiffness of some fashions so that his figures seem angular and frozen, more often his style is distinguished by his representation of movement. His plate from the early nineteenth-century (plate 2.17) anticipates a photograph by Friedrich Seidenstucker in 1930 (plate 2.18). In both, an independent looking woman elegantly clothed in dress and hat is jumping a stream of water across a city street.

The sort of attitude and mobility that Vernet allowed his fashionable figures was not representative of nineteenth century plates. Nonetheless, throughout the ‘golden years’ of French fashion plates, there were attempts to represent the fashion plate figure in a manner that corresponded with modern life. In 1829 the publisher Henri de Girardon co-founded *La Mode* with Honoré de Balzac with a declaration against the ‘well-dressed doll’ mode of fashion illustration. In his treatise in the first edition, Balzac expressed the view that *la toilette* is the expression of society and, accordingly, the artist they chose to represent the philosophy of *La Mode*, Paul Gavarni, painted his subjects relaxed in their surroundings. Women now appeared within the context of their everyday lives but there is an impression that the effort given to appearing in a fully propped setting drains her of vitality and character. She manages to appear both endlessly busy and terminally passive. Nothing can perturb her serenity as she parades fashionably and fully accessorised from the theatre, the opera and balls to the races, the park and the seaside, her expression unchanged as she contemplates the latest

\(^{134}\) Mackrell, *An Illustrated History of Fashion*, 120.
works at the Salon or how to return to shore in a boat without rowlocks, oars or rudder. Of course, her lack of animation could be attributed to the absence of diverting company which, apart from animals and children, mostly consisted of a differently attired version of herself due to the practice of using the same head for different figures.\textsuperscript{135} (See plate 2.19).

Although Mackrell consistently comments on the ‘vitality’ and ‘animation’ of the best \textit{imagiers}, looking at the evidence it is hard to agree with her judgement. Despite the intentions of Girardon and Balzac, Gavarni’s figures do not always successfully avoid a doll-like appearance although they do avoid the excessive fashion plate prettiness of the Colin sisters and Jules David. His work also appeared in many other fashion magazines but he was most celebrated for his series of characters from modern Parisian life. It is in a comparison of these separate bodies of work that the limitations imposed by the fashion plate form are most apparent, for the figures in Gavarni’s popular illustrations are burdened with far more humanity than those in his fashion plates. While it could be argued that from the approach of the half century fashion plates echoed a romanticised ideal, presenting a comforting (and conforming) image of femininity, the standardised expressions and gestures of the female form in these plates could also be seen as the inevitable result of the woman being unimportant. Holland remarks that in the works of Jules David the ladies ‘are not just dummies on which clothes are hung’ but in a sense they are; the woman is an empty space whose role is not to ‘wear’ the clothes but be moulded by them and display \textit{their} charms. The purpose served by the fashion plate was to differentiate between this week’s and last

\textsuperscript{135} There is an echo of this in modern fashion photography (and parades) where make-up, hairdressing, styling and lighting techniques suppress the individuality of the model in favour of a uniform appearance.
week’s minute variations in fashion, the change was in the detail, not the whole and as a consequence everything about the figure is subservient to fashion.

An observer who takes a different view to that expressed by Mackrell and Holland is Valerie Steele who describes the fashion plate mannequin as a ‘stiff artificial figure’ with a ‘psychological disconnection’ to the other figures and her surroundings. She is a clean and flattened silhouette, a cardboard cut-out, denuded of ‘feelings’ or sexuality, in everything she is conventional, defined by her elegance. In short, limited to one role—displaying clothes—she provides no competition for fashion. Steele makes an interesting comparison with these figures and the illustrations of American cars in the 1950s which were, in contrast to the engineer’s drawings, exaggerations of reality. The fins were longer, the lines sleeker in much the same way that the features of the fashion plate figure were exaggerated for effect, with added height and a longer and slimmer waist.136 Steele’s comparison to the commercial drawings of an inanimate object references not only the lack of personality in the fashion plate figure but also foregrounds the fashion plate’s function as advertisement.

In his introduction, Holland warns that fashion-plates ‘must not be confused with “trade plates” issued by manufacturers of dress materials, [which] are really only advertisements.’137 We have already seen that, as early as 1590, addresses of drapers were given in Vercellio’s costume book and it is difficult, notwithstanding the artistic merits displayed, to divorce fashion plates from commercialism. The success of fashion publishing occurred in a climate where changing social and economic conditions provided the right terrain for the individualist entrepreneur to flourish.
Promotion of fashion became important on a local and individual level and what we see is the organisation of a nascent fashion industry created out of the nexus of fashion producers and promoters. The appearance of a specialised fashion press in the decades before the Revolution coincided with an acceleration of changes in fashion. This is regularly attributed to the general malaise that infected a society restless for change but there can also be no doubt that the symbiotic relationship that existed between the publishers of fashion journals and fashion creators had a considerable impact on the fashion process to the point where it is difficult to determine which had the most influence—the fashion makers or the publishers who advertised their latest innovations to an international audience.

From their inception, the fashion journals and the artists they commissioned worked in close alliance with tailors, marchandes des modes, and other fashion suppliers to ensure the most up-to-date information for their subscribers, including the names and addresses of these establishments. Although this provided a service to followers of fashion, their interest in the dissemination of fashion ideas should be considered less as motivated by sartorial philanthropy than by economic considerations. This arrangement became more overtly commercial as paid advertisements and advertorial (‘puffery’) became commonplace. It also became increasingly venal in the more competitive atmosphere of the nineteenth century where various tactics, including bribery, were employed by dressmakers eager to see their creations portrayed in full colour. Unable to escape the taint of the shop floor, the veneer of artistry that had distanced fashion illustration at its height from its connections to trade faded and, by

137 Holland, Hand Coloured Fashion Plates, 22.
138 Mackrell, An Illustrated History of Fashion, 77.
the turn of the century, fashion plates had degenerated in the face of competition from fashion photography.

2.4 Early Fashion Photography

Magazines began to experiment with photography after the Franco-Prussian War and the art of fashion plates went into a slow decline, especially once technological advances in the 1890’s made the inclusion of photographs in fashion journals easier and more economical.\footnote{Steele, Paris Fashion, 104.} In the long-running \textit{L’Art et la mode}, photography made the occasional appearance alongside fashion illustration, which attempted to imitate the clarity and sharpness of photographs (plate 2.20). In magazines such as \textit{La Mode pratique} fashion photo engravings were a feature right from the start of its publication in 1892. This was a schizophrenic format that seemed split between a desire to engage with the realism and modernity of the camera and a dissatisfaction with the reality it revealed, with the consequence that both the female figure and the clothing were embellished or re-designed to fashion’s exacting standards. (See plates 2.21, 2.22 and 2.23). Photography inevitably speeded up the dissemination of fashion but, in the early stages, photographing fashion was less than successful. Fabrics and colours had to be carefully chosen; velvets, wool and brocades ‘swallowed up’ the light while white and pale colours were washed out. However, by the last decade of the century, photographic and printing techniques were such that fashion photography offered

\footnote{In \textit{The History of Fashion Photography}, Nancy Hall-Duncan writes that photographs of fashionable dress existed almost from the beginning in the form of portraits. The commercial potential of fashion photography, however, was not fulfilled until the invention and refinement of the half-tone printing process in the 1880s, which allowed the publication of photos and text on the same page. These early}
serious competition for fashion illustration as a method of communicating fashion ideas. At a time when the Art Nouveau style was at its height, fashion photography was able to capture ‘every flowing flounce, layers of ruching, yards of lace, lavish beadwork and embroidery on the luxurious materials that made up the ostentatious dresses’ created by the haute couture houses of Worth, John Redfern, Madame Paquin, Jacques Doucet, Douilet and the Soeurs Callot (plate 2.24).

Couture houses had become accustomed to using photography as an adjunct to fashion illustration—Worth had a studio on his premises where each gown could be recorded and copied by fashion artists—but, increasingly, fashion photography was employed enthusiastically by magazines. In 1901, the new, very chic magazine Les Modes made half-tone photographs and tipped-in pages of colour photographs printed on high quality glossy paper available for the first time. It came in a larger format than most of its competitors, measuring 30 by 35 centimetres and was sold in London, Berlin and New York as well as Paris. By 1909 other French titles such as Le Jardin des modes, L’album du figaro and Femina as well as the American publications, Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar were all featuring fashion photography.

The difficulties that had early on faced the photographing of fashions had a parallel in the photographing of the human figure wearing them. The early daguerreotypes required an exposure time of two minutes and photographers used head clamps to ensure perfect stillness. Even after the advent of the dry-plate process in 1871 which, with its one second development time gave an ‘instantaneous’ portrait, immobility remained a feature of nineteenth century photography. However, the other potential photographs were produced by, among others, the studios of Maison Reutlinger, Seeberger Frères, Mayer et Pierson, Lemercier et Cie and Talbot.
difficulty—who would model the clothes—had already been resolved; magazines simply followed the lead provided by the long tradition of portrait painting and the much more recent phenomenon of portrait photography which had irreversibly changed people’s relationship with the image.

Once photographic studios opened in London and Paris, having one’s portrait taken quickly became a popular social activity although the expense of the process meant that it remained a pursuit of the upper and middle classes. By the mid-1850s, the process had become relatively simpler with a positive image now able to be made onto albumen paper. With the subsequent rise in photographers and photographic societies, photographic likenesses were now accessible and affordable to most people. The most popular format was the *carte-de-visite*, so-called because images were trimmed and mounted on cards measuring 4 inches by 2 1/2 inches, the standard calling card size. Collecting *cartes*, often through the medium of advertisements placed in fashion magazines, and displaying them in albums was an activity pursued with the vigour formerly reserved for needle-point and pictures of family members vied for space with those of royalty and celebrities. This format was also used to promote styles produced by the growing ready-to-wear market. In 1876, the London department store, Peter Robinson, produced a ‘Book of Styles’, composed of *cartes-de-visites*, to launch a mail order department. In it models were shown wearing particular ‘costumes’ with fabrics, colours and prices printed on the reverse along with a note that, ‘Patterns of the silk, and forms for self-measurement sent by post on application.’ The National Portrait Gallery also has in its archives portraits of models displaying the hair-pieces and styles of a ‘Mr Bond of Oxford St’, which were

---

141 Mackrell, *An Illustrated History of Fashion*, 152.
produced with instructions for the ‘lady’s maid in country to arrange hair of her
mistress.' However, the models in such advertising catalogues were then, and hence
remain today, anonymous.

Following the mania for cartes-de-visites, large cabinet photographs were introduced
in 1866 and by 1880 had become the most popular portrait format. The impact of
these portraits as images of fashion was enhanced by their convention of setting the
figures against an empty background, however the mannequins in these photographs
were not the anonymous girls of the mass produced garment industry but women and
men who held interest in as much for themselves as for what they wore. This marked
the beginning of a cultural and social transition that reaches its apotheosis in the next
century with the phenomenon of the cult of celebrity. The camera and photography
changed people’s perception of Society and the role of famous people in it—whereas
before they may have been known only by reputation, they now became recognisable
public figures. In Vita Sackville-West’s, The Edwardians, the doctor’s wife, Teresa
Spedding, is ‘fascinated by high life’ and cuts out photographs from newspapers
which she collects in an album. So familiar is she with their faces that were she to
attend the opera she is ‘quite confident she would be able to recognise many of these
celebrities although she had never seen them in the flesh.’

The burgeoning of mass culture and its fascination with spectacle was a situation used
to advantage by fashion houses and also by fashion magazines. Photographs of ‘the
good and the great’ were incorporated into fashion engravings and fashion magazines

---

142 Quoted in Miles Lambert in Association with The National Portrait Gallery, Fashion in
143 Lambert, 14
depicted famous people as mannequins. In the 1870s, the practice of sticking the heads of well-known people, including royalty and statesmen, on a fashion plate had been popular (plate 2.25) but with the dying breath of the Victorian regime, the upright citizen was replaced by les grandes horizontales who were always dressed ‘in the fashion of the day after tomorrow’. These women of the demi-monde, actresses and courtesans, became known as Professional Beauties and are the antecedents to the modern supermodel with their fame, if not their success, dependent solely on their looks and the camera or, to put it another way, on the image and their existence as image. If they were just beginning in their career, these actresses, dancers, chorus girls and music hall performers would be photographed as anonymous ‘models’ but, once they had become stars, they were given the same status as the wealthy, sophisticated socialites and debutantes with whom they shared the fashion pages after the war, joining them in becoming household names (plates 2.26, 2.27 and 2.28).

Many of the greatest names of photography began their careers as fashion photographers in the first two decades of the twentieth century; however, the chance that their work would eventually be celebrated by museums and the academy would have seemed distant at a time when even the fashion world questioned the artistic merits of photography. After an initial enthusiasm for the new medium, there was a return to fashion illustration and it is in this period that it reached its apex of artistic achievement. Against this, photography came to be considered a less desirable

---

145 Steele, Paris Fashion, 159.
146 The brothers Jules, Louis and Henri Seeberger (and Louis’ sons, Jean and Albert) contributed to numerous fashion titles from 1909 until 1950. Although Nancy Hall-Duncan suggests that their work was of uneven quality, they nonetheless created a collection of fashion images in the first half of the century, rivalled only by the magazines themselves. Man Ray worked as a fashion photographer for Vanity Fair, Vogue, and Harper’s Bazaar. Baron de Meyer, Edward Steichen and Cecil Beaton all
medium than illustration for the depiction of fashion ideas until well into the second
decade of the twentieth century. For example, it was not until the Summer of 1932
that *Vogue* broke this monopoly by using a photograph on its cover. At *Vogue* it was
the ‘underlying policy, unstated and unassumed…that the graphic arts should have a
useful and rightful place in the natural scheme of things.’\(^{147}\) Not only did fashion
photography itself disappoint received notions of the artistic ideal so too did its
subject fall short of the desired fashion ideal. In the same way that photography was
considered a lower art form than illustration, neither could the fashion model rival the
elegance of the imagined figure. This was not only an issue of the shape demanded of
the fashionable figure but also an insecurity on behalf of fashion itself which was
eager to cloak its commercial instincts beneath an artistic mantle. But even as it
attached itself to the artistic tradition fashion did not ignore its own magical powers,
and woven through the gowns of *haute couture* was a narrative of fantasy and
transformation. The model was not as malleable as cloth and could not be spun from
precious threads of silver and gold but, maybe, she could at least be imbued with the
same intangible essence.

### 2.5 The Professional Model

Following Worth’s success, other *maisons de couture* opened in the last decades of
the nineteenth century.\(^{148}\) All were to copy the structure that had been founded by
Worth, including the use of moving mannequins as a means of displaying and

\(^{147}\) Mackrell, *An Illustrated History of Fashion*, 171.
advertising their clothes. While fashionable society women spent up to 4,000 pounds a year at the house of their favourite couturier, actresses and demi-mondaines acted as semi-official models, often being dressed exclusively by one fashion house. It was a symbiotic relationship that benefited both parties in the competition to capture the gaze of society with the most spectacular versions of fashionable dress. In his blue period painting, *At the Races* (1901), Picasso captures this sartorial combat (plate 2.29) and, in *The Glass of Fashion*, Cecil Beaton celebrates these legendary women, reminiscing imaginatively about the ‘tart with éclat’ whose dignity in bearing could not be excelled by any duchess:

Strolling up and down the lawns at Longchamps or Deauville…adorned with furs and hypertrophic plumes; the strut of a bird, the gestures of a queen, a magnificent carriage of the head. When one draped them in a chinchilla cape, it showed its ten thousand louis’ worth. One knew what one had for one’s money. They were women born for luxury. Competition made them achieve the impossible, since all the Parisian dressmakers outdid each other in invention and daring to assure the triumph of their latest creations.  

Unlike the house models of a salon (or, for that matter, the horses on the track) these women did not wear a number, but the race course was nonetheless a close approximation of the catwalk right down to the backstage flurry with dressmakers still sticking pins into a gown on the morning of the opening race meeting. 

---

148 Rouff (established 1884); Paquin (1891); Callot Soeurs (1896); Doucet (1880); Lanvin (1909); Chanel and Patou (1919).
150 In a nod to fashion history, the practice of numbering gowns was re-introduced by Jean-Paul Gaultier at his first haute couture collection in 1997, decades after it had been abandoned by the established couture houses.
The role of the professional model, however, evolved into one that approached its modern incarnation at the house of the English couturier, Lucile, who began her dressmaking business in the last decade of the nineteenth century. From humble beginnings as a penniless divorcee, working from the dining table of her mother’s small London house, she went onto become hugely successful in London, Paris and New York. The romantic gowns of Lucy, Lady Duff Gordon (as she became) were worn by royalty, society women and the great actresses and courtesans of the belle époque. The key figures of these worlds remained important as clients who would promote the creations of a particular designer but Lucile’s innovation lay in creating figures who would cause a sensation that reflected solely and directly back on her design house.

In the last days of the Victorian age, many of the most fashionable Paris and London establishments were showing gowns on ugly sawdust and wax figures. When live mannequins were used they were little more than walking dummies, carefully distinguished from the clientele by the wearing of a high-necked black satin or crepe maillot and heavy boots underneath their gowns, thus ensuring no flesh was exposed. Lucile dispensed with these unattractive concessions to modesty (and class difference) and set about fulfilling her vision of a salon where her gowns would be shown against the incandescent skin of ‘a long line of sylphs.’ Her striking looking mannequins were recruited from the middle or lower classes and, after coaching in deportment and hairdressing, they were renamed and reborn as exotic creatures who became famous
overnight in a publicity dream that had headlines announce the arrival of ‘Lucile’s mysterious beauties’.\textsuperscript{151}

The fashion parade, which Lucile—probably apocryphally—claimed to have instituted, became a feature of all the great design houses in the years before the First World War. These were exclusive affairs that catered to wealthy invited clients but, with the instituting of fashion shows in department stores, they became an entertainment available to a wider audience of middle-class women. Photographs of a 1910 parade at Wanamaker’s department store in Philadelphia reveal two thousand fashionable spectators in raked seating around a central catwalk adorned with potplants and mannequins. The mannequins appear stately and dignified and are mostly configured alone, although some are placed together in the manner of ‘conversation piece’ fashion illustrations (plate 2.30). The situating of the parade as entertainment—rather than as simple display or advertising—had become an integral element of the fashion show. However, at the house of Lucile, the parades often evolved into full-scale theatrical events.

In 1909, after a visit to America, she presented her collection in a seven act performance titled \textit{The Seven Ages of Woman}. The performance included lines by Shakespeare and the gowns were individually named as characters that reflected the public and intimate lives of the woman of her fashionable London audience as she progressed from initiation into elegance as ‘The Schoolgirl’ through to the sartorially

demanding years of ‘The Fiancée’ and ‘The Hostess’ with the curtain falling on the subdued gowns of ‘The Dowager’. Her 1912 show in Paris was reported by *Vogue* as being in the style of the *thé dansant* with music, tea and tangoing. The dancers were the mannequins and wore not only tango dresses but also ‘the most wonderful of wonderful—tango hair!’ These *têtes de couleurs* caught on and, in a reversal of the practice whereby mannequins emulated the appearance of famous clients, every woman wanted to wear green, blue or red hair. By 1916 her shows had become more ambitious and, instead of the usual presentation in her salon, she presented a series of *tableau vivants* called *Fleurette’s Dream at Peronne* at a New York theatre to which tickets were sold in a benefit for the war effort in France. Clearly, the role of the mannequin had evolved into one where a level of performativity was imperative. In fact, on viewing *Fleurette’s Dream*, Florenz Zeigfield contracted Lucile to design costumes to be worn by her mannequins in his *Follies* thus, inadvertently, creating the concept of the showgirl.

The success of Lucile’s spectacles as a vehicle for sales is unquestionable; on the afternoon of her first show in New York orders were taken for over 1000 gowns at a cost of no less than three hundred dollars each but this triumph cannot be divorced from the publicity generated by the presence of her beautiful mannequins and the onslaught of glamour they represented to the eager consumer base that was American society. Lucile’s arrival in New York exemplified the tightening relationship between journalism and retailing with the American press outdoing itself in its attempts to

---

152 Etherington-Smith & Rilcher, 162. The fashion show as spectacle had been prophesied long before it appeared. Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell report the critic, William Archer’s prediction in 1885 of a future where doing ‘openly what many have surreptitiously attempted, namely, to dramatize a fashion-plate’ would form the basis of drama in the new-age. Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.
describe the unique beauty of each of the four ‘crusaders of the Dream Dress’ Lucile had brought with her from London while placards on street corners announced ‘Titled Dressmaker and her Golden Girls Arrive Today to Show Americans How to Dress’.153 Dressmakers and couturiers before Lucile had relied on publicity and patronage to attract clients and establish a name but with Lucile the marketing of a collection was an orchestrated and transparent media event. Patronage by influential leaders of society did not lose importance but it was attracted not by a timid wife showing drawings of her husband’s designs to a princess but by means of the modern marketing machine, by professionals—the hired publicity man and the journalist—who exploited the attractions of beauty, glamour and celebrity that surrounded the couturier and, increasingly, the model.154

Lucile’s American attitude to promotion and her eccentric theatrical style earned her the title of Lady Muff Boredom amongst her contemporaries but the public interest in the professional mannequin and how that interest could be translated into enormous sales was not lost on other designers of the pre-war era. Paquin sent a group of models and dresses on an acclaimed tour of the United States in 1914 and Poiret toured America in 1913 and again after the war. Both times the publicity engendered by Poiret’s own presence as a great French couturier was enhanced by a publicity stunt that centered on his use of local mannequins. On his first trip he employed American women as mannequins and his second trip was shrewdly represented as a publicly advertised beauty quest to find American girls (whose height and athleticism were more appealing to the American buyers who increasingly dominated the market) to

return to Paris with him as models (plate 2.31). A similar publicity stunt was followed by Jean Patou who, in 1924, staged a search in conjunction with *Vogue* for American models. He proclaimed to be looking for mannequins who ‘would slide rather then glide’ and chose girls for their ankles and (lack of) hips. The media interest in America at the casting and in France upon their arrival was huge, ensuring large orders from the important American clients.  

The indispensability of the professional model for the designer occurs in conjunction with increased competition, the broadening of the fashion audience, and the public thirst for kinetic, somatic spectacle. For couturiers, (who were generally not above their share of snobbery) celebrated beauties and society women continued to be an integral element of promotion but the professional model possessed one advantage—she was a *tabula rasa* upon which the design image could be drawn, enabling the couturier complete control. A hint of the complications involved with dressing famous clients is provided by Lucile’s comment regarding the famous society beauty, Mrs Willie James who she described as a better advertisement than Lily Langtry—Langtry’s taste was extreme and people were less inclined to copy her, however much they might admire her distinctive type. There may be a level of disingenuous in this comment, the imitating of ‘the Langtry style’ was legendary, however, she was never loyal to one designer and was known to wear creations she devised herself. In creating her own celebrated beauties, Lucile avoided the pitfalls inherent in using another strong personality to wear her designs; although the beauty of Lucile’s mannequins was never overlooked in press reports or discussion, in a sense, their

154 Although this role would soon be eclipsed by that of the movie star.
beauty, grace and style belonged to the designer, the accolades bestowed upon a gown
worn by the mannequin—unlike those worn by a woman famous in her own right—
were not shared between designer and client, but belonged to the designer alone.

Occasionally, mannequins achieved individual fame—one of Lucile’s girls, Dolores,
achieved renown as the most beautiful star of Zeigfield’s Follies—but the profession
remained primarily one that was low in status and poorly paid. The professional
mannequin had become an indispensable marketing tool for the designer but it was
this embodiment of economic reality that reduced her value for many designers who
preferred the illusion of elegance offered by the amateur model. In his memoirs,
Poiret describes what he expected from his mannequins:

The living mannequin is a woman who must be more feminine than all other women. She must react
beneath a model, in spirit soar in front of the idea that is being born from her own form, and by her
gestures and pose, by the entire expression of her body, she must aid the laborious genesis of the new
creation. I have had many mannequins, and very few who were worthy of their priestesshood.157

Poiret, like most designers, found that the barrier to priestesshood was easier to cross
if the model was already an actress, countess, duchess or princess and, increasingly,
they were as professional models attracted wealthy, titled husbands. Modelling also
became a popular past-time for society women to the point that, in 1928, Punch ran a
cartoon of a daughter telling her blue-blood mother that she has a job. ‘Not a
mannequin’, the grande dame asks in awe. ‘Oh no darling’, the daughter replies, ‘But

156 See, for example, Vanessa R. Schwartz: ‘Cinematic Spectatorship before the Apparatus: The Public
Taste for Reality in Fin de Siecle Paris’, Charney & Schwartz eds, Cinema and the Invention of
Modern Life.
I’m going to dress one’.\textsuperscript{158} The cartoon is as much about an overturned hierarchy as the condition that seemed to cross all class boundaries—the cult of celebrity.

Fame was not an invention of the twentieth century, but the invention of the camera in the century before created the circumstances whereby the mannequin would achieve celebrity status. Barbara Worseley-Gough writing of the success of the demi-mondaines of the era comments,

There were Society beauties in this as in every other age...but their beauty was a part of their existence and not the whole of it. For the professional beauties it was everything. It is doubtful if they would have achieved their lasting fame in an age in which the camera played no part.\textsuperscript{159}

Worseley-Gough’s camera-free world is now, at the beginning of a new millennium, impossible to imagine. Indisputably, without the photographic image, the impact of the fashion model would have been limited to a small, immediate audience. The intricate and multi-faceted relationship that exists between the camera, the model and fashion is one to which I return but, suffice to say here, the fashion model has come to be understood—despite the continued existence of the fashion show and the occasional guest appearance at public events—as primarily image. In the media saturated present this is not a rare phenomenon and, in an environment of a postmodern polemic that questions the traditional division of image and referent, discussion about the difference between the actual model and her image can lose relevance. Of more immediate interest, however, is the concurrence of the rise of the model as a recognised public icon and feminine ideal with the emergence of an

\textsuperscript{158} Reprinted in Frances Borzello, \textit{The Artist’s Model} (London: Junction, 1982), 107.
aesthetic of thinness that has influenced the desirable female body shape since the early decades of the last century.
Section II

The Aesthetic of Thinness
...only the mobile ... aspects of things, beings, and souls can be photogenic.

— Jean Epstein

Fashion, so utterly committed to the new, does not extend its obsession to the frame upon which its fortune hangs. Occasionally, it will admit different shapes in its models but, more often, flesh is kept to a minimum to such a degree that, in practice and in the public perception, there is no more salient attribute of the fashion model than thinness, usually exaggerated by height. An aesthetic of thinness is so pervasive in the modern fashionable ideal that it manages to incorporate and determine the other signifiers associated with the fashion model—youth and beauty.

In Robert Altman’s film about the 1994 Paris collections, Prêt-a-Porter, the scene that provoked the most controversy was one where some of the world’s top models paraded along the catwalk completely naked. Unclothed, these tall, extremely thin

160 Jean Epstein, Ecrits sur le cinéma, 1921-1953; tome 1, 1921-1947 (Paris: Seghers, 1947), 140. Quoted in Leo Charney, ‘In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity’, Leo Charney & Vanessa R. Scharwtz, eds, Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1995), 287. Epstein’s definition of photogénie, writes Charney, was an attempt to describe the essence of film, the sensual moment of film where ‘fleeting fragments of experience...provide pleasure in ways that the viewer cannot describe verbally or rationalize cognitively.’ His understanding touches upon the essence of fashion and encompasses not only the vitality of modern life but also its poignant correlate, a consciousness increasingly infiltrated by the ephemeral.

161 Jean-Paul Gautier, Christian Lacroix, Issey Miyake and Vivienne Westwood are examples of designers who have attempted to break this mould and introduce a variety of body shapes (and models of different ages) into their shows. Nonetheless, the majority of their models conform to standard measurements. Precisely because the bigger model is such a novelty, she is able to be read as a political statement but the value in this can often be eclipsed by her being seen as a gimmick or publicity stunt. At the 1999 Sydney Fashion Week, the (then) curvy model Sophie Dahl was brought out by designer Lisa Ho in a bid to connect with the realities of the market but she was squeezed into dresses made for a smaller woman, a move that undermined the campaign. Dahl herself tends to try and distance herself from the question of her weight,
women evoked, variously, images of anorexics, of Holocaust survivors, of famine victims, or of aliens. However, first and foremost, they present an image of fashion models. Their extreme thinness identifies them as such (and this spectacle as a fashion show) because, despite the absence of clothes, fashion’s presence remains manifest, written on the bodies of the models.

No amount of criticism emanating from the shock of seeing the apparently starved, exposed bodies of these otherwise idealised women will change the defining feature of the fashion model. The level of thinness demanded by fashion varies in its extremes but the widespread desirability of the slim silhouette in the western world has remained a constant since the early 1920s. This coincides with the consolidation of the fashion model as an icon of feminine beauty. Thus she emerges from anonymity tall and thin so that, in the modern consciousness, it is impossible to separate fashion, the fashion model and the fashionable ideal of serpentine slimness (plate 3.1).

3.1 The Changing Feminine Ideal

At the turn of the nineteenth century the public and private imagination was entranced by a feminine ideal that was buxom, overfed and matronly (plate 3.2). Whether it was across the parquet floor of a gilded ballroom or the more prosaic boards of the music hall stage, the great beauties of the era glided through society with the Junoesque, saying she is tired of being labelled a ‘plus-size girl’ or ‘the fat model’, insisting that she is no longer a size twelve and, to prove it, posed luxuriantly naked in the campaign for Yves St Laurent’s ‘Opium’. However, in their empirical analysis of changes in the fashion silhouette over a period of three centuries, A.L. Kroeber and Jane Richardson find that thinness may be differentiated by the waist only, and this has fluctuated over time. Jane Richardson and A.L. Kroeber, ‘Three Centuries of Women’
dignified grace of a ship’s prow through tranquil waters. Foremost came the hat, measuring up to a yard across, decked with a small aviary of plumes and feathers or basket-loads of artificial flowers. Underneath swelled the hair, trussed and padded to rival the pouter pigeon chest, overspilling with frills. The waist dropped away at a sharp angle to skirts and petticoats that frothed and rustled in an artful arrangement of silk chiffon and lace, bringing up the rear as they swept the ground behind them. This particular brand of sexuality belonged to an era that would soon fade into history, within two decades the full-blown rose who had inspired lovers to offer her weight in pearls would hold as much appeal as a lavender-scented aunt. The imposing figure of mature, well-upholstered femininity was replaced by the garconne, an ideal characterised by youthful, angular restlessness, an independent girl who projected sleek, modern eroticism dressed in Chanel and driving a Hispano-Suiza car (plate 3.3).

The metamorphosis in the appearance of women in the first decades of the twentieth century is often represented as being a direct consequence of the First World War, sometimes to such an extent that one could be forgiven for presuming that between 1914 and 1918, while men fought, women dieted. Although the truly thin physique was not declared essential until the early twenties, this did not prevent the emergence of the slender ideal being considered as a direct response to wartime rationing. Hence, on the pages of British Vogue one finds the pragmatic suggestion that a slimmer figure will use less fabric and, by a happy coincidence, restrictions on butter and sugar will help the recalcitrant dieter in her quest to lose unfashionable ‘avoirdupois’.163

---

163 In America, being fat took on the moral overtones that are familiar to us today. America’s general guilt about its late entry into the war transferred blame onto overweight people who were made to feel
More generally, there is a widespread belief that, in the face of their contribution to the war effort, women gained civic, economic and political rights and that fashion was forced to adapt in response to changed social conditions that gave women a more active and public life.

It is easy to exaggerate the differences between pre- and post-war society but if the war cannot claim full credit for releasing women from both social and sartorial suffocation, there can be no question that it did accelerate the slow process of women achieving parity with men. In Britain, women over thirty were given the vote, professions such as the law, which had formerly been the exclusive domain of men, were opened to both sexes, and women were officially recognised as ‘socially moral persons’. Judging from the pages of women’s magazines and popular novels, those who could afford to lead a freer life did so in a seemingly endless whirl of golf, tennis, swimming, motoring, skiing, cocktails and dancing the Black Bottom, the Charleston, the shimmy or the kikikari. Those women whose names would never appear in the social pages or gossip columns benefited from advances in education, improved labour conditions (although women still received half to a third less pay than men), and a relaxation of class boundaries. Dancing and the movies were popular entertainments available to a girl of limited means who, thanks to mass production and artificial fabrics, could now afford to participate in fashion to an extent that had hitherto not been possible.

guilty for ‘using’ up rations. Maud Ellman writes, ‘A woman overweight by 40 lbs was accounted to be hoarding 60 lbs of sugar in her excess flesh, thereby depriving her European allies of their rations.’ Maud Ellman, The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing & Imprisonment (London: Virago, 1993), 8-9.

Designers of the immediate post-war period were by no means in agreement as to what was the appropriate style for the modern woman. There seemed to be a general consensus on skirt lengths, which had been rising since well before the war and now hovered around mid-calf; headwear and hairstyles too continued their pre-war trend to follow more closely the skull; the unfettered torso was popular (although by 1921 *Vogue* decreed that ‘the absolutely uncorseted laissez-allez effect is no longer the proper one’), and, with the exception of Lanvin’s new bouffant crinoline, the slim silhouette prevailed. Nonetheless, the famous couture houses of Doucet, Drecoll, Poiret and Doeulliet—all of which would close within a few years—were among those who failed (or refused) to adapt their elaborate design aesthetic to the consciously young and streamlined style presented by Chanel, Patou and Lelong or the classical perfection of Vionnet.

Much has been made of the practicality of these styles but the idea that they were born out of a conscious desire for liberation from fashion or as part of a popular demand for more functional clothing can be overstated. In *Paris Fashion*, Valerie Steele makes the point that inspiration for the new attitude in dress ‘came from the highest circles of Parisian haute couture. It was not, in any meaningful sense, the expression of a self-conscious movement for women’s liberation, nor for “practicality” in the world of work. The readers of *La Gazette du Bon Ton* were generally neither feminists nor working women.’ While Chanel—whose intuitive grasp of her times and shrewd understanding of the media meant that every style she imposed went unquestioned—was certainly a working woman, it is unlikely that the same could be said of the majority of her clients, whose lifestyle was based around leisure. Although
a simple suit of wool jersey or tweed was undeniably an improvement in terms of ease of mobility and maintenance on the corsets, petticoats, crinolines, bustles and delicate fabrics of previous centuries, the recommendations of *Vogue* reveal that the fashionable woman of the post war years was still required to change up to six times a day. And, without a well-informed lady’s maid, a Vionnet gown designed to ingeniously wrap and twist around the body could easily end up, like Beau Brummel’s famous ‘failures’, in a rejected heap on the floor.

In her book, *Sex and Suits*, Anne Hollander dismisses the notion that the overriding impulse behind the form taken by modern female dress was simply functionalism; for centuries restrictive clothing had not prevented women from participating in physical and mental activities from playing tennis to ruling an empire.\(^{166}\) Practicality in clothing can take many forms and the short skirted, looser styles of the early decades of the twentieth century were part of the evolutionary process of fashion that had roots going back to the 1880s. From the basic premise that fashion is a form of artistic expression, she argues that, less important than actual functionalism in dress, was an aesthetic requirement that it appear so. In this fashion was part of, and influenced by, the zeitgeist that produced a revolution in the fine and decorative arts. What is fundamentally embodied in female fashions of the nineteen twenties and thirties, then, are the stylistic tendencies of modernism. The great couturiers of the era designed clothes that privileged a visual model of coherence and integrity over surface display, clothes that followed the movement of limbs in action, thus revealing an organic relationship between clothes and body. In doing so they created an image of the

elegantly clothed woman as ‘a self-propelled car or motorboat, smoothly designed, vibrating with life, built and fitted for graceful speed.’ The most successful (if only because the most commercial) couturier of the period was Gabrielle Chanel.

Many of Chanel’s innovations were adapted from the sportswear of her aristocratic male friends and also the hard wearing clothes of the working man. Despite this masculine influence and the widespread adoption of the garçonne look, the modern style was not necessarily one of androgyny; men and women remained easily distinguishable with pants worn very rarely by women in the twenties and even then by only the most daring. There was also no question of these clothes being unfeminine. The shorter skirts showed more leg than had previously been seen in fashion history, jewels—real and costume—were worn in abundance, hanging from ears, wrists and throats day and night, heels were high, and couture evening gowns, though sleek in line were made from luxurious, richly coloured silks, lace and velvets and were often intricately beaded or sequinned with frivolous fringing emphasising every movement. Rather, what had occurred was a change in the definition of ideal femininity; modern erotic appeal was based on a rejection of passive grandeur in favour of the appearance of active youthfulness and sexual confidence. With its dignified visual unity the fashions of this era combined to project an image of a free, independent woman (plate 3.4).

---

166 This is not to deny the level of physical discomfort experienced by some. For example, reports of post-tennis match corsets hanging in change rooms—stained with blood—provide a vivid image of endurance verging on self-torture.
3.2 The Mechanical Ideal

By the time of the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris in 1925 (the exhibition that gave Art Deco its name), it had become apparent that the look personified by Chanel had filtered down to all classes of society. Bobbed, shingled or cropped, brilliantined hair, economic use of colour and pattern, and clean lines with sober ornamentation had all entered the mainstream. However, simplicity in design presented a new dilemma for couturiers—their styles were easily copied by the mass market. Many responded to the reality of the modern clothing industry with an official system of reproduction, which profited the authorised designers. The other alternative was to take illegal copyists to court. In one such case brought by Vionnet, the court room was given a glimpse into the rarefied world of couture as models with ‘strawberry red lips’ paraded before the presiding judge. And in an echo of his father’s desire to suppress the commercial heart of fashion, Jacques Worth, as chief witness, argued that a beautiful dress design was equal in artistic worth to the statue of Gambetta at the gate of the Tuileries.\(^\text{168}\) The response of Chanel was more pragmatic: ‘If there is no copying, how are you going to have fashion?’\(^\text{169}\) Her implied dismissal of the importance of individuality in dress—the motivating force behind fashion for centuries—in favour of the other half of fashion’s equation is, if somewhat disingenuous, pure democratic capitalism. Towards the end of the century, Vivienne Westwood would rail against the ‘hypocrisy of Chanel’s little black dress’ but, at the time, American *Vogue* underscored her vision by christening the simple black, crêpe sheath, ‘Chanel’s Ford’ (plates 3.5 and 3.6).

This surprising conflation of a Paris couture dress and an American mass-produced machine suggested by Vogue’s epithet underlines a crucial tendency in modern fashion away from complex ornamentation and individual expression towards standardisation and homogenisation. Importantly, this did not emanate from a factory production line but from within the exclusive realm of one of Paris’ leading couture salons. While the demands of couture dressmaking meant that standardisation was a fiction (at Chanel, a single dress could require as many as thirty fittings), the crucial point is that the well-dressed woman projected an image that lent itself to the metaphors of the machine age.170

While the Chanel workroom did not operate according to the principles of Taylorism, a version of the Ford production line existed in the showroom where Chanel turned out model after model in a mirror image of her dark, slender looks (plate 3.7). In doing so she broke from the tradition of employing mannequins for their similarity in appearance to individual clients or as representatives of individual ‘types’.171 Although it can be safely presumed that the effacing of individuality as a fashion statement has never been the goal of mannequins du monde or fashion leaders—for example, even the limited elements of the ‘simple chic’ wardrobe, personified by Chanel but now reduced to a textbook style of monotonous sameness, were originally cynosure disguised as understatement—the idea of the model conforming to an abstract fashion principle did, eventually, become the standard language of the fashion

170 Even the delicate evening dresses of the period, fabricated from silver or gold metallic thread or metal sequins, suggested a body with machine-like properties. It is worth noting that the metaphors of the industrial age had been the mode in men’s clothing throughout the nineteenth century at a time when floral metaphors were commonly used in reference to fashionable women.
171 Caroline Evans writes that the need for house models to represent the variety of customers’ physical types continued until well after the Second World War and, even in the 70s, designers projected a
parade. Every season designers send models down the catwalk who are spectacularly but identically made-up and coiffed, presenting clothes that are predominantly a variation upon a theme so that the models appear like so many label conscious androids. Of course there are exceptions, but, in general, the attempt to impart an individual and headline grabbing ‘look’ to a label is achieved through a paradoxical effacing of the individual model (plate 3.8). This tendency towards homogeneity is fundamental to the iconic status of the model image; difference occurs in the detail but it is veiled by a generalising code.

This combination of spectacle and sameness has a parallel in the revue culture of the post war period where the subjugation of the individual was taken to an extreme. In Hollywood, Busby Berkeley used a phalanx of sequinned and feathered chorus girls as set decoration and, in cities throughout the world, an American dance troupe, the Tiller Girls, performed a synchronous dance of mathematical precision in a display of what Siegfried Kracauer termed ‘the mass ornament’. For Kracauer the spectacle of thousands of ‘sexless bodies in bathing suits’ transformed individual girls into manufactured and exported products: ‘…when they kept repeating the same movements without ever interrupting their routine, one envisioned an uninterrupted chain of autos gliding from the factories into the world…’172 (plate 3.9). Kracauer’s conception of the mass ornament identified the underlying threat to humanity posed by the objectification of the human body in modernity; the mass ornament drained humanity of spiritual life and organic energy and, by effacing meaning, symbolises

172 Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Girls und Crise’. Quoted in Karsten Witte, ‘Introduction to Siegfried Kracauer’s “The Mass Ornament”’, New German Critique, no 5, Spring, 1975: 64, 67. In New York, a similar revue, the Rockettes, a chorus line of 64 dancers of identical height and appearance, have been performing their robotic, synchronous routine at Radio City Hall since its opening in 1932.
nothing other than itself or, rather, it symbolises only that which it mirrors—capitalism. The characterisation of capitalist modernity as an attack on the life and soul of humanity is now a familiar trope and the concept of the human body as automaton and as living ornament has long since become part of the lexicon of exploitation under capitalism (of the worker, of women) but it is a concept that was expressed in more ambivalent terms at its genesis in the artistic practices of early high modernism.

3.3 Modernism and Mobility

The notion of the body as machine and the absorption of the body into the language of machinery was a concept that preoccupied artists in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The approach was not always one imbued with pessimism. Although Jacob Epstein’s sculpture, *The Rock Drill* (1913-14), invokes a sinister memory of Frankenstein or a machine-made human, other artists, seduced by the romance of technology, created images that combined the human and mechanical in more optimistic terms. In Fernand Léger’s *The Cardplayers* (1917), the smooth, reflective contours of steel columns form limbs more beautiful than those made of flesh and Francis Picabia’s, *La Fille Née Sans Mère* (1916-17), blasphemously equates the birth of the machine with the birth of Christ, the subtext being the arrival of a long-awaited usurpation of the authority of the past. The interest shown by artists in the mechanical seems inevitable in an age where avant-garde engineering and avant-garde art seemed to occupy common ground. Underlying this was the fact that...

---

173 The effect of capitalist modernity on humanity expressed through the relationship between the
lived experience had been completely altered by the machine age. In addition to the social and economic transformations rendered by modernism’s iconic motif, the railroad, came a change in perception; the traditional barriers of space and distance were eliminated and a bodily intimacy with time, space and motion was forged.

The fascination with this change is epitomised in the work of the American photographer, Eadweard Muybridge, and the French scientist Etienne-Jules Marey. In 1879, Muybridge made a photographic series of a running horse in an attempt to capture and analyse the continuity of movement. Marey undertook a similar experiment with the flight of a bird on a camera he invented that recorded 12 separate images on a revolving disc of film. These pre-cinematic motion studies anticipated cinema, an aesthetic form that itself had been prefigured by the experience of the passenger on the train looking out the frame of the window as the ‘film’ of the world passed by. In the 1895 Lumière short film of a train arriving at a station, the experience was reversed in a definitive moment of ‘modern attention as vision in motion’. By the beginning of the twentieth century, this was apparent in the functions of everyday life as scientific and technological advances created a world typified by change, distraction, dynamism, and speed (the most visible sign of this being the automobile). It was also manifested in the appetite for leisure activities such as amusement parks, the fashion parade, and the cinema—entertainments that emphasised the body in motion and, although presented as relief from modern life, replicated its mobile, kinetic sensations. Thus, the experience of metropolitan life, with its ‘rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a

---

human body and fashion is explored more fully in Chapter Six.

single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions’ had become inherently cinematic.\textsuperscript{175}

The invention of cinema exposed the limitations of photography which, dependent on stasis, was incapable of producing images that captured the extent of modern existence.\textsuperscript{176} The project of reflecting the immense shifts in consciousness implied by the modern landscape also occupied avant-garde artistic movements as they grappled with the question of how to produce a parallel dynamism to the machine age. In the most radical proposition art had seen in nearly five hundred years, Picasso and Braque (inspired by Cézanne) overthrew the convention of one-point perspective with paintings that confirmed the instability of vision. In presupposing the mobility of the viewer, Cubism revolutionised the way we see paintings and offered a solution to the age-old dilemma of how to represent motion with the inherently static tools of paint and canvas. No artistic movement was more concerned with capturing the energy of the modern era than the Futurists, whose 1909 Manifesto proclaimed unequivocal faith in technology and eulogised ‘the beauty of speed’. In an attempt to translate their vision into paint they turned to Cubism and the sequential photographs of Muybridge and Marey.

The effect of this combination is apparent in Gino Severini’s \textit{Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin} (1912), which depicts the frenzied activity of the dance halls and tango cafes fashionable before the War (plate 3.10). What the viewer sees is a fragmented, chaotic world of kineticism. Dance, gaiety, and the psychosexual fears of

the capitalist form the context of a scene where the disembodied violet and scarlet sequinned skirt of a dancer restlessly escapes the monocled eye of a top-hatted observer, himself carved from geometric slices of flesh, moustache and bow-tie. A comparison with an almost contemporary painting of a similar scene, J. Béraud’s *Jardin de Paris. The Night Beauties* (1905), illustrates the extent to which art had undergone revolutionary changes (plate 3.11). (Picasso and Braque first exhibited ‘Cubist’ works at the Salon des Indépendants in 1907). *Jardin de Paris* depicts a slice of *demi-mondaine* nightlife; heavily made-up beauties, shrouded in spectral layers of gossamer trailing and frothing to the ground, stroll invitingly past self-important café patrons, dressed—as in the *Dynamic Hieroglyphic*—in dinner jackets and top hats. One coquette holds her skirts in her hand, offering a glimpse of stockinged ankle. Placed against the figure of the naked woman astride a pair of scissors in the Severini painting, this hint of sexual promise seems unnecessarily coy but it is a significantly modish gesture that recurs throughout art (and, later, photography) from, at least, about the mid-nineties and heralds the arrival of a modern relationship between women, dress and body. The glimpse of the leg was not only a sign of a new immodesty but also made visible the act of women in motion; no longer propelled by a seemingly magical force hidden beneath voluminous skirts, women could be seen to have active, functioning limbs. (See plates 3.12, 3.13 and 3.14).

The distance between the two worlds represented by Severini and Béraud’s paintings found a parallel in fashion. Women’s fashions in the pre-war period are often written of wistfully; sumptuous confections of lace, silk, velvet and fur are described in elegiac language that mourns an era when costume remained devoted to the

---

176 A possible early exception is the work of the amateur photographer, Jacques Henri Lartigue, who has
adornment of women rather than being seen as a symbol of an as yet unknown freedom. This tension between old and new worlds was played out on the bodies of women who abandoned old styles or adopted new ones not so much as an expression of the independence and activity that an uncertain future would force upon them but rather, in the words of Boucher, to fulfil their ‘centuries-old role of pleasing’. Thus the messages that fashion sent out were often contradictory with radically modern gestures coexisting with the most reactionary symbols of the Belle Epoque. Elegant dress followed two opposing tendencies that existed side by side. The more traditional style was represented by Jacques Doucet, who produced delicate, airy toilettes in a palette of eighteenth century lightness, and Mme Paquin, who continued to show the S-line until right before the war. An alternative to this hot-house femininity was the graphic modernism of Orientalism seen in the avant-garde couture of Paul Poiret and the costumes of the Ballets Russes, which had an enormous impact when it arrived in Paris in 1909. Accordingly, there were two corresponding fashionable ideals, one seemingly more modern than the other, however, even the most modern bore only a superficial resemblance to early high modernist art practices. Women’s dress retained an aura of passivity and referentiality that was out of step with artistic essays into the machine age and abstraction. Fashion copied art but remained behind.

Probably the most advanced of the pre-war designers was Madeleine Vionnet who had an instinct for what the twentieth century woman would require of fashion. She opened her own house in 1912 and continued unabated until she closed down at the outbreak of war in 1939; however her innovations, derived from the modernist principle of form following function, continued to influence designers, notably, John

been recognised as having captured ‘a modern feeling of astounding immediacy and movement’. Francoise Heilbrun and Quentin Bajac, Orsay Photography (Paris: Scala, 2000), 90.
Galliano, through to the end of the century.\textsuperscript{178} Although Isadora Duncan had been performing her Arcadian free style of dance since the early 1900s and there was an established campaign against tight-lacing, when Vionnet presented her first collection at Doucet in 1907 with mannequins barefoot and ‘in their skin’—corsetless—it was considered a revolutionary move.\textsuperscript{179} Her experiments with the drape of fabric, most notably cutting garments on the bias, are legendary and gave freedom to limbs, revealing the outline of the body in movement in a manner that was absolutely attuned to modernity’s fascination with mobility. Nonetheless, photographs of her early collections show the beautiful actress Lantelme (Vionnet’s favourite client and model) in a boudoir setting, the eroticism of her soft, round, unrestrained body announcing availability in an image of passive femininity that would soon disappear from fashion photography (plate 3.15). Ironically the Vionnet bias cut gown, especially in its Hollywood incarnation, came to represent a passive, malleable body instead of a mobile, active one. The phrase, ‘poured in’, coined by \textit{Vogue} to describe the fit of the figure-hugging satin sheaths, conjures up an image of a body of molten substance, the ‘natural’ body waiting to be moulded by the dress as much as any of the corseted styles that preceded the modern period (plate 3.16).

The most famous designer in the years before 1914 was Poiret. From the perspective of almost a century, his significant contribution to the revival of the \textit{Directoire} line, the ‘war’ he alleged to have waged on the corset and the ‘barbaric’ exoticism of his

\textsuperscript{177} Francois Boucher, \textit{A History of Costume in the West} (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966, 1996), 401.
\textsuperscript{178} Vionnet could also be credited with anticipating the deconstructivist approach taken by fashion, most notably by Belgian designers in the 1990s. As early as 1920 she was creating dresses that exposed the method of their construction.
\textsuperscript{179} Claims as to who first discarded the corset are full of controversy. Lucile and other couturiers were also against it—as were members of the aesthetic movement—but it seems Vionnet was the innovator within \textit{haute couture}. 

123
Yet his pride at having freed a woman’s torso was equalled by his perverse glee in having shackled her legs with the hobble skirt. The sylph-like silhouette towards which fashion was progressing was achieved by Poiret only through an incomprehensible restriction of movement. After the war, Poiret’s taste became increasingly remote from the prevailing mood of the age with his nostalgic, increasingly theatrical style appearing outdated in contrast to the simplicity of line, fluidity and understated elegance demanded by a society moving faster than memory. He continued to produce sublime pieces into the mid-twenties but the signs of his eventual bankruptcy were foretold in the expensive failure of his doomed post-war nightclub, Oasis which, at a time when the first dance of the day started not long before lunch and finished just before breakfast, was disastrously and perversely ‘anti-jazz’. He despised the Chanel style, alleging that it made women look like ‘emaciated telegraph poles’ but Chanel, whose unerring instinct for what was chic never failed her, cut closer to the truth; if, as Poiret suggested, she appeared to be suffering eternal mourning, it was for none other than Monsieur Poiret himself.

However, at its height, Poiret’s business empire encompassed every aspect of the luxury industry; an early day Calvin Klein there was little that escaped the imprint of his signature. In his book *Art and Phynance*, he gives a list of the adornments of house and body that he created: furnishings, interior decoration, perfumes, bottles, patterns, carpets, furniture, mirrors, cutlery, lighting, embroidery, trimmings, lace, dresses and coats. He designed for the theatre and established schools of decorative arts.

---

180 Poiret claimed to have ‘thrown some wolves into fashion’, consciously linking himself to the Fauvists.
art where students were trained in the sort of aesthetic appreciation and skills that enabled them to design products to fill the furnishing departments he opened from Berlin to Philadelphia. Confident of his position as an artist—an image he tirelessly cultivated—he was nonetheless a pioneer in the art of fashion promotion and, to this end, he can be credited as having organised the first fashion ‘shoot’. This was a collaborative project of designer, photographer and magazine editor and, although this would eventually become standard practice, at the time, it was considered revolutionary. The photographs by Edward Steichen, which appeared in the April 1911 issue of *Art et Décoration*, featured gowns from Poiret’s *Directoire* line and took place against the backdrop of his Directoire style salon, with his wife, Denise, as model (plate 3.17).

### 3.4 Art Deco Fashion Plates

The appearance on the scene of fashion photography coincided with a decline in the artistic quality of fashion plates, which had descended from the artistic heights reached in the nineteenth century to a period where they were commonly produced by a collective of uninspired illustrators, with no one individual solely responsible for the finished artwork. In different circumstances, this could have lead to the demise of the fashion plate. However, in 1908 and again in 1911, Poiret commissioned two artists to draw albums of fashion plates depicting his *Directoire* designs. *Les Robes de Paul Poiret racontée par Paul Iribe* and *Les Choses de Paul Poiret vues par Georges Lepape* came out as limited editions, with no text and were printed with the exquisite colours enabled by the *pochoir* process on heavy *papier de luxe*. The first three
hundred of the thousand copies of Les Choses printed were signed by Poiret thus underlining the collaboration of art and fashion (plates 3.18 and 3.19).

The illustration in these fashion plates marked a radical departure from the nineteenth century style and heralded a new era not only in fashion but also in its representation. Other designers were quick to follow Poiret’s lead\(^\text{182}\) and, in The Golden Age of Style, J. Robinson credits Iribe’s treatment of Poiret’s designs as being an innovation in the visual arts, exemplifying the purity of line which became one of the hallmarks of the Art Deco style.\(^\text{183}\) In Paris Fashion, Valerie Steele writes that the so-called Art Deco fashion plate had a profound influence on the development of modern fashion; by breaking from the tradition of delicate, complex drawings of highly detailed garments in favour of representing the modern spirit of the dress, the streamlined silhouette emerged as the fashionable ideal. While the illustrations of Iribe and Lepape each have a recognisable style, both successfully reduce body, clothes and background to their fundamental elements in stark lines and bold colour. The women are often stem-like in appearance but even when voluptuously rounded (as in some of Lepape’s work) they appear strikingly modern, with the confident brushstrokes, hastily drawn, suggesting a movement and vitality that contradicts the languid passivity of the pose. This is not to say that simplicity of line and reduction (or boldness) in surface detail were not already elements of Poiret’s designs; comparisons of Iribe and Lepape’s interpretations with museum photographs of the actual gowns show that there is still a high level of correspondence between the gown and its representation. However, this soon changed as the avant-garde style became increasingly acceptable. Steele writes

\(^{182}\) For example, in 1911, the house of Paquin commissioned a deluxe album called L’Eventail et la Fourrure chez Paquin, by Paul Iribe in collaboration with George Barbier and Georges Lepape. Valerie Steele, Paris Fashion, 222.
of a semi-cubist fashion plate of a Poiret design featured in *La Gazette du Bon Ton* in 1914 that gave ‘only the vaguest sense’ of the construction and detail of the dress.  

Fashion illustration was following art into the abstraction of visual form and by the 1920s both dress and woman were regularly conceived as an idea, configured out of floating geometric forms (plate 3.20).

The enormous success of Poiret’s collaboration with Iribe and Lepape lead to a renaissance in fashion illustration with a number of *de luxe* fashion publications launched in the years prior to the war and continuing into the twenties. The most celebrated was *La Gazette du Bon Ton* which was launched in 1912 and published by the Librairie Centrale des Beaux-Arts under the directorship of Lucien Vogel and sold in Paris, London, Berlin, Geneva, Buenos Aires and St Petersburg. It was a luxuriously compiled book with the stated aim of being ‘a showcase in which only the most luxurious examples of high fashion and the best of the decorative arts could be displayed, regardless of the cost involved’. Its intention, ‘now that fashion has become art’, was to unite artists and couturiers and to this end was sponsored by Chéruit, Doeuillet, Doucet, Paquin, Poiret, Redfern, and Worth. In addition to drawing the couture gowns, the contributors also presented their own fashion designs which, although criticised by contemporaries, for being unwearable, were sometimes produced by the designers (plate 3.21). *La Gazette* was printed on hand made paper and featured *pochoir* fashion plates by artists, many from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, who included Georges Barbier, Benito, Bernard Boutet de Monvel, Pierre Brissaud,  

---

184 Steele, *Paris Fashion*, 223.
Raoul Dufy, Paul Iribe, Georges Lepape, Charles Martin, André Marty, and Thayaht.\textsuperscript{187} By the time it was bought by Condé Nast and merged with \textit{Vogue} in 1925, the contribution of these highly skilled artists on these and the pages of other publications to fashion illustration had raised the fashion plate to a highly regarded art form.

### 3.5 Emerging Fashion Photography

By their exclusion, these journals reflected an attitude towards fashion photography that was also shared by magazines that became increasingly dependent on what could be captured by the ‘flash of a shutter’.\textsuperscript{188} During the twenties, fashion photography coexisted with fashion illustration but could not compete—neither in vibrancy nor spirit—with the graphic form’s direct link to the modernist aesthetic, thus fashion plates dominated. At \textit{Harper’s Bazaar}, the illustrator and designer, Erté was under exclusive contract from 1915 to 1936 while at its competitor, American \textit{Vogue}, illustrations by artists such as Lepape and Benito monopolised the cover until a colour photograph by Edward Steichen broke this hold in 1932 (plate 3.22).

Nonetheless, from before the war, there were movements aimed at promoting photography as a legitimate art form and, to this end, Steichen joined forces in 1902 with Alfred Stieglitz, the influential proselytiser of modernism in America, to co-found the ‘Photo-Secession’ group, which encouraged experimentation in the field of


\textsuperscript{187} Occasional contributors also included Bakst, Drésa, Guy Arnoux, Dammy, Drian, Erté and Carlège.
photography. They were early admirers of the work of the eccentric Baron Adolphe de Meyer, an avid amateur photographer whose experimental portraits, which replaced attention to detail with the suggestion of mood, influenced a generation of fashion photographers. De Meyer turned professional in 1914 when he fled to America at the outbreak of war and was there put under exclusive contract to *Vogue* and another Condé Nast publication, *Vanity Fair*, at $100 per week. He represents a view of the fashionable woman that is resonant of an earlier time. His portraits were of shimmering society beauties draped in gilded soft focus, appearing from the page like ‘a vision in a dream or an apparition inside a backlit aquarium’.189 (See plate 3.23). His images dominated in *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* until he defected to *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1922 and was replaced by Steichen who was joined by George Hoyningen-Huene, a temperamental Russian émigré, in 1925 and, in the late twenties, Cecil Beaton.

All three had a fine art background and, in a field where no rules had been made, set a standard of ground-breaking inventiveness that continued unchecked until conservative commercial pressures intervened in the late thirties. Fashion photography coexisted in these magazines with fashion illustration but there is a tension on the pages between the two competing art forms. Photography had the advantage of verisimilitude but, in an era when representation itself had been under question for decades, this was not enough. In surveying contemporary fashion photographs there is a sense that—despite the technical and formal virtuosity often

achieved—they do not successfully express the modernist aesthetic. Steichen’s photographs of Poiret’s 1911 Directoire collection, for example, seem to be almost in the manner of nineteenth century fashion plates and appear stilted, posed and dull, next to the fluid, spare and brilliantly coloured plates that Lepape produced the following year. (See plates 3.17 and 3.19). Ultimately, fashion photographers faced the same problem that had been troubling painters—how to represent movement. At a time when the popularity of dancing, movies and cars meant that to stand still was to be left behind, when fringes on hats, dresses, capes, and stoles exaggerated this frenzied kineticism so that the shimmying continued after the body had stopped, to freeze the image in a photograph was to lose the essence of the fashionable woman.

Photographers were impeded by slow film and cumbersome equipment. When Beaton first arrived at Vogue in 1928 he was still using a ‘toy’ Kodak, which he was loath to give up because of the access and mobility it allowed him in approaching his subjects. Hoyningen-Huene complained in his memoirs, ‘No matter how fast we worked, the problem of creating an impression of movement seemed to remain insoluble.’ His primary frustration was that he couldn’t render his models as they appeared in ‘real life’, protesting: ‘Somehow the photographers had as yet not captured the attitudes and gestures that women assumed. The models seemed to freeze in front of the lens, as if posing for their portraits, whereas the top fashion illustrators would render them as they actually saw them.’

Hoyningen-Huene’s lament, while true in a poetic sense, indicates something beyond simple difficulties with the available technology: the possibility that fashion

---

190 Hoyningen-Huene, quoted in On the Edge, 20.
photography was limited by the human form. The models favoured by photographers and magazine editors into the twenties were the *mannequins du monde*, women whose name (if not their face) was already familiar to readers. They included actresses and dancers and an endless supply of debutantes and society women who shrugged off respectable anonymity as easily as an outdated wrap. These women were beautiful, stylish, and slender; they created, as well as wore, fashion and yet they could not compete with an artistic impression of themselves.\(^{191}\) The endless leg, the pencil thin hip, the swan-like neck, the disdainful mouth, the cut-glass cheekbone, and the nonchalant brow—all the characteristics that came to typify the fashion model may have been inspired by a real woman (or a composite of several women), but they are exaggerated and extended by the fashion illustrator who drew what he or she wanted—needed—to see.\(^{192}\) Until photography and the female figure could successfully unite to communicate the essence of fashion, the fashion model remained an important but not indispensable element of the fashion image, her role in relation to fashion one of a mundane functionary rather than one of a consort of dreams.

### 3.6 The Modern Body

In *Cubism and Fashion*, Richard Martin, describes the gowns of Worth and his contemporaries in the late nineteenth century as a ‘carapace’ for women, their three-dimensional form of heavy satin or wool amplified by heavy, static decoration that

\(^{191}\) The distance between the illustrated ideal and the reality of the majority of women was, in Australia at least, already a source of anxiety in the 1920s. Margaret Maynard writes that, ‘Fashion drawings of thin models…sit quite uneasily with the plump, healthy-looking women common in photographs of the period…’ *Out of Line: Australian Women and Style* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001), 124.
extended the space they occupied in the world. These gowns were ‘body aggrandizing’ but could also be anthropomorphised, easily imaginable as being able to stand on their own as entities that existed independently of the women who wore them. This remained true, although slightly less so, of the fashions of the Belle Époque. Modern fashion, on the other hand, was based upon a two-dimensional system of flattened planes, its decoration more akin to collage than sculpture. These were garments with little hanger appeal, insubstantial whispers of cloth that, without the frame of the body, collapsed to the ground. But in overturning the tacit understanding that clothing shaped the body, modern fashion did not relinquish its sovereignty; rather it oversaw the shifting of the focus of its power from the dressed body to the undressed body. Consequently, the relationship between the body and clothing can no longer be considered as one of separate existence; the body does not await the transforming effect of dress; the dress slips onto a body already shaped by fashion.

Of course, in the representation of fashion, the body and clothing always appear as an integral unit and, in the case of illustration, are created as such, however, in the photographic image, the real can interfere with the purity of vision that the combination of clothing and body hope to convey (plate 3.24). That a tradition existed in fashion illustration (particularly, in the work of Horace Vernet and Francois-Louis-Joseph Watteau), of distorting the female image to produce a pleasingly disproportionate, elongated silhouette was discussed in the previous chapter. However, in the early decades of the twentieth century this becomes, almost universally, the only silhouette to appear in fashion art and, for the first time, thinness

---

of frame becomes uniformly fashionable and desirable. The extent to which this new aesthetic overturned the pre-existing image of female beauty as soft and rounded is summarised by Hollander in *Seeing Through Clothes*:

It came about that all the varieties of female desirability conceived by the twentieth century seemed ideally housed in a thin, resilient, and bony body. Healthy innocence, sexual restlessness, creative zest, practical competence, even morbid but poetic obsessiveness and intelligence—all seemed appropriate in size ten. During the six decades following the First World War, styles in gesture, posture, and erotic emphasis have undergone many changes, but the basically slim female ideal has been maintained. Throughout all the shifting levels of bust and waist and the fluctuating taste in gluteal and mammary thrust, the bodies of women have been conceived as ideally slender, and clearly supported by bones.\(^{194}\)

It would be apocryphal to suggest that this somatic revolution was brought about by a subversive band of fashion illustrators determined to cast unwitting women in a mould of their own creation. As we have seen, social, cultural, psychological and economic factors—magnified by the experience of the war—had their impact on fashion and all played their part in the metamorphosis of the ideal female form from hyperbolic stateliness to bare-boned slickness. However, the underlying theme of what I have been arguing in the previous pages is that, less important than factors that directly affected the way women both lived their lives and what they wore, is the over-arching aesthetic paradigm of modernism. In painting and sculpture the illusion of three-dimensions had given way to flat planes, indeterminate spaces and geometrical forms and this was reflected in a fashion silhouette that was abstract and two-dimensional with forms that suggested a dynamism appropriate to the modern age. Fashion illustration, unburdened by the limitations of an actual body, achieved a

---

closer approximation to this ideal and inevitably contributed to the visual desire for a thin, wiry, nimble physique.

Of course, in the same way that the requisite look demanded by earlier centuries was never universally achieved, neither, in the twentieth century, was thinness. Fashion though is judged mostly by the images of those who can wear it successfully and, increasingly, in the 1920s photographs of models begin to resemble their illustrated counterparts. (See plates 3.25, 3.26, 3.27 and 3.28.) If the model did not quite meet the exacting standards of the camera, photographers resorted to the knife. Kennedy Fraser reports that Cecil Beaton would yell at his retouchers: ‘Slice the hips! The sag must go!’ (See plate 3.29.) Fashion, in the era that Beaton found it necessary to demand this surgery, revealed more of the woman’s body than any previous period in history; dresses had become shorter, sleeveless and backless, skimming the body in clinging and diaphanous fabrics so that limbs emerged and flesh was visible. But it was as if this wasn’t enough. Once the body was revealed, there was an almost scientific fascination with its construction, with seeing the cogs and wheels of a working machine.

In the work of artists such as Picabia, Duchamp, and Léger the emphasis was on the conflation of the human body and the machine but a different relationship to the body is apparent in the sculptures of Auguste Rodin and Constantin Brancusi. Rodin’s anatomical sculptures seem to cut away the flesh to reveal the hidden forms of muscle and bone while Brancusi went a step further to create elemental forms that represented

---

'not the outer form but the idea, the essence of things'.\textsuperscript{196} As the decade of the twenties progressed, it seemed that women had embarked on a similar quest and the flesh of the female body was chipped away until, beneath hitherto smooth rounded contours, a multi-faceted, modernist work of art was revealed. In 1928, the transition was complete, as Cecil Beaton wrote in \textit{Vogue}:

Our standards are so completely changed from the old that comparison or argument is impossible. We can only say, ‘But we like no chins! Du Maurier chins are as stodgy as porridge; we prefer high foreheads to low ones, we prefer flat noses and chests and schoolboy figures to bosoms and hips like water-melons in season … Small dimpled hands make us feel quite sick; we like to see the forms of bones and gristle. We flatten our hair on purpose to make it sleek and silky and to show the shape of our skulls, and it is our supreme object to have a head like a wet football on a neck as thin as a governess’s hat pin.’\textsuperscript{197} (See plate 3.30.)

In Beaton’s enthusiastic endorsement of the disappearance of feminine curves from the fashionable ideal there is little that evokes the anti-materialist impulse manifested in Brancusi’s artistic statements. Nonetheless, before extreme thinness became the fashionable ideal it had periodically carried spiritual connotations. Thinness in models is, today, often discussed in terms of the unhealthy example they, as role models, provide for women. However, the underground aesthetic that idealised unfashionable thinness in the nineteenth century did so precisely because of what thinness signified—poverty, illness and imminent death. Heroines of Romantic art, literature and opera turned their backs, like the religious ascetic, on the abundance and depravity of industrial society and wasted away in a passionate embrace of denial.

\textsuperscript{196} Eric Shanes, \textit{Brancusi} (New York, London, Paris: Abbeville Press, 1989). The anatomical and flayed paintings and sculptures of the human figure that had been a feature of life drawing since the Renaissance were used as an adjunct to the study of the human form, and were not intended as the final work.
This morbid tendency, which was first popularised with the Romantic Movement, continues to resurface in fashion images despite fluctuations in the fashion silhouette and against vociferous criticism of the fashion industry’s promotion of a dangerous physical ideal. In the following chapter I explore the roots of an aesthetic that correlates beauty with illness and why fashion is inevitably drawn to this unhealthy liaison.

197 Cecil Beaton quoted in Howell, In Vogue, 56.
Chapter Four
From Consumptive Chic to Junkie Chic

Stretch a person out like taffy, and he’s either suffering or modelling.
— Adam Gopnik

4.1 The Prototype Model

Inspired by a Proustian impulse to capture a glittering world through the heartbeats of fashion, Cecil Beaton, in his book *The Glass of Fashion*, invokes half a century of memories—real and imagined—to sketch the combination of woman and dress that forms the modern fashion image. It is in one of these imaginings that he describes Ida Rubinstein, a dancer with Diaghilev’s Ballet Russe and an unforgettable element in the emerging visual landscape of modernism. She was, recalls Beaton:

An incredibly tall, thin woman, the proverbial ‘bag of bones’, [her] slender height allowed her to wear the most outlandishly remarkable dresses, often with three-tiered skirts that would cut up almost any other figure. In private life she was as spectacular as on the stage, almost stopping traffic in Piccadilly or the Place Vendome when she appeared like an amazon, wearing long, pointed shoes, a train, and very high feathers on her head, feathers that could only augment an already huge frame.

There was, however, another image of Rubinstein that co-existed with this one of her gliding across the cobblestones of pre-War Paris as if upon the catwalk at the *haute couture* collections of a Galliano, Gaultier or Lacroix. In Romaine Brooks’ painting of

---

her from 1911, *Le Trajet* (or *Dead Woman*), Rubinstein’s body is draped the length of a morgue-like slab, her dark hair hangs in limp tendrils and throws into relief the ‘hollow eyes and anorexic emaciation’ which, writes Bram Dijkstra, ‘were well-known and well-publicised features of [her] dramatic personality.’

Beaton barely acknowledges the enormous social, economic and political upheavals, let alone the horrors of two World Wars, witnessed by the period that his book covers but he cannot fail to notice the ‘neurotic state of impermanence’ that fashion both epitomises and symbolises as being part of the modern condition. As a central player in the world of fashion neither can he ignore the shadow that fashion casts over those who attach their fate to its unsentimental carousel, those tragic souls who build their lives on ‘shifting sands’ only to learn that sooner or later, ‘the odds are against their survival’. So, despite the focus of his book being primarily a portrait of fashion viewed in its surface manifestations—it’s beauty, its glamour, its style and its *joie de vivre*—it is also a work prefaced with the melancholy assertion that ‘the fleeting expression of fashion or fancy can reflect something beyond its limited time, something haunting that whispers of the nostalgia of human impermanence and mirrors man’s tragic destiny.’

The modern fashion system, structured around seasonal collections that celebrate the arrival of new fashions, institutionalises that characteristic of fashion—perpetual change—that has ensured its continuing existence. But fashion as an entity can only

---

201 Beaton, *Glass of Fashion*, 333.
202 Beaton, 3.
203 Beaton, 2.
endure at the expense of individual fashions which are, from their first appearance, under a death sentence. The ‘glass of fashion’ then is a metaphor for fashion’s double nature: its obsessive superficiality and devotion to spectacle is a veil that never quite succeeds in obscuring the provisionality of its incarnations. The two images of Ida Rubinstein embody both aspects of fashion’s character and it is this superimposed image that, in the second half of the twentieth century, is played out on the body of the model in fashion images. Thus, we are now familiar with the morbid tendency that periodically infiltrates fashion photographs, where a fatal instinct seems to be an almost essential criterion for existence in the fashion world; if a model is not actually represented as being dead, then her attachment to a body whittled down to the dimensions of a Giacometti sculpture raises the fear in outsiders that she is teetering on the edge of survival.

4.5 The Fashionable Body

That we think of the fashion model as thin is due to a set of historical, technological, and economic circumstances that made her essential to the modern fashion system and propelled her into the public eye at a time when the prevailing aesthetic imperative was best served by a slender female form. The development of mass media and the widespread distribution of fashion images motivated by the publicity requirements of a modern fashion system capable of large-scale production—in other words, the factors that thrust the fashion model into the general consciousness—were by-products of the greater technological innovations that inspired the Imaginary of modernism and the consequent apotheosis of the sleek, pared-down female body. It is
thus almost impossible to transpose our conception of the fashion model onto her Renaissance, Enlightenment, Victorian or Edwardian counterparts; the conditions that created the fashion model as a public icon are inextricably linked to the conditions that determined the way she looked. This has produced a homogeneity in our storehouse of images of the fashion model that excludes those body shapes with prior claim to being the fashionable ideal.

It is only within living memory that the aesthetic imperative has been one that finds the slender form—and what it denotes—beautiful. In fashion, this slender ideal is exaggerated, stretched to a tenuous sketch of flesh and bone. As anyone can observe, models are not representative of the general population; they look like each other, they do not look like us. No matter how fashionable the area, the casual observer, sipping espresso at a sidewalk cafe while flipping through *Vogue* will find a disparity between the pages of the magazine and the reality of the passing parade, even if some slight correspondences can be detected. However, within the image world of fashion, there is a striking uniformity in the appearance of women as each model is captured in the make-up, the pose, the clothes and the lighting that announce her conformity to the ‘now’ of fashion. This homogeneity weakens over time as the ideal adjusts according to fashion’s arcane code (so that a fashion image of 1955 may look very different from one in 1995) but, taking into account the subtle variations in degrees of desirable boniness, what alters little over time is the ubiquity of the thin model. In the eight or so decades since a minimum of flesh came to be regarded as ideal, thinness has not been universally achieved except, as a casual glance at any fashion magazine over this period will confirm, within the world of fashion models.
The disparity between the ideal posed by the fashion and media industry and the reality of most female bodies has become a major publishing category, with feminist sociologists and psychologists united in their condemnation of images of fashion models even when there is acknowledgment by medical professionals that the causes of eating disorders are complex, with the media only one of the multiple factors contributing to the disease. The aspiration to be thin, however, is constantly related back to an industry that ‘dictates the cultural ideal by posing anorexic looking models on the covers of magazines’. This cultural ideal, in turn, is represented as being determined by patriarchal Western society which ‘upholds the image of the underweight woman as glamorous and socially acceptable.’ While the goal of these writers is primarily aimed at the promotion of the acceptance of a multiplicity of female body shapes, there remains in the wider culture a delineation between the fashionable ideal and what is considered to be a more generally acceptable, healthy feminine ideal.

This reflects the fact that the thin body shape of the model may be worshipped in our culture but it is rarely regarded without ambivalence, evoking paradoxical emotions of envy, respect, vitriol, desire, guilt, wonder, resentment, mystification, hostility, superiority and repulsion. Invariably, interviews and questionnaires carried out for

psychological and sociological surveys designed to determine attitudes towards body image in girls and women show that thin models are perceived negatively. In discussing models, typical comments from adolescent girls were: ‘They look horrible. They’re ugly half the time.’; ‘I think they do sometimes look too thin. They look anorexic.’ The responses of adult women were more complex with many women saying that, in general, models were, ‘Too skinny. Definitely too skinny.’ Others were more ambivalent in their attitudes: ‘They make me sick. They are too thin,’ says one respondent before adding, ‘But I would kill for one of their bodies.’ Even a model, such as Cindy Crawford, who is deemed as looking ‘quite healthy’ and ‘not too thin’, is considered to be too skinny for her height.

In her comprehensive book on body image, which surveys recent research in the area from England, the United States and Australia, Sarah Grogan concludes:

Women were critical of the narrow range of body shapes presented in the media (which are viewed as unrealistic and unhealthy), and angry at the ways in which they perceive that the media (and in particular the fashion industry) manipulate the ways that they feel about their bodies by setting up unrealistic ideals.

Articles expressing these sentiments appear regularly in fashion magazines, with apparently little thought given to changing the appearance of the models in the fashion pages. Some advertisers have responded by using more representative models and icons of femininity’ in The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

207 Sarah Grogan, Body Image: Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men, Women and Children (New York: Routledge, 1999), 35. Kate Moss and Amber Valetta are often cited as being too thin (p.108). Naomi Campbell, Claudia Schiffer and Cindy Crawford are the models most frequently mentioned as having the desirable ‘skinny curves’ body shape (p. 108, p. 36).

208 Sarah Grogan, Body Image, 108.

209 Grogan, 116.
others have withdrawn their ads from magazines they feel to be promoting unhealthy physical ideals.\textsuperscript{210} It would seem then, that given the criticism of the fashion industry’s continued use of models who are not representative of the general fashion buying public, commercial pressures would encourage the use of models that look healthily robust, who are in a range of sizes, if not actually overweight. Periodically, claims are made by the modeling and fashion industries that the bony-looking model has been replaced by a more curvy type (exemplified by Claudia Schiffer, Cindy Crawford or lately, Gisele Bundchen and Esther Canovas) but on the catwalk and in the media the lie of these claims is exposed by an obvious reluctance to give up the model whose hipbones take the same cup size as her breasts.\textsuperscript{211} (See plates 4.2 and 4.3.)

Maybe this is not so surprising. Despite the attitudes of the respondents in Grogan’s book, none of the women interviewed (aged from 16 to 63) wanted to gain weight, almost all wished to be slimmer and, for women of all ages, the prime motivation for dieting and exercise was to be able to look good in clothes.\textsuperscript{212} This subservience of the body to the demands of clothes is widely thought to be a factor in determining the

\textsuperscript{210} For example, advertisements for a lingerie company have used larger models (\textit{The Australian}, March 4, 2000.) Swiss watchmakers, Omega, was one of British \textit{Vogue}’s biggest clients until it pulled their advertisements, citing distaste at the use of emaciated models as the reason. (Jacqueline Lunn, ‘Sick Chic Whips Up a Backlash’, \textit{Daily Telegraph}, June 4, 1996: 4-5) On the other hand, when Cyndi Tebbel, the editor of the Australian publication, \textit{New Woman} (a ‘women’s’ magazine rather than a fashion magazine), put size 16 model Emme Aronson on it’s cover in 1997 and called it ‘The Big Issue’, advertisers withdrew support and Tebbel resigned. (Rosalie Higson, ‘Made to Measure’, \textit{The Australian Magazine}, April 8-9, 2000: 29).

\textsuperscript{211} It seems that the only way magazines will cease their portrayal of ultra-thin models is by government decree. In June 2000, at a ‘body image’ conference (dubbed the ‘super-waif summit’) in London, which was convened in response to a ministerial summons, fashion editors, modelling agencies and designers agreed to accept a code of self-regulation to remove images of too thin women from the pages of glossy magazines. It remains to be seen how long the enthusiasm expressed at the conference for more realistic images in magazines lasts. See, Cherry Norton, ‘Fashion world agrees to stop using anorexic models’, \textit{The Independent International}, June 28-July 4, 2000:10. Susie Orbach, ‘An epidemic wrecking so many lives’, \textit{International Guardian} June/July, 2000:15.

\textsuperscript{212} In a letter to the Good Weekend Magazine responding to a story on body image, a reader complained about the presumption that body image problems cease in your sixties and asked ‘where were the oldies?’ \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, Good Weekend Magazine, March 25, 2000: 8.
body shape of the model. It is the attitude expressed by Laura Craik in an article defending the popularity of thin models at the height of controversy over representations of too thin models. Hoping to put a definitive end to the argument, she suggests that critics can debate ‘until the cows come home, but models will always be tall and thin because clothes hang best on that sort of figure.’ The same opinion is given in a *Vogue* article with the author echoing the familiar claim of designers, editors and art directors that ‘clothes hang better on thin women’. She goes on to explain: ‘When fat settles in, it renders the body formless, amorphous…In athletes and very thin people, the endoskeleton, the ligature, and the striae of muscle become visible, reminding us of what a wonderful piece of machinery the body is.’ The conception of the body as modernist artwork then underlies the conception of the thin model as superior coathanger. There seems little point in disputing the ‘fact’ of such dogmatic explanations for the ubiquity of the thin model in our times; the way we see has been pre-determined by an image culture that reinforces the view that all styles of clothing—from voluminous ball gowns to jeans and singlet—look ‘right’ on the model frame (plate 4.4 and 4.5). Nonetheless, in this era of post-modern fashion where designers create gowns fitted with crinolines, bustles and corsets—modes of dress originally born on a soft, rounded figure—or where the richly adorned body of a Masaii princess pales beside the extravagant ornamentation of a designer’s cultural plundering, it seems that the sleek, dynamic, modernist aesthetic cannot fully explain the continuing domination of the exaggeratedly thin frame on the catwalk and in fashion images. (See plate 4.6)

---

215 The extreme thinness of models on the catwalk is not always accurately conveyed by video footage and photographs of a parade. It needs to be emphasised that I am not asserting that all or even most models are too thin but even hardened regulars at shows can be shocked at how emaciated models can look.
Paradoxically, fashion’s obsession with a body of specific proportions co-exists with an attitude that amounts to an almost complete disregard of the body; fashion is aware that it needs the body but, nonetheless, remains not entirely satisfied with the raw materials. In his Spring/Summer 1999 collection for Givenchy, Alexander McQueen showed on fibre-glass dummies which were almost literally pencil thin; the garments worn by these cylindrical forms of inhuman dimensions cost thousands of dollars but would never fit a human body. In her article, ‘Catwalk Politics’, Nathalie Khan interprets this move as being part of a trend to shift attention away from the models and on to the clothes. By not presenting their clothes on the ‘star body’ of the fashion model, designers such as McQueen imply ‘a refusal to conform to the idea of the fashionable body… The model is made obsolete by a process of depersonification that allows the clothing to become the body.’

This impulse however also goes hand in hand with the realisation that clothing without the model is not quite complete; fashionable clothing without the fashionable body almost fails to qualify as ‘fashion’, it risks sliding into the alternative categories of either ‘clothing’ or ‘art’ (plates 4.7 and 4.8). On this view, the thin body is a compromise. As has been observed in reference to the frail figures sculpted by Giacometti, thinness gives the impression of distance even when the object is seen from up close. A similar sort of optical illusion can explain the appeal of the thin model to the fashion creator—the body ‘fades away’ allowing the clothing to occupy the foreground. The thinner the model, the more likely this is to be achieved; androgynous in Calvin Klein jeans and singlet or overtly feminine as an eighteenth century countess the model retains a presence but her body

---

does not interfere with the clothes, in the service of fashion it becomes an apparition that does not compete with what she is selling.

4.3 **Heroic flesh, saintly bones**

Commercial imperatives alone, however, cannot explain the sublimation of the model’s body into the performance of fashion. Neither, for aesthetic reasons, is there much imperative for fashion to discard the body completely as is implied in Khan’s suggestion that ‘clothing become the body’. A more likely scenario is that fashion is inclined to create the model in its own image. Set within the context of the history of western image making there is nothing new in the authority of dress over the female body which, even when unadorned, retains the imprint of fashionable clothing. As with the reader of the fashion magazine mentioned above, the student of western art will find a lack of heterogeneity in the female figure of any given era. This, as Anne Hollander has shown, has less to do with purely artistic principles than with the power of clothing to determine how the body is represented.

This is not to say that art did not conform to its own aesthetic rules. Renaissance artists were governed by classical principles that defined beauty in the human figure as perfect proportion and this legacy became institutionalised practice in the late seventeenth century. Drawing from life was as much about controlling imperfections and normalising vision as it was an attempt to capture natural effects with the artist—who was aware of the proportions of the ideal body—being expected to correct flaws as he or she drew. But beauty, even classical perfection, is always open to
interpretation. The nude figure, over any given period of time, will more closely resemble other contemporary representations than a similar nude of another era; a correspondence also exists between the nude and the clothed figure of a given era. This is explained by Hollander:

Changes in fashion alter the look of clothes, but the look of the body has to change with it. An image of the body that is absolutely free of any counterimage of clothing is virtually impossible. Thus all nudes in art since modern fashion began are wearing the ghosts of absent clothes—sometimes highly visible ghosts.  

It is not the undressed figure of any given time then that gives clothing its form, rather the predominant style in clothing, the dressed figure, will determine what is considered beautiful in the nude. Tradition dictates that this rule applies more so to women than to men.

From the outset, the inherent appeal of the interplay of flesh and fabric has held the artistic imagination in thrall and this was particularly the case with the female figure as artistic convention in early Greece decreed that women should be represented clothed. In Hesiod’s accounts of the creation of the first woman, Pandora, she is ‘dressed and adorned in a gleaming white garment’ even before she is endowed with life and, in Greek art, Aphrodite does not emerge in absolute nakedness until the late fourth century B.C. In contrast to the concern over female nudity was the veneration of the perfect beauty of the naked male which was celebrated in statues of

---


218 Peter Raissis, ‘Drapery and Display’. In Terence Maloon & Peter Raissis, eds, *Michaelangelo to Matisse: Drawing the Figure* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1999), 61.
proud, full frontal nudity. Nakedness was considered the appropriate costume for the idealised male (to clothe Apollo would be regarded as an insulting denial of his divinity) while modesty was deemed a suitable function of clothing for women. The effect of this disparity between the representation of the sexes is one where clothing, when incorporated into the male statue, serves to emphasise the bare beauty of the male body whereas in female statuary the body is often distorted at the service of delicately draped marble folds. The *Apollo Belvedere*, states Hollander, wears his cape elegantly draped across one shoulder to fall down behind so that the viewer is not deprived of the pleasure of beholding his full nakedness. The body of the *Ceres* in the Vatican Sala Rotunda, on the other hand, is sculpted with disproportionately broad shoulders, an excessively wide chest and misplaced breasts in order that the folds of her robe lie across her upper body in ‘a satisfying system of hills and channels’.  

(See plate 4.9) Presumably, fashionable women of antiquity, trying to emulate the images of perfection surrounding them, could empathise with modern women who complain of the impossibility of looking like the current ideal; modern attempts to recreate the female dress of Greek statues on living models have not met with success, the breasts and curves of the actual body, rather than assertively thrusting through the fabric, vanish under the woolen folds.

The lavish attention given to drapery by the ancients did not go unappreciated by artists of the Renaissance who adapted pagan aesthetics to Christian art, shifting the focus from an abstract interest in drapery and endowing it with the ability to evoke

---

219 Kenneth Clark dates the nude Venus earlier than Hollander, in the 5th century, but this was very rare. Statues of nude Apollo date from 600 BC. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (London: John Murray, 1956), 26.

220 Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, 3. Greek costume consisted of a completely untailored garment, there were a very small number of types of costume in Ancient Greece and Rome but there was enormous creativity in how this was worn, the artistry of drapery was appreciated in and of itself in life as well as art. See Francois Boucher, *A History of Costume in the West* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966, 1996), 103.
spiritual, moral and emotional intent. Because of its classical and heroic allusions, drapery was used by Michaelangelo and the Mannerists to signify transcendence while Raphael and his followers, used it to help idealise the world of mortals, serving to ‘thicken and weight and slow down the human figure and thereby solemnify its movements.’ In historical and religious paintings, the desirable bulkiness of fashionable dress was adapted to the robed garments of saints, which leant themselves easily to the heavy, aggrandizing possibilities offered by drapery. And in all kinds of portraits of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fashionable costume imitated the effects of drapery, appropriating the idealising, spiritual connotations it had acquired. This is evident in the stiff but voluminously padded, slashed and ruched fashions seen in sixteenth century portraits and in the déshabillé and negligée styles of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries where untidy drapery becomes elegant dress, billowing and flowing around the sitter, a drawing room Venus in a silken ocean. (See plates 1.3, 4.10 and 4.11.)

Fullness in the clothed figure required a concomitant richness in paintings of the unclothed figure. In Michaelangelo, the Greek male ideal is thickened in the torso, the arms and legs rippling with muscular energy of an almost crushing strength; the exposed arms and shoulders of his sibyls in the Sistine Chapel are, despite their sex, massively Herculean and his Eves, like the bodies of nymphs, goddesses and odalisques of those artists who displayed more interest than Michaelangelo in the female nude form, appear to have a heavily quilted underlay beneath their skin. In Rubens, their already substantial form is given extra bulk by being draped in flesh that wrinkles and puckers, capturing and reflecting a multifaceted luminescence. But even

---

221 Hollander, Seeing Through Clothes, 52.
when flesh is stretched smoothly over languid limbs, from about 1500 through to the First World War, feminine beauty in art rarely deviated from the rule that regarded bones as unsightly (plate 4.12).

Hollander makes clear that this ideal was not universally achieved outside of art, just as universal slenderness in the twentieth century is a myth beyond the pages of fashion magazines. Modern fashion photographers may slice off what is considered to be ungainly ‘sag’ but artists from earlier eras were accustomed to lovingly adding it on. The leading academic artist during the reign of Louis XV, Francois Boucher, was known to have drawn from life using his wife, among others, as his model. In his finished paintings, his women are luxuriously padded but preliminary studies revealing musculature and bones indicate that, like Rubens, he improved upon the raw materials of the body by plumping up his female figures with flesh. Kenneth Clark points out that such adjustments were not restricted to the transition from life to art. The Venus of Arles, a replica of one of Praxiteles famous statues of the goddess, was refashioned to contemporary taste by the sculptor Girardon who, following the instructions of Louis XIV, not only added arms and changed the angle of the head but smoothed down the whole body as the King found the sight of ribs and muscles offensive.

The Renaissance interest in the Greek nude as a heroic body rescued the scrawny, crudely formed Christian body of the early Middle Ages from its shamefully naked state by asserting the oneness of spirit and body: physical perfection expressed spiritual victory. In Michaelangelo’s *Creation of Adam*, creator and created face each other as mirror images of the Greek ideal and, in the hands of Michaelangelo and
Raphael and their followers, the figure at the centre of innumerable *Pietas*, *Crucifixions* and *Entombments* adopts the pumped up muscular form of Arnold Schwarzenegger, doubling in size from his withered Medieval state. The unclothed female body is extremely rare in pre-Renaissance Christian art but Eve too is re-formulated from a brutal figure cowering in the consciousness of sin (plate 4.13) to a voluptuous Venus. Yet, in what Kenneth Clark terms ‘the alternative convention’, the unity of spirit and body is expressed in a distinctly unclassical body that betrays a lingering Early Medieval appreciation of thinness.

Artists in the Gothic North were less influenced by Classical proportions than their Italian counterparts, and felt no need to swathe skeletal structure and musculature in comfortable layers of flesh. German and Flemish nudes of the early Renaissance favoured a delicately attenuated female form with a clearly discernible bony framework, similar to that admired by modern taste. Nonetheless, until the late eighteenth century, when the ubiquitous lushly bulging stomach was replaced by the breasts, buttocks and, later, a tiny waist as the source of erotic imagination in Europe, even the scrawniest nude featured a fashionably protuberant belly and an incongruously padded jaw line (plate 4.14). In the South, the Gothic ideal could be used to intriguing effect by capitalising on the contradictory significations of flesh and bone. In Pisanello’s drawing of Luxuria, copied from the Bacchic sarcophagi in the Campo Santo, the malevolence of the neirid is expressed through her distance from the Classical ideal, her sinewy, sharply boned frame embodying, in the words of Clark, ‘an evil thinness, a kind of Baudelairian corruption’.222 (See plate 4.15) This almost Medusian depravity, though, is countered by her curved belly and pretty, softly

---

222 Clark, *The Nude*, 278.
rounded face. Such concessions to fashionable sensuality give the nude an erotic charm that, combined with the lack of flesh elsewhere on the body, create an appropriate effect of simultaneous repulsion and attraction.

The moral position that equates thinness and evil, assumed in Clark’s description of Luxuria, is derived from the Classical notion of flesh as heroic; the Gothic tradition, informed by the Christian Middle Ages, holds an antithetical view that connects flesh to decay, mortality and sin. This sentiment was not exclusive to Gothic art, indeed it is one that is always present, if somewhat submerged, in all Western art, but in Northern Europe it was interpreted artistically to produce an analogous connection between visible bone structure and spirituality. This is not without basis in actuality; in Christianity and many other faiths thinness is more saintly, more holy or more noble because of a tradition of self-starvation and self-mortification as part of an economy of sacrifice. The martyred Saint Catherine, who gave up food in order to incorporate the word of God, and Saint Teresa, another holy anorectic, both belong to this tradition of visionary starvation. To the austere Northern sensibility, it was thinness—with its ability to express denial, restraint and suffering—not flesh that was heroic. In our own times where, as Maud Ellman writes, ‘The fat woman…has come to embody everything the prosperous must disavow: imperialism, exploitation, surplus value, maternity, mortality, abjection, and unlovliness,’ this mystical, holy aspect of thinness continues to play a part in the idealisation and valorisation of the thin body.

4.4 Consumptive chic

The mode for boneless femininity in art appears more uniformly across Europe after the sixteenth century due to the artistic and cultural hegemony of the Italians and, later, the French. Although overall slenderness is often admired in both the clothed and the nude female body, exaggerated slenderness, unnatural length of limb and self-conscious elegance of bearing were seen as a conscious rejection of the classical norm. Such traits defined the ‘unnatural’, chic style of the Fontainebleau mannerists whose physical ideal Kenneth Clark dismisses as ‘the eternal feminine of the fashion-plate.’²²⁴ Elongation and slenderness, at least in art, indicated modish elegance from the sixteenth century but, as we have seen, it is not until after the First World War that the bony female body is confirmed as a feminine ideal. By then, the artistic eye had already transferred its allegiance to thinness; in the March, 1914 issue of *Art and Progress*, the art critic Ezra Tharp defended the insubstantiality of Thomas Wilmer Dewing’s women by declaring that it was ‘part of their modernness—thinness being a modern and an American ideal…after all there is nothing so handsome as a skeleton, as the drop and set and hang of the bones.’²²⁵ The genesis for this physical type, however, emerged much earlier in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist artists who, from about the mid-nineteenth century, revitalised the notion of heroic suffering as being suitably embodied in an etiolated, wasted frame.

Despite the mythological and legendary subject matter preferred by the Pre-Raphaelite artists, their aesthetic purpose was realism and the models they used

---

²²⁴ Clark, *The Nude*, 130. Although the Fontainebleau school manifested interest in a less dumpy feminine ideal, this was an aberration and the dominance of Boucher in the eighteenth century and Ingres in the nineteenth reveal the reinstatement of rounded femininity at the Salon.
²²⁵ Reference details missing.
reflected their rejection of the principles of the idealised body of the Academy. Jane Burden, who became the wife of William Morris and the mistress of Gabriel Dante Rossetti, was dark and sullen, tall and thin and it has been speculated that the gaunt, haunted looks of Rosetti’s wife, Elizabeth Siddal, were the result of anorexia, which in the nineteenth century was usually misdiagnosed as consumption. Siddal was already weak when she was discovered working in a milliner’s shop, and came close to death after spending days lying in tepid water posing for John Everett Millais’ *Ophelia*. Her fragile pallor, thrown into relief by waist-length auburn hair, gave her a spectral quality perfectly suited to posing as the ailing, wretched, mentally unstable and dead women that populate Pre-Raphaelite art (plate 4.16). Ill-health and premature death (from an overdose of laudanum prescribed for depression following the death of a stillborn child) only increased the appeal of Siddal’s type of beauty at a time when writers and artists on both sides of the Atlantic mythologised and romanticised a femininity defined by passivity, helplessness and sacrifice. The predilection of these artists for a certain ‘fatal slimness’ developed into a healthier slender ideal towards the turn of the century as women discovered the pleasures and benefits of physical activity. Nonetheless, the defining look of elegant thinness that soon dominated the new century is always haunted by the image of the passionately wilting heroine, whose status as victim or martyr was often charged with a sadistic, exploitative prurience.

The ubiquity of this type of heroine was a feature of Romantic literature and poetry and lead to the creation of an alternative physical ideal that was celebrated in the work

---

226 After a visit to the Rosetti household, Ford Madox Brown wrote: ‘Miss Siddal looking thinner and more death-like and more beautiful and more ragged than ever … a woman without parallel for a long year.’ Quoted in Debra N. Mancoff, *Jane Morris: The Pre-Raphaelite Model of Beauty* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2000), 18.
of Rosetti, Millais, Edward Burne-Jones, John William Waterhouse, Gustave Moreau and others throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{227} Her defining characteristics evolved out of the lofty ideals of the Romantic Movement, which had developed in Germany, France and England towards the end of the eighteenth century in reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment intellectuals who were perceived as advocating calculating utilitarianism over feeling, passion and emotion. The disciples of the new philosophy rejected pleasure, worldly success and stability to elevate suffering, failure, intensity of feeling, martyrdom and defiance to the level of sacred values. In the struggle to fight for a passionately held belief or cause, death was ‘brave, right and honourable.’\textsuperscript{228} At their extreme, these beliefs were held by only a minority but they left an imprint on political and artistic practice that had profound effects in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The sentiment expressed by Diderot: ‘Action is the soul of the world, not pleasure… Without action all feeling and knowledge is nothing but postponed death.’\textsuperscript{229} is emblematic of the Romantic hyperbole that eventually contributed to violent outbreaks against oppression across Europe. England’s most famous Romantic poet, Byron, who died in Greece fighting for just such a cause, was an exemplar of the philosophy, and in his declaration that, ‘the great object in life is sensation…to feel that we exist—even in pain,’ can be seen the unequivocal credo that he bequeathed upon future generations.\textsuperscript{230}

The role of the Romantic hero, then, was clear—active defiance of social convention and malevolent authority, attaining glory in bloodshed was all the better if the blood

\textsuperscript{227} The counterpart to the Romantic-woman-as-persecuted-woman was her antithesis, the \textit{femme fatale}, a type in which the gender of the sadistic and masochistic roles was switched.


\textsuperscript{229} Berlin, ‘The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will’, 229

\textsuperscript{230} Berlin, 229. Byron himself was somewhat averse to food and declared women should never be seen eating or drinking except lobster salad or champagne.
was one’s own. The Romantic heroine, on the other hand, silently accepting her own oppression in a suffocatingly patriarchal society, is excluded from the action-packed gallantry of the battle and the barricades but not from passionate suffering, denial and martyrdom; nowhere are the obligations of the Romantic heroine more sublimely fulfilled than on a sick-bed, tragically succumbing to the choking hands of consumption. In Verdi’s La Traviata, Violetta sacrifices her happiness and life for her lover, Alfredo, at the request of his bourgeois father. As she dies, a mysterious force lifts her frail form and the repentant father and son mourn her departed soul. A popular device on the stage, the fashion for consumptive heroines is also manifested throughout Romantic novels, literature, and poetry. Admittedly, it was a plot device with a firm grounding in reality; the storyteller most admired by Baudelaire, Edgar Allen Poe, had a life marred by consumption losing both his mother and, later, his child bride to the disease. This dual tragedy infected the tone and theme of his writing, as evidenced in his declaration that the most poetical topic in the world was unquestionably the death of a beautiful woman, advice that was taken to heart by the author of Ode to Consumption who begins his poem with the line, ‘There is a beauty in woman’s decay.’

In nineteenth century society, especially at a time of rampant tuberculosis, the fact that thinness could denote either illness or poverty (or both) meant that the underfed frame posed a threat to stolidly bourgeois values. The vision of beauty that best represented these values is found in Ingres’ portraits of plump, rosy-cheeked grandes dames, respectable bourgeoises and sumptuously curved odalisques and bathers who, when they are not caressing their richly displayed silk gowns or strands of pearls, are

---

231 Cited in Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1933,
portrayed placidly resting their double chins in their dimpled little hands (plate 4.17). In reaction to what Clive Bell described as Ingres’ ‘hearty appetite of a great eueptic bourgeois’ \(^{232}\) arose an underground style that could be identified as consumptive chic.\(^{233}\) This was a conception of beauty that was enhanced by exactly those qualities which seem to deny beauty. ‘Gradually,’ writes Hollander, ‘the look of sickness, the look of poverty, and the look of nervous exhaustion were… able to acquire the visual authority of a fashionable ideal type…’\(^{234}\) In the heartbroken, consumptive Violetta, Baudelaire’s definition of beauty as ‘quelque chose d’ardent et triste’ is fulfilled, her impending death ensuring an exquisite poignancy to her ephemeral beauty. But in the poet’s praise for ‘skeleton-like beauty’, the Nympha macabre, the dark side of the Romantic admiration for ‘beauty tainted with pain, corruption and death’ is exposed. Baudelaire’s tastes echo those of Sir John Lambert who was well-known in pre-revolutionary Paris for liking only women of ‘a dangerous thinness’ and for his arranging on armchairs his collection of mummies.\(^{235}\) In Emile Zola’s Thérèse Raquin, the character of Laurent wanders through the morgue, his initial disgust at the blood spattered bodies laid out on grey slabs giving way to fascination then ‘fearful desire’ as his gaze falls upon the naked corpse of ‘a girl who had hanged herself out of unrequited love.’\(^{236}\) Clearly, there is more going on here than an appreciation for a beauty heightened by impassioned sadness.

---

1954), 27.
233 The contemporary term was ‘consumptive sublime’. Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity, 29.
234 Hollander, Seeing Through Clothes, 151. Dijkstra argues that physical weakness in women came to be seen as evidence of spiritual purity, delicacy and good breeding, with the result that a cult of invalidism spread through women of the leisure class, whose bed-ridden lifelessness, disguised as helpless elegance, could be viewed as a rarely admitted expression of the ‘conspicuous leisure’ Veblen wrote of as being an essential indicator of the Victorian husband’s wealth and social position. She quotes from Abba Goold Woolson, a nineteenth century writer on American mores who describes the fad of women starving themselves in a form of ‘slow suicide’ in an attempt to acquire the look of tubercular virtue. Women in America, 1873. Cited in Dijkstra Idols of Perversity, 29.
235 Praz, The Romantic Agony, footnote 37, p.49.
236 Emile Zola, Thérèse Raquin, trans. L.W. Tancock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 109. The German artist Albert von Keller, in a quest for accuracy, visited the morgue to paint the facial expressions and bodies
Sadism, masochism and necrophilia are not the only sexual perversions poeticised by Romantic writers and artists; the underlying meaning of the Symbolist painter, Gustave Moreau’s androgynous figures, writes Praz, is incest. The frail Romantic heroine with the tortured eyes may have been on the road to becoming a new ideal but, given the baggage she carried, it is not surprising that her appearance could upset the comfortable prudery of the nineteenth century bourgeois.

4.5 Junkie Chic

In our own times, thinness retains a suggestive power that can still provoke moral outrage. In the millennium script the victim is not a chaste, virtuous girl who is violated and left to languish in a dungeon, but a young innocent who has been lured into the venal world of fashion where middle-aged men with unplaceable accents and year-round tans act as pimps and pushers, promising glamour and fortune but delivering only disillusion and dependency. Like the heroine of Richardson’s Clarissa (another ‘lovely skeleton’) she starves herself, but not as a perverse act of revenge against a rape but, it is said, because of the demands of a creatively void fashion industry, which needs the shock value and publicity that promoting death and drugs provide. The contemporary persecuted woman is a fashion model, her disease: anorexia, addiction, ennui. Her image is inescapable, precariously preserved in the pages of fashion magazines or on advertising billboards where she (or he—

---

of corpses. Von Keller did not attempt to disguise the correlation he made between female eroticism and sacrifice; his painting Moonlight (or Martyr) 1894 depicts the body of a naked woman, tied Christ-like to a cross and in his notes he compares the faces of ‘girls and women who had died a natural death’ with ‘the miraculous expression of a woman who is in love to the point of ecstasy’. (Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity: 54)

androgynous appeal ensuring, for once, an almost equal role for the male model) affects the same attitude of lassitude, enervation, self absorption and spiritual onanism captured in the canvases of Rossetti and Moreau. (See plates 4.18, 4.19 and 4.20.) The fashion world that has created her condition is widely condemned as promoting unhealthy role models for adolescent girls, of encouraging eating disorders, and glamourising drug abuse. Headlines are made, letters are written, committees formed and the President of the United States of America makes a public address, condemning the malevolent trend of ‘heroin chic’.

A front-page story in the New York Times on May 20, 1997 was the catalyst for President Clinton’s awakening to the fundamental problem facing the militia in the drug wars, and a long month of public soul-searching by fashion industry insiders.239 The article described how three months after the fatal overdose of twenty year old photographer Davide Sorrenti, magazine editors were beginning to acknowledge that layouts of models apparently affected by drug use—slumped over toilet seats, passed out in dingy rooms, in police line-ups with visible trackmarks, and generally vacant, hungover and wasted—were irresponsibly glamourising the reality of eating disorders and drug use by models, photographers, designers, stylists, and others in the fashion industry.240 (See plate 4.21.) Sorrenti, whose final fashion photos in Detour magazine were text book examples of the condemned aesthetic, was represented as

---

238 This ‘script’ was the centre of a controversial BBC documentary, MacIntyre Undercover, and is the theme running through Michael Gross, The Model: The Ugly Business of Beautiful Women (London: Bantam, 1995).

239 Amy M. Spindler, ‘A Death Tarnishes Fashion’s “Heroin Look”’, New York Times, May, 20, 1997:1. Clinton spoke about the problem a few days later, saying that he had been alerted to the problem by the Times piece. In his speech to mayors gathered to discuss the ‘war on drugs’ he misrepresented the role that heroin played in drug-taking by youth, exaggerating its usage and condemning the fashion industry. The Council of Fashion Designers subsequently set up a committee to formulate plans to fight illegal drugs and promote healthier role models. NYT June 10, 1997: B13.

240 The look became so prevalent that it inspired parodies of itself, eg., ‘Hey, hey we’re the junkies’, which suggests an irony to the aesthetic overlooked by its critics.
simultaneously victim and advocate of a competition to appear the most decadent, the
most hip. His death produced a spate of (mostly) contrite statements by the accused
and five weeks after the appearance of the article it was reported that (male) models
were being advised by their agents to get to the gym as designers were now ‘looking
for guys who were built and muscular’ and that the fey, waif look was out. 241

The controversy generated by Sorrenti’s death and Clinton’s response was only the
culmination of a series of outcries against a look that had been, in one form or
another, a major current for most of the nineties. The short-lived fashion of grunge,
deconstruction fashion, the Prada-led 1970s ‘bad taste’ retro style of polyester service
uniforms in faded linoleum colours, minimalism, customised clothing and anti-
designer fashion and the popularity of the waif-like model (Kate Moss first appeared
on the cover of The Face in 1989, aged fifteen) were conscious attempts to provide an
antidote to the colourful, flashy 1980s fashions and the reign of the supermodel.
Overtly young, urban, uncommercial and easy to copy, the look suited a style of
photography that was being showcased in cutting edge ‘style’ magazines like The
Face, i-D, Detour and Dazed and Confused. The look continued a tradition of a style
of fashion photography that, beginning in the 1950s, borrowed the techniques of
social documentary much in the same way that fashion had always drawn upon artistic
movements to mask its commercial roots. Throughout the 1980s, i-D and The Face
had been challenging the mainstream representation of fashion as a glamorous visual
fantasy, inaccessible to all but a conventionally beautiful few, by publishing the
fashions and people found on the street rather than in exclusive boutiques and exotic
locations. But the look pioneered by the group which has been labeled the ‘school of

London’ broke new ground by presenting ‘a realism never witnessed before within fashion photography’. However, by 1993 the aesthetic could be found in establishment publications such as British Vogue, which published an eight-page spread by Corinne Day of an underwear-clad Kate Moss in her rundown London flat (plate 4.22).

At the time, Day and Moss were close friends but the series marked a turning point in both their careers which, in hindsight, has been written into the narrative of the photographs. Moss, on the verge of a huge career that would transform her from teenage girl to commodity, is pictured pale, isolated and withdrawn, the camera capturing a poignant truth that she herself had yet to realise: ‘that it is a sad trade to be a lovely woman’. Hilton Als would later describe these photographs as the ‘first testament to the fashion industry’s now pervasive flirtation with death’ and credit Day with influencing, ‘indeed, defining’, the ad campaigns and pictorials that would predominate in the years that followed. The photographers of this period, who included Day, Juergen Teller, Mario Sorrenti, David Sims, Nick Knight, Terry Richardson, Glen Luchford, Wolfgang Tillmans, and Steven Meisel, took as their premise the understanding that fashion photography, as an applied art, had ‘a wider role than just showing off frocks,’ and gave their editorial layouts a gritty, ordinary, unprofessional feel, emulating the candid, unsparing, ‘realist’ portraits by

---

242 Elliott Smedley, ‘Escaping to Reality: Fashion Photography in the 1990s’, in Fashion Cultures, 147. 243 After this series Moss was advised by her agent against working with Day and the friendship was over. Day never worked for Vogue again and her career as a fashion photographer temporarily faltered. In 1998, Moss was checked into the Priory clinic and treated for exhaustion—she has stated that she had spent the whole time she was modelling drunk, joining a long list of models (including James King, the girlfriend of Davide Sorrenti at the time of his death) who have made ‘confessions’ and written memoirs chronicling their battles with drug abuse and anorexia. 244(‘Que c’est un dur métier que d’être belle femme.’) Baudelaire, ‘Confession’, Les Fleurs du Mal. The translation is by Susan Buck-Morss. 245 Hilton Als, ‘Buying the Fantasy’, The New Yorker. No other details. 246 Lisa Lovatt-Smith, ed., Fashion Image de Modes No. 4 (Steidl, 1999), 7.
photographers from outside the commercial field like Larry Clark, Jim Goldberg and Nan Goldin.

Themselves the centre of controversy, these three typify a genre that documents those living on the margins—drug addicts, transsexuals, drag queens, prostitutes, homeless adolescents—from a putatively non-voyeuristic, participatory perspective. In writing about Clark, Goldberg and Goldin, *The Face* reported that their ‘pictures evidence a fascination with imagery that probes the darker aspects of adolescence: narcotics abuse, suicide, prostitution, AIDS and violence.’ However, as Elliott Smedley points out in his article, ‘Escaping to Reality’, the different context in which documentary photography and fashion photography are viewed impacts upon the way the images they portray are received: ‘seemingly “art photography” and “realist” fashion photography have ostensibly different roles. In fashion’s case, this role is seen as promoting a destructive ideal…within an art context it is seen as making visible the situation and needs of the less fortunate.’

It was the appropriation of this contentious imagery, with its predictably gaunt cast of characters posed in cheap, if not seedy, surroundings, that soon bled its way from the pages of fringe magazines onto the catwalks, billboards and into mainstream publications. The look was watered down—syringes, for example, never made it into a fashion spread—but what was left was an atmosphere of dissolute decadence and ‘young models posed as alienated and disengaged, with numbed or depressed facial expressions and postures, often ultra-thin bodies, and at times distinctly unhealthy

248 Smedley, ‘Escaping to Reality’, 152. Smedley also makes the point that Goldin’s advertising campaign for Matsuda attracted condemnation in a way that had not occurred with similar images that had been part of her gallery work for years.
The preponderance of extreme thinness ignited concerns not only about drug use but also anorexia. The seventeen year-old British model, Jodie Kidd, who became a focus of the debate, appeared so thin, her agent explained, as a result of being ‘stretched out’ after a growth spurt that saw her reach six foot. But in the tabloid press she was ‘SKELETAL JODIE’ who resembled ‘a screwed up kid in an anti-drug campaign’. 

(See plate 4.23) To paraphrase Adam Gopnik, it seemed that, ‘stretched out like taffy’ these girls could be understood only if they appeared to be both modeling and suffering. By the middle of the decade, the look was so entrenched that it was not only models who conformed to the aesthetic but also shop display mannequins, redesigned with snake hips, flat chests and lank hair, moping and slouching as convincingly as the highly paid models of the Calvin Klein ads.

Proponents of the controversial style defended it by claiming that it was an attack on the conventions of fashion photography and iconography with its ‘old notions of beauty, glamour and fantasy.’ By not disguising—even emphasising—the flaws of the model, they produced a more honest way of seeing beauty, one that was not reliant on perfection. To this end, models were replaced by ‘real’ people, friends of the photographer or kids they saw in the street and, in turn, real models aspired to looking increasingly ordinary. (See plate 4.24.) Critics, on the other hand, read it as a desperate attempt at transgression, the cheap trick of an immoral fashion industry bereft of ideas and reduced to the shock value of taboos in order to boost falling sales.

---

252 Corinne Day claimed that she just shot the models (more often friends than professionals) in whatever they happened to be wearing and then attributed the clothes to Helmut Lang or another designer. The desire to look ordinary could backfire on the model – after seeing photos of Kristen McMenamy, Gianni Versace banned her from his shows saying she was not glamorous enough. She responded with photos taken by Juergen Teller of her naked with a ‘Versace’ love heart written across her buttocks in lipstick.
The question asked by an eating disorders expert echoed the sentiments of many: ‘Why would someone want to promote death and drugs anyway’?253

This criticism is, at least in part, unfair; at the couture and commercial fashion houses and in mainstream magazines the response to falling sales was a return to glamour and fashion that looked expensive. Models who had made their name scratching vacantly at their ribs with dirty fingernails either disappeared to work through their angst in a philosophy degree or were bathed, fed, and groomed re-emerging, like Stella Tennant, as the new face of Chanel. Pictures of too-thin models that incited advertisers to withdraw in protest were airbrushed into acceptability, and lenses and angles that exaggerated bone to fat ratios were taken out of the photographer’s box of tricks (plate 4.25). Nonetheless, the question posed by the eating disorders expert remains valid; for a certain section of the market—primarily magazines and labels directed to a consciously young, hip and urban audience—death and drugs did seem to be a valid backdrop to fashion images, even if this was not what they were actively promoting. It is important to note, however, that this was rarely achieved with images as directly related to drug taking as the ones described above; more often a dissolute lifestyle is suggested simply through the thinness of the model. It is thinness (or the air of thinness) that ultimately produces the impression of living dangerously; if dark circles under the eyes, lank hair, a greenish tinge, bruised bodies and insalubrious surroundings suggest a flirtation with an unhealthy, risky lifestyle, then extreme thinness confirms that this is indeed a long term relationship.

253 Dr Suzanne Abrahams quoted in Boshoft, ‘Junkie’s a chic look for models’, Sunday Telegraph.
In her thoughtful article, ‘Thinness and Other Refusals in Contemporary Fashion Advertisements’, discussing the high profile fashion advertisements of Calvin Klein, Prada, Miu Miu and Matsuda that drew heavily upon the maligned aesthetic, Katherine Wallerstein makes the point that even when the models are not all extremely thin (as is the case), their appearance suggests a wasting or wastedness, so in effect, evoking thinness. It is not, she writes, that models had not always been young, thin and affected a blasé manner, it was ‘the deliberate dwelling in an aesthetic of thin, pale withdrawal, an aesthetic of abjection’ that made images of these too thin and too young models so disturbing.254 (See plate 4.26) In her complex reading of these images, Wallerstein does not deny that they do look thin and sometimes do look like they are on drugs (or coming down from drug-induced highs) but argues that the criticism of them as being an incitement to anorexia, as heroin chic or as simply passive disengagement is too simplistic. By drawing on the historical connotations associated with the cult of consumptive beauty in the previous century, the practice of fasting to attain higher spiritual and emotional states, and the romantic figure of the artist starving in a garret, Wallerstein constructs an alternative discourse around thinness. The refusal of nourishment, nurturing, and fulfillment is posited as a deliberately, rebellious act, one that denotes passionate intensity (for emotion, for experience) and a refusal to complete the process of socialisation into categories of identity (male or female, heterosexual or homosexual). Thinness, which can signify a disciplined body, a self-possessed body and a defiant body can thus be understood as ‘the supremacy of lack’, and the figures in the ads read not as enacting ‘passive hunger but an active hungering.’255 Wallerstein concludes by expressing a hope that her method of placing contentious images of models who are ‘withdrawn, disaffected

and unhealthful’ into the context of various avant-gardes and counter cultures will help explain, to the sceptical viewer, the appeal of these images.

But Wallerstein can only translate the gaunt, hollow-eyed faces, the wasted bodies into an acceptable, almost paradoxically life-affirming image by downplaying the darker side of the counter cultures and practices she invokes. What both the person disturbed by and the person attracted to images of wasting youth is responding to, in part, is the nihilism of nothingness, of non-existence. It seems difficult to speak of those who are inspired to fast for a spiritual, moral, artistic or political cause without also bringing to mind the end point of self-starvation: the suicide which is ‘murder by proxy’ of the politically motivated hunger striker, or the bones ‘clad with skin’ that constitute the corpse of the anorectic.\(^{256}\) Similarly, sublimating the figure that appears to have over-indulged in drug-induced highs to romantic outlaw ignores the potential incidence of overdose. And finally, the romantic fetishisation of the thin, etiolated tubercular body, as I have described above, is also a fetishisation that combines beauty and youth with death and decay. Rather than denying the morbid tendency of these images, I would place them in a fashion historical context and argue that they represent a resurfacing of fashion’s abiding fascination with the theme of death and decay.

At the height of the junkie chic aesthetic, a fashion spread appeared in *The Face* using x-ray photography to reveal true skeletal thinness and long after all the moral outrage had subsided the magazine published a spread by Guido Mocafico where the ‘model’

\(^{255}\) Wallerstein, 147.
\(^{256}\) Twenty per cent of anorectics die of the disease. The phrases belong to Maud Ellmann.
was an actual skeleton (plates 4.27 and 4.28). These parodic tributes to the victory of the discourse of bone over the discourse of flesh show the fashionable body performing the role of the *momento mori*, recalling a long tradition in western art that embodies death in an emaciated frame (plate 4.29). In stripping away all the flesh of the model to reveal the corpse that lurks beneath, what these images from *The Face* make overt is not just the endgame of falling for a dangerous lifestyle (albeit, tongue-in-cheek) but also the endgame of fashion itself. In the ultimate signification of thinness—death—fashion finds a parallel to the suicidal economy that is the necessary condition of its precarious yet eternal existence. This idea is taken up in the following section where I argue that it is an instinctive understanding of this metaphysical state of fashion that has infiltrated fashion photography since early last century.

---

257 This inevitably reignited the debate over fashion images and concerns regarding anorexia.
Section III

Fashion’s Transformations
Introduction to Section III

Image/Clothing/Body

III.1 Image-clothing

The first chapter of Roland Barthes’, *The Fashion System*, begins with the statement, ‘I open a fashion magazine’. His response to this quotidian action surprises the unsuspecting reader with a maze of symbols, tables and analytical tools drawn from structural linguistics. This preoccupation with the verbal language of fashion is the unavoidable outcome of his intention to undertake a semiological study of the subject, an approach which, in his preface, Barthes readily acknowledges will disappoint. Not surprisingly, *The Fashion System* is notorious amongst readers for its seemingly perverse and frustrating eclipsing of what is most seductive not only about Barthes’ writing but also about fashion in general.

Barthes’ determination to analyse fashion from within the paradigm of structural linguistics encourages a methodology that puts the caption that accompanies the fashion photograph, or illustration, at the core of his exploration of the fashion system. This decision seems to go against the common experience of both real and represented fashion as being an essentially visual, if not tactile, medium. In defense of his decision to concentrate on the translation of clothing into language he argues that, when it comes to the specific object of the garment of fashion, the temporal relationship is such that written language is constitutive to the object. He writes, ‘without discourse there is no total Fashion, no essential Fashion. It thus seemed unreasonable to place the reality of clothing before the discourse of Fashion: true
reason would in fact have us proceed from the instituting discourse to the reality which it constitutes. This is not to say that fashion as a whole can be reduced to a linguistic entity but rather that, attached to the word ‘Fashion’, are numerous concepts and images that are made meaningful by language. It is through language that the discourse of fashion is primarily created, defined, explained and determined, allowing for the continual shifting of its boundaries and parameters, establishing, for example, what is ‘in’ and ‘out’ of fashion or what ‘is’ and ‘is not’ fashion. In the specific instance taken by Barthes—the fashion magazine—it is the caption—text—that controls the promiscuity of the image.

Accordingly, when Barthes opens a fashion magazine he sees two different garments. The first garment is photographed or drawn and belongs to the category of ‘image-clothing’. The second is the same garment transformed into language and describes the dress in the photograph; this he calls ‘written clothing’. Both these garments refer ‘in principle’ to another one, that which belongs to ‘real-clothing’ and exists as a ‘concrete item that the first two types are supposed to represent’. Image-clothing and written clothing are referring to the same real garment but it does not follow that they have the same structure. Barthes describes the substance of image-clothing as being ‘forms, lines, surfaces, colors’ and the relation of these substances is spatial. In written clothing, the substance is words and the relation is, ‘if not logical, at least,

---

259 For this reason, when fashion images are reproduced in another context—for example, as art objects in a gallery or book, as social or political artefacts in newspapers or historical and cultural studies—they are invariably reproduced without the original captions. This is not simply an aesthetic decision but one that allows the image to shift into or overlap with different categories of meaning and representation, that is, to be meaningful according to the terms of the discourse of art, feminism, history, etc.
If, writes Barthes, image-clothing and written clothing are not the same then one could at least expect that they recover a single identity in the actual dress to which they refer. But this is not the case. The real garment may serve as a model for image-clothing and written clothing but, in the same way that the latter possess ‘a difference in substances and relations, and thus a difference of structure’ so too does real clothing. In addition to these three distinctions there is another category, ‘the used garment’, which describes the life of the garment once it has entered into the dimension of consumption.

The relationship of the garment to the dimensions of production, distribution and consumption is crucial to Barthes’ analysis. The temporal relationship of image-clothing and written clothing—which correspond to the dimension of distribution—places represented clothing at the centre of production and consumption but it is also central in another sense; it creates a need for these dimensions which otherwise would not exist. It is the discourse of fashion—and here, Barthes gives precedence to the written garment—that, in industrial society, blunts ‘the buyer’s calculating consciousness’ and encourages her to participate in ‘an act of annual potlatch’ replacing the garment long before it is no longer serviceable. Thus fashion, for Barthes, resides in the word; it is essentially linguistic. It is discourse that creates the short life span of the fashion object, injecting it with its ephemeral, flighty essence; without discourse there would be no ‘Fashion’.

While it may be difficult to agree with his demotion of the constitutive role of image-clothing to fashion it is, nonetheless, possible to appreciate Barthes’ justification for

---

261 Barthes, 3.
his focus on written clothing as it does manage to shift the definition of fashion away from the thing that is manufactured and/or worn to the thing that exists only as representation and meaning. What becomes clear in Barthes’ analysis is that a picture of a dress is not a dress. This contradicts the underlying assumption that the real garment is the same as the represented garment. (This is especially prevalent in costume histories that go to great lengths to establish the correspondence between an actual and represented piece of clothing.) While it is possible for a real garment to become a used garment—that is, to enter into the dimension of consumption—written clothing and image-clothing can never be anything other than what they are; you cannot wear a photograph, neither can you, except metaphorically, throw on a coat of words.\(^{264}\) What this means is that represented clothing does not have the other potential modalities contained in real and used clothing. Barthes explains: “‘Real’ clothing is burdened with practical considerations (protection, modesty, adornment); these finalities disappear from ‘represented’ clothing, which no longer serves to protect, to cover, or to adorn, but at most to signify protection, modesty, or adornment.”\(^{265}\)

However, on his view, image-clothing retains a set of values that differentiates it from written clothing and thus risks complicating the purity of its analysis; the importance of written clothing is precisely in what it lacks, in what it is unable to do; having no plastic qualities it also has, uniquely, no practical or aesthetic function. Being ‘entirely

\(^{262}\) Barthes, 4.

\(^{263}\) Barthes, xi-xii.

\(^{264}\) With the popularity of retro and vintage clothing as current fashion used garments can also become real garments, going from the dimension of consumption into the dimension of distribution, thus reversing the process.

\(^{265}\) Barthes, _The Fashion System_, 8. It can be seen here that the considerations of ‘real’ clothing are similar to the considerations of the fashion buyer or the tabloid journalist at the seasonal collections. Part of the discourse of the _haute couture_ parades involves the “unwearability” of what is being shown.
constituted with a view to signification’, and ‘unencumbered by any parasitic
function’ or ‘vague temporality’, the sole content of the verbal description of clothing
in the fashion magazine is ‘Fashion’. \(^{266}\) Image-clothing, on the other hand, Barthes
only allows to ‘be fashionable (it is so by its very definition), but it cannot be Fashion
directly; its materiality, its very totality, its evidence, so to speak, make the Fashion it
represents an attribute and not a being. \(^{267}\) In short, the dress in a photograph (without
description) may also be something other than fashionable, (for example, ‘warm,
strange, attractive, modest, protective etc.’) whereas, ‘on the contrary, this same dress,
described, can only be Fashion itself.’ \(^{268}\) Barthes’ rigid definition seems to rest on the
possible relationship or otherwise that image-clothing and written clothing can have
with the reader of the magazine. The former can intoxicate with aesthetic plenitude or
initiate identification fantasies, effectively replacing the need to make any purchase at
all. The latter, however, ‘rids the garment of all corporeal actuality’ and thus cannot
satisfy in itself but only by encouraging the purchase of the garment described. \(^{269}\)

In reducing fashion to the level of written clothing, Barthes is able to sift through and
shift away from commonsense definitions of fashion and thus makes an important
contribution to the study of fashion and clothing as a system. \(^{270}\) This notwithstanding,
by any standards it seems unreasonable to expect an entity whose life-blood relies on
being seen to accept the vaporised state of a verbal structure as its most pure form.
There is, however, a way of looking at the manifestations of fashion whereby it can be
reconciled with the spirit, if not the letter, of Barthes’ stringent definition. In Chapter

\(^{266}\) Barthes, 8.
\(^{267}\) Barthes, 16.
\(^{268}\) Barthes, 16-17.
\(^{269}\) Barthes, 17.
Seven, I consider the possibility of ‘the synthetic ideal’ as a mode of image-clothing that could be construed as a distilled form of written clothing or, at least, share the same qualities. But for the present, I wish to draw a parallel between Barthes’ thinking and the instincts of fashion at its highest level of creative activity where an impulse to distance clothing from function, practicality, use-value or even availability is implicitly held to be evidence of fashion at its most abstract or pure form. This is the imaginary thread woven through the myth of the haute couture collections where there is little expectation that more than a handful of garments will be worn outside the context of the fashion spectacle presented on the catwalk. In this instance, the life trajectory of the garment is not implicated with a body in the way that clothes normally are: it will not adorn, protect, warm or cover in modesty as either real or used clothing.\textsuperscript{271} This is to be seen not as a failing but as a mark of success as the closer that any garment can come towards failing to signify functionality, the more successful it has been in veiling its commercial purpose and perpetuating the idea of its ontological status as art object.

To this end, within the framework of haute couture, there is a more extreme tendency that wants to be absolutely sure that the garment cannot exist as functional or practical to any body at any time. Here one could cite as examples the garments shown on Alexander McQueen’s catwalk mannequins (referred to in Chapter Four) or the shoes from Vivienne Westwood that not even one of the highest paid models in history

\textsuperscript{270} For a discussion on the important contribution of The Fashion System to an understanding of what fashion is, see Michael Carter, Fashion Classics From Carlyle to Barthes (New York & Oxford: Berg, 2003).
\textsuperscript{271} There is, of course, a practical function behind the institution of haute couture as, to use Gilles Lipovetsky’s phrase, ‘advertising pure prestige’. The individual garments from the couture collections may also be sold, used on fashion shoots or worn by stars at public events such as the Academy Awards, but the extreme presentation of the fashion show (with fantastical make-up, hair and over-laden styling) is never repeated. While it may seem that ‘adornment’ is the primary function of these
could wear without falling down (plate III.1). The idea that clothing is adorning the
body is questioned also by incarnations of fashion that share no correspondence with
the human form (plate III.2). Alternatively, the concept of functionality is pushed to
such excess that it becomes meaningless, a denial of what it claims to be. This is the
case with Hussein Chalayan’s collection from Autumn/Winter 2000, ‘Afterwords’,
which was shown at the Sadler’s Wells Theatre in London instead of on the traditional
catwalk. Before a typical fashion week audience, the models on the stage gathered
around a group of chairs and a table which were revealed to be wearable garments—
the covers of the chairs transformed into dresses, the chairs themselves folded into
briefcases and the table concertinaed out to become a skirt (plate III.3). On the face of
it, this appears to be an exceptionally practical approach to clothing the body and
furnishing the home. It is, in fact, neither. One negates the other; even if it is shown
that a table can be a skirt and vice versa, it cannot function as both at the same time.
This is not to deny the startling brilliance and beauty of Chalayan’s design, but rather
to emphasise that the value of the ‘garment’ resides in its futility, its unwearability
ensuring that it remains purely at the level of the abstract with no use-value that is
related to a living body. What we are witnessing instead is fashion as idea. Even
though the ‘garments’ have been produced and have been worn, they do not move out
of the conceptual realm.272 By introducing uncertainty or ambiguity over the category
to which these designs belong—dress, furniture, fashion, art—such conceptual
fashion cannot help but be part of a self-reflexive discourse, operating as its own
caption. This is not, however, a caption that prosaically describes the garment (‘a
table that becomes a skirt’) but one that questions the ontology of fashion itself. In

---

272 This is what differentiates the ‘Afterwords’ collection from Chalayan’s ‘futuristic’ pieces such as
the ‘Long-Jag’ dress which has a built-in headrest for long-distance travel.
doing so it provides an example of (real) fashion that comes closest to existing in the realm of the verbal without sacrificing its right to appear.\textsuperscript{273}

In his preface to \textit{The Fashion System}, Barthes does not pretend that his analysis of the arid language of the fashion caption is other than a semiological project and, as such, does not actually address clothing. Nonetheless, his identification of the three different categories of clothing does produce a valuable insight into where it is that fashion resides in its most undiluted form. As we have seen, for Barthes, the answer is in that part of represented clothing that is written (or described) but, because making an appearance is so fundamental to fashion’s ontological status, any study interested in more than a purely linguistic analysis must locate fashion in image-clothing. It is, however, possible to disagree with Barthes’ assessment but still accept his reasoning: the aesthetic and commercial function of the fashion image, its freezing of an endless number of possibilities of what could (and could not) be considered fashionable, are not attributes of fashion but comprise its being. Representation filters out the practical functions that threaten fashion with becoming a material (as opposed to idealised) mode of being. Paradoxically, the more fashion can be, the more it can do, the less it is fashion. For this reason, interaction with the body (a body whose use-value of fashion is always supplemental to what fashion is willing to provide) diminishes fashion. Put another way: image-clothing is only theoretically clothing and, conversely, real clothing is only theoretically fashion.

\textsuperscript{273} Chalayan himself might refute my assessment of the functionality of these designs but not, I think, my assessment that they are first and foremost presenting fashion as idea. His stated theme of the collection was to imagine a family in times of war who are forced to flee their house with only five or ten minutes to gather their possessions: ‘The idea was to hide those possessions that mean a lot to you: hiding the clothes on chairs, turning the chairs into suitcases, and carrying them away. So it’s like you’ve carried your environment with you.’ Quoted in Nathalie Khan, ‘Catwalk Politics’, in Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, eds, \textit{Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations and Analysis} (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 122.
It is in the image that the transformation from clothing that potentially warms, protects, covers in modesty or adorns the individual and/or social body to an entity that exists only as fashion takes place. The image is fashion’s realm, allowing it to ‘live’ even when it is never ‘imitated’ by the market. In retribution for Alexander McQueen’s defection from his post as designer of Givenchy (owned by fashion baron Bernard Arnault’s LVMH) to the arch-rival fashion conglomerate, Gucci, Arnault promptly announced that the next Givenchy show would be closed to the press. This petulant act was not simply a refusal of publicity; it denied real clothing its essential transformation into image-clothing. This dependence on the two-dimensional representation is imitated in the designer’s atelier. The story is told of Yves Saint Laurent never looking directly at the model wearing the garment but at her image, effectively anticipating the perception of the reader of the fashion magazine. This disregard for what the real looks like, and for what happens to the real, encapsulates the disregard of fashion for its existence beyond the image in the dimension of consumption. Furthermore, the image in the mirror or in the photograph is, crucially, not just of the fashion garment. It is of the fashion garment melded into the same substance as the body of the model. Although this can be said of all images, there is much more at stake in the fashion image where the body competes with fashion over what exactly it is that is being signified or, more to the point, which signifies the most. The counterpart to the real or used garment is the real body or the body in use, and in neither can fashion impose the full presence of its being. This can only occur in representation.
III.2 Image-body

In *The Fashion System*, the categories of image, real and used clothing do not have direct corporeal counterparts. However, Barthes does identify three ways in which the passage from the abstract body to the real body is resolved and his explanation of these three ‘bodies’ serve as useful tools to understanding the relationship between the image and fashion, the image and the ‘real’, and fashion and the ‘real’. The first body proposed by fashion, argues Barthes, is ‘the cover girl’. This ‘ideal, incarnate body’ is the body of the model and ‘represents a rare paradox’ as having both ‘the value of an abstract institution’ and being the body of an individual. In keeping with his structural linguistic paradigm, Barthes finds a correspondence between these two conditions in the system of language, but unlike the oppositions of Language (*Langue*) and Speech (*Parole*) to which, respectively, they correspond, between these two there is no ‘drift’.274 In the case of the cover girl, the structure exists (like ‘Language’) but there is no empirical instance of it (i.e., there is no ‘Speech’). ‘This structural paradox’, writes Barthes, ‘defines the cover girl utterly.’ He continues:

…her essential function is not aesthetic, it is not a question of delivering a “beautiful body”, subject to the canonic rules of plastic success, but a “deformed” body with a view to achieving a certain formal generality, i.e., a structure; it follows that the cover girl’s body is no one’s body, it is a pure form, which possesses no attribute (we cannot say it is *this or that*), and by a sort of tautology, it refers to the garment itself; here the garment is not responsible for signifying a full, slim, or slight body, but, through this absolute body, for signifying itself in its own generality…275

---

275 Barthes, 259.
In general terms, the cover girl is the equivalent of the fashion model but, as construed by Barthes, the term does not refer to a living, breathing person: the cover girl—the fashion model—exists only in the image. As I have suggested from the outset, it is this understanding of the fashion model as image that informs the primary argument of this thesis. In this I make no clear distinction between the model in a fashion photograph and the model on the catwalk—both are apprehended in the realm of representation, as performance, with the appearance on the catwalk neither significantly less intense, less artificial nor less mediated than in her appearance in the photographic image.

The second body proposed by fashion is the ‘fashionable body’. This is established by a yearly or seasonal decree ‘that certain bodies (and not others) are in fashion.’ Although the fashionable body (also characterised by Barthes as, ‘this year’s face’) is ‘fixed abstractly, previously, and externally to any given reality’, it will be ‘immediately incarnated empirically in certain bodies and not in others’. 276 For the red-haired, moon-faced, thin-lipped woman, the sudden ubiquity of the model, Maggie Rizer, has its sartorial equivalent in being told that the muu-muu you have stored in the bottom of a trunk is suddenly the height of fashion. In other words, there is a presumption of prior existence of a real body that already imitates the body in the image. The fashionable body is the structure with the most direct correspondence between the image and the real, but even this correspondence is only coincidental and, because it is determined by the same forces that determine what constitutes fashionable clothing, it is limited by time. Importantly, Barthes underlines the futility of attempts to establish whether the fashionable body is created by the spoken decree

276 Barthes, 259.
or whether the spoken decree is enunciating the real, pointing out ‘that we no longer know whether the structure is inspired by or determines what is real’.  

The third ‘solution’ consists of ‘accommodating clothing in such a way that it transforms the real body and succeeds in making it signify fashion’s ideal body’.  

If, however, the reader finds that they do not possess the fashionable body, fashion, as ‘healing goddess’, promises to transform the real body into the ideal body through the artifice of dress. It is this solution, writes Barthes, that explains ‘a certain feeling of power’ experienced by (and attributed to) fashion: it ‘can convert any sentience into the sign it has chosen, its power of signification is unlimited’.  

The body is ‘dissolved’ in the crucible of fashion. This is the case even when the actual body does not have to change or undergo fashion’s transformations as once it is ‘discovered’ by fashion it is no longer able to be anything but fashionable.

In his analysis Barthes does not consider the body that cannot be transformed. In part, this is because fashion itself does not recognise any failures.  

More fundamentally, however, it is because the body of fashion—image-body—exists only within representation. Just as a picture of a dress is not an actual, material dress, a picture of a model is not the model as a living, breathing entity. The real body and the represented body are not the same. The image of the model does not have to be practical, it does not have to operate as a real body; in representation, then, the body can be seen to operate under the same logic as fashion.

---

277 Barthes, 259.
278 Barthes, 259-60.
279 Barthes, 260.
280 This may explain the complaint of being considered ‘invisible’ by fashion from women who do not fall within its rigid parameters. For fashion they literally do not exist, not in the shops when they go to buy clothes and certainly not in the magazines.
III.3 Counterimage

The previous chapter was, in part, informed by the work of Anne Hollander who forcibly argued, in *Seeing Though Clothes*, that the body in art is strongly influenced by the form of contemporary fashions; in effect, the nude painting or sculpture viewed over time resembles less other nudes than images of *dressed* men and women of the same period. Her point—crucial to the development of my own argument—bears repeating:

Changes in fashion alter the look of clothes, but the look of the body has to change with it. An image of the body that is absolutely free of any counterimage of clothing is virtually impossible. Thus all nudes in art since modern fashion began are wearing the ghosts of absent clothes—sometimes highly visible ghosts.281

The clothing ‘worn’ by Goya’s *Nude Maya*, for example, does not appear in the frame, and yet it has guided the hand of the artist who, ignoring the liberated state of the breasts, waist and stomach of his model, has painted her ‘wearing the ghost of absent clothes’. (See plates III.4 & III.5.) In terms of what has been discussed in the previous chapter, the modern body—both real and image—adapted to the aesthetic appearance of clothing, which in turn had been inspired by the modernist aesthetic informing artistic practice in the early twentieth century. Also discussed was the idea that the fashionably thin frame was not simply re-enacting the clothes or mirroring them but tapping into an (originally) underground aesthetic that poeticised morbid thinness as ephemeral beauty. Such thinness, I have suggested, performs the role of the *momento mori*, referring not necessarily to the literal death of a real body, but to
the metaphorical death that underscores the dark side of fashion’s ability to continually present itself as ‘new’. The notion of the body wearing a ‘counterimage of clothing’, then, can be extrapolated to an understanding of an image-body that is not simply imprinted with the ghost of absent clothes but, rather, can be said to embody the defining characteristics of sartorial fashion as a whole.

From the outset, I have identified the structure or logic of fashion as being reducible to two primary features operating in conjunction with each other—change and artifice. These in turn, I have suggested, metaphorically produce fashion as an interplay between mortality and immortality. By identifying image-clothing and image-body I am hoping to establish that they are the same thing, or merging towards being the same thing. Once the body disappears into the shell of fashion, it no longer signifies as sentient being, it is not considered separate from fashion, simply ‘wearing’ fashion or dressed in fashion, rather, it is fashion.

In some ways this idea is not new—the notion that woman (and to a lesser extent, man) should be understood as a complete ensemble only once dress and the other ‘feminine’ arts are taken into account has been crucial in the determination of ‘femininity’ and, of course, the fashion image has itself played a central role in reinforcing, shifting or challenging ideals of femininity. However, this is not my argument. Rather my intention, in the following chapters, is an exploration of the idea that the fashion image can be guided, not by the desire to display individual fashions, but by the very conditions whereby individual fashions are able to appear. This creates an image of the female body which, although influenced by other systems of

281 Anne Hollander, Seeing Through Clothes (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1975,
representation—art, cinema, celebrity photography, pornography—cannot be adequately explained by these systems. It would be hard to deny that the constant need for inventiveness and novelty—in other words, the fashion system—is a driving force behind many of the images that I discuss. On the other hand, it is precisely because of these demands that those creating the fashion image are pushed to constantly reconsider the form in which fashion is to be represented. Furthermore, the fashion image is, mostly, limited by its subject matter—clothes and body. Unsurprisingly, this has produced a lot of repetition. Less predictably—and this is where my focus lies—it has produced a reflexive impulse that sees fashion representing itself to itself, imposing a counterimage of its being on the body of the model. In this we see a transition of the function of the fashion model from one that is displaying fashion to one where she is *being* fashion.
Chapter Five

The Shadow Side of Style

*Fashion dies very young so we must forgive it everything.*

— Jean Cocteau

5.1 Endlessly New

In Sally Potter’s film, *Orlando*, a young aristocrat lives through a period of four hundred years barely ageing a day. At one point Orlando goes to sleep as a man and wakes up as a woman. While this occurrence eventually becomes an issue to be settled in court, the fact of Orlando’s immortality passes without comment: ‘because this is England’, remarks the narrator, ‘everyone pretends not to notice.’ What is impossible not to notice, however, is Orlando’s slavish following of fashion. As both man and woman, s/he is always spectacularly and excessively dressed *à la mode*. The omnipotent hand of fashion is also manifested in virtually everything in the film; the grounds of the house, the topiary, décor, architecture, colours, lighting, music, conversation, mores—even the weather all undergo repeated transformations according to the dictates of fashion. The effect of this is not to meticulously recreate a historical period—in fact, the film consciously avoids the naturalism of period drama—rather, fashion is used as the leitmotif which allows the audience to accept Orlando’s ability to elude death. Orlando’s immortality is fantastical but, given the film’s obsession with fashion, as inevitable as a change in hem-lines: Orlando sleeps, time passes, fashions die and are reborn—and so is Orlando.
The film operates then according to the logic of fashion which has, as part of its mythology, magical powers of transformation that cannot be explained away as simply an effect of desire and self-delusion. Up against the long-standing claim that the transformations of fashion lack substance, or theories that would have fashion as an empty sign or a performance ritual, there stands, as Margaret Maynard points out, fashion’s ‘deep-seated capacity to convince of its efficacy’. In *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes refers to the ‘transformational myth which seems attached to all mythic reflection on clothing’ and distinguishes three conceptions of this myth in stories and proverbs.

These are: ‘(1) a popular and poetic conception: the garment (magically) produces the person; (2) an empirical conception: the person produces the garment, *is expressed* through it; (3) a dialectical conception: there is a “turnstile” between person and garment.’

An example of the first conception of the myth might be Cinderella, the second, Beau Brummel and the third is often seen in the *bildungsroman* where clothes can be central to the passage from the passive to active state of the hero or heroine. He states that the transformational myth is also ‘quite prevalent in the literature of Fashion’ and, as we have seen in the previous discussion of ‘the transformed body’, fashion invokes this myth to legitimize its powers over the body.

---

283 Margaret Maynard, “‘La Mode’—as Sacral?”*, Form/Work* 4, March 2000: 20.
285 Barthes, 256.
But the charge of superficiality so often leveled at fashion creates a lingering doubt—even in the person who has experienced the effect of a new suit, dress or shoes—that nothing has really changed. While we may not be able to rid ourselves of the suspicion that fashion only appears to substantiate its illusions, leaving us as exposed as the emperor in his new clothes, we cannot deny the reality of fashion’s own transformations. It does not matter that these transformations may lack substance, its seemingly meaningless, inexplicable changes are its life force, holding out for us the promise (against everything we know to be true) of the possibility of endless renewal and eternal youth. For the paradox of fashion is that while it is forever changing—renewing and perpetuating itself by continually invoking the spectre of death or obsolescence—it enables the idea of an unchanging body.

To a certain extent, all social systems invest clothing and adornment with the quality of reinforcing somatic boundaries and hence suppressing the anxiety aroused by the biological realities of a permeable, slowly decaying body. However, when the element of fashion is introduced to practices of adornment there is an inherent promise of renewal and hence preservation: each fashion ‘death’ ensures the continuation of fashion itself. Hence we might say that the condition of survival for fashion is suicide. This ‘competition-induced self-destruction of fashion’ points to its essentially morbid nature or, as René König puts it, behind fashion’s ‘apparent levity hides a restless, consuming death-wish’. König recognises the almost desperate investment that is placed in the transformative and preservative powers of fashion. For if (as has often been remarked), costumes preserved in museums without

---

287 It is not that a specific fashion will be recycled—this is a postmodern phenomenon.
the breath of a living body lose their lustre and take on a ghostly emptiness, so too
does clothing, in turn, give life and form to the human body. Elizabeth Wilson
succinctly articulates König’s thesis:

He sees fashion’s perpetual mutability, its ‘death-wish’, as a manic defence against the human reality
of the changing body, against ageing and death. Fashion, Barthes’ ‘healing goddess’, substitutes for the
real body an abstract, ideal body; this is the body as an idea rather than as an organism. The very way
in which fashion constantly changes actually serves to fix the idea of the body as unchanging and
eternal… [protecting] us from reminders of decay…

Since about the third decade of the twentieth century, fashion has almost exclusively
aligned itself with youth. In The Fashion System, Barthes accounts for this in two
ways: on the one hand, in the homogenous universe of the (women’s) fashion
magazine, gender (sex) is a given, therefore ‘the phenomenon of opposition’ shifts to
age where ‘there is a perceptible, rational variation’. On the other hand, he writes,
‘…the model’s youth is constantly asserted, defended, we might say, because it is
naturally threatened by time … its fragility creates its prestige’. In this sense, the
model’s youth—her ‘freshness’—mirrors the life trajectory of the fashion garment
which, trapped in an economy of the perpetually new, is always threatened by the
passage of time. However, this ‘shadow side of style’ is usually suppressed in the
fashion image. Thus the body that appears to have escaped the ‘human reality of

---

289 Elizabeth Wilson, Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity (Berkeley: University of California
Press, 1985), 58.
291 Barthes, 258.
292 The phrase is from Kennedy Fraser, On the Edge: Images from 100 Years of ‘Vogue’ (New York:
the changing body’ is that which is most closely aligned with fashion—the ‘ideal, incarnate body’ of the cover girl. But, as an image, ‘she’ is discarded along with the magazine. Hence it is only because the body in the fashion image also ‘constantly changes’ that it can give the impression of an unchanging body. The self-perpetuating body of the fashion model then can be seen to operate under the same logic as fashion; its changes do not take the form of the real body, which slowly succumbs to ageing and death, but rather produce a body that is always becoming, preserved by fashion’s abstract cloak of the ‘endlessly new’.

Of course the ‘real’ body is denied fashion’s whispered promise of immortality. (See plate 5.1.) A much more likely outcome for the fashion victim Orlando is represented in a still taken from Ulrike Ottinger’s film *Freak Orlando*, in which two ancient and withered men tug on each other’s long, straggly beards (plate 5.2). They are dressed in satin evening gowns, the sagging flesh of their upper arms and backs exposed. The dresses, hang off them like those on an old display mannequin, they are lifeless and give no life in return, neither moulding nor moulded by the body. In this image, there is no transformation, no preservation, only grotesque parody. These two decrepit bodies betray the true fate, spoken of by Walter Benjamin, of the ‘woman who allies herself with fashion’s newness in a struggle against natural decay’. After the passage of four hundred years, it is not the svelte, translucent perfection of Tilda Swinton—the actress who plays Orlando in Potter’s film—that is reflected in the mirror. Rather, the dedicated follower of fashion will find herself confronted by an image that Benjamin ruthlessly describes as ‘a gaily decked out corpse’.
5.2 The Dialogue Between Fashion and Death

Walter Benjamin, whose attitude to fashion, as we shall see below, had not always been so scathing, is supported in his view by a Western tradition that has for centuries objected to feminine adornment on moral and religious grounds. Whereas many other frivolous practices have escaped condemnation, the consequences of a cultivation of beauty and fashion are damning. On this hostile ground, the role that fashion plays in Orlando’s immortality should have assured him/her of the retribution meted out to other fictional characters (for instance, Dorian Gray) who have defied the ravages of time, but Orlando reaches the end of the film with her soul, as well as her youthful glow, intact. This is not, however, the predicted outcome for the fashionable woman who, seeking eternal youth, is fated to suffer much more than the relatively minor disappointment of disillusion at a broken promise; to participate in fashion’s follies and vanities on the (inevitably doomed) hope of physical salvation is to risk spiritual damnation.

The failure of cloth to transfer the endlessly new of fashion to the flesh it enfolds invariably returns focus to the death which is at the heart of fashion. Literally, symbolically and metaphysically death permeates the entirety of the discourse of fashion. In Efrat Tseelon’s book, The Masque of Femininity, she refers to the nineteenth century philosopher Giacomo Leopardi’s work, ‘The Dialogue between Fashion and Death’. In this moral tale, Leopardi describes how fashion boasts of the suffering and destruction she has inflicted upon humankind, reminding death that she is able “to cripple people with narrow boots; to choke their breath and make their eyeballs pop with the use of tight corsets” and in general to “persuade and force all civilised people to put

---

293 Susan Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project
up every day with a thousand difficulties and a thousand discomforts, and often with
pain and agony, and some even to die gloriously, for the love they bear me.”295

Fashion’s majesty extends beyond the borders of the loyal subjects who bend to her
autocratic rule; her achievement is not only to serve death in the manner of illness and
war but to introduce death into life itself so that ‘people who move and go about on their
own feet are, so to speak, [death’s] property…from the moment they are born…’296

Tseelon points to literal, indelible attacks on the body, such as piercing and tattooing, as
instances of the capacity for fashion to go further than transforming life to death;
‘fashion’s real victory’, she writes, is ‘to make people who practice this believe that they
are choosing life’297. She cites cases of women who regard nipple or navel piercing as
acts which allow them to reclaim their bodies after childbirth or breast-feeding, in effect,
effacing the signs of life.

Leopardi has over-estimated the efficacy of fashion’s attacks on the body—painful as
they are, neither bunions nor tight-lacing have ever been life threatening—generally, the
imprint that fashion leaves on the living body is minimal. The impact of fashion on the
represented body, however, is indelible. In the battle between fashion and the body, it
is in the image that fashion has its real victory, for it is here that Leopardi’s characters
of Death and Fashion coalesce. This coalition infuses the aesthetic of junkie chic and
is mocked in images such as Guido Mocafico’s ‘Bone Idle’. (See 4.28.) It also appears
in a more disturbing mode in Cornelie Tollens photograph, ‘States’, in which a pre-
pubescent girl, dressed only in white lace knickers, clutches against her torso the ribs
of a dead beast, the raw meat hacked from its bones (plate 5.3). It is a picture that

---

296 Tseelon, 119.
eloquently addresses the hidden fear and anxiety behind the rhetoric about models who are too young and too thin. The ribs recall the skeletal frames of older models but they also perform the same task as the skull or emaciated frame that appear in Renaissance paintings, reminding us that thinness is fashion’s *momento mori*, exposing the truth of fashion: it ‘knows to escape from death only by mimicking it’.

Given that throughout *The Masque of Femininity*, Tseelon has sought to disrupt or discredit the ‘old misogynies’ that have created a powerful and unyielding nexus between woman, body, adornment, sin and death, it is perhaps surprising that she should contribute to the enduring mythological, theological, metaphysical and philosophical arguments that explain the evil of fashion (and hence woman, whose essential identity is constructed around sin and adornment) in terms of its opposition to fecundity. And yet, it may be that fashion itself is tempted to reach the same unsavoury conclusion. Despite fashion’s apparent obsession with youth, it inevitably draws attention to the pathological implications of its incessant cycle of redundancy and newness. The evolution of the seasonal fashion show from an understated presentation of available garments worn by numbered mannequins into a sound and light spectacle—art directed, choreographed and performed in a spirit of celebration at the arrival of the latest collection—tends to emphasise renewal, whilst concealing, in an atmosphere of forgetfulness, the fate of what is now out of date. The symbolic dimension of the fashion process, which imitates the rhythms of life and death, is thus reduced to an optimistic flourish of rejuvenation, mortality conveniently displaced under what Barthes describes as the ‘law of euphoria’ in which ‘fashion’s *bon ton* forbids it to offer anything morally or aesthetically

---

297 Tseelon, 119.
displeasing’. And yet for the thoughtful observer amongst those who operate within the daily workings of fashion, it is hard not to be impressed by the sense of mourning that emerges from the surface pomp and ceremony. At the couture shows the designer whose name is on the label is often long since dead, replaced by a youthful renegade who draws inspiration from conquered tribes, destroyed civilisations, doomed heroines and beheaded queens. Since the social revolution of the seventies had almost rendered it obsolete, the institution of couture itself is often spoken of in allegorical terms of survival, the story of centuries-old artisanal skills rescued from near extinction painstakingly woven into the cloth of each of its treasures. The resurrection of couture is in contrast to the fate of its victims; the struggle by animal liberation groups such as PETA echoes the nineteenth century fight against the slaughter of hundreds of millions of birds per year at the service of the millinery trade and, despite occasional lapses into conscientiousness, it remains true that, ‘for fashion to live, something must die’.

With this in mind, the characterisation of fashion by Margaret Maynard as ‘similar to ecclesiastical ceremony’ resonates, not with the promise of rituals that celebrate the miracle of rebirth (‘sacral replacement’) but with the more sombre tones evoked by the funeral and the wake. For a period during the nineties, the metaphor became literal with the appearance on the catwalks of emaciated models who, writes Maynard, had ‘acquired an especially funereal quality of bodily disposition and style’. This look of being a ‘mournful funerary attendant’, if not the deceased herself, gave rise to ‘heroin chic’ which, as outlined in the previous chapter, repudiated Barthes’ assertion that fashion could not offer anything displeasing. Although the self-flagellation of the fashion

300 Margaret Maynard, “‘La Mode”—as Sacral?”, 19.
301 Maynard, 21.
302 Maynard, 22.
industry and the ferocity of criticism towards it by a less blasé public over this episode could be considered as a vindication of his view, seen from an historical perspective, fashion can and does regularly break its own law of euphoria. The arena in which this is most evident is fashion photography.

5.3  Deathrow

Underneath the banner, ‘SENTENCED TO DEATH’, the face of a middle-aged white man in a nondescript red t-shirt stares out blankly at the viewer. In small print to one side we are informed that this is a photo of David Leroy Skaggs, born 6/2/1950 in a mental institution. His crime is first degree murder, two counts, his sentence, death by electrocution. Further down the page is the United Colours of Benetton tag, set in the familiar green background. Beneath this is a website address: www.benetton.com/deathrow (plate 5.4).

For their Spring 2000 advertising campaign, the Italian clothing giant, Benetton, featured portraits of prisoners on deathrow in American jails. The resulting photographs, which resembled a cross between a Diane Arbus portrait and a mug-shot, appeared in fashion and general interest magazines (such as The New Yorker and Vanity Fair) internationally. The example referred to above appeared in The Face in the prominent and expensive pre-contents pages and was sandwiched between ads which featured conventionally beautiful models wearing clothes by the more up-market labels Ralph Lauren, Mui Mui, Armani Jeans, Jil Sander, Gucci, Versace, Hugo Boss, DKNY and so on. Hence, there can be no question of the Benetton advertisement not being read
as a fashion image even though fashion and the fashion model, as they are usually understood, are absent. On their initial release these pictures were accompanied by excerpts of interviews with the felons (the full interviews were available on the web-site) which, according to the Benetton press release, revealed ‘the present of those without a future’. The campaign inevitably attracted attention: the retailer Sears pulled all items produced by the parent company, the California Assembly voted 58 to 9 to urge all residents to boycott Benetton, and many were in accord with the outraged views expressed by the author of a web-site, ‘The United Killers of Benetton’, who called the campaign ‘tasteless’ and likely to ‘cause pain and distress’ to the families of innocent victims. Others defended the campaign for its ‘eloquent’ contribution to the death penalty debate, even if not all were prepared to go as far as agreeing uncritically with Benetton’s claim that it was producing an ‘innovative mode of corporate communication’.

Previous Benetton campaigns (which have highlighted issues such as race, AIDS, and refugees) also depended upon being controversial, treading the fine line between political and social commitment and a cynical marketing strategy that relies on shock tactics. However, whatever moral and ethical judgment one chooses to make upon the legitimacy of corporations using social and human rights issues as a means of self-promotion, the incongruity of the faces of condemned men and the gaily-coloured, playful clothing produced by Benetton—for a teen to early twenties demographic—is unavoidable. In place of a smiling teenager wearing layers of the latest brightly patterned garments from the Benetton range—an image with which Benetton continues to be associated and the one that the company displayed in its shop windows concurrently with the deathrow campaign in the press—we are confronted
with a middle-aged man who is condemned to death, wearing a nondescript t-shirt. The implicit threat of imminent death that is fashions paradoxical life-force is made explicit, effectively placing both fashion and the fashion model on death row.\textsuperscript{303}

Benetton’s method of promotion invites scepticism, but even if one thinks that the company is motivated by nothing more elevated than commercial interests, the deathrow campaign nonetheless taps into a morbid tendency that has recurred from early on in the history of fashion photography. Baron de Meyer’s fashion and society portraits shrouded his subjects in an otherworldly light to such effect that, almost a century later, they continue to evoke the haunting, disquieting quality of specimens preserved in formaldehyde. (See plate 3.23.) In March 1945, Erwin Blumenfeld’s cover for \textit{Vogue} showed a wraithlike woman suspended in a blood red cross (plate 5.5) and, at the end of the War, \textit{Vogue} published extraordinarily graphic photographs taken by one of its former models, Lee Miller, of a defeated Germany. Her photos at Buchenwald showed corpses lying in a skeletal pile, the face of a victim bashed beyond recognition left hanging from a wall by a hook and streets reduced to ghostly rubble. Such images were unprecedented in the pages of a fashion magazine and paved the way for the melancholy tone that periodically seeped into \textit{Vogue} in the years immediately after the war. In December, 1945, Cecil Beaton shot Balmain’s flannel jacket and trousers—worn by a model whose defiant gaze betrays the distrust of a hungry street urchin—against the scarred wall of a bomb-shelter (plate 5.6).

Eighteen months later, Clifford Coffin captured the desperate failure of attempts to forget what the world had witnessed. In a shoot for British \textit{Vogue}, he photographed ball-gowns on an extremely tall, frail looking beauty in the bombed-out decaying

\textsuperscript{303} An earlier Benetton campaign represented the other aspect of fashion’s cycle in a graphic
remains of a stately home. Despite her height, she is overwhelmed by the ruin surrounding her, the brittle expression of the model barely masking something more akin to sorrow (plate 5.7).

Irving Penn’s abiding interest in decay and mortality as subject matter for his exhibition photographs has regularly infiltrated his fashion work. Wearing a body-contorting evening gown trimmed with dagger-like feathers, Lisa Fonssagrives takes on the appearance of a rare bird (plate 5.8). The impression that she is an endangered species—like the Asaro mudmen photographed by Penn—is reinforced, as Martin Harrison points out, by the backdrop of the distressed scrim that Penn used to shoot both his fashion and exhibition work. More overtly, suicide, self-destruction and murder were the incongruous narratives that appeared in the pages of fashion magazines in the atmosphere of editorial freedom that presided in the years prior to 1975. In 1962 Richard Avedon created a fictionalised account of the downside of fame and beauty in an editorial series that had as its final frame a shot of model Suzy Parker being escorted from hospital after slashing her wrists, a detail emphasized by the conveniently cut three-quarter-length sleeve of her Yves St Laurent jacket, which revealed bandages as the latest ‘must-have’ accessory (plate 5.9). Bob Richardson’s sequence for Nova in 1972, reflecting the drug culture of the beau-monde, concluded with the body of Angelica Huston slumped across an anonymous hotel room bed, an empty bottle of pills by her side and, at the bottom of the page, disinterested type included the time of death alongside the name of the designer of her clothes (plate 5.10). Much earlier, in 1960, Paris Vogue published a fashion spread by Guy Bourdin of a model, elegantly dressed in hat and gloves, standing amidst carcasses of dead

__________________________________________

photograph of a new born baby with its umbilical cord still attached.
meat (plate 5.11). The year before he photographed a model wearing a hat by Dior, her flawless appearance disrupted by the presence of a cluster of flies crawling across her neck and face, as if to suggest that the inevitable processes of post-mortem decay and corruption had prematurely begun (plate 5.12).

More than any other photographer, the fashion work of Guy Bourdin was imbued with the look of ‘morbid fantasy’. Throughout the seventies, he was responsible for the advertising campaigns for Charles Jourdan, a forum which gave him the freedom to shoot whatever he liked—with shoes. This lack of constraint often produced surreal images that were not always without humour but more often explored darker themes. One of the most memorable showed a black limousine parked alongside a blood-soaked footpath where the chalked outline of a dressed female body, two fuchsia wedge-heeled shoes and matching sunglasses are all that remain of the victim of a brutal murder (plate 5.13). Unlike his contemporary, Helmut Newton, the work of Bourdin has, until recently, rarely been seen outside its original context in the pages of (mostly) Paris Vogue and his oeuvre still retains the power to shock the viewer with images that are extraordinary both for their sophisticated formal beauty and their macabre vision of weightless, ethereal, young women caught up in surreal narratives of dark eroticism and sadistic murder.

It has been argued that Newton’s work can be excused from simplistic accusations of misogyny and pornography because it places women in a position of power, thwarting...
the exploitative male gaze and questioning sexual stereotypes. In ‘Green Apartment Murder’, for example, the tables are turned and a lingerie-clad woman is finishing off her male victim. It is not possible, however, to employ a similar argument in defense of Bourdin; his models are nothing like Newton’s amazons; in his most extreme pictures they are frail and child-like: suffering, tormented, mutilated, exploited. This was no accident; working for him as a model was an arduous, even dangerous assignment. In one layout for Vogue he had the entire bodies of his models covered in tiny black pearls to disturbing effect—sitting up in a bed of fine, embroidered linen they hold hands, a tray of coffee is poised between them, but their pearlized bodies look like charred corpses, the whole scene reminiscent of a macabre and deadly joke (plate 5.14). During filming, the glue on the models bodies nearly suffocated them and they blacked out. In response to the editor’s suggestion that they stop the shoot before the girls died, Bourdin apparently responded: ‘Oh, it would be beautiful—to have them dead in bed!’

It is obvious that Bourdin’s personal obsessions inflected his work, but it is precisely because his obsessions—with their overriding themes of mortality and desire—coincide with the pre-occupations of fashion that his images are successful. On one level, they are an honest if unsettling reflection, as Anthony Haden-Guest suggests, of the ‘[m]asochism and narcissism [that] pervade the fashion world’. However, on another level they can also expose a deeper truth about fashion, one which is reflected in the view that ‘the nostalgic eye always seems to regard change as a form of

306 See, for example, Martin Harrison, Appearances: Fashion Photography Since 1945 (New York: Rizzoli, 1991).
308 Haden-Guest, 143.
dying’. Hence, in much of Bourdin’s work, the fashion system’s devotion to the transient is exposed as a game of deadly seriousness where the victory of cloth over flesh is always assured. This eternal victory of fashion informs the narrative of an image from Bourdin’s personal archives in which two models are posed in a stained, basement-like room, the body of one (naked, apart from her shoes) is arched supine over an old table, legs splayed, a large carving knife glinting against the flesh of her buttocks, while in a corner the other, dressed in a black and white polka-dot strapless dress, is hanging limply from a noose around her neck (plate 5.15). At first glance this scene, overburdened with misplaced desire, portrays a failed act of auto-erotic asphyxiation and, as such, is open to criticisms of being pornographic and pandering to unreconstructed voyeurism. However, this view is complicated by the presence of three dresses suspended from the wall which, with their puffed sleeves, cinched waists and padded hips seem to be articulated by invisible limbs, more animated than the lifeless forms over which they hover with an air of smug, if not sinister, intent. Their imperturbable presence serves as a reminder that the drama of self-destruction and constantly renewable desire—acted out by fashion to ensure its survival—cannot be transposed onto the human body where vulnerable flesh only confirms its submission to mortality.

5.4 *Momento Moris*

Bourdin’s work remained within its original context of the glossy fashion magazine. But at an exhibition in 1975, which showcased the work of some of his

---

contemporaries, including Newton and Deborah Turbeville, the art critic from the *New York Times* observed that recent fashion photography revealed a chilling taste for ‘perversity and violence’ and had become, in the case of Newton, ‘indistinguishable from an interest in murder, pornography and terror’.\(^{310}\) This echoed the sentiment of the female readers of fashion magazines at the time whose distaste for such images had caused a shift in editorial policy at *Vogue* toward something more palatable. The move was motivated by commercial considerations, which would support art critic Johnathan Green’s assertion that ‘the end result of fashion photography is not art, but increased sales and corporate control’.\(^{311}\) However, the fact that the situation of creative freedom, previously allowed photographers, continued in Europe renders Green’s assessment as too simplistic. What has now become apparent is that the two can bleed together without any real injury to either. However, for the most part, the view expressed in 1966 by the publisher of Seventh Avenue’s bible, *Woman’s Wear Daily*, John Fairchild, that ‘freaks racing across the pages of fashion magazines...discourage [women] from buying clothes’ still applies.\(^{312}\)

Implicit in both Green and Fairchild’s comments is the presumption that the sole motivation behind fashion photography is to sell clothes. In this they are reiterating


\(^{311}\) Johnathan Green, quoted in Harrison, *Appearances*, 19. Ironically, the style of photography that Green privileges, i.e. the social documentarist style exemplified by Diane Arbus, has since infiltrated the vilified ‘dirty realist’ fashion photography of practitioners such as Corinne Day, Wolfgang Tillmans, Juergen Teller etc.

\(^{312}\) Quoted in Harrison, *Appearances*, 18. However, it could be argued that fashion magazines have long been aware that they are selling fashion images just as much, if not more, than clothes. The presumption that the role of fashion photography is primarily as advertising for clothing is challenged further by the recent trend for publishing annual compilation books of fashion photography, underlining the fact that the market for fashion images outlives the availability of the clothes themselves.
Harper’s Bazaar editor Carmel Snow’s injunction to Lilian Bassman in 1949: ‘Lilian you are not here to make art, you are here to show the buttons and bows’.  

For both the art critic and the industry insiders, the role of fashion photography does not entail speaking beyond the literal. Such a view presumes that photographs have ‘an innocent relation to visible reality’, but even the most unimaginative fashion photograph speaks outside of its present moment. If nothing else, the fashion photo refers to the wider narrative of the fashion process which, with its accelerated cycle of life and death, emphasises the dialogue with time that is the quality of any photograph. For some great photographers who felt ill at ease with the commercial requirements of fashion, such as Louis Faurer, Robert Frank and, indeed, Bassman, the editor of Harper’s Bazaar’s sage advice was studiously ignored; others—usually those who have had the most impact on the medium—transformed the idea of what could be considered a fashion photograph in images that underscore the fragility of what they are representing.

In his exceptional survey of fashion photography since 1945,Appearances, Martin Harrison makes the point that from the moment fashion photography was no longer only recording a description of the garment, it ‘began to appreciate that it could comment on as well as reflect its subject matter’. Rarely, does any fashion photographer who aspires to the level of art in their work admit to their prime interest being in the garment itself; in the field of fashion photography there does not exist someone who, like Ingres, showed a fascination—bordering on the fetishistic—with

---

313 Quoted in Harrison, Appearances, 16.
315 It should be noted that photographers did not act alone in this but with the influence and support of art directors, Alexey Brodovitch (at Harper’s Bazaar) and Alexander Liberman and editors, Diana Vreeland and Polly Allen Mellen (at Vogue).
316 Harrison, Appearances, 10.
the intricacies of cloth, drape and cut. Rather, the fashion photograph aspires to pointing towards something outside of the immediate fashion object, it ‘must be’, declared Richard Avedon, ‘about something’. 317 Irving Penn’s comment, ‘I always thought we were selling dreams, not clothes’ may apply less to recent fashion photography. 318 But the compulsion to show more than just ‘the buttons and the bows’, to rebel, in some way, against fashion while still remaining in its thrall, is the impulse behind all of the most successful fashion images. In interviews, it becomes apparent that the most thoughtful of fashion photography’s exponents not only incorporate their own obsessions into their work, but make a conscious decision to explore the ephemerality of fashion and those who are fatally attracted to the false glamour of its glittering world. After all, insiders are better placed than anyone else to see the truth of Kennedy Fraser’s words: ‘The fashion world’s a dangerous place. The most vulnerable don’t survive it’. 319 Of course, other industries preoccupied with beauty, fame and glamour have also claimed their victims, but the fleeting moment of glory—imbued with a fatal atmosphere of morbidity—remains particularly pertinent to fashion.

The result is not always as explicit as some of the examples cited above. In Vogue, the final straw came for readers with Deborah Turbeville’s shots of five women in a steamy run-down bathhouse. Outraged letters complained about the anorexic appearance of the models, the possible masturbatory and/or lesbian connotations, and also its apparent referencing of Auschwitz (plate 5.16). Unlike some of the more overtly voyeuristic work of her male counterparts, it can be hard to see now what was so disturbing about Turbeville’s work, but her images, which grappled with

317 Quoted in Harrison, 14.
expressions of violation and incorporated her own obsession with decay, did not suit an era when commercial pressures were pushing for a mood that captured ‘lifestyle’. By shooting in dilapidated environments and using techniques such as distressing the image at the stage of the negative, her approach acknowledged the chronic tension that exists between the ephemeral and the permanent in photography. Although this is a characteristic of representation in general, it is particularly acute in the fashion photograph with its unspoken threat that youth will age, beauty will fade and styles will change. It is this reality of ageing, death and decay that hides behind fashion’s narrative of perpetual youth and newness. It underlies the impulse behind fashion photographer Guido Mocafico’s still lives of plates of rotting food for The Face (plate 5.17) or Cornelie Tollens ‘States’ mentioned earlier. Such ‘unappealing’ images, however, can happily reside alongside those of idealised perfection for, unlike the mortal human body, fashion revels in a cycle of replacement and proclaims its death as a rebirth, as evidence of its immortality. Like Orlando, fashion perpetually dies and is reborn—‘the same, but different’.

5.5 Fleeting Eternity

An echo of fashion’s necromantic transformation of death is also present in the image. In his essay, ‘Two Versions of the Imaginary’, Maurice Blanchot makes an association between the image (which ‘exists after the object’) and the body of a dead

318 Quoted in Harrison, 18.
319 Fraser, On the Edge, 4.
320 These techniques have now become somewhat of a fashion cliché, albeit an effective one.
person which, ‘is neither the living person himself nor any sort of reality’.\textsuperscript{321} It is not that the two are alike in substance (they cannot be; neither are substantial, neither are tangible realities, they are not objects, or rather they are not, or are no longer the objects they resemble) it is more, he writes, that although ‘the image does not resemble a cadaver…it could be that the strangeness of a cadaver is also the strangeness of the image.’\textsuperscript{322} In both there is a haunting, ghost-like quality; the animistic anticipation that ‘at a certain moment the dead person begins to wander’ is also present in the fixed image, which is ‘without repose’.\textsuperscript{323} However, when the image and the cadaver are superimposed, as in an image of a dead person, there is a reversal: ‘in bringing back resemblance to a figure and the image to a body, in reincorporating it…the image [becomes] vitalising negation.’\textsuperscript{324} This is the potential of the imaginary to thwart finitude, to ‘not tolerate either a beginning or an end’, by encompassing the possibility that is death, it finds that ‘in death the possibility that is death dissolves too.’\textsuperscript{325}

The image of which Blanchot writes is not specifically the photographic image, but what he sees as the haunting strangeness of the image is a widely recognised characteristic of the photograph. It has been suggested that all great photographs are ‘reminders of mortality, poems about loss’\textsuperscript{326} but, as Susan Sontag writes, the link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people, stating ‘the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction’.\textsuperscript{327} The image that

\textsuperscript{322} Blanchot, 81.
\textsuperscript{323} Blanchot, 84.
\textsuperscript{324} Blanchot, 86.
\textsuperscript{325} Blanchot, 86.
\textsuperscript{326} Sebastian Smee, ‘Just Out of Shot’, \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, March 18, 2000: 14S.
\textsuperscript{327} Sontag, \textit{On Photography}, 70.
photography conjures is always from time past, hence it is an elegiac art inescapably
drawn to documenting what soon will vanish—a Papuan tribe, the flawless skin of a
child, a fleeting smile. But just as there are things we see that seem to touch us ‘with a
grasping contact’\textsuperscript{328}, the act of looking, the scopophilic regard is not always less
intrusive than touch. The manner of seeing of the camera is even more ‘a sort of
touch…a contact at a distance’\textsuperscript{329}, in freezing a moment in time, its purpose is to
‘capture’, an act that is implicitly aggressive, diminishing even—as every tourist
snapshot affirms—the implacable facade of stone with each click of the shutter.

The fragility of flesh makes it even more susceptible to the ‘sublimated murder’ of the
lens. The temptation to extend the metaphor of camera as weapon is the subject of
Michael Powell’s 1959 film, \textit{Peeping Tom}, in which the camera becomes a literal
weapon, used by a disturbed man intent on filming the fear on the faces of beautiful
women. In \textit{Blow Up}, Michaelangelo Antonioni’s 1966 story of a fashion photographer
who thinks he is witness to a murder, the voyeurism of the camera is linked to a violent
crime. For Balzac, who experienced the invention of photography in his lifetime, this
recondite process of image making was a furtive, but nonetheless literal, attack on the
body. The nineteenth century photographer, Nadar, explained that the great realist author
thought a body was ‘made up of a series of ghostly images superimposed in layers to
infinity, wrapped in infinitesimal films…each Daguerreian operation was therefore
going to lay hold of, detach, and use up one of the layers of the body on which it
focused.’\textsuperscript{330}

\textsuperscript{329} Blanchot, 75.
\textsuperscript{330} Quoted in Sontag, \textit{On Photography}, 158.
Balzac’s superstitious fear is substantiated in the museum, where it is forbidden to photograph precious objects. Costumes, especially, are displayed in the shadows, protected from an essential element of photography—light. The flash that helped launch Dior’s ‘New Look’ to fashion-starved post-war consumers of magazines world-wide, making it (or its copies) the most desired commodity of its time, now threatens the threads of its existence. Once its fleeting moment in the spotlight has past, the fashion object avoids the camera—vulnerable in the harsh light, even the well preserved garment knows it has not escaped the ravages of time—yet it displays proudly (sometimes in a separate locked glass cabinet) the photos from its youth. In the museum, fashion objects, deprived of any life-giving body, hang limply ‘as if they had been touched by death’, but in the images they can shake off their corpse-like air, here they are immortalised, ‘vitalised and animated by the beautiful women who wore them’.\(^{331}\) Yet already in these photographs, there is a presentiment of their fate, their imminent and inevitable demise imprinted in the image like a death mask, the melancholy nature of the photograph a constant reminder of fashion’s transient, precarious existence.

In a very different type of exhibition from that of the costume museum, Christian Boltanski’s *The Reserves – An Ongoing Clothes Installation* (1988), piles of clothes were strewn across the floor of a huge space, as in a ransacked jumble sale, sleeves, skirts and trouser legs intertwining in intimate embrace. Here, it is not a question of fashion’s ephemerality that is foregrounded but that of human existence. Visitors were asked to walk into the room ‘to take in the smell, the vestiges of human presence, now vacated’\(^{332}\) but, as Juliet Ash observes in her article on the installation, children refused

---


the offer because ‘It would be like walking on people.’

The discarded clothes denote dematerialised presence, the absence of people, specifically in this case, the absence of Holocaust victims. These clothes, imbued (as are all objects once owned) with memories of previous lives, recall a sense of human frailty, their presence a melancholy boast of survival, as if it is not their owners who have discarded them but they who have discarded their owners.

Of course most discarded fashions do not end up in museums or art galleries: if they are not left to languish in cupboards, they are recycled either as rags or as clothes to be worn again. Even old clothes dumped in charity bins can find their way back to fashionable second-hand stores and vintage clothing suppliers—from there, they may be chosen by editors or stylists to be photographed as current fashion. They can be reassembled by consumers or by designers who will send them down the catwalk where they will be fetishised by the fashion press as the latest articles of desire.

Yet the possibility of this Phoenix-like rebirth can mask the ontological reality of fashion that is a ‘metaphysics of transience’; the fact of fashion revival does not refute the death that is at the heart of fashion.

---


334 This is the premise behind Australian designer Michelle Janks collection of ‘one-off’ pieces and also of the US label Imitation of Christ who ‘salvage unloved, unwanted clothes from the deepest darkest
5.7 Eternal Fleetingness

Despite the familiar sense that what we see in the latest *Vogue* looks suspiciously like the dress we wore to our high school formal, recycled fashions do not copy directly from the past. In her article, ‘Dressing Down Dressing Up: The Philosophic Fear of Fashion’, Karen Hanson writes: ‘Fashions are born and die; they may sometimes be revived, but—just as we feared—the revivals are never quite the same as the originals.’ There is more at stake here than nostalgia for the fashion of our youth; rather, what is mourned is youth itself. If fashion were to exchange fickleness for constancy, to renounce its commitment to change, then perhaps time—and even death—could be arrested. But as it is, any particular fashion is doomed and thus we experience what Freud identified as the ‘foretaste of mourning’. He chanced upon this observation while trying to console a melancholic, young poet whose despair was increased by observing beautiful things of a transitory nature. Rather than focus on the death they foretold, Freud argued that he should see their fleetingness as a sign of their worth:

> The beauty of the human form and face vanish forever in the course of our own lives, but their evanescence only lends them a fresh charm. A flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely.

To Freud’s amazement, the poet remained unconvinced by this ‘incontestable’ argument, and, no doubt, just as he was able to look at fields of spring flowers and see only their imminent demise, so too would this sensitive soul see through the vain hope
inspired by fashion’s eternal becomings, and realise that although fashion, by perpetuating the idea of what is barely new as being already ‘so five minutes ago’ can ‘mock death’, the transience of human existence cannot be so easily dismissed.

Yet in fashion’s relationship to the image, its public face of flippant abandon to the suicidal impulse is exposed as a mask. For all its bravado, fashion—which has been described by König as the ‘restless image’—constantly seeks a safe haven of permanence. ‘In the Renaissance’, writes Barthes, ‘as soon as one got a new costume, one had a portrait done.’ By capturing and stilling the momentary, the photograph does ‘the very thing fashion is unable to do’—it immortalises the fashion object. This creates an insecurity in the relationship between fashion and photography that is compounded by a fundamental inequality: the fashion object needs to be recorded (in print, on film) but photography does not need fashion and, in fact, for many years was ashamed of an association that undermined its artistic aspirations. Fashion’s suspicion that, in one sense, it perhaps exists only as image is well founded. Without the image as validation, fashion faces a loss of identity; it shrugs a nonchalant shoulder at the most vitriolic scorn as easily as it basks in the glow of praise—as long as it does not suffer the purgatorial fate of being ignored. For this reason, at each seasonal showing, banks of photographers are the privileged audience for whom the models perform, their flashbulbs operating with a gravitational pull on the model as she proceeds in her orbit around the catwalk. Take away the image and fashion’s launch risks being stillborn, a fact that is

338 Maynard, ““La Mode”—as Sacral?”, 24.
339 As was discussed at the beginning of this thesis, the almost instantaneous transmission of images to the public is a relatively new phenomenon. But the impulse to keep photographic records of collections was already in place at Maison Worth, which had a studio on the premises.
well recognised within the industry and was behind Bernard Arnault’s refusal to allow the press into Alexander McQueen’s final show for Givenchy. Fashion’s reluctance to trust the recording of its catwalk image to something as ephemeral and unreliable as memory is understandable. In forgoing mechanical or digital reproduction at the moment of its birth, its existence as a cohesive vision (the designer and fashion’s glory being synonymous) can be counted in minutes, if not seconds. For once it leaves the catwalk the original image becomes more and more dissipated as it passes through the increasingly disrespectful hands of editorial teams, retailers and, finally, consumers, all of whom are, to varying degrees, only convinced of the validity of any particular collection by the aura surrounding it, by what fashion insiders call ‘buzz’. In psychological and, more importantly, commercial terms, buzz translates into desire. The most effective element in creating this desire is the fashion photograph.

Rejection by the camera is not commensurate with rejection by the consumer. Racks of citrus-coloured puffball skirts, left unwanted and unsold at the end of the season, are confirmation of the mutability at the core of fashion’s identity. In fact once it is launched, the shorter-lived any particular fashion, the more vital fashion will seem. It is this impermanence, this expression of fickle, mutating desire that has, since its inception, most infuriated fashion’s critics. As Karen Hanson points out, the philosophic conviction that ‘something virtually defined by changing desire’ can have no real value

340 This is an example of the complicated relationship that fashion has with the market, too permanent a fashion will reduce desire to spend, too brief and the market will be facing a profit loss.

341 The complaints against fashion are manifold—it is injurious to animals and the environment; it exploits workers and directly upholds class and economic differences; it supports and is a manifestation of the western imperialist project of cultural hegemony—but these criticism are not specific to fashion and can as easily be directed at car manufacturing or the fast food industry. What people really seem to hate about fashion is its perceived capacity to powerfully affect human action according to ever-shifting, mutable and superficial whims. This attitude is summed up in a comment by Iggy Pop: ‘I think the whole basis of fashion is contempt. The whole idea of fashion and style expresses a preference for abstract aesthetics in
condemns fashion and those who partake in it to a futile pursuit of unachievable beauty.\textsuperscript{342} On this view fashion, which Oscar Wilde called ‘a form of ugliness so unbearable that we are compelled to alter it every six months’, is antipathetic to beauty, its compulsive re-inventions propelled by self-hatred, its misguided followers victims of deceitful promises. ‘Truly beautiful, definitively beautiful clothing,’ wrote Jean Baudrillard, ‘would put an end to fashion’ and in conceptions of an ideal world, sartorial stability is emblematic of political and social stability.\textsuperscript{343} Thomas More’s Utopian vision allows for only a few simple, identical outfits, worn by everyone year after year, with religious ceremonies or a new season the only dictates of change. Historical dress reform movements have also shared the ‘assumption that a right way of dressing can be found and, once found, sustained.’\textsuperscript{344} But as the above quote from Baudrillard reveals, even fashion’s most contemptuous critics recognise that if it were to suddenly share their attraction to permanence, it would no longer exist.

In his later writings, Baudrillard found reason to revise his attitude to fashion’s instability, seeing in its ‘acceleration of the simple play of signifiers… the enchantment and vertigo of the loss of every system of reference.’\textsuperscript{345} Long before Baudrillard discovered the value of fashion’s perpetual change as an exemplar of the postmodern world of simulation and hyperreality, Walter Benjamin was embracing modern fashion’s constant striving for novelty. He interpreted its obliviousness to the immediate past, not as perverse inconstancy, but as irreverence towards tradition, ‘celebratory of youth rather [opposition to human values.’ Quoted in Lisa Robinson, ‘Rebel Nights’, \textit{Vanity Fair}, November, 2002: 230.

\textsuperscript{342} Hanson, ‘Dressing Down Dressing Up’, 60.

\textsuperscript{343} Escape from the tyranny of ugliness also informs the explanations of fashion given by Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel. On the other hand, Fernand Braudel, who also draws a connection between the stable costumes of non-western cultures with political and social stability, views this stability as antipathetic to progress.

\textsuperscript{344} Hanson, ‘Dressing Down Dressing Up’, 61.
than social class, and thus emblematic of social change.\textsuperscript{346} In an early entry of the \textit{Passagen-Werk}, Benjamin makes a rather endearing (if somewhat naive) case for the anticipatory potential of fashion generally, citing ‘the incomparable scent which the feminine collective has for that which lies ready in the future.’\textsuperscript{347} In this, he is arguing against the view that change in fashion is arbitrary, rather, the raising or lowering of a hemline, the width of a sleeve, the prescribed amount of decolletage are ‘secret flag signals of things to come’ which, if correctly read, would reveal ‘new currents of art…new laws, wars and revolutions.’\textsuperscript{348} However, by the thirties, his attitude towards fashion is less euphoric and he reverts to a more traditional Marxist view of fashion; fashion’s ephemerality \textit{reinforces} class distinctions and its frequent changes serve the mode of production of private capital whose sole motivation is founded in the interests of profit. It is the commodity that steps between fashion utopia and fashion hell.

Despite his eventual recantation of what he saw as its utopian aspects, Benjamin’s work remained infused with remnants of his earlier fascination with fashion. In his unfinished opus on mass consumer culture in the nineteenth century, \textit{The Arcades Project} (\textit{Passagen-Werk}), fashion emerges as one of the overriding motifs, its ‘endless repetition of the “new” as the “always-the-same”’ appearing as a rebus for the temporality that, according to Benjamin, passes for ‘progress’ in modernity. The nineteenth century depicted modernity as a Golden Age; in Benjamin’s critique of modern reality he

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{345}] Jean Baudrillard, ‘Fashion, or the enchanting spectacle of the code,’ \textit{Symbolic Exchange and Death}, trans. Iain Hamilton (London: Sage, 1993), 87. This view is very close to that of Simmel.
\item[\textsuperscript{346}] Buck-Morss, \textit{Dialectics of Seeing}, 97-8.
\item[\textsuperscript{348}] Benjamin, quoted in Buck-Morss, 403. Caroline Evans points out that a marginal note from Adorno added, ‘I would think, counterrevolutions.’ Evans, ‘Yesterday’s Emblems and Tomorrow’s Commodities: The Return of the Repressed in Fashion Imagery Today’, in Stella Bruzzi and Pamela
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
proposes an alternative vision: ‘Modernity, the time of Hell’. The centrality of fashion to this ‘dialectical schema’ is laid out in a note from 1935:

Hell—Golden Age. Keywords for hell: Boredom, Gambling, Pauperism. A canon of this dialectic: Fashion. The Golden Age as catastrophe.349

In equating modern temporality with hell, Benjamin is drawing on archaic, mythic imagery of the underworld in which time is characterised by a combination of deadly repetitiveness and novelty. It describes a metaphysics of stasis where there is ‘transiency without progress, a relentless pursuit of “novelty” that brings about nothing new in history’.350 It is important to note here that Benjamin is not simply describing the phenomenon of fashion, rather, fashion is the modern ‘measure of time’—the lived experience of modernity is played out according to the logic of fashion. Just as the utopian promise of fashion’s transitoriness is defeated by its reification in commodities, so too ‘the living, human capacity for change and infinite variation becomes alienated and is affirmed only as a quality of the inorganic object’.351

In Benjamin’s dialectical schema, mechanical productivity is contrasted with the organic creativity of ‘old nature’, which is personified by women’s fecundity. For this reason, Benjamin positions woman at the centre of his ‘metaphysics of fashion’; as essentialised Source, the well-spring of life, she poses a threat to capitalist society which seeks, in Malthus’ terms, ‘the liquidation of fecundity’.352 Historically, in the Western philosophical tradition, being defined by biological potency and its concomitant

349 Benjamin, quoted in Buck-Morss, Dialectics of Seeing, 96.
350 Buck-Morss, 96. Italics in original.
351 Buck-Morss, 99.
associations with the body has weakened women’s social and political position; hence there is little incentive for women to embrace this role as embodied assault on industrial capitalism. In The Arcades Project, Benjamin notes that Simmel associated ‘the weakness of the social position to which women have been condemned for the greater part of history’ as explanation for why ‘women in general are the staunchest adherents of fashion’. Nonetheless, surrendering to the false promise of ‘the cult of the new’, argues Benjamin, threatens women with the ‘repetitive punishment of Hell’. The commodity here is specifically represented as fashion, which is the special realm of women, holding them in thrall, its tyrannous pleasures offering an escape from reality, its constant renewal emblematic of eternal youth. Benjamin explains fashions extraordinary appeal thus: ‘Being “everyone’s contemporary” means never growing old; always being “newsworthy”—“that is the most passionate and most secret satisfaction which fashion gives to women.” However, the human body must confront ‘the biological rigor mortis of eternal youth’, just as the exposure of the endlessly new as always-the-same disappoints any hopes for social change, the transformations of fashion can only ever be cosmetic; the paradox of its eternally fleeting existence offers false comfort to the fragile flesh it enfolds—behind fashion’s mask there lies only death and decay.

352 Buck-Morss, 99.
354 Buck-Morss, Dialectics of Seeing, 99-100.
355 Buck-Morss, 99.
Chapter Six

The Struggle Between Fashion and Nature

Just as little as we can say that all fashion is somewhat unnatural—not least because fashion as a form of life is itself natural to the human being as social being—so conversely one can indeed say of the absolutely unnatural that it can at least exist in the form of fashion.

— Georg Simmel

6.4 Fashionable Beauty

For fashion’s critics, the exposure of its inability to deliver the promise of eternal youth is emblematic of the economy of deceit under which adornment (of which fashion is the most pernicious example) has always operated. Since Plato, philosophers have attempted to discern the real truth from the merely apparent, to discover what is as opposed to what seems, and on this ground fashion finds itself repeatedly condemned as inherently superficial. Sartorial fashion may not be the only transitory vanity that stands condemned for its masking of the reality of human mortality but its proximity to the body has always left it open to accusations that it is used as a deliberate device, not only to conceal the ‘natural’ body, but also the ‘real’ self. A more honest approach to appearance is recommended by Thoreau who famously cautioned, ‘beware of all enterprises that

---

require new clothes\(^3\), and proposed that the integrity of the individual should be guided by a sort of self-imposed sumptuary law that would ensure that the exterior self was a true reflection of the individual’s moral or spiritual state. In this he reverses what seems normal to most—rather than depending on the sense of rejuvenation that even a new pair of shoes can bring, we should wait until we are ourselves new before refurbishing our outer layer.

Thoreau would probably agree with the mender of shoes who sees ‘man’s character and style betrayed in well-worn leather\(^4\) but his advice would be ignored by those for whom old, uncared-for clothes or a certain negligence towards appearance and dress signifies virtue and a contemplative life. As Karen Hanson points out, the ‘philosophic fear of fashion’ is not without contradictions—while Beauty itself is considered a legitimate value, ‘the changing modes of dress which are a source of pleasure to many, are appreciated and desired by most, are often seen by the philosopher as worse than worthless’.\(^5\) The possibility that beauty might be found in something as capricious and superficial as fashion is rejected outright by traditional aesthetic thought which, if it does not insist on the primacy of natural beauty is compelled, at least, to equate Beauty as a value beyond the whims of an ever-changing taste.\(^6\) This tradition is challenged on both counts in Charles Baudelaire’s famous essay, *The Painter of Modern Life*, in which the foundations of a modern aesthetic are set down. In his *Salon of 1845*, Baudelaire posed a challenge to the creative artist of interpreting the age to itself and, in the later essay, champions the illustrator, Constantin Guys, as having achieved this ambition. But

---

358 Richard Church, ‘Snobs’, *Collected Poems*.
359 Hanson, ‘Dressing Down Dressing Up’, 60-61.
before Baudelaire has even introduced his reader to ‘the painter of modern of life’ he
tells them of the fashion plates ‘dating from the Revolution and finishing more or less
with the Consulate’ that have caught his imagination, not least because they contain ‘the
moral and aesthetic feeling of their time’.\textsuperscript{361} This relationship between \textit{mode et
modernité} is implicit in a large part of Guy’s drawings, which were often inspired by
modern dress, but the fact that Baudelaire begins his analysis of the modern aesthetic
with praise for the fashion plate as an art object is a crucial point—for Baudelaire, writes
Ulrich Lehmann, fashion ‘became the paradigm for modernity itself’.\textsuperscript{362}

As we have seen, few observers of fashion are able to counter its irrational commitment
to constant change—seemingly in a state of eternal dissatisfaction with its own form,
how could it possibly expect to be taken seriously by others on the question of beauty?
Baudelaire’s response to these critics is to suggest an impartial survey of the ‘\textit{whole}
range of French costume’ and adds that if the viewer were to add to the fashion plate of
each age,

the philosophic thought with which that age was most preoccupied or concerned—the thought being
inevitably suggested by the fashion plate—he would see what a profound harmony controls all the
components of history, and even in those centuries which seem to us the most monstrous and the maddest,
the immortal thirst for beauty has always found its satisfaction.\textsuperscript{363}

Later in the essay, Baudelaire concedes that, from an historical perspective, it may not
always be easy to justify the taste of the past, but it is enough to know that they were

\textsuperscript{360} Although in philosophy the shift from nature to art as the primary locus of aesthetics occurs after
Kant with Schelling and Hegel, natural beauty continues to be valorised as a \textit{subject} of art.
\textsuperscript{361} Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ in \textit{The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays},
In accepting that beauty can be contingent, mutable, transitory, Baudelaire is questioning the classical notion of beauty as intrinsically unchanging and eternal, something that stands resolute against the fickleness of the human mind and inconstant taste. In his introduction to the collection of essays, Johnathan Mayne points out that such an idea of beauty is not unique to Baudelaire (the notion is already implicit in Stendhal) but what is new is his assertion that both elements are essential if there is to be any Beauty at all. Baudelaire explains this ‘double composition’:

Beauty is made up of an eternal, invariable element, whose quantity it is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you like, whether severally or all at once, the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions. Without this second element, which might be described as the amusing, enticing, appetizing icing on the divine cake, the first element would be beyond our powers of digestion or appreciation, neither adapted nor suitable to human nature.

In fashion plates, in Guys’ drawings and, in fact, in every ‘scrap of beauty’ these two elements are to be found.

Early in his essay, Baudelaire explains the pleasure derived from representations of the present as being ‘due not only to the beauty with which it can be invested, but also to its essential quality of being present’. The ‘inestimable value’ that novelty held for

364 Baudelaire, 33. The change in taste that accompanies changes in fashion is addressed by Walter Benjamin who twice makes the point that each generation finds the fashions of the immediately preceding generation as ‘the most radical anti-aphrodisiac imaginable’. Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass., London: Belknap Press, 1999), 64, 79.
365 Baudelaire, 3.
366 Baudelaire, 3.
367 Baudelaire, 3.
Baudelaire was not because of any intrinsic value that it might contain—what was ‘new’ did not need to be judged by any objective standards as ‘beautiful’—but rather novelty, a constantly revised ‘new’, is valued for its own sake. As Walter Benjamin points out, the ‘tireless agent’ of novelty is fashion and certainly the aesthetic position championed by Baudelaire closely mirrors that of fashion. But if he refuses to join in with the chorus of those who consider fashion’s endless mutations as a perpetual struggle to escape from its own ugliness, neither does he consider fashion’s changes as being only driven by the passage of time. Rather, he characterises fashion’s mutable form as being the outcome of its constant struggle against the ‘powerful, but senseless and undirected impulses of Nature’. Baudelaire’s view of nature was unequivocal: ‘the whole of nature,’ he wrote in a letter to the naturalist, Toussenol, ‘participates in original sin’. His attack then is based on moral, as well as aesthetic, grounds—virtue and beauty are qualities that exist only when art has intervened. By inheriting from the field of ethics in the eighteenth century the false premise that Nature is ‘ground, source and type of all possible Good and Beauty’, the field of aesthetics, he argues, has erroneously negated the value of artifice. Good philosophy knows that the ‘frightfulness’ of ‘purely natural man’ is only redeemed and reformed by reason and calculation, nothing beautiful and noble can be a result of Nature, which is ‘a bad counsellor in moral matters’, Virtue can only be artificial. What is true about Reason also applies to the realm of Beauty thus, writes Baudelaire, he is ‘led to regard external finery as one of the signs of the primitive nobility of the human soul’.

Following Baudelaire’s view, it would seem then that the philosophical question of substance and appearance is one that, paradoxically, can only be played out on the surface. It is wrong to condemn fashion on the grounds that it creates the illusion of youth or beauty; deceit is not the goal of fashion for ‘artifice cannot lend charm to ugliness and can only serve beauty’.

Neither can fashion be criticised for trying to imitate Nature of which its goal is not replication but ‘sublime deformation…a permanent and repeated attempt at her reformation’. Rather, fashion should be recognised by the philosopher-artist as ‘a symptom of the taste for the ideal…[and] every fashion…a new and more or less happy effort in the direction of Beauty’, thus elevating us above ‘the crude, terrestrial and loathsome bric-a-brac that natural life accumulates’. The use of cosmetics should not be considered as trickery but as an attempt to approximate what is superior and divine; if skin has the texture and hue of marble, eyes the appearance of ‘a window open upon the infinite’ and cheeks glow with the ‘mysterious passion of the priestess’, it matters little that the effect is achieved with rice powder, eye-liner and rouge.

For Baudelaire, unadorned nature extinguishes the divine gift of a ‘spark of that sacred flame’ of Beauty bestowed upon some women at birth, the fire of her glance is enhanced by ‘the metal and mineral which twist and turn around her arms and her neck’, her beauty entirely bound up in the ‘muslins, the gauzes, the vast, iridescent clouds of stuff’.

---

372 Baudelaire, 32.
373 Baudelaire, 34.
374 Baudelaire, 33.
376 Baudelaire, 34. Cf. Glenn O’Brien on photographs of the fashion model: ‘This beauty wasn’t a simple matter of natural biological attraction. This beauty wasn’t a matter of nature. It was art improving on the best nature had to offer. It was art in the service of evolution (or vice versa).’ Glenn O’Brien, ‘Pink Thoughts’ in Andrew Wilkes, ed., The Idealizing Vision: Art of Fashion Photography (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1991), 62.
in which she develops herself’. The image of a beautiful Woman is unthinkable to the poet or artist without her ‘costume’. (That she is not simply dressed or wrapped in fashionable clothing is reinforced by the impression—hard to shake even after repeated readings—that se développer and s’envêlopper were confused in translation.)

Baudelaire’s insistence on valuing the external, artificial qualities in women (qualities now often associated with subjection) also had its male equivalent in the figure of the dandy. Born into an undistinguished family and at a time unfavoured by history (the preceding generation had experienced decades of glory and honour on the battlefield), Baudelaire sought heroism in ‘the cult of the self’, the origins of which he traced back to the great military men of antiquity. ‘The dandy’, he is reported as saying, ‘should live and sleep in front of a mirror’ and hardly a work on the poet fails to mention the fastidious care he took with his appearance. For a conscientious advocate of superficial change such as Baudelaire, this attention to the externals of life is not to be construed as vanity but as the means of transforming the self. Art or, failing that, artifice was the real antidote to nature. But, beyond this, through art one could rewrite the metaphysical world, using creativity to overcome the state of nature, performing a divine act which emulates the original Creator. As Anita Brookner puts it in her essay on Baudelaire, ‘If Nature represents the Fall, then Imagination, “la reine des facultés”, can point the way to redemption. Paradise can be regained, not by Grace, not even by Will, but by Imagination.’

377 Baudelaire, 31.
378 Baudelaire, 27.
6.5  Fashion as Divine Artist

Baudelaire’s elevation of the outer layers of the human figure to an expression of spirituality does not mean that he was blind to the phantasmagoria of nineteenth century commodity culture. As a poet forced to earn a meagre living as an art critic he was acutely aware of the market-place as a gaping abyss into which art, as well as the artist himself, met the fate of all other *nouveautés*. Nonetheless, imparting a spiritual, even ideal, dimension to modern clothing—to fashionable clothing—is a conscious attempt to counter the prevailing aesthetic thought of his time. In the first volume of his *Aesthetics*, Georg Hegel wrote disparagingly of modern clothing, comparing it to the ‘more ideal drapery of the ancients’ and, in the second volume, he expands upon this argument setting down a case that the body and clothing should follow distinct principles. Hegel argued that spiritual expression in the human figure could be portrayed only through the face and the posture as a whole. In ideal art, anything that was superfluous to the ‘expression of the spirit’ was to be considered unimportant, thus the purpose of clothing in art was to ‘emphasise only the spiritual treatment of the form in its living outline’. This is successfully achieved in drapery, ‘where a higher intellectual significance, an inner seriousness of the spirit, is prominent’. Modern clothing, which follows closely the shape of the limbs and throws into relief the head (the source of inner life) should, on this principle, he admits, be highly appropriate for artistic treatment. But this is not the case: because it is cut, stitched,

---

383 Hegel, 2:744.
384 Hegel, 2:745.
folded, buttoned and otherwise produced in ‘unfree forms’ that only imitate and then conceal the body, modern clothing is to be considered ‘wholly inartistic’. 385

The principles of drapery, on the other hand, can be compared to those of architecture; the mantle, for example, he likens to a house ‘in which a person is free to move’, fastened only on the shoulder, it hangs and forms independently and spontaneously, it is not ‘tight and manufactured’, it is not restricted by seams, buttons and button-holes but only by ‘the pose of the wearer’. 386 It is thus imbued with the spirit but remains true to the essential principle that ‘the body is one thing, the clothing another, and the latter must come into its own independently and appear in its freedom.’ 387 On this account, modern clothes fail entirely, being ‘so subservient’ to the body that the expression of the pose appears too predominant and yet they manage to disfigure the forms of the limbs, a situation hardly improved by an additional act of subservience—their willingness to bow to the caprice of fashion, whose rationale is ‘the right of continual alteration’. 388 The influence of fashion on clothing can thus operate to shift the power relationship between the body and clothing. In 1858, Théophile Gautier observed: ‘The garment of the modern age has become for man a sort of skin, which he is not prepared to forsake under any pretext and which clings to him like an animal’s hide, nowadays to the point that the real shape of the body has been quite forgotten.’ 389 Much later, in the following century, surrealists would employ clothing as a simulacrum for the human body displacing it all together. (See plates 6.1 and

386 Hegel, 2:747. Not surprisingly, the revival of classical clothing is one of the tropes of dress reform movements and utopian visions where freedom of movement is equated with freedom of the individual.
387 Hegel, 2:747.
388 Hegel, 2:749.
In between these two points in time the German sociologist and social philosopher, Georg Simmel, would directly address the question of the relationship between the individual and fashion in a theory that leaves open the possibility that fashion, in a demiurgic act of transfiguration, would become divine Artist, creating humanity in its own image.

In his book, *Tigersprung*, Ulrich Lehmann emphasises Simmel’s role as the first philosopher to seriously address fashion and to establish the relationship between fashion and modernity. Like Baudelaire (and, later, Benjamin), Simmel’s interest in fashion derived from its immediacy and its essentially transitory, ephemeral nature, a mode of being that reflected everyday experience in modern life as well as existence itself. Fashion was the ideal metaphor for the fragmented social reality that characterised modernity and, in its fundamental ambiguity and mutability, provided a model of co-existence for multiple social and aesthetic modes of expression. Furthermore, its quotation of the past and its anticipation of the future refuted the totalitarian tendencies of historicism and symbolised the patchwork temporality of modern life, conveying a feeling for the present more effectively than other phenomena. The sartorial commodity then was the emblem par excellence of objective culture, reflecting the overriding exteriority of an age where ‘men and women no longer determined themselves from within’. Thus the fashion object not only produced societal appearance as a whole but also represented the individual in society. Just as social life could be understood as coherent ‘only in its absolutely

---

390 Lehmann, 155.
dispersed incoherence so too was the individual tailored from fragments that relied on fashion to provide the illusion of a self as an apparently seamless garment.

At the core of Simmel’s writings is the belief that all the phenomena of life can be explained as occurring in the interplay between two opposing tendencies. Although he lists many instances of the operation of such dualism, in his essay from 1905, ‘The Philosophy of Fashion’, he casts ‘the whole history of society’ around the human experience of reconciling the desire to adapt to the social group with a simultaneous need to acquire individual elevation from it. Social adaptation manifests in the psychological tendency towards imitation and its foremost attraction lies in it permitting ‘purposive and meaningful action even where nothing personal or creative is in evidence.’ The imitative human being is assured of not standing apart from the group but in doing so relinquishes both the demand for creative activity and its action to another. The opposing tendency is toward differentiation or distinction and derives from an impulse for change, progress, and an imaginative state that envisions the future instead of being bound to the past and to tradition. The struggle between these two fundamentally antagonistic principles underpins a multitude of social forms that would not exist if ever one principle were to permanently cede ground to the other. It is this perpetual contest between imitation and distinction (or, as Lehmann puts it, invention) that comprises the philosophical foundation of Simmel’s theory of fashion:

Fashion is the imitation of a given pattern and thus satisfies the need for social adaptation; it leads the individual onto the path that everyone travels, it furnishes a general condition that resolves the conduct

391 Lehmann, 129.
of every individual into a mere example. At the same time, and to no less a degree, it satisfies the need
for distinction, the tendency towards differentiation, change and individual contrast.393

Once fashion is recognised as the outcome of these two opposing tendencies, its
autonomy from individual decisions becomes apparent. Because the parameters of
fitting in or standing out are so elastic (for example, the punk—with so much as
altering a safety-pin—will signify the extreme of both positions depending on whether
he is on the Kings Road in 1979 or at an accountants’ conference), sartorial choice
begins to look less like the creative activity of an individual and more like the
relinquishment of aesthetic responsibility to fashion.

By crystallising the phenomenon of fashion to a simultaneous instance of imitation
and distinction (which, in practice, determine individual and social identities), Simmel
corrects the misguided approach of those before him who have attempted to
understand or explain fashion only from ‘the viewpoint of the development of their
contents’.394 In other words, the particular form that a fashion may take is irrelevant as
all instances of fashion conform to this inner articulation. Fashion can and does
infiltrate every area of life—Simmel observes its ‘unbearable’ presence in religious,
scientific and political thought, for example—but this is not to say that fashion’s
despotic hand is inescapable. Even its most visible and untiring ambassador—
clothing—is not entirely faithful to the cause, serving as it does some objective
purpose towards our material needs. But for the most part there can be no logical
explanation for the dictates of fashion. There is no reason why a perfectly serviceable
suit becomes virtually unwearable due to such seemingly minor details as the width of

393 Simmel, 189.
394 Simmel, 189.
a lapel, the number of buttons on a jacket or the presence or not of cuffs on the
trousers, neither can any useful explanation be given as to why ‘the ruffle on a dress’
should be considered ‘in’, ‘out’ or ‘the height’ of fashion.

Although the source for these decisions is possibly traceable to an individual or a
group of individuals, they are nonetheless determined in a completely arbitrary
manner; it makes no difference what the decision is, as long as the principles that
create fashion are obeyed. In this sense fashion, often pronounced wilful, knows no
other aesthetic authority than its own:

Judging from the ugly and repugnant things that are sometimes modern, it would seem as though
fashion were desirous of exhibiting its power by getting us to adopt the most atrocious things for its
sake alone.395

Whereas other observers of fashion’s ability to warp our taste see that as a reason to
condemn it (for instance, Thorstein Veblen), Simmel seems tacitly admiring of a
despotism driven by an apparently inexhaustible creative activity. Because the
variations of fashionable dress per se are irrelevant to Simmel’s theory of fashion, so
too are the individual creators. Unlike art, which requires an artist and bears the trace
of the artist, fashion comes into being because of a set of circumstances, not because
of any individual act. Despite the manipulation of a system that assiduously promotes
the idea of the artist-creator, the self-perpetuating dynamic of fashion, with its
constant imitation, novelties and inventions, gives the impression that it is in charge of
its own destiny, is itself the hand behind its endless creations.
For Simmel, writes Lehmann, creative achievement was to be considered ‘the basis of cognition’ and in his first essay to address the subject, ‘On the Psychology of Fashion’ (1895), he applies the neo-Kantian problematic regarding the origin of cognition—whether its source is in the objects of cognition or in the cognitive subject—to fashion.\(^{396}\) In his discussion of the essay, Lehmann paraphrases Simmel asking, ‘can cognition said to be founded in the clothes we choose to wear, or is it in the human mind that chooses them?’\(^{397}\) In this early essay, writes Lehmann, ‘cognition and self-awareness are regarded as the creative achievement of the subject, aided by the guidelines extracted from the conglomerate of experience’.\(^{398}\) However, following the logic established in ‘The Philosophy of Fashion’ regarding the conditions in which fashion comes into being, it is not humanity but fashion that wields the sceptre of invention and, from its throne, decrees the only sumptuary laws that have ever met with any success.

6.6 The Fashion/Body Split

In Simmel’s opinion, there is no limit to the contents of social and cultural life that, ‘to all appearances and in abstracto’, can be absorbed by fashion but just as the ‘inner essence’ of certain forms have a ‘special disposition to live themselves out as fashion’ there are others, which he terms ‘classic’, that put up ‘an inward resistance’.\(^{399}\) In his discussion of the term he defines it as,

\(^{395}\) Simmel, 190.
\(^{396}\) Lehmann, *Tigersprung*, 137.
\(^{397}\) Lehmann, 130.
\(^{398}\) Lehmann, 130.
A concentration of appearance around a sublime middle point; the classical possesses something collective, which does not offer so many points of attack, as it were, from which modification, disturbance and destruction of the balance might emanate.  

As illustration, Simmel offers the contrasting examples of Greek and Baroque sculpture. The former concentrates its energy—the limbs do not distract or draw visibly away from the whole, offering a sense of unity and a ‘feeling that this formation is exempt from the changes of general life’.  

The opposite impression is given by Baroque sculpture whose unity seems under constant threat of fragmentation due to its unruly limbs which always look like they might break off. Although the more obvious feature of the classic is its persistent presence over time, in theory, the classic comes into being as a classic (hence the term, ‘instant classic’) and therefore this endurance should not be seen as a defining characteristic but rather the by-product of a form, an ‘inner life’, which does not ‘possess the unrest, the character of fortuitousness, the subjugation to the momentary impulse’ of the purely fashionable.  

This is not to deny that the classic can periodically fall under the sway of fashion but it does so without losing its essential identity as a classic and its appearance in social and aesthetic life is not dependent upon the whim of fashion; it may experience moments as fashion but it also has a life outside of fashion. So while the Levis 501, first invented in 1890, has been continuously wearable as acceptable casual clothing since the 1950s, the same cannot be said of the jean in any of its flared, cuffed, high-waisted, low-waisted, acid-washed, over-dyed, stretched, sequined, embroidered, patched, engineered, distressed or safety-pinned incarnations over the successive

399 Simmel, ‘The Philosophy of Fashion’, 204.  
400 Simmel, 205.  
401 Simmel, 205.  
402 Simmel, 205.
years. We can say, then, that there is a different relationship of power between fashion and the classic and fashion and the purely fashionable.

The integrity of the classic in the face of fashion’s wilfulness and mutability can be usefully compared to Simmel’s understanding of the power relationship that exists between fashion and the individual. Writing of this relationship, Virginia Woolf suggested that although we may make clothes ‘take the mould of arm or breast…they would mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking’. Simmel does not completely agree but neither does he pretend that conforming to the frequent and inexplicable changes of fashion constitutes anything other than a ‘tremendous subjugation of the individual’. He observes that ‘similarly dressed people behave in relatively similar ways’. This is particularly the case with those who follow fashion because, in the quest for novelty, its wearers are regularly attired in new clothes which, being unfamiliar, impose attitudes and postures upon the body. Rejected as out-of-date before they are ‘worn in’ fashionable clothes never take the mould of an arm, a breast (or a knee), the body never gets the chance to inflict upon the clothes its own idiosyncrasies. This applies not just to the relatively restrictive attire of Simmel’s age but also to the more recent fashion for clothes that are pre-fabricated as ‘loose fit’ or ‘aged’.

---

405 Simmel, 191.
406 As I sit here at my computer in my over-long, over-sized Lee slouch-fit jeans, I am conscious each time I get up, of the gait I must adopt to avoid tripping over the hem, the stance I must take to prevent them falling off my hips. In an even more exaggerated version of the style, skate-boarders (or their imitators) have learnt not to worry about the gravitational pull and select their brand of underwear with exposure in mind.
However, unique amongst his contemporaries, Simmel does not extend the meaning of such subjugation as being emblematic of a wider social and economic oppression. Veblen, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), characterises fashion as a powerful ideological tool of an essentially corrupt and tyrannical social system. Simmel, on the contrary, claims that a highly developed fashion system indicates the ‘increased social and political freedom’ of the individual in society, for it is only in the absence of an absolute and permanent despot that fashion, the ‘ephemeral tyrant’, can reign.\(^{407}\)

Furthermore, fashion is one form through which the individual can ‘seek to save their inner freedom’.\(^{408}\) Because fashion only affects ‘the externals of life’, the ‘subtle movements of the soul’ are thus protected from outside attack:

It is in fact fundamental to fashion that it makes no distinction at all between all individualities alike, and yet it is always done in such a way that it never affects the whole human being; indeed it *always remains somewhat external to the individual*—even in those spheres outside mere clothing fashions. For the form of mutability in which it is presented to the individual is under all circumstances a contrast to the stability of the sense of self, and indeed the latter must become conscious of its relative duration precisely through this contrast. The changeableness of the elements of fashion can express itself as mutability and develop its attraction only through this enduring element of the sense of self. But for this very reason fashion always stands, *as I have pointed out, at the very periphery of the personality*, which regards itself as a *pièce de résistance* to fashion, or at least can be experienced as such in an emergency.\(^{409}\)

He adds that just as the sensitive and retiring person may hide their true feelings behind some trivial comment so too can the integrity of the inner self remain intact and unobserved, masked by the veil of fashion.


\(^{408}\) Simmel, 200.

\(^{409}\) Simmel, 198. Emphasis added.
For Simmel, such a masking of the private self heralds a ‘triumph of the soul’, a victory made all the sweeter because that which threatened the personality—fashion—has been subdued to the level of servant. But in the fragmented abstraction of modern social reality where (at least for the upper classes), ‘the social forms, the clothes, the aesthetic judgements, the whole style in which human beings express themselves are conceived in the constant transformation through fashion’, its inability to subjugate the depths of subjectivity appears less like a failure than a strategic decision to retreat from a battle over territory it regards as little more than a wasteland. In the highly reflective surface world of modernity, where the sartorial commodity is imbued with metaphysical value, the material reality of the veil is all that counts.

In his *Philosophy of Money* (1900), Simmel wrote of the radical opposition between the subject and the object that arises from the conditions of production under industrial capitalism. Under the system of customised, artisanal production, goods have a ‘subjective aura’ in relation to the consumer but this disappears in the ‘economic cosmos’ of modern society where the commodity is produced independently of the consumer. Simmel uses the example of the difference between the highly specialised modern clothing store and the work of the tailor who visited the client at home. In the latter, the sartorial object, from its conception, is closely identified with the consuming subject but in the former the product acquires ‘supra-individual independence’ as ‘an objective entity which the consumer approaches externally and whose specific existence and quality is autonomous of him’. He concludes:

---

Simmel, 198.
It is obvious how much this objectifies the whole character of the transaction and how subjectivity is destroyed and transformed into cool reserve and anonymous objectivity once so many intermediate stages are introduced between the producer and the one who accepts his products that they lose sight of each other.\textsuperscript{412}

In the mid-nineteenth century, mass production and the division of labour in the clothing trades was still fairly limited but, as the century wore on, the traditional practice of an object being produced by a single person or for a single person became increasingly obsolete in all areas of fashion as, from the atelier of Worth to the mills of Lyons or Manchester, it developed into a powerful industry. Even though the estrangement was not entirely a product of modern times, the broadened consumer base of nineteenth century capitalism provided the conditions for the definitive rupture between the fashion commodity and its wearer.\textsuperscript{413} The possibility, attributed by Hegel to ancient dress, of sartorial items existing autonomously as creative designs and as garments that interact with the body, adapting their form according to the person who is wearing the clothes is definitively quashed. In the context of industrial modernity, the independence and freedom of the fashion object, writes Lehmann, alienates it ‘as a commodity, as a fetish, from the body it was originally meant to warm, protect or cover in modesty’.\textsuperscript{414} In acquiring a fetish character and drifting

\textsuperscript{411} Simmel, 190.
\textsuperscript{413} It is possible to consider the one-off tailored piece and ready-to-wear clothing in terms of Benjamin’s notion of ‘aura’—respectively, as the original work of art and the reproduction. However, the fashionable commodity is criticised whereas the reproduction (eg. film) is held to be breaking with tradition and therefore valuable to the Marxist society. This then raises the question: What prevents the commodity from being considered a ‘work of art’?
\textsuperscript{414} Lehmann, \textit{Tigersprung}, 222. What is not considered here is clothing’s role in adorning the body, surely as much an ‘original purpose’ as utilitarian concerns.
from its ‘original purpose’, clothing, as economic object, follows the pattern that Marx assigned generally to commodities in the age of capitalism.

With the development from made-to-measure to ready-to-wear and the evolving alienation between the sartorial commodity and the consumer, the interaction between body and clothes becomes short-lived. Once liberated from the body, fashion’s notorious facility for amnesia comes into play, erasing the body’s imprint from sartorial memory. The adaptation of the clothing to the body can now be seen as a performance, one that it slips in and out of as easily as the multiple costume changes of a diva; a transformation is observed, maybe a change in character is signified but it is a transformation without commitment. In the same way that the identity of Barbra Streisand or Cher is never under question—no matter how convincing the performance—so too does the act of being worn leave the reified fashion object metaphysically and ontologically intact. It is not so clear that the same can be said for the body, whose existence as an entity independent of clothing comes under threat. Whereas the autonomous character granted clothing in Hegel’s proposition does not appear to prevent the body and clothing from operating in a spirit of co-operation—neither one overwhelms the other—in capitalist modernity, the ontological shift that dresses the fashionable body sees fashion overwhelm the body. Unwilling to tolerate what is distinct about the body, it seeks to invent a humanity that imitates fashion itself.

415 It is worth remembering that what is under discussion here are new clothes, specifically, the rapid turnover of garments required by a highly evolved fashion system. A different dynamic comes into play with second-hand or vintage clothing which is often imbued with the ‘soul’ of the former owner—ghosts of shoulders, elbows, knees, etc. remain. Depending on the item, this may make it easier or harder for the garment to adapt to a ‘new’ body. On the other hand, new clothes (even those that are ‘pre-aged’) are bought with their integrity intact—no body, through sweat and wear, has staked a prior claim.
6.4 An Artificial Humanity

Walter Benjamin’s unfinished magnum opus, *The Arcades Project*, was an attempt to redraw the boundaries between philosophy and cultural history and in it he spins a complex web that weaves between the ephemeral and the monumental, rescuing one from the dustbins of history while excavating the solid ground beneath the other. This is not done in order to reverse an established hierarchy but rather to reveal the processes of myth-making and reification that underscore the cultural products of nineteenth century industrialism and thus capitalist society. As such, his anthropological sifting through the mass culture of nineteenth century Paris is a process of uncovering the relics of a nascent industrial society where the only remaining measure of value is the price tag. Not only has the value of objects become detached from the human labour that has produced them but every dimension of human existence and experience has been ‘hollowed out’ of any social value or meaning.

The increasing reification of society in capitalist modernity lies at the heart of the paradigmatic value that fashion held for Benjamin.\(^{416}\) Fashion was the inorganic commodity that enfolded and adorned the human body, asserting its authority as the supreme object in the socio-cultural landscape of the nineteenth century. It fluttered its ornaments within tantalising view of all classes, offering itself freely in streets dominated by crinolined skirts and ringing with the sound of satin heels. Its gestures

---

\(^{416}\) As previously noted, in the early stages of *The Arcades Project* Benjamin interpreted fashion affirmatively; as a structure its inherent instability symbolised social change whilst specific fashions themselves could create a visual landscape that reflected or anticipated social freedoms of both the lower classes and of women. Ultimately, though, this rather utopian view is replaced by a belief in the fundamental conservatism of fashion and, instead, its constant cycle of obsolescence and replacement is interpreted as upholding class division and serving the interests of profit.
were those of the coquette, infiltrating the imagination and seducing the soul. Furthermore, it threatened to seep into the very core of humanity. In Benjamin’s formulation, writes Susan Buck-Morss in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, it ‘embodies the changed relationship between subject and object that results from the “new” nature of commodity production. In fashion, the phantasmagoria of commodities presses closest to the skin’. The positioning of clothing ‘quite literally at the border between the subject and object, the individual and the cosmos’ is not specific to capitalist modernity but according to the metaphysics of fashion, under which Benjamin saw industrial modernity operating, fashion dictates not only human behaviour and appearance but also the way that humanity constructs its relationship with and understanding of the natural world. Tradition and rituals that, in the Middle Ages, were determined by the life cycles of a revered organic nature are replaced by the ‘spring rites of fashion’ which, in modernity, celebrates ‘novelty rather than recurrence’.

The history of fashion shows that it is not a phenomenon experienced exclusively by women, nonetheless, it is the figure of Woman that is central to Benjamin’s metaphysics of fashion. At first, this appears to be a reiteration of the misogynistic view that demonises the combination of women and adornment on the grounds that it demonstrates their inherent propensity to artifice, dissimulation and sin. However, in his writing, there is not an intertwining of desire and sin according to a theological concept suspicious of finery and its intimate connection with the body. Rather, it is the transference of desire to a mythic commodity that is under attack. The underlying principle in the view that correlates adornment with sin is that the body is the

dominant signifier—fashion’s guilt is by association—but the experience of modernity sees the fashion object escape from its traditional implication with the body. An economy run according to the precepts of fashion witnesses ‘active, sensual desire…surrendered to objects and perverted into the passive desire for new sensations’. The fashionable object reconfigures the impulses of sexual desire, arresting desire at the borderline of fabric and skin, artifice and nature, the organic and inorganic; at the same time, desire is dependent, like the fashion process, on a never-ending dissatisfaction with the present.

In the schema of *The Arcades Project*, the mystical, allegorical understanding of Woman as Nature is valorised. For Benjamin, ‘woman’s fecundity personifies the creativity of the old nature, the transiency of which has its source in life rather than death’. As such, she is, potentially, in dialectical opposition to the mechanised productivity of nineteenth century industrialism. However, by accepting fashion’s morbid economy of novelty as newness, the modern female archetype forfeits the political potency of the authentic newness of birth and, in aligning herself to fashion, she embodies, rather than threatens, capitalist society. Seduced by the commodity, she becomes, in the figure of the prostitute, herself a commodity. Woman’s living body—no longer connected to an organic world with its recurring life cycles—Benjamin argues, can be said to imitate the mannequin which, with its detachable parts, encourages fetishistic fragmentation. The fashionable body then evolves into an

---

418 Buck-Morss, 97.
419 Buck-Morss, 98.
420 Buck-Morss, 103.
421 In an entry in *The Arcades Project* Benjamin notes: ‘Hallmark of the period’s fashions: to intimate a body that never knows full nakedness.’ (*The Arcades Project*, 68) And in many of Baudelaire’s poems desire is intricately (and intimately) connected to dress. See, for example, *Les Bijoux, Le Cadre* and *A une Madone*.
assembled body, its form determined by layers of accoutrements that, themselves mythologised as objects of desire, redirect libidinal desire away from the body to its manufactured outer shell. This transference from the organic to the inorganic has profound consequences for what it means to be human:

In the process of displacing nature’s transiency onto commodities, the life force of sexuality is displaced there as well. For what is it that is desired? No longer the human being: Sex appeal emanates from the clothes one wears. Humanity is what you hang your hat on.423

The dialectical struggle between fashion and nature that underlies many of the ideas investigated in The Arcades Project was also the central theme of the illustrator, Grandville, much admired by Benjamin for his witty, caustic critique of industrial capitalism. Grandville (a contemporary of both Marx and Baudelaire), produced books of proto-surrealistic lithographs which ‘created a sensation’ when they appeared toward the middle of a century that was so ‘parched and imagination-starved’, wrote Benjamin, ‘that the collective dream energy of a society has taken refuge with redoubled vehemence in the mute impenetrable nebula of fashion’.424 In the dreamworld of capitalism nature is modernised and subsumed under the artificial forms created by humanity and, in Grandville’s illustrations, the myth of human omnipotence and dominance is caricatured according to the terms of commodity society. For a nineteenth century audience, he depicted a ‘cosmology of fashion’ where, from the bottom of the sea to the outer limits of the universe, a compliant nature conforms to the needs and aesthetic standard of the elegant consumer. Marine

423 Buck-Morss, 100. It is also possible that clothes do not discount the skin, the body and, in fact, enhance the body. Thus sexual attraction has always been one (if not the) reason why people wear clothes.
life shrugs off its out-dated primeval form in a fashion make-over that sees it emerge as the *dernier cri* in grooming aids—flowers face the spring, tight-laced and crinolined, and the principles of Haussmann’s urban renewal reach far into the cosmos, transforming Saturn’s ring into an iron balcony for fashionable society to display itself. (See plates 6.3, 6.4 and 6.5.).

But in the part of his work that *Benjamin* suggested naming ‘The Struggle of Fashion with Nature’ Grandville allows nature to finally gain the upper hand, turning humanity’s impulse to fetishise it as a commodity back upon itself in depictions of grasping consumers blind to a revengeful, rebellious nature that uses the same fetishised commodities to lure humans to their fate (plate 6.6). Even here, lived experience is diminished. Nature does not wreak vengeance on a biblical scale—there are no floods, storms or earthquakes—rather, revenge comes in the petty form appropriate to a humanity that inhabits not deserts and oceans but the nineteenth century equivalent of shopping malls and credit card debt. For Grandville the dreamworld of capitalism is, in reality, an unacknowledged nightmare where the hubris of man prevents him from seeing the undisclosed contract of capitalism: the price of domination over nature is one’s humanity. In ‘Fashionable people represented in public by their accoutrements’ (plate 6.7), a lithograph from 1844, Grandville depicts a gathering of anthropomorphised hat stands, oversized hats, canes, high-top boots, and frock-coats apparently engaged in polite conversation with some parasols, bonnets, feathers, blouses and shawls. They are escapees from the shops of the rue St Honoré, unmoulded by customers’ bodies but still confident in their *tenue*. In this caricature of the *bon ton*, Grandville suggests a world where cloth and leather have

424 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 64.
displaced flesh and bone, where being human is an irrelevant pre-requisite for social intercourse. Ultimately, commodities are left to interact with each other, undisturbed by the messy, natural realities that lie hidden in the folds of the human body.

The extent to which Grandville’s illustrations allign with Benjamin’s metapysics of fashion is noted in his essay from 1935, ‘Paris—the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’:

Fashion prescribed the ritual by which the fetish Commodity wished to be worshipped, and Grandville extended the sway of fashion over the objects of daily use as much as over the cosmos. In pursuing it to its extremes, he revealed its nature. It stands in opposition to the organic. It prostitutes the living body to the inorganic world. In relation to the living it represents the rights of the corpse. Fetishism, which succumbs to the sex-appeal of the inorganic, is its vital nerve; and the cult of the commodity recruits this to its service.426

He finds a correspondence to Grandville’s fantasies in the spirit of fashion found in Guillaume Apollinaire’s, Le Poète assassiné, in which fashion’s indiscriminate pilfering from nature to create its dresses and decorate its hats, shoes and umbrellas is described. Cork, fishbones, sea-shells, steel, sandstone, crystal, glass, mirrors and even recycled book-bindings made from calf are all ‘ennobled’ by being the chosen materials of fashion.427 Elsewhere, Benjamin notes the promotion of a cosmetic that promises to give women of the Second Empire a complexion like ‘rose taffeta’.428 The implication here is not that the uncontrollable physical impulse of ‘blushing like a

425 Benjamin, 71.
rose’—long intertwined with sexual attraction and desire by both poets and scientists—is achieved through artifice, but rather that this artifice is now metaphorically woven into the fabric of an inorganic skin. Not without reason, Buck-Morss sees Benjamin as less convinced than Apollinaire’s fictional character as to fashion’s noble intentions, interpreting the combination of fashion mimicking organic nature and its counterpart—the living human body imitating the inorganic world—as a ‘macabre inversion of the utopian dream of a reconciliation between humanity and nature.’\footnote{429} In this context, she introduces Focillon’s notion, quoted by Benjamin in The Arcades Project, that fashion ‘invents an artificial humanity’.\footnote{430}

In The Dialectics of Seeing, Buck-Morss presents this proposal without any ambiguity; the attitude of fashion towards nature—and, by extension, humanity—is, more or less, one of malign indifference. The tone of the original reference taken by Benjamin is less judgmental:

Most often…[fashion] creates hybrids; it imposes on the human being the profile of an animal…Fashion thus invents an artificial humanity which is not the passive decoration of a formal environment itself. Such a humanity—by turns heraldic, theatrical, fantastical, architectural—takes, as its ruling principle, the poetics of ornament, and what it calls ‘line’… is perhaps but a subtle compromise between a certain physiological canon…. and imaginative design.\footnote{431}

The idea of a compromise between a ‘certain physiological canon’ and ‘imaginative design’ draws attention to an aspect of fashion that is often underplayed—the limitations imposed on it by the body. For centuries, fashion has successfully altered,
restricted and manipulated the natural form and surface of the human body but, in lived reality, its creativity is required to compromise with the raw materials of a human physiology that continues to put up a degree of resistance to the aesthetic whims of fashion. However, in representation, fashion has always had more freedom to express its aesthetic vision, it is therefore in this realm that fashion’s struggle with nature has been won.

6.5 Taking off the Body

A fashion editorial by the photographer Phil Poynter and stylist Charlotte Stockdale, originally published in Dazed and Confused in 1998, revisits the theme suggested by Grandville’s polite gathering of accoutrements a century and a half before. ‘I Didn’t Recognize You With Your Clothes On’ is a literal interpretation of the proposition discussed above: What is it that is desired? No longer the human being: Sex appeal emanates from the clothes that one wears.

In the late twentieth century version, the representation of bodiless clothing has progressed from casual conversation to casual sex: a blow job on a train; sex in a restaurant bathroom; a male client in a bespoke suit, bowler hat and monocle observing a dominatrix and her female victim in a hotel room; and a post-coital cigarette amidst the weeds on the edge of a housing estate. (See plates 6.8, 6.9, 6.10 and 6.11.) In each scenario, the characters are dressed according to easily identifiable codes that place them in a social tribe or milieu. The kids in the train sport baseball caps...

---

caps and hooded jackets, their expensive street wear is catalogue fresh, the couple in the bathroom is dressed in designer minimalism and the S&M/D&B participants wear expensive versions of all the usual clichés. The ‘lovers’ in the weeds are the only ones to have bothered undressing and lie ‘naked’, surrounded by their hastily discarded garments. Not a single identifying accessory or item of clothing is missing or out of place. However, what is missing are the bodies, which have been digitally manipulated out of the frame so that only the outline created by what they are wearing remains, leaving the impression that the clothes can perform quite adequately without a human presence.

These images display an impressive technical skill of what is possible in the realm of digitally manipulated photography while simultaneously filling the conventional brief of the fashion photograph to be ‘new’ and show the clothes. Nonetheless, ‘I Didn’t Recognize You With Your Clothes On’ tacitly invites a questioning of the fashion image genre. It addresses, if only insincerely, complaints regarding the use of overt erotic or pornographic references and the objectification of the (female) body in fashion photography. Nonetheless, the mise-en-scène of the images recalls the work of photographers who have put sex and sexual perversion at the centre of the frame, thus to some extent disrobing the thinly veiled possibilities of such fashion photography. But more apparent in these images than the quotation of a particular style of fashion photography is a sense of boredom surrounding the representation of the body, a fatigue perhaps brought on by the breaking down of any taboos associated with sex or perhaps by a saturation with images of the human figure. This could particularly apply to fashion photography which, with its limited codes and repertoire, is so familiar a genre that the body is no longer needed in order to display clothes, ostensibly
rendering the model obsolete. However, it is precisely because the body is so familiar that it is never really absent from the frame; if it cannot actually be seen, it exists at least as a memory. In most of the shots the clothes are moulded by an invisible human form and when this disappears, as in the last shot, the clothes lose their identity (rather than bestowing it), becoming indistinguishable from half-finished garments on a clothing factory floor. Because of this, despite its explicit sexual nature, the modern version of ‘Fashionable people represented in public by their accoutrements’ is less radical than the original, evincing a dependence upon the body that the consumer items drawn by Grandville do not betray.

Nonetheless, Poynter’s photographs are a vivid representation of the determination by the fashion object to exist independently of, and dominate the human subject. Even though the familiar outline of the body remains more or less intact in these images, the absence of any actual body symbolises a disregard for the organic body, paving the way for the possibility of a reversal of the notion that it is the body that takes off the clothes—rather, it is the clothes that have removed the body. Once this has occurred, the original frame around which fashion has been constructed for most of its history can be discarded and any organic realities of the human body ignored. The fashion object is thus left free to recreate an ideal humanity according to its own desires and tendencies, moulding the body out of a fabric more amenable to fashion than flesh. Ultimately, reconfiguring the human form itself into fashion.
Chapter Seven

The Synthetic Ideal

Nothing dies; all is transformed.

— Balzac

7.1 Artificial Nature

In an age where there is an unprecedented availability of products and techniques that reverse or allay the signs of ageing, the concept of an ‘artificial humanity’ would appear to be an appropriate description of the woman of fashion. After surveying a century in the pages of Vogue, Kennedy Fraser would write, ‘Increasingly, women are willing to regard their bodies as photographic images, unpublishable until retouched and perfected at the hands of surgeons’.432 In mainstream fashion publications such as Vogue, W, Harper’s Bazaar, Elle and Marie-Claire, endorsement and advertising for cosmetic products and procedures constitute a large proportion of the beauty editorial and advertising content.433 While the desirability of a youthful, flawless complexion and a toned, fat-free body is nothing new to fashion media, the development of relatively simple procedures that can be undertaken without the inconvenience and pain involved with major surgery has opened up new possibilities of achieving this goal. Liposuction that pumps fat out, botox and collagen injections that pump it in,

433 It is rare that the aesthetic I identify as the synthetic ideal appears in these titles. On the other hand, publications where the synthetic ideal does appear (such as Dutch, i-D, The Face and Dazed and Confused), do not tend to advertise or run feature stories on beauty and cosmetic products. Whether this is due to editorial policy, the demographic or reluctance on the part of the cosmetic branch (as opposed to the fashion branch) of companies to be associated with images that are unconventional is unclear.
laser surgery and acid peels that remove blemishes, uneven pigmentation, wrinkles and other visible signs of ageing are the unquestioned allies in the eternal quest to eliminate the traces left by the passage of time on the human body. In the era of the ‘lunch-time facelift’, where grandmothers can emerge from a doctor’s appointment with a petrified brow as unfurrowed as that of a seventeen-year-old, the infiltration of the non-organic into the living, moving body is a fact of the material world.  

More literal instances of an artificial humanity have been supplied by advances in those fields of technology and science that are unconnected with the beauty or fashion industries, where a substitute ‘body’, as opposed to a body infiltrated by the non-organic or synthetic, is the goal. Detachable, bionic, or replaceable body parts, bodies that can be kept alive when the mind has ceased to function, genetic engineering and cloning, artificial wombs, automatons entrusted with landing planes or conducting precise surgical procedures, and cybernetics have all left the pages of science fiction to enter into the realm of the everyday. These scientific and technological discoveries have been described as taking us into the era of the ‘post-human’ and while this remains a contentious term, at the very least we have been compelled to reconsider the notion of the body as essentially organic and mortal. This notwithstanding, no-one has yet found the ultimate solution to escape the reality of human bodies as ‘one-use only units that crumble around us’.  

434 A note on the use of the terms ‘non-organic’ and ‘unnatural’: while I realise that it is not scientifically correct to describe botox (a form of botulism) as non-organic, in the cosmetic and fashion industries ‘natural’ and ‘organic’ can be meaningless terms; the semiotic of botox and, to take an example from fashion, latex (made from plastic foam, the original source of which is petroleum) can only be described as inorganic, unnatural. Furthermore, in relation to the ‘natural’ body, clothing—even when made from organically grown, hand-picked flax—signifies as ‘artificial’.  


efforts of the scientific and engineering communities, humanity still remains defined by the physical fact of its mortality. The body in the lived world may have come closer to overcoming the limitations of its organic reality, but the idea of a truly artificial humanity remains a metaphorical description. This is not the case, however, for the imaginary body of the fashion photograph where a synthetic ideal—born out of the technology of computer manipulation of the image—has transcended the ‘bloody mess of organic matter’, signalling Fashion’s triumph over Nature.437

Observers of fashion are accustomed to both its disregard toward the realities of the human body and its lack of interest in conforming to the precedents set by nature. In Tigersprung, Ulrich Lehmann explains humanity’s ancient dissatisfaction with the natural body and the universal attempts to disrupt and alter its given form as a creative impulse. He writes:

Nature, as well as man, was already perfected from the moment of creation. Therefore it had always been possible to imitate this perfection. However, the greater task for any artist lay in inventing images for which nature had not provided a model.438

Rituals carried out in traditional, pre-capitalist societies, such as foot-binding, neck-rings and scarification, can be considered alongside the practices of western fashion such as tight-lacing and wearing stilettos or the surgical procedures of breast, calf or shoulder implants, rib removal and facelifts as methods of physically altering or

437 Cavallaro and Warwick, Fashioning the Frame, 125.
438 Ulrich Lehmann, Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity (Cambridge, Mass., London: The MIT Press, 2000), 144. J.C. Flügel in The Psychology of Clothes (London: Hogarth, 1933: 237) makes a similar point but with an overt acknowledgment of the part played by fashion in this artistry: ‘Art itself (and with it sartorial art) is a compromise between imagination and reality; it deals with real media but implies an inability to find complete satisfaction with reality and creates a new world “nearer to the heart’s desire”’. 


manipulating the natural structure of the body. But in life, and slightly less so on the catwalk, fashion has always been restricted by the material human body and found itself obliged to contend with its realities in a way that has not been the case in fashion photography, where the faults of nature can be modified by re-touching and airbrushing. To this effect, digital manipulation of the image can, of course, be considered as little more than a sophisticated technology to enhance the image of a model into the state of perfection often required in fashion’s world of wrinkle-free humanity. However, as the title of a book dedicated to the topic, *The Impossible Image*, suggests, at the cutting-edge of fashion photography the appeal of digital manipulation lies more in the potential it offers to not only outstrip conventional fashion photography but also to create something that is beyond the reach of lived reality. For fashion, digital technology offers the artistic freedom to invent something that does not already exist.

In portraying a figure that has no ‘real’ counterpart, that, in effect, has no existence beyond the realm of representation, the synthetic ideal self-consciously announces its artifice. To a large extent this is already a feature of any fashion photograph where, more than in other photographic fields, naive notions of the camera’s innocent relation to reality is undermined. Not only is there a degree of transparency regarding the artificial nature of a situation that calls for a model to pose before the camera, but the reader is also aware that reels of film, with each frame carefully overseen by a team of credited experts in charge of make-up, hair, styling and lighting, are required to produce—usually after retouching—a handful of shots suitable for publication. But underlying our complicity in the constructed nature of the medium, there remains a
presumption that what we see in the final image is more or less what appeared in front of the camera. No such correspondence between the image and reality exists in the case of the digitally manipulated image where the solid elements of the conventional photograph dissolve into a kaleidoscope of pixels that, like the chorus line from a Busby Berkeley musical, are easily choreographed into endless permutations. Here, the final image is created by reconfiguring many millions of coloured points in a matrix and held in a computer. With this technology there is no original and nothing is left to chance, as every square millimetre is subjected to minute scrutiny and consideration. In this way, explains Robin Derrick, ‘pictures can be seamlessly altered, blended and mixed together’, making ‘anything possible’. 440 In the images of fashion photographers who have embraced the full potential of digital manipulation, Baudelaire’s description of fashion as ‘a sublime deformation of Nature, or rather, as a permanent and repeated attempt at her renewed reformation’ is taken to its extreme. 441

The image created by Nick Knight for the invitation to Alexander McQueen’s Autumn/Winter 1997-8 couture collection, ‘It’s a Jungle Out There’, is a radical re-interpretation of the rules of harmony, symmetry and proportion that, since antiquity, have governed ideals of beauty (plate 7.1). Although extreme in appearance, the body of the model could be considered as the perfect ‘accessory’ to a collection that conformed to a tradition in sartorial fashion of both mimicking and attempting to out-

439 That there is already a presumption of artifice in the fashion photograph is tellingly revealed in the conditions for an international photographic competition in which entries made with digital manipulation are disqualified in every category except that of fashion.
do nature. Here, a beautiful black model is shown naked in an awkward crouching position, her arms are distorted and unbalanced in width, one preternaturally long, sinewy leg tapers down to a furred hoof; from her left shoulder, an antelope horn extends out towards her elbow and from her right rib, a smaller horn, (‘stolen’ from a different species), points menacingly upwards like a dagger. The model’s compact breasts are left intact but her pubic region, fully exposed and dominating the centre of frame, is hairless and moulded closed into a smooth, featureless surface, assertively denying the sexual possibility that is often implicit (or explicit) in conventional fashion images.

In his essay, ‘The Deviations of Nature’, Georges Bataille makes the point that what is labelled ‘unnatural’ in the human form is, in fact, ‘incontestably’ the responsibility of nature. However, the beautiful but freakish creature of  ‘It’s a Jungle Out There’ is not a product of nature, on the contrary, she is a creation of that which is not nature—fashion. This is not simply because the context in which she appears is that of a Parisian couture show nor because the body in the image (in its unmanipulated form) is recognisable as that of a fashion model. Rather, it is because the new technology allows fashion to ignore the corporeal realities of the model and create an utterly imaginary form, much in the same way it would go about creating a garment. In the synthetic ideal, the original, corporeal properties of the body can finally be dismissed or overcome. Thus Fashion, ever at war with Nature, finds itself released from the limitations of the human form and revels in the freedom to invent a ‘humanity’ where any trace of the organic has been eliminated. In the synthetic ideal,

442 The collection included jackets with horns emerging from the shoulders and finger horns designed by Sarah Harmanee.
fashion finds itself free from the restrictions of the body and can finally come close to realizing its imaginary self.

The hunger of the fashion industry and media for anything new or innovative might alone explain its enthusiasm for digital technology, but if the use of digital manipulation by fashion’s image-makers was inevitable, less so—at least on the face of it—was what the images produced would look like. As Derrick points out, once anything is possible photographers are faced with the question of what to do. The field, he writes, has seen the unleashing of ‘powerful imaginations’ where ‘the concept is supreme’ and, to a certain extent, this appraisal is born out by the editorial and advertising pages of those publications whose readership is easily bored by conventional fashion images. With the new technology also came the opportunity to radically change what could be expected from a fashion photograph; as we have seen in Phil Poynter’s sequence, ‘I Didn’t Recognise You With Your Clothes On’, the model herself can be rendered obsolete. A different threat to the future of the model in the age of computer manipulation is the chance it gives the digital imager to emulate the Roman sculptor, Zeuxis, and create a modern day Venus by combining the features of several women into one image of perfection.

Alternatively, the digitally manipulated fashion image could use anyone (or anything) as the model, the standard pre-requisites no longer the preserve of a rare few. In Phil

---


444 The fashion image without anything that could reasonably be called ‘fashion’ or a model has precedents—the portraits of cigarette butts by Irving Penn or the plate of mould-covered food by Guido Mocafico (chapter five) are such examples. However, the tendency in fashion photography (and the exhibition work of fashion photographers) employing digital technology is to retain the body or some version of the human form.
Poynter’s sequence, ‘Gisele’, the model undergoes a computerised ageing process and, in theory, there is no reason why this process could not be reversed. Furthermore, not only wrinkles but cellulite, blemishes, bulges could be made to vanish, cheekbones and breasts lifted, lips inflated, eyes enlarged, lower face reduced and the whole ensemble stretched out to willowy loveliness—all traces of ordinariness eliminated with a push of a button. However, fashion’s commitment to novelty has (as always) limits when it comes to the appearance of its vehicles of display and this vision of aesthetic egalitarianism has not come to pass. When using digital technology, fashion publications and photographers in both the mainstream and at the cutting-edge have proved mostly disinclined to venture beyond the raw materials of youth, thinness and beauty that the model has always supplied and the fashion industry nearly always demanded (plate 7.2).

Behind the industry’s reluctance to discard the model in favour of her technologically produced counterpart there is an element of pragmatism—given the constant stream of new faces available to the industry there is little economic or market imperative to overturn the established system. Behind fashion’s reluctance may be its relationship with the body, which it holds as the most amenable canvas upon which to practice both its authority and its creativity. For fashion, the memory of the natural body is essential if it is to effectively assert the supreme authority of artifice. But even if such considerations were not a factor, the way in which the fashion media, across the spectrum, has used digital technology was, as it turns out, inevitable; it might be true that ‘anything is possible’ but it does not follow that ‘anything’ is acceptable as a fashion image. The consistency of style or theme that can be identified in many of the

---

445 This was the option chosen by the magazine *Mirabella* which presented, as ‘The Face of America’,
fashion images that have taken advantage of the possibilities available with digital technology suggests that, despite the rhetoric employed by Derrick to describe the powerful imaginations working without any of the practical and conceptual restrictions imposed by conventional photography, there still remains limitations on what fashion models or fashion images will look like.

These restrictions cannot be attributed to commercial pressures—many publications and forums now thrive on expanding the parameters of what is acceptable or what constitutes a fashion photograph. Rather, the arbiter is Fashion which, ultimately, determines how it will appear. With the new technology, fashion can continue to effectively explore its age-old obsessions, but it does so within an atmosphere where the artifice intrinsic to fashion is intensified. Even if the concept can be said to be supreme, it is nonetheless a concept collapsed into the world of fashion; the purported freedom is possible because the technology—in images which consciously indicate the traces of manipulation—coincides with the ontology of fashion: the deep layers of artifice that constitute the defining feature of the synthetic ideal point directly to its existence as a creation of fashion.

7.2 Immortal Beauty

A common charge against the fashion image is that it imposes unrealistic aesthetic standards upon women and then encourages acts of imitation. However, it could be argued that, as the ‘real’ body gets closer to the ideal of airbrushed humanity, the

a composite made from six different women.
influence works in the opposite direction, giving fashion representation the impetus to push the limits of preservation in order to maintain an unattainable level of perfection. On this view, the intensified artifice of the synthetic ideal could be seen as a determination to maintain an aesthetic that is beyond the reach of the corporeal world. But in the mainstream fashion press, digital manipulation of the image is not particularly obvious and the hyperbolic artifice that I identify as being the hallmark of the synthetic ideal rarely appears. Instead of unsettling with its strangeness, intensifying the impression that models belong to a different species than us, the conventional perfection aimed at in these images, despite the artifice, appears normal and, possibly, attainable.

It was in reaction to this tradition of normalising artifice, perfection and glamour in the conventional fashion photograph that photographers, stylists and models in the early nineties responded with an introduction of realism in the style known as heroin or grunge chic. Although in appearance the synthetic ideal is the diametric opposite of this look, in the work of at least some of its creators, its exaggerated artifice was similarly an attempt to expose the fiction behind the fashion image. One way of viewing the synthetic ideal then is that, by representing an unattainable ideal, it acts as a comment upon the perfection demanded by the fashion industry and a parody of the promises held out by the beauty and cosmetic surgery industries. Even if this is not always the case, at the very least, it can be said that both the gritty, realist aesthetic and that created by overt use of digital manipulation were originally motivated by a

---

446 Parody, however, does not always achieve its ends, and images that may intend to critique the cosmetic or fashion industry can also encourage either an established ideal or, as one protagonist of the realist look of the nineties lamented, replace it with another equally unattainable ideal. It could also be said that a critique of fashion via the method of exaggerated artifice is inevitably doomed, as artifice is inherent to fashion’s mode of being.
desire to produce images that broke away from the standard that had come to dominate fashion photography in the era of the supermodel.

As discussed in previous chapters, in the dirty realist aesthetic the vulnerability of what it is to be human is emphasised; by showing scars, bruises, pimples, flaws, freckles, blemishes, wrinkles, bones and blood, the delicate system that keeps a body functioning is on display—it is as if the body has been turned inside-out. And with the suggestion of the blood pumping through the veins also came the suggestion of that body’s mortality. Behind this aesthetic was the desire to reduce or collapse the difference between the image-world and the real-world, both in clothing and in the body. In short, to rescue fashion from an idealised, glamourised fantasy world. But even in fashion images that conform to the fiction that the woman in the fashion image is untouched by everyday realities or concerns, the image body remains connected to the idea of a real body. Images of an exuberant supermodel do not emphasise the fragility of the human body, rather the glossy fashion campaign or editorial focuses on the desirability of the body represented. In such images, it is only by degrees of association that beauty and youth can hint at the inevitable fate faced by even the most perfect specimen fashion has to offer. But if the reality of the biological mortal body is side-stepped, the biological sexual body or the body available for sex remains a persistent theme in fashion imagery.447

447 By the end of the nineties, the overlap between fashion and pornography had become well-established. The cross-over was emphasised by David Lachapelle’s shots of a naked Naomi Campbell in compromising positions with a ceramic leopard, an astronaut and a carton of milk for Playboy, but images almost as explicit as these are common to fashion photography. For example, Dior celebrated lesbian love, as did Versace with an added S&M twist, Sisley did everything (including bestiality). Dolce & Gabbana had model Gisèle aiming a dildo-like video camera at her crutch while surrounded by video screens of her in various erotic poses and Gucci combined the twin obsessions of the new millennium—the prominent logo and the Brazilian wax—in an ad that gave renewed meaning to the term product placement.
However, in contrast to both the realist aesthetic and conventional fashion imagery, in the synthetic ideal the biological reality of the body is denied—death and sex are invoked but do not signify as ‘real’ in the image because the organic properties of these bodies have been excised. In the Diesel campaign ‘Save Yourself’ from Autumn 2001, the body of the models have appropriated the invulnerability of fashion and they too ‘mock death’. In this parody of the never-ending quest for an elixir from the fountain of eternal youth ‘Helen Pickering’ (born 1899) recommends the benefits of drinking urine, ‘Henri Inchbald’ (born 1884) raves about the powers of algae and ‘Jules and Dorothea Updike’ (born 1897) suggest forgoing sex. (See plates 7.3, 7.4 & 7.5.) The accompanying caption quotes them as saying: ‘We’d rather be sexy forever than have sex. Keeping all our bodily fluids to ourselves stops us from getting old. Virginity is ever so good for the complexion.’ The models used in the campaign are typically young, slender, full-lipped and have flawless skin but their features have been subtly altered so that they take on the disturbing character of those who are not quite human. Inanimate and doll-like, there is no hint of ‘bodily fluids’ underneath their waxen complexions which appear immune to the imprint of time.

Similarly, in two images created by Katerina Jebb, both the face and body of the model appear to belong to an android-looking mannequin freshly emerged from the production line of a doll manufacturer. The features of her face have a painted on quality and there is no hint of the presence of flesh and blood beneath the plasticky surface of her skin (plate 7.6). In Nick Knight’s ‘Devon’, the exotic, otherworldliness of the model is exaggerated by (among other things) a large gash across her forehead which, decorated with flowers and held inadequately together by a safety-pin, gapes

---

448 The idea of creating confusion around the flesh-and-blood model and the inanimate dummy has been a recurrent theme in fashion photography since the 1920s.
open to reveal nothing more than an empty cavity (plate 7.7). Another of Knight’s images (again in collaboration with Alexander McQueen) ‘Laura de Palma’, has the model supine, her legs held open and her arms held in place by a metal brace (plate 7.8). Despite her pose and the use of the bondage apparatus she is unavailable for sex as her pubic area is pixeled into Barbie-doll impenetrability, effectively denying the carnal sexuality of this body. However, if her purpose as a sex object is thwarted, her purpose as a fashion object remains unquestioned. Even though completely naked, she is ‘dressed’ in a fashionably svelte frame which is strikingly accessorised by feet that taper down to form a ten-centimetre stiletto heel. The fashion object has now become an inseparable part of her body.

The models in each of these images resemble in some way the store mannequin or a doll, both of which belong to an order of ‘humanity’ that betoken the deep core of artificiality that is the model in the synthetic ideal. However, whereas the unclothed doll or mannequin is considered ‘naked’, the unclothed synthetic ideal is not waiting to be dressed. Rather she comes as a self-contained unit, pre-packaged as an entity where the body and garment are synthesised into one. The alterations to the human form in these images constitute the ultimate in fashion statements; the infiltration of the body by fashion is permanent. Even when the fashion object as such is absent—in ‘It’s a Jungle Out There’, ‘Laura de Palma’ and in Jeb’s images the models are all ostensibly unclothed—fashion remains, not only superimposed onto the body, but replacing its very substance. Fashion no longer requires clothing in order to alter the body as the body has itself become the fashion object. In the synthetic ideal the idea, inherent to digital manipulation, of endless possibilities is applied to the human body which is treated as if it is made from the same material as clothing and can,
henceforth, be cut, shaped, pasted and stitched in any imaginable way. Such a body no longer carries the characteristics or signs of the biological human, rather its qualities have become indistinguishable from those of fashion. If this body were to be turned inside-out, one would not find the fragile mechanisms of the organic body but only more of that which appears on the fashionable surface.

With the synthesis of body and garment, René König’s understanding of fashion as substituting for the real body an ideal, abstract body is realized beyond the removable sartorial shell to the biological layers that lie beneath. Seemingly moulded from a non-biodegradable substance, the body in the synthetic ideal is invulnerable to the ‘relentless melt of time’, thus beauty and youth lose their fragility and no longer register as a melancholy reminder of human mortality. In earlier chapters, the realist aesthetic in fashion images was discussed in terms of the correlation between the vulnerability of the body, the transience of existence and the ephemerality of fashions that quickly outlive their function as fashionable commodities. It is not that this narrative chain is absent from fashion images in general—beauty, youth and fashion all being entwined in a metaphysics of the fleeting moment—but that it is suppressed. By transforming the body into an inorganic entity, immune to the normal processes of ageing, death and decay, fashion negates the impact of time and excises this morbid tendency. Instead of beauty acting as a wistful reminder of human impermanence, it evokes a tradition which, to this point, has not been considered: the association of beauty (and youth) with immortality.

In the West, the philosophic roots of this tradition can be traced to the putative exchange in Plato’s Symposium between Socrates and the wise woman, Diotima, who
states that the purpose of beauty is immortality. For humans, as well as ‘hoofed and winged animals alike’, she claims, beauty attracts the desire in another to reproduce and give birth, by which device ‘what is mortal shares in immortality’. A similar argument has, in our time, been proposed by evolutionary psychologists and biologists who claim that the major factor in our understanding of human beauty is connected to biological adaptations that advertise one’s fitness for reproduction. This is the case even when reproduction is assiduously avoided. Evolutionary theories of beauty do not claim a simplistic inevitability between what is aesthetically pleasing and sexual desire (for example, signals of availability, voice and smell are also listed as playing a part) but they do put sexual attraction and the desire to procreate on centre stage. Meanwhile, philosophers of aesthetics have spent the last two millennia trying to keep this aspect of beauty in the wings, indicating a human need to elevate beauty beyond the level of satisfying base sexual desires. In Plato, for example, appreciation of physical beauty is merely a stepping stone to ‘the Beautiful itself, absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh or colors or any great nonsense of mortality’. Elaine Scarry, however, offers an alternative way of considering the connection between beauty and immortality that turns on reversing linear time. In her book, On Beauty and Being Just, she attributes to beauty not only the impetus towards ‘new acts of creation’ but also a chronological search back for ‘precedents and parallels’.

---

451 Plato, ‘The Speech of Diotima’, 59. The Platonic legacy of an ideal Beauty disassociated from the purely physical realm penetrates the aesthetic considerations of philosophers from Kant onwards to the point where, as formulated by Schopenhauer, desire and the satisfaction of desire are considered inimical to the true pleasure to be found in aesthetic contemplation.
For Scarry, the first and most simple instance whereby beauty becomes intertwined with the eternal is in the act of staring. Staring extends the moment of looking, releasing beauty from the immediate object and also from the limitations of time. She explains:

One can see why beauty—by Homer, by Plato, by Aquinas, by Dante (and the list could go on, name upon name, century by century, page upon page…) has been perceived to be bound up with the immortal, for it prompts a search for a precedent, which in turn prompts a search for a still earlier precedent until it at last reaches something that has no precedent, which may very well be immortal.453

In the act of searching the memory for a previous encounter with beauty, the imagination replicates the beautiful object back through time; the parallel experience upon encountering beauty is to replicate the beautiful object, ‘to draw it, to photograph it, or describe it to other people’.454 Scarry differentiates between ‘true’ beauty, which incites ‘the will toward continual creation’, and those instances of beauty that encourage ‘a contagion of imitation’. These latter, she writes, are ‘just an imperfect version of a deeply beneficent momentum toward replication’ as are those instances of beauty that give ‘rise to material cupidity and possessiveness.’455 The salient point here is that true beauty is not inherent in the thing itself but rather in the impulse driving the replication. It would appear then that fashion (and the fashion model and the beauty associated with both) would fall under the category of an ‘imperfect version’. This is not necessarily because fashion is tarnished by commercialism (to make this claim would be to ignore the commodity driven practices of the fine art market) but because of the essentially barren nature of

453 Scarry, On Beauty and Being Just: 30.
454 Scarry, 3.
455 Scarry, 6-7.
fashion’s replications. The only impulse driving fashion’s eternal creations is to replicate itself.

The imitation engendered by fashion is startlingly illustrated in ‘Joanna’, an image from 1995 by Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin for Hervé Leger, in which two models display the same tightly elasticised mini-dresses and stilettos in two different colourways (plate 7.9). They are set against a trompe l’oeil background of a Mediterranean balcony bathed in aqueous light. There is nothing aleatory or natural about the elements in the frame, everything in the environment is controlled and artificial. However, the most extreme expression of artifice is achieved with the models themselves who, on closer inspection, turn out to be just one model or, more to the point, two versions of the same model. If, in the Diesel campaign, immortality is invoked via the ‘biological rigor mortis of eternal youth’\(^{456}\), here it is achieved via the creation of a ‘humanity’, cloned according to the DNA of fashion. With the flaxen-haired, flawless perfection of ‘Joanna’ and her clone comes the intimation of an eternally renewable body, one which, like fashion, performs the repetition of ‘the new as the always-the-same’.\(^{457}\) However, this has only been achieved because the biological ensemble that entails the ‘great nonsense of mortality’—that which makes us human—has been purged. Having usurped the organic creativity of old nature, fashion uses the body as an emblem of itself, replacing reproduction and fecundity with cloning as an exaggerated form of imitation. In this extreme of its artifice, fashion finally fulfills its promise of immortality.


\(^{457}\) Buck-Morss: 201.
In ‘Joanna’ we witness a double metamorphosis—the garment and body could also be body and garment—but it is one where only fashion has hegemony. As will be considered in the next section, it is not that the body is unchanging in form or substance but rather that it is mutable in the same way that fashion is mutable. By a process of transubstantiation the fleshy, organic substance of the body is transformed into the artificial, synthetic substance of the fashion garment. The separate ontological states of what is possibly ‘clothing’ and what is possibly ‘body’ no longer signify and in the new entity that emerges from this alchemical process, the boundary between self and non-self is dissolved.

7.3 Body as Garment

The demarcation of the boundaries of the natural body has always posed a challenge to conventional definitions of the boundary as a precise and unambiguous division between two discrete entities. With its shedding of skin, nails and hair and its expulsion or loss of bodily fluids, the body ‘overflows’ into the outside world which, in turn, infiltrates and permeates a body so vulnerable that, on the one hand, it cannot survive without incorporating air, food and water and, on the other, is always at risk of outside contamination or attack. By both containing the body and protecting it, practices of dress and adornment have long been construed as safeguarding purity and renewal, the garments themselves caught up in rituals of purity and pollution. Furthermore, by establishing a clear division between the self and non-self, the inside and outside, such practices can serve to assuage the cultural and psychological anxiety connected with all ambiguous states. This tactic, however, inevitably fails. The
boundary provided by clothing and adornment is always provisional, at best serving only to mark ‘an unclear boundary ambiguously’; instead of defining the body and individuating the self, practices of clothing and adornment challenge the idea of a clearly marked border, reinforcing the fluidity of the body’s frame and blurring the line where the body ends and dress begins.

In the preface to their book *Fashioning the Frame*, Alexander Warwick and Dani Cavallaro pose the question: ‘Should dress be regarded as part of the body, or merely as an extension of, or supplement to it?’ The idea of the body/clothing partnership as reinforcing the already ambiguous boundaries of the body, and the consequences this entails for the complex relationship between the self and the non-self in the social, psychic and artistic realm, is central to their argument and, as such, the question posed has no definitive answer. They write:

Undeniably, the language of clothes and bodily adornment generally experiments relentlessly with ways of defining and redefining the boundaries between self and other, subject and object, inside and outside. The boundary never survives these alchemical processes as an intact and inviolable barrier. As regions to be playfully traversed, rather than frontiers to be crossed only at the trespasser’s own irreparable peril, the boundaries proposed by dress are eminently disrespectful of notions of either integrity or reparation. Ludic activity and aleatory curiosity may well be the only criteria which ultimately define and constitute them. Therefore, these boundaries are far more permeable structures than any of those beloved of classical logic. Each side of the border may at any point spill over into the other and thus spawn, by osmosis and contagion, a hybrid clan of unpredictable mutants. Each of the

---

seemingly bounded parties on either side of the partition is continually in the process of becoming otherwise.\textsuperscript{460}

However, more so than for those who exist beyond the image world of fashion, for the fashion model the boundary between body and clothes, flesh and material, nature and artifice, self and non-self is always, to some extent, resolved in favour of one term or the other. Because the body of the model is at the service of fashion, the question posed above undergoes an inversion: should the body be regarded as part of dress, or merely as an extension of, or supplement to it? However, with the appearance of the synthetic ideal, the process of playful interaction between clothing and body described by Warwick and Cavallaro is arrested and the uncertainty over the demarcation of a constantly fluctuating border is removed. In its place the boundary, ostensibly dividing body and clothing, is permanently dissolved and their fusion becomes complete.

The fusion of the fashion garment and the body is effectively illustrated by the images created by Rankin, entitled ‘A Little Bit of Gary’ (plate 7.10). In these, the model wears a maillot encrusted with onyx crystal beads, the garment itself consists of little more than two strips of fabric held together with eight fine ribbons, but the fabric of the garment does not stop at its borders rather, it extends beyond its edges to invade the entire surface of the model’s body—torso, limbs, face and hair sparkle and glow with the glittering, faceted substance of the fashion garment.\textsuperscript{461} Considered in the context of the history of fashion images, ‘A Little Bit of Gary’ recalls Guy Bourdin’s cover for \textit{Vogue} in which the models were meticulously coated in tiny black pearls

\textsuperscript{460} Cavallaro and Warwick, xviii.
\textsuperscript{461} The rather obscure title is perhaps a reference to the seventies glam-rocker, Gary Glitter.
In this image too the entire surface of the models’ bodies (including the face) is transformed by fashion, however, the semiotic of the two images is quite different. As previously discussed, the jewel-encrusted bodies of Bourdin’s photograph have a deeply unsettling quality—the colour, sheen and texture of the charcoal-tinted pearls and the inanimate pose of the models make these bodies appear like two burnt-out carcasses, carefully made-up and laid out on view by the undertaker. This impression is reinforced by the extra-diegetic knowledge that the real models were on the point of expiring as the combination of pearls and glue threatened to suffocate them. In the Rankin image, however, the substance of the garment has seeped into the very core of the body, replacing organic life with deep layers of artifice. With this synthesis of garment and body, the categories of surface and depth, exterior and interior no longer apply; this body, from the core out, is fabricated from the material of fashion, scratch the surface and nothing organic or corporeal will be found. All signs of life—flesh, blood, air, etcetera—have been excised. There is no longer any referent—the constituency of this body is only multiple layers of image—thus the threat of death no longer exists. There is nothing ‘underneath’ to expire.

In transforming the fashion body into the same substance as that of the fashion garment, the synthetic ideal is amplifying a tendency already present in the fashion image. In his brief discussion of the fashion model in *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes suggested that ‘by a sort of tautology’ the cover girl’s body ‘refers to the garment itself’. By this, I take him to be saying that the body does not introduce anything new into the image, it is a reiteration of what is already present, that is, fashion. In Bourdin’s image, the entire body is literally ‘wearing fashion’ but this is
only making overt what is true of all fashion images. Even when adopting a ‘natural’ pose, make-up or hair-style, the fashion garment does not end at the meeting of skin and fabric, rather its domain extends to the entirety of the model’s appearance. Once the body, the clothing, etcetera have been transformed into image, no gesture, no look, no decoration is accidental; everything in the image—including all scenic elements—articulates the garment.

Barthes returns to this idea in the appendix of *The Fashion System* when he describes the ‘protocols’ by which fashion operates. In fashion photography, he writes, the world is presented as a theatre of meaning that works through a metaphorical or literal association of words, ideas, themes, etcetera to always refer to fashion’s signifier—the garment. In the fashion photograph the background is ‘excessively but uselessly signifying’, placed under quotation marks by fashion, it is ‘unreal’, equally expressive (that is, not at all) on its own terms whether it is a deserted tropical island, a busy city street or the featureless void of the plain white photographic backdrop or cyclorama. The model appears in this framework, this setting, but does not belong to it; her reality is only in reference to fashion.463 ‘By making its signified unreal’, explains Barthes, ‘Fashion makes all the more real its signifier, i.e., the garment’. Thus:

… the world, *everything which is not the garment*, is exorcised, rid of all naturalism: nothing plausible remains but the garment… Fashion dissolves the myth of innocent signifieds, at the very moment it

---

463 This is, in fact, the logic behind the use of the cyclorama which gives the impression of unlimited, but empty, space. Thus, the world is reduced to the model and the clothes—nothing, apart from this figure, exists.
produces them; it attempts to substitute its artifice, i.e., its culture, for the false nature of things; it does not suppress meaning; it points to it with its finger.  

Earlier, Barthes has identified this process as ‘the disappointment of meaning’ whereby fashion luxuriantly elaborates its meaning only to then empty it of any meaning other than itself. He writes:

Fashion is merely a garment and the Fashion garment is never anything but what Fashion decides it is; thus, from signifiers to signified, a purely reflexive process is established, in the course of which the signified is emptied, as it were, of all content, without, however, losing anything of its power to designate: this process constitutes the garment as a signifier of something which is yet nothing other than this very constitution.

The paradox presented by the fashion image (the microcosm of Barthes’ example, the fashion magazine) is that it is not empty, it does signify, and yet it has nothing to say. If it did have something to say, it would ‘exhaust that something’, but, on the contrary, its processes of self-reflexivity mean that it ‘is theoretically infinite’. It can be said then that, within the fashion image, it is not just the codes of fashion that are reinforced but also the ontology of fashion—that part of fashion which is infinite, immortal—is repeatedly articulated. This has important consequences for the survival of fashion.

In Warwick and Cavallaro’s explanation regarding the shifting boundary between clothing and the body, the interplay across this region is characterised as playful, with

---

465 Barthes, 287.
little at stake for either party—rather, together they form an alliance in subverting (even as dress upholds) hegemonic structures and binary mythologies. However, in the way I have described the absorption of the body, the background and all other elements of the fashion image into the garment, there is too much at stake for fashion to operate in ludic mode. If fashion cannot infiltrate everything in the image, it risks irrelevance, not being fashion. The fiction behind fashion’s survival—that this garment is new and that one passé—can no longer be sustained. Once the myth of fashion’s immortality is undermined, the entire foundation upon which its authority is based crumbles. In the synthetic ideal, any chance that this may happen is removed—via the deep penetration of artifice, no rogue element can break through. In the synthetic ideal, the idea of everything in the image wearing fashion is no longer satisfactory and is replaced by the idea of something that more adequately articulates fashion’s power—that of everything being fashion.

The capacity of fashion to dissolve all other signifieds into its own world is illustrated on multiple levels in a twenty-six page fashion editorial by Alexei Hay that appeared in the September/October 2001 issue of Dutch magazine. In ‘Total and Fatal for You’, the possibility, suggested by ‘A Little Bit of Gary’—that the fashion body can be transformed into the same substance as the fashion garment—is extrapolated into an exploration of what fashion can do with the body once it can be considered to possess

---

466 Barthes, 288.
467 For this reason, I would argue that the pictures of celebrities in designer frocks parading on red carpets are not, strictly speaking, fashion images. The phenomenon of the supermodel—whose celebrity status threatens to overwhelm her role as model—complicates this argument. However, Donatella Versace has explained her recent decision to use (original) supermodels, Amber Valetta and Linda Evangelista, because they “exude stability” in uncertain times. This return to familiar faces (and the implication that fashion garments are ‘investments’, that they endure) is antithetical to fashion, if not always to the fashion industry. Tim Banks, ‘Wonder Women’, Vogue (Australia), April 2003: 70-74.
the intrinsic properties of the garment. The first page of ‘Total and Fatal’ shows a model—dressed in a leather jacket, a lace bodysuit and a scarf—perched high above a mountainous desert landscape (plate 7.11). The leather jacket has sleeves and a high neck but is cut-off above the line of the breasts in the style of a ‘shrug’, thus clearly revealing the pattern created by the lace embroidery of the bodysuit which covers the breasts and comes down to a point below the navel. At first glance, the pattern itself resembles a moth or butterfly but is also vaguely bat-like, recalling the emblem of a superhero’s costume. Echoes of this pattern appear, in one way or another, throughout the spread; in this first image, its reflection is created by a combination of the lace pattern itself and the ends of the scarf which, held in place at hip-level by the model’s hands, resemble the ‘wings’. A more striking inversion of the pattern is created by the graphic arrangement of the model’s hair across her face, a highly unnaturalistic effect that transforms the everyday pattern into an arcane motif that, in the succeeding images, metamorphoses (through the folds and creases of the clothes and the body) into a vulva-like symbol which impresses—very deliberately so—its form into the clothing (plate 7.12), the landscape (plate 7.13) and the models’ bodies (plate 7.14).

Despite the overt sexual symbolism of the motif, it also remains vague enough to resonate with some sort of mystical, mysterious or shamanistic presence, the imprint of an ancient or interplanetary civilisation or the sign of a higher order discovered in a moment of visionary awakening. There is a hallucinatory quality to the images that is reinforced by being set against a backdrop of untameable wilderness, the stage for countless narratives of the self reduced to nought, awed into submission by the power of sublime nature, returned to ‘oneness’ in an eruption of the primeval consciousness. However, the limitless magnitude of natural objects to reveal the ‘capacity of the
mind to apprehend the limitless or indeterminable’ is of no interest to fashion, rather the romantic trope of nature at its most immense, its most sublime, is drawn on by fashion to demonstrate its power, its ability to refer everything back to itself. The awe inspiring backdrop is just that—a backdrop, a black and white photograph after the manner of Ansel Adams digitally incorporated into a foreground that may or may not be ‘real’ (plate 7.15).\textsuperscript{468} The best nature has to offer is subsumed into fashion’s culture of artifice.

In this sequence, the capacity fashion displays in asserting its authority over the natural landscape by reducing it to a prop is a small feat compared to what it achieves upon the human body. Completely uninhibited by the body’s original shape, fashion transforms it into a multiplicity of previously unimagined forms. In the first photograph of the spread (plate 7.11), the body of the model is almost conventionally represented—she is shown from mid-thigh, standing front-on to the camera with arms akimbo. However, the image has been split down the middle and reproduced to create a completely symmetrical form and yet, in the process, a sliver of her middle has been removed creating the effect of a waist that has been surgically corseted and legs that are melded to form a pedestal. The same technique of cutting and pasting the body is used throughout the spread—limbs, torso, head are treated like scraps of fabric, patch-worked together to create kaleidoscopic forms. Sometimes this synthesis produces something that references the natural world or a hybrid from this world, for example, a leopard-skin spider (plate 7.16), but in other images, the shape could be anything, coming into being only as a figure from fashion’s imagination (plate 7.17).

\textsuperscript{468} There is some difficulty in determining exactly which elements in these photographs have been
One of the possible reference points for the manipulated images in ‘Total and Fatal’ is the fetishistic work of the surrealist photographers, Pierre Molinier and Hans Bellmer (plates 7.18, 7.19 & 7.20). Like the bodies in these earlier images, the models are all splayed legs and bare breasts, fragmented forms that are contorted into positions of defenseless submissiveness or float above the reader as if appearing in a dream.

However, the most persistent referencing of female sexuality in the series is provided by the vulva-like symbol which is either carved into the clothing of the model (plate 7.12), or, more often, formed by the configuration of the model’s body in the landscape. (See plates 7.13, 7.21 & 7.22.) In these images the fetishisation of the body as sexual cavity is absolute; abstracted vaginas emerge out of the folds of clothing, the arrangement of the body and even in the formation of the clouds (plate 7.23). But despite the nudity or sexually charged content of the manipulated images, they signify less as erotic or pornographic than most conventional fashion photography. This is underscored in ‘Total and Fatal’ where the radically manipulated images are juxtaposed with ‘straight’ fashion shots that use the conventions of porn (the come-hither look, legs spread open, the flash of panties or buttock cheeks, or a sultry, teen-age gaze through tousled hair) to emphasise what is nearly always present in fashion images—the intimate relationship of the clothing to the naked, penetrable body that lies beneath (plate 7.22).

The contrast between the two styles of images in ‘Total and Fatal’ underscores the notion of the synthetic ideal as a body which no longer signifies as corporeal. In the preface to Fashioning the Frame, Warwick and Cavallaro point to the dual role of revelation and concealment played by garments such as masks and veils which
amplify the tantalising suggestion, intrinsic to all clothing, that the garment can be peeled back to reveal more. They quote from Barthes’, *The Pleasure of the Text*:

Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes?…it is intermittence… which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two edges… it is the flash itself which seduces…

But in the synthetic ideal the erotic allure, the fascination of the fragment, the slice, the cut, the seam of the body is removed. Expectations are thwarted. The technique used in ‘Total and Fatal’ of the mirror image, cut and pasted to create one body exemplifies the self-containment of these bodies. Unlike the penetrable collage-body created by Molinier or many of Bellmer’s ‘poupeés’, in these figures substance runs up against itself, it is a completely enclosed system. Not only is the ‘gape’ of the garment sealed but there is also no ‘gape’ of the body. Despite their sexual explicitness, these bodies are hermetically sealed, incapable of being penetrated; the biological reality that pornography relies upon is removed as everything organic is collapsed into the sign system of fashion.

7.4 Fashion’s Imaginary

In the synthetic ideal fashion fulfils the dream, already familiar to humanity, of ‘increased plasticity, an ur-state in which the world becomes totally malleable’. The role of the imagination in making such a world is explored in Michael Carter’s book

---


Putting a Face on Things, which investigates the various ways that humans ‘shape the world in their image, make reality over as a reflection of themselves’. In his essay ‘Notes on Imagination, Fantasy & The Imaginary’, written as an addendum to this book, Carter identifies Gaston Bachelard’s notion of the ‘material imagination’ as the original point of departure for what would become a ‘meditation upon the imaginative potentialities that might be lodged within the various stuffs of the world’. This suggestion of a reversal in the ‘natural’ order of creation, a shift in the hierarchy of human beings and things, provides a way of thinking about what might be happening in the synthetic ideal where, as we have seen, fashion turns this impulse back on a humanity that considered itself as homo faber—a maker of things. In the synthetic ideal it is ‘humanity’ that is being made by the object.

There can be no doubt as to the narcissism of fashion’s project. The synthetic ideal is, I have suggested, an image of fashion incarnate, that is, fashion presumes a ‘bodily’ form even as it rejects the material biological substance of that body as irrelevant. By replacing the characteristics that make the body belong to the sign system of the natural order with those of fashion, the synthetic ideal then is the apotheosis of fashion and from its deified position it creates an avatar of itself. That this occurs only within the realm of the image—an admittedly reduced ‘world’ from the point of view of humanity—is not an admission of defeat. For fashion the image is the epicentre of existence. Furthermore, the synthetic ideal is not something that exists prior to the image, rather it only comes into being inside the realm of the image.

---

472 Michael Carter, ‘Notes on Imagination, Fantasy & The Imaginary’ in Macarthur, 47.
For Carter, the three terms in the title of his essay ‘Imagination, Fantasy & The Imaginary’ initially presented themselves as interchangeable, little more than straightforward synonyms. The essay is an exercise in retrieving these terms from their vernacular usage (with, for all three, its emphasis on what is not ‘real’) to uncover the complexities hidden in the significant differences of meaning between each word. My intention here is not to rehearse the intricacies of Carter’s analysis but rather to consider his careful unpacking of the notions ‘imagination’ and the ‘imaginary’ in terms of the synthetic ideal. Keeping in mind that, as I speak of it here, fashion reaches the limits of its domain at the edge of the image, the synthetic ideal can be construed not just as a product of human imagination but as an embodiment of imagination itself or, more specifically, considering the digitally manipulated image as a crucible where elements are ‘seamlessly altered, blended and mixed together’, it mirrors the machinations of imagination.

In Coleridge’s famous definition of the two modalities of imagination, it is secondary imagination, characterised by the poet as ‘an echo of the former’ that, in Carter’s view, clarifies the first. Coleridge describes secondary imagination thus:

It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.⁴⁷³

Before considering the implications of this citation in full, the point can be made that the first sentence sounds remarkably like what, in the preceding pages, I have

suggested is happening in the synthetic ideal. This impression is reinforced by Coleridge’s discrimination between imagination and its important but minor form, fancy. The distinction here seems to rely on the absence, in the case of fancy, of a process that ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate’. In fancy, the elements come together but the traces of this joining remain visible, it is a concatenation or what Carter vividly describes as ‘the Frankenstein effect’; imagination, on the other hand, is a re-formation that ‘obliterates’ the differences between these elements, ‘its aim is fusion and seamless unity’. It would seem then that ‘fancy’ would describe the relationship between the body and clothing in the conventional fashion image (where the two elements maintain a degree of heterogeneity) whilst the equation of body and clothing in the synthetic ideal could legitimately be described as ‘imagination’, the originating force of which is fashion.

Imagination for human beings, as suggested at the beginning of this section, helps us make sense of the world, essentially by ‘re-making’ the world, maybe eventually replacing ‘the original presence of divine being’. Carter puts it thus:

…the work of the productive imagination becomes the mechanism through which we make a place for ourselves. We do this by re-making the world into a place with significance, and this is accomplished by violating the order of the natural and by replacing it with the artificial. It is only through the displacement of the given and the natural by artifice that the world can come to have significance for human beings.

---

476 Carter, 53.
In the world of ‘us’, of human beings, sartorial art is but one of the ways in which we achieve this goal. But if the ‘universe’ is, like the one currently under observation, tailored by and limited by that art, then the cosmic schema will consist of that which is significant for and to fashion. Bearing this in mind, we can now approach what could be called ‘fashion’s imaginary’. In his essay, Carter’s formulation of the notion of the Imaginary is construed through the work of the French theorists, Mikel Dufrenne and Cornelius Castoriadis.\(^{477}\) In both, the idea of the Imaginary as little more than ‘something invented’ or ‘unreal’ is criticised; also, as Carter makes clear in his conclusion, neither is it, as a term, interchangeable with imagination. Both these points are crucial. The distinction between the two terms, imaginary and imagination, could be determined along a chronological axis; put crudely, imagination can be conceived of as something that takes place after the constitution of the mind, whereas the reformulations undertaken by Dufrenne and Castoriadis ‘are such as to make the Imaginary into something which is anterior to the fully constituted mind’.\(^{478}\) But although this suggests (at least, in Dufrenne) an \textit{a priori} existence, it is not to be thought of as an alternative formulation of the Platonic idea for the Imaginary can be expressed, it can ‘exist’. On the other hand, in neither writer is there a straightforward relation between the Imaginary and representation.

In Dufrenne’s construction of the notion, writes Carter, ‘Art is not simply a function of representation (which would mean that at base it was a product of the mind), but it


\(^{478}\) Carter, ‘Notes on Imagination’, 59. The moment at which, in the totality of the human/world transactions, the Imaginary becomes present are conceived differently in Dufrenne and Castoriadis. For Dufrenne, the Imaginary is present ‘from the start’ whereas for Castoriadis, it is a social fact and hence ‘commences immediately with a collective/social modality’. (Carter, ‘Notes on Imagination’, 60.) The divergence in the conceptions of the two thinkers is explained in more length by Carter.
is rather an active transformation of the sensuous materiality of the world”. In this there is something of Bachelard’s notion of the ‘material imagination’—inherent to things is a potential for transformation. For Castoriadis the order of the Imaginary, explains Carter, ‘does not consist of elements which are representations of “something other”’. Rather its domain is to ‘see in a thing what it is not, to see it other than it is’. There is in this a social/political dimension (this is in fact its point) that is beyond the scope of the reduced cosmos under discussion here, nonetheless, this element of aspiration in Castoriadis can be used to explain what might be happening in the fashion image.

In looking at the synthetic ideal, it could be considered as an extrapolation or intensification of the conventional fashion image but with all restraints removed. The imaginary of fashion then might reveal the aspirations of fashion, it might be the completion of something that was straining to but was stopped from being realized. As Carter writes of the Imaginary in Castoriadis, ‘it is no longer a question of signification, or even representation, but rather the very forms in which the world [fashion] is construed.’ It is not that fashion’s imaginary represents the achievement of a final, perfect form; rather it is the realising of a form that announces the idea of a continual becoming. In the synthetic ideal, fashion operates like imagination; the processes that create the synthetic ideal are analogous to the processes of fashion. What emerges from this is an avatar of fashion, a supreme form to which fashion has been striving—fashion’s imaginary. But this is not a form that remains stable; it is a mode of being that has moulded the stuff of its world into a form that is continuously

---

479 Carter, 60.
480 Carter, 61.
482 Carter, 64.
malleable. The traces of its alterations, its re-creations, are invisible, seamless—there is no ‘Frankenstein effect’. Nonetheless, our familiarity with the body—the original, ‘natural’ body—is such that these alterations do not go unperceived and therefore carry the idea or possibility of continual alteration.

I want at this point to return to Coleridge’s definition of secondary imagination, which I earlier left hanging. In addition to the operations of dissolving, diffusing and dissipating in order to recreate, he also describes imagination as being ‘essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead’. It is here that the metaphysical parallel of imagination and the synthetic ideal can be traced back to the originating force of fashion. In his discussion of Carter’s book, Rex Butler observes the irony of “plasticity”—metamorphosis itself becoming the new ideal\footnote{Butler, ‘The Interval in Carter’, in Macarthur, 43.} but, one could counter that, for fashion, ‘plasticity’, metamorphosis has always been the ideal; it is fashion’s currency, the coin of the realm. Fashion’s metamorphoses—its endless manifestations as ‘a new source of newness’—are what ensures its continuation as a system and allows us to speak of it as immortal. However, fashion’s immortality, as Lehmann has pointed out, ‘is of a particular kind, as it instantly dies when picked up by society and becomes resurrected at the very next moment in order to restart the cycle’\footnote{Butler, ‘The Interval in Carter’, in Macarthur, 43.}. This interplay of mortality and immortality is fashion’s metaphysical coinage, allowing it to perform an ontological sleight-of-hand—without any formal change the fashion object both ‘is’ and ‘is not’ fashion. And it is the system of obsolescence and renewal that brings about this change in status. As we have seen, it is also possible to think of the body of the model in these terms but here, unlike with the fashion object, formal change—or, at least, the idea of formal change—is
essential. In the realist aesthetic, the body exposes the trackmarks of time and with it the idea of a changing body. In the synthetic ideal, the body itself is moulded and transformed, drained of all that is natural or organic, its metamorphosis happening, in a sense, before our eyes. Both of these tendencies are an intensification of something that is present, but held in check in the conventional fashion image.

It is here, finally, that we can speculate as to why fashion, apparently content to entertain a multitude of forms in the body of the model, is so resistant to the multitude of bodily forms that exist beyond the parameters of its image world. Why does it not respond to those critics and observers who ask where are the non-slim, the non-young and those who are not able-bodied? Answers that explain the appearance of the fashion model only in terms of fashion’s industrial base, of the market and an economy of desire, always fall short. What is not recognised is that fashion cannot incorporate all body shapes in a gesture of politically correct egalitarianism; if fashion were to allow the body to take over, to be just anything, any shape, any age, it would have no power. The sign of its authority—artifice—would fade. The point here is that fashion does not supplant the natural body with an ideal body but with an imagined one. On the body of the fashion model, imagination, the Imaginary and fashion coalesce and what we witness is fashion’s metamorphosis, ‘a world made malleable by imagination’. If fashion were to forsake these transformations it would face the same fate as if it were to respond to those critics who ask that it arrest its interminable permutations and settle for one perfect form. By imposing its economy of perpetual alteration on the body of the model, it ensures that it will not suffer the fate of other

---

484 Lehmann, Tigersprung, 275-276.
despotic regimes that have allowed hubris to make an enemy of change; eternally changing, it will not atrophy, it will not fossilise, it will not die.
Bibliography

Archives

Bibliothèque Forney, Paris

*Le Moniteur de la Mode* 1846 –1847; 1851 –1891.

*Le Journal des Dames et des Modes* 1801 –1803.

*L’Art de la Mode* 1881.

Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris

*Incroyables et Merveilleuses* 1810 –1818.

*La Mode* 1829; 1832; 1845; 1854.


*Le Bon Ton* 1834 –1835; 1854; 1874; 1884.

*Galerie des Modes et Costumes* 1778.

Fashion Institute of Technology, New York

*Vogue* Paris 1969 –1978

*i-D* 1996 –1997

Newspaper and Magazine Articles


**Journal Articles**


Maynard, Margaret. ““La Mode”—as Sacral?” Form/Work 4, March 2000.


Books and Edited Collections


Maloon, Terence & Raissis, Peter, eds. *Michaelangelo to Matisse: Drawing the Figure*. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1999.


Milam, Jennifer. ‘Understanding Life Drawing’. In Terence Maloon & Peter Raissis, eds. Michaelangelo to Matisse: Drawing the Figure. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1999.


Raissis, Peter. ‘Drapery and Display’. In Terence Maloon & Peter Raissis, eds. *Michaelangelo to Matisse: Drawing the Figure*. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1999.


**Filmography**


*Peeping Tom.* Directed by Michael Powell. 1959.


*The Look.* BBC.

*Masters of Style.* CBC.

*MacIntyre Undercover.* BBC.

**Websites**

www.benetton.com/deathrow

Eastland, Tara. ‘Eating Disorders: A Feminist Issue’,
http://vanderbilt.edu/AnS/psychology/health_psychology/feminist.htm