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Creativity at Work:

# The Fashion Show as an Art Form

*By Lise Skov, Else Skjold, Brian Moeran, Frederik Larsen  
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*October 2009*



# The Fashion Show as an Art Form

Lise Skov, Else Skjold, Brian Moeran, Frederik Larsen and Fabian F. Csaba

## 'The Sun Never Sets on the Runway'

Not so many years ago, the fashion industry was called a 'sunset industry', and was deemed to have no future in the most developed countries. But recently, the New York Times has suggested that 'the sun never sets on the runway' (Wilson, 2008). Under this heading the article described the diffusion of fashion week organizations, with accompanying fashion shows, that are no longer limited to a handful of fashion capitals, but are spreading to small-country capitals and medium-sized cities all around the world.

A catwalk fashion show is a sales promotion mechanism in the clothing industry and a widely recognized cultural event. From Robert Altman's film *Prêt-à-porter* (1994), which was filmed during Paris Fashion Week, to style.com or, indeed, the website of any major fashion brand – from museums that display historic garments in clothes parades, to school children putting on charity fashion shows – we recognise the elements of a fashion show when we see them. It is a clothes parade with *son et lumière*: the trivial phenomenon of dress turned into spectacle in a theatre-like setting. Cultural studies have called it an enchanted spectacle (Evans, 2001), the greatest show on earth (Duggan, 2001; 2006) and a performance art (Theunissen, 2006)

Although the fashion show is essential to how the fashion industry works, it has also become a cultural icon in its own right. This paper presents an analysis that takes account of both economic and cultural aspects by defining what a fashion show is and by discussing why it continues to be essential for the fashion industry. Our definition of a fashion show is as follows: *a fashion show is a biannual presentation of a new clothing collection on moving bodies for an audience*. A new collection is produced by a designer, brand, company, or group of companies. The parade of moving bodies makes up an essential feature of a fashion show, and has given rise to the modelling profession as well as to a range of conventions of movements, poses and looks. It is accompanied by music which emphasizes the rhythm of movement and blocks out other sounds from the overall impression. The moving bodies are predominantly female. Although menswear fashion shows have been held since the late 1929s (Musée Galliera, 2006, 155), they are still by far outnumbered by women's wear shows. The presentation for an audience is associated, firstly, with the restricted hierarchical space in which a fashion show is presented, and secondly, with balancing the two essential concerns of product promotion: sales and entertainment. In the following sections, the paper presents a structural and historical analysis of each of these elements of the fashion show.

Our argument is that the fashion show is an art form, in two related ways. Firstly, we regard the fashion show as a cultural form with its own set of aesthetic conventions which have developed during the course of the 20th century. This is a neutral definition, in the sense that we do not make a claim for the prestige or quality of the fashion show, but merely state that it is a part of what sociologist Howard Becker (1982) has defined as an art world with its own social and aesthetic traditions.

The second way in which we see the fashion show as an art form is as a means towards claiming higher status: fashion shows are held by exclusive brands. Since the 1930s, in Paris, the ability to stage biannual fashion shows has been the defining characteristic of *haute couture*; fashion houses that were unable to do so were labelled *moyenne couture* (Grumbach, 2006). President of the French Federation for Couture, Didier Grumbach, equates belonging to French high fashion with having a place in the fashion show calendar (2006). The calendar has a business function in coordinating presentations for overseas buyers and in protecting fashion houses against copyright infringement through documented release. But equally important is the fact that it is through a fashion show that a designer or brand can most fully control an aesthetic vision or concept; it is the *défilé* that makes the designer an artist, and not merely a dressmaker.

Here we find ourselves at the core of Pierre Bourdieu's notion that art is defined, not by specific qualities in art objects, but by being produced by people who are recognized as legitimate artists (Bourdieu, 1993). He identifies the relationship between creator and art work as essential for the Western notion of art. This idea can be seen at work in the development of the fashion industry from a manufacturing apparel industry to a creative industry, which according to the British government definition is characterised by the fact that the creativity of individuals accounts for a substantial part of the value creation (DCMS, 1998). Fashion is thus mediated through a designer or brand, each of which can establish an author function (Foucault, 1984, 108-111) similar to that found in the institution of art. That the fashion show is an essential tool for industry upgrading can be seen in the fact that during the last decade there has been a growth in fashion week organizations and fashion shows around the world (Skov, 2006). The approximation of fashion production to art production also has consequences for the ways in which fashion is studied. The relationship between creator and art work is an essential methodological component in art scholarship, which has now been extended to 'readings' of fashion shows and collections, interpreted as expressions of the designers' creativity, vision, critical intervention, and so on.

In this paper we do *not* present a 'reading' of fashion shows; instead we are concerned with defining elements that makes the fashion show legible (Skov, 2004a; Skov, 2004b). As will soon become clear, such elements define the social situation, direct gazes, and in this sense create the spectacle. But just as, in the theatre, the stage is necessary for, but not seen by, the audience when watching a performance, so are similar elements overlooked when the fashion show works as a fashion show. We call these framing devices, a term borrowed

from Goffman's dramaturgical analyses of social life (1986). The fashion show is framed by a set of technologies and props that function to set the fashion show aside from ordinary interaction, and in so doing define it as distinctive and meaningful.

### **Fashion Show as an Art Form**

The proposition of this paper that we view the fashion show as an art form is based on Howard Becker's work on *Art Worlds* (1982) in which he defines art works as the result of collective activity, based on a shared understanding of artistic conventions. According to Becker's definition, art worlds are defined as networks of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that the art world is noted for (Becker, 1982, x). In this way, an art world is a connecting system that lies between production and consumption. In his book, Becker analyses all kinds of art worlds from painting to street theatre by way of Hollywood film production, jazz, documentary photography, and quilting. In this respect, he makes no claim about the cultural worth of art works. On the contrary, he points to the ways in which art worlds tend to claim prestige by setting themselves apart from broader social organizational forms, and argues that 'sociological analysis should take into account how they are not really separate at all' (Becker, 1982, 39)

On the basis of this approach, our claim that the fashion show is an art form will be substantiated in three ways. Firstly, we will describe the defining elements of the fashion show (a presentation of a new clothing collection on moving bodies for an audience), and how they have developed their own conventions historically, from the first experimental sales shows to the long-lens shots of fashion models parading down the catwalk that have come to signify the fashion show today. These conventions are both social and aesthetic. They have emerged historically and have come to form an aesthetic tradition that fashion show producers can consciously enact, quote or subvert. In this respect, the fashion show is characterised by self referentiality.

Secondly, we take Becker's point that art works are produced by networks of people cooperating. Each form of art is characterised by routinized interaction in which different roles and functions are prescribed. In this respect, the fashion show can be compared to film, theatre or classical music in that it is based on a fairly complex form of social organization, involving many different groups of creative and humdrum workers, all of whom work under different constraints to realize the creative vision of the designer or fashion show producer. These include carpenters, decorators, light engineers, sound engineers, DJs, PR agencies, make-up artists, fashion models and dressers. Some of these professions have emerged directly as a result of the development of fashion shows - most notably the fashion model from the late 1920s, and the fashion show producer from the late 1960s. There are also fashion show-related jobs that have become defunct. For example, until the 1960s fashion shows had

announcers who read out the name, style and quality of each outfit. Today, fashion show announcers only appear in amateur shows or in shows that self consciously quote the conventions of the past. They have been replaced by music.

The third way in which we use Becker's work to substantiate our argument is by analysing how the fashion show is set apart from wider society. In quite a concrete way, this is a necessary condition for the development of the relative social and aesthetic autonomy of the fashion show. While Becker says that this is a general point about art, we find that it is especially important in relation to fashion, which is a diffuse participatory phenomenon that thrives on multi-directed interaction. Instead of a crowd in which each individual is both an observer and observed, the fashion show separates performers from spectators by aid of the catwalk. Instead of a mixture of old and new clothing items, which most people tend to wear, the fashion show separates the new collection, presented on stage, from the clothes worn by the audience, making them in the process appear 'already-old'. In these ways, framing devices are essential to making the fashion show a distinctive cultural form.

In this respect it can be argued that the fashion show consists of two performances encased in each other. One is the clothes parade on stage, planned and scripted down to each pose and turn (although, as in any live performance, accidents can and do happen). The other is the performance put on by the audience, whose behaviour is scripted, if not literally then sociologically. Members of the audience are simultaneously observers and part of the spectacle, and ultimately it is they who determine the success or failure of a show. In this respect, the drama of a fashion show derives from a 'double antagonism' (Hauser, 1982, 495) the first between the various participants (designer, producer, models, stylists, and so on); the second between those producing and those witnessing the performance. The fashion show, like the theatre, mediates between production and consumption.

When we argue that the fashion show should be seen as an art form, we find ourselves focussing, in particular, on its defining elements and conventions, as well as on the framing devices that set the fashion show apart from any other interaction of dressed bodies. In this respect, our concern is quite different from the main interest in fashion studies that connects fashion and art. For example, it is distinct from the claim made by Elizabeth Wilson (1985), who argued that fashion is an everyday art form, which allows everybody, but especially those who are the most distant from legitimate culture, such as working class youth, women, lesbian and gays, to aesthetically express the tensions of modernity.<sup>1</sup> This is an important claim about the expressive and aesthetic work embedded in dress practices, and one that, democratically, takes the definition of fashion out of the showrooms and into the streets, workplace and home.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams* is a key work in cultural studies which in hindsight can be seen to have established fashion studies.

If fashion is an everyday art form, the fashion show becomes insignificant. However, we often find an opposite drift in the argument that fashion is an art form (or that it should be analyzed as such) – a drift that implicitly makes fashion shows *the* most important signifying event in fashion. This comes about when fashion is associated primarily with newness, or defined as a ritual staging of newness, even at a time when fashion magazines are clearly the premium means of communication and promotion. When fashion shows become so central to the scholarly understanding of fashion, they clearly need to be examined in their own right. The strength of an approach that analyses fashion shows, therefore, is that it directly makes the aesthetics of fashion comparable to those of art. For example, art scholars such as Barbara Vinken have argued that, as an art form, fashion is superior to the classical and romantic art ideals of perfection, transcendence and permanence because its themes are ‘the traces of a death, whose carrier the living body becomes’ (Vinken, 2007, 58). But the price that is paid for this perspective is the marginalization of everyday dress practices from the study of fashion.

This approach is not just based on the fashion show as a privileged site of cultural production. It has been argued that the fashion image and especially the magazine are the defining features of fashion (Barthes, 1983; Lehmann & Wälchi, 2007; Vinken, 2005). These two, the fashion show and the fashion press, have a long enmeshed rivalry about which can produce the images that define fashion. In our analysis, the fashion show became the dominant technology for creating fashion images from around 1910, when it first emerged. It continued as such until the 1960s, when the fashion photographer and the magazine took over as the leading institutions, though always locked in struggle with the fashion show. To some extent this has been a struggle between the fashion houses or brands that have clothes to sell and the magazines that broker images as a kind of cultural intermediary. In reality, the tension between the two image-creating institutions in fashion has led to a kind of creative alliance that has enabled fashion images to grow all the more powerful (cf. Moeran 2006).

In a similar vein, Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren (2005) has coined the term ‘the catwalk economy’ to characterize the continuous launching of novelties with planned obsolescence. Löfgren’s argument is that, in the ‘new economy’ of the 1990s, the catwalk technology that had been developed in the fashion industry became paradigmatic for a range of other industries. The catwalk economy is defined by impression management, ‘the aesthetics of looking good’, and event making, ‘the well-choreographed release of newness on the move and the strategies of secrecy and exclusivity creating an economy of expectations’ (Löfgren, 2005, 64). Löfgren’s argument is less concerned with the actual novelties released than with ‘the energy of being ahead’ (2005, 65). In fact, the catwalk is more a technology for controlling newness than for actually producing it.

## Framing the Fashion Show

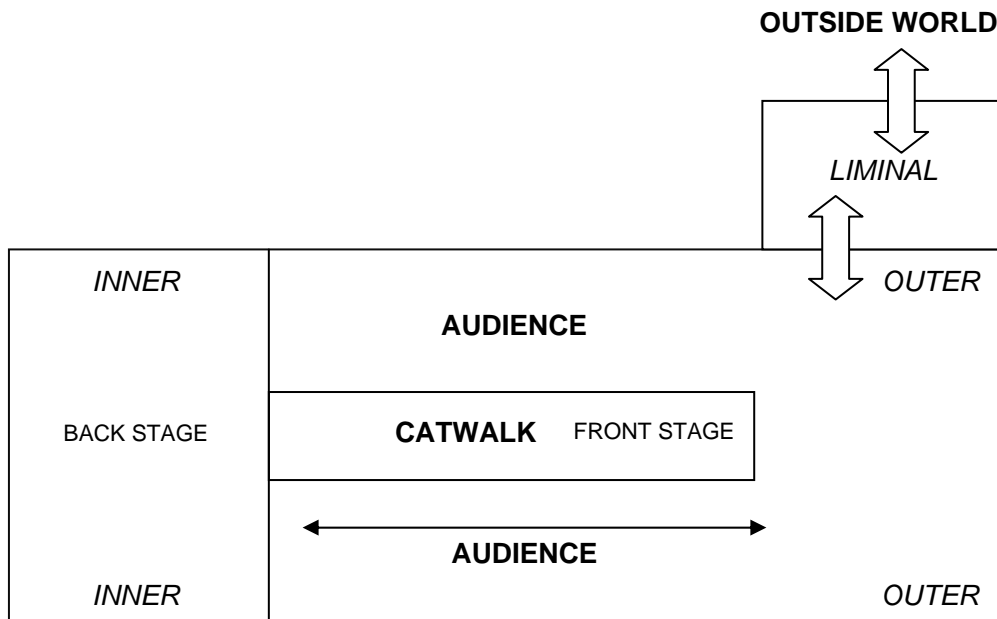
As mentioned above, a fashion show and its modes of presentation may be explained to a large extent in terms of frame analysis (Goffman, 1986). This applies both to the spatial (setting, catwalk, set and runway design), and temporal (music, performance, staged appearances) framing of the fashion show (see *Figure 1*). Framing devices include the technologies, props and conventions that set the fashion show apart from ordinary interaction and define what is going on both *within* the fashion show itself and *between* the fashion show and the outside world.

Firstly, fashion shows are set apart from the outside world in terms of their location. As part of a Fashion Week programme, fashion shows are often held in conjunction with trade fairs in exhibition grounds that are typically (but not always) located on the outskirts of large and medium-sized cities. The atmosphere in such locations (whether they be exhibition hall or marquee tent) is neutral and anonymous. Typically, they have no windows and the fact that they are totally enclosed enables the staging of the fashion show to be completely controlled. In this way, the attention of the invited audience is directed away from the outside world and made to focus entirely on the ephemeral setting that frames the fashion show performance.

In addition to this type of neutral setting, fashion shows are also held in locations that are chosen to colour the atmosphere of the show. In French and Italian fashion shows aristocratic *ancien régime palais* may be selected, while other typical locations include derelict factories, warehouses, theatres and museums. In reality, therefore, fashion shows are held in all sorts of locations. The only constraints are practical travelling distance within a city's confines, the designer's concept for the brand and collection, and the negotiation of contractual arrangements concerning rent, practical matters and liability. In such locations, however, the designer and fashion show producer have less control over the staging of the show – for example, the length of the *défilé* or sources of lighting – because of the features of the selected setting so that potential locations are inspected and carefully considered before being chosen. In this respect, the location has a supporting function in enhancing the concept of the show.



**Figur 1: The Fashion Show Framework**



Secondly, the importance of the presentation is marked on a vertical plane by the procession of models. The parade typically takes place on a raised stage. In the golden age of *haute couture*, the stage was referred to as the podium (Spanier, 1959, 187). Since then, other terms have taken over, including catwalk, signifying a narrow passage, and runway, which – with a reference to the take-off of an airplane – refers to the launching of a new collection. The raised dais – like a theatre stage, college high table or church altar – gives ritual significance to the activities performed, and exalts the persons performing, there, thus separating the audience from the performers, those who look from those who are looked at. The direction of gazes is re-enforced by lighting which bathes the runway in strong light and leaves the surrounding audience in the dark.

Not all fashion shows make use of a raised stage. Instead, they create a catwalk by making an aisle between audience seats or in other ways use the features of the location to create a space visibly laid out for the *défilé*. For instance, in an exhibition on fashion shows, the Galliera Museum showed a photograph from a swimwear fashion show held in a special train travelling from New Haven to Broadway on January 1st 1949 (Musée Galliera, 2006, 162). Invariably, the fashion show makes associations to other situations where people walk along aisles between seats. In the heyday of Paris *haute couture*, at the end of the *défilé* the male creator would accompany a model wearing the bridal dress, traditionally the last number in a fashion show, in a gesture that quoted the convention of the father leading a young woman up the church aisle at her wedding. In the 1960s, flight attendants were educated in fashion model schools in order to learn how to move gracefully up and down the aisle of an aeroplane (Marshall, 1978).

When it comes to the placement of the audience around the stage, we find a whole set of framing conventions reflecting what Dorinne Kondo (1997) has referred to as the politics of seating. Invariably, photographers are placed at

the end of the runway to enable long-lens shots of the models walking down the catwalk. Depending on the importance of the show, the crowd of photographers may vary from a few to a veritable forest of telephoto lenses and cameramen, although for TV, webcast transmissions or videotaping, two to three cameras give the best coverage. This means that space needs to be available for not only a head-on spot, but also a side view and a position closer to the start of the runway for the 'return' shot. Photographers also need to have access to positions from which to shoot the guests, especially the 'dignitaries' in the front-row – if not during the show itself, then immediately before or after it. So photographers are given privileged visual positions, underlining the importance of the mediation of the event to audiences not present.

In the politics of seating, choice spots are determined by their proximity to, and view of, the action on the catwalk. The seating area in front of the cameras at the end of the stage is considered to provide the best view when available. In general, though, the best seats at a fashion show are in the front row at the end of or along the stage. These front row seats are reserved for the most important guests, such as magazine editors, who are the essential filters through which the shows are reported in the media, and celebrities, whose presence may add prestige to the show. In sales shows, buyers are also seated in the front row, but today most buyers will view the collection informally in the showroom, so that the purpose of the fashion show is increasingly to present an overall image for the press, and only indirectly for the buyers. The seats behind the first row are for less important guests, including many buyers and business contacts, company employees, design school students, and other members of the public interested in attending the fashion show. In large fashion shows there may be a standing area behind the VIP seats. In other shows, the first row is extended by manipulating the space, so that everyone in the audience can have a first row seat. This is possible in fashion shows held in large premises where the catwalk area can be extended, sometimes through several rooms and corridors. It can also be done if the parade of models trails around or through audience seating arrangements.

At the back of the catwalk is the set design, which serves as the backdrop of the performance. A fashion show is typically accompanied by a set of slides, projecting the logo and credits, as well as images, colours and designs that enhance the concept of the show. The set design also separates front stage, where collections are appreciated and consumed by the audience, from back stage, where they are pieced together and produced by the designer concerned. As such it marks the point where models change their staged pace as they prepare to leave or enter the front stage theatre. While the front stage is carefully scripted in its staged framing devices, both in place and time, in order to exclude all possibility of unscripted behavior and individual improvisation in the ritual performed, the back stage consists of ordered chaos – order in the necessary arrangement of clothes enabling models to hurriedly dress, change and dress again, but chaos in the sheer number of different kinds of personnel present and the multiplicity of tasks that they must carry out to enable the front stage performance to take place.

In this framework, the fashion show can be said to consist of two performances encased in each other. The first one starts with the arrival of the audience, which is obliged to form a queue to enter a single access point to the fashion show stage (often via a liminal space between the outside world and the show venue), and every member of which is vetted and passed or rejected by gatekeepers who examine printed invitations and check individual names as printed on their invitation lists.<sup>2</sup> The start of the show is almost invariably delayed, which incidentally gives everyone time to observe the crowd and spot which editors and celebs grace the show with their presence. VIP guests may calculate the delay and time their arrival at the venue accordingly, with the more famous being allowed to arrive later than the *hoi polloi*.

The second performance, the performance of the models on stage, starts with the outbreak of music – usually so loud that it drowns all other sounds – together with an adjustment of lighting. It is at this point that the first model appears on stage. The music accompanying a fashion show is selected and played by a DJ in order to match the designer's concept for the show. Together music, lighting and slides are used to emphasize discrete sections in the collection presented. The fashion show usually lasts for no longer than fifteen to twenty minutes. Its end is signified by the appearance of all the models who parade together down the runway to the accompaniment of the audience's applause. Eventually, the designer whose collection has been shown also makes an appearance, sometimes brief and informal, sometimes obviously choreographed. Not infrequently, a few members of the audience will come up to the catwalk to hand a bouquet of flowers to the designer. After this, the fashion show has ended and the audience leaves. For many, fashion shows are part of a busy fashion week schedule, so they may well be rushing on to the next appointment.

### **Backstage Production**

Backstage, a large number of people work to realize the show. A relatively basic fashion show involves around twenty people – excluding models and support personnel such as caterers and drivers – and can easily run to a budget of €60,000. By comparison, for top designer shows, such as those by Dior or Chanel, figures of five million dollars are quoted (Duggan, 2006, 226). In spite of the variations, which do occur, there are bundles of tasks and lines of command that are common. They make for a routinized interaction which is necessary for the success of an event that is usually produced under considerable time pressure.

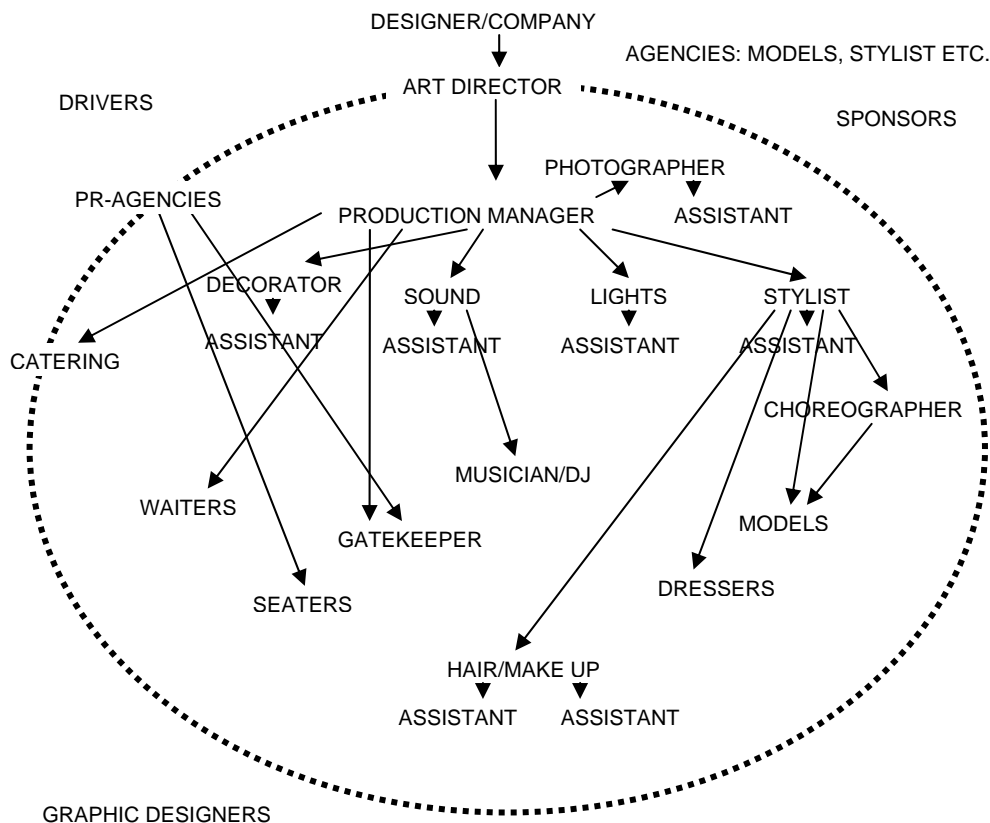
In fact, preparations start well in advance of the fashion show. Typically, a designer or the fashion house concerned approaches an event agency six months before the planned show to talk about concepts and budgets. The event maker or art director of the event agency presents a concept, which is perhaps

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<sup>2</sup> The role of the invitation card is explored by Clark (2001).

modified, but otherwise accepted by the company, and the event maker will then start the actual preparations for the show. In the proposal, some of those who will be involved in the production are named – for example, the stylist, an interior decorator, possibly a photographer to document the event, the production manager, persons in charge of lights and sound, and possibly one or two top models. These people will have been approached in advance and asked to join the project. Upon acceptance, the professionals discuss and come to agreement on the proposal, often supplementing details in their own area of expertise. The involved parties will then prepare their own part in the production, and the art director will present additions or changes to the fashion house for approval. Next a venue is chosen. Normally, it has to be coherent with the theme of the show, unless the latter takes place in a venue set up to house different shows – for example a tent connected with a fashion fair. If this is the case, the following account will need to be modified since lighting, sound, decorations and so on will for the most part already have been put up.

**Figure 2: Fashion Show Organisation**



The backstage venue consists of separate stations where the different professionals have their base. This is in order to organize the somewhat chaotic *ad hoc* workspace, and to make communication easier. Hair and make-up are located in a faraway corner; stylist at the entrance to the runway; people in charge of sound, lighting and decoration all around the front area (see Figure 2).

Most professionals have assistants, and throughout the day, different people arrive and begin their separate jobs. As it is not necessary for the models or dressers to be there when lighting and chairs are being set up, models, for instance, arrive only when the hairdresser, make-up artist, and stylist are ready to start preparing them.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, waiters and seaters will not be present until shortly before the invitees arrive. Depending on the type of fashion house and the scale of its show, the designer or designers will not be at the venue until shortly before the guests.

Throughout the day, rehearsals are carried out. This is mostly to estimate the time, and make sure that models, choreographer, lighting and sound technicians know what to do when. Simultaneously, clothing might be stitched up or ironed, lights may be put up, and seating arranged. Dressers receive their instructions and, as each dresser often dresses up more than one model, and each change must be done in a few seconds, all the clothes are hung up unzipped and unbuttoned in exact order. The models are introduced to their dressers, and during the event, they will go from the stage to the dressers and wait for them to finish dressing the previous model. To help organize outfits, a photograph of each model is put up at each wardrobe station. At big shows there is a table of order of outfits that serves as a visual reference for all details.

By the time the show is ready to begin, the backstage area will be filled with people who are all connected to the realization of the event. As the venue is often small, only people who are essential are allowed into the backstage area. The production manager is now very important since the level of concentration in each area makes him or her the only link between the different professionals, and the only one who has an overview of the entire production. Hair and make-up are now finished, and are on standby for touch ups during the show. The people in charge of music and lighting are present in the front stage area to keep an eye on the show while it is in progress. As the guests enter the venue, the boundary between backstage and front stage is strictly upheld.

During the show, the production manager acts as the link between front and back stage, cueing lights, sound and the choreographer. The models are lined up just behind the curtain waiting, dressed in the first outfit they are to present. They are cued by the choreographer and enter the catwalk, and as they return, the dressers are waiting with the next outfit ready and unzipped. The models are quickly dressed and sent to the stylist and make up for touching up before going out on the catwalk again.

Everything is quickly dismantled after a show. Hair and make-up pack their things; models rush off to another show; and stylists and dressers organize the clothes on hangers or in boxes to be sent to a showroom.

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<sup>3</sup> The standard number of models used in a fashion show is 24, but there is considerable variation and many designers make do with fewer.

## The Presentation of a New Collection

Let us now turn to the substantiation of the definition, offered earlier, that a fashion show is a presentation of a new collection on moving bodies for an audience. The first part of the definition of a fashion show, a presentation of a new collection, classifies the fashion show as sales promotion, even though, as we shall see, it has developed by detaching itself from the sale of clothes to an image-creating event.

A collection is a series of garments that a company presents to the market all at the same time. The number of pieces in a collection can vary considerably. A classical *haute couture* collection consisted of more than 150 dresses, although today it is much smaller; a ready to wear show often consists of about 50 ensembles made up of approximately 120 pieces.<sup>4</sup> In industrial collections this number represents only about one third of the collection, as it often also holds a basic or classical section, the same styles in other materials and colours, less radical or less expensive versions of particular styles, and a collection of shoes, bags and leather goods, not presented in the show. Most industrial collections are thus divided into themes and groups of coordinates: that is, groups of garments that match each other in material, colour and style, so that they can be combined in different ways. *Haute couture* shows, on the other hand, present an entire collection. Today, a fashion show is typically the first public presentation of a collection, taking place around six months before the collection is launched on the consumer market, and the response from buyers, and to a lesser extent press, determines how many of each style a brand will order from the manufacturer.

The collection and the fashion show share the same historical origin in the 1850s in the early *haute couture* in Paris. As a business model, *haute couture* is characterized by the joining of fabric vending and dressmaking, which enabled the couture house to produce a series of outfits that were customized or remade for individual clients. This was the first time the upper classes handed over design decisions to their dressmakers. The fact that acquiring a dress was based on selection from a collection rather than dreaming up an outfit from scratch shaped the need for displaying dresses on models. Charles Frederick Worth, who is remembered as the founder of *haute couture*, also pioneered the idea that clothes should be shown in motion. He would send his wife, Marie Vernet, who is in fact the first named fashion model in history, to the race courses and the Bois de Boulogne frequented by the upper classes, to create interest in his latest creations (Evans, 2001, 274; Quick, 1997, 23-24).

Although the biannual fashion calendar was not institutionalized until the 1930s, at the beginning of each season Worth invited his clients to a

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<sup>4</sup> Although this may of course vary, many designers and fashion companies also design shoes, ties, bags, jewellery and so on, making this number much larger. Smaller designers, on the other hand, may not design their own accessories, nor the number of styles necessary for a whole presentation, and they will therefore borrow shoes from others and show the same style in different colours or patterns.

presentation of his collection in his studio. This type of fashion show was known as a salon show, in which models paraded dresses in an informal atmosphere in front of clients, typically on the floor rather than on a raised stage of some kind. The fashion show roughly as we know it today was developed by the British designer Lucille, who in the first decade of the 20th century organized show presentations of her clothes in both Europe and the United States (Evans, 2001, 273). It was quickly taken up by American department stores in the early years of the 20th century (Leach, 1984). However, the department store shows did not keep the intimate atmosphere between clients and dressmaker, but turned the procession of mannequins into a large-scale entertainment event. They began to stage fashion shows each season to present the newly arrived collection to loyal customers who could watch the clothes parade while enjoying their afternoon tea, accompanied by piano music and by an announcer who would describe every single garment.<sup>5</sup>

For a long time, fashion shows were aimed at society women, who were the clients of fashion houses and department stores, and in addition to the seasonal shows, clients could return for a private show of selected outfits (cf. Evans, 2001, 295). In other words, a fashion show was part of an upper-class woman's shopping experience. *Haute couture* shows were rather long by today's standard, since they consisted of more than 150 outfits, and would last for up to two or three hours. The pace was slow and each outfit was paraded twice down the stage (Marshall, 1978; Spanier, 1959). With the transatlantic licensing agreements that revitalised *haute couture* after the Second World War, even the audience for the Paris shows changed from individual clients to buyers representing retailing companies. American buyers would make a limited selection of the styles that they would want to buy for reproduction under their own label, typically a department store.

Up to this point, members of the press had constituted a rather marginal segment of fashion show audiences. Cameras were not allowed; only registered illustrators, who could capture the silhouette of outfits in a passing moment, were permitted to be present and they would typically be under contract not to publicize their pictures until the commercial launching of the collection. This set-up underwent a radical change in the 1960s when the press emerged as the primary audience for fashion shows, and the careful presentation of large numbers of dresses gave way to a fast-paced show with a design concept. This development was fuelled by a number of changes in society at large, including technology. Pierre Bourdieu describes how when it first became possible to send satellite television from France to North America, a fashion show was chosen as the first transatlantic transmission (Bourdieu, 1991, 108). In both London and Paris fashion came to be associated with fun, sex and youth culture, and fashion shows brought in informal elements of dance and acrobatics.

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<sup>5</sup> Clients also drank tea at their leisure during fashion shows in London and Paris in the first dozen years of the 20th century (Evans, 2001, 275, 277).

Since then, end-consumers have been almost completely marginalised as fashion show audiences. Indeed, there are few women today who have the opportunity to decide their potential clothes purchases on the basis of a clothes parade, except for the celebrities and members of royalty who have become regular attendants at the Paris collections and other important fashion shows.

But the tension between professional buyers and the press continues. Today they constitute the dual audiences of fashion shows, even though in reality the dominance has shifted to the press (cf. Moeran, 2006). This is closely related to the way in which the clothing business has developed since the 1960s, from rather formalised relations between company and buyers on the basis of biannual sales, to informal collaborative relationships between company networks on the basis of near-continuous collection development. In all but the most prestigious fashion design companies, biannual collections have now been replaced by multiple annual collections, guided by the fast fashion principles of continuous replenishment, pioneered by Biba and glorified by Zara (Skov, 2006). Therefore, the fashion industry no longer ticks off its calendar by biannual sales presentations; a fashion brand's buyers and business partners are already familiar with new collections in the pipeline from visits to the showroom and business planning. For the industry, the fashion show is therefore less of a sales, and more of a social and ritual, event; less of a risky launching and more of a party.

By contrast, the fashion press still operates on the basis of a bi-seasonal structure, and reports on fashion shows at the conventional beginning of the fall/winter season in September and of the spring/summer season in February, no matter when the shows actually took place (Moeran, 2006). In this respect, the press has become the primary audience for fashion shows today.

One effect of this is that, because fashion shows are reported in fashion magazines and broadcast by TV stations, the audience for fashion shows has grown enormously and is many times larger than the traditional salon shows. As Harriet Quick (1997, 142) has remarked: 'In 1986, the Paris shows were attended by 1875 journalists and around 150 photographers: nearly a fourfold increase on the figures recorded for 1976. Front rows were studded with celebrities, backstage awash with champagne'. Fashion shows today are much shorter than they used to be, typically presenting around 50 outfits in less than 30 minutes. The fact that the primary purpose of the fashion show is not to present every single number in the collection has liberated its form from a mere clothes parade. This was evident in the 1960s and 70s when models first began to perform on stage. Kenzo's launching of the Jungle Jap collection is remembered as the first time that *prêt à porter* outshone *haute couture* in terms of fashion shows (Quick, 1997, 125).

In spite of the fact that the fashion show has gained a relative autonomy from its original sales purpose, there are still companies that stage catwalk shows as a no-frills presentation of a new collection, with the styles from the look-book paraded soberly down the runway. This is done by premium brands, such as Marimekko and Hugo Boss, as well as by middle-market brands, which



in this way signal that they take the business of making and selling clothes seriously.

There are a number of fashion shows that do not present a single brand or designer, but a group thereof. Group shows include graduation shows, staged by most design schools where each graduate will present a small collection, typically consisting of three to eight outfits. Similarly, fashion show contests, usually for young designers, consist of multiple small collections, produced under conditions specified by the content organizers. Apart from the entertainment, the purpose of such shows is not to sell clothes, but to showcase the capabilities of individual designers, both for the press and for potential employers (Skov, 2004a; Skov, 2004b). In addition, fashion fairs often open with a trend show, which presents a selection of garments by the exhibitors at the fair. Here the selection and presentation of garments is entirely in the hands of the show producers and stylists, who will organize the outfit in themes that illustrate the trends of the season. Such a show may, of course, help direct buyers and press to specific companies, but most of all it is a presentation of what the local industry can do by giving companies that would not otherwise put on a fashion show a chance to present a part of their collection on stage. In this respect, trend shows also serve to brand the local industry that organizes the trade fair.

## On Living Bodies

Whether a show is an *haute couture*, ready-to-wear, group, or trend show, the clothes are presented on living bodies. In the following the characteristics of these bodies and their movements are presented.

During the first decades of fashion shows, normative changes in society influenced not only how fashion developed as an industry, but also how they determined how fashion was displayed. The budding obsession with health, body exercise, hygiene and youth in the late 19th century, that grew stronger in the 1910s to 30s, redefined ideals of beauty: the stoic, posing bourgeois woman in her mid-30s, epitomised by 'the Gibson Girl', was slowly replaced by a more youthful, and most importantly, sporty and boyish ideal. Secondly, the parallel obsession with movement, as expressed for instance by futurist artists, not only glorified automobiles, airplanes and motorbikes, but also the body (Braun, 1995). It was only natural that fashion should also reflect these developments and currents, and desert two-dimensional display and presentation in exchange for a three-dimensional one, with the moving body at the centre.

Showing clothing on a moving body demonstrates how the cut and fabric interact with the wearer. This was acknowledged by the couture houses that emerged in Paris in the 19th century, with house models parading in front of the customer in private salons. In the early presentations, the models were women working on the shop floor. They were not chosen for their beauty – in the early years of the fashion show it was not desirable that the model should

outshine the potential client – but for their good figure and ability to walk in a straight line (Quick, 1997, 24-27). In the early 20th century, women modeling were still closely connected to one designer, and only in the 1920s were actual model agencies established. Runway models were rarely the same as the society women featured in designer clothes in magazines, and even as professional models began to replace these women in photographs, a rather strict division remained between runway and photographic models (Quick, 1997, 39). As the body was the important feature of the former, they were rarely recognized for their personal features, and were only engaged to showcase what a specific piece of clothing could and could not do (Craik, 1994, 79).

By the 1950s, fashion shows had become the dominant technology for presenting fashion to a public. The audience was no longer limited to the rich clientele of French *haute couture* salons, but was made available to all types of women. And with the professionalization of fashion presentations for a growing mass production, modeling became a respectable business for young women (Quick, 1997, 89). During these decades, the fashion body was standardized, and the myriad unprofessional bodies that earlier presented the more or less tailor-made dresses were replaced by figures that could be mass produced. Rather than being selected so as not to outshine the customer, models in the 1950s came to represent ideals of beauty to other women. Although the idea of perfection definitely persisted, the 60s offered a change, and especially in photography a new sense of experimentation suddenly made models popular for their looks, and even in shows personality and style became important (Craik, 1994, 81-84). The top models were no longer those who walked well and oozed arrogance, in the way that Barbara Goalen and Bronwen Pugh had done, together with others who are only remembered by the first name given to them by the couturier to whose *cabine* they belonged, but those who responded the best to the camera and who were able to participate in the new celebrity culture, like Jean Shrimpton, Patti Boyd and Twiggy (Marshall, 1978, 30). A lot of this experimentation was institutionalized in the 70s, and gradually conventions were added to repertoire.

In the 1980s models suddenly found themselves surrounded by cameras. Not only did video transmit fashion shows and represent fashion in movement; a few models came to be generally referred to as supermodels, and were paid abundantly to lend their faces and bodies to advertising brands that were often less known than the models themselves. This was the era of Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista, Tatiana Patitz, Cindy Crawford, and Christy Turlington. Although the term supermodel has an earlier use, the idea of extraordinary beauty and idealized bodies made this a fitting term at a time when appearances were highly important. Visions of perfection returned to fashion, and although the models represented different types of women, the formalized 90 x 60 x 90 measurements guaranteed a powerful singular body in western fashion imagery. Fashion and celebrity became synonymous, not only because models became household names even when not married to rock stars, but because fashion shows now attracted celebrity audiences. Overall the bodies on the catwalk in the 80s and early 90s offered a glamorous and idealized vision of

beauty, and although this 'ideal incarnate body' (Barthes, 1983, 258) was just an image to many, the idealized life it represented corresponded with fashion at a time when sex and glamour predominated.

During the 1990s, ideals shifted towards a skinny androgynous style which came to be known as 'heroin chic'. Instead of cultivating conventional beauty, the most sought-after models had striking, unusual features – often also of an ethnically mixed origin. With this shift, a greater sense of variety returned to the runway, and few models managed to stay on it for as long as the supermodels of the 1980s. In the first decade of the 21st century, the preference for 'new faces' has continued, creating variety and the possibility for fashion designers to select models who embellish their brand concept. As Roland Barthes says (1983, 259), certain bodies, certain faces (and not others) are in fashion this season.<sup>6</sup>

## Posing Bodies, Moving Bodies

Before the advent of shows, fashions were disseminated via fashion dolls or copper stitching, or displayed in portraits. In the two-dimensional display of fashion, the pose was important. As early as the 16th century, male court members in particular were taught to display the right '*sprezzatura*': that is, a way of carrying their bodies and posing in a casual, effortless manner, which of course was strictly controlled by codes and conventions of how to be effortless in exactly the right manner (Entwistle & Wilson, 2001, 151). Much as Veblen later pointed out in his theory about 'the leisure classes', the objective was to show that not only did they not have to work, they didn't even have to button their shirt or look as if they cared, because they were born to be looked at, obeyed, serviced, and idealised. In the 19th century during the rise of the bourgeoisie, the rigid gender polarisation that was imposed made women supposedly passive creatures reigning in the private sphere, and posture became important to express control over body and mind, and of course to create a perfect display for their elaborately decorated dresses.

The growing preoccupation with health, hygiene and sports towards the end of the 19th century was expressed in the several attempts by members of the *avant-garde* to create reform in dress that did not constrict the body. Fused by warnings from physicians and other specialists about possible health problems caused by their wearing, traditional corsets went out of fashion in the 1910s, and were replaced by various aggregates in new stretch materials that would not constrict the body quite so much. Especially after World War I, the naked, exercised body came to be idealized. It was now the responsibility of the individual to control the shape of the body through workout and diet, thereby creating an inner corset (Evans, 2001, 268, 287). The new bodies were rewarded

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<sup>6</sup> One other feature, however, has been that, by creating a constant turnover of typically very young models, working conditions for fashion models have not been improved in any way.

and praised in public beauty contests that resembled catwalk shows, where young women in bathing suits would parade back and forth with a number pinned on their back, just like the numbers stitched on dresses in early fashion presentations (Evans, 2001, 284-5, 287). Anne Hollander has shown how the new ideals of bodily mobility were reflected and embellished by the visual media, both in terms of fashion photography, which began to ape the look of the snapshot (Hollander, 1978, 328) and of fashion illustration which followed the direction of 'large shapes with clear outlines, quickly grasped visually but not instantly recognized as human', in contrast to the earlier elaborate style (1978, 331). Consequently, 'the quick impression, the captured instant, was the new test of elegance' (1978, 332).

The patterns of movement - especially of female catwalk models - were developed and stylised, in order to present the collections in as flattering a manner as possible. This had the function of showing press and buyers how the cut and fabric actually interplayed with the body, how it 'worked' when worn. What looked good in a picture did not always look so good when worn, revealing the lack of skills, the bad choice of fabric, or bad manufacturing on the part of the designer and his or her department. In the first half of the century, therefore, models began to make use of stylised gestures, like holding the hem of a coat or putting a hand in one pocket (Evans, 2001, 293), that effortlessly revealed the cut, material and feel of the clothes.

As moving images became an integral part of fashion show presentations, a strange interplay of movement and montage was created. The staccato movements of the models suggested a montage of still images, and during the heyday of the supermodels, a certain number of end poses were in play as models rested momentarily at the end of the runway, offering opportunities for the perfect image for photographers. The movements rather resembled those of soldiers on parade; but while the movements of soldiers are choreographed to be firm, determined and very abrupt, the catwalk movement for especially female models had to be soft, swaying, and spherical, to reflect particular ideals, with poses not so unlike the '*sprezzatura*' and '*posa*' described above. Thus, while the upper body is kept erect and passive, with the arms dangling carelessly along the sides while maybe holding on to a bag, it is the legs that are more active in creating the right effect. The knees are lifted higher than in a normal walk, with each leg swayed exaggeratedly over the other, as the moving foot is placed in front of the one behind. All in all, this movement pattern causes the model to look like an idealised or stylised object, while at the same time causing the skirt of the dress or the fabric of the pants to follow the legs in a stylised feminine manner. Many would argue that the way models walk looks more odd than flattering, but it has become so entrenched in the conventions surrounding the catwalk presentation today that it is hardly questioned by insiders. This is also the case with the walk of male models, but as the swaying of the body is often considered feminine, male models project

images of masculinity by either walking with an erect posture without moving the body, or by performing a careless 'slouch'.<sup>7</sup>

As fashion in the 90s grew less interested in perfection and more shows became works in progress or adapted elements from performance, the movement of models came to require personality and presence. Though still in play, the formalized walk was loosened and less stylized movements were encouraged. As fashion over the last decade has become deeply preoccupied with its own history, movements and gestures, body shapes and poses have also been reenacted. The last century of fashion shows has adapted, invented and rejected conventions of the body and its movements that now constitute a repertoire for designers to use, while underlining the fact that, although gestures and poses may have a history outside fashion, once perfected in fashion shows they become intrinsically connected with it.

## Audiences

Labeling those who attend a fashion show an audience might be slightly misleading. In an age when fashion shows are media events, many of those attending might just as well be seen as part of a cast. Audiences are usually carefully selected and organized, and in some cases computer programs even assist the designers and their PR agencies in devising optimal plans for who is admitted – or, in other cases, brought in – and who is seated where. In the context of fashion shows Arnold Hauser's (1982, 490) comment that 'there is no form of art in which reception takes place without a special institution which serves that reception', hints that the audience is a product of the collection whose showing they attend, whether they applaud or reject it. The audience is also a product of the designers who enable members of that one and the same audience to react in different ways to his or her collection. So, while the public is to this extent produced by the designer, the collection is at the same time the creation of that public.

The fashion show thus serves to define the fashion industry as a *community* – in terms of production (fashion world personnel and fashion students), distribution (buyers), reproduction (media photography and reporting) *and* consumption (celebrities). It brings to the fore questions of membership of that community (in who is let in and who turned away by a show's gatekeepers), manages the interpersonal relationships of participants (both in audience seating arrangements and in back stage practices), and regulates their overall behaviour. The separation of the onlookers from the performers holds an echo of film scholar Laura Mulvey's critical analysis of 'the male gaze on the female body' (1975). Indeed, the way in which the fashion show turns the moving female body into a mass spectacle supports the general

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<sup>7</sup> For further discussion of the use and body posture of models in fashion shows, see Evans (2001, 295-98 in particular).

validity of the 'scopophilic' relationship between men and women, identified by Mulvey. As illustrated by earlier examples, the fashion show has quoted other gender-coded situations and, in turn, provided a code for them.

However, as a corrective to Mulvey, we have also found that the sexualizing male gaze tends to be bracketed in fashion shows, when attention is paid to how the fashion image is created. Thus, clothing may, intentionally or accidentally, reveal a model's nipples or pubic hair without anyone raising an eyebrow. Since such images tend to find their way into newspapers and even fashion magazines, it seems appropriate to argue that the professional fashion world is characterized by, if not subversion, then a marginalization of the heterosexual male gaze. In this respect, it may be worth noting that for the professional audience, the fashion show is not merely an opportunity for 'visual pleasure', but more like a business proposition, which they must decide whether to back, be they buyers in a position to place orders or editors to write a favorable review. However, while this gaze may not actively constitute the 'act of seeing' performed by a professional audience at a fashion show, the often highly gendered and sexualized image created still aims at satisfying a hetero-normative desire.

Coded gender relations also appear in other guises in the fashion show, most notably in the relation between designer and model. Valerie Steele has analyzed the emergence of the first male fashion creators, coinciding with the institutionalization of haute couture in the 1860s, and sees it as a general shift towards professionalization, in which men with formal authority and qualifications took over from women practitioners. For example, she compares fashion with the medical profession (Steele, 1991, 25). Anne Hollander has analysed how Charles Fredrick Worth presented himself as an artist, down to his mannerism and dress; the artist being another male role that claimed the authority of creative genius in the late 19th century (1978, 354). To be sure, there have been and continue to be many influential women designers. For example, in so far as a single designer can be credited with inventing the fashion show it is Lucile, the trade name of Lady Duff Gordon, who presented her collections in Britain, France and the US in the first decade of the 20th century (Grumbach, 2006, 130). However, the rise of the fashion designer has been conditioned on a shift from a supporting tailor or dressmaker (typically same-gender relationships) to a hetero-normative relationship between the active (male) creator and the (female) model or customer who passively gives her body over to the artist's vision. In this respect, the fashion model certainly embodies the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' identified as the female position by Mulvey.

References to theatrical production presented earlier in this paper obviously comply with the audience of fashion shows as well. One particular difference, however, is that a fashion show audience is not there solely for the entertainment. A large part will be made up of people somehow professionally obliged to attend. As fashion shows have grown into media events, the image is of course blurred, but the shows are still to some extent meant to be aestheticized sales presentations, or at least the stylistic framework of a collection. As other media now distribute images of the new collections more

effectively, the audiences at fashion shows have gained importance. On the one hand, the favour of editors is no longer the only way for designers to reach their customers; numerous internet pages, including the designer's own, will broadcast the show long before magazines are even printed. On the other, because magazines no longer compete to be the first to show the new collections, they compete in taste; every title will show very personal selections of the available styles. In this way it is still crucial for designers to keep up a good relationship with their audience.

For Roland Barthes (1983) fashion was ontological; fashion journalism served as a user's manual and did not aim at being cultural criticism. It was a question of describing what was there. These days, with the vast amount of fashion images and internet accessibility now available, the selection made by fashion journalists, though nonverbal, does present a form of criticism. It is still true that very few written appraisals ever really challenge the fashion houses (cf. Moeran, 2006, 737-739), although some of the more essayistic writers, like Holly Bruback and Colin McDowell, have been excluded from shows on account of bad reviews. Besides underlining the fact that fashion is still an industry, this also demonstrates how reliant the members of the fashion 'community' are on one another.

As we have already noted, antecedents of present-day fashion shows varied in their approach to the role, size and composition of audiences. The classical Parisian *haute couture* fashion show was exclusive and intimate (Leach, 1984, 101), often taking place in the *couture* salons of famous designers. Later, this elite audience was supplemented by retail buyers. Today's shows at fashion weeks are usually restricted to a select fashion crowd composed of (roughly in order of importance) fashion editors, photographers and journalists, celebrities (including other designers), retail buyers, fashion industry representatives, business associates (such as sponsors and partners), guests of designers and other key performers (such as models, stylists), including well-connected and persistent *fashionistas*.

As noted earlier, admission and seating arrangements are highly symbolic and political. Both the designer and the guests' reputation are at stake. The 'caliber', size and mood of the audience reflect upon the status of the designer. Top fashion editors and A-list celebrities naturally confer status upon the designer by merely showing up. But representatives from magazines and celebrities who match the brand in terms of values, expression and following might also reflect well upon the designer. Organizers may go to great lengths, therefore, to attract the right editors and celebrities, including flying them in. While being selective and excluding people without the right 'credentials' from the guest list (or maintaining the image that many requests for invitations have had to be turned down), it is important that the venue be well attended. The absence of queues at the entry and empty seats during the show are signs of failure – signs which set the tone for the experience of the whole show. While a lot of focus is on the influential editors, iconic celebrities and powerful buyers, the lower priority guests might be vital in creating a vibrant atmosphere that shapes the dominant verdict about the quality of the event. The audience brings

together 'aristocratic' (read, celebrity) and 'democratic' spectators who are divided according to different strata, but who nevertheless form a more or less closed – though somewhat ephemeral – community (Hauser, 1982, 479).

Audiences may also influence the tone of the show with their own clothes. Not unlike theatres in the 18th and 19th century, fashion shows are highly social scenes, and arenas for showing off. Members of the audience may go to great lengths to compose the right outfit, either to be noticed or to demonstrate their sensitivity towards trends, while others show their loyalty to the designer by sporting her or his designs.

Former house-model Cherry Marshall (1978, 34) recalls:

"It was quite amusing at our press shows to see the giants from Vogue or Harpers who were given pride of place in the front row, but well separated from each other at opposite ends of the room. They would usually be dressed identically in the current fashion, and that meant hair styles, make-up and shoes as well, and it was unheard of to do your own thing, and only the colour they wore would be different. If Vogue were promoting lilac then they would all be wearing lilac, whereas Harpers might be all dressed in black."

Through their acts of exclusion, inclusion and seating, the designer and her or his team make statements about the positions of actors in the field. Often it is a matter of reproducing established boundaries and hierarchies, admitting or bringing in representatives from the relevant groups of a stature befitting the status or ambition of the designer, and seating them accordingly. This is a complex process since the relative status of various players is rarely clear or fixed, and practical and personal issues interfere. Sometimes, authoritative fashion commentators are relegated to lesser seats or even excluded from attending shows in vendettas for poor coverage. As Colin McDowell of *The Sunday Times* explained in an interview (Bishop, 2006),

"I've been banned from several shows in my time. Balenciaga banned me last season. I wrote about the pretentiousness of fashion houses and meant Balenciaga, of course [...] When I'm banned, I'm always pleased because I know I've said something important and I think that's my job."

Of course, not all designers can afford to alienate influential fashion writers. But neither can fashion writers afford to be deemed *persona non grata* in too many places (even if exclusion might be taken as a sign of integrity and enhance their reputation), particularly if large advertisers are represented there.

Another matter of contention is waiting time: queuing outside or waiting to be seated. As Kondo (1997, 103) has observed: 'designers seem to measure their stature by how long they can make their audiences wait'. At the height of his powers, designer Marc Jacobs let his audience wait for two hours for his spring/summer show in New York in 2007, incurring the wrath of *International Herald Tribune's* Suzy Menkes, an untouchable in the industry (Karimzadeh & Foley, 2007). Besides being a demonstration of power, 'the stable tradition of a constant last-minute chaos backstage' is also a means of assuring the audience



that they are getting absolutely the newest (Löfgren, 2005, 64). But generally designers and their PR-agencies take the utmost care to accommodate their guests, particularly the most important ones. This includes keeping tabs on who does and does not want to be seated with whom (including seats for friends and family). Complementary gifts, or 'goody bags', and other hospitality measures (VIP zones, after-show backstage admission, drinks and snacks) are usually integral parts of the fashion show experience.

To what extent do fashion shows in fact stick to the practices of audience management? Staff and participants no doubt cut and bend the 'rules' of the game. Martin Margiela, for example, is well known for defying fashion conventions. His shows, for the most part, seat people on a first come, first served basis (Frankel, 2008). As in other ritually performed spectacles, bending the rules serves as evidence of the existence and power of the conventions at play in staging the fashion show and, while adding to the repertoire, underlines their importance.

## The Art of the Perfect Moment

Throughout the history of modern fashion, novelty and change have been important concepts in the creation and reception of fashion. The main aim has been to distinguish the fashion show as a significant event in establishing modern fashion that with the help of constant change and crave for novelty, is still keeping the field in a state of continuous flux. Whether fashion is seen as mere *conspicuous consumption*, or as a social art form, most writers agree that change has been important for the development and vitality of fashion. And although change isn't always a guarantee for something new, and contemporary thinking to some extent has abandoned the idea of novelty as the sole initiator in modern society, the anticipation of a 'new look' still haunts the audience at fashion shows.

In the early critical writing on fashion, the importance of novelty was stressed as a key element in the visual differentiating of social class. In late 19th century, Thorstein Veblen described fashion as a conspicuous tool of the leisure class, by which its members could differentiate themselves from the mass. Also in Georg Simmel's writing on fashion, novelty was distinguished as one of two characteristics. He saw the reiterating interplay between distinction and imitation, individuality and conformity as important elements in constituting a system of fashion.

As fashion distanced itself from craftsmanship and turned into an institutionalized part of modern living in the great European and American cities, the pursuit of novelty grew to be a core value. The developing of the industry, and consequently the *prêt-à-porter* gave the fashion industry a greater market. Besides its commercial success, which to some critics was largely a display of status, fashion also developed its creative force, as well as an understanding of its field. In other words, fashion modelled itself in the image

of modernity, and by reflecting its tempo and forward thinking, evolved into what some have called the urban 'art form' par excellence (Lehmann, 2002, xii; Vinken, 2007, 57).

It was not just sociologists who noticed this fashionable need for change. Countless writers, philosophers, and poets have described the changeability and modernity of fashion. Nietzsche, for one, regarded fashion as a truly modern phenomenon, because of its refusal of tradition and authority, and Mallarmé saw the beauty of fashion in the temporal, and had no need, like some of his peers, to search for the eternal in fashion. Fashion designers themselves also reflected on the temporality of fashion. In her autobiography, Elsa Schiaparelli (1890-1973) notices the problem inherent in the realization of fashion and writes how the birth of a dress automatically makes it a thing of the past (Beward, 2003, 71). As she saw it, the designer would never stop creating new dresses, all of which would disappear into the oblivion of time passed.

When Paul Poiret started to perform shows, and designers like Schiaparelli and Madeleine Vionnet accentuated movement, the temporality of fashion became even more evident. However, the ephemeral condition also fuelled criticism. As fashion was quickly linked with feminine qualities, thanks to the logic of rational thought at that time it was not a topic worthy of interest. Its highly irrational character has been suggested as the point that has made it incomprehensible to the modernist mind. Consequently scholars in the 20th century showed little interest in fashion, even though it was the century in which fashion truly came to flourish.

Gilles Lipovetsky and Barbara Vinken argue that the period from the 1860s to the 1960s constituted what they term 'a century of fashion', characterised by negating history and concerned only with the momentary absolute. This largely corresponds with the notion of modernity, and so a 'fashion after fashion' is needed since competing notions of postmodernism and deconstruction later in the 20th century, have blurred the image. Roland Barthes (2006, 54) has lovingly said that fashion is blessed with a short memory, and thank god for that. For through this constant search for novelty, designers often stumble onto the past. In Barbara Vinken's words, the preoccupation with history and self-referentiality are marks of postmodern fashion (Vinken, 2007, 58). 'Fashion after fashion', or 'postfashion', is more concerned with time than novelty (Vinken, 2007). While this may be, and while changes towards a broader perception of time and the past have definitely taken hold of fashion, fashion has always been trans-historical, and its inarticulate citations are part of what makes fashion a modern art form (Lehmann, 2002, xiii). In order to understand fashion in the age of postmodern thought, therefore, Vinken (2007, 58) argues that temporality is no longer the issue. Suddenly history and mortality are what concern designers. This may in a strictly aesthetic sense hold some truth, but if fashion is not to be understood only as a work of art but – as Lehmann, Barthes and others have argued – as something that goes beyond the singular piece of clothes, as a sociality or a system, one cannot fail to notice that in fashion writing, fashion photography and certainly in the fashion show, novelty as a parameter is still heavily imposed. However, if fashion and its

preoccupation with the past can easily fit into our understanding of modernity, the fact that novelty still has a strong hold on it is less problematic.

Ulrich Lehmann, in particular, provides a useful insight into the paradox of fashion and modernity. He rejects the idea of post modernity largely by pointing out that fashion is perfectly understandable within the confines of modernism. This in itself points to the constant change that haunts fashion, but which also allows it to transcend history. Lehmann argues that *modernité* as a social or creative expression indeed needs the past as reference. Using dialectic reasoning, Lehmann argues that even early modernism needed antiquity in order to mirror itself: 'Fashion and modernity, as the expressions of elementary progress, need the past as a (re)source and point of reference, only to plunder and transform it with an insatiable appetite for advance. Without a fixed base against which to distinguish themselves, their haste appears without direction' (Lehmann, 2002, 10). In this way no sudden change is necessary to explain the unfolding of fashion through the 20th century and, although its accompanying aesthetics may have changed, the foundation of fashion as a social modern art form dependent on change remains intact.

Even though Barbara Vinken (2007, 57) may be forcing assumptions on the ambitions of fashion, her descriptions of fashion as the perfect moment are enlightening:

Fashion in the moment of its appearance is a promise which it has already broken when it becomes true. For then it is *démodé, passé*-dead. As the art of the perfect moment, of the surprising and complete harmonious appearance, it brings the ideal to appearance and so for a last time, and for the price of a last gaze, the ideal can be possessed. The veil of melancholy heightens the tormenting beauty of the fleeting moment. In the moment of the appearance, time is negated as *durée*, the traces of time are erased, the model stands outside of time- a normativized body, beyond age and decline.

Here the importance of novelty is underlined, as something essential to the very realisation of fashion. It needs the fleeting, changing moment. In her attempt to theorize fashion, the fashion show becomes the event that incarnates fashion. The show is the constituting event, which in Vinken's words expresses fashion as something that negates time and death, which at the same time form its foundation. A new collection is shown within an institutionalized setting and, even though what is seen may not be revolutionary, the concept of fashion is established. Lehmann has a similar phrase: 'Fashion has to mark absolute novelty yet has already died when it appears in the physical world' (Lehmann, 2002, xx).

In many ways, the fashion show works as the event where the ambition and potential of fashion meet. It creates the perfect moment by staging the fleeting ephemeral perfection of fashion. It is closely linked to the living, temporal exhibition of clothes on moving bodies, and short-lived importance is underlined. It is a paradox within fashion that links the ephemeral with the

lasting, novelty with repetition, in constant interplay at a highly schematized show, thereby staging the constant of fashion: its state of flux.

In other words, with its ideas of change and stability, individualization and imitation, the show functions as the recurring static setting of what is essentially a staging of novelty or temporality. Even postmodern designers, who have explored the boundaries of fashion, playing with concepts and normative ideas, have never really abandoned this dogma. In 'postfashion', duration and past times suddenly enter fashion and stretch its concept, but the presentations of new collections are still carried out. And although designers such as Martin Margiela have cleverly distorted ideas of novelty, in many respects it still remains the norm (Frankel, 2008).

## Conclusion

This working paper has sought to describe and analyse the fashion show. In so doing, it has adopted a number of different tacks that, in part at least, reflect the different interests of the paper's five authors. One of these tacks has been historical: attention has been paid to the emergence and development of the fashion show, as part of an attempt to show how it has changed over time from a method of selling clothes to a select customer base (its economic function) to a means of creating images and attracting broad popular attention (its cultural function).

A second tack has been to consider the fashion show as an art form. Here the work of Howard Becker has acted as the primary theoretical underpinning of an analysis of the fashion world, and we have attempted to move away from qualitative judgements about the artistic or aesthetic merits and demerits of fashion that have tended to characterise writings in cultural studies on fashion as an art form.

At the same time, however, our definition of the fashion show as 'a presentation of a new clothing collection on moving bodies for an audience' has enabled us to examine all-pervading concepts such as novelty, temporality and change, in an attempt to situate them within modernity, and to show that the fashion show acts to create a 'perfect moment' in fashion itself.

A third tack has been to present a frame analysis of the fashion show. Here we have focused on the division between front stage and back stage, and examined how a fashion show is performed in front of a select audience of magazine editors, photographers, celebrities, buyers and the *hoi polloi*. During this process we have analysed both spatial and temporal aspects of the fashion show frame and shown how it is used to set the fashion show apart from the outside world and thus establish a sense of community among members of the fashion world. This emphasis on the social organization of frames thus complements Becker's art world approach.

Like many ritual events, a fashion show may be seen as a performance – or even a 'spectacle' (Duggan, 2001, 245-250) – which frames what is taking

place and highlights the fact that every show *is* a ritual event performed for the community of actors who constitute a fashion world. But it is more than just theatrical spectacle, in that it complies in important ways with the concept of a tournament of value first outlined by Arjun Appadurai (1986) and later developed by others (see Anand & Watson, 2004; Moeran, 1993). Like other tournaments of values (cf. Moeran, 2009) a fashion show is a complex periodic event occurring in a special place and at a special time. It is 'both a ritual and a unique event,' with a 'fixed trysting place' set apart in terms of time, place, setting and props (Baudrillard, 1981, 116; Malinowski, 1922, 85; Smith, 1989, 108-9).

The fashion show is also removed from the routine of everyday economic life, and yet what goes on there (the showing of clothes, the gathering of celebrities, media photography) has consequences within the more mundane realities of the field of fashion as a whole. The 'currency' of the show can be said to be 'the collection', which is the central token of value for designers, buyers and the various different constituents of the attendant audience. The fashion show thus serves to define the fashion industry as a *community* – in terms of production (fashion world personnel and fashion students), distribution (buyers), reproduction (media photography and reporting) *and* consumption (celebrities). It brings to the fore questions of membership of that community (in who is let in and who turned away by a show's gatekeepers), manages the interpersonal relationships of participants (both in audience seating arrangements and in back stage practices), and regulates their overall behaviour (including in-group language and dress codes) (cf. Smith, 1989, 51).

In these respects the fashion show is also a theatrical frame. Firstly, its boundaries sharply (and arbitrarily) cut off what takes place on 'stage' from what lies beyond it (the catwalk from the outside world). Secondly, an individual is transformed into a performer who is watched by, and consciously engages, an audience (the model, but also other performers like the designer and audience celebrities at different stages of the show). Thirdly, if the modeling of clothes is understood as a form of discourse, only one person at a time is allowed to hold the stage and 'speak uninterrupted' (hence the stylistic exaggeration of clothes, makeup, and model's walk), ideally providing his or her audience covertly with the information necessary to sustain dramatic effect. Fourthly, unlike in ordinary conversation, more or less everything that is spoken 'on stage' is significant and is treated as such by participants and audience alike (Goffman, 1986, 143). The drama of a fashion show derives from a 'double antagonism' (Hauser, 1982, 495) the first between the various participants (designer, producer, models, stylists, and so on); the second between those producing and those witnessing the performance. The fashion show, like the theatre, mediates between production and consumption.

But the fashion show is not just theatre or spectacle. Contrary to Goffman's original intention that frames should refer only to the organization of experience (1986, 13), we would argue that frame analysis is also concerned with the core matters of sociology – social organization and social structure – and with the power of durable institutional structures to influence framing

rules in such a way that participants' 'moves' are limited, or at least affected in some way. What we find in such social frameworks are the 'guided doings' of individuals – guided because they are subject to certain standards, norms, expectations and social appraisal.

One means by which experience is organized is the *primary framework*, the function of which is to render 'what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful' (Goffman, 1986, 21). In our opinion, a fashion show is a primary framework in the organization of the fashion world. In every fashion show, certain kinds of behaviour are expected (at certain points) during its performance (how a model walks, the kind of music played and how loud, rapt attention on the part of the front-row spectators, and audience applause). People at the show behave according to norms and expectations because they know that to do otherwise would be to invite criticism and possibly social sanctions of one sort or another. As in every primary framework, in the fashion show a transformation takes place whereby designs become first clothes (garments, styles, numbers) and then (part of) a 'collection', which itself becomes articulated as 'Fashion'. It is thus the *transformations* that take place, rather than the framework of the fashion show itself, that frame analysis seeks ultimately to explain (Goffman, 1986, 499).

What *are* the transformations, then, effected by the fashion show? Firstly, the distinction between back stage and front stage clearly illustrates the fact that transformation is the main function of the fashion show. Back stage, people working in the fashion world contrive by all kinds of means to dress models in such a way that they may move front stage and parade a designer's clothes. By so doing, they transform a designer's collection into a *representation* of a brand and a season. This process is marked by the staging of models' appearances, by the visual recording of those appearances by means of media photography, and by the accompanying music. Secondly, production is transformed into *consumption*, by means of both visual images and participating audience at whom the collection is directed. In the process of this particular transformation, the fashion show itself is transformed from an economic evaluation of clothes with the intention of purchase into a mediated aesthetic, social and cultural experience. At the same time, thirdly, precisely because the fashion show is aimed at named celebrities in the fashion, media and entertainment worlds, each collection is simultaneously transformed into, and consecrated as, *Fashion*. It is in its ability to transform clothes and the relationships among people involved in the production, distribution, representation and consumption thereof that the fashion show is itself transformed into a 'tournament of values'.

Finally, the static framework of the setting enables a flow of garments to be arrested in time by photographers positioned at the end of the catwalk. This enables us to point to the dialectic between 'anchorage' and 'flow' (or 'relay') used by Roland Barthes (1977) in his analysis of an advertising image for Italian foods, and applicable to other media forms such as fashion magazines (Moeran, 2006, 234-244). We come here to a final transformation effected by the fashion show, which acts as a means of both anchoring and relaying Fashion itself, for it simultaneously launches *and* captures the new – defined as such by what has

gone before. In this way, the fashion show acts as a break with all that has gone before by anchoring a new collection designed for a new season. Yet, by showing garments as part of a collection, it relays links with clothes shown in previous collections in other, earlier fashion shows. The fashion show thus anchors a new collection in the flow of what is deemed to be Fashion. In other words, 'it is the content of fashion that is constantly shifting, not the institutions' (Kawamura, 2005, 31).

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