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Article

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economic sociology_the european electronic newsletter

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Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies (MPIfG), Cologne

Suggested Citation: Mears, Ashley (2013) : Working it in the fashion market, economic sociology_the european electronic newsletter, ISSN 1871-3351, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies (MPIfG), Cologne, Vol. 15, Iss. 1, pp. 22-28

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/156023>

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Working It in the Fashion Market

By Ashley Mears

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In Midtown New York, beneath the neon glare of Times Square, a casting director, let's call her Joss, sits in her small office, trying to figure out which young woman among a global pool of thousands of fashion models she would like to call into her office for an audition, and eventually, for a photo-shoot in a prestigious fashion magazine. She scans her computer screen full of girls' images, pulling up pages of model agency websites and fashion blogs, opening emails loaded with girls' images from around the world. Her office is similarly plastered in pictures of girls – above her desk, neat rows of Polaroid pictures run along the walls, mostly images of models' headshots or profiles, some full-length body shots, some smiling, some staring out blankly at Joss' desk. After taking a Polaroid, Joss pencils notes into the margins, including the girl's name, age, height, and travel schedule. She keeps track of models around the world through these Polaroids, she explains: "I usually put up girls that I feel are right for us on the wall."

But what is right, and how do cultural producers know such an ineffable thing? When I met with Joss for an interview while researching my dissertation, which I later published as a book *Pricing Beauty* (2011)¹, I wanted to know what it was that she was looking for in all those pictures, and how a Polaroid travels in and out of her office, and ultimately, how a client like herself makes the decision to choose any given model for the pages of her magazine. In the fashion modeling market, models are a type of aesthetic good because of their high aesthetic and symbolic value, which must be converted into economic value in what Joanne Entwistle has dubbed the "aesthetic economy" (Entwistle 2009). In the fashion model market, a model's "look" – a combination of personality and physicality – is available for rent to "clients," including editors like Joss, as well as fashion designers, photographers, and stylists seeking to hire models and use their images for advertising. Model agents, called "bookers," broker the trade, in exchange for a charge of 20% commission from both the model and the client.

For an economic sociologist, Joss' job poses questions at the intersection of culture and markets: her job is professional tastemaking – that is, she enacts taste decisions on a day-to-

day basis. By choosing fashion models to appear in her magazine, she is declaring that a particular model's look is socially as well as economically valuable. This is the puzzle posed by the fashion model market: looks are a matter of subjective evaluation, and since this is fashion, evaluations are constantly changing. With fuzzy definitions of worth, why does any model succeed or fail?

Success in cultural production markets like fashion modeling might on the surface appear to be a matter of blind luck or pure genius. But luck is never blind, nor does genius work alone. Behind every winner in a winner-take-all market like fashion modeling, there is a complex, organized production process, which hinges on a variety of different types of work performed by multiple actors, often rendered totally invisible to market outsiders. The tastemaker's dilemma – economic calculation under uncertainty – hits one of the central problems of economic sociology: How does economic exchange happen in the absence of clear standards for good exchange? Or, as Jens Beckert has posed it, what do we do when we do not know what is best to do (1996)? Like other cultural producers – in music, art, books and film markets for example – bookers and clients cannot rely on standard measurable characteristics to discriminate worth between models' looks. This is one of the defining characteristics of creative industries: nobody knows which goods will be successful (Caves 2000). Pricing becomes a particularly troublesome endeavor for cultural producers, because in these contexts there is no clear correlation between price and quality.

What I learned through years of observing and interviewing people like Joss is that participating in such a market requires considerable social and emotional work. Below, I show two types of work performed within such an uncertain market setting: the work of models and the work of market intermediaries, the bookers and clients. As models work to become marketable looks, they struggle to redefine the precarious terms of their labor. Meanwhile, the intermediaries try to game chance in the market by marshaling their interactional skills and mobilizing social ties with each other. While on different sides of the body trade – as sellers, buyers and brokers – both of these types of labor are deployed to cope with uncertainty.

Ethnographers are well suited to document how markets work through direct participation and observation. I was able to observe the making of the model market from a position within it. As a graduate student in New York, I was recruited to work as a model for agencies there and in London. I did this work for two and a half years, attending castings, shows, and hanging out with agents. I followed up the ethnography with 110 interviews with models, bookers, and clients. My access to the backstage world of fashion enabled a first person and embodied perspective as I took up the challenges of becoming, and then selling, my own look.

This approach follows a rich ethnographic tradition in the sociology of work and organizations, as scholars have sought to understand, for instance, labor compliance in manufacture (Burawoy 1979), or how luxury services workers produce elite consumer sensibilities (Sherman 2007), or how boxers are matched in prize fighting (Wacquant 2004). For economic sociologists, such research can inductively reveal the subtle logics and tacit rules that make markets work.

Seeing the Field

The work of modeling begins first with an orientation to the field of fashion itself. Fashion modeling, like other fields of cultural production, combine profit motives with artistic pursuits in a stratified way. Similar to Bourdieu's analysis of the literary field (1993), and Velthuis' study of art markets (2005), fashion modeling is stratified between an economically interested field of commercial or catalogue fashion, and an economically *disinterested* field of editorial fashion. This divide, like the division between mass-produced commercial art and avant-garde art, manifests in an ethos of "fashion as commerce" in the commercial realm but "fashion for fashion's sake" in the editorial realm.

In the commercial realm, models book jobs for catalogue houses and print and TV advertisements, produced to appeal to the masses – a case of large-scale production in Bourdieusian terms. In the editorial realm, models work in fashion shows and magazines, largely aimed at impressing other producers – a field of restricted production. This means that the types of looks vary between commercial and editorial models. Commercial models are described as "mainstream" or "classically pretty," sometimes even with references to the American heartland and all-time favorites like "apple pie." Editorial models, in contrast, have looks that will not resonate with the masses, but with other fashion insiders. Their looks are described as "edgy," meaning

they are on the cutting edge of fashion – not beautiful per se but with striking features that might be seen by field outsiders as strange or uncanny. To understand this editorial look, bookers and clients train their eyes by constantly scanning magazines and blogs. Many have studied art and fashion history at elite art schools and they further train their eyes by immersing themselves in fashionable urban scenes, like bars of Soho or the Meatpacking District of New York and Hoxton Square in London.

When creating catalogues or television commercials, producers pay explicit attention to consumer demographics, sales records, and feedback from consumers to know if they are getting it right. Editorial producers, for instance those casting Fashion Week shows and magazine shoots, have less measurable feedback, since they are in the business of generating hype and buzz for companies with their uses of edgy models. This translates into greater artistic freedom for editorial producers, but with greater freedom of choice comes greater uncertainty. Because editorial producers are out to brand fashion companies by breaking open new ideas of edgy looks, they are faced with a rather daunting set of questions, season after season: What is the next fashionable look? Who is edgy in just the right way? Coming back to Joss' dilemma: what is the "right" kind of face, and how do you know? The world of editorial fashion production is what Patrik Aspers has conceptualized as a "status market," since it lacks rubrics to measure product value independent of its actors (2009). Or as Lucien Karpik has outlined, editorial models exemplify a market for "singularities," those goods and services that evade standard economic analysis because they are multidimensional, incommensurable, and of ambiguous quality (2010). By comparison, the commercial market has less uncertainty because it has more measurable feedback in the form of consumer behavior. Choosing a commercial model is a relatively straightforward task.

Because of its distance to the artistic side of fashion, the commercial realm is also regarded as the less prestigious end of the fashion market. And here's a lesson from Bourdieu on the field of cultural production: as a general rule, the credit attached to any cultural product tends to decrease with the increasing size and social spread of its audience. Hence the lower value, perceived or real, attached to commercial models. Visually, we can picture fashion models as grouped along class hierarchies and their corresponding dress codes; there is the blue chip "editorial" model in Prada and Gucci on one board, and the commercial middle classes donned in big-box chain labels on the other.

In what seems like a paradox, editorial models are generally lower-paid than their lower-status commercial counterparts. In fact, some of the most prestigious jobs pay the smallest sums of money. The prestigious magazine *Vogue* magazine pays first-time models just \$150 a day, and the celebrated Fashion Week shows are typically low-paid, or paid in “trade,” meaning bartered gifts of clothing. By contrast, catalogues are the bread-and-butter of a modeling agency, with day rates for shoots starting at \$1,000 a day for new models, peaking at \$20,000 a day for top models, and averaging about \$3,000 a day for those in-between. Catalogue work is steady income for models and agents, though it is perceived as less exciting by models, bookers and clients alike.

However, editorial jobs, because of their high status in the field, reward models and their agents with symbolic capital which will translate, so they hope, into better and bigger jobs for models in the long-term. With more prestigious bookings in her biography, a model can command higher fees from commercial clients, and she may then be able to book a cosmetics or fragrance campaign, considered the occupational jackpot because such jobs are both well paid (starting from \$20,000) and very prestigious. Such lucrative campaigns, however, almost always go to models on the editorial side of the market, since they have accrued enough status in the field to be recognizable as both culturally and economically valuable.

At the time of my research, this field configuration between editorial and commercial was just beginning to be formed into TV buzzwords by Tyra Banks on “America’s Next Top Model.” I discovered the split-market not from watching reality TV, but by stepping into the field. Modeling agencies tend to differentiate their models into separate “boards” of editorial and commercial looks, each connected to a loosely distinct network of bookers and clients, and boards are physically separated by seating arrangements within agency offices.

I discovered through practice the symbolic esteem associated with editorial work. When I booked a high-profile designer show for Fashion Week (which I later learned would pay in trade, or gifts of clothing), I was congratulated upon walking into the agency. A request casting (also unpaid) for a major editorial client required the close attention of four bookers, each giving me wardrobe advice before the appointment. In contrast, a typical catalogue job that paid \$2,000 (a significant and celebration-worthy sum to my mind) received no kudos, and the bookers offered no preparation for the casting.

Bookers and models must also orient themselves to the paradoxical payments in high fashion production. An agent who books steady money for catalogues may feel less socially relevant than a booker who makes little money but secures high-status magazine covers. The logic of working for free also requires adjustments on the part of models, as many of them enter the field expecting supermodel-sized salaries. In interviews, models spoke of having to learn the value of the unpaid editorial or fashion show, and spoke of such work as investments or advertisements for themselves and their own long-term games of accruing enough symbolic capital to “cash out” with higher day rates in the commercial realm. Or so they hoped. Such adjustments to the field do not come easy or automatically, and models spoke of being constantly disappointed to see their bank account statements, despite doing what fashion-insiders considered “good jobs.” One model explained her difficulty of asking for help from her parents, who couldn’t understand how she was so busy working yet always broke.

Here we see the picture of a field that is polarized into a commercial and a pure, i.e., economically disinterested, realm. This pure editorial pole typifies more clearly a market in singularities, because it is characterized by greater uncertainty, and as such, models and intermediaries in the editorial realm must work to manage greater risks and higher stakes in pursuit of the next big look. Once these editorial participants are acclimated to the field, they can engage the work of performing and selling looks. To illustrate such work, I center this essay around the daily grinds of editorial models, their agents, and their clients.

Working for Chance

When I sat down with models for interviews to ask how and why their looks are traded, they typically drew upon discourses of luck and fate to explain their careers. They readily admit that finding success, and indeed any level of employment, is a matter of something called luck, karma, subjective appeal, destiny, or fate. Several models reported that success is a matter of “timing,” and being in “the right place at the right time.” One woman used the cultural production literature truism of a “crap game” to describe her career trajectory, echoing the words of one successful music producer’s memoir of the entertainment industry (Bielby and Bielby 1994). Success in modeling is both very unequal, skewed with few winners and many contenders, and it is very unpredictable since it hinges on just a handful of people: bookers and clients. While fashion models’ labor has been analyzed as a case of aesthetic labor and affective

labor, I focus here on one kind of work models perform that crucially enables this winner-take-all market to function, and that is models' acceptance and redefinition of chance.

Chance figures prominently in discourses of work in the Post-Fordist economy (Lash and Urry 1994). As cultural meanings, "soft knowledge," signs, and aesthetics have moved from the margins to the center of production in urban economies, contemporary capitalism demands a much different type of self-fashioned worker than the factory worker of generations past. Now, so-called "precarious labor" characterizes a greater share of workers facing insecurity, unpredictability and general disposability (Kalleberg 2009). Workers in the new economy must be flexible, adaptive to quick changes in the market, and ever more self-reflexive in the absence of clear or corporate guidelines and schedules. Furthermore, in a culture of constant reinvention of careers and dwindling job loyalty, one's work biography is losing its value, and past performance is no longer a meaningful predictor for future stability.

Within these new contours of what work is, we have arrived at higher expectations of what work *should* be. Twenty-first century discourses promote work as something that should be personally satisfying; it's what we rely on for self-fulfillment. It is not an activity one *does* for a living, but an integral part of who one is – one's lifestyle and personal ethos (Ross 2003).

The model market offers a window into understanding how workers come to accept, and even seek out, the precariat lifestyle. Both the promises and the risks of this new economy are prominent in the "cool" industries like fashion, entertainment, and advertising. Part of what makes work in these industries appealing is their aura of cool, creativity, and freedom from bureaucratic organization strictures. This "entrepreneurial laborer" manages her *own* schedule and opportunities, time, dress code, and attitude (Neff, Wissinger and Zukin 2005). Free of traditional structures and organizational hierarchies that steer careers, cultural producers have artistic-style careers based on short-term per-project contractual relationships (Menger 1999). In years past, most people spent a rather long time preparing for their jobs with schooling and training, a small time trying to get jobs in application and interview processes, and then a long time doing them. Models, conversely, require no job preparation. They spend relatively small, if potentially highly paid, amounts of time actually working at jobs. And they are almost permanently engaged in trying to find work. One model I interviewed explained that he wakes up at 6:30

every morning to email his various agencies around the world, line up international modeling trips and jobs, keep in touch with advertising contacts and social networks, and update his self-designed website. He did this with a kind of go-getter optimism that many models mobilized to face their dim prospects in a precarious career. Such work offers the promise, however fallacious, and the connotation, however unfulfilled, of a work life less ordinary; it's precarious, sure, but it beats a dull nine to five, models commonly explained in our interviews.

Given the inverted relationship between earnings and prestige explained above, models are often working for jobs that do not pay, but offer prestige and the possibility of leading to paying jobs. A Fashion Week show for a prestigious New York designer may generate much excitement among bookers but it is likely to pay in trade, if anything, for approximately four hours of work at the show. Walking for a prestigious designer hardly guarantees future employment. But because models (and their demanding bookers) are keenly aware that a "big break" can come at any moment, they cannot easily turn down such opportunities, and are thus prompted to accept every job and attend every casting despite meager and unlikely rewards.

During my fieldwork as a model, I discovered an ethos of embracing risk, rather than averting it, in pursuit of the seductive stakes of becoming a "winner" in the market. At one point during my research, after booking a fashion show with a top designer, I too considered putting my studies on hold to pursue a modeling career full-time, a fantasy that quickly abated when, just a few weeks later, my bookings slowed and the fleeting interest in my look seemed to have all but evaporated.

To manage the long odds, models adopt the entrepreneurial disposition of the "enterprising self," taking personal responsibility for their success or failure in the market. They become entrepreneurs of the self, working on their own images, bodies and emotions. In interviews, models frequently talked about shooting unpaid editorials and walking for free on catwalks with an optimistic air of self-investment. Editorial work, they explained, is "advertising for myself." Working "for free" is recast as working "for myself," and building a portfolio is likened to building one's self-image, which models recognize is vital for securing future work. Echoing management guru Tom Peter, models spoke of being their own boss and marketing their own "brand called 'You,'" all of which requires personal commitment and

individual responsibility to be the best “free agent in an economy of free agents” (Peters 1997).

In addition to the seductive possibility of catching a big break, the work of modeling provides daily small thrills and pleasures, of for instance, performing a gendered self, embodying the social ideal of beauty, feeling an adrenaline rush before the catwalk lights up, or receiving the praise of a booker when a magazine spread is celebrated in the office. Other models simply love fashion, and they study clothes and poses, taking pride in creating editorial looks. At times I came to think of modeling as a workplace that blurs the boundaries between work and leisure. It is a productive type of consumption, what we might think of as work consumption (Aspers 2005).

The flipside, however, of this enterprising self, is an unwillingness to recognize the hidden costs of entrepreneurial labor. It is a lonely and endless endeavor to work on the self. As Entwistle and Wissinger have noted (2006), freelancing requires that the model be “always on,” always promoting herself, always managing her body and its appearance, always dressing stylishly: there is no rest for the worker who’s career is in her own hands (and body). As work and leisure blur into the ongoing production of the enterprising self, working hours are ever more difficult to calculate. They are potentially unlimited, especially now in an era in which bookers encourage models to cultivate a public personae with every tweet, status update, and Instagram pic.

There is a dark side to embracing this kind of work. With new freedoms come new opportunities for failure, and the culture industries are rife with them. First is obligation to manage market risks and failures oneself. Models must cope with unpredictability and rejection on many levels and sources: at casting calls, where they are routinely and sometimes publicly dismissed; in their agencies, where they are subject to harsh criticism or, at other times, vague feedback; and over the course of their careers, which are marked with close calls and near misses of those big breaks, all set within a narrow window of opportunity which values the female body between ages 13 and roughly 24. Models are subject to constant and unavoidable rejection; as in most sales occupations, attempts to sell something are far more likely to result in failures than success. Because models are selling their look – both their physical beauty and their personalities – rejection stings as intimately personal.

The cultural economy caters to workers’ similar desires to live up to modern discourses of work as an activity that

should be emotionally and personally rewarding, in addition to – and even at the expense of – work as financial security. Angela McRobbie has found among designers significant financial hardship in order to maintain a pleasurable work experience (2004). Among fashion models, the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Census reports that models earn on average about \$32,000 income per year, far below the household median. Thus the so-called cool industries propel workers’ own desires for a particular type of work. The constant readjustments of expectations with market realities are necessary for the fashion market to attract, and retain, a labor supply of young women eager to accept these terms of being in the business.

Tastemaking as Interactional Work

While models come to embrace the market as a game of chance, their agents and clients are engaged in another kind of work, the very social work of tastemaking, in order to reach a collective consensus on the value of the look.

To return to the picture-plastered office of the magazine editor Joss: What makes Joss pluck one Polaroid from among the hundreds on her wall? What does any client look for in such a vast editing process, and how do bookers know which models to supply to them?

Though we talked for almost an hour, Joss, like almost every client I interviewed, could at best explain that she “just knows” what she’s looking for. She recognizes it when she “sees” it. She just gets a sense if the girl is *right* or not, she says: “It’s just a matter of, you know, developing your eye and seeing who you like and who you think is gonna be right. So you throw it to the wall and see what sticks.”

When I interviewed bookers and clients, they explained that a model rises above the pack on the whims of pure individual taste. But as sociologists, we know that much more is at work in guiding taste, and indeed if you look at catwalk records on Style.com, you’ll see a huge convergence of fashion houses’ taste. In any given show season, there are hundreds of models who walk the catwalk; almost half walk just once, while a handful of models like current superstar Cara Delevingne may walk in dozens of shows (see Godart and Mears 2009). Thus another paradox emerges: if models are chosen according to personal taste, how does this convergence happen? It’s not just a matter of luck to land at the top of the pile, because behind-the-scenes, social processes among bookers and clients is at play to parse out winners

from the rest, to add value to looks, and to shape the direction of the market.

When looking for the right look, clients tend to gravitate toward models that other high-status clients have chosen. The importance of status signaling is an established finding in other markets in which quality differences are hard to figure out, in markets like art, jewelry, and wine, for instance, status helps people with the problem of uncertainty: when faced with lots of options from a similar pool of candidates, buyers make their choices by looking to what other buyers are choosing. In a key contribution to economic sociology, Harrison White noted that market niches are formed by producers primarily looking to each other for a sense of how to orient to consumers; they don't look only to consumers. In the editorial end of fashion, where mass consumers are several steps removed from fashion shows and magazine spreads, producers keep an eye on each other as they assess models' looks.

Producers do look to each other, and this does not happen in abstract space, but in the physical space of urban sociability. In interviews, I learned that fashion producers hang out with each other. Much of the work of being a booker involves building relationships with clients, at dinners, bars, and at one point in New York, a downtown karaoke party where clients were invited to have fun on the agency's expense account. Clients and bookers are embedded in networks together. They travel together. They date each other. And when they bump into each other in Soho or the Meatpacking District of New York, where fashion offices are clustered, they exchange pleasantries and also tips on who is hot this season, and who is not. The fashion world is fairly insular, and it need be, for fashion insiders make it their business to know the pulse of what each other is doing and thinking.

Because of the uncertainty and the highly subjective valuation among singularities, the market for editorial models works in part because participants are equipped with what Lucien Karpik, in his work on singularities, calls "judgment devices" – mechanisms to render transactions possible, such as guidebooks and critics, and rankings, brand identities, and networks, all of which provide buyers with the credible knowledge needed to make reasonable choices. For clients to make their selections of models, they rely on a set of informal judgment devices, what Karpik identifies as network sources of information (p. 45), and these take the shape of gossip and information sharing, which takes a good deal of working fashion's social scene. Clients who are

outside the network, like photographers and stylists in the emerging fashion markets of China, are more likely to look to formal ranking systems of models, such as the website www.models.com, which tabulates models' bookings into a rank-order hierarchy, including multiple Top Ten lists, like "Top 10 Newcomers," described on the site as a "curated lineup of the most in-demand newcomers in the business." This suggests that different types of judgment devices are employed by different segments of buyers, in this case because a geo-social divide makes network information less accessible to remote clients, who must rely on publicly available rankings.

To break into the high-status circuit of clients, a model needs to secure an initial push in the market, and that comes from her agents, who strategize how to place their best models with the right clients, and at the right time. No model will get far, for instance, without a booker who both believes in her and who is sufficiently connected to high-status clients. While the work of choosing models looks like the individual enactment of taste, it is only made possible by enormous efforts to insert oneself into a social field of fashion to the point of understanding how fellow fashion producers think, and what they also feel is right.

Working the Market for Research

If we think of markets as composed of a set of coordinating actors, key questions then guide an inquiry to how they function: who are the important actors? What field logics orient their actions? What strategies and practices do they employ as they enter exchange? Such inquiries take us into the mundane everyday routines of making markets, from the organizational practices that sustain firms to the hopes and desires of would-be buyers and sellers. When examining the everyday work of making the fashion model market, we find the mental energies expended by models to both cope with precariousness and to redefine what sociologists call "bad jobs" into highly desirable ones. We also find the lively social work of intermediaries, engaged in understanding each other's taste as a way to develop and enact their own "eye" for looks. Though such work remains invisible in the pages of a magazine or on the catwalk, it is immensely consequential to the shape of the fashion model market.

Ethnography is an ideal tool for documenting the work of making markets. Even for field insiders, such work is often misrecognized, in this case, as mere luck, individual taste, or natural beauty. Much of this work is also tacit, with buyers and sellers relying on a "feel" for what is right, and having

limited vocabularies to express what they mean in interviews or surveys. Participant observation allows researchers to tap into the full range of everyday, tacit and embodied work that sustains market exchange.

Ashley Mears is assistant professor of sociology at Boston University. She studies the intersections between culture and markets, by exploring how people assign value to things, and by focusing on how gender, race, and class inequalities inform the production and change of culture. Her works include her book *Pricing Beauty*. The making of a fashion model (Berkeley University Press, 2011) and several articles in peer-review journals such as *Poetics and* .

Endnotes

¹See this issue for a book review.

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