

Fad Phobia: The (D)evolution of the American Fashion  
Industry and the Revolutionary Potentials of the Market

by

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## Prologue

Is fashion a leftist's nightmare? It is ruled by artifice, thrives on the surface, embodies conspicuous consumption, belies function or use, and fosters narcissistic and unproductive desire in the ultimate flaunting of the commodity fetish. Its trends are fleeting and frivolous. The emotions it invokes are vapid and shallow. Its endless cycles and empty meanings demand constant, unsatisfied spending. The pleasure fashion evokes is not the right kind, failing to emerge from some deeper level of expression or fulfillment of a common good. It is a manipulated, manipulating, blissfully ignorant, insidiously convenient kind of pleasure. Take the high heel: what expert method of capitalist patriarchal brainwashing would make a person (me) not only agree to, but desperately *want* to spend money on this foot crushing, movement prohibiting, sexualizing and objectifying pedal straight jacket? Or, for that matter, take any number of popular or subcultural styles—the punk look, the mini skirt, the grunge look, the flowerchild look. What an ingenious and inescapable tactic of domination to pacify the laborer and reenergize him/her for the next day's work by allowing some shallow solace in taking off the factory jumpsuit or service industry uniform.

This superficiality and conformity was often my source of embarrassment or shame growing up with a heightened susceptibility to clothes' mystical—fetishized—appeal. Society's moralizing (and undoubtedly feminized) disdain for vanity and surface pleasures did not go over my head, and early on I picked up and became fluent in a different liberal art—the language of self-expression. It was much easier to garner praise for a unique sense of personal style than just a love for shopping. I

could engage in the same activities—cutting out magazine ads, trying on outfits, buying high heels—without scrutiny if they were done in the name of my elevated taste and singular subjectivity, and not through narcissistic indulgence or some sheeplike obedience to the crowd. In other words, fashion is and can be a threat to progressive politics; but as long as it is defensively grounded in an elevated, righteous selfhood, it is everything the left could hope for. And, anchored in this way to a prized individualism, it can also be everything a liberal capitalist society could hope for—the uninterrupted pursuit of self-interest and its spontaneous and unintended fulfillment of a common good.<sup>1</sup>

Still, this retroactive approval of fashion stipulates quite a fragile condition of admissibility, which necessitates a precarious and muddled balance of the subject over the commercial. Though I have long been socialized into knowing the correct rationale for my interest in fashion, I had my own difficulties keeping this distinction upright and insoluble. My best efforts to convince myself and others that my closet was a mode of pure expression were ultimately disingenuous. The pleasure I feel in shopping, purchasing, and dressing did not come from within, from a deep personal satisfaction. Nor, I intend to make clear, did it stem from a monotonous field of numbing capitalist entertainment and manipulation. Reluctantly, against my social instincts, I came to admit that the affect of dress is irreducible to my insulated, isolated self, and thus not entirely within my control. The pleasure of buying and wearing clothing is in its hedonism, its vanity, its lack of authorship, and its surplus of influence. My closet does not show a linear progression of identity, like the rings in a

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 276.

tree, but rather makes up a wandering, impulsive, reactive assortment, like the termite tracks that aimlessly transect and disrupt this growth.

This thesis is a theoretical and historical study of that unapproved affect. It is an exploration, interrogation, and probing of the fragility of the liberal social structures that stand on rickety stilts above currents of dissociated and uncontained movement. In tracing the fashion industry's descent from liberal society's controlled fantasy to chaotic nightmare, I intend to expose the immanent and inherent danger felt by civil society and the sovereign subject at the hands of the self-effacing splendor of the market. This thesis engages Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the autonomous cultural field to map fashion's unruly departure from a sanctioned hierarchy of cultural production and its current manifestation as the amorphous result of spontaneous and unorganized mass motions. Ultimately, through the work of Jean-Christophe Agnew on the cultural phenomenology of the market and Leo Bersani on the queer sociability of cruising, I hope to uncover the revolutionary potentials of market and money form that have gone overlooked by Marxist theory and that have sparked defensive and revealing retreat from liberal structures of control and subjection.

## Chapter 1: Pierre Bourdieu and the Autonomous Field of Fashion

For Pierre Bourdieu, the origins and workings of culture can be derived and explained through a specific linear equation of cultural production. The idealized cultural system, or institution, that he describes in this model depends on the compounding interactions of a series of elements and players in a “social game.”<sup>2</sup> Each of these distinctly analyzable roles proportionally effect and add up to the purity and influence of the overarching whole that they comprise: the autonomous field, dotingly defined as a cultural haven above the socially destructive current of the market. Bourdieu’s equation for this most valued institution is as follows.

In his essay “The Historical Genesis of the Pure Aesthetic” in *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu weighs in on a longstanding problematic: “the question of what enables one to distinguish between works of art and simple, ordinary things.”<sup>3</sup> In attempting to answer this question, philosophers have, Bourdieu laments, been ensnared by the desire to discover “a transhistoric or ahistoric essence” of the art object.<sup>4</sup> He interrupts this quest to insist that the experience of seeing and knowing art is in itself an institution that is “the product of historical intervention.” At the core of this paradox, he insists, is the socially and historically conditioned eye of the viewer:

...the pure gaze, capable of apprehending the work of art as it demands to be apprehended (i.e., in itself and for itself, as form and not as function), is inseparable from the appearance of producers of art motivated by a pure artistic intention, which is itself inseparable from

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 257.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

the emergence of an autonomous artistic field, capable of formulating and imposing its own ends against external demand<sup>5</sup>

Solving backward from the moment of reception and recognition of a work of art, Bourdieu contends that the “pure gaze” is born out of the prolonged historical evolution of an autonomous field, the defining mission of which is to progressively purify itself and its objects against outside influence. The material institution of the field is thus coproduced with an acquired “cultured habitus,” which endows the trained viewer with the “aesthetic competence” to recognize and impart artistic value.<sup>6</sup>

The autonomous field is the whole that Bourdieu solves for for—a tall silo of cultural production that stands above and apart from polluting forces such as market, commercialism, or politics. Though above he takes the art field as his elucidating object, his analysis and solution apply across all “legitimate” cultural goods “such as music, poetry, philosophy and so on” and even, as he contends in his chapter “Haute Couture and Haute Culture,” luxury goods such as fashion.<sup>7</sup> Alongside these other forms, Bourdieu analyzes fashion as a linear system with separable, analyzable agents contributing to a common purpose—the integrity and purity of haute couture clothes.

Bourdieu’s selection of haute couture as his object, rather than ready-to-wear retail is not incidental. From its origins, haute couture maintained exclusivity and a rigid hierarchy that enforced its seat as the unquestioned dictator of international style. The distinction of haute couture is in fact legally protected by the French Ministry of Industry, only granted to designers if the clothes on their runways are

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (London: SAGE Publications, 1993), 132.



entirely handmade, of the highest quality construction, and are personally fitted to each client.<sup>8</sup> Throughout its history, haute couture and its powerful design houses have pursued prestige, influence, and exclusivity in fulfillment of Bourdieu's most crucial criteria of a cultural field: complete autonomy from impure external pressures. Sealed off from the political, economic, and social forces that threaten pure artistic invention, designers of traditional haute couture wielded immense aesthetic and cultural power only possible in a hermetic field.

Fashion has been an industry of autocratic mandate and mass obedience from its roots in the royal courts of 18<sup>th</sup> century France. At its origins, couture's influence did not lie in the dressmakers and tailors, but rather from Marie Antoinette and her fellow members of the royal court, who would impose their demands—more often for fabrics than for different styles—on deferent royal dressmakers and, by extension, on the styles of their subjects down the social ladder. Creative control did not transfer to fashion designers themselves until the arrival of Charles Frederick Worth to Paris in 1845. Working with his wife and saleswoman Marie Vernet, Worth lay the foundation for fashion designer's claims to artistic and creative value. Rejecting the rigid and constrictive system into which he entered, Worth insisted, "My work is not only to execute but especially to invent. My originality is the secret of my success. I don't want people to dictate what they want to buy; if they did I should lose half my trade."<sup>9</sup> By presenting completed dresses on live models to influential clients, Worth

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<sup>8</sup> Robin Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles: The Night American Fashion Stumbled into the Spotlight and Made History* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2015), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Didier Grumbach, *History of International Fashion* (Northampton: Interlink Publishing Group, 2014), 19.

pioneered the modern system of selling personalized versions of pre-designed items.<sup>10</sup>

This model persisted and expanded into haute couture's heyday in France, from the 1930s to 1960s, along with its declarative influence on the public. The fashion field found its pure voice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's god-like designers—Elsa Schiaparelli, Cristóbal Balenciaga, and Coco Chanel to name a few—whose worshiped designs trickled down from lavish runway shows and the wardrobes of the wealthiest A-list clients into department stores and middle class closets across Europe and the United States. Fashion critic Robin Givhan describes,

A shift in hemlines in the Paris ateliers reverberated throughout the retail world like an encyclical from the Vatican. Whatever Paris said, the wealthiest and most beautiful—and therefore the most influential—women all over the world took heed. Other ladies across social and economic classes then fell in line.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, haute couture dresses themselves were sold selectively. Not only did the patrons of these esteemed designers need deep pockets, they also had to earn access to ateliers through high social standing. Clients often inherited their access, or else cultivated relationships with houses through important social connections or involvement in the highest echelons of society. This vetting process ensured that women had the necessary disposition to make them deserving of such venerated and sacred styles. In exchange for access, these rich and famous clients ensured that haute couture habitus trickled down as a mandate for the masses.<sup>12</sup>

Couture's exclusivity meant that structures were in place to ensure its influence across social and economic levels, and thus to guard against its pollution by

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 14.

commercialization. The collaboration of distinct institutions and players is fundamental to Bourdieu's model, and he insists, "the 'subject' of the production of the art-work—of its value but also of its meaning—is not the producer who actually creates the object in its materiality, but rather the entire set of agents engaged in the field."<sup>13</sup> In other words, the sanctity and influence of haute couture is modular, able to be dissected to reveal specially functioning organs that can be extracted and studied for their impact on the whole. As with other fields, the autonomy of haute couture is signaled "by the emergence of an entire set of specific institutions which are a necessary condition for the functioning of the economy of cultural goods....all of whom are endowed with the dispositions objectively required by the field."<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps most fundamentally, an autonomous field requires "institutions of consecration and sanction" to set it apart and police its exclusive borders. Up until the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there remained little distinction in France between the artistic pursuit of haute couture and the banal business of garment manufacturing. For about four decades, both branches of the industry were arbitrarily housed under the same trade organization, in which "there was no hierarchy between the two." Though the sewing machine was invented in 1831, its impact on the industry was gradual, to the point where for some time there was no blatant difference between haute couture and "ready-made" fashion's techniques of production.<sup>15</sup> Haute couture began to make formal claim to singularity in 1910, when independent designers like Jacques Worth, Lucien Lelong, and Pierre Gerber took advantage of the disbanding of the larger

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<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 261.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>15</sup> Grumbach, *History of International Fashion*, 31.

industry trade group to form their own organization, the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*. Within a year, this group had established its rules of membership and had erected the institutional structures by which potential new members could be evaluated and sanctioned by committee. *Couture* identified itself through rigid exclusivity that affirmed its artistic superiority, contrasting its craft of innovative, custom-made pieces with the ready-to-wear trade, which “dressed Mrs. Anybody” using pre-made patterns and standardized measurements.<sup>16</sup> While ready-to-wear expanded lucratively into the mass market, haute couture proudly defined itself against the diluting force of commercialism and came to inhabit and enforce its values of creative autonomy and prestige that turned it into a global cultural power.

Another institution that Bourdieu says enables the functioning of the field are “places of exhibit.”<sup>17</sup> It is not difficult to identify this element in the fashion field, whose gaudy and extravagant runway shows create a spectacle that impresses the sanctity of the designers’ creations. Givhan describes, “...up until the late 1960s [haute couture shows] were like religion, a cross between Easter Sunday and Holy Communion....There was a hush over the room. At Balenciaga, there was utter silence.”<sup>18</sup> These displays originated almost simultaneously with the formal establishment *Chambre Syndicale*, and provided an advantageous and dignified way to further emphasize and convey the prestige of haute couture design. A clear enforcement of the haute couture habitus, couture shows instilled an atmosphere of reverence and grandeur that signaled the purity of the designs. In addition the practice

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 13.

attracted an increasing and devoted following from journalists and foreign retail buyers who were crucial to conferring Parisian fashion's taste and influence on a broader public.<sup>19</sup>

Second, haute couture's elevated status as an artistic form earned its inclusion and appreciation in museums, especially Paris' longstanding *Musée des Arts Décoratifs*, or Museum of Decorative Arts. In fact, the institution of the museum was crucial in returning haute couture to its position of cultural primacy at one of the most precarious moments in its history. Immediately after World War II, French fashion's isolation from global clients and subsequent drop in sales sewed uncertainty about haute couture's future. To right its falling trajectory and reassert its cultural mystique, The Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture, headed by Lucien Lelong, launched an exhibition of handmade dolls dressed in the finest miniature clothes at the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs*. The show, "Le Théâtre de la Mode" ("The Fashion Theater") was met with enormous popularity, and was even invited to tour museums throughout Europe and the Americas. Couture's sanctioning by and placement in museums reinforced its cultural cachet, effectively reigniting a downtrodden industry.

The fashion industry is also reliant on an array of "specialized agents" who occupy small but crucial niches in the field.<sup>20</sup> As referenced above, haute couture clients played an important role in the success and autonomy of the field and were vetted for the proper "disposition" like any other member of the industry. Once admitted into the exclusive world of haute couture, these beautiful and wealthy women accepted a lifelong post in the industry and the ateliers, as they "tended to

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<sup>19</sup> Grumbach, *History of International Fashion*, 33.

<sup>20</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 260.

remain loyal to one or two courtiers for a lifetime.”<sup>21</sup> Although designers cultivated personal connections with their most prominent patrons, they employed skilled saleswomen, or *vendeuses*, to form new relationships and attend to the needs of clients. This was especially crucial given the meticulous personalized fittings required for haute couture garments. Each client was assigned a *vendeuse*, whom she would contact after a runway show to place an order and who would ensure the perfect execution of the piece over a series of appointments. More than saleswomen, Givhan explains that *vendeuses* were also “social arbiters, gatekeepers, and meticulous business women.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, *vendeuses* did a great deal more than oversee transactions; they possessed and cultivated the sophisticated habitus of couture. In addition to ensuring the quality of the garments produced, *vendeuses* safeguarded and advanced the future of the field by carefully selecting and grooming proprietors with the necessary disposition to protect the purity of fashion.

The problem then remains how luxury haute couture garments and the pure aesthetic that accompanied them descended onto the masses unscathed by the profanity of commercialism. The answer lies in the stronghold that couture ateliers maintained on the final “specific institution” of commercial retail. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American department stores such as Lord & Taylor, Bergdorf Goodman, Saks Fifth Avenue, Marshall Field, and Orbach’s earned immense celebrity and reverence, and their racks were monopolized by the styles of French haute couture. However, department store garments were not Dior or Balenciaga originals, but less expensive copies of their seasonal designs. Still, these clothes were

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<sup>21</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

not counterfeits or illegal knockoffs. Givhan explains, “copying was not just standard practice for American stores and designers, it was formalized and conducted in the light of day.” Frequent spreads ran in *Vogue* with captions like, “Dior red wool coat, with incisive seams making the point of a very controlled flare. This, imported and copied by Saks Fifth Avenue.”<sup>23</sup> These down-market imitations were permitted and facilitated by a longstanding system in place between Paris ateliers and American retail. Provided they displayed the desired “cachet, aesthetics, and financial solvency,” haute couture designers granted department stores access to their designs in exchange for a fee, called a *caution*. This system proved so successful that “By the 1960s, these commercial entities—retailers, not individuals—accounted for the bulk of couture purchases.”<sup>24</sup>

Stores would frequently send buyers to Paris, who would return with original garments that the store would display in small-scale fashion shows. In the 1950s, Chicago’s Marshall Field, for example, would hold three runway shows per collection: one to inform the sales staff on the styles of the season, another to showcase these French designs to American manufacturers, and a third for high-end clientele. Marshall Field provided the American designers attending the second show with detailed lookbooks outlining the silhouettes, methods of construction, specific fabrics, and overall themes of the season so they could accurately produce “copies of couture designs that Marshall Field and other stores peddled to the masses.”<sup>25</sup> In the third show, high-end customers could purchase items directly from the runway that

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 31

would be constructed just for them by store employees and that would then bear a tag that read “Yves Saint Laurent for Bergdorf Goodman” or “Christian Dior for Marshall Field.”<sup>26</sup> The sanctity of haute couture was therefore not only preserved but also expanded and popularized, with even the most commercial retail sales bending to the authoritarian aesthetic of haute couture.

Among the most crucial and powerful conveyors of these aesthetic orders were fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, whose reports from Paris avid followers of fashion heeded like gospel. Editors at these publications attended couture showings and filtered through the season’s numerous styles to determine and relay the next big trend to an eagerly awaiting and devoted readership. As the influential *Harper’s Bazaar* editor described her trade, “It is our role to recognize fashions when they are still only the seeds of the future. The designers create, but without magazines their creations would never be recognized or accepted.”<sup>27</sup> Fashion editors became experts in their field. Like art and cultural critics, they were “sensitive to every new trend, expert in analyzing, appraising, selecting, discarding.”<sup>28</sup> In turn, their magazines carried unparalleled influence over shoppers, and were thus crucial players in securing couturiers’ cultural supremacy. Former editor at *Vogue*, Grace Mirabella, explained in her memoir that during the golden age of fashion magazines, “*Vogue’s* power couldn’t be underestimated...If we said it was the year of sweater dressing, everyone was in knits. If we said hemlines were falling, they fell.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 30-31

<sup>27</sup> Kate Nelson Best, *The History of Fashion Journalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 133.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>29</sup> Grace Mirabella, *In and Out of Vogue* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 100.



These essential organs, separable by their specific functions, each offer their contribution to the greater whole of an autonomous fashion field. However, Bourdieu insists that aesthetic purity is not a stagnant goal, but perpetually in flux in the natural evolution of the field. This movement, he says, is born out of internal competition for “the same stakes”: the purification of the field.<sup>30</sup> With these “successive revolutions,” the silos of artistic fields, haute couture included, build their walls higher and higher, reaching towards greater autonomy and leaving further and further below the contaminants of markets and politics. These upheavals, Bourdieu notes, are often, carried out by the “new avant-garde” against the “orthodoxy.” Though the intent of revolutionary figures in the field may be to overturn the existing hierarchy or incite a shift in values, change remains on a linear trajectory and within the walls of the field by way of being “reflective” and “cumulative.”<sup>31</sup>

In his exploration of haute couture, Bourdieu references several instances of struggle within the fashion field. For example, he points to televised debates between established courtier Pierre Balmain and Jean-Louis Scherrer, a member of the younger generation of designers. In these debates, Bourdieu describes, “Balmain in very long, rather pompous sentences, defended ‘French quality,’ creation, and so on; Scherrer spoke like a student leader in May ’68.”<sup>32</sup> In addition, he notes that the rhetoric shifts between more established designers, whose designs are described as “luxurious, exclusive, elegant, traditional, classic, refined, select, balanced, made to last,” and newcomers, who garner such praise as “super-chic, kitsch, funny,

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<sup>30</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 264; Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 133.

<sup>31</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 264-5.

<sup>32</sup> Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 135.

appealing, witty, cheeky, radiant, free, enthusiastic, structured, functional.”<sup>33</sup> Bourdieu also calls upon the “revolution” started by André Courrèges, a central member of the 1960s postmodernism trend in fashion, which often centered on reflexive critiques of the fashion industry.<sup>34</sup> What Bourdieu illustrates in these examples is a struggle between orthodox and avant-garde courtiers over the essential values of haute couture.

However, it is important to note that the tensions/debates he identifies are insular. While their “cheeky” designs may have seemed like heresy to traditionalists like Balmain, Scherrer and Courrèges were not outsiders. Rather, they were protégées of Dior and Balenciaga respectively, were both members of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*, and were the peers of couture powerhouses like Pierre Cardin. This clarification brings us to a crucial caveat in Bourdieu’s analysis of the field:

...the precondition for entry into the field is recognition of the values at stake and therefore recognition of the limits not to be exceeded on pain of being excluded from the game. It follows that the internal struggle can only lead to partial revolutions that can destroy the hierarchy but not the game itself.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, the change that is the “motor of the field” must contained within sanctions of the field itself so as to avoid spoiling its integrity. To preserve the system’s linearity, all growth must be proportional, so as to allow “changes in content” while ensuring the field “remains structurally identical.”<sup>36</sup> Though Scherrer

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.; Bonnie English, *A Cultural History of Fashion in the Twentieth Century: From the Catwalk to the Sidewalk* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007), 76.

<sup>35</sup> Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 134.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 135.

and Balmain imagine different futures for haute couture, they share the same goal of ensuring that future means the field's increased sanctity and influence.

Within this limiting condition of cultural change, Bourdieu betrays a concern for the fragility of the social system he identifies and is invested in. Though throughout his work Bourdieu portrays the autonomous field as an increasingly impervious edifice of pure cultural production, his restrictive terms for the appropriate evolution of the institution insinuate that this valued structure teeters precariously on its pedestal. The field's supposedly positive trajectory of "cumulative" progress is in reality a defensive one, as any advancement must be measured and guarded against the perpetual threat to its delicate equilibrium. In a brief but illuminating passage at the end of this exploration of haute couture, Bourdieu provides an indication as to the nature of the field's essential vulnerability:

The two extremes of the field [the orthodox and the avant-garde] agree at least in saying that Retro and girls who dress any old how are all very nice, very pretty, but only up to a point. For what are girls who buy their clothes at jumble sales doing? They are challenging the monopoly of the legitimate manipulation of the sacred in matters of fashion, just as heretics challenge the priestly monopoly of legitimate reading of Scripture. If people start challenging the monopoly of legitimate reading, if any Tom, Dick or Harriet can read the Gospel or make dresses, then the specialist field is destroyed. That is why revolt within the field always has its limits.<sup>37</sup>

In "dress[ing] any old how," these heretical consumers turn their back on the habitus that each player the haute couture field has so carefully constructed and bestowed. What is so troubling to Bourdieu and threatening to the cautious hierarchy he illustrates is not simply the fashion consumer's subjective negation of a single field mandate. Once again, Bourdieu encourages the overthrow of the orthodox by the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 138.

avant-garde—the thoughtful and value-based transfer of creative power. The shoppers he studies, however, do not bypass a Balmain for a Scherrer or a Courrèges; they bypass all three for the discount bin—for the disruptive and profane plentitude of the mass market—and thus nullify any form of cultural power from above. This seemingly mundane insubordination terminally transgresses the fundamental boundaries of the cultural field. By failing to passively receive the dictates of high culture, these consumers throw the entire system of cultural production into distortion and chaos, enacting a tectonic shift that threatens the very structure of the elevated field. The central ratio of proportional cause and effect at the basis of the autonomous field faces collapse as its subjects fail to perform their constitutive, obedient role in the process of stable socialization, and instead distribute cultural influence amongst infinite, unspecialized individuals—“any Tom, Dick or Harriet.” Invested in the stabilized, regulatory hierarchy of cultural production that manifests in the autonomous artistic field, Bourdieu’s ultimate anxiety is the destructive potential of market mutiny.

Bourdieu’s investment in the autonomous field as a governing social force is consistent with the intellectual legacy of Durkheimian structural functionalism from which he descends. In *Suicide*, Émile Durkheim identifies society as the crucial “regulative force” that stabilizes and directs human life. Because, Durkheim explains, humans are endowed with a “power of reflection,” the individual is able to imagine,

anticipate, and pursue a level of personal fulfillment beyond what one is given.<sup>38</sup> However, human nature does not contain the capacity for the self-discipline of this fundamental ambition. Left to one's own unfettered imagination, the individual becomes trapped in the infinite pursuit of unattainable satisfaction, resulting in a "state of perpetual unhappiness," or "anomy," that Durkheim argues may ultimately lead to suicide.<sup>39</sup> The salvation from this cycle of self-destructive greed must come in the form of an "exterior," "moral," and "just" power to which individuals "yield spontaneously," an idealized amalgam of regulatory traits that Durkheim ultimately locates exclusively in society.<sup>40</sup> His reverence to the social not only lies in its singular ability to corral the anomic wanderings of "deregulated" humanity, but additionally in the inherent communal value of the collectivity it creates:

Either directly and as a whole, or through the agency of one of its organs, society alone can play this moderating role; for it is the only moral power superior to the individual, the authority of which he accepts...Finally, it alone can estimate the reward to be the prospectively offered to every class of human functionary, in the name of common interest.<sup>41</sup>

It is society's capacity to provide order and restraint to humanity, against the chaos and immorality of greed and toward the "rational pursuit of collectively defined and approved ends," that captivates Durkheim and that later inspires Bourdieu's investment in the organized hierarchy of the artistic field.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), 247.

<sup>39</sup> Durkheim, *Suicide*, 248.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 248-249.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>42</sup> Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market* (New York: New Press, 1998), 104.

For the most part, barring “some abnormal crisis” or “state of upheaval,” Durkheim explains, society’s apparatuses of regulation are stable, and humanity’s entropic tendency toward perpetually unfulfilled desire is contained.<sup>43</sup> Still, there remains “one sphere of social life” in which social restrictions are perpetually overturned and the individual is left unchecked to fall into her natural, amoral, and anomic descent—a sphere that Bourdieu, in “Haute Couture and Haute Culture” conjures through the language of “Retro” style and “jumble sales.”<sup>44</sup> Facilitated by the development of “trade and industry,” the ultimate threat to Durkheim’s social equilibrium—and Bourdieu’s valued field—is the “almost infinite extension of the market.”<sup>45</sup> Immersed in the corrosive and “limitless” expanse of the market, Durkheim mournfully asks, “How could passions accept their former confinement...?”<sup>46</sup> A caustic torrent of potentials for satisfaction, the market disintegrates the regulatory structures of society, obstructs any potential to realize a “common interest,” and even leads to the fundamental destruction of the social subject through suicide.

For Bourdieu, the market is equally vilified. In *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, Bourdieu condemns the theory of neoliberalism and its “utopia of a pure, perfect market” as diametrically opposed and actively detrimental to the “collective structures” that instill a cohesive and just community.<sup>47</sup> Bourdieu places the market and these treasured social institutions at constant odds in the

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<sup>43</sup> Durkheim, *Suicide*, 251.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 254; Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 138.

<sup>45</sup> Durkheim, *Suicide*, 254, 255.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>47</sup> Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance*, 96.

neoliberal system, insisting that the “institutions and agents of the old order [are] now being dismantled” at the hands of the “destabilized habitus,” that is the consequence of an untamed market.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, Bourdieu claims that these collective projects of “solidarity” and proper habitus are the only defense against “the rush into the abyss.” As, “reserves of social capital,” these structures “protect...the present social order from falling into anomie.” However, under constant attack from the market, these resources present no guarantee of permanent social stability, constituting a draining “capital which, if it is not renewed, reproduced, will inevitably run out.”<sup>49</sup>

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School of sociology resume the narrative of Bourdieu’s anxiety by providing an illustration of the dystopian outcome that results from the final exhaustion of the social institutions of market resistance. In their critical unpacking of the “culture industry,” Horkheimer and Adorno describe the oppressive monotony of the mass culture that arises out of the collapse of pure forms of cultural production at the hands of the market. Rejecting the theory that the disintegration of pre-capitalist social structures gives way to “cultural chaos,” these authors paint a landscape of consumerism that is repressive and disciplined to the extreme, in which “culture now impresses the same stamp on everything.”<sup>50</sup> Polluted by mass commercialism, all forms of artistic production have, in this reading, toppled from their elevated status and been reduced to “just business,” ensuring widespread and inevitable mediocrity and stagnation. Horkheimer and

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 98, 103.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 102-103

<sup>50</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997), 120.

Adorno insist that the claims by the culture industry that mass culture is grounded in “the consumers’ needs” obfuscate the true dynamics of manipulation and obedience at the roots of a society corroded by liberalism. Paradoxically, market society’s lack of social regulation enforces a “ruthless unity” on its subjects by way of the standardized and specialized nature of capitalist production and labor.<sup>51</sup> The “rhythm of the iron system” simultaneously informs and is perpetuated by commercialized and desecrated cultural forms, whose producers work to satisfy “identical needs” with “identical goods,” thus participating in “the circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows ever stronger.”<sup>52</sup> The deregulatory “private culture monopoly,” as Durkheim and Bourdieu both agree, “directs its attack at the soul.” Unrestrained by the positive collective structures of society—in this case, the hierarchy of the cultural field—“the deceived masses are...captivated by the myth of success.”<sup>53</sup> In this way, consumers of mass cultural goods become compliant with their own subjugation and ideological confinement, endlessly seeking satisfaction within “the very ideology which enslaves them” and therefore contributing to the increasing uniformity of both the form and content of cultural goods.<sup>54</sup> As a result of this “false universality” (as opposed to the “real universality” pursued by “serious art” by way of the autonomous field), these forms of entertainment, representing the “standardized average of late liberal taste,” are endlessly cloned, never drawing from the past or inventing a future, and thus never facing failure or obsolescence.<sup>55</sup> Left

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 120-121.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 133-134.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 135, 134



exposed to the market, Horkheimer and Adorno theorize, the pure institution of the cultural field not only disintegrates, but is captured in a cycle of inescapable mediocrity.

However, this capture can never be absolute. In his essay “The Conflict of Modern Culture,” Georg Simmel describes the essential restless movement of life against its containment by cultural frameworks, and thus implicitly challenges the Frankfurt School’s diagnosis of cultural life within the market as falsely fatalistic. For Simmel, “the whole history of culture” is reducible to the conflicting dynamic between life and form. Constituting the “internal contradiction” that Simmel takes as his object, these fundamental elements of modern cultural life are both warring and mutually dependent. While life relies on its enclosure in form to obtain order, legibility, and “logic and lawfulness” in culture, it also inherently possesses a “restless rhythm” that fights against and ultimately transcends its rigid confinement.<sup>56</sup> This incessant motion makes it impossible for a specific cultural form to achieve the enduring and unwavering supremacy that Horkheimer and Adorno attribute to the market. Simmel explains that life’s unrelenting fluidity

...opposes the fixed duration of any particular form. Each cultural form, once it is created, is gnawed at varying rates by the forces of life. As soon as one is fully developed, the next begins to form; after a struggle that may be long or short, it will inevitably succeed its predecessor.<sup>57</sup>

The history of modern culture is thus characterized by its perpetual cycles of displacement. Simmel cites this essential dynamic to quell the anxieties of “moralists,

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<sup>56</sup> Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 375.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

reactionaries,” and those who “complain about the increasing ‘lack of form’ in modern life,” like Bourdieu and members of the Frankfurt School.<sup>58</sup> These critics, in their panicked nostalgia for “the old order now being dismantled,” “fail to understand...that what is happening is not only a negative, passive dying out of traditional forms, but simultaneously a fully positive drive towards life which is actively repressing these forms.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, Simmel contends, Bourdieu’s dread for the destruction of the autonomous field, and Horkheimer and Adorno’s subsequent fatalistic portrayal of its rigor mortis at the hands of the market, may be stemmed by the assurance of life’s continuously proliferating resurrections in endlessly displaced cultural forms.

In accordance with Simmel’s model of constant cultural succession, Stanley Aronowitz identifies one such displacement that has arisen out of the supposedly sealed and stagnant system of the culture industry. In his essay, “Critic as Star,” Aronowitz picks up where the Frankfurt School closed their reading and searches for the transposed locus of life after its active corrosion of the expressive artistic form. Paralleling Horkheimer and Adorno’s illustration of the state of the pure cultural form under the market, Aronowitz agrees that “the penetration of mass audience culture into all corners of the social world has generated a crisis for critics, artists, and those culture consumers concerned with the preservation of high art.”<sup>60</sup> Locating the audience as the art’s constitutive source of meaning, he argues that the dilution of the art object into mass culture, as well as the dwindling numbers of pure high art

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 377.

<sup>59</sup> Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance*, 103; Simmel, *On Individuality*, 377.

<sup>60</sup> Stanley Aronowitz, *Dead Artists, Live Theories, and Other Cultural Problems* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 49.

consumers indicate that the form of the autonomous field has indeed been emptied of its life or, to use Aronowitz's preferred term from Walter Benjamin, its aura. Ultimately, Aronowitz finds that this capacity for authorship has been superseded by the critic, who takes up these vacated forms in order become "the source of signification."<sup>61</sup>

The artist—the initial author—is the first to confront the aura's disruptive drift. Following the Frankfurt School, Aronowitz explains that the "power of the culture industry is to absorb even the most opposed art forms and force the artist to produce work in the context of the requirements of the industry." Confronted with her own commodification, and thus the pollution of her pure mode of cultural production, the artist turns to self-reflection, adopting "the ironic expressive mode of discourse for the purpose of commenting upon mass culture."<sup>62</sup> In doing so, the artist "takes herself as her own object" and assumes the conflated role of both author and critic.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, the academic critic has sought to stymie high culture's "eclipse by the spectacle" by preserving its aura and restoring its powers of signification.<sup>64</sup> Again, however, high art's subsumption into the market has drained the artist of her culturally authoritative voice, reduced her art to the empty "reproduc[tion] of object relations,"<sup>65</sup> and precluded any retroactive reinstatement of value. Aronowitz explains, "While Walter Benjamin was certainly right to have noticed that the result of the mechanical reproducibility of art was to remove the aura from the artifact, he

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 93.

was not correct to have argued that the aura itself was destroyed.” On the contrary, in the very act of taking up the fallen art object and asserting its meaning, critics have constructed the substitute form for life. Because the work they interrogate “contains no inherent or signified meaning”—no longer received by a reverent audience—critics’ “acts of interpretation or deconstruction are the real art.”<sup>66</sup> In recasting the abstracted “raw materials” of the reified artifact, the critic inherits and resurrects the aura that, far from passively dimming at the hands of the market, actively broke free of the expressive art form.

Similarly, in his interrogation of “The Mass Ornament,” Siegfried Kracauer reopens Horkheimer and Adorno’s sealed off treatment of the culture industry, and even goes so far as to argue that the capitalist, mass-market framework that the Frankfurt School reproaches, as well as the emptied, abstract cultural forms it leaves behind actually carry the promise of realizing a fundamental truth that has been stifled and obscured by unifying social structures. Kracauer’s analysis of modernity is comparable to Simmel’s in that it rests on the concept of perpetual motion in culture. However, while Simmel specifies no clear trajectory to the fluctuations of modern life in relation and resistance to the form, the underlying dynamic of the “The Mass Ornament” is one of linear progress toward a specific goal, namely the triumph of a “weak and distant reason” over “the forces of nature.” For Kracauer, the history of culture can be explained by this central conflict, in which nature, in its “omnipotent” control over humankind, “gave rise to the great cultures of humanity” and “serves as the ground for the superstructures of a mythological thinking,” at the great expense of

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 90.

humankind's fundamental capacity for a defiant and just reason.<sup>67</sup> Evoking Simmel's concept of form, these mythological, natural structures have been dismantled and reconstructed throughout time. Reason, however, suppressed by the cultural form, "does not operate within the circle of natural life." Like the powerful force of morality and justice in fairy tales, reason serves as a fundamental purveyor of "truth" that seeks victory over "natural power."<sup>68</sup> Thus, Kracauer describes the inherent conflict between these two elements as the underlying driver of history, which can be understood as a "*process of demythologization* which effects a radical deconstruction of the positions that the natural continually reoccupied."<sup>69</sup>

The "mythological thinking" that Kracauer interrogates as hindering the triumph of reason is that of the "capitalist process" and its culture industry, distilled for him in the synchronized, rhythmic formations of the "Tiller Girls."<sup>70</sup> For Kracauer, these modulating performances of "mass ornament," perfectly reflect "the entire contemporary situation" of capitalist market-based society. Recalling the complaints of the Frankfurt School, Kracauer explains how these mathematical movements in unison, like the "capitalist production process" itself, organize dehumanized dancers into endlessly mirrored fractals, in which "community and personality perish when what is demanded is calculability" and the individual exists "only as a tiny piece of the mass."<sup>71</sup> In other words, the Tiller Girls embody the desired "rationality" of mechanized production and mass culture. As such, Kracauer

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<sup>67</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 79.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

explains, this calculated choreography draws disapproval from critics of the capitalist system, who, like Horkheimer and Adorno, “judge anything that entertains the crowd to be a distraction of that crowd.” However, Kracauer views this dismissal to be a fatal mistake, insisting that “the *aesthetic* pleasure gained from ornamental movements is *legitimate*,” especially compared to the “outdated noble sentiments in obsolete forms,” to which both Bourdieu and Horkheimer and Adorno are guilty of harboring an attachment.<sup>72</sup> In fact, for Kracauer, this modular form, precisely by way of its distillation of the mass-market system, is imbued with “unprecedented” potential for the conquest of reason over nature. In other words, contrary to the Frankfurt School’s defeatist criticism of mass culture, “the capitalist epoch is a stage in the process of demystification.”<sup>73</sup> Because capitalism’s specific mythological framework of thinking “does not arise purely out of nature,”<sup>74</sup> it thus “fosters a greater independence from natural conditions and thereby creates a space for the intervention of reason.”<sup>75</sup> This partial release from the forces of nature, Kracauer reproachfully explains, is the root of the traditionalist critique of the culture industry, whose defenders resent “capitalism’s rationalism for raping man, and yearn for the return of a community that would be capable of preserving the allegedly human element.” Yet, as a stage in the progression toward absolute reason, the “core defect” of capitalism is not that “it rationalizes too much but rather *too little*,” in that it produces culture in which form is abstracted from content and meaning. This abstraction, through which the Tiller Girls’ performance serves only as “an end in

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 80.

itself,” stubbornly refuses the full realization of reason and thus reduces capitalism’s rationalism to “murky reason.”<sup>76</sup> The failure of the culture industry to fully shed the oppressive restraints of nature indicates “that the process of demythologization has not come to an end,” and thus implies that the constrictive framework of capitalism is not only escapable, but inevitably bound to give way to the next stage in the struggle for “form-bursting reason”.<sup>77</sup>

Following Durkheim, Pierre Bourdieu’s central ideological investments lie in the strength and collectivizing power of society and its institutions. In the realm of culture, Bourdieu argues, the most crucial instrument of social cohesion is the autonomous field. This formalized convergence of audience socialization—cultural habitus—with structural bodies of support and execution is propelled by and esteemed for its perpetual, internal progression toward the pure artistic form. In other words, the field is necessarily defined against the polluting and profane force of the market. In the case of fashion, the collective enforcement of elevated taste across all level of society is crucially founded on the autonomous field of haute couture’s stratification and systemization of influence along hierarchies of pure creative ability and institutional obedience and legitimacy. In his vilification of the market in relation to couture’s venerated edifice of cultural production, however, Bourdieu reveals the market’s abstracted and unprincipled system of exchange to be the ultimate and intimate danger to the social cohesion provided by the field. The German social

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 82-83.

theorists of the Frankfurt School take up this same threat to articulate more fully the feared social consequences of such an intrusion, which, in the opinion of Horkheimer and Adorno, take the shape of a monotonous, valueless, and mediocrity-ridden culture industry, stripped of the creative magic of pure artistic expression. I have invoked Simmel, Aronowitz, and Kracauer to counter the seamless defeatism of the Frankfurt School and insist instead that the cultural field's decline toward the market cannot be reduced to a lifeless, inescapable uniformity, but rather must be identified by the restless elusiveness of authorship. In the following chapter, I illustrate not only that the market is indeed a force of corrosion against the structure and collective identity of the social, but also that the ideology of society and selfhood that serve as our ontological guide through modern life—and therefore as the basis for social relations of power that shapes that experience—has been fundamentally constructed throughout history in anxious defense from the disruptive formlessness of market exchange.



## **Chapter 2: “Commingle and Crush Worlds”: Cruising Sociability and the Market**

Émile Durkheim and Pierre Bourdieu are not alone in their disdain for and fear of the market, nor is the suspicious sentiment they hold against this abstract form of trade limited to the theoretical realm. Since the advent of the abstract money form in commerce, the regulating controls of the social have come into conflict with the destabilizing force of the market, manifesting in a fundamental and enduring antagonism whose fossilized iterations of confrontation, suppression, and compensation in culture can be traced back in time like layers of sediment.

### *The “Confidence Man” and the American Crisis of Identity*

In American Victorian society in the early to mid-nineteenth century, for example, the social anxieties provoked by the expansion of industrialism and a laissez-faire economy can be unearthed in the odd proliferation of self-help literature and the conjuring of the amorphous villain of the “confidence man.” As Karen Halttunen portrays in *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870*, the still nascent American national body of the Antebellum period suffered an “uneasiness with the dramatic expansion of the American market economy in the first decades of the nineteenth century.”<sup>78</sup> The source of this apprehension lay in the threat the growing money economy posed to the traditional organizational structures of society. Before the nineteenth century,

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<sup>78</sup> Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 18.

American life centered on three “vertical” institutions of control—“the family, the local community, and the church.”<sup>79</sup> Though these forces were largely separate, they all worked through and imposed the same overall structure of “authority and deference” in social relationships.<sup>80</sup> Individual social actors knew themselves and their roles within society only as members of a rigid and stratified social structure. However, throughout the eighteenth century, population growth, industrial development, and the expansion of urban centers drew “people out of self-sufficiency into the money economy,”<sup>81</sup> and placed strain on the “tight social, psychological, and ideological bounds of the traditional systems of elite control.”<sup>82</sup> This seismic shift led to a widespread identity crisis on the individual and social scale. Whereas the institution of commerce once served as a valuable instrument of social stability, instilling “mutual confidence” and “benevolence,” it no longer rested on “face-to-face” interactions; rather, exchange was now diluted into a national market of strangers solely bound by the fluid and confounding money form.<sup>83</sup> Speaking to the fears this transformation evoked, a contemporary writer complained, “We have fallen into a period of social disorders, agitations, and excitements. There are signs of a spirit of anarchy in the very midst of us, which makes us sometimes tremble for the weal of our institutions.”<sup>84</sup> Spearheaded by Andrew Jackson, the populist politics of the day stoked the panic incited by the market’s abstract immensity. Jackson and his followers launched a “war against the Bank,” which condemned the “money power”

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 17, 19.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 21.

for “constructing ‘a mysterious swaying web of speculative credit’ in ‘a false, rotten, insubstantial world’ of corrupt finance.”<sup>85</sup>

Suddenly stripped of the strict social structures against which they self-identified, and facing a boundless, anonymous, and speculative landscape of exchange, many American citizens during this period projected their anxieties onto the increasing numbers of young men who left their small towns, farms, and structured lives for the promise and chaos of the city. Young and impressionable, these boys symbolized for members of the old order the fragile, corruptible future under a national market, as well as their own suddenly “malleable” and uncertain selfhood under this new social (dis)order.<sup>86</sup> In response, writers and defenders of the status quo published a number of advice manuals for these at-risk urban trailblazers.<sup>87</sup> The advice they provided offers an illuminating window into the specific fears induced by the expanding market. The majority of these concerns were distilled into a single all-encompassing villain of the new formless society—the “confidence man.” The confidence man personified the American Victorians’ crisis of identity; often a wealthy, well dressed, and friendly gentleman, the manuals warned, he was a “master of disguise” who, though, “mild and courteous in his manner,” had “the heart of a fiend.”<sup>88</sup> In the eyes of these concerned authors, the confidence man was the ultimate hypocrite, who, though he presented himself and acted according to their rules of propriety, made it his purpose to trick the young traveler out of his money, introduce him to sex and vice, or, worst of all, convert him to his own deceitful ways, making it

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 5.

so that the young man's "worst enemy lurked not in the city streets but within his own breast."<sup>89</sup>

This character of deception and distrust embodied for Americans the abstract fear induced by the market of the disintegration of the established rules of intersubjective interaction. The collapse of the pre-capitalist hierarchy and the "proliferation of moveable wealth" made society, and the city especially, an "anonymous 'world of strangers,'" wherein true motives were obscured and illegible.<sup>90</sup> Even more distressing, however, and illustrated by manual workers' "deepest fear" of total corruption, was individual subjects' inability to fully recognize themselves within a market society. The dilution of the stratified framework of social status once again meant that modes of self-identification were made horizontal, diffuse, and uncertain. Halttunen explains, "In this 'era of the common man,' when most Americans claimed to be middle-class, and when to be middle-class was to be socially fluid, a majority of Americans appeared to be liminal men who defied social classification." What is more, Americans feared that their success within this new fluid system of exchange necessitated their own debasement at the hands of the market and the relinquishment of their moral principles. Forced out of the insulated and self-affirming practice of subsistence, Americans feared that they themselves "might have to learn the tricks of the confidence man."<sup>91</sup> This identity crisis even infiltrated the national, political level, as contemporary thinkers worried about their nascent country's ability to sustain a cohesive and just national body. Defenders of

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 2-3, 32.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 7, xvi.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 32.

the “republican order” grew fearful that a nation founded on individual self-government might descend into chaos at the hands of a public consumed by personal greed and blind to the common good. One such concerned scholar predicted, “Should our grand experiment of self-government ultimately fail, it will doubtless be because our prosperity is greater than our virtue can bear.”<sup>92</sup> Likewise, governing forces feared the irrationality of the horizontally bonded, leaderless mob that could surface out of the lack of social structure and “trample law, order, property and life.”<sup>93</sup> To defend against these individual and collective perversions, advice manual authors insisted that the young man entering the market-monopolized city engage in an especially rigorous and isolated process of self-formation. The young city-dweller had to become a “*self-made man*”: “by exercising self-possession, self-government, and, above all, self-reliance, he placed himself beyond evil influences and became a law unto himself.”<sup>94</sup> To these antebellum authors, the only protection against the socially and morally destabilizing force of the market was the reaffirmation and solidification of the impervious, autonomous subject. The disturbing consequence of the failure to construct this moral, legible, and transparent character—and the true embodiment of anti-market, pro-social anxieties—was the unwieldy, unprincipled, and unbounded youth, symbolizing the future in an unchecked market-dominated society:

...a wild, a chainless, and a dangerous thing—wandering forth, like some terrible principle in nature, not bound to the fixed paths of

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 25.

planets, or subject to any known law of order, threatening to *commingle and crush worlds*.<sup>95</sup>

### *Chaos and Calculus*

The public anxieties and coping strategies of the antebellum United States against the disorienting intrusion of the money economy are far from an anomaly; rather, this moment in American history serves as a microcosmic and emblematic instance of the fundamental confrontation between market and social order that has reoccurred throughout the history of liquid exchange. In *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750*, Jean-Christophe Agnew invokes the literature and cultural practices surrounding the advent of the modern market in the sixteenth century to illustrate, not only that this conflict is congenital to the implementation of the modern money form, but also that the very structuring ideologies that have informed society and selfhood throughout history have emerged out of defensive response to the volatility of the market. To Agnew, then, the panic in the U.S. in the nineteenth century is merely an example of the sporadic eruption of market-induced cultural agitation that flows beneath carefully constructed and reconstructed structures of social discipline like lava beneath the earth's crust.<sup>96</sup> For Agnew, recognizing and investigating these cultural upheavals and reactions is essential to accurately mapping the "motives at play in the market," which are woefully misunderstood and obscured by abstract political economic theories that ignore "the very social, cultural, and historical contexts within which those motives

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>96</sup> Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 6.

have been variously structured.”<sup>97</sup> Political economists, in willfully bypassing the phenomenological roots of market exchange, naturalize retroactive explanations of market behavior and work, and thus conceal the corrosive character of the economic system upon which society stands.<sup>98</sup> Agnew explains that the nature of this corrosion rests in the “distinctive antagonistic relationship” at the heart of the “cash nexus of commerce.”<sup>99</sup> Whereas “archaic” forms of exchange relied on uniformly “administered prices” that made trade a predictable and cordial intersubjective interaction—similar to that Halttunen describes in the “face-to-face” practices of American agricultural commerce—modern, cash-based modes of gain depended on “bargained rate[s]” and “fluctuating prices.”<sup>100</sup> This uncertainty imbeds an inescapable antagonism between buyer and seller into the practice of exchange, serving as a primary indication of “the potentially disruptive implications that fully negotiable financial instruments can have for the cognitive and affective structures within which societies value their cultural goods.”<sup>101</sup> What is more, Agnew employs Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money* to describe, not only the conflict at the moment of purchase, but also the delayed gratification of the seller in the “money transaction” and the “barrier between persons” this distance instills. Simmel explains, “only one of the parties to the transaction receives what he *actually* wants, what corresponds to his specific needs, whereas the other party to the transaction, who only receives money,

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 3, 2.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 3; Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 19.

<sup>101</sup> Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 3, 4.

has to search for a third party to satisfy his needs.”<sup>102</sup> This suspension of reciprocal satisfaction conveys the disorienting immateriality of money and the concept of “exchange value” it introduces. Filled with a “sharpened sense of opportunities foregone, withheld,” the seller applies the formless liquidity of the money he now possesses to the very social landscape he inhabits, ensuring that “the environment itself assumes the character of a more or less calculable liquidity and becomes, like money, not a source but a store of value.” In other words, unbound to a particular use or end, the money form enforces an “infinite purposiveness” that imbues all life with “an aspect of presumptive loss” and “a pervasive and ongoing sense of risk.”<sup>103</sup>

It is precisely this quality of simultaneous immediacy and limitlessness that makes money such a “radical disruption” of the social order.<sup>104</sup> As illustrated in the case of proto-capitalist America and the conjuring of the villainous urban “confidence man,” the boundless liquidity of monetary exchange—as opposed to the legible relation of the barter—throws established structures of social and subjective knowledge into chaos. Speaking to this confounding interference, Karl Marx insisted, “We see here, on the one hand, how the exchange of commodities breaks through all local and personal bounds inseparable from the direct barter...; and on the other hand, how it develops a whole network of social relations spontaneous in their growth and entirely beyond the control of the actors.”<sup>105</sup> In response to this anarchic disturbance, and in an effort to ideologically contain the “socially and culturally subversive

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>105</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 112, quoted in Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 52.



implications of the ‘free’ market,” political economic theorists during and after the sixteenth century invented a lasting “grammar of motives” for market actors—“the hedonistic calculus.”<sup>106</sup> This framework retroactively defines the autonomous subject and his or her specific “self-interest” as the motivation for any market interaction, thus suppressing the abstracting tendencies of the money form and reinstating “the coherence of self and society.”<sup>107</sup> In addition, this calculation imposes a notion of scarcity against which the subject can measure her own gain and loss. Though, Agnew argues, “societies can and have operated with negligible notions of scarcity or opportunity costs,” the disciplining rationalization of the market relies on “allocations of scarce means to alternative ends” in order to harnesses the volatility of the infinite risk of liquid exchange.<sup>108</sup> By securely redefining the corrupted and unbounded subject, economic theorists successfully worked to “sharpen boundaries” and “‘purify’ the terms of *all* social relations.”

It is therefore unsurprising to Agnew that Pierre Bourdieu and other defenders of high culture see the market as the ultimate threat to the stringent social structures of elevated taste. In fact, Agnew describes the discipline of “cultural studies” as founded by Anglo-American thinkers in an effort to “reserve a portion of their collective world of meaning from incorporation within the price system.”<sup>109</sup> In partial resignation to the monopoly of the market, these thinkers paved the way for theorists like Bourdieu and Horkheimer and Adorno by carving out a sacred and “priceless”

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<sup>106</sup> Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 5.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

field of “aestheticism” entirely separate from the profanity of “economism.”<sup>110</sup> It is based on this “eminently acceptable division between market and culture” that Bourdieu desperately seeks to maintain the purity of the autonomous artistic field, and the stabilized social ideology of which it is a benefactor and enforcer.

### *Cruising the Market*

In the analysis that follows, I employ Agnew’s theory of the “socially and culturally subversive implications of the ‘free’ market” to illustrate that the rigid and isolated structure of pure cultural production that Bourdieu so passionately values is one element of a unique social built on the market-resistant concepts of scarcity and the Western subject. Citing Louis Althusser’s Marxist critique of the social subject, as well as Leo Bersani’s queer theory of the psychoanalytical heterosexual relationship, I argue that these two fundamental tenants of contemporary capitalist ideology impose a widespread and socially ingrained hostility to difference that stabilizes the stratified status quo. Furthermore, I explain that the reproduction of this model relies in part on a linear and progressive notion of time (enforced against the infinite present of the money form), and that attempts at social change that rely on collective teleological advancement will therefore only contribute to that process. Finally, I contend that meaningful social change must therefore take the form a negation of past and future ways of knowing that depend on the interests of the sovereign self as prescribed by scarce means. In this ascetic rejection of selfhood, a mode of cruising

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 7.

sociability surfaces that is born out of the market and that, this thesis intends to illustrate, exists now in the form of the spontaneously emergent fashion trend.

Though targeted to the individual, the framework of hedonistic calculus, as the cornerstone of the re-stabilized market society, plays a crucial and insidious social role. Because the process of social and ideological restructuring delimits boundaries of knowledge and social exchange, it cannot be separated from the hegemonic desire to reinstitute the dynamics of power latent in the vertical social structures made horizontal by the market. Any ideological edifice against liquidity, Agnew explains, will inevitably “form the basis for any ruling class’s claim to authority, legitimacy, and justice.”<sup>111</sup> In *Essays on Ideology*, Louis Althusser confirms and elaborates on the centrality of the subject to the consolidation and employment of capitalist hegemonic power. Althusser contends that the defining function of ideology is to constitute individuals as subjects: “The ‘obviousness that you and I are subjects—and that that does not cause any problems—is an ideological effect, the elementary ideological effect.”<sup>112</sup> We recall, for example, that the paramount defensive instinct for American subjects under siege by the market and its figures of hypocrisy was the reflexive invention of the “self-made man.”<sup>113</sup> Additionally, Althusser exposes the role of power in this process of self-making. By “interpellating” or “hailing” the subject, ideology constricts the “infinite purposiveness” of the money form into a linear trajectory of power. In this trajectory, the subject recognizes the hail of the

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>112</sup> Louis Althusser, *Essays on Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1984), 45-46.

<sup>113</sup> Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 19.

“Absolute Subject,” which “occupies the unique place of the Center, and interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects.” This process not only solidifies the subject, but simultaneously establishes the form of the Absolute Subject.<sup>114</sup> From an infinite and unimaginable market infrastructure, ideology precariously reestablishes order through the co-construction of the interpellated subject and the interpellating dominant power. In the same movement, the sanctioned motive of hedonistic calculus narrows the field of potentiality in which the subject can act by enforcing an economy and culture of scarcity. In his essay on American neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault provides insight into a contemporary manifestation of this ideology. He explains that unique to the neoliberal system is its crucial analysis of the laborer, not as a mere object inserted into the process of production, but as a so-called “economic subject.”<sup>115</sup> As such, the worker is understood as navigating the economic and social system through the weighing of cost and benefit. The economic subject faces “substitutable choices” for the distribution of “scarce means.”<sup>116</sup>

In his article “Sociability and Cruising” Leo Bersani illustrates the “destructive sociality” produced by an economic theory based on scarcity and the subject. Here, Bersani takes Freud’s psychoanalytic theory as a map of the formation of dominant ideology (“heterosexual love”) as well as a window into the “perversions” that threaten it (“homosexual love”). Through Freud, Bersani describes a similar formation of the subject through the introduction of scarcity. In psychoanalytic theory, this scarcity takes the shape of the castration complex, which

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<sup>114</sup> Althusser, *Essays on Ideology*, 54

<sup>115</sup> Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 223.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

instills “a retroactively fantasized fullness of being” that has been lost. The restoration of a cohesive self therefore relies on a compensation for that lack by the “love object.” In other words, just as in economic theory, subjectivity and scarcity are mutually constituted concepts. Bersani locates the hostile and oppressive character of dominant sociability (heterosexual love) precisely in this process of self-making defined by “lack or loss.”<sup>117</sup> Freud locates the psychological formation of the subject in the invented “ego ideal,” which allows for “object-love as self-love.”<sup>118</sup> This capacity precludes the heterosexual subject from recognizing himself in others, and thus the subject is led to “stigmatize the external world as constitutively alien and hostile to the self.”<sup>119</sup> When the subject does find an external object of desire, the relationship that is formed in a framework of scarcity and property is one of obsession and possession.<sup>120</sup> This is the nature of intersubjectivity based on a selfhood formed by scarcity and the foundation of the oppressive structures of power latent in our social structure. Adam Smith describes a similar dynamic of social exchange. A proponent of the selfish hand of the market, Smith theorizes that despite man’s fundamental self-centeredness, inherent forces exist that make the feelings of others in his interest.<sup>121</sup> However, Agnew interjects that the supposedly unselfish sociability that Smith theorizes is in reality thoroughly ensnared in hedonistic calculus. At the basis of this connection is the interest in winning sympathy for one’s self. Thus, Agnew argues, any interpersonal sociability is saturated with the toxic motive of

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<sup>117</sup> Leo Bersani, "Sociability and Cruising," *Umbr(a): Sameness*, no. 1 (2002): 16.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>121</sup> Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 177.

satisfying the self: “Man was social, it seemed, despite, against, and at the same time, because of his worst intentions”.<sup>122</sup> In short, the work of containing market formlessness through the invention of the subject produces a standard of social exchange that is inherently possessive, hostile to difference, and therefore fundamentally oppressive.

A social structure based on scarcity is reproduced through a temporality of progress that collects and perpetuates the past and present. The presence of “scarce means” and property necessarily builds off of a past and assumes a compounded future. The neoliberal conception of “human capital,” for example, does not imagine the worker as a commodity of labor power, sold at distinct points in time. Rather, the worker becomes the producer of “an earnings stream”—a constant provider for the future, a “machine” of income with “a lifespan, a length of time in which it can be used, an obsolescence, and an aging.” Built within the subject is a drive toward self-preservation and futurity, an imposition of individual responsibility and choice wherein the worker becomes an “enterprise for himself.”<sup>123</sup> In his analysis of the film *Born in Flames*, Stephen Dillon critiques this teleological framework of thinking as the central tool of social reproduction and barrier against change. Just as one’s human capital aggregates over time and conditions future opportunities, Dillon describes the present as an “accumulation” or storage of “a nonsynchronous array of past times,” that, without intervention, will be carried on in the future in a “closed circuit of

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<sup>122</sup> Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 176.

<sup>123</sup> Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 224.

reverberation and magnification.”<sup>124</sup> The hostile subject requires a progressive temporality upon which to map self-interest and ensure the continued stability of the social against the market.

By extension, revolutionary projects that adapt this teleology will modify the trajectory of social reproduction at most, and potentially even exacerbate the grip of oppression. In June of 2000, after years of planning and construction, the long awaited and celebratory London Millennium Footbridge welcomed the first public footsteps across the river Thames. Thousands of pedestrians gathered to take in the structure and walk its passage in suspense. As the hordes of admirers funneled on, the bridge began to sway ever so slightly. The structure of the bridge was so that the random perturbations of the public’s footsteps caused to subtly swing on its suspension chords. As the bridge swayed, pedestrians adjusted their walks to keep balance, taking wider steps to compensate for the ground’s movement. Their steps synchronized with the swing of the bridge, and the force of the wide collective steps left and right forced the bridge to sway more, in turn, causing the public to widen their steps and exert more force on the bridge, and so on.<sup>125</sup> This nauseating and inescapable loop describes the dynamics of progress-oriented change within an ideology and social structure founded in reaction to the market. In his writings on ideology, Althusser elaborates on the classical Marxist metaphor of an edifice to describe the social structure of capitalism. This model identifies the “*infrastructure*,

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<sup>124</sup> Stephen Dillon, “‘It’s Here, It’s That Time’: Race, Queer Futurity, and the Temporality of Violence in *Born in Flames*.” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 23, no. 1 (2013): 38-51.

<sup>125</sup> Steven H. Strogatz et al., “Theoretical Mechanics: Crowd Synchrony on the Millennium Bridge,” *Nature* 438, (2005): 43-44.

or economic base” and the “*superstructure*,” which contains the law, the state, and ideology. The superstructure is dependent on the infrastructure to stay upright; however, the dynamic between the two levels is complicated by a reciprocity of influence.<sup>126</sup> I have illustrated, through Agnew, that the dominant ideology is a defensive response to the destabilizing force of the market. The infrastructure and superstructure of the social are therefore blurred and hanging by suspension. The ideal of subjectivity enacts a force of compulsion and conformity on the dispersed and chaotic influencers of the market that simultaneously solidifies both levels of this social edifice. Any collective movement forward in this structure exacerbates the subjecting and subject-making forces. If loyal to a historical conception of progress and evolution, revolutionary projects will not only assist, but will provide new fuel for the reproduction of the current means of oppression. Dillon elaborates: “the past is where the future is anticipated, recollected, and demonstrated. If there is no progress, but instead repetition, modification, intensification, reversals, and suspensions, then we know what the future will be. The future will be what it was before.”<sup>127</sup> For Dillon, any imagination of or action toward the future makes the bridge swing higher and higher. He points to queer scholar José Muñoz as a proponent of this teleological view of “a horizon imbued with potentiality.”<sup>128</sup> However, as illustrated above, hope in the form of “potential” or “the way things *could* be,” that criticizes the present in pursuit of a future with a clean slate, relies on a calculation of cost and benefit and a

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<sup>126</sup> Althusser, *Essays on Ideology*, 8-9.

<sup>127</sup> Dillon, “‘It’s Here, It’s That Time,’” 43.

<sup>128</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 1; quoted in Dillon, “‘It’s Here, It’s That Time,’” 42.



grammar of motives that is absolutely foundational to the (hostile) social as we know it. These movements of defiance are so easily absorbed and adapted because they are constructed by and through the same logic of the ideological apparatuses they hope to transform.

Another central mechanism of this process of hegemonic appropriation is the collective affinity that must be called upon for this kind of teleological reform. Unity and togetherness are essential in the achievement of a single vision of the future. Although Muñoz is careful to tread around the “out-moded, universalizing and prescriptive” connotations of concepts such as “revolutionary consciousness,” he nonetheless recognizes the necessity for a “collective escape” and generalized unity in pursuing the movement toward a tangible utopian goal. The “Concrete Hope” he imagines necessitates an “us” to move beyond the present and past.<sup>129</sup> However, this model once again will only contribute to the feedback loop of hegemonic discipline. The creation of a collective or community calls on the same tactics of interpellation and subject-making that are employed by the ruling class. Similarly, Bersani insists that the intersubjective bond is the root of the hatred of difference upon which those structures feed.<sup>130</sup> Dillon explains that hegemony’s own “utopian aim is to reduce the disorderly and chaotic social order under its purview into a mirror of the administrative knowledge central to its observations and governance.”<sup>131</sup> The formation of communities and unified aims thus does the work of the state and ideological apparatuses by establishing legible and pre-subjected groups. In

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<sup>129</sup> Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue," *Women & Performance* 19, no. 2 (2009): 278.

<sup>130</sup> Bersani, "Sociability and Cruising," 17.

<sup>131</sup> Dillon, ““It's Here, It's That Time,”” 44.

describing the mode of economic analysis employed in American neoliberalism, Foucault reveals that the process of reduction and containment that Dillon depicts is enacted precisely through the cultivation of mutuality. He explains, “To bring labor into the field of economic analysis, we must put ourselves in the position of the person who works.”<sup>132</sup> Adam Smith advocates a similar intersubjective understanding in his explication of sympathy as economically motivated.<sup>133</sup> Intersubjectivity and mutuality are therefore once again the tools of dominant ideology in the discipline, surveillance, and subjection of disorderly individuals into contained subjects.

In short, the “Concrete Hope” advocated for by Muñoz must always fall into the trap of accumulative time if it does not shed the ideological constraints of the social structure it hopes to surpass. Muñoz and other social analysts, such as Margot Weiss, question the realistic revolutionary potential of transgression in the pursuit of widespread transformation.<sup>134</sup> However, as I have attempted to illustrate, any movement to cross into a different future will be met with compensatory movement from the structure below that keeps its subjects so perfectly in step. Any meaningful escape from the oppressions and confinements of the present social order must then involve “the total epistemological and ontological undoing of the forms of knowledge and subjectivity” that produce it.<sup>135</sup>

Though this ideological entrapment sounds dire, and the divestment from the future and the grounded hope it instills may seem counterintuitive or defeatist, Agnew

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<sup>132</sup> Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 223.

<sup>133</sup> Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 179.

<sup>134</sup> Margot Weiss, “Queer Economic Justice: Desire, Critique, and the Practice of Knowledge,” in *Global Justice and Desire: Queering Economy*, ed. Nikit Dhawan et al., (New York: Routledge, 2015) 82.

<sup>135</sup> Dillon, “‘It’s Here, It’s That Time,’” 46.

implies that the truly transgressive and “ontologically subversive” weapon against the prescriptive social is eternally and immediately available in the form of the “boundless” and “extratemporal” market.<sup>136</sup> In describing the threatening roots of society’s inception, Agnew points to the strange sociability induced by the abstract money form as the fundamental antithesis of the structures of social exchange and subjectivity we know and conform to, and therefore as the crucial instrument of their upheaval. This is a sociability conceptualized by Bersani, founded in the practice of queer cruising, that renounces the self, and with it all conception of interest or possession, in pursuit of the “particular pleasure gained from the restriction of the personal.”<sup>137</sup> This transcendence of possession and property does not involve the retreat or escape from the market, nor the renouncement of its pleasures. On the contrary, it is emulated in Simmel’s description of the money form as filled with an “infinite purposiveness” that Agnew describes as infusing life with a “pervasive and ongoing sense of risk” without scarcity.<sup>138</sup> Stripped of the imposed ideology of self-interest and possession, this constant risk conveys an infinite present—a paradox of eternal ephemerality that defies the future-oriented temporality of social reproduction. Once again we are reminded of the corrupted youth of early American cities, who, left unprotected from the whims of the market and failing to construct a proper autonomous selfhood, becomes “a wild, a chainless, and a dangerous thing” who threatens to “commingle and crush worlds.”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 40.

<sup>137</sup> Bersani, "Sociability and Cruising," 10.

<sup>138</sup> Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 4-5.

<sup>139</sup> Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 26.

Bersani theorizes this fleeting commingling in contrast to the hostile model of intersubjective social exchange that he locates in heterosexual desire. Once again calling upon psychoanalysis as a window into the formation of dominant ideology, Bersani explains that while heterosexual desire is based in the defeated fantasy of a “fullness of being,” the “psychoanalytically defined homosexual” does not suffer from the castration complex, and thus does not bear the same “rageful resentment” that results from that loss. According to Freud, the queer man feels such an intense bond with the mother that at the end of puberty that he identifies with her and loses his “ego,” or subjectivity.<sup>140</sup> Instead of compensating for this loss through interpersonal identification with a love-object (heterosexual intersubjectivity), the queer man adopts a sociability of sexual cruising, wherein he copes with the loss of his ego by searching for himself in others. In doing so, he forms promiscuous and non-possessive associations.<sup>141</sup> In short, Bersani explains, psychoanalysis’ pathologizing explanations of and anxieties about queer “perversion” provide insight into a radical form of sociability that rejects the hostile ideology of subjectivity.<sup>142</sup> The ascetism of queer denial of selfhood, embodied in the market by perpetual risk, promotes a decentralized relationality that refuses interpellation.

Extended on a large scale, as achieved in an unbounded market, this mode of sociability engenders, as Marx fearfully explains, “a whole network of social relations spontaneous in their growth and entirely beyond the control of the actors.”<sup>143</sup> In this model, change is “non-attributable”—it emerges and spreads from every self-less

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<sup>140</sup> Bersani, "Sociability and Cruising," 17.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-18.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>143</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, 112, quoted in Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 52.

individual. In his essay “All Sound is Queer,” Drew Daniels describes the same phenomenon in sound vibrations: “At once micro and macro, the sound of the world turning resonates and resounds whether you are listening or not, and it is addressed to all.” Knowledge and desire extend from an infinite number of points. Quoting Nietzsche, Daniels illuminates the dynamic that surfaces when we shed the self: “In every Instant being begins; round every Here rolls the ball. There. The middle is everywhere.”<sup>144</sup> In this form of association we shed the “capitalist dream” of a future horizon—of a “then and there”<sup>145</sup>—for incomprehensible, but present and existing, large-scale movements, not based on community or collectivity, but rather emerging in multi-centered, ephemeral, spontaneous synchrony. This perpetual ephemerality composes what Dillon names “our time”—the resistance of an oppressive future and entrenched past in recognition of the queer dynamics that permeate the present.<sup>146</sup>

In the chapters that follow, I hope to illustrate that contemporary fashion serves as an existing and large-scale instance of market sociability and spontaneously synchronistic movements. In tracing fashion’s devolution from an autonomous field to an authorless market phenomenon, I narrate the history of fashion as a contemporary example of the congenital conflict between societal and monetary systems of value and the corrosive (re)emergence of the market out from under the restraints of social infrastructures of cultural production. Ultimately, I argue that the deconstructed and dispersed industry that encompasses fashion today denies any

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<sup>144</sup> Drew Daniels, “All Sound Is Queer,” *The Wire*, 2012, 46.

<sup>145</sup> Dillon, ““It’s Here, It’s That Time,”” 42.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

“pure genesis” of a dictated and commonly obeyed aesthetic, but rather is characterized and influenced by leaderless, ascetic, and dehomogenized associations that take the form of the contemporary fashion trend.

### **Chapter 3: Christian Dior and Haute Couture Heresy**

Decades before the invasion of discount chains, outsourcing, and mass-market expansion, the powerful infrastructure of the haute couture field began to show signs of erosion by the market. After emerging from the valley of the Great Depression, the French fashion industry, headed by the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*, welcomed prosperity and growth in the late 1930s. Design powerhouses, old and new, such as Elsa Schiaparelli, Cristobal Balenciaga, Madeleine Vionnet, and Lucien Lelong reinstated Paris as the exclusive mecca of style and taste—a source of great national pride, as well as revenue. The maisons pulled more than their weight when it came to the French economy. In 1938, the clothing industry brought in profits of 25 billion francs. This astounding recovery from the economic scares earlier in the decade, however, was enabled by a few necessary adjustments to the fashion system. Tough economic times thinned the ranks of loyal couture clients, which meant dwindling profits from sales to private individuals. To compensate, couturiers turned to department stores and manufacturers abroad, to whom they would sell samples and copying rights. This one step remove from the client ensured the industry remained “at the forefront of the French export drive,” while also preserving couture’s cultural primacy and imperatives of purity.<sup>147</sup>

However, the unstable circumstances of the First World War and the 1930s stock market collapse engendered a curiosity in the French establishment about possibilities for industry growth beyond the limits of individually fitted, handmade

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<sup>147</sup> Lou Taylor, “Paris Couture 1940-1944,” in *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*, eds. Juliet Ash and Elizabeth Wilson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 127.

garments. In 1935, the French Ministry of Industry delegated designer Lucien Lelong to travel to the United States and observe the operations of the American apparel industry.<sup>148</sup> Unlike that in France and other European countries, the US garment industry was built on a system of large-scale industry production for a mass market. In other words, US manufacturers were experts in making and distributing ready-to-wear clothes that could be sold quickly, in large quantities, and over great distances.<sup>149</sup> Lelong returned to France inspired by the possibilities of producing for a wider market and “with ideas of how a couture house might sell its products to a broad class society while retaining its prestige.” He soon opened the first French line of prêt-à-porter (high-end ready-to-wear), Robes d’Edition, which advertised “clothes at affordable prices” for women who wish to “express elegance with class and personality, against the banality and fake luxury that has always [been] associated with ready-to-wear fashion.” While still clinging to prestige and authenticity in the face of market “banality,” Lelong managed to cautiously unlock a new source of revenue to secure couture from economic threats.<sup>150</sup> Other ateliers turned to high-end accessories like perfume to supplement their operations. With these additions securing the industry financially, haute couture neared the end of the 1930s in a seat of almost uncontested supremacy and with the seeds cautiously planted to expand the industry beyond its traditional limits.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Tomoko Okawa, “Licensing Practices at Maison Christian Dior,” in *Producing Fashion: Commerce, Culture, and Consumers*, ed. Regina Lee Blaszczyk (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 86.

<sup>149</sup> Elizabeth Ewing, *History of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion* (London: Pavilion Books, 2014), 123.

<sup>150</sup> Okawa, “Licensing Practices at Maison Christian Dior,” 87-87.

<sup>151</sup> Taylor, “Paris Couture 1940-1944,” 127.



When war was declared in 1939, however, Paris fashion braced for its largest threat yet. Under the Nazi occupation of Paris, the couturiers debated the fearfully uncertain future of French fashion. Although the ateliers had managed to send their goods to their North American clients in the first year of the war, the presence of the Germans starting in 1940 shut this export operation down. Though Lelong, the then Chairman of the Chambre Syndicale, was able to (controversially) keep haute couture running in Paris during the occupation despite limits in staff, fabrics, and clients, the liberation of Paris in 1944 left the industry and the nation devastated.<sup>152</sup> While the French government was desperate to restore the garment exports, fabric shortages left the industry in crisis. That year, textile production in France was at a meager fourteen percent of what it had been before the War.<sup>153</sup> What garments the ateliers did manage to make during and immediately after the war were difficult to sell to the American clients they relied upon. Designs that were “more suitable to the French war effort” were simpler and more utilitarian, and clients were reluctant to expend the cost of traveling to France when they could purchase similar designs from manufacturers at home.<sup>154</sup> Meanwhile, the War had given American fashion a chance to take root and start to flourish. Cut off from France and the dictate of haute couture, American ready-to-wear designers were given the room to invent on their own and cultivate a nucleus of fashion in the states. Momentarily released from their gravitational orbit of Paris, American designers developed casual sportswear and “play clothes” that

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 128-9.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 136-7.

satisfied demand and took off in popularity.<sup>155</sup> Paris's position of global supremacy was teetering.

The couturiers, the Chambre Syndical, and the French Ministry of Industry were all anxious to recapture the loyalty of North American clients and, in doing so, refocus global attention to be once again in deference to Paris. They were soon able to kick start an impressive comeback, but not without pulling at a few threads that the pre-War couture field had carefully kept intact. In order to preserve the industry, the Chambre Syndicale faced the often conflicting task of meeting daunting post-War financial challenges while preserving the purity and traditionalism of the field against the influences of the market. In the process of taking back its primacy and relaunching its profits, couture was forced to concede, at least partially, its position above the mass market and commercialism and reprioritize. As the houses' reliance on wealthy individual clients for much of their profits became less sustainable, they turned their attention more seriously to the commercial buyers they had begun to woo after World War I. Particularly telling of the shift in primary focus was the Chambre Syndicale's decision to schedule showings for international manufacturers and store buyers before the collections were shown to esteemed private clients.<sup>156</sup> Though these moves helped restore the industry and usher it into what many see as haute couture's "golden age," it was an anxious time for couturiers and the traditionalist fashion

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<sup>155</sup> Ewing, *History of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion*, 148.

<sup>156</sup> Alexandra Palmer, *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2001), 18.

establishment who had doubts about the polluting effects of engaging in a more global and more popularized market.<sup>157</sup>

The person who best exemplified this dilemma was couturier Christian Dior. An emergent star of the post-World War II era, Dior can be credited with almost single handedly lifting Paris couture back into dominance and ushering in its lucrative future. His first collection, held in September of 1947, which debuted his signature wasp-like silhouette of thick calf-length skirts, tight waists, and soft shoulders—the “New Look”—was an instant, widespread, and unprecedented success.<sup>158</sup> The New Look’s feminine style and opulent use of fabric (some dresses used up to 50 meters of luxury fabrics), not to mention its viral popularity, signaled the return of Paris as the ultimate leader in style.<sup>159</sup> Fashion journalist Madge Garland later celebrated the collection as “the afterglow of the sunset of French taste which has led the civilized world for 400 years.”<sup>160</sup> Dior’s designs presented the kind of growth and change Bourdieu finds fundamental to an autonomous field—that which respectfully builds off of a celebrated past to offer up a purer interpretation of the values of haute couture.<sup>161</sup> Maison Christian Dior represented the ticket to ensure the fashion field’s full return to autonomy and influence.

However, less celebrated is the fact that Maison Dior was not exactly the mecca of pure creative production that the couture establishment desired. From its founding, the house was a departure from the traditions and values of haute couture.

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<sup>157</sup> Palmer, *Couture and Commerce*; Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*.

<sup>158</sup> Okawa, “Licensing Practices at Maison Christian Dior,” 85.

<sup>159</sup> Taylor, “Paris Couture 1940-1944,” 138; Okawa, “Licensing Practices at Maison Christian Dior,” 85.

<sup>160</sup> Ewing, *History of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion*, 158.

<sup>161</sup> Bourdieu, “Haute Couture and Haute Culture,” 134.

In a troubling break from designer or family-owned fashion houses, Maison Dior was entirely funded from the start by an international business conglomerate, Groupe Boussac, owned by the textile magnate, nicknamed the “Cotton King,” Marcel Boussac. This kind of corporate backing was previously unheard of in French fashion.<sup>162</sup> Groupe Boussac’s initial investment was an unprecedented five million francs and the atelier was equipped from the start with an eighty-five person staff.<sup>163</sup> In addition, Boussac provided Maison Dior with access to unparalleled resources and business experience owing to the conglomerate’s sixty subsidiaries and extensive global reach.<sup>164</sup> The group’s largest branch, Comptoire de l’Industrie Cotonnière (CIC) not only provided Maison Dior with financial support, but also had significant input on the house’s operation and strategy. Dior himself did not own a single share in his maison, and though he maintained a position as head designer and manager, the corporate intrusion presented an unprecedented proximity of market agents to the autonomous creative power of the couturier.<sup>165</sup>

This corporate encroachment may explain why more established designers like Elsa Schiaparelli reacted coolly to the instant success of the New Look, describing it as a collection which “cleverly planned and magnificently financed, achieved to the greatest din of publicity ever known, the shortest life in fashion history.” Though many disagree that the New Look was as inconsequential as Schiaparelli insists, citing its immense impact on postwar fashion, her backhanded

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<sup>162</sup> Grumbach, *History of International Fashion*, 114.

<sup>163</sup> Okawa, “Licensing Practices at Maison Christian Dior,” 88; Ewing, *History of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion*, 159.

<sup>164</sup> Okawa, “Licensing Practices at Maison Christian Dior,” 85.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

analysis betrays a reluctance to concede Dior a true or worthy influencer.<sup>166</sup> Cleverness and financing are not words to describe an innovator in a prestigious autonomous field, but rather reveal a disapproval of what Schiaparelli sees as success through pandering, wealth, and corporate publicity stunts.

Despite its detractors, the New Look's success fueled Maison Dior's impressive and groundbreaking expansion.<sup>167</sup> Dior himself was eager to take advantage of Groupe Boussac's scope and business expertise. He had been a designer for Maison Lucien Lelong before the War and had admired Lelong's venture into ready-to-wear with Robes d'Édition. With the enthusiastic backing of CIC, Maison Dior opened a ready-to-wear boutique, Christian Dior-New York, on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in New York City in October, 1948.<sup>168</sup> The establishment of this branch marked the beginning of the rapid global expansion of Maison Dior. Wholesaling offices were established in New York, London, and Mexico to organize the sale of large quantities of cheap ready-to-wear designs to retailers. The house also capitalized on the manufacture and sale of fashion accessories that had taken root before the War. Within ten years of the launch of the New Look, the maison introduced internal subsidiaries in perfumes, furs, ties, shows, hosiery, and menswear.

In 1948, the fashion house pioneered a crucial new form of profit-making in fashion when it signed one of the first couture licensing agreements with an American hosiery manufacturer for the production of Christian Dior Hosiery-New York.<sup>169</sup> This highly profitable endeavor, in which manufacturers pay royalties to a design house in

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<sup>166</sup> Ewing, *History of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion*, 158-9.

<sup>167</sup> Okawa, "Licensing Practices at Maison Christian Dior," 85.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>169</sup> Grumbach, *History of International Fashion*, 117.

exchange for producing and distributing goods carrying its prestigious name, spurred the Maison Dior to pursue more licensing deals worldwide, as well as encouraged other designers, like Jacques Fath and Pierre Cardin, to follow suit.<sup>170</sup> By 1954, Maison Dior had more than a thousand Paris employees, did business on five continents, had eight international boutiques, and oversaw sixteen subsidiary departments.<sup>171</sup>

The corporatization and commercialization of haute couture under Dior and Groupe Boussac sewed disapproval from traditionalists in Paris. Defenders of couture as an artistic field resented the threat that Dior's licensing and market expansion tactics posed to the prestige of French fashion. Not far behind the scenes, couturiers and other fashion insiders took sides on the future of their field in an industry-wide debate that strayed dangerously away from sanctioned "internal struggles" over a pure aesthetic and instead indicated a questioning of the autonomy of the field itself.<sup>172</sup> Following Schiaparelli's subtle rebuke of the New Look and Dior's tainted success at the hands of his corporate investors, purists watched Maison Dior's expedition into the market with disdain, and even at times attempted to get in his way. One of the first vocal outcries against the maison was after the house's wholesaling division struck a deal in 1950 to sell stockings, ties, and gloves in the French department store Galeries Lafayette. Industry veteran Didier Grumbach explains that the move struck Dior's clients and colleagues as a "tragedy" and "The very

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<sup>170</sup> Okawa, "Licensing Practices at Maison Christian Dior," 83, 89.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>172</sup> Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, 134.

democratic presence of a grand couturier's label in a French department store offended people's sensibilities."<sup>173</sup>

However, an even greater uproar was brewing around Maison Dior's experiments with licensing. The introduction of Christian Dior Hosiery-New York in 1948 and a line of silk ties a few years later left much of the haute couture community uneasy. When Jacques Rouët, the powerful manager of the maison, signed a licensing deal for costume jewelry with a German manufacturer in the early 1950s, the fuse was lit. At a meeting of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*, then president Jean Gaumon-Lanvin confronted Rouët, scolding, "You are the wasp who has come to disturb the hard working hive"<sup>174</sup> The French Ministry for the Economy and Finance even attempted, unsuccessfully, to forbid the deal, resenting the surrender of the prestigious Dior name to the Germans. In an especially impassioned article in 1952, Fashion journalist Lucien François harshly condemned Dior and other designers who engaged in the practice:

How is it that these grand couturiers do not realize that by speculating, the way they do, on the prestige of their names, they are condemning a secular art, mocking tradition...? ...they work for mass production, limiting themselves to whatever can be vulgarized and thus collaborate with the systematic suffocation of the concept of elegance in Paris that they are the living heirs to...The haute couture clients will soon abandon the houses whose 'devalued names are worth nothing abroad.'<sup>175</sup>

Although Dior attempted to preserve the prestige of his craft and his name by discouraging licensees to produce their own designs and putting structures of quality assurance in place, the house's foray into this new realm of the market continued to

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<sup>173</sup> Grumbach, *History of International Fashion*, 115.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

face disapproval, made all the more bitter by several designers' choice to follow suit.<sup>176</sup>

Amongst Dior's designer colleagues, his friend Cristobal Balenciaga was famously the most adamantly against licensing, ready-to-wear, and all forms of commercialized production. In response to inquiries about a ready-to-wear line Balenciaga insisted, "I will not prostitute myself."<sup>177</sup> Balenciaga also disapproved of other changes within the industry and held steadfast to the traditional operations and values of the field. He refused to sell his patterns to American retailers and only published copies of his designs for journalists to see a month after other designers. Dior on the other hand, not only sold his patterns to several international buyers, but controversially allowed the press to view photographs of his designs a day before they were to be shown.<sup>178</sup>

Despite the reprimand the house received from industry authorities and purists, these criticisms fell with little consequence, as Maison Dior had left the *Chambre Syndicale* over disputes over sanctions against counterfeiting a few years prior. What is more, Dior's business model attracted a significant following within the industry. For every one of Balenciaga's devotees, like Hubert de Givenchy and André Courrèges, there were those like Jacques Fath and Pierre Cardin who took after Dior's example and made it more and more difficult for the holdouts to resist the new reality put forth by Maison Dior.<sup>179</sup> By the time Dior died in 1957, his "elegant maison," as he called it, was bringing in \$22 million in sales from around the

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-139.



world.<sup>180</sup> The business did not slow with the loss of its leader. After the reinstatement of Dior's young protégé Yves Saint Laurent, and his replacement with Marc Bohan after Laurent's departure in 1960, Jacques Rouët ensured that the maison continued on its trajectory of exponential growth. Rouët and Bohan entered the 1960s leading the industry in an expanding and accelerating charge into ready-to-wear and licensing.<sup>181</sup>

From its congenital entanglement with an international corporation to its pioneering venture into the global market, Maison Dior presented a corrosive internal threat to the pure legacy and defining autonomy of haute couture at the same time that it led the industry out of the daunting slump of World War II. Maison Dior's dependence on Groupe Boussac marked a significant change in fashion, wherein couturiers would not only be accountable for continuing and purifying the legacy of inimitable French style, but would also carry the often contradictory responsibility of sewing profits for investors or competing with wealthier brands. With the Groupe Boussac eagerly searching for new profit frontiers, it was inevitable that Maison Dior would outgrow the limitations of couture and seek growth in the global market that the textile conglomerate knew hosted opportunities unexplored by European fashion.<sup>182</sup> Evidenced by his chastisement from the Chambre Syndicale and purist members of the haute couture field, Dior crossed the elite and protective boundaries of the field and left it open to the erosive elements of the market.

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<sup>180</sup> Okawa, "Licensing Practices at Maison Christian Dior," 93.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 93, 94.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

## **Chapter 4: American Fashion Fights for Autonomy, 1940s-1970s**

While the incendiary trajectory of French fashion bent toward the unraveling of the autonomous field in the face of the market, the history of the American industry entails a prolonged upward climb towards the purity and creative agency boasted by traditional haute couture. As the longtime servants and subjects of the French aesthetic rule, American designers and their advocates waded against a strong current. Not only were designers hindered by a population of consumers and creatives alike who were stuck in the habit of turning to Paris, they also struggled to surface from a well established industrial infrastructure that had benefited for decades from following the couturiers' lead.

Even as French haute couture felt its foundations waver in the years following World War II, American designers and the industry they served continued to be caught in its grasp. Despite relatively feeble attempts throughout history to break free, the American fashion market gazed dotingly and obediently across the Atlantic. In addition to paying their usual *cautions* to the maisons for copies and patterns of the latest Paris styles, American retailers now eagerly bought into the new proliferation of couture-label wholesale lines and licensed products. In her late 1940s guide to the fashion industry, Bernice Chambers explains that American consumers still “clamored for Parisian clothes” and, in turn, that department stores and manufacturers knew well that “Paris labels made a gown or costume sell” in ways that home-sewn garments could not.<sup>183</sup> To reinforce this hierarchy, American fashion magazines for

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<sup>183</sup> Bernice Chambers, *Fashion Fundamentals* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 1947), 162.

the most part stuck to covering Balenciaga, Dior, Vionnet, and other established influencers. Rather than investigating and reporting on up-and-coming or lesser-known styles in the U.S., *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Women's Wear Daily* served as one-way convoys carrying the latest orders from Paris.<sup>184</sup>

Still, over this time a few Americans emerged from this torrent of couture's creative authority, particularly during moments in history in which the line to Paris was cut off, and the industry and its consumers were forced to turn to the talents on their own front. The stock market crash of 1929, for example, brought on the industry's first identity crisis after the US government imposed a 90 percent tax on imported garments to encourage domestic production. For the first Paris couture showings after the crash, not a single American retail buyer was in attendance.<sup>185</sup> Without the imposed inspiration of the French, Americans were forced to improvise and innovate, paving the way for homegrown creative input.<sup>186</sup> This stylistic independence even inspired some nationalist support from other areas of the industry. In 1932, for example, Dorothy Shaver, the vice-president of Lord & Taylor launched an ad campaign to promote American designers, introducing consumers to what she dubbed "The American Look."<sup>187</sup>

But these opportunities never yielded an autonomous field of creative output like that found in France, the reason being that, apart from a few exceptional designers, it was American manufacturers and retailers that rushed to pick up the

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<sup>184</sup> Caroline Rennolds Milbank, *New York Fashion: The Evolution of American Style* (New York: Abrams Books, 1989), 172.

<sup>185</sup> English, *A Cultural History of Fashion*, 62.

<sup>186</sup> Milbank, *New York Fashion*, 98.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 106; Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 28.

slack when the tap from Paris ran dry. Rather than construct a counterpart to Paris haute couture, a field that values individual creative genius and strives to purify its craft, the Americans paved the way for industrial capital to adapt handmade styles to the assembly line. The threat the Americans posed to France was not to their aesthetic supremacy, but to their profits. Designers' success in the US was thus constrained and quieted by the longstanding and lucrative infrastructure of ready-to-wear manufacturing. Even those designers who somehow managed to garner fame under the shadow of the Paris couturiers, like the influential and established Nettie Rosenstein, were denied the artistic reverence fostered in an autonomous field, to the point where consumers would be unable to even find their garments to buy. In Rosenstein's own profile in *Time* magazine in 1937, the article informed the readers that the designs pictured did not carry her name, but could be found under the label of Bergdorf Goodman.<sup>188</sup>

In many ways, any attempt to put an autonomous field in place was a direct contradiction of the United States industry's hegemony of mass production. It was Lucien Lelong's curiosity and observation of American industrial practices that planted the parasite of ready-to-wear and the mass market into the haute couture system that was later taken up and nourished at Christian Dior. As the ultimate marketplace, the United States personified the threat of commercialism to the noble old ways of couture. American industry was always a site of anxious curiosity, or downright disdain, from French traditionalists. While at times intrigued by the speed, quantities, and profits coming out of American factories, couture's advocates

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<sup>188</sup> Milbank, *New York Fashion*, 106.

maintained that American products were lacking in quality, creativity, and, above all, taste: “In America, variety is the exception and good taste even more so.”<sup>189</sup> With its prioritization of profit and quantity far over artistry, the American fashion industry and its complete submergence in United States’ free market represented all that French haute couture so carefully defined itself against. Any hope for the growth of a pure creative spirit in the American designer had to hold out against the stifling weight of the liberal U.S. market.

The years after World War II marked the acceleration of this central contradiction into the foreground. The Nazi occupation of France and the stifling of European economies once again left the United States garment industry to fend for itself.<sup>190</sup> The demands of the war immeasurably strengthened and multiplied the output of manufacturers throughout the apparel industry. The war effort provided unparalleled demand for uniforms, leather boots, silk parachutes, and more, and manufacturers were eager to apply their newfound wealth and capacity to postwar prospects.<sup>191</sup> With the French monopoly on style and dress temporarily incapacitated, “The American garment industry needed, for the first time, to depend on its own design talent to contribute fresh ideas on which the prosperity of the industry relied.”<sup>192</sup> Though eventually tempered by the reinstatement of French authority with Dior’s New Look, the moment marked a rare and significant transfer of creative

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<sup>189</sup> Nancy L. Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 109.

<sup>190</sup> Ewing, *History of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion*, 148; Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 26; Milbank, *New York Fashion*, 130.

<sup>191</sup> Milbank *New York Fashion*, 136-7.

<sup>192</sup> Gregory Votolato, *American Design in the Twentieth Century: Personality and Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 238.

responsibility. However, while the shift enabled the distinction and fame of a few individuals, namely Norman Norell, Hattie Carnegie, Adrian, and others, the majority of American designers remained behind the scenes—out of sight and relegated to industry employee, rather than revered aesthete.<sup>193</sup>

Because few American designers in the 1940s had control of their own house, or even their own label, they enjoyed a fraction of the creative freedom that the French couturiers were allowed. Under manufactures and large department stores, contracted designers were siloed into strict departments. Once delegated to coats, furs, evening gowns, or sportswear, designers were often inescapably typecast. What is more, American creatives were subject to manufacturers' stifling cost constraints. Strict price brackets put considerable limits on design that French couturiers did not even consider until the fabric shortages during World War II. Putting even more pressure on this industrialist design process was the added presence of the garment workers' union that set exact standards for wages and the amount of labor that could go into each garment.<sup>194</sup> Even after designers adjusted their styles to fit within cost restraints, however, their creativity remained at the mercy of their capitalist employers. Once the lines were created and models of each garment produced and priced, manufacturers still held the right to drastically alter or remove items from the line before they went into mass production. These edits were frequently motivated by practical evaluations of profit margins—the production costs were too high, the fabric was unavailable, or a cheaper version had already entered the market from elsewhere—but they were also subject to the whims of merchandisers and executives

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<sup>193</sup> Chambers, *Fashion Fundamentals*, 163.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

who might decide that a look did not fit the buyers' expectations, or even salesmen who disliked a style and felt they could not promote it.<sup>195</sup> Designer Bill Blass complained that during his time at Maurice Rentner, a prestigious ready-to-wear manufacturer, "designers were kept very much in the back room, almost something to be ashamed of. The minute a collection was over, we were encouraged to take long holidays, which gave the manufacturer a chance to totally change the collection."<sup>196</sup>

On top of this, copying between manufacturers and from the French remained widely practiced, especially at the lower price margins. In fact, even those fortunate few American designers who did manage to break out from under the industrialist system and give their name influence were hardly ever nationalist figures of American style. Haute couture was still the guiding model, and Americans seemed to want to break into the French field more than they wished to build their own. One such star was the renowned Mainbocher, who opened his own business in New York in 1940. Born in Indiana and née Main Bocher, the designer built up his fame in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s where he took up the name Mainbocher, pronounced with a French inflection. Mainbocher was the editor of French *Vogue* until 1929, when he opened his own maison of custom-made clothes in Paris. By the time he founded his business on 57<sup>th</sup> Street, his loyal and wealthy clients saw it as an opportunity to find famous and coveted French haute couture in the U.S.<sup>197</sup>

And yet, despite the garment manufacturers' hold over the United States' creative output, the aesthetic independence from France during and immediately after

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>196</sup> Ben Brantley, "Heart of Blass," *Women's Wear Daily*, June 24, 1962, 5.

<sup>197</sup> Chambers, *Fashion Fundamentals*, 174.

World War II planted the seed for a slow growing movement for designers' artistic autonomy out from under and against the grain of the industry's market-driven hegemony. Much of this uphill climb towards instating an autonomous fashion field advanced on the heels of one outspoken and proactive advocate for American design: Eleanor Lambert. Originally a publicist for New York artists and museums, Lambert turned her attention to fashion after designer Annette Simpson approached her wanting to cultivate her own name and success apart from department stores and manufacturers.<sup>198</sup> Representing Simpson piqued Lambert's interest in the world of fashion, particularly the talents of the individuals hidden behind the scenes in design rooms. In 1940, Lambert was hired by the New York Dress Institute, a recently formed organization of unions and manufacturers, to promote 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue's industry.<sup>199</sup> She became an instrumental part of putting American fashion on the map, and started by coaxing the eye of magazine editors and commercial buyers back onto U.S. soil. In 1943, Lambert organized the first Fashion Press Week. The instrumental precursor to the New York Fashion Weeks, Fashion Press Week convened the showings of almost every 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue collection during a meticulously organized few days at the Plaza Hotel.<sup>200</sup> The event was groundbreaking, as American collections had previously been scattered, disorganized, and poorly publicized, meaning they flew under the radar of fashion editors and journalists. Lambert matched this effort with a talent for corralling the press. She carefully planned the showings for a month after commercial buyers had made their selections (so that the styles in the magazines

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<sup>198</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 28; Best, *The History of Fashion Journalism*, 142.

<sup>199</sup> Best, *The History of Fashion Journalism*, 142.

<sup>200</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 36, Best 142.



would always be in the stores), and distributed individualized and exclusive photographs of designs to each publication. She aggressively pursued editors, convincing them to lend their influential pages to the best domestic talent, whom she was simultaneously signing as her clients in impressive numbers.<sup>201</sup> One of her most popular tactics was her formal instatement of “The International Best Dressed List,” a publicized and provocative ranking voted on by the top fashion editors that ensured headlines for her designers.<sup>202</sup>

At the same time that Lambert worked to uplift the American fashion industry as a whole, she made individual designers her priority, gradually lifting them out of the shadow of manufacturers and department stores and laying the important groundwork for their ascendancy to the status of autonomous artists and influencers. Her first challenge was to free designers from anonymity and begin to cultivate personalities and fame.<sup>203</sup> One early step in this direction was Lambert’s 1943 inauguration of the “American Fashion Critics Awards,” nicknamed the Coty Awards, which ensured press coverage of individual winners, singled out from underneath their employers.<sup>204</sup> Conveniently, manufacturers were often coerced by their own dependence on their design talent to give designers more power and leeway, often giving their most indispensable creative talents their own secondary labels or even making them partners in the firm to keep them from leaving.<sup>205</sup> Eventually, Lambert had built a large and influential enough client base, and had

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<sup>201</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 36-37.

<sup>202</sup> Best, *The History of Fashion Journalism*, 142.

<sup>203</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 28.

<sup>204</sup> Best, *The History of Fashion Journalism*, 143, Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 38.

<sup>205</sup> Chambers, *Fashion Fundamentals*, 211.

garnered her designers enough media and retail attention to insist that a more prestigious subset of the New York Dress Institute be formed—the New York Couture Group—that made sure to foreground designers’ names, and included such powerhouses as Maurice Rentner and Hattie Carnegie.<sup>206</sup> Still, this was no *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*, and though inclusion in the Couture Group of the New York Dress Institute denoted a newfound level of prestige, its more stylistically inclined members were still relatively large manufacturers who employed soon to be breakout stars like James Galanos, Donald Brooks, and Bill Blass.

In her construction of the American fashion field from the ground up, Lambert not only needed to obtain name recognition for her clients, but also to elevate the artistry of their craft and thus give their names reverence as well as renown. Lambert spent much of her career representing not only her individual clients, but the industry and art of fashion as a whole. She took frequent trips to Washington D.C. where she organized runway shows at white house benefits, sent designers as delegates of American style around the world with the support of the U.S. government, and petitioned congress to consider fashion on par with other American artistic fields when funding and championing the arts.<sup>207</sup> In 1963, for example, Lambert testified before congress on the place of fashion design in American culture: “Americans today are artists, honored and respected in many fields. Yet American fashion is still far from assuming its rightful place as a vital cultural force in our life, as a part of our

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<sup>206</sup> Amy Fine Collins, “The Lady, The List, The Legacy,” *Vanity Fair*, April 2004, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2004/04/eleanor-lambert200404>.

<sup>207</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 39, 36.

world image.”<sup>208</sup> In 1937, Lambert and some of her colleagues had worked to instill some respect for the craft by forming the Museum of Costume Art, later subsumed under the Metropolitan Museum of Art as The Costume Institute in 1946. The Costume Institute served as the dignified setting for many of Lambert’s PR events, most notably the annual charity gala that continues today under the curation of Anna Wintour.<sup>209</sup> The museum served as an invaluable institutional backing for the message that Lambert was helping to permeate American culture, specifically, that American fashion was an elevated art that should be formally and ideologically situated above the profanity of the market.

In conjunction with the slow movement of designers out of manufacturers’ and department stores’ back rooms and into a developing spotlight, this insistence on artistry and cultural influence started to bring the underlying conflict between market executives and fashion creatives more to the forefront. Rising tensions between those invested in “commercial promotions” and those occupied with more “esoteric matters”<sup>210</sup> culminated in the near cancellation of the Fashion Press Week in 1962. That year, infighting along commercial and creative lines escalated in the Couture Group, which put on the Press Week. The majority of the conflict arose from the decision of the Couture Group leaders to move up the date of retail showings to May 11 instead of the usual June date. Designers resented the earlier deadline as they were made to rush to finish their collections to oblige manufacturers who were clearly to

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<sup>208</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 35-6.

<sup>209</sup> John A. Tiffany, *Eleanor Lambert: Still Here* (New York: Pointed Leaf Press, 2011), 75; “The Costume Institute,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, <http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/curatorial-departments/the-costume-institute>.

<sup>210</sup> “The Eye,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, November 27, 1962.

gain from the new date. Defending the change, New York Couture Group president Larry Aldrich told *Women's Wear Daily (WWD)*, “No one can question the value to manufacturers and retailers of early openings, which would result in earlier deliveries.”<sup>211</sup> In protest of move and the implied prioritization of the commercial over design, Adele Simpson and Pauline Trigere refused to show their lines on May 11. In response to their insubordination, the two designers were asked to leave the group, and Couture Group leaders voted to cancel Press Week, a crucially important event for designers. In response to the threats of cancellation, *WWD* reported, Lambert, the designers’ champion, said she was prepared to step up and put the event out of her own pocket.<sup>212</sup> Aldrich and the Couture Group establishment faced backlash from all sides: Jane Derby and Christian Dior-NY resigned from the group until Press Week was officially reinstated and fashion editors insisted they would not cover any member of the Couture Group “If they drop Press Week and Eleanor Lambert.”<sup>213</sup> The group quickly backtracked and held Press Week as promised on July 8-14, but in many ways the damage was already done. Six members of the group refused to participate in the event in continued protest of the commercialization of their organization.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Mort Sheinman, “Six Out of Circulation for Fashion Press Week,” *Women's Wear Daily*, June 19, 1962.

<sup>212</sup> “Lambert Warms Up in Bullpen; May Run Own Press Week,” *Women's Wear Daily*, June 7, 1962.

<sup>213</sup> “Is Press Week Blue Pencil Set?” *Women's Wear Daily*, June 5, 1962; “Lambert Warms Up in Bullpen.”

<sup>214</sup> Mort Sheinman, “Six Out of Circulation for Fashion Press Week.”

This conflict was mirrored in the discourse and debates occurring throughout the industry. Bill Cunningham, for example, wrote a column in *WWD* that year critiquing assertions that designers should design more practically:

What's all this talk about realist designers? Since when is an artist, if only in the minor art of fashion, a realist? I don't see how the two go together. I think a lot of people are mixing up stylists and true creative designers....When will business people get it through their heads that it's the dreams of good designers that create joyous, ever fresh fashion—not a mathematical equation....Everyone should go to [Norman] Norell and [James] Galanos or Paris for inspiration—not to have the whole look put on a hamburger bun so the public can eat on the run...Why should we ruin brilliant ideas for a quick show at Macy's?<sup>215</sup>

Cunningham's scathing takedown of commercial fashion signals the emergence of a set of values fitting for an American field like that in Paris. He even gestures to American creative talent (Norell and Galanos) as on the same level as Paris couturiers, hinting at the foundations in place for an autonomous and purely artistic realm of production in American fashion.

Along the same lines, Norman Norell took to *WWD* in 1965 to air his grievance that the fashion American industry remained too dependent on Paris. In a heated interview, Norell took his chance to “scold” designers, manufacturers, and retailers for their persistent deference to haute couture and their unwillingness to bet on American style. “There are American designers,” he vented, “who could be more creative. These are the ones who upset me. And I say, it's high time that they do their own designs and forget Paris.” Not ignorant to the role of employers and buyers in the

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<sup>215</sup> Bill Cunningham, “Realistic Designers?” *Women's Wear Daily*, December 7, 1962.

stymied growth of the American aesthetic, Norell chastised both for “influenc[ing] the designer” and making American clothes “boring.”<sup>216</sup>

Following these divisions, Lambert resigned from the Couture Group and founded the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) in 1965. The new trade organization represented the long awaited infrastructure of an American autonomous fashion field, as it finally separated out artistic values from commercial needs. Its mission, its charter read, was “To further the position of fashion design as a recognized branch of American art and culture, [and] to advance its artistic and professional standards...”<sup>217</sup> The new organization fostered the talents that Lambert had been seeking out and promoting for years, including Bill Blass, Donald Brooks, Rudi Gernreich, and Ben Zuckerman to name a few. Reflecting on the origins of the organization, Lambert later explained,

We were a group of people of equal qualifications and equal thoughts about moving forward. There is a difference between business people and artists. I was representing a coat manufacturer at the time who was upset that he hadn’t been included in on of our meetings, and I asked him, ‘Well, do you have a designer? I’ve never met him,’ to which he responded, ‘He’s in the back room. That’s where he should be, right?’

Though some remained members of both the business minded New York Couture Group and the CFDA, Lambert was successful at convincing several designers to defect to her group and leave back room copying behind.<sup>218</sup>

Many argue that the crowning moment for the American fashion field came in 1973, when, organized, selected, and encouraged by Eleanor Lambert, five American

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<sup>216</sup> June Weir, “Norell Talks Straight,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, June 21, 1965.

<sup>217</sup> “The Eye.”

<sup>218</sup> Marc Karimzadeh, Lisa Lockwood, and Rosemary Feitelberg, “Lambert: A Life in American Fashion,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, October 8, 2003.

designers—Bill Blass, Oscar de La Renta, Halston, Anne Klein, and Stephen Burrows descended on Versailles to show collections alongside the most prestigious and established Paris couturiers.<sup>219</sup> While the French expected the evening to prove to them what they already knew, that haute couture taste was unparalleled and that the Americans had the least chance of matching their caliber, the Americans saw it as an opportunity to, as Lambert explained, prove that they were “equal to anyone in the world, including the French.”<sup>220</sup> When the night came, the mostly French audience was blown away by the American delegation, even as the jersey dresses and casual sportswear they sent down the runway were so drastically different from the meticulous handmade productions of the haute couture maisons. French critic Jean Fayard wrote “I would not be telling the truth if I did not say the Americans show their clothes one hundred times better than we....In brief, *la mode americaine* brought forth ovations from the cream of Paris who gathered at Versailles.”<sup>221</sup> The American field had emerged from under the thumb of both Paris and the industry of mass production that was so eager to dutifully copy the couturiers’ designs. Ascending from the creatively stifling dictates of the mass market and into a field of its own, American fashion design converged with Paris at a time when the insular French haute couture field, taking queues from the United States, was beginning to open its doors to ready-to-wear and mass production.

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<sup>219</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 6.

<sup>220</sup> Karimzadeh et al., “Lambert: A Life in American Fashion.”

<sup>221</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 214.

## **Chapter 5: “The Rush Into the Abyss”: American Fashion Descends into the Market**

The Versailles show marked the ceremonious convergence of the opposing, yet similarly fraught trajectories of the American and French industries onto level ground. While the French couturiers found themselves in the midst of a desperately resisted but accelerating slip from their pedestal of creative autonomy, the Americans viewed Versailles and their unexpected triumph as the culmination of their arduous struggle to surface from the current of the American liberal market. Bill Blass, Oscar de la Renta, Halston, Stephen Burrows, and Anne Klein returned from Paris as symbols of Eleanor Lambert’s hard-fought success: the leaders of a newly erected hierarchy of American style and influence. As Klein, Burrows, and Halston’s designer lines became the beacons of youthful innovation, Blass and de la Renta settled comfortably into their roles as arbiters of taste, dressing members of the American elite, from first ladies to sophisticated Hollywood stars and socialites.<sup>222</sup> However, their emblematic success, both personal and on behalf of their national field, was short-lived. Within a generation, American designers and the industry that served them were swept up in the same torrent that was carrying French haute couture into commercialism. After years of cultivating the independence and influence of an artistic field, American fashion had little chance to enjoy its elevated status and autocratic voice before its entropic descent back into the chaos of the American marketplace. Both American and French hierarchies of aesthetic power disintegrated under the tide of corporate takeovers, excessive licensing, discount chains, and

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<sup>222</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 232-237.



strategic marketing. As the process of “democratization” and commercialization initiated by Dior and his followers picked up speed internationally in the 1980s and 1990s, the carefully intertwined operations of design houses, retailers, and editors came under stress, and with them the structure of trickle-down trends that lent designers’ creative genius such control over consumers’ tastes. Individual creatives like the Versailles designers are no longer the commanding suns from which ubiquitous styles radiate and descend on their orbiting subjects. Dissolved into the market, fashion influence has diffused to resemble our expanding universe: infinitely centered, it emanates and extends from every discernable point.

#### *The Fall of the Versailles Five*

A striking indicator of the transience of the American fashion field, Oscar de la Renta is the only design house of the five present at Versailles that survives today. While de la Renta was able to retain consistent authority and popularity up to the contemporary moment due to his longevity, his charismatic public persona, and his family-run operations, his peers’ prestige and profits could not withstand the overwhelming pull of commercialism.<sup>223</sup> Anne Klein returned from Versailles to a diagnosis of terminal cancer. She died within four months, but not without taking the steps to safeguard her legacy.<sup>224</sup> After ensuring her house’s financial stability by securing the investments of businessmen Frank Mori and Tomio Taki, Klein appointed her former assistants, Donna Karan and Louis Dell’Olio, as her successors.

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<sup>223</sup> Vanessa Friedman, “Keeping the Oscar de la Renta Name Alive,” *Washington Post*, February 13, 2015.

<sup>224</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 235.

The loyal duo kept her inimitable sportswear style afloat for a decade. As Klein's signature mix of practicality and glamour lived on in department stores and closets, so did she. Dell'Olio later explained, "Anne Klein created the line and what the line stood for...Whenever Donna or I tried to go out of that parameter, the stores would say, 'That's not Anne Klein.'" Mori and Taki successfully extended that influence across multiple price points, launching one of the first "bridge collections"—Anne Klein II—that sold clothes with her designer label at reduced cost. In 1985, however, Donna Karan departed the brand to start her own label—a modernized version of Klein's practical businesswoman aesthetic—and took much of the house's star power and clientele with her. The brand's sales began to dwindle, and by 1990, the Anne Klein Collection was losing money. Desperate to clamber back into relevance, the company replaced Dell'Olio with a stream of new talent; but each attempt failed to recapture Anne Klein's prominence, suffering everything from outlandish departures from the Klein aesthetic that alienated loyal customers, to unambitious returns to the status quo that bored critics and failed to stand out in the seas of department store racks. By 1996, the owners revealed, the designer collection had hemorrhaged "well in excess of \$25 million."<sup>225</sup> After receiving scathing reviews in the press, the collection was "no longer even a positive vehicle for publicity" and the company shut down the designer line.<sup>226</sup> Mori and Taki kept the bridge collections and licenses in

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<sup>225</sup> Robin Givhan, "Anne Klein Collection Reaches End of Runway," *Washington Post*, April 13, 1996.

<sup>226</sup> Givhan, *The Battle of Versailles*, 236.

operation, but after passing through a convoluted succession of corporate owners, Anne Klein's name petered out of the contemporary fashion lexicon.<sup>227</sup>

Stephen Burrows suffered a similar fate when he took his newly validated talents to 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. After the praise he received in Versailles, Burrows found investors, left his design position at department store Henri Bendel, and struck out on his own. Like most designers at the time, he looked to perfume to kick-start his company's growth. He signed a deal with a perfume manufacturer and released Stephen B.. The weight of Burrows' name helped the perfume bring in millions of dollars from high-end clients. The young designer balked, however, when the manufacturer began distributing his prestigious fragrance to grocery stores and discount chains, and sued the company for diluting his image. Disillusioned, Burrows canceled his perfume after winning a modest settlement. Meanwhile, his apparel line was failing. Due to his cheap manufacturing, flat retail displays, and high prices, shoppers passed him by. Burrows resigned to failure and, after only three years, he returned to Bendel. After the chain was bought up, Burrows left fashion altogether. Despite several attempts at a comeback over the decades, Burrows, the youthful innovator who had captured the spirit of the 1970s, fell out of relevance.<sup>228</sup>

Even more tragic to the fashion world was the demise of Bill Blass. Blass' empire was among the closest Americans had to a legacy like Balenciaga or Chanel. By the time Blass was ready to retire in 1999, his company had enjoyed decades of prosperity and both market and cultural dominance. Blass had won every major fashion award, including the CFDA Lifetime Achievement Award. *Women's Wear*

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 242-243.

*Daily* reported that by his last runway show, Blass one of the top five most recognized designers, was reaping more than \$700 million profits from over 40 licenses, and had an apparel collection that was bringing in \$20-25 million at retail. Many in the industry saw Blass's retirement as "symbolic of the end of an era in fashion." Blass's loyal clientele of older "ladies who lunch" as well as his elegant, but traditional style of tailored women's suits seemed at that point to be "relegated to the history books."<sup>229</sup> The distinguished designer ultimately sold Bill Blass Ltd. to Michael Groveman, his CFO, and Haresh T. Tharani, his largest licensee, for an estimated \$50 million.<sup>230</sup> Despite the distinction of Blass' name and career (the bond deal that secured the sale placed a premium on the value of Blass' trademark) and the efforts by the new owners to sustain the brand after his departure, the sale marked the beginning of the company's long decline into mass commercialism. Years later, when Oscar de la Renta was struck with illness and had to prepare for his eventual departure from fashion, he confided in his son-in-law and CEO, Alex Bolen, "I don't want to end up like Bill Blass."<sup>231</sup>

The problems began immediately after the naming of Blass' successor, Steven Slowik. Slowik's first collection for Bill Blass was disastrous. His showy aesthetic shocked Blass' distinguished and traditionalist clientele, causing the designer collection's profits to drop from \$25 million to \$5 million in a single season. He was swiftly let go and replaced with his assistant, Lars Nilsson. The chaos only picked up

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<sup>229</sup> Holly Haber, "Bill Blass Gets Set to Call it a Career at the Millennium," *WWD*, February 16, 1999.

<sup>230</sup> Lisa Lockwood, "Bill Blass Goes the Bond Route," *Women's Wear Daily*, October 28, 1999

<sup>231</sup> Friedman, "Keeping the Oscar de la Renta Name Alive."

from there. For two years, Nilsson brought in rave reviews but no profits. As the editors at *Vogue* sang Nilsson's praises, the management at Bill Blass became more desperate and agitated. Tensions came to a head in the winter of 2003 after "reports of screaming matches over creative control" between Nilsson and his profit watchers. While Nilsson and his team prepared the Fall collection, Bill Blass' owner, Michael Groveman secretly arranged for Yvonne Miller, the company's public relations director, to create a "ghost collection" to distribute to retailers in case Nilsson did not meet expectations. The day after Nilsson's collection opened—to mostly bad reviews—Groveman fired him. The harsh dismissal was met with uproar from the creative side of the industry, especially from those at *Vogue* with whom Nilsson had curried favor. While Blass executives cited the designer's lavish spending and low profits, the defenders of the fashion field loudly resented corporate encroachment on the creative process. Andre Leon Talley, an editor at *Vogue* insisted that the company's owners had made it so Nilsson "couldn't even do an embroidery unless it was approved." Eventually, though Michael Vollbracht, the new creative director was able to slow the house's decline, perpetual losses compelled Groveman and Tharani to sell the company in 2006 to NexCen Brands Inc., a conglomerate that owned a rather random assortment of mall stores like Athlete's Foot and Great American Cookies.<sup>232</sup> By 2008, NexCen owed \$30 million, was headed towards bankruptcy, and needed to shed its number one asset: Bill Blass. As the conglomerate searched for buyers, it became clear that the unprofitable ready-to-wear department, which included the designer line, would not live through the sale, as any potential buyer

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<sup>232</sup> Eric Wilson, "The Long Fall of the House of Blass," *New York Times*, December 24, 2008.

would be unwilling to absorb its losses of around \$1 million a year.<sup>233</sup> By the end of that year, NexCen sold the Blass trademark and licenses for a meager \$10 million, less than a fifth of what it had bought it for two years earlier.<sup>234</sup>

As far as Bill Blass fell—from respected leader of the field to the namesake of cheap trademarked products—few downfalls can compare to Halston’s. Once the esteemed designer for such prestigious clients as Jacqueline Kennedy, Liza Minnelli, Bianca Jagger, and Lauren Bacall, Halston was a celebrity in his own right. Where Halston moved, fashion followed, whether he was sending a floor-grazing cashmere dress down the runway or escorting his posse of famous friends to a party at Studio 54. Soon after his appearance at Versailles, however, his power in the field began to unravel at the hands of the market. The descent of Halston’s brand rapidly picked up speed in the late 1970s, to the point where he is now remembered as fashion’s most notorious and tragic victim of commercialism. In a 1987 profile of the fallen designer in the *New York Times Magazine*, Lisa Belkin mourned, “Halston, once an example of everything a designer could want, has become an example of everything a designer hopes to avoid.” In 1973, the year of the Versailles show, Halston sold his company and his trademark to Norton Simon Inc.. He was enthusiastic about the \$16 million sale, trusting of Norton Simon’s chairman, David J. Mahoney, and confident that the conglomerate would be able to expand his company and his name far beyond where he would have been able to take it alone. In signing the deal, however, Halston signed over his right to use his own name without the permission of his parent company. As

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<sup>233</sup> Vicki M. Young, “Bill Blass Couture Line Said In Peril,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, September 11, 2008.

<sup>234</sup> Vicki M. Young, “NexCen’s Bird in Hand: Bill Blass Brand Sold to Men’s Firm Peacock,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, December 30, 2008

his brand took off, it started to leave Halston behind.<sup>235</sup> Halston wanted to oversee and contribute to each new product made in his name, but as Norton Simon signed new licensing contracts and expanded the brand's scope, his input only slowed operations down.<sup>236</sup> In 1983, Halston sealed his fate by agreeing to lend his name to a lower-priced collection at J.C. Penney, which he eagerly greeted as an opportunity to, in his words, "dress America." Others saw the line as the sign that the Halston name had lost its exclusivity, and thus, its worth. After carrying his label for 20 years, Bergdorf Goodman refused to sell Halston clothes. The same year, Halston had to weather chaos from above, as his brand was tossed from corporation to corporation in a series of rapid acquisitions, settling temporarily under the Beatrice Companies, a publicly traded conglomerate. Deaf to Halston's objections, Beatrice stripped Halston Enterprises down to perfume and the J.C. Penney line. As his trademark finally ended up in the hands of the Revlon Group, Halston resigned himself to exile from the world that once worshiped him. Unable to sell designs under his own name, year by year he quietly accepted royalty checks for anonymously designed discount clothes until his death in 1990.<sup>237</sup>

These five idols of the American fashion industry, having erected their own edifice of superiority and laid its final stone in Versailles in 1973, had faith in their young field and the values it would enforce. Their triumph should have sparked the upward trajectory of the field that Bourdieu presents—a perpetual series of internal

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<sup>235</sup> Lisa Belkin, (No Title), *New York Times Magazine*, March 15, 1987.

<sup>236</sup> Givhan, *Battle of Versailles*, 237.

<sup>237</sup> Belkin, (No Title).

revolutions aimed at determining and establishing the purest form of fashion creation. Instead, as the tides of international fashion shifted toward the mass market, the Versailles five teetered on their pinnacle. Eventually the current of change from below eroded their foundations, eating away at their field of creative autonomy and power until it collapsed into the torrent of commercialism below. Even Oscar de la Renta's brand, which held onto its prestige decades longer than those of de la Renta's peers, is now showing cracks. In the two years since the great designer's death, the brand has seen two different creative directors, a troubling sign for the continuation of de la Renta's legacy.

#### *Bernard Arnault and the Era of the Luxury Conglomerate*

The generation of designers that followed Dior in many ways proved his conservative critics right. In expanding his business and licensing products abroad, Dior threatened to turn his name into a "vulgarized" tool of the market, rather than an emblem of pure creativity.<sup>238</sup> Still, throughout Dior's era, even as he chipped away at the walls of haute couture, this profane expansion was not yet in the mainstream, but rather seen as a crutch or "life buoy" that could bolster the faltering tradition of handmade clothing. It was Dior's former protégée, Pierre Cardin, who threw the gates of haute couture open, fully exposing the precious field to the erosive elements of the mass market.<sup>239</sup> By the end of the 1980s, Cardin had signed an unparalleled 800 licensing contracts for everything from ready-to-wear to home furnishings to food

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<sup>238</sup> Grumbach, *History of International Fashion*, 118.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.



and was bringing in millions of dollars.<sup>240</sup> Cardin recognized the potential of licensing to make his name not just an esteemed symbol for a privileged few, but a ubiquitous international phenomenon. He surrendered haute couture to marketing. As his brand expanded rapidly over products, territories, and price points, it drifted further and further away from his autonomous creative vision. Couture was the only area of the company that retained his fingerprint, and, in the shadow of his retailed products, it was reduced to a valuable marketing tool that strengthened the image behind the name. As Cardin and his licensing managers got carried away making hundreds of international deals, their power to enforce a cohesive aesthetic slipped away, along with the quality of the products. Cardin's brand began to fade, but the impact he had on the industry was firmly rooted.<sup>241</sup> Marketing caught on as the number one strategy of modernization in the fashion industry. Suddenly, in order to grow, or even compete, designers were hiring publicists and market analysts to help them navigate the chaos below and cater to the masses who once took their word as sacrosanct.

For a time, Cardin's cheap goods and fading image seemed like they could be the fate of a great deal of the haute couture greats who dove headfirst into licensing in the 1960s and 70s. Licensees took eager advantage of the cachet that accompanied names like Emanuel Ungaro, Louis Vuitton, and Dior, and in some cases, their eyes on the markets they served, broke free from the dictates of these esteemed brands and began making ready-to-wear lines, cosmetics, and housewares they knew would

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<sup>240</sup> Teri Agins, *The End of Fashion: How Marketing Changed the Clothing Business Forever* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 30.

<sup>241</sup> Grumbach, *History of International Fashion*, 145.

garner high profits, often at the expense of quality or cohesion.<sup>242</sup> Legacy brands were in danger of diluting their powerful names and falling from prestige and prominence. Fashion seemed doomed to the industrialist future as imagined by the Frankfurt School: monotonous, mediocre, and devoid of life. However, starting in the late 1980s, luxury conglomerates, pioneered by Bernard Arnault at Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton (LVMH), swooped in to buy up and revive the fading brands. Still, Arnault is no hero to haute couture, whose traditionalist advocates imagine him as a capitalist villain who cleverly but ruthlessly reenergized and restructured international high-end fashion to fit the mass market. From the beginning, Arnault showed no reverence for the long history of the fashion field, only greed for the profits that revered names like Dior, Givenchy, and Louis Vuitton could bring in under the right hands. More than tradition or legacy, Arnault was interested in branding and led the charge for the disintegration of the family-owned business model on which most couturiers relied. As one of his executives explained, Arnault paved the way for “a new era when the company’s name is no longer identified with the designer and becomes a brand.” To cultivate and unify a brand’s image, LVMH allowed licensing contracts to expire at each one of their new acquisitions, putting in place a structure of vertical integration that gave the houses direct control over design and factory production. The couture establishment, still loyal to their field, were scandalized by the heresy that the pure creative talent of their beloved artists should be overtaken by marketing schemes and pandering to the press. For his capitalistic callousness, members of the French

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<sup>242</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 67.

industry started disparagingly referring to Arnault as the “American.”<sup>243</sup> Arnault, however, continued unfazed. Freely admitting to his American influence, he retorted, “I face reality as it is and not as I would like it to be.”<sup>244</sup>

LVMH showed no restraint in its rapid takeover and reorganization of Paris maisons. Arnault fired Marc Bohan without warning after nearly 30 years as the creative director for Dior and his similarly brutal acquisition and disruptive tactics at Givenchy prompted Hubert de Givenchy to resign from his namesake brand in frustration. His replacements for these respected couturiers marked the first step in his marketing revitalization strategy. Despite protests from couture devotees, Arnault selected provocative newcomers to head up these time-honored houses in an attempt to attract the press and cultivate a new and exciting image for these staid brands. The Paris ateliers were now the home to flamboyant young iconoclasts like Marc Jacobs, John Galliano, and Alexander McQueen, none of whom had any experience in haute couture, nor showed any interest in picking up the legacy of their renowned forbearers or catering to their loyal older clientele.<sup>245</sup> Much more important to Arnault was their ability to deliver outlandish collections and front-page attention. With these designers in the public eye and LVMH steering the houses’ image, the haute couture collection once again took center stage.

Arnault continues to give his creative directors incredible creative license, seemingly reminiscent of the heyday of couture’s artistic influence. Industry insiders are quick to qualify this shift, however, insisting that this freedom is hardly the return

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<sup>243</sup> Holly Brubach, “And Luxury for All,” *New York Times*, July 12, 1998.

<sup>244</sup> Dana Thomas, *Deluxe: How Luxury Lost its Luster* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 54.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 52

of old values but rather an effective marketing strategy to sell less expensive goods down market. Hubert de Givenchy once complained, "They just want their collections to be talked about as mad and extravagant so they can sell perfume and licenses."<sup>246</sup> In fact, at an LVMH brand like Louis Vuitton, the haute couture division accounts for only five percent of sales.<sup>247</sup> Still, couture's marketing value is so high that Arnault is willing to incur heavy losses to cultivate an alluring and lucrative image. He explains, "We are here to sell dreams. When you see a couture show on TV around the world, you dream. When you enter a Dior boutique and buy your lipstick, you buy something affordable, but it has the dream in it." LVMH's model of luxury branding has proven so successful that it has become the leading growth strategy for the fashion industry, with conglomerates like the Gucci Group and the Prada Group acquiring design houses and following suit. The ubiquity of Arnault's marketing tactics, though on the surface hints at a return to creative design freed from commercial pressures, in reality signals the complete immersion of the haute couture industry into the market. Arnault and his peers have succeeded in reducing the designer from a venerated artist to a marketable figurehead.

*Calvin, Ralph, and Tommy: American Fashion's Designer-Marketers*

While Cardin and Arnault paved the way for prestigious designers to build commercial foundations for their "castles in the air," a counterforce emerged in the

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<sup>246</sup> Brubach, "And Luxury for All."

<sup>247</sup> Thomas, *Deluxe*, 51.

US that reversed this paradigm and permeated fashion from the ground up.<sup>248</sup> Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, and, later, Tommy Hilfiger were never a part of the American fashion field, and could never have been compared to the greats of French couture, nor did they ever wish to be. Taking a powerful seat in fashion in the 1970s and 1980s, all three of these designers were under no pretense of possessing creative genius or authority over fashion. On the contrary, they embraced their role as industry outsiders, and prided themselves in filling a niche that was decidedly “anti-fashion.”<sup>249</sup> Klein, Lauren, and Hilfiger’s talent and popularity lay in their abilities to read and reflect the desires of the mass market. Indifferent to the autonomous field and the pursuit of artistic, innovative styles, these three iconoclasts came from anonymity, made simple clothes, and earned their renown through their enormous commercial success.<sup>250</sup> Hilfiger told *The New York Times*, “I don’t want to design clothes for the museum and worry about paying the rent.” Only after Hilfiger and the others had secured their financial standing and fame from their mass-produced products would they turn to the higher end of fashion and loosen their creative leash on the runway.<sup>251</sup> Successful as it was, this strategy of building prestige by appealing to the masses met criticism from members of the fashion industry who continued to value artistry over profits. Resenting his emergence from under fashion’s still snobbish nose, as well as the inconsistency of his WASP-ish and Western aesthetics with his Bronx Jewish upbringing, critics disparagingly accused Lauren of having

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<sup>248</sup> Amy M. Spindler, “Hilfiger’s New Blueprint,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1996.

<sup>249</sup> William E. Geist, “Ralph Lauren: Three Purveyors of Executive Style,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1985; Amy M. Spindler, “Hilfiger’s New Blueprint.”

<sup>250</sup> Jonathan Yardley, “King Lauren, Conferring Nobility,” *Washington Post*, December 15, 1986.

<sup>251</sup> Spindler, “Hilfiger’s New Blueprint.”

“invented himself.”<sup>252</sup> Similarly, Jack Hyde, at the Fashion Institute of Technology, resented Tommy Hilfiger’s initial financial backing from an apparel manufacturer and the company’s promise to make him famous, insisting, “He’s not a designer, he’s a creation.”<sup>253</sup>

With their fingers so intuitively on the pulse of the market, Klein, Lauren, and Hilfiger were formidable marketers who set the standard for fashion branding. While Lauren and Hilfiger ensured their brands were universally recognized with their ubiquitous logos of a Polo horse and a red, white, and blue yachting flag, all three went to unprecedented lengths to build a cohesive and desirable image. To do so, they shifted their focus from cultivating a style, to a “life style.”<sup>254</sup> The Ralph Lauren aesthetic, for example, extended far beyond clothes. One’s whole house could be Ralph Lauren, from men and women’s clothing to “shoes, fragrances, sheets, towels, furniture, fabric, wallpaper, rugs, potpourri, napkin rings” and more.<sup>255</sup> In fact, in the ultimate marketing win and as the end goal of this enormous range of products, one’s entire life and persona could be “Ralph Lauren.” Lauren and his peers launched unprecedented advertising campaigns that featured dreamlike landscapes, sexually suggestive poses, and scenes decorated with the entire range of products they had available.<sup>256</sup> Next, starting in the mid 1980s, they led the charge of American designers into retail. Though French designers had occupied boutiques in the US since Christian Dior, few Americans had taken their merchandise outside of

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<sup>252</sup> Cathy Horyn, “Ralph Lauren, Suiting Himself,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 1992.

<sup>253</sup> Lisa Belkin, “The Making of a Designer,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1986.

<sup>254</sup> Yardley, “King Lauren, Conferring Nobility.”

<sup>255</sup> Horyn, “Ralph Lauren, Suiting Himself.”

<sup>256</sup> Yardley, “King Lauren, Conferring Nobility.”

department stores. These personalized spaces allowed the designers to curate their merchandise and extend their image into the shopping experience itself.<sup>257</sup> Lauren's stores, for example, sucked shoppers in with the décor and feel of an old-money mansion.<sup>258</sup> These lavish investments gave an indescribable, almost metaphysical power to Lauren's name that enraptured people in huge numbers. "So a woman walks into one of my stores," he once described, "She sees a world. She sees what I have to say. And she says, 'Oh, I love this world. This is what I want. This is me'....She is buying Ralph Lauren. There is nothing else you can say." More than just eschewing the autonomous field by designing and selling mass-produced and derivative clothes, Lauren and his peers engaged in the highest profanity by reducing their own identities to marketable goods.

As was so lucratively proven by Klein, Lauren, and Hilfger, the driver of fashion success was increasingly becoming the everyday mass-market consumer. Fashion began to shift its attention from the creative mandates of field leaders, to the desires from below. Designers' newly opened retail boutiques proved the perfect place to begin collecting on-the-ground information. Designers could gather immediate feedback and data unmediated by department store retailers and could even test out new ideas before sending them into mass distribution. Norma Kamali told *Women's Wear Daily*, "I couldn't design without a retail store," and confided that some of her most successful collections were inspired by watching the buying

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<sup>257</sup> Mark Sullivan, "Designers' Next Empire: Retailing," *Women's Wear Daily*, April 13, 1984.

<sup>258</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 90.

patterns of her boutique customers.<sup>259</sup> Members of the industry even began developing technologies and putting infrastructure in place to gather consumer data more efficiently. Levi's, for example, the era's largest apparel brand, created a customer survey system in 1989 to predict the popularity of future styles and prevent losses from markdowns.<sup>260</sup>

### *The Profane Fate of the Department Store*

Part of the motivation for increased market research were confounding changes in consumer habits that were threatening the authority, relevance, and profits of designers and the large retailers that traditionally brought their clothes to the public. American department stores and their savvy buyers were crucial players in the fashion field long before the US cultivated its own talent. For decades, department stores were the respected and unquestioned conduit of French and (later) American style, housing couture ateliers, designer ready-to-wear lines, and lower-priced styles that enforced the sanctioned trends across a wide range of shoppers. What is more, the buyers at individual branches were powerful tastemakers in their local communities. These highly valued employees not only were experts in fashion, they were plugged into their communities and their customers, and were thus given creative agency to make purchasing decisions based on what they knew would sell or fail at their branch. However, as mass merchandising took hold of fashion and discount chains lured consumers off of the carefully curated floors of Bloomingdale's

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<sup>259</sup> Sullivan, "Designers' Next Empire: Retailing."

<sup>260</sup> Maryellen Gordon, "Levi's Consumer Test Takes Aim at Retail Markdown 'Gremlins,'" *Women's Wear Daily*, December 27, 1989.



and Dillard's, department stores across the country began to falter. Fashion's turn towards branding was the first sign that department stores' power was waning. Phillip Miller, the chairman of Chicago's Marshal Field's explained,

“The department store used to be the vehicle that introduced merchandise to the customer, but today it's the brand. The designer is now communicating directly through national advertising and editorial and through fashion shows. The consumers see it in many instances as fast as we retailers do.”<sup>261</sup>

In other words, the buyers' ability to curate and cater to their customers was bypassed by designers' perpetual marketing and self-promotion. This dynamic was made even more apparent by the boom of designer boutiques in the 1980s. Though designers often insisted that their shops did not take away from their success in department stores, many established retailers argued otherwise. Less deniable, however, was the fact that these image conscious shops once again formed a direct line of communication between brand and consumer, so that even when they increased sales at nearby department stores, the customer was shopping with the brand in mind, not the retailer.<sup>262</sup> This ideological shift coerced department stores into reprioritizing and reformatting. The traditional coat, cosmetic, dress, and lingerie departments were replaced with in-store boutiques for popular brands like Liz Claiborne and Ralph Lauren. Individual buyers lost their freedom to take risks on avant-garde styles and new brands or make locally tailored decisions as buying operations were streamlined across all stores to protect the bottom line.<sup>263</sup>

Meanwhile, sales were slowing in stores across the U.S.. Discount stores,

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<sup>261</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 179.

<sup>262</sup> Sullivan, “Designers' Next Empire: Retailing.”

<sup>263</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 178-179.

specialty stores, catalogs, and TV shopping networks captured consumers and left department stores overloaded with unsold merchandise and competing amongst each other for their remaining business.<sup>264</sup> In 1990, the financial collapse of the retail giant Campeau Corporations sounded alarms across the industry and prompted the *Women's Wear Daily* headline, "Are Department Stores Dead?"<sup>265</sup> One of department stores' most striking detractors was the Gap, which, throughout the 1990s and along with its partner chains Banana Republic and Old Navy, was expanding and annexing business at an impressive, yet baffling rate. Gap not only boasted highly competitive prices, but a popular pared-down aesthetic that confounded traditional retailers. Former *Women's Wear Daily* editor Patrick McCarthy lamented, "People are now defining Gap and Banana Republic as fashion, even though those stores are charging \$30 for a dress."<sup>266</sup>

Once again, fashion seemed to be facing the fate laid out by the Frankfurt School, falling from a revered art of personal expression to a profanely uniform amassing of mediocre clothes. Industry insiders feared that Gap's lucrative cycling through of the same lackluster styles in different colors, patterns, and fabrics signaled the end of fashion, in which finally placated shoppers had settled complacently into lifeless repetition at the hands of the culture industry. However, as Simmel would have predicted, fashion's "life" soon broke out of the Gap's subdued form. Though Horkheimer and Adorno insist that in the stagnant trap of the culture industry "nothing unsuitable will appear," the Gap's "standardized" offerings started to lose

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 164; "Are Department Stores Dead?," *Women's Wear Daily*, January 11, 1990.

<sup>265</sup> "Are Department Stores Dead?"

<sup>266</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 185.

their grasp on the not-so-obedient public within a decade of their heyday.<sup>267</sup> Starting in 2000, despite its claim to the title of the largest specialized apparel retailer in the U.S., Gap suffered two straight years of unabated losses. In 2002, the speed and consistency of this decline compelled the surprising resignation of longtime CEO and visionary Mickey Drexler, whose unparalleled marketing instincts had previously earned him the nickname “Merchant Prince.”<sup>268</sup> Since this initial turning point, Gap has remained on rocky ground. The stores’ once ubiquitous staple styles have deflated in the eyes of shoppers, who are now captivated by a plethora of fast-fashion chains and other competing retailers. Analysts claim that Gap has not “innovated with product” and has therefore failed to adapt to the shifting desires of new generations of shoppers. The result has been its continued fade into obsolescence. In 2015, the retail giant and once ominous threat to the industry announced that it was closing 175 of its 675 stores in North America, along with others in Europe.<sup>269</sup> While chains like Zara are managing to open five hundred stores a year by cycling out their merchandise every three weeks, the Gap continues to scale back its operations with its feet planted firmly in its abandoned uniform of the 1990s.<sup>270</sup>

Still, the 90s proved to be an anxious decade for retailers as continued losses from below meant that local department stores either went under or merged with their

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<sup>267</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 134; Katherine Bowers and Jennifer Weitzman, “Drexler to Retire, Gap Speeds Search for the Next Savior,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, May 22, 2002.

<sup>268</sup> Bowers and Weitzman, “Drexler to Retire.”

<sup>269</sup> Hannah Marriot, “Muddying the Gap: How the U.S. Clothing Chain has Failed to Uphold Its Identity,” *Guardian*, June 19, 2015.

<sup>270</sup> Suzy Hansen, “How Zara Grew Into the World’s Largest Fashion Retailer,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 9, 2012.

competitors.<sup>271</sup> By 1997, the significant majority of department store sales fell under four conglomerates—Federated Department Stores, May Department Stores, Dillard’s, and Nordstrom—who, desperate not to fall into complete obsolescence, once again adjusted their operations to the mass market. Many stopped carrying high-end clothing in their stores and almost all restricted their merchandise to a limited number of the most popular brands—“matrix” brands—like Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, Nautica, and Levi’s, that guaranteed profits and efficiency.<sup>272</sup> Once the arbiters of style and key players in the sanctioning of new designers and trends, department stores continue to be pressured into submission to the market. As their declarative power wilts, department stores have lost their ability and willingness to take risks on new brands and avant-garde styles. A garment or collection’s mere presence on the racks of Barneys or Bloomingdale’s no longer guarantees mass success, threatening not only traditional retailers’ role in upholding the autonomous field, but designers’ ability to enforce their autonomous creative vision.

### *Breaking In*

This inhospitable environment has led to an emerging crisis of young creative talent in the U.S. fashion industry. The past two decades have proven Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger, and Ralph Lauren to be among the last self-made American designer brands to capture both culture and market, likely due to their unconventionally commercial approach. The stalemate in the search for the next great

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<sup>271</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 164.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

American designer is not, however, the result of a drought in up-and-coming talent, but rather of the erosion of the very structure of the field that once nurtured, valued, and imparted their creative visions on a reverent public. Recent years have seen no shortage of designers who received enthusiastic approval from those in the industry who remain devoted to the model of the field; yet, these brands' simultaneous commercial failure has proven that coveted sanction to have lost its grip beyond its own insular ideals, as it has been gradually overtaken by the profane and chaotic hand of the market. Throughout the 1990s, Isaac Mizrahi was the designer expected to assume the throne of fashion leadership. A graduate of New York's Parsons School of Design, Mizrahi had served brief apprenticeships at venerated Seventh Avenue houses like Calvin Klein and Perry Ellis, where his creative input had earned him the nickname "Yves-aac," after the famous French couturier Yves Saint Laurent.<sup>273</sup> In 1988, at the young age of 25, Mizrahi launched his first Seventh Avenue collection to immediate and unanimous praise.<sup>274</sup> Fashion editors and retailers alike insisted that Mizrahi was a "superstar," and praised his premier season as "one of the best shows here or in Europe."<sup>275</sup> Soon, he had clothes on the racks at Bloomingdale's and Barneys New York, was being showered with CFDA awards, and had top celebrities fawning over his red carpet gowns. In other words, he perfectly embodied the traditional archetype of the charismatic couturier, whose coveted creations, endorsed at all levels of the fashion system, were to set the standard of high-end taste. Fashion critic Cathy Horyn explained, "No other designer of his generation was more destined

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<sup>273</sup> Cathy Horyn, "The Couture Limits," *Washington Post*, November 1, 1994.

<sup>274</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 3.

<sup>275</sup> Bridget Foley, "The New Rage: Isaac Mizrahi," *Women's Wear Daily*, April 18, 1988.

to succeed than Isaac Mizrahi.”<sup>276</sup> In 1992, that role seemed to be set in stone when Mizrahi’s house secured a long-awaited investment from Chanel.<sup>277</sup> However, despite the promise of this partnership and the ease with which Mizrahi had taken his seat among the fashion elite, a crucial inconsistency began to undercut his impressive rise to prominence. For all of his praise and esteem from fashion insiders, Mizrahi was failing in stores. Approaching his work on Seventh Avenue like a true artist of the autonomous field, Mizrahi had no interest in designing for or marketing himself to the masses. To him, couture shows, *Vogue* profiles, and red carpets were the truest and only indicators of success. His resounding affirmations from these traditional pulpits of prestige were to confirm his pure creative power. Thus, he did not need to hear from the masses below, because each season they would all be obediently awaiting his decree from the top of the autonomous field of fashion. Mizrahi proudly explained, “Look, it is all I can do to make fabulous collections and fabulous clothes. That is *all* I can do. You know I can’t imagine after all these years, *I can’t imagine* how it will translate at retail.”<sup>278</sup>

Unfortunately for Mizrahi, this trickle-down system of the fashion field had been crumbling for decades, and the endorsements against which he measured his success no longer guaranteed a lasting place in fashion. In the industry’s harsh new landscape, internal reputation and celebrity must be buttressed by commercial strength. Kal Ruttenstein, fashion director at Bloomingdale’s and one of Mizrahi’s earliest supporters, tried to warn the designer of these pragmatic concerns after the

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<sup>276</sup> Horyn, “The Couture Limits.”

<sup>277</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 4.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

success of his first runway, advising, “It’s nice to have powder blue parkas in your line, but make sure you also have the blazers and the skirts that people will buy.” For the next few seasons, however, Mizrahi showed no interest in playing it safe, and as his inventive and entertaining runways continued to collect rave reviews, his own prominence in the industry seemed to be secured. Yet, as the years passed both retailers and fashion editors found it increasingly difficult to reconcile their personal admiration and surface praise for Mizrahi with his collections’ lack of momentum in the mass market. Less than a decade after his impressive debut, Mizrahi’s stagnancy beneath his insider world forced buyers and editors to confront their internal conflict as both proud purveyors of the values of fashion’s artistic field and as servants to a chaotic marketplace. One Condé Nast editor explained, “You have to give him credit for having this creative vision...but in a way he's shooting himself in the foot, because that vision is not coming off clearly to the consumer. Fashion editors love his clothes because he's very smart and entertaining, but out of that context, what do you do with them?” In the same vein, Dina Garber, a buyer at Saks Jendel department store lamented that, even though Mizrahi was her personally favored designer, “...I have to admit that it isn’t easy selling his clothes....The people who keep up with fashion know who Isaac Mizrahi is. But the customer doesn't even know how to say his name.” By 1994, Mizrahi was having to convince Bloomingdales, his original advocate in retail, to keep his boutique in stores.<sup>279</sup>

At this plateau in his career, it became clear that Mizrahi’s trajectory was slowing precisely due to the qualities of artistic integrity and innovation that had

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<sup>279</sup> Horyn, “The Couture Limits.”

launched him to the top of the field. Mizrahi's creative impulses diverted him from any coherent marketing strategy. Unlike the American powerhouses that dominated the market, like Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, and Donna Karan, Mizrahi refused to narrow or anchor his creativity to an identifiable aesthetic, influence, or consumer base. His designs changed so much each season that he never cultivated a recognizable style or signature for shoppers to connect with and come back to.<sup>280</sup> Retailers often implored Mizrahi to repeat well-performing styles, like his paper-bag-waist pants, but he refused to be held back.<sup>281</sup> As a result, only 50 to 60 percent of his designer collection would sell full price from season to season, significantly underperforming similar high-end lines, which on average were seeing sales from 70 to 80 percent. Responding to Mizrahi's years of losses and uncertain standing in department stores in 1994, company president Jennifer Peck explained,

You've got to buy into something, at least Americans do...When you buy Ralph, when you buy Donna or Calvin, you're buying into something. But with Isaac, it's very unclear...If we came out with a secondary line, it wasn't going to mean anything...You can't come out with Isaac Mizrahi II if there's no Isaac Mizrahi I.

Peck elaborated that houses like Ralph Lauren, where she spent ten years before joining Mizrahi, employ 75-person design teams and approach their collections from a standpoint of "styling and marketing." "Isaac," she differentiated, "is a true designer." Yet for all their originality, Mizrahi's designs never broke through the floor of the field. Mizrahi executives, confident in the power of the house's extensive editorial coverage and praise, neglected to significantly invest in advertising and,

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<sup>280</sup> Constance C.R. White, "Mizrahi, Designer Most Likely to Succeed, Doesn't," *New York Times*, October 2, 1998.; Horyn, "The Couture Limits."

<sup>281</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 5.



even more detrimentally, never pursued the lucrative licensing and down-market deals that would have popularized Mizrahi's name and brought in the sales needed to cushion the losses from the designer line.<sup>282</sup> In 1994, at Chanel's urging, Mizrahi developed a moderately priced secondary line for department stores as a means of backing his prestige with profits. However, Mizrahi once again misread his industry. As Peck predicted earlier that year, the collection was disastrous.<sup>283</sup> As illustrated above, department stores were swept up in the undertow of commercialism that had uprooted the framework of the autonomous field and left Mizrahi dangerously exposed. When the Isaac line landed in stores, anticipating devoted secondary collection shoppers that brands like Anne Klein had attracted a few decades earlier, it sat virtually untouched. Customers who had grown accustomed to Gap and Target's prices were unmoved by Mizrahi's \$150 dresses and \$300 coats, and the collection failed.<sup>284</sup> After three seasons and no profits, Chanel cancelled the line in 1996. With no revenue to back up his celebrity, it became clear that Mizrahi's brand was a losing investment. In 1998, Chanel withdrew its support and the house of Isaac Mizrahi collapsed; in ten years on Seventh Avenue, Mizrahi never saw a profit.<sup>285</sup> Mizrahi's supporters—those holdouts for the fashion field who had praised his innovation and his snobbish distance from the mass market—mourned the loss of a potential American great and the apparent final resignation of the fashion industry to anonymously designed discount chains and luxury accessories. *Harper's Bazaar*

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<sup>282</sup> Horyn, "The Couture Limits"; White, "Mizrahi, Designer Most Likely to Succeed, Doesn't."

<sup>283</sup> White, "Mizrahi, Designer Most Likely to Succeed, Doesn't."

<sup>284</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 4.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

editor in chief Liz Tilberis lamented at the time, “A smile has gone out of the fashion industry. But the saddest part is we are heading toward a kind of mediocrity. I mean commercialism.”<sup>286</sup>

Since Mizrahi closed his doors in 1998, countless promising new designers have proven his trajectory to be the new norm. With the collapse of the field at each of its pillars, young designers struggle to take root in the harsh new market terrain and gain traction beyond magazine profiles and unsubstantiated praise. The very act of getting collections to shoppers has become more strenuous and more expensive than Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger, two brands conceived for department stores, ever experienced. Thrown into flux by the emergence of cheap clothing chains, traditional retailers no longer have the financial security or the social standing to take big gambles on new labels. With struggling new brands simultaneously desperate to gain access to their platform, department stores often enforce a system wherein the designer absorbs all of the risk of putting their secondary collections on the racks. In this agreement, brands are frequently required to contribute to the cost of advertising, take back any unsold items, make up any profits lost in markdowns, and even pay for salespeople for in-store boutiques.<sup>287</sup> Unable to support themselves, designers work to keep their floating pedestals suspended and until they are able to attract the attention of an investor. John Bartlett, whose lauded design career ended in 2000, explained, “So many of us are just riding on smoke and mirrors, hoping that the next season a

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<sup>286</sup> White, “Mizrahi, Designer Most Likely to Succeed, Doesn’t.”

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.; Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 189.

sugar daddy will be sitting in the audience.”<sup>288</sup>

However, even when that investor materializes, there remains no guarantee that a brand will survive. Isaac Mizrahi could find no more prestigious and experienced backer than Chanel, which has proven its ability not only to bring in revenues, but also to preserve and promote the untarnished image of its maison through the appointment of Karl Lagerfeld. Even so, his consistent losses surmounted his relatively lenient and committed investors’ willingness to cultivate his brand.<sup>289</sup> For most American designers, fashion financiers are far less forgiving, and their greed for a rapid return on investment places strict restraints on creativity. In 1988, Rebecca Schaefer, the managing director for designer David Cameron complained to *Women’s Wear Daily*, “We tend to do things really fast here [the U.S.], and we’re all about marketing and merchandising rather than creating. You’re forced to be very fashionable, but the market waters you down. They don’t nurture design talent as much as they nurture marketing talent.” By contrast, Schaefer went on, “In Europe, it’s treated more as an art, and they’re so taken by the idea of something new being created, while here it’s, ‘Oh, something new. Can we sell it? Can we ship it?’”<sup>290</sup>

However, while American designers gaze enviously at Europe as the haven of the cherished values of the artistic field, even there, with the help of Bernard Arnault, LVMH, and his fellow conglomerates, designers’ artistry buckles under the pressure of marketing. Even LVMH, the formidable giant of the fashion industry, failed in its

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<sup>288</sup> Cathy Horyn, “Young Stars of U.S. Fashion Can’t Seem to Find Right Fit,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2002.

<sup>289</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 4.

<sup>290</sup> Lawrence Chua, “New Designers: Rough Going on the Home Front,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, June 29, 1988.

attempt to develop a contemporary label from scratch. Arnault invested in Christian Lacroix, the only label he has carried from the ground up, in 1987. With the vast resources at his disposal at LVMH, Arnault was able to underwrite Lacroix's haute couture pursuits for nearly two decades despite sustained losses that remained unabated by usual revenue attempts like ready-to-wear lines and accessories. Like Mizrahi, Lacroix occupied a cherished position at the top of the French haute couture field, and valued that prestige far more than profits. Formerly a designer at the esteemed fashion house Jean Patou, which graduated such top contemporary designers as Karl Lagerfeld and Jean-Paul Gaultier, Lacroix's tasteful and high-end collections earned praise from Parisian industry traditionalists who welcomed his designs' respectful reference to the heyday of haute couture. Once again, however, this very commitment to ingenuity prevented the business's growth, as the brand failed to gain any widespread recognition outside of the isolated fashion field. Lacroix's early attempts to launch a fragrance and a ready-to-wear line were both failures. While Arnault had hoped to cultivate Lacroix's elite style into an internationally respected label that could be used to market inexpensive accessories, as he has achieved with his acquired historic brands, Lacroix resisted this dilution of his talent. Lacroix's former business partner, Jean-Jacques Picart, explained, "He refused to play the game," later adding, "A dress is not a sculpture, it's a business,"<sup>291</sup> Arnault shared in Picart's frustration with Lacroix's reluctance to drag the company out of the red by extending the brand down-market, frequently coming into conflict with the designer and once insisting, "Christian Lacroix treats me like a patron of the

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<sup>291</sup> Max Colchester, "The Fall of Christian Lacroix," *Wall Street Journal*, August 2009.

arts, and not a financier.”<sup>292</sup> In 2005, after seventeen years, Arnault’s notoriously successful business tactics and Lacroix’s acclaim had never managed to push the brand over the profit line. Under pressure from investment analysts, LVMH finally dropped the Christian Lacroix brand, into which it had sunk an astonishing and unrewarded \$260 million.<sup>293</sup>

In spite of hostile conditions of the American and international markets, a fortunate few designers have managed to survive longer than Mizrahi and Lacroix. However, as indicated by the circumstances of the failure these two lauded brands, these relatively rare successes have been granted only through designers’ sacrifice of the sacred values of the field and surrender to the profanity of commercialism. The collapse of the field and its careful process of sanction and admission has narrowed the point of entry for new designers and redirected their path through the treacherous and diluting territory of market. The least risky, yet most restricted path into the industry is through the inheritance of a legacy brand. Top contemporary designers like Michael Kors, Alexander McQueen, and Marc Jacobs thrive today (under the generous backing of groups like LVMH and the Gucci Group) after serving as creative directors for historic brands whose established reputations allowed the designers free creative reign and unparalleled resources for self-branding. These revitalized brands serve as already long established and widely recognized platforms from which young designers have the incomparable opportunity to develop a coherent, marketable image and avoid the fatal public obscurity of Mizrahi and

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<sup>292</sup> Godfrey Deeny, “Arnault: Lacroix is Ungrateful,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, December 9, 1994.

<sup>293</sup> Suzy Menkes, “LVMH Is Planning Sale of Lacroix Designer Line,” *New York Times*, January 8, 2005.

Lacroix. Arnault and his peers' strategies of rejuvenation for time-honored brands include the transformation of creative directors into celebrity personalities,<sup>294</sup> thus fast tracking young designers' personal branding and providing the perfect fodder for successful namesake brands. Throughout Marc Jacobs' tenure as creative director at Louis Vuitton, for example, his once struggling Marc Jacobs label grew from around \$20 million in yearly revenue, to close to \$1 billion. In that time, Jacobs and his business partner, Robert Duffy, secured a majority investment from LVMH as well as launched a powerful expansion campaign that included a popular secondary line, "Marc by Marc Jacobs," international licensing agreements, multiple fragrances, and men's and women's stores in over thirty-five countries worldwide.<sup>295</sup> In other words, as Jacobs secured success for Louis Vuitton, raking in enormous profits that added up to 60 percent of LVMH's total revenue, he also ensured his own public prominence by association, elevating his brand to a level of recognition that granted similar status and profits to LVMH's more historic labels.<sup>296</sup>

Designers who cannot cultivate their fame and salability from the platform of a renowned luxury brand and can no longer reliably depend on the field's sanctioned process of induction must immediately take the perilous plunge into the market. As the field loses more and more of its influence, the time between a new designer's CFDA award and their inevitable discount chain collection becomes increasingly shorter. Todd Slater, fashion industry analyst at Lazard investment bank, explains, "It

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<sup>294</sup> Thomas, *Deluxe*, 51-52.

<sup>295</sup> Bridget Foley, "Louis Vuitton Bows Out," *Women's Wear Daily*, October 3, 2013; Ashok Som and Christian Blanckaert, *The Road to Luxury: The Evolution, Markets, and Strategies of Luxury Brand Management* (Singapore: Wiley, 2015), 188-190.

<sup>296</sup> Som and Blanckaert, *The Road to Luxury*, 188.

took Pierre Cardin 30 years to go from couture to Wal-Mart, and Mossimo three years to become a Target brand...It now takes six nanoseconds for a brand to go from class to mass.” Zac Posen, for example—one of the few designers to surface from the torrent of commercialism that swept less adaptable up-and-comers like John Bartlett and Isaac Mizrahi out of business—took root in the inhospitable terrain of the American market by lending his name to mass-produced lines and cobranding deals. After the launch of his company and his premier runway show in 2001, critics assumed that Posen, who was backed by modest family investments, would eventually join the majority of his contemporaries in bankruptcy.<sup>297</sup> To evade this fate, Posen and his CEO and mother, Susan Posen, jumped into the mass market, striking “moonlighting” deals to supplement the brand’s designer collection. Spearheading a popular survival strategy for American brands wishing to remain independent from demanding investors, Posen collaborated with several retail chains on peripheral “cobranded” lines that not only delivered desperately needed revenue, but also promoted his name. As Susan Posen explained, such agreements served as promising “precursor[s] to licensing arrangements” as well as a mode of “selective brand outreach.” In response to this accelerating trend, Stan Herman, president of the CFDA in 2005 observed the practice’s new role in breaking into the industry since the collapse of the traditional field: “I can’t remember a time when so many designers started their business at so early a stage in their career. Now, they bypass the apprenticeship and go into business very early. In a sense, taking on these projects is the new apprenticeship....The best thing a designer can do is take these kinds of jobs

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<sup>297</sup> Horyn, “Young Stars of U.S. Fashion Can't Seem to Find Right Fit.”

and use them as a grounding for their business.” In the few years since his debut on Seventh Avenue Zac Posen lent his name to several collections “from limited-edition jeans with Seven For All Mankind to tights for Wolford and driving gloves for Jaguar.”<sup>298</sup> More recently, in addition to a more traditional secondary collection at Saks Fifth Avenue, Zac Posen introduced a line at Target in 2010 and even designed the Delta Airlines uniforms in 2016.<sup>299</sup> Without the advantage of a famed luxury brand endorsing his name, Posen stooped to the mass market to advance his prestige and influence, leading several of his contemporaries in a precarious walk on the fine line between asserting one’s prominence on a popular (and profitable) scale and diluting and devaluing one’s brand in the mass market. In both trajectories to the top of the industry, however, the field and its pillars of influence speak their insularly valued judgments to deaf ears, abandoning young designers to the profane whims of the mass market. Though Marc Jacobs, Michael Kors, and others were fast tracked to prominence by long esteemed luxury labels, their success is no less in submission to the market. With the help of their corporate conglomerate parents, these designers have reached primacy just as Zac Posen and other self-made brands have, through the reduction of the creative self into a superficial, saleable image, thus ensuring their complete self-surrender to the market.

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<sup>298</sup> Marc Karimzadeh, “Moonlighting to Make Ends Meet,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, October 4, 2005.

<sup>299</sup> Christina Binkley, “‘Mom, I’ll Make a Profit Soon’; How Designer Zac Posen Works With His Mother to Expand His Brand,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 15, 2010.; Valeriya Safronova, “Zac Posen Presents New Uniforms for Delta,” *New York Times*, October 18, 2016.



*“Post-Trend Universe”*

For most of the last century, the history fashion has left behind a highly legible path. Each decade plotted a new point on the trajectory of international style, revealing a pristinely segmented timeline of creative dictates and collective movements. From the hobble skirt to the flapper dress, the New Look, the poodle skirt, the miniskirt, to bellbottoms and wrap dresses, the visual history of fashion has been highly discernable and traceable to an exclusive legacy of influencers. Paramount to this narrative has been the fashion designer—that prophet-like creator whose divine inspiration has proliferated across vast areas and populations with the help of a loyal church of editors, buyers, and high status clients to instill these ubiquitously recognized periodic trends. The present moment, however—the culmination of decades of disruption to this status quo—has proven to be a puzzling departure from the pattern of legible, unanimous progress. Years of commercial interference have forcibly averted the fashion world’s gaze from its own insular values to the point where contemporary designers, with eyes now fully focused on the market they serve, no longer wield the power for wide scale change, but rather take their cues from a chaotic, infinite multitude of planar points. While the concept of the trend often evokes an ephemeral or meaningless consumption craze, as Cathy Horyn explains, “the heyday of trends occurred, paradoxically, in eras when people had time to absorb change. A hemline remained in place for years, whereas today every length is on offer.” With no governing body or system of enforcement, American style has become authorless and diffuse. In much the same way that new slang and Internet memes enter popular consciousness, patterns in fashion now emerge from everywhere

and nowhere. Dissolved into the marketplace, fashion no longer moves along a linear timeline, but exists in a scattered, perpetual present, wherein independent loci spontaneously synchronize into unarticulated sentiments and styles and then drift apart before any one player can take hold and enforce some unifying progress. As a result, each level of the fashion industry has been stripped of its authoritative voice and reduced to chasing the ever-illusory chaos of the market.

As illustrated above, the highly valued design side of fashion has long felt its grip on the masses loosening. Increasingly undercut by highly efficient, inexpensive, on the ground retail, and the growing inability of supporting players to uphold their authority, designers and their investors have clung to branding as way to navigate and attempt to discipline their tumultuous market environment. A further departure from the unified aesthetic of the trend-driven past, designers work to develop a singular, identifiable image that will narrow consumers' field of vision and distinguish themselves among an illegible sea of potential stimuli.<sup>300</sup> Still, marketing requires a fundamental understanding of what is desirable and relevant to everyday consumers, and has thus motivated brands to cater their designs to the fluctuating movements of the marketplace, symbolized in the fashion industry by "the street". Emergent patterns in street style have begun to attract the attention of luxury designers eager to prove their relevance by pandering to the masses and grabbing hold of any recognizable micro trend they can see. These instances of mimicry, though often obscured by designers' lingering desire to appear uniquely imaginative, are ubiquitous. Marc Jacobs, for example, has rather notoriously taken inspiration from

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<sup>300</sup> Cathy Horyn, "The Post-Trend Universe," *New York Times*, February 15, 2015.

the street, weather by channeling the aesthetic of youth subcultures or, in the case of his Fall 2017 collection, holding his runway show on the New York City sidewalk to the unmediated soundtrack of passing traffic.<sup>301</sup> As Guy Trebay of *The New York Times*, explains, designers have been coerced by the pressures commercialism into relinquishing their pedestal of exclusivity and upper class refinement: “Despite the best efforts of luxury-goods manufacturers and their attendant lap-dog press, fashion seem[s] to have mislaid the capital ‘F.’”

The compulsion to popularize has enabled the emergence of a new inverted hierarchy, in which avant-garde “cult” brands that foster a loyal following among the coveted younger demographic set the standard for their more distanced and outdated predecessors. Chief among these industry influencers is Shayne Oliver, of Hood by Air, who, drawing his influence from own background in New York City voguing balls and underground parties, betrays no desire to emulate the field’s elitist traditions: “How not fashion can your piece be,” he once posited, “but still be really fashion.”<sup>302</sup> His seemingly effortless adaptation of street styles, and the commercial success he has enjoyed as a result, has made Oliver an object of envy—and imitation—for those who have entered fashion by way of elite or aging brands. Several times, fashion analysts have accused designers like Ricardo Tisci at Givenchy, and Alexander Wang of making uncited reference to Hood by Air in their

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<sup>301</sup> Julianne Escobedo Schepard, “Marc Jacobs's '70s-Inspired Runway Show Was Soundtracked by New York Street Noise,” *The Muse*, February 16, 2017, <http://themuse.jezebel.com/marc-jacobss-70s-inspired-runway-show-was-soundtracked-1792456879>.; Mackenzie Wagoner, “The Dreadlocks Debate: How Hair Is Sparking the Conversation of the Moment,” *Vogue*, September 21, 2016, <http://www.vogue.com/article/dreadlocks-hair-debate-moment>.

<sup>302</sup> Guy Trebay, “Trendsetter of 2013? Goodwill,” *New York Times*, December 27, 2013.

street-wear inspired collection.<sup>303</sup> Oliver himself has complained of plagiarism, insisting, “the amount of original pieces that have been stolen and not returned by stylists, but have been seen later in other designers’ collections, is insane.”<sup>304</sup> With lofty haute couture creations no longer connecting with a broad population of buyers, designers have abandoned the field’s elitist values of pure creative innovation and turned to the street—or at least to brands more in sync with that youthful aesthetic—to attempt to capture the illusive desires of their consumers. Increasingly, brands and retailers alike are turning to data, rather than instinct, to inform their analysis of the market. Though the practice of forecasting is a well-established one when it comes to secondary collections and accessories, more recently brands have taken advantage of the information available to even steer their creative decisions on the runway. In the fall 2013 season, WGSN, a trend-forecasting firm, introduced a service that analyzed each garment that walked in the London, Milan, Paris, and New York fashion weeks. Able to compare the occurrence of certain prints, fabrics, and silhouettes to previous years, WGSN service “gives fashion houses the data to back up decisions for last-minute tweaks in their own autumn 2013 collections to match the runway trends.” The program’s debut was so well received by brands, WGSN executives said, that it was working to significantly expand its capabilities for the following season.<sup>305</sup>

As these tactical innovations imply, the practice of mass-market pandering has even begun to permeate the most protected and elite realm of the fashion industry:

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<sup>303</sup> Guy Trebay, “Capturing the Energy of Hood by Air,” *New York Times*, February 14, 2014.

<sup>304</sup> Alex Hawgood, “Hood by Air Has a Fashion Moment,” *New York Times*, April 10, 2013.

<sup>305</sup> Libby Banks, “How to Tell the Fashion Future?” *New York Times*, August 26, 2013.

high-end and haute couture collections. In the heyday of the fashion field, haute couture clients were just as crucial in disseminating the dictates of the grand fashion houses as the fashion media, and were thus subject to the same scrutiny. Especially in Paris, couturiers were highly selective about who deserved to wear their clothes. Not everyone with wealth displayed the elevated taste, status, and appropriate values that made her worthy of a Balenciaga. In fact, it was the job of the house's *vendeuse*, or saleswoman, to discern and recruit the clients that would uphold the designer's name and purity of influence. Mostly made up of European aristocracy and American socialites, these esteemed clients would often form a lifelong loyalty to one or two designers, reverently heeding their creative ingenuity from season to season.<sup>306</sup> As this privileged group's wealth and brand loyalty passed down from generation to generation, the highest-end collections of luxury brands saw relatively little change and welcome stability for a good portion of the market tumult that plagued other areas of their companies and other pillars of the industry. The paradigmatic luxury buyer remained for the most part "a predictable, almost monolithic, caste of global elites."

In recent years, however, this consumer group has been thrown into flux, forcing one of the final holdouts of the fashion field to bend to the market. The recent surge in new global wealth has brought in droves of new consumers to the luxury price point, prompting a disruptive "generational shift," in which older, more consistent clients are being gradually phased out by a younger, more diverse, and harder to please population.<sup>307</sup> These new buyers, who betray "zero brand and

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<sup>306</sup> Givhan, *The Battler of Versailles*, 14.

<sup>307</sup> Nicola Clark, "The New Luxury Buyer: Younger, Richer, and Well-Wired," *New York Times*, December 2, 2014.

company loyalty,” pose an unprecedented challenge to “incumbent famous ‘legacy’ fashion houses,” that have long been sustained by their aging clientele’s automatic respect for their brand.<sup>308</sup> Designers at historically revered houses suddenly find themselves having to engage in marketing at their highest level—in many cases, the final holdout of their creative autonomy—to capture consumers who have not inherited the automatic deference to the name on which their empire is built. Former editor at *Women’s Wear Daily* Robin Lewis explains, “There are now hundreds of equally compelling brands, such that we have reached a situation of competitive congestion...Increasingly, brands will need to figure out how to get out in front of the consumer ahead of their competitors.”<sup>309</sup> In response, established brands have launched massive social media marketing campaigns—like Burberry’s street style-like crowdsourcing blog, “The Art of the Trench,” that collects photos of people wearing the label’s signature trench coat—to attract the attention and approval of fickle luxury consumers. The anxiety and marketing frenzy caused by this demographic shift thus betrays the steady loss of any remaining authoritative voice in high-end markets, a disruption that Cathy Horyn emphasizes in her description of the luxury consumer’s accompanying “mania for exclusivity” and custom-designed garments that has further “limited the influence of high fashion designers” even at the highest price range.<sup>310</sup> Recently, certain brands have begun to cater to and facilitate this desire for uniqueness, creating online platforms that allow wealthy customers to

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<sup>308</sup> Lianna Brinded, “Luxury Fashion Houses are Starting to Crack the Secret to Attracting Millennials,” *Business Insider*, February 26, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/luxury-fashion-good-millennial-consumers-kanye-west-2016-2>.

<sup>309</sup> Clark, “The New Luxury Buyer.”

<sup>310</sup> Horyn, “The Post Trend Universe.”

design their own luxury products. In a seemingly final surrender of creative control, in 2014, Burberry, Salvatore Ferragamo, and Prada enabled their clients to customize their own coats and shoes by choosing, cut, pattern, colors, and heel heights.<sup>311</sup>

*Fashion Editors, Celebrities, and the Invasion of the Blogger*

Following design's inversion of influence, and mortally intertwined in its descent into the market are the traditional modes of communication that once glamorously, obediently, and imperiously enforced the dictated trends of designers' autonomous imagination. Chief among these purveyors of cultural values and mandates, and often presiding over the rest, were the ubiquitous and beloved fashion publications like *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*, whose symbiotic relationship with designers on both Seventh Avenue and Avenue Montaigne made them a crucial force in the maintenance of the artistic field. Not only did these magazines and their editors evoke and impart a reverence for established tastemakers and their values, they also served as the respected gatekeepers of the industry, able to pave the way to prominence for selectively favored newcomers who would alter collections and even offer under-the-table favors in order to be the subjects of the publications' immensely powerful editorial voice.<sup>312</sup> However, precisely because these publications were so intimately entangled in the success and maintenance of the status quo, their

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<sup>311</sup> Mattie Kahn, "The Luxury Market Comes Up Close and Gets Very, Very Personal," *ABC News*, July 2, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/luxury-market-close-personal/story?id=24387750>.

<sup>312</sup> Mirabella, *In and Out of Vogue*, 99.

authoritative seat above the industry transformed and fell with the field, eventually dissolving into the anarchic profanity of the market that consumes fashion today.

The venerable foundations of fashion journalism began to shake in the 1980s with the shift toward marketing, branding, and “lifestyle” ushered in by Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger in the U.S. and Bernard Arnault and corporate conglomerates in Europe. As market-possessed brands focused on cultivating their image, and designers accordingly began to foster their own personal celebrity, the carefully constructed web of power that kept editors and designers’ relationships in a mutually beneficial balance began to waver. In her autobiography, Grace Mirabella, former editor of *Vogue* describes the “disturbing” changes brought about by designers’ gradual turn to the commercial:

Whereas manufacturers had once been thrilled to find themselves featured in the editorial pages of *Vogue*, designers didn’t have to depend on good favor of magazines like *Vogue* to get their clothes shown anymore. Designers now had so much money that through heavy and well-placed advertising they could “buy” the look of a magazine, or reach an even wider audience by buying spots on television, as Calvin Klein did so very powerfully...

With designers relying less and less on official sanctions from the field, focused instead on pandering to and penetrating the consciousness of their elusive consumers, fashion editors lost their leverage, and with it, their cultural power. Even if brands still recognized and coveted the ability of editorials and critics to confer prestige, the publications themselves often had to forfeit their power to withhold this privilege, as designers would frequently bate editors for “positive mention[s]” with ad sales.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 187.



In addition, the new emphasis on the market brought in an entirely new set of players that interfered in the intimate collaboration between designers and editors. Brands' public relations officers worked to build up the independent image of their employers and thus served as the unwelcome mediators between these once interlocking pillars of the field, ushering in a new period in which "The era of sustained, close working relationships between editors and designers was over."<sup>314</sup> This was a fissure, Mirabella reflects, that signaled a new industry-wide indifference to the values of artistry and authenticity that once endowed publications and their featured designers with such noble power. The PR staff, she laments, "had no creative pride at stake; what they really wanted was a mention in *Vogue* that would boost name recognition and status and bolster the sales of the designer's licenses....Fashion was first and foremost about big business and only secondarily about design."<sup>315</sup> It followed that brands no longer showed *Vogue* and other publications the respect Mirabella and other editors felt they still deserved, but rather used the magazines' highly visible platforms as props in their new complex marketing agendas. With market consumers, not field-entrusted critics, now the deciders of success, fashion editors suffered from an imbalance of power that suddenly left them clambering for access to designers. Any attempt to assert a less-than-glowing judgment of a label or collection—or even a failure in the eyes of designers to include enough mentions and photographs of their work—put publications at risk of retribution from publicists and

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<sup>314</sup> Best, *The History of Fashion Journalism*, 202; Mirabella, *In and Out of Vogue*, 188.

<sup>315</sup> Mirabella, *In and Out of Vogue*, 188.

their brands.<sup>316</sup> Mirabella recalls, for instance, the Armani press team's particularly volatile response to a negative review, in which they promised that *Vogue* could “never...count on being able to photograph Mr. Armani's clothes ever again.”<sup>317</sup> Designers exploited their position of power, making their runway show seating a physical, hierarchical representation of journalists' favor and turning the front row into a coveted position of special access and prestige. They even went so far as to ban critics from their shows—often newspaper writers who were less at the mercy of advertising and thus more candid in their coverage—if their reviews caused offense.<sup>318</sup>

In response to this structural upheaval, fashion publications slowly began to adjust their content. Following the shift in focus elsewhere in the industry away from specific trends and toward personality, image, and lifestyle, editors softened their decisive and evaluative edge and gave into more palatable editorials that satisfied desires cultivated by branding specialists and publicists. These included rapidly ubiquitous monthly designer profiles, longer articles that explored designers' personas beyond their seasonal collections, lifting these brand figureheads from anonymity and turning them into “fashionable icons” whose glamorous, exclusive, and enviable lives could be experienced vicariously through their clothes.<sup>319</sup> In other words, fashion magazines' continued relevance hinged on their complicity in designers' marketing schemes—the mystical brand identities that were so skillfully interwoven with mass desires—and thus their own prostration before the market. As

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<sup>316</sup> Best, *The History of Fashion Journalism*, 202-203.

<sup>317</sup> Mirabella, *In and Out of Vogue*, 188.

<sup>318</sup> Best, *The History of Fashion Journalism*, 202-203.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

Mirabella explains, “everyone was now a *personality*. Everyone was *presenting*.”<sup>320</sup> To keep up with this change in priorities, *Vogue* and other publications for the most part dropped their reporting agenda and instead documented those glamorous presentations. As early as 1972, John Fairchild, editor and chief of *Women’s Wear Daily*, introduced its sister magazine, *W*, that took as its primary object the social spectacle of Seventh Avenue in editorials like “Beautiful People,” “The Fashion Victims,” “Nouvelle Society,” and “The Tribes of New York” that chronicled, as Mirabella complains, the lives and gossip of “people obsessed with seeing their faces in print.”<sup>321</sup>

In 1995, *USA Today’s* fashion editor, Elizabeth Snead, frustrated by the disparate, trendless spectacles that were American and European runway shows (“It didn’t make sense to call the shows fashion ‘news’ when they weren’t anymore”) was one of the first to set her sights on Hollywood.<sup>322</sup> This swing from runway to red carpet had been building throughout the 1980s, in conjunction with the fashion and media industry’s increasing “commodification of individuals and their lifestyles,” distilled in certain “fashionable personalit[ies]” like Princess Diana, Madonna, or the newly idolized figure of the supermodel.<sup>323</sup> Still, though novel and popular magazines like *People* or *Hello!* capitalized on this newfound fixation on the public persona, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, entertainment industry celebrities were an uncommon feature in fashion magazines; even if they were pictured, their clothing often went unremarked upon and the designer unmentioned. In 1994, however,

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<sup>320</sup> Mirabella, *In and Out of Vogue*, 184.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 189

<sup>322</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 37.

<sup>323</sup> Best, *The History of Fashion Journalism*, 211, 213.

*InStyle* magazine, a subsidiary of *People* bridged the gap between fashion and icon to almost immediate public approval. The magazine, which was making generous profits by 1997, followed fashion strictly through the lens of celebrities, offering its readers advice on how to “Steal This Look” from their favorite red carpet icon and identifying the items, like Louis Vuitton “status handbags,” that elevate the wearer to the elite lifestyle they envy.<sup>324</sup> By explicitly connecting designer clothing and accessories with celebrity glamour, *InStyle* and the magazines that followed suit effectively served as branding campaigns for designers, who enthusiastically welcomed this new angle. Soon, even strictly fashion magazines like *Vogue* (now under Anna Wintour) and *Harper’s Bazaar* began replacing their relatively anonymous cover models with popular culture icons.<sup>325</sup>

Editors’ new embrace of Hollywood and the well of marketing opportunities it presented emerged almost simultaneously with designers’ discovery and development of celebrity power. Though respected brands had formed relationships with pop culture icons in the past—most notably, Hubert de Givenchy with Audrey Hepburn—and had even in some cases started their careers designing costumes for Hollywood productions, there remained no widespread paradigm for incorporating celebrities into the fashion industry in any significant way. Even when such bonds were formed or muses identified, the relationships showed little sign of bringing in new clientele.<sup>326</sup> “Who are you wearing?” was never a question on the red carpet, whose celebrities

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<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>325</sup> Ellie Krupnick, “Anna Wintour to Talk About Madonna, Covers on ‘CBS Sunday Morning,’” *Huffington Post*, December 9, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/09/anna-wintour-cbs-sunday-morning\\_n\\_1138812.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/09/anna-wintour-cbs-sunday-morning_n_1138812.html).

<sup>326</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 137.

were almost always dressed by anonymous studio costume designers.<sup>327</sup> The institution that most resembled the celebrity fashion coverage we have grown accustomed to today is Eleanor Lambert's popular 1940s publicity stunt, "The International Best Dressed List," determined by the fashion editors of the day. However, though the list brought welcomed attention to fashion designers, the clients featured were far from pop culture idols, and were rather tasteful members of the American and European aristocracy, deemed worthy of the precious products of the fashion field, who helped to emphasize the elite creative status of their couturiers.<sup>328</sup> The first designer to truly mine Hollywood and the music industry's wealth of market influence was Milan's Giorgio Armani, whose label's lengthy and glamorous appearance in the movie *American Gigolo* in 1980 (and later in the TV series *Miami Vice*), and subsequent peak in profits, sparked his interest in the publicity potential on the West Coast.<sup>329</sup> Armani set his sights on Los Angeles, opening a boutique in Beverly Hills in 1988 and making it his central PR strategy to court and dress celebrities. In 1991, his dresses and suits were so ubiquitous on the Academy Awards red carpet that *Women's Wear Daily* renamed the ceremony "The Armani Awards."<sup>330</sup> Soon, with his clothes on everyone from Robert De Niro to Martin Scorsese, Sophia Lauren, and Glenn Close, Armani became a household name with lasting power and "mystique" that other designers craved. As Teri Agins writes, "The whole world associated Armani with the rich and famous" and saw his label as a

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>328</sup> Best, *The History of Fashion Journalism*, 142.

<sup>329</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 132.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 137.

chance to garner “gilt by association.”<sup>331</sup> With mutual encouragement from fashion publications that were simultaneously leaning into Hollywood’s cachet, Armani provoked a stampede of fashion designers to Los Angeles. The celebrity had become the most crucial branding figure in the industry, and designers and their PR agents fought—and paid generously with cash payments and gifts—for any chance to have their clothes photographed on these publicity magnets.<sup>332</sup>

The industry’s seismic shift toward Hollywood even uprooted the physical conventions of the runway show. Before the celebrity craze, when fashion shows were seen as merely “high-flown trade events” inhabited by retail buyers, journalists, and “a smattering of well-heeled ladies who lunched,” celebrity appearances at New York Fashion Week and other events were exciting perks that remained secondary to the clothes.<sup>333</sup> In the early 1990s, however, when shows in all four fashion weeks—New York, Paris, Milan, and London—were consolidated from scattered studios into a single venue, the celebrity-scattered front row took center stage. These new locations, in addition to enforcing a physical hierarchy through their descending rows of seating, relegated photographers to a pit at the end of the runway, thus leaving the front row visible to all, and well within the photographer’s frame. “The front row,” Fern Mallis, former executive director of the CFDA, explained, “had become part of the content of the show—and the vehicle for celebrities.” The prioritization of celebrities was emblematic of the industry-wide betrayal of artistry and authenticity in the pursuit of mass-market popularity, and thus garnered criticism from those who

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 136-137.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>333</sup> Ruth La Ferla, “Where Have You Gone, Angelina Jolie? Celebrities Vanish from Fashion’s Front Row,” *New York Times*, February 8, 2017.

lamented fashion's abandonment and debasement of the values of the field. Mallis, for example, continued, "The messaging has changed and become all about the celebrities—and not the clothes. What's a shame is that a fashion show without celebrities is considered blah."<sup>334</sup> In fact, the fashion field establishment has a long tradition of disapproval for celebrity icons, as Dior, even for all of his unorthodoxy, refused to dress rising French star Brigitte Bardot in one of her films and "risk incurring the displeasure of some of his most elegant clients by allowing his dresses to be put on vulgar display on the screen."<sup>335</sup>

Still, "vulgar" as they might be, celebrities served as a welcome life raft for rapidly sinking fashion publications. Though inevitably caught up in the polluted and polluting branding schemes of market-driven designers and luxury conglomerates, celebrities at least provided a way for fashion magazines to cling to some instructive reporting power and maintain their readers' decreasingly obedient attention. In addition, celebrities themselves became, if not field-approved, recognizable players in the institution that seemed to carry some "trendsetting" power that made the marketplace more legible. However, in recent years, the open source of the Internet has caused this centralization and intelligibility to unravel. An abundance of amateur style bloggers and Instagram photographers have emerged and gained enormous popularity, posing a simultaneous threat to journalists and celebrities by conflating and popularizing both roles. The producers of this content—neither pop culture icons nor professional writers—are often their own subjects or "stylish personalities":

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<sup>334</sup> Teri Agins, *Hijacking the Runway: How Celebrities are Stealing the Spotlight from Fashion Designers* (New York: Gotham Books, 2014).

<sup>335</sup> Agins, *The End of Fashion*, 140.

“young people who promote their daily outfits on Instagram, accumulating ‘likes; that are essentially data points for designer brands.” Due to the proliferation of these platforms, as well as their often rapid turnover in popularity, the emergence of fashion blogging has not signaled a mere transfer of influence, but rather the disintegration of it into the market.<sup>336</sup> Requiring no institutional approval—only likes and views—these mundane industry impostors are to fashion journalism and style icons what Hood By Air and Vetements have become to established luxury brands: the scattered, on-the-ground purveyors of street style that threaten and elude the members of the industry attempting to harness and instruct mass-market desires. Bloggers intercept their readers and viewers long before still far-removed fashion editors and draw their content from far beneath the celebrity level. Articles on online publications like *Manrepeller* or *Who What Wear* rarely report on high-glamour Hollywood celebrities, and much more frequently publish editorials and share photos of and about themselves, anonymous street style, non-famous local artists or stylists, or broad and ambiguous personas like the “French girl,” the “fashion girl” or the “it girl.”

Their sometimes massive online following has turned these writers and photographers into icons in their own right, once again blurring the lines of fashion journalism by embodying a confounding hybrid of editor and icon, journalist and marketing tool that—although not all too dissimilar from the defensive form that fashion magazines took throughout the 1980s and 1990s—more traditional publications find disruptive and disturbing. More and more, these online personalities

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<sup>336</sup> Horyn, “The Post Trend Universe.”



have taken the place of Hollywood stars as brand figureheads and front row VIPs. In an editorial in 2017, *The New York Times* observed declining numbers of celebrities at fashion week runway shows, pointing out their “dwindling presence matched only, some say, by their diminishing impact.” Tommy Hilfiger explains that designers are gradually evolving beyond this perhaps over-played marketing strategy, claiming, “a star’s presence does nothing to move the needle.” Several publicists have agreed, citing consumers’ “jadedness” and the “diluted” influence of now pervasive celebrity appearances and endorsements. They explain that designers are now reluctant to shell out the tens of thousands of dollars that celebrities have come to demand for runway and red carpet appearances for an increasingly limited pay off.

At the same time that the imperfect but stable system of celebrity style is losing its edge, brands have begun looking at fashion bloggers to fill their front row vacancies. As distinguished Hollywood stars and pop culture icons have begun to drift away from the pulse of the market, online personalities present an invaluable proximity to the “street” that fashion labels are eager to mine.<sup>337</sup> In an attempt to make their brands more and more relevant to the popular consumer, fashion publicists and executives have placed bloggers at the center of “a new way of doing PR,” in which these online “tastemakers” are paid in cash or gifts to attend runway shows or be photographed on the street wearing a designer’s clothes. One of the premier “tastemakers” and the first to glean profits from this untraditional form, was Chiara Ferragni (often known by her site name and pseudonym *The Blonde Salad*), who in 2009 worked with her then boyfriend and current CEO to transform her blog from a

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<sup>337</sup> La Ferla, “Where Have You Gone, Angelina Jolie?”

strictly “‘personal space’ into a business.” As *The Blonde Salad* picked up momentum and views, as well as income from banner ads, Ferragni recognized her site’s potential value to designer labels, and began exchanging mentions for increasingly steep prices.<sup>338</sup> As her strategy took off and her success escalated, Ferragni became an unlikely fashion insider, twice making the *Forbes Magazine*’s “30 Under 30” in list in the arts category, landing over fifty-five magazine covers, serving as the spokesperson and model for a Guess campaign, and even starting her own apparel and accessories line.<sup>339</sup> By 2016, her social media presence totaled “7.3 million followers on Instagram, 1.2 [million] likes on Facebook and more than 14 [million] page views per month on her website,” transforming her once mundane fashion diary into a million dollar business and making her a coveted (and expensive) asset for fashion brands.<sup>340</sup> In the past few years, this tactic has become ubiquitous and formalized, with specialized marketing firms organizing placements and pseudo-candid photo shoots for their designer clients. The practice is also not restricted to fashion newcomers desperate for a publicity stunt, but rather has been embraced by such respected luxury standbys as Jean Paul Gaultier, Moschino, Alberta Ferretti, and more.<sup>341</sup> When designers do involve celebrities, their selections are still a step removed from industry-approved Hollywood glamour, often including “social media

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<sup>338</sup> Lauren Cochrane, “Chiara Ferragni—How a ‘Crazy Blogger’ Turned her Life into a Shop Window,” *The Guardian*, November 29, 2016.

<sup>339</sup> Cochrane, “Chiara Ferragni”; Marianne Dabir, “Blonde Salad Blogger Chiara Ferragni is Guess’s Latest Glam Campaign Star,” *TeenVogue*, December 4, 2013, <http://www.teenvogue.com/story/blonde-salad-guess-holiday-ad-campaign>.

<sup>340</sup> Cochrane, “Chiara Ferragni”; Lauren David Peden, “Million Dollar Bloggers Give Fashion a Bad Name,” *Observer*, June 26, 2014, <http://observer.com/2014/06/million-dollar-bloggers-give-fashion-a-bad-name/>.

<sup>341</sup> Ruth La Ferla, “Who Am I Wearing? Funny You Should Ask,” *New York Times*, September 12, 2012.

megastars” like Gigi Hadid and Kylie Jenner “and others who are famous simply for being famous.”

Predictably, the turn toward less distinguished, more mass-market personalities has been presented with backlash. Hollywood publicist Leslie Sloane contests, for example, “Those girls may be lovely, but they’re not fashion.”<sup>342</sup> Though, again, not too far afield from what their publications have been moving toward for decades, fashion editors have met this new practice with disgust, finding it a threat to their lingering values of creative authenticity, not to mention their own relevance. In 2016, *Vogue’s* online editors launched a particularly aggressive attack on these self-made insurgents, which insisted that bloggers’ distorted roles as both writers and marketing tools was “heralding the death of style.” Alessandra Codinha elaborated, “Rather than a celebration of any actual style, it seems to be all about turning up, looking ridiculous, posing, twitching in your seat as you check your social media feeds, fleeing, changing, repeating.”<sup>343</sup> Though their sanctioning and authoritative position has long been on a steady decline following the downfall of the fashion field, fashion editors see this intrusion as the ultimate threat to their remaining status and exclusivity, which has been compromised and indiscriminately dispersed among an unqualified and value-less group whose only credentials include a couple thousand Instagram followers.

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<sup>342</sup> La Ferla, “Where Have You Gone, Angelina Jolie?”

<sup>343</sup> Sally Singer et al., “Ciao, Milano! Vogue.com’s Editors Discuss the Week That Was,” *Vogue*, September 25, 2016, <http://www.vogue.com/article/milan-fashion-week-spring-2017-vogue-editors-chat>.

*Conclusion: Athleisure and the Spontaneous Synchrony of the Market*

Within the last decade, spectators of street style have witnessed the emergence of a new sartorial genre off the runways. The initial investigators of this incongruous trend in casual-wear watched confounded as its disciples multiplied, and groped for explanations like ecologists observing a never-before-seen behavior in nature. Nicknamed athleisure, this puzzling style described the growing tendency of (mostly) women to dress for the gym—and never actually go. What attracted people to this habit, it seemed, was the impression it gave that its adopters were always—and eternally—on the *verge* of exercising. Still, the work out clothes they donned were hardly the shabby sweatpants and raggedy t-shirt one might imagine as appropriate for a good sweat. On the contrary, and new to fashion’s stylistic lexicon, this trend called for carefully coordinated, form fitting, and pristinely designed exercise ensembles. Athleisure’s wearers could just as easily be jogging at the park or chatting over brunch, on the Pilates machines or in the carpool lane. This peculiar aesthetic of functionality divorced from actual function, many believe, is a stylistic byproduct of a culture of health, emerging alongside a growing public obsession with yoga studios, spin class, kale smoothies, Fitbits, and a vague lifestyle of “wellness.”<sup>344</sup> However, widespread and compounding adaptations and appropriations of this health aesthetic have caused athleisure to drift further and further from its referent—actual exercise—and become a sweeping style of untethered meanings.

Athleisure’s rise, its examiners contend, can be traced back to the arrival and rapid success of the athleticwear retailer Lululemon Athletica, which first opened its

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<sup>344</sup> Katie Smith, “Athleisure: A Mass Movement Not A Trend?” *Edited*, August 25, 2015, <https://edited.com/blog/2015/08/athleisure-a-mass-movement-not-a-trend/>.

doors in Vancouver in 2000. In a lucrative departure from other broad activewear brands and chains like Nike or Dick's Sporting Goods, Lululemon marketed specialized and stylistically attractive clothes for yoga. Capitalizing on the growing cultural obsession with health, the company hosted free public yoga lessons in urban centers, and referred to their salespeople as "educators." The store's tight-fitting synthetic fabrics, colorful patterns, and luxury prices swiftly attracted a cult following and impressive revenues. By 2008, the company was raking in \$350 million in sales from 113 stores.<sup>345</sup> Its feverish popularity prompted other sports apparel companies to follow suit and offer specialty womenswear lines of comparable designs, often with celebrity partners, like Rihanna for Puma, Kanye West for Adidas, or Beyoncé for Topshop.<sup>346</sup> As the store and its luxe athletic aesthetic permeated the market and grew in popularity, women began to show off their stylish leggings, sports bras, and running shoes outside of the gym and the studio. Still, the larger trend is not confined to the stereotypical Lululemon shopper—the wealthy suburban mom or the SoulCycle-going twenty-something. As Nike, Under Armour, Adidas, and more took up the trend and incorporated their products, the scope of athleisure grew to include casual sneakers, joggers, neoprene jackets, and all manner of upscale, everyday activewear for consumers across price points, affiliations, and stylistic preferences. The style even sparked subcultural spinoffs like the "health goth" trend, which channels a more punk-inclined wellness aesthetic.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Bryant Urstadt, "Lust for Lulu," *New York Magazine*, July 26, 2009.

<sup>346</sup> Hiroko Tabuchi, "Products and Competition Stretch Market for 'Athleisure' Clothing," *New York Times*, March 25, 2016.

<sup>347</sup> Meirav Devash, "Health Goth: When Darkness and Gym Rats Meet," *New York Times*, December 10, 2014.

As athleisure expanded to encompass more and more styles and variations, it continued to take off outside of exercise classes and nutrition centers. The average woman on the street in leggings or track pants no longer encounters any expectation that she'll go to the gym—or, for that matter, that she's been in weeks. That initial function has been relegated to a cognitively distant and irrelevant etymology. This detachment from the actual work athletic gear is made to facilitate has unsurprisingly sparked complaints from those who remain loyal to its intended purpose. These activewear purists resent its demotion to a frivolous fashion choice, as opposed to a practical performance tool. Susan Lacke, a writer at *Competitor.com*, an online publication for runners, is especially incensed by the stylistic embellishment of sports bras that are made to be seen, not exercised in. "It's become cool to dress like a runner," she explains, "but we can't actually run in these clothes anymore." Lacke resentfully discerns her own legitimate athleticism and physical labor from the women who do not actually intend to break a sweat, but "just look like they do." Describing a sports bra with thin interwoven straps and push-up cups, she writes, "I'm supposed to be able to run a marathon in that thing? For the average woman who runs, sports bras are not for show. They're the workhorse of the wardrobe...I don't need lace and cleavage; I need a good old-fashioned over-the-shoulder boulder holder."<sup>348</sup> Even the founder and CEO of Lululemon, Chip Wilson, seems to be confounded by his products' appropriation outside of the yoga studio, and has even gone so far as to try to distance his company from the term athleisure. Reaffirming

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<sup>348</sup> Susan Lacke, "Here's the Real Problem with the Athleisure Trend," *Competitor*, April 11, 2017, [http://running.competitor.com/2017/04/shoes-and-gear/real-problem-with-athleisure-trend\\_163574](http://running.competitor.com/2017/04/shoes-and-gear/real-problem-with-athleisure-trend_163574).

Lululemon's true allegiance to exercise and performance, Wilson denies that his company's clothes are worn purely for their ungrounded aesthetics. "It's not fashion people trying to make this stuff look athletic," he insists, "[The] Lululemon business is athletic wear that's made technical and just because [it] works so well technically, people wear it onto the street."<sup>349</sup> In claiming customers' more "legitimate" motives for wearing Lululemon clothing in unintended settings, Wilson reveals how athleisure has departed from its original, mostly practical roots, and left its original marketers in the dust. What is more, the trend and its proponents have outpaced mainstream culture and its police, who have put up resistance to its increasing normalization. Most of this opposition has centered on leggings, as the skin-tight style has struck gatekeepers of propriety as an inappropriate substitute to "real" pants. Most recently, this conflict entered the foreground of national news when a United Airlines employee denied two passengers entry onto a flight because their leggings supposedly breached United's Contract of Carriage requirement for proper dress.<sup>350</sup> What has started off as a lucrative, but relatively simple, expansion of the market for exercise clothes has expanded, scattered, and detached from its origin point to become an unruly and widespread style, uninhibited by intended function or marketing boundaries.

Athleisure swiftly became culturally ubiquitous (the word athleisure was officially entered into the Miriam-Webster dictionary in 2016) and economically

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<sup>349</sup> Mallory Schlossberg, "Lululemon Founder Says Athleisure is Over—Now It's All about 'Streetnic,'" *Business Insider*, June 4, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/chip-wilson-says-athleisure-is-old-2016-6>.

<sup>350</sup> Luz Lazo, "Two Girls Barred from United Flight for Wearing Leggings," *Washington Post*, March 26, 2017.

powerful. After its true takeoff in 2014, athleisure's sales continued to climb, to the point where analysts determined it could no longer be shrugged off as a passing fad, and classified it as a market of its own.<sup>351</sup> From 2014 to 2015, athleisure sales grew by sixteen percent, an impressive acceleration compared to the two percent growth that the entire clothing market usually sees per year.<sup>352</sup> Compared to the same three months in 2014, the number of yoga pants on the market increased by 341 percent.<sup>353</sup> In 2016, the athleisure market netted \$97 billion.<sup>354</sup> In addition to athleticwear's clear claim cultural primacy, its impressive numbers have grabbed the fashion industry's attention. According to the apparel industry analysts at the NPD Group, the \$2 billion growth in clothing, shoes, and accessory sales in 2014 was largely attributable to fervor for athleisure.<sup>355</sup> At the hands of down-market retailers and enthusiastic consumers, workout clothes became fashion, but left the runway behind.

In a stark reversal of the traditional flow of fashion's aesthetic power, luxury brand designers scrambled to retroactively adopt the trend that so many of their clients were taking up. Some of the earliest instances of athleisure arriving on the runway were Dior and Chanel's couture collections for Spring/Summer 2014. In a striking aberration from the stuffy sophistication of the haute couture runways, both

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<sup>351</sup> "A More Casual, Active Lifestyle Drives Fashion Sales Growth in 2014, Reports NPD," *NPD*, February 19, 2015, <https://www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/news/press-releases/2015/a-more-casual-active-lifestyle-drives-fashion-sales-growth-in-2014/>

<sup>352</sup> Shelly Banjo, "Has the Activewear Fashion Fad Run Its Course?" *Bloomberg Gadfly*, April 13, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/gadfly/articles/2016-04-13/lululemon-inspired-fitness-fashion-trend-cools-down>.

<sup>353</sup> Smith, "Athleisure"

<sup>354</sup> Hiroko Tabuchi, "Products and Competition Stretch Market for 'Athleisure' Clothing."

<sup>355</sup> "A More Casual, Active Lifestyle Drives Fashion Sales Growth in 2014, Reports NPD," *NPD.com*, February 19, 2015.



Karl Lagerfeld, at Chanel, and Raf Simons, at Dior sent their models out in lavishly bedazzled sneakers.<sup>356</sup> The previous season, both designers had opted for more expected and formal footwear, like pointed-toe pumps (at Dior) and heeled thigh-high boots (at Chanel).<sup>357</sup> From this tentative moment infiltration, athleisure on the runway took off. Karl Lagerfeld, for example, continued the allusion to the street style craze the next season in Chanel's Fall ready-to-wear line, which took place in a reconstructed grocery store and featured leggings with matching cropped sweaters and sneakers.<sup>358</sup> For Spring/Summer 2015, Alexander Wang sent his models down the runway in mesh and neoprene jackets and tanktops, knit dresses that resembled workout tops, and tennis dresses made to look like Adidas' famous Stan Smith sneakers.<sup>359</sup> A season later, Tommy Hilfiger turned his runway into a football field, and dressed his models in various iterations of jerseys, cleats, and letterman jackets.<sup>360</sup> In Fall 2016 Hilfiger returned with more jerseys, tracksuits, boxing shorts,

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<sup>356</sup> Stephanie Trong, "Sneakers Make a Surprise Appearance on the Haute Couture Runways," *Fashionista*, January 21, 2014, <http://fashionista.com/2014/01/sneakers-make-a-surprise-appearance-on-the-haute-couture-runways>.

<sup>357</sup> Tim Blanks, "Fall 2013 Couture: Christian Dior," *Vogue*, June 30, 2013, <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2013-couture/christian-dior>; Tim Blanks, "Fall 2013 Couture: Chanel," *Vogue*, July 1, 2013, <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2013-couture/chanel>.

<sup>358</sup> Tim Blanks, "Fall 2014 Ready-To-Wear: Chanel," *Vogue*, March 3, 2014, <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2014-ready-to-wear/chanel>

<sup>359</sup> Nicole Phelps, "Spring 2015 Ready-to-Wear: Alexander Wang," *Vogue*, September 6, 2014, <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2015-ready-to-wear/alexander-wang>.

<sup>360</sup> Lauren Sherman, "Fall 2015 Ready-to-Wear: Tommy Hilfiger," *Vogue*, February 16, 2015, <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2015-ready-to-wear/tommy-hilfiger>.

and sweatshirts.<sup>361</sup> Subtle and not so subtle references athleisure continue to proliferate across luxury design in the forms of stretch fabrics, leggings, body suits and leotards, puffer jackets, sweatpants, tennis skirts, visors, sneakers, slip-on shoes, and more. The most recent Spring/Summer 2017 fashion weeks saw athleisure looks from Max Mara, Balmain, Stella McCartney, Balenciaga, Luis Vuitton, and others on the highest end of fashion.<sup>362</sup> What is more, luxury brands have recognized athleisure, not just as a mine of cultural influence and relevance, but also as a promising opportunity for profit-making. Designers like Tory Burch, Rebecca Minkoff, Derek Lam, and Alexander Wang have either started their own strictly activewear lines or teamed up with retailers. Even the popular online retailer for designer goods, Net-a-Porter, has capitalized on demand and designer supply and has opened Net-a-Sporter, a sister site for designer athletic gear. This embrace, and the accompanying relinquishment of creative agency to a street style fad, has not entirely been engaged without reluctance. Derek Lam, for instance, calls leggings “one of the blights on contemporary design.” Nevertheless, his collaboration with Athleta premiered in 2015.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Chioma Nnadi, “Fall 2016 Ready-to-Wear: Tommy Hilfiger,” *Vogue*, September 9, 2016, <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2016-ready-to-wear/tommy-hilfiger>.

<sup>362</sup> Steff Yotka, “Athleisure Has Infiltrated the Runways in Unexpected Ways,” *Vogue*, October 25, 2016, <http://www.vogue.com/article/althleisure-spring-2017-runway-trend>.

<sup>363</sup> Vanessa Friedman, “Adventures in Athleisure Clothing,” *New York Times*, November 4, 2015.

The rise of athleisure was not orchestrated or enforced. Certainly not the invention of traditional fashion designers, the trend even grew to defy its originators, expanding exponentially beyond the boundaries of its intended and marketed use. No one retailer, journalist, creative, celebrity, or even corporate mind authored, authorized, or directed this widespread movement; even its name seems to have sprung up from the ground without traceable origin. Rather, all of these industry actors were caught with their ears to the ground, hoping to pick up the seismic waves of the market. Untethered from its initial roots in wellness and yoga, this trend simultaneously is devoid of meaning and encompasses all meanings. As such, its signals radiate from infinite loci and between individuals by way of shallow affinities that graze the surface and make no attempt at a deeper knowing or authenticity. In this way, athleisure and other fleeting fads of its kind epitomize a mode of leaderless, dissociative, and ultimately uncapturable momentum that spontaneously emerges between subject-less actors pursuing the superficial pleasures of an unbounded market. In mapping the fraught and complex downfall of the fashion field, I have attempted to illustrate how intimately the destabilizing force of the market rests beneath the defenses of civil society and cultural infrastructures of authority and authentication. Though Horkheimer and Adorno have imagined commercialism's break through the cracks of the unifying social as the installment of a manipulative, unchanging, oppressive regime of industrial repetition and capitalist manipulation, the winding and frenzied trajectory of fashion since its initial slip from pure autonomy paints a different picture, one in which continual upheavals of influence and disintegration of stabilizing hierarchies have left all sides of the industry desperately

chasing after an illusive source of authorship. Dispersed into the market, the voice of fashion no longer dictates from above, but rather emerges unpredictably and untraceably from the cacophony below.

## Afterword

In a talk on the TED stage in 2008, mathematician Steven Strogatz identified and described what he believes is “perhaps the most pervasive drive in all of nature”: the drive towards synchrony. This force of emergence, Strogatz explains, is often overlooked by our propensity to assume that if systems are left alone, they descend into chaos: “I’m not saying the law of entropy is wrong—it’s not. But there is a countervailing force in the universe—the tendency towards spontaneous order.” In this ubiquitous phenomenon, countless unassociated, leaderless, often unintelligent or even inanimate individual entities spontaneously generate a single, unified outcome. 10,000 pacemaker cells in the human heart fire signals perfectly in-time to set a life-giving beat, a colony of synchronous fireflies flash in harmony, hundreds of pedestrians crossing a London suspension bridge begin to step and sway in unison.<sup>364</sup> In the final pages of *Philosophy of Money*, Georg Simmel offers a caveat to his theorization of the eternal duality and conflict of life (motion) and form (constancy), in order to account more fully for this drive toward emergence. While elsewhere in his work Simmel maintains that form is constantly “completely transcended” and replaced by the restlessness of life, here he concedes, “If we observe the image of the world as it immediately presents itself to us, then there are certain forms that do persist through time.” However, this inertia of the whole is not the result of complete disciplinary control over the “life” of each of its parts; rather, Simmel explains, “the

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<sup>364</sup> Steven Strogatz, “The Science of Sync,” *TED*, December 2008, [https://www.ted.com/talks/steven\\_strogatz\\_on\\_sync/transcript?language=en#t-251970](https://www.ted.com/talks/steven_strogatz_on_sync/transcript?language=en#t-251970).

real elements of which [these forms] are composed are in continuous motion.”

Reminiscent of Strogatz’s models and examples, he continues:

Thus, for example, the rainbow persists despite the constantly changing position of the water particles; the organic form persists despite the constant exchange of material of which it is composed. Indeed, in every inorganic object only the relationship and the interaction of the smallest parts persist, whereas the parts themselves, hidden to our eyes, are in constant molecular flux. Thus, reality itself, is in a restless flux, and though we are unable to observe this because, as it were, we lack the sharpness of sight, the forms and constellations of movements solidify in the appearance of the enduring object.<sup>365</sup>

In other words, Simmel claims that order and structure are not contingent on the conscious obedience or affinity of their singular components, but rather spontaneously and inexplicably materialize as the unintended result of the combined trajectories of these individual parts. He defines the ultimate “constancy” that surfaces as a “law,” a principle and bestower of meaning that persists through “all given conditions.”<sup>366</sup>

It is this dynamic that Michel Foucault uncovers in his final lectures in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. In his interrogation of neoliberal economic theory, Foucault zeros in on a central problematic of this “laissez-faire” system built on the uninterrupted and unguided interests of the individual economic subject, or “*homo æconomicus*.” If, as the neoliberals insist, the self-interested pursuits of *homo æconomicus* cannot be interrupted by the state, Foucault asks, “Is *homo æconomicus* an atom of freedom in the face of all the conditions, undertakings, legislation, and prohibitions of a possible government...?” Put more simply, how can a governing social structure maintain and assert its defining power without causing an inherent disruption of the dynamics of

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<sup>365</sup> Georg Simmel, *Philosophy of Money* (London: Routledge, 2004), 515.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 516.

economic freedom central to the neoliberal project?<sup>367</sup> Foucault begins his answer by insisting on the exceptional qualities of the altered, but still intact subject under a system of the “free” market. *Homo œconomicus*, he clarifies, is a “subject of interest,” as opposed to a “subject of right.” While the subject of right is characterized by his or her agreement to forgo some natural rights in order to obtain others, the subject of interest “is never called upon to relinquish his interest.” The subject of interest is not driven by a social contract, but rather by a purely indulgent “egoistic mechanism.”<sup>368</sup> As a subject that is so narcissistically self-interested and socially disinterested, *homo œconomicus* thus fulfills the two characteristics that Simmel describes in phenomena of constancy. First, because each person’s interest “will depend on accidents of nature about which he can do nothing and which he cannot foresee,” the subject will be caught up in a perpetual and lawless motion. However, despite this “apparent chaos” and the lack of any social contract, the “individual’s interest, without him knowing it, wishing it, or being able to control it, is linked to a series of positive effects which mean that everything which is to his advantage will turn out to be the advantage of others.”<sup>369</sup> In other words, like the randomly rushing water particles conjure a rainbow, the selfishly acting subjects of neoliberal laissez-faire economics, without intention, spontaneously assemble a governing social.

To make this order endure, Simmel explains, it must be encompassed by a universal law, like that of physics or mathematics, which persists over any

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<sup>367</sup> Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 271.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

circumstance.<sup>370</sup> In Foucault's terms, it must be regulated by a distinct governing body. However, the indifference and unruliness of economic subjects, as well as the "atheistic discipline" of which they serve as the base, makes the imposition of governance a confounding project, as it outpaces the abilities of the traditional model of sovereign power.<sup>371</sup> Because *homo œconomicus* and the "invisible hand" that drives economic harmony "must be left free" from any interference by the state, the "totalizing unity of the juridical sovereign" has become obsolete and fundamentally incompatible with "the non-totalizable multiplicity of economic subjects of interest."<sup>372</sup> To remedy this inconsistency, Foucault explains, would require "either the sovereign's abstention" from the economic realm, or else its demotion into the passive role of market supervision.<sup>373</sup> Thus, Foucault explains, the true "governability" of economic subjects can only be achieved through the construction of an entirely new model of power:

These individuals who are still subjects of rights as well as being economic actors, but who are not 'governable' as one or the other are only governable insofar as a new ensemble can be defined which will envelop them both as subjects of right and as economic actors...And I think it is this new ensemble that is characteristic of the liberal art of governing.

This new "field of reference" Foucault names "civil society."<sup>374</sup> This "self-limiting" mode of governance tames the chaos of self-interest and reinstitutes the "power relations" of the social without encroaching on the spontaneous dynamics of the economic realm. As such it is characterized by its "inseparab[ility]" from *homo*

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<sup>370</sup> Simmel, *Philosophy of Money*, 516.

<sup>371</sup> Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 282, 294.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 282, 284.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.



*œconomicus*—its origin and target—and may be defined as “the concrete ensemble within which...economic men must be placed so that they can be properly managed.”<sup>375</sup> Civil society therefore operates by maximizing the collective benefits of individual interests, without infringing or imposing on those pursuits. Its power and success is based on its recognition and facilitation of “the spontaneous synthesis of individuals.” Thus, civil society enforces “no explicit contact, no voluntary union, no renunciation of rights, and no delegation of natural rights to someone else,” but rather rests on the “summation of individual satisfactions within the social bond itself” that will necessarily add up to “a happy public.”<sup>376</sup> This “de facto bond” between economic subjects leads to a similarly “spontaneous formation of power.”<sup>377</sup> In the unregulated interactions between individuals, neoliberals explain, various talents, differentiations, and ascendances “naturally” emerge, and provide the basis for “divisions of labor” that make up structures of power.<sup>378</sup> Through “spontaneous synthesis” and “spontaneous subordination,” civil society provides a frame of reference for liberal governance that advantageously incorporates *homo œconomicus* without stifling the economic process.<sup>379</sup> With no single leader, nor any one recognizable instance of state restriction or suppression, this form of governance is diffuse and all-encompassing, and therefore seems discouragingly inescapable.<sup>380</sup>

However, both Foucault and Simmel lay out a fundamental vulnerability of and adversary to this social system of spontaneous order. After enumerating the

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<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 296, 297.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 304, 303.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 296.

potential for absolute “constancy,” Simmel reasons, “there must be a corresponding form of motion to this distinctive absolute form of persistence.” This drive of constant change would conversely be immune to all attempts at capture and constancy, and would thus be equally “stable,” precisely and paradoxically for its “indifference” to time and shifting circumstances.<sup>381</sup> For Simmel, there is one social entity that perfectly embodies this “completely dynamic character of the world”: money. Simmel insists that the money form is inherently imbued with unbounded motion, in that its very “meaning...lies in the fact that it will be given away.”<sup>382</sup> This “infinite purposiveness” of money ensures its endless pursuit of eternally distant and unreachable futures, and thus its corrosive social potentials.<sup>383</sup> Simmel elaborates, “Money is nothing but the vehicle for a movement in which everything else that is not in motion is completely extinguished...It lives in continuous self-alienation from any given point and thus forms the counterpart and direct negation of all being in itself.” Money is poisonous to the very ways in which we know the world and ourselves, and thus is an inherent detriment to any social system that operates through that ontology. He continues, “If all motion proceeds between a ‘here’ and a ‘there,’ then through this absolute motion...the ‘here’ completely disappears.”<sup>384</sup> In other words, the “plane of reference” that Foucault insists is necessary to govern the unwieldy economic subject is under constant siege by the very entity that drives this subject—the market.<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Simmel, *Philosophy of Money*, 516, 517.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 517.

<sup>383</sup> Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 4; Simmel, *Philosophy of Money*, 517.

<sup>384</sup> Simmel, *Philosophy of Money*, 516.

<sup>385</sup> Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 295.

One need only look to Durkheim's panicked analysis of the market in *Suicide* to infer the money form's destructive consequence on the social, as well as the very concept of the subject itself. With no social frame of reference to set boundaries and endless pleasures available, the individual in an unfettered market sets her goal at "infinity" and thus can never reach fulfillment. By ceaselessly setting one's sights on an unattainable, forever retreating future, the market actor exists in limbo.<sup>386</sup> Never progressing and devoid of a meaningful past, the economic agent is thus denied what Durkheim insists is the essential "pleasure" of the subject in society: the knowledge that one's "efforts are not in vain and that by walking [one] has advanced." He explains, "One does not advance when...his goal is infinity. Since the distance between us and it is always the same, whatever road we take, we might as well have made the motions without progress from the spot."<sup>387</sup> The subject is detrimentally denied her constitutive temporality of progress and futurity, and is confined to a perpetual and unfulfilling present. Thus, this affect of market-induced entropy—the "apotheosis of wellbeing"—is for Durkheim the ultimate threat to the subject, who in the midst of this chaos becomes "blinded to himself."<sup>388</sup>

This is the essential paradox of a society built on the free market: at the same time that the "economic bond" forges connections between subjects under and through a civil society, "it is also a principle of dissociation at the same time." Foucault elaborates on this strange social fabric, which, while it serves to build and strengthen community, also simultaneously "tends to undo what the spontaneous

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<sup>386</sup> Durkheim, *Suicide*, 248.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 256, 248.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

bond of civil society has joined together by picking out the egoist interests of individuals, emphasizing it, and making it more incisive.”<sup>389</sup> In other words, while civil society self-forms and operates through the multiplicitous and spontaneously unifying interests of cellular market actors, it also faces its counteraction and destruction at the hands of those same cancerous egoistic impulses. Ultimately, Foucault implies that the restless money form and the market it serves could be the downfall of the ensnaring mode of neoliberal governance: “...the more we move towards an economic state, the more, paradoxically, the constitutive bond of civil society is weakened and the more the individual is isolated by the economic bond he has with everyone and anyone.” Hanging by precarious suspensions, the very structure of neoliberal society is characterized by its swaying under the perilous footfall of its disassociated travelers. Essential to this civil society, Foucault explains, is “a spontaneous synthesis within which the economic bond finds its place, but which this same economic bond continually threatens.”<sup>390</sup> In other words, Foucault’s analysis of neoliberalism implies that the very source of Durkheim’s panic—the ascetic and dissociative hedonism of the market—is the key to the revolutionary undoing of stifling structures of power which reside today in civil society.

In his book *Sync: The Emerging Science of Spontaneous Order*, Strogatz adds nuance to the simplified dichotomy of entropy and emergence.<sup>391</sup> Chaos, he clarifies, describes a system that, much like money or the whims of an ascetic market actor, is predictable in the short term, but entirely unpredictable in the long run. A ubiquitous

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>391</sup> Steven Strogatz, *Sync: The Emerging Science of Spontaneous Order* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2003), 184.

example of the butterfly effect, money and the hedonistic decisions it enables defy order because their ultimate outcomes bear almost no grounding in their starting points. Thus, these forces of chaos, though ruled on the small scale by legible “deterministic laws” like value, ultimately deny legibility on the scale of the larger system, as the infinite potentialities they store outpace any linear predictions or comprehensible imagination of time.<sup>392</sup> This thesis has attempted to argue that this illegibility to governance instigated by the money form and the unregulated market is not only desirable, but also possible and present now in the form of contemporary fashion. The term chaos, however, as well as the notion of an atomistic, dissociated, and self-less market of actors, may raise doubts over the viability of any meaningful or effective large-scale revolutionary action. As interpellated subjects, we have been socialized into an epistemology that values and cannot see beyond intersubjective connections and the collectives they produce as the route of any significant movement. If Bersani advocates for no interpersonal “knowing,” if money installs a system of calculated relationality based on “indifference and balance between all other phenomena in the world,” if Durkheim insists that a cacophony of individual pursuits ensures that “all classes contend among themselves because no established classification any longer exists,” and, finally, if this chaos negates any imagining of a future, how might change occur?<sup>393</sup>

The answer, Strogatz might reveal, is in the strange and fluid formations that may emerge through disorder, a phenomena he describes as “synchronized chaos.”

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<sup>392</sup> Strogatz, *Sync*, 188.

<sup>393</sup> Bersani, “Sociability and Cruising,” 22; Simmel, *Philosophy of Money*, 517; Durkheim, *Suicide*, 253.

This synchrony is not rhythmic like the pace-making beats of heart cells, nor stagnant like the refracted light of a rainbow. Rather, it is a mass motion that coalesces and morphs randomly over time without a leader, stabilizing supervision, or meaningful social adhesive. In his TED talk, Strogatz shows footage of large schools of fish and flocks of birds that group together in one restlessly undulating amoeba-like formation. Strogatz explains, “These are not particularly intelligent creatures, and yet...they exhibit beautiful ballets....For a long time, biologists were puzzled by this behavior, wondering how it could be possible. We're so used to choreography giving rise to synchrony. These creatures are not choreographed.” To elaborate on this mystical synchrony, he cites a computer model that has captured the unpredictable movements of a single bird or fish in a school or flock. Though, as is the nature of a chaotic system, the long-term trajectory of one of these animals is unforeseeable, their movement at each instant is governed by a determined set of parameters: “First, all the individuals are only aware of their nearest neighbors. Second, all the individuals have a tendency to line up. And third, they're all attracted to each other, but they try to keep a small distance apart.” Applied to each individual, the result is a spontaneous swarm. Strogatz reminds his audience that this a selfish and disconnected formation that emerges due to converging individual instincts of self-preservation:

...although it looks as if each individual is acting to cooperate, what's really going on is a kind of selfish Darwinian behavior. Each is scattering away at random to try to save its scales or feathers. That is, out of the desire to save itself, each creature is following these rules, and that leads to something that's safe for all of them. Even though it looks like they're thinking as a group, they're not.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> Strogatz, “The Science of Sync.”

It is this group action, devoid of essentializing or homogenizing collective purpose and stuck in an infinite present, that emerges spontaneously from the chaos of the market and that I contend is visible in the dispersed form of the fashion trend. The limiting parameters at the micro level of this system—the value of money and commodities, the unhindered narcissism of its players—give way to a revolutionary swarm, in which individual actors remain illegible to the subjective forces of governance as they act on self-effacing narcissism and react to fleeting, localized, and shallow contact with others. Freed from the moralizing social limits put in place by the left, as well as the stabilizing counter-movements of civil society, life in the unregulated market gives way to a new kind of sociability, one in which eludes categories of identification, methods of subordination, and collectivizing progressive teleologies. In descending into the realm of the authorless market, fashion has reverted to civil society's original sin and counter-defining force. As such, the fashion fad's randomly emergent momentums work, not simply to modulate the predetermined future of the social, but rather to subvert its very ontology by instilling an infinitely ephemeral, hedonistically pleasurable present.

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