



Beauty, Work, Self. How Fashion Models Experience their Aesthetic Labor
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English Summary

The profession of fashion modeling is culturally prominent. Fashion models are placed on a pedestal as symbolic holders of beauty. Their work and lives are depicted as glamorous and fabulous. However, they are simultaneously critiqued for what they represent: unhealthily thin, unlawfully young, predominantly white, obsessive, exploited or otherwise oppressed. Despite these critiques, the notion that looking good potentially leads to an exciting life full of glamour, fame, travels and fortune, has sparked the interest and ambition of countless young women and men. To them, becoming a fashion model remains an alluring prospect.

This dissertation gives an elaborate account of what working as a fashion model entails. It provides an inside view into the field of fashion modeling, and the working lives of fashion models in particular. It addresses the basic question of what it is that male and female fashion models actually do during their work, and accordingly, how labor conditions impact how models experience their work. Fashion models perform what is called ‘aesthetic labor’: they professionally cultivate their bodies and emotions in order to look and behave like a fashion model. Importantly, aesthetic labor also involves the imperative to project and produce a particular self, in the form of personality. Involving the entire ‘body/self,’ aesthetic labor is often comprehensive and causes work to be intrinsically related to workers’ sense of self. Therefore, I address the additional question of how models justify how this form of work impacts their lives and their selves.

This dissertation adopts theories of aesthetic labor, field theory and sociological approaches to the self, to make sense of how fashion models carry out and experience their work. The analytical perspective that runs through these combined approaches is that of Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) on the quality of creative labor in cultural industries. They present a framework that enables analytical distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad work,’ by looking at the extent to which labor is experienced as meaningful, valuable and life-enriching, by the workers themselves. Although the matter of good and bad, alienating and fulfilling labor, is relevant to all workers, this dissertation

shows that the quality of work is especially important to aesthetic laborers, of whom fashion models are an extreme case. For them, their work basically comes down to a professional imperative of selfcommodification. For this reason, the subject of good and bad work has particularly deep implications for fashion models, as it potentially causes self-alienation.

The method of person-centered ethnography has allowed me to look at aesthetic labor in fashion modeling from a perspective that takes persons, their practices and their experiences as its analytical point of departure. This dissertation relies on ethnographic data gathered in Paris, Amsterdam and Warsaw – fields that are all part of the transnational cultural field of fashion modeling. Fieldwork lasted from March 2011 until March 2013 and resulted in 60 interviews with fashion models and other fashion professionals like bookers, photographers, designers and stylists, as well as numerous ethnographic observations – of fashion models' everyday (private) aesthetic labor as well as aesthetic practices and interactions occurring 'on the job', for example in back-stage settings of fashion shows and shoots.

This article-based dissertation consists of four articles that highlight different practices and experiences of aesthetic labor. I first investigate how, and to what ends, professional fields such as fashion modeling embed 'food rules' and beliefs that structure (as well as challenge) the aesthetic labor of fashion models (Chapter 3); I then go on to analyze objectification, a process that happens almost continuously in fashion modeling (Chapter 4); next, I explore how models justify and maintain a coherent self, when both their professional and private lives are strongly guided by aesthetic imperatives (Chapter 5); and finally, me and my co-investigators address what it means to be an aesthetic laborer in the periphery of fashion and modeling – a place where chances of consecration and success are low, but where labor conditions might be not all that bad compared to the fashion centers (Chapter 6).

Chapter 3 traces the relation between food, the body and morality in the field of fashion modeling. More than has been recognized in modeling studies so far, eating is a continuous and reflexive form of body work that is essential to models' aesthetic labor. Eating is a three-fold challenge in fashion modeling: an aesthetic, moral as well as a personal one. First, eating is geared at attaining professional aesthetic standards and is therefore a job requirement for fashion models. With every bite they (do not) take, models are prone to consider their professional status as aesthetic objects to be displayed. Second, food beliefs include moral imperatives that (further) complicate good eating for fashion models. For example, food-control is framed as an individual responsibility

of models and slenderness as an individual achievement. Consequently, models are thrown back on their individual capacities of self-control and are also held fully accountable when they fail to apply to slender aesthetics. Along with the imperative of food control exists the idea that ‘truly good models’ achieve aesthetic standards effortlessly. Paradoxically, this creates a taboo around practices of food-control. The moral paradox of control and effortlessness renders practices concealed and results in normalizing narratives on food-control. Especially female models go out of their way to demonstrate that they did not obsess over food, by using the careless expression of ‘watching my food’. Finally, food beliefs in fashion modeling renders models preoccupied with self-surveillance and self-objectification, and subjugated by agencies and clients. It also renders eating a sober, solitary, hardly enjoyable practice for models.

Fashion professionals like bookers, stylists, designers, and models too, often use metaphors like ‘canvas,’ ‘dress up doll’ or ‘coat hanger’ to describe models’ function as objects. Chapter 4 details the process of objectification in fashion modeling. By employing an experiential perspective, which involves models’ different emotional and practical responses to being objectified, the chapter empirically interrogates the idea of objectification as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ by investigating how fashion models subjectively experience objectification. In line with the theory of Martha Nussbaum, I find that objectification manifests itself through various distinct but related forms – a multiplicity most observable at castings, where different forms accumulate and coincide with the scrutinizing gazes of clients, making it an unsettling experience. However, objectification is not necessarily unpleasant: when models perform as aesthetic objects on a runway, they feel admired, empowered and proud. This chapter contributes to existing feminist perspectives, arguing that objectification is often, but not inevitably, related to subordination. Objectification turns out to be a multifaceted, situationally and institutionally embedded practice that is experienced in a range of ways. This does not imply that objectification is less compelling as a process, or is easy to avoid, but rather, that objectification might be all the more effective because it is embedded in different social contexts and adapts itself accordingly.

Be it through ‘watching your food’ or becoming an aesthetic object, fashion models are caught up in a continuous process of aesthetic labor. As their private lives are strongly guided by professional imperatives, it can be argued that not only models’ bodies, but their entire selves are being colonized by an industry that is greedy in nature. Chapter 5 demonstrates how and against which moral backdrops models justify their body practices and maintain a coherent sense of self.

This chapter shows that aesthetic labor requires models to continuously reinvent and negotiate their self in different contexts. Models do this according to different moralities that call for varying manners of justification, which I have called natural modelhood, healthy modelhood and pragmatic modelhood. These categories of justification all relate differently to the aesthetic logic of fashion modeling of ‘beauty for beauty’s sake.’ First, natural models refer to a contemporary ‘ethic of authenticity’ and define beauty as something models should naturally possess; making too much effort to attain beauty is not a good way of modeling. Second, healthy models replace the purpose of beauty with an alternative one of healthiness. Referring to a ‘biological ethic’ of self-care and responsibility, these models state they arrive at adhering to standards of youthfulness and slenderness, by engaging in particular ways of wholesome living. Finally, pragmatic models, who refer to an ‘instrumental ethos’ of exchanging bodily efforts for money, replace the purpose of beauty with financial gain. Embodying beauty standards then becomes a means to this economic end. Natural and healthy modelhood resonate to various extent with what Bourdieu (1987) has called *illusio*: a subjective belief that ‘the beauty game’ is worth playing. Pragmatic modelhood is completely opposite to it. The varying adherence to *illusio* results in a stratified field wherein different forms of modelhood bear different degrees of legitimacy within the modeling field. As this struggle over legitimacy exceeds national borders, the modeling field can be defined as one single transnational field.

By studying ‘justifications of self’ in the field of fashion modeling, Chapter 5 introduces the self as a central and important element of field theory. Accordingly, Chapter 6 demonstrates how a peripheral field position produces specific ‘peripheral selves’. This chapter seeks to understand what it means to work in the periphery of the field of fashion, where opportunities for consecration and success for workers are limited. While existing studies typically portray cultural peripheries as grim places that people are trying to escape from to ‘make it’ in the center, this research sheds light on the periphery as a place that some people embrace rather than flee. Although a considerable part of the fashion professionals in the periphery look up to the center and experience their work as failing to live up to expectations, which leads to frustration, peripheries also offer opportunities that may weigh up against the low chances for cultural consecration. A substantial part of peripheral professionals therefore ‘embraces the periphery’, as it provides them with better labor conditions than the center does. We find that, although a ‘peripheral self’ might bear little legitimacy in the

transnational fields of fashion and modeling, it potentially serves as a safeguard against the risks of precarity and exploitation so typical of high-status centers of cultural production.

Chapter 7 presents conclusions concerning the central question: what does being a fashion model entail, and how do models experience and justify their aesthetic labor in relation to their selves? While the profession of fashion modeling signifies the importance of beauty in contemporary society, and places models on a pedestal as ‘symbolic carriers of aesthetic capital’, the chapter explains how models’ aesthetic labor practices and conditions also complicate their self-experience. I argue that models have to work hard and continuously, at times obsessively, to comply with narrowly defined beauty standards of slenderness, youthfulness, tallness, and often whiteness as well. These standards reflect classed, racialized, gendered and age-specific corporeal aesthetics, similar to the hegemonic global beauty standards of today. They therefore have excluding effects: no matter how much aesthetic labor is put in, there are many people who cannot become a fashion model.

I further argue that beauty is particularly elusive and hard-won at the high-end of fashion modeling, where beauty standards are more extreme. This renders the aesthetic labor of high-end fashion models extra invasive. In addition, high-end centers of fashion modeling are characterized by a ‘winner-take-all’ hierarchy, which significantly reduces the chance of landing a career as a successful, consecrated model. For most models in the center, their ‘costs’ hardly ever balance with the benefits of being a high-end fashion model: the investment of their entire body/self through aesthetic labor does not balance with the low symbolic and material returns for their efforts. So, if we can speak of something called an ‘aesthetic precariat,’ it mostly includes high-end models employed at the center of fashion modeling. Their everyday labor conditions and practices fall under Hesmondhalgh and Baker’s definition of ‘bad work:’ insecurity of work and pay, multiple objectification, extensive aesthetic labor in a context where making an effort is a moral taboo – all these, cause a significant drift away from the self. Conversely, pragmatic models are decisive in embracing their peripheral position, and while they are often dismissed by others as ‘bad models,’ they often do good, or at least ‘better’ work compared to those in the center. They are more steadily employed, work in more sociable and trustworthy professional networks, receive reasonable pay and finally, the beauty standards they have to adhere to are less extreme. This renders their aesthetic labor somewhat less extensive and continuous and lowers the risk of developing a problematic relationship with the body.

The presented findings in this dissertation on the risk of self-alienation in aesthetic labor can be extended to other cultural fields but are also relevant for understanding modern-day labor more generally. As the conditions of 'new flexible capitalism' commodify most workers and can have estranging effects, the issue of self-coherence has become relevant for most modern-day workers. However, for fashion models, their commodification is multiple and encompasses their bodies and behaviors, as well as their public and private selves. Finally, taking into account the growing interest of young cosmopolitans to be employed in aesthetic and cultural industries, this research on fashion modeling provides the concept of alienation with a renewed and profound relevance and makes a case for further investigations of how labor conditions in other (cultural) fields affect experiences of work in relation to self.