Beauty: Triggering the Sociological Imagination with a Webcomic

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Abstract

The standard academic publication is often not an effective way to trigger the sociological imagination. This essay discusses an alternative means to invite people to think sociologically: a webcomic. In a collaboration between a sociologist and a team of comic artists, we created a webcomic (https://www.erccomics.com) to highlight insights from a research project on the social shaping of beauty standards in the transnational modelling industry. In the making of this *Beauty* comic, three "translations" had to be done: from analytical to narrative, from verbal to visual and from conceptual to concrete. We discuss how these translations were done and what we learned from this, including broader implications of these translations for (social) science communication, the public relevance of sociological research, the usefulness of thinking in different modalities and the fraught relationship between standard academic modes of communication and the sociological imagination.

Keywords: Beauty; Sociology; Comics; Science Communication; Visuality.

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It is the political task of the social scientist — as of any liberal educator — continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals. It is his [sic] task to display in his work — and, as an educator, in his life as well — this kind of sociological imagination. And it is his purpose to cultivate such habits of mind among the men and women who are publicly exposed to him.

C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, p. 188

1   Introduction: Making a Sociological Comic

Every day, we see dozens, even hundreds of images of beautiful people — in advertisements, on billboards, in clips, TV series and on social media. For us, humans of the early twenty-first century, this visual culture with its constant barrage of beauty is so mundane that we tend to forget how new this phenomenon is. The fashion and modelling industry is the first institution devoted exclusively to the production of images of beautiful people, and it dates back less than a century. Since its rise to global prominence, many have argued that this fashion and modelling industry has affected not only our beauty standards, but also our perception of social worth. As Heather Widdows (2018) has argued, beauty has become a "moral imperative". As the opportunities for improving one's appearance increased, and the images presented by the fashion industries became ever more idealized and perfect, beauty standards became more demanding. For women and men, young and old, it has become more important to look good — if not beautiful, at least slim, fit and well-groomed. Thus, "good looks" have become an increasingly important form of capital — and thus an increasingly important source of inequality. The beauty and fashion industries have emerged as a central institution for the diffusion and legitimation of this "aesthetic capital" (Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Anderson et al., 2010; Mears, 2014).

In 2010, the first author embarked on a study of the social shaping of beauty standards in the European fashion and modelling field. In 2015, toward the end of the project, the "beauty team" received an invitation to join ERCcOMICS, an ERC project that made webcomics based on ERC-funded research. The second author was part of this team. The creation of the Beauty webcomic was an exciting opportunity to experiment with the dissemination of scholarly insights to wider audiences. The topic of beauty is close to many people's hearts — but maybe not to the heart of most academics. Traditional forms of academic publishing — papers, articles, books, talks — are ill-suited for sharing research insights with the people who care most about the topic. As human beauty is primarily a visual experience, and contemporary beauty culture is a visual culture, our findings were difficult to translate into the main vehicle of academic communication: words. Thus, a comic seemed like the perfect way to share our research with the world.

In this article we reflect on the experience of converting a sociological study into a visual, narrative form. For us, this was a collaborative learning experience, guided by a double question. First, the webcomic aimed to answer the original research question: How are beauty standards socially shaped in the transnational fashion and modelling industry; and how does this impact everyday beauty standards? To answer this question via a webcomic required us to think through both form and content: how can we convey the answers to this question in a narrative, visual form with real people, a beginning and an ending, images rather than words, and concrete situations rather than abstract insights?

However, this collaboration sparked a second question. This question started out as the traditional question of science communication: how can we share our findings and insights about beauty standards with non-academics? Along the way, it became more like the meta-question of science communication: how can we make people think about our research questions? How can we invite people along in this process of discovery? How can we spark people's sociological imagination (Mills, 1959), making them reflect on personal experiences of beauty as embedded in larger social realities, related these "personal troubles" with beauty into "public issues".

2   The Beauty Project: Towards a Comparative Sociology of Beauty

Despite much critique and speculation about the role of the beauty, fashion and modelling industries, there has been remarkably little research on the social shaping of beauty standards in, and by, these industries. The BEAUTY project aimed to develop a comparative sociology of beauty: a theory of the social creation of aesthetic standards, as they are applied to the bodies and faces of women and men. By comparing these standards within and across nations the project aimed to identify central mechanisms and institutions through which such standards are developed and disseminated. With a team of researchers, we studied this in six European countries: France, Italy and the UK — each country home to a global fashion capital — and three peripheral countries: the Netherlands, Poland and Turkey. In this project, we "followed" the process by which these standards were produced and disseminated from the producers who create (images of) beauty, to the fashion models who embody beauty, to the fashion magazines that represent beauty, and finally to the "average people" who consume beauty.

The project developed a sociological perspective on human beauty — and, consequently, also on human ugliness (the latter became an important theme in the webcomic). Most scholars of human beauty have looked for universal characteristics of beauty. Researchers in human biology and evolutionary psychology, the fields in which the study of human beauty is most developed, have identified commonalities across cultures (Etcoff, 2011; Foo, Simmons & Rhodes, 2017). These studies generally show that beauty is related to signs of health and fertility: facial and bodily symmetry, a healthy look with clear skin and shiny hair, a youthful appearance, and well-developed secondary gender characteristics like strong jaws and wide shoulders for men and a narrower face, narrow waist and wide hips for women. From this perspective, beauty and ugliness are opposite categories. Ugliness is the absence of beauty: old, asymmetrical, unhealthy, unfeminine or unmasculine.

The sociological approach to beauty developed in this project does not negate the importance of such biological or psychological factors. Our research highlights show universals in the preference for beautiful faces and bodies. Most importantly, the power of beauty itself: people's strong desire to seek out beauty, and the strong effect it has on all of us. But also: the preference for youth, for forms of beauty that radiate health, sexual attraction, and (in some cases) strong femininity and masculinity. However, such universal theories do not help us understand the dominant social position of the fashion and modelling industry, or the quickly changing, sometimes unusual and near-ugly beauty styles that this field produces and promotes.

Our project draws attention to three other important social mechanisms in the shaping of our beauty standards. First, the universal human ambition to show one's allegiance to a specific group (tribe, class, community) through aesthetics, including adapting one's appearance to culturally specific standards that may seem outlandish to others (Hebdige, 1979; Wohl, 2015). The flip side of this mechanism is distinction: through these standards, we show who we belong with, and who we are not (Bourdieu, 1984). Second, the central human tendency to

adopt (aesthetic) standards and practices from people and institutions with more status (Simmel, 1957; Aspers & Godart, 2013). Consequently, beauty and appearance is also deeply entangled with social inequality. First, beauty itself functions as a form of "capital" (Anderson et al., 2010; Hakim, 2010). But as people imitate high status styles, status also comes with the power to define what counts as beautiful. Thus, beauty standards are not only biology, a simple reflection of our inner mammal. They fall fully in the domain of sociology: they reflect the group we belong to, the group we do not belong to, and the high status group we want to belong to.

The third social mechanism is institutionalization. In today's complex, globalized and mediated societies, standards are shaped both by face-to-face interactions and by institutions like education, media, or the fashion field. However, such institutions come with inbuilt social variations. People develop social allegiances not to "education" or "fashion" but to positions within institutional fields: people identify with a certain magazine, brand or style that they look up to or identify with (Bourdieu, 1983). Institutions like the media, fashion and modelling industries produce, spread and legitimate aesthetic standards that reflect wide-spread cultural repertoires of evaluation (Lamont, 1992), and existence senses of "groupness" (Wohl, 2015). Because of the durability of institutions, aesthetic standards are preserved and diffused as people come and go. Institutional standards thus acquire a persistence that makes them as influential and "real in their consequences" as biological mechanisms.

The beauty standards of the fashion industry, and of their publics, cannot be explained only from biology or psychology. Just a brief glance at a recent issue of high fashion magazines such as *Vogue* (or *Vague* as it became known in the comic) shows that the women and incidental men portrayed in these magazines are nothing like the evolutionary prototypes (van der Laan & Kuipers, 2016). Admittedly, they are young. But often they are so thin that their secondary gender characteristics are hardly noticeable. Although the 1990s fad "heroin chic" is over, contemporary high fashion models, with their pale skin and sunken cheeks, don't look particularly healthy. Their androgynous looks make them anything but clear specimens of fertile masculinity and femininity: female top models often have strong jaws and square faces, male high fashion models look frail and skinny. Thus, the fashion and modelling industries shape beauty standards that are specific to a certain time and place. Yet, they are experienced as true; this is what many people perceive as beauty, and try to emulate.

Our research project followed this social shaping of these aesthetic standards, from industry to everyday life. We started with an analysis of fashion field and the standards and practices of the people working in this fields, such as editors of fashion magazines, photographers, or bookers at modelling agencies (Kuipers, Chow & Van der Laan, 2014). A key insight of this phase was that fashion/modelling functions as an autonomous "art world" (Becker, 2008; Bourdieu, 1984), with its own standards, roles, rules and hierarchies. In this art world, the ambition to create "beauty" is mixed with the need to create novelty. Everybody in modelling is constantly on the lookout for "new faces" (Aspers, 2006; Mears, 2011). This is particularly true for high fashion, the more prestigious and autonomous pole of this fashion/modelling field, which sharply distinguishes itself from the less prestigious, more profitable commercial field. Because of the search for rarefied, unconventional forms of beauty, the standards of the (high) fashion field often differ considerable from everyday understandings of beauty. Moreover, the search for novelty make beauty standards time-specific: what was beautiful last year, has lost its luster today.

In a second step, PhD candidate Sylvia Holla (2016; 2020) examined how models "embody" these beauty standards. In her dissertation *Beauty, Work, Self* (2018) she analyzed the

"aesthetic labor" models perform to maintain the unrealistic (and often unhealthy) beauty standards. Holla's work shows a stark contrast between the high status of fashion models as "emblems of beauty" in society at large, and the lack of power and agency of these models within the fashion field. Despite all the changes in aesthetic standards, modelling reproduces an underlying beauty ideal of young, white, slim, middle-class femininity, thus upholding wider societal inequalities.

In a third step, PhD candidate Elise van der Laan looked at representations of beauty in fashion images in our six countries. In her dissertation *Why Fashion Models Don't Smile* (2015) she traces the crystallization of high fashion aesthetic from the 1980s until the 2010s. She shows that the trajectory of high fashion resembles the trajectory of art in the twentieth century: away from beauty that is directly understandable to everyone, pleasing to the senses and continuous with everyday life, towards avant-garde styles that negate everyday beauty, or even negates the idea of beauty itself. Thus, in the beauty industry, especially in high fashion, beauty is not the opposite of ugliness. Instead, the beauty standards of high fashion play a complicated game with everyday beauty standards and the more conventional standards of mainstream fashion. They negate the "pretty" aesthetics of mainstream magazines and advertising, where models look more like the evolutionary ideal: young, health, smiling, radiant. They also negate the "sexy" aesthetics of commercial magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health*: provocative, sexualized, exaggeratedly feminine or masculine.

In a final step, we looked at the evaluation of these representations by "average people", or the consumers of these images. To what extent do they share the beauty standards of the modelling industry? For this, we developed a new research method, the visual Q-sort (Kuipers, 2015). In all countries of our study, a stratified sample of "average" people were asked to sort four sets of 25 images of male and female faces and bodies, from most to least beautiful. These images were sorted on a pre-defined grid, which means that people (often without realizing) assigned scores to each picture, from -4 (least beautiful) to +4 (most beautiful). Simultaneously, people were asked to think out loud while sorting, and to explain their reasons for their ranking. These interviews thus yielded both quantitative mappings of beauty tastes, and qualitative information on people's repertoires of evaluation of beauty.

This Q-study showed that although there are people whose beauty tastes are very similar to the standards of (segments of) the modelling and beauty industry, many people do not accept or share the beauty ideals of the fashion field. What we did find, instead, was that beauty standards are strongly associated with social background characteristics, notably education, age and urbanity. Consequently, beauty standards function as cultural capital, separating those with discerning highbrow standards from those with less prestigious tastes. However, we also found that almost all informants are embedded in an "beauty regime" that tells them beauty is important and worth pursuing, and that a failure to care for one's looks or to look bad is stigmatized and penalized (Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Mears, 2014; Vandebroeck, 2016). The vast majority of informants were comfortable and practiced evaluators of beauty, with a wide array of repertoires of evaluation of beauty to praise those who looked good, and to (harshly) judge and stigmatize women and men who did not conform to their beauty standards. So, while beauty standards were not universal, what is (near) universal is the belief that people have to look good. In the production of this "beauty regime", the beauty, fashion, and modelling industries play a central — though not uniquely defining — role.

3 ERcCOMICS: Drawing Inspiration from Science to Tell Stories and Create Images

The ERCcOMICS project was a joint project of La Bande Destinée, a Paris-based communication agency, and the Sorbonne University. Funded by the European Research Council, it ran from 2015 until 2019. During this period, 18 webcomics were produced, each based on a project of a European scholar funded in the framework of the Horizon2020 program. The comics covered topics from pregnancy among refugee women and the roots of hatha yoga to cosmic dust and computer security. ERCcOMICS describes itself as "a creative and ambitious project that exploits the power of webcomics to innovate the way European science is communicated."[1]

The idea behind ERCcOMICS was to explore visual narrative as tool for science education and communication. It aimed to make scientific subjects more accessible and more engaging for a wider audience through the use of metaphors and character-driven narratives. The potential of comics as an educational tool has been traditionally recognized (Sones, 1944). In the past decade, comics have been more systematically studied as a tool for classroom education (Aleixo & Norris, 2010; Hosler & Boomer, 2011). Recent studies have explored their application to science communication. For instance, in a review, Farinella (2018) summarizes the various cognitive mechanisms by which visual, narrative and metaphoric communication characteristic of comics can aid science communication. Friesen, Van Stan & Elleuche (2018) even present a methodology for creating scientific comics.

ERCcOMICS started with four projects including the Beauty project. These four original projects were nominated by the ERCcOMICS team, on the basis of their visual potential and their different research domains. The other initial projects included a biological project about lianas, a physics project about invisibility, and a computer science project about music and Artificial Intelligence — the latter particularly challenging and abstract topics.

The principal investigators were paired with writers, visual artists and specialists in science communication. The second author of this article was part of the ERCcOMICS team. Beside the making of comics, the ERCcOMICS team organized a series of outreach events, including lectures and TEDtalks with live drawing, roundtables and presentations at various universities, and presentations at comic fairs and meetings. Thus, the making of the comics came with a range of activities targeting different publics.

A central feature of the ERCcOMICS project was the foregrounding of artistic freedom. As the website announces: "We do not want to do traditional popularisation. We want to draw inspiration from science, tell stories and create images." After a first Skype meeting, Giselinde Kuipers (first author/PI) shared all materials related to the project with the team. These materials were scrutinized by the two people in charge of making the story, Fiammetta Ghedini (coordinator of the project, script writer, second author of this article, with a PhD in cognitive science) and Massimo Colella (art director, script writer, who wrote the script). These materials included scientific texts, like the proposal, publications and working papers, and the visual materials that we used in developing the project, including research instruments (such as the Q-sort images), data analysis figures, codebooks with examples and other "raw materials". In the comic, many of these visual materials make an appearance. For instance, the images shown in the lecture in Episode 1 are used in the Q-sort, and the editorial staff at *Vague* magazine look at scatterplots of the analysis of fashion photographs.

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1.   https://erccomics.com/about Consulted 6 December 2020.

Fiammetta Ghedini and Massimo Colella used these materials and the first conversation to create the concept and the story. This occurred largely outside of the influence sphere of Giselinde. Only after the main concept was formulated, Giselinde was invited to comment and think along. Thus, artistic freedom was at the heart of the project. After this, there were regular conversations about the storyline and the sociological ramifications of the story. This included a visit to Amsterdam, and a tour of the University buildings and its environment to ensure the setting of the comic was as realistic as possible.

The script of the "Beauty" webcomic was created by inventing characters corresponding and incarnating the sociological concepts of the research; in particular, the fashion industry is personified by the editorial team of a fashion magazine, *Vague*. A group of young students become aware of the sociological dynamics behind the sociology of beauty as they follow a university course with "Professor Kuipers". The cameo of Giselinde Kuipers in the webcomic during a lesson allows to convey some of the most abstract research concepts and gives the readers a knowledge base to follow the development of the story. The students decide to call themselves "anti-beautysts", and decide to stand up against the "moral imperative" of beauty, taking to the extreme consequences the sociological findings behind our research. Their storyline is intertwined with the editorial choices by the *Vague* editorialists who are, on the other hand, trying to artificially impose a new beauty standard on society.

The visuals were drawn by two artists who each took care of a different "world". Francesca Protopapa drew the Beautyst world of fashion magazines (Figure 1); Eleonora Antonioni drew the storyline of the Anti-Beautyst students (Figure 2). Thus, the form of the comic echoes the dual research question: how are beauty standards shaped in the beauty industry, and how does this affect everyday beauty standards? The contrast between the two worlds is signaled by distinct styles: a bold style with strong lines and cold blues for the fashion world, a more intimate style with finer lines and warmer, softer colors for the student world. In some images, both styles are combined, to show the meeting of these worlds (See Figure 2). At the end the worlds converge.

Figure 1: Protagonists and Drawing Style of the Fashion World

The webcomic consists of ten episodes that were released over the course of a year. For each episode, Giselinde was asked to comment before it was published, and to supply scientific commentary that was published along with the webcomic as "the science behind the comic".

Figure 2: Protagonists and Drawing Style of the "Student World" Juxtaposed with the Fashion World (Billboard)

Throughout the process, there was an intensive back-and-forth to think through the storylines, the characters and the real-world implications. Thus, the translation process from sociology to webcomic became a true collaboration as well as a joint learning process.

4 Making Sociology into a Comic: Three Moments of Translation

In making this comic, three "translations" had to be done: from analytical to narrative, from verbal to visual, and from conceptual to concrete.

4.1 Tell Stories: From Analytical to Narrative

The beauty webcomic is a fictional story with characters, a beginning and an end, and a conflict to drive the story. This insistence on narrative form is a defining feature of the ERCcOMICS project. All webcomics are stories, with genres varying from Sci-fi to travel story to realistic narrative. This translation from analytical to narrative was done by the ERCcOMICS team, who "dramatized" the research project, pitting against each other the Beautysts of the fashion industry, and a group of Amsterdam sociology students who after a lecture by a comic "Prof Kuipers" become "Antibeautysts".

The comic starts in a university classroom, where a drawn version of Giselinde is explaining "aesthetic capital": good looks as a resource that people can exploit and convert to other social advantages. She explains how the importance of looks has increased in today's media-saturated service economies, how beauty industries contribute to this, and how this reinforces social inequalities. In this lecture, as in the research project, issues of inequality and social justice are

presented in a rather dispassionate academic way. However, this distanced and value-free "academic habitus" is challenged in the webcomic — as it often was when we presented our research outside academia.

After the lecture, the focus shifts to four students who are visible struck by the injustice of the beauty regime. As they leave the lecture hall, one of them vandalizes a large billboard image, showing a familiar-looking advertisement for a brand called *Gior*. Their newly acquired sociological insight becomes a driver of action: the narrative has been set in motion. Each of the students personifies a different strategy in the quest to critique, transform, attack or undermine the beauty regime — with one of them, Daniel, choosing the most radical option.

In the second episode, we move from everyday beauty standards to the fashion industry, from cultural consumption to production and from one drawing style to another. We see the editors of fashion magazine *Vague* consulting the findings of the Beauty project and planning a competition for a new, non-beautiful, form of beauty: "the beauty of the future". This sets in motion the second storyline, based on sociological analyses of the highbrow art world. The quest for novel, anti-mainstream beauty standards becomes personified in the character of editor-in-chief Cecile Swernink, who is the embodiment of what sociologists call a "style entrepreneur" (Aspers, 2006).

Over the next episodes, these storylines unfold and eventually converge. Both the "beautysts" and the "antibeautysts" discover that changing society's understanding of beauty is not as easy as they hoped it would be. The beautysts discover that if they want to do something really new, they will have to make it themselves. The antibeautysts discover that earlier attempts to make beauty standards more just and less unequal have mostly strengthened the beauty regime; and that to change the beauty regime, they may need to give up their own belief in beauty. Both groups find that rethinking beauty requires radical thinking: a turn to ugliness. A series of dramatic twists and turns, including the appearance of a plastic surgeon with a nasty sense of humor, an escalating conflict in the group of friends and rising tensions in the editorial team at *Vague* leads to the meeting of both storylines. In the end Daniel undergoes plastic surgery in order to become "a man of intolerable ugliness". He ends up on the cover of *Vague*, which proudly announces that "BEAUTY days are numbered".

The translation from sociological analysis to (sociological-imbued) narrative was a three-step operation. First, the narrative personifies what sociologists call "field positions": beauty consumer; sociology student; fashion editor. Second, it dramatizes the central quests or aims related to these positions: to consume and embody beauty; to think through social mechanisms; to find new forms of beauty. The meeting of field positions and field logics creates the conflicts that drive the story.

The story shows a world where beauty is both an asset that is extremely valuable to those who have it (or who control it, which is not the same thing, cf. Mears, 2015), and something that is increasingly manageable and malleable. A magazine like *Vague* has first pick of the most beautiful and eager people, and while they cannot completely change what people think is beautiful, they exert significant influence on beauty standards and on public attention. Yet, they are trapped in a field logic that pushes them to increasingly radical, possibly unsustainable beauty ideals in their quest for novelty and attention. The students attempt to undermine the beauty regime, but they, too, find they are trapped: while critical of the system, they find they cannot give up on beauty. Daniel's friends refuse to follow his radical choice to withdraw from the beauty logic altogether. In the end, the extremes meet: Daniel's choice to give up on beauty takes him to the heart of the beauty industry and makes him a celebrity.

In the representation of the high-fashion world, we opted for exaggeration: taking real-life

mechanisms to the extreme. The dynamic to seek out increasingly strange forms of beauty not only leads to questionable ethics (as we did indeed observe in our research), but also renders the notion of beauty void: at some point, beauty becomes ugly and the other way around. The student storyline was more realistic in style and content. It revolves around a question that preoccupies many (social science) students: what can we do to change a system that creates inequality and oppression? Is it even possible to escape the system? The students even consult comic Giselinde — one of the moments where she was most directly involved in co-authoring the script. Embodying C. Wright Mills' formulation of the task of the educator to "translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals", she offers sociological reflections, Socratic questions and an admonition with dramatic consequences: "But before thinking about other people's vision of beauty you should start changing your own. I mean, just look at yourselves. You all look very affected by that 'beautysm' you intend to fight. You can't have people embrace your idea of antibeautysm if you don't set an example to follow".

This admonition is where fictional logic takes over: the real-world Giselinde would try to avoid such direct suggestions. Here, the goals of sociology and fiction diverge. The admonition marks the dramatic turning point of the story in episode 4 (Figure 3 and Figure 4), in which the beautysts turn to a plastic surgeon and the students prepare to discard their own beauty standards.

The tension between narrative and social science also manifested itself in writing the ending. Social life never ends. At the strong request of the sociologist, the ending remains open. Are "BEAUTY days numbered" as the cover of *Vague* triumphantly (and paradoxically) announces? Has Daniel sold out, or has he successfully infiltrated the system? Can this system be changed? However, narratives need closure. Thus, on a personal level, the story ends in tears: the surgically adapted Daniel is now famous, and breaks up with his girlfriend Layla.

4.2   Create Images: From Verbal to Visual

The second translation was from words to images. Academia is world of words. Since beauty is experienced primarily as visual (at least in contemporary culture), the research project had given much thought to the relation between the verbal and visual modalities (cf. Knowles & Sweetman, 2004). We developed new visual methods (Kuipers, 2015) and a (partly) visual codebook and coding form (Van der Laan, 2015), and had experimented with data visualization (Kuipers, 2015; Van der Laan & Kuipers, 2016).

Yet, the collaboration with comic artists put this translation into stark relief. The visual form allowed us to convey some insights more directly: the contrast of highbrow versus more everyday beauty standards, the aesthetics of international fashion people which makes them into a rather recognizable "tribe". Three aspects of the visual modality stood out: compared with words (as used by academics), images are specific, redundant and aesthetic.

First, images are specific. Words make it easy to speak of generalities ("beauty standards"; "consumers"; "industry"; "field") but in visual representation, details have to be filled in. We struggled with this specificity in our analysis of fashion images, leading to a whopping 200+ codes for each picture. In the comics, specifics had to be added. The comic is full of evocative details: the weird outfits in a fashion show, the lobster on the *Vague* lunch table, the smug bald face of the evil plastic surgeon, an explosion of photographers when Daniel announces his plans, a cat to match Daniel's new face. This specificity includes specificity of place. Verbal products of academia often decontextualize, or only draw out only theoretically relevant as-
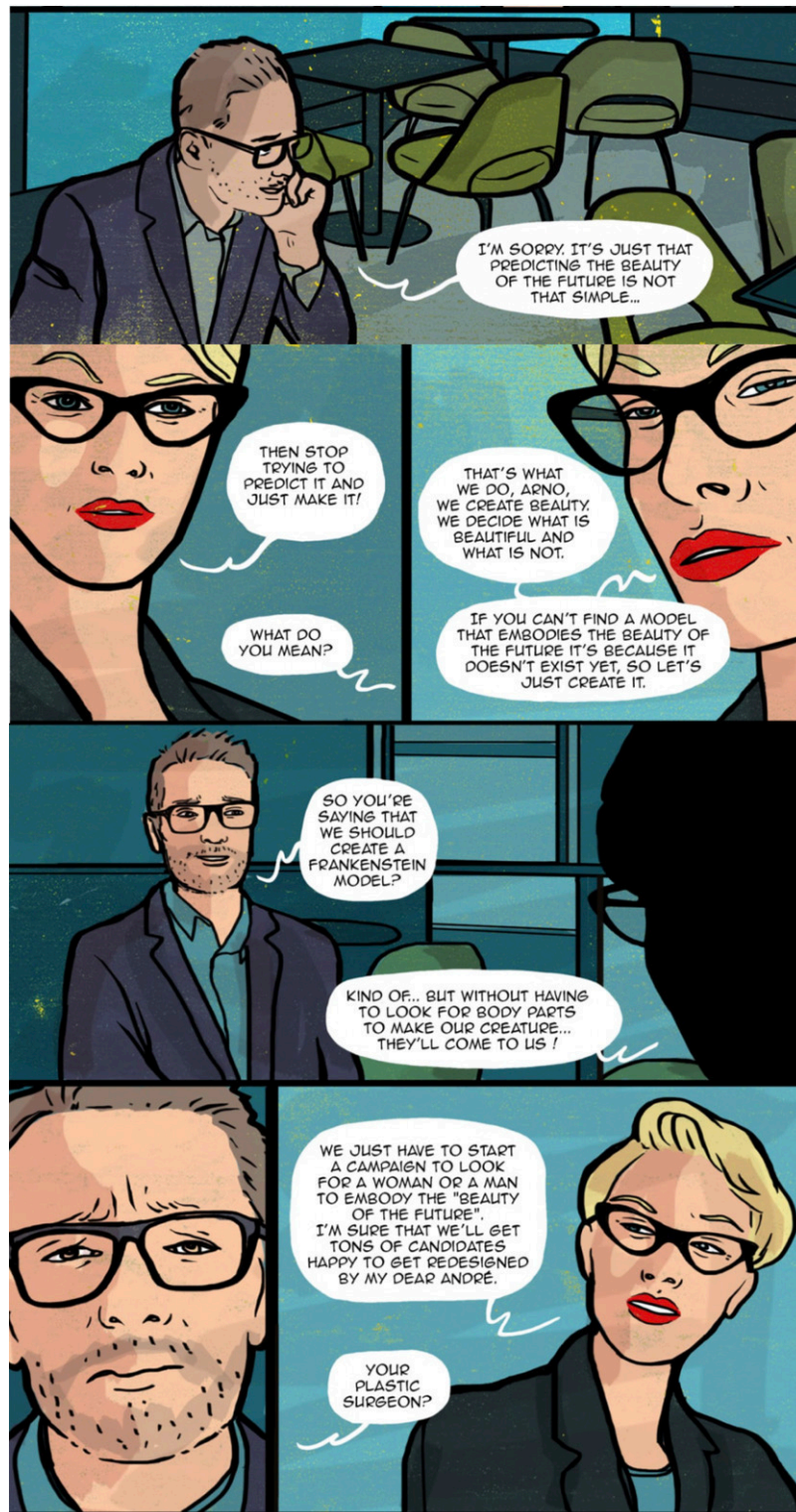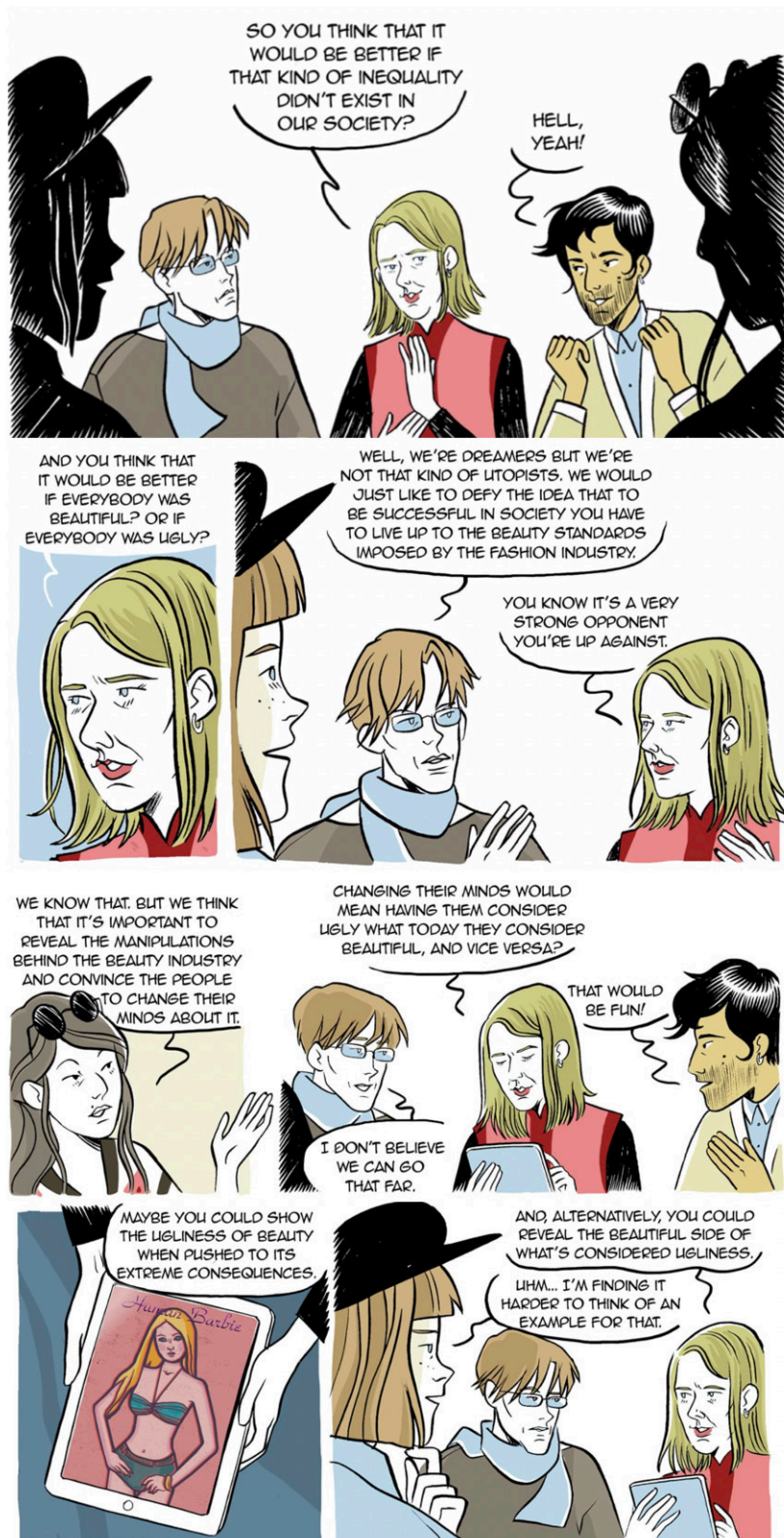
Figure 3: Episode 4: "Let's just create it."

Figure 4: A Sociological Consultation

pects of place ("the Netherlands is relatively egalitarian, prosperous and peripheral to the fashion world"). The webcomic, in contrast, is full of scenic Amsterdam bridges, bikes and bus stops, and detailed reconstruction of the University of Amsterdam lecture halls and cafeteria. In visual representation, specifics have to be filled in, so choices have to be made.

Consequently, visual information is redundant. Where academic writing is often about cutting out all unnecessary information, images are full of "extra" information. This offered enjoyable new opportunities, for instance to add clues to the research project, and nods to some of the themes without making them explicit. A favorite example are the punks at the end of Episode 4 (Figure 5). Without making it explicit, this shows how aesthetics of group allegiance trumps conventional beauty standards based on health, symmetry and gender-specificity. It also highlights the moment where beauty and ugly meet.

Figure 5: Blurring Lines between Beauty and Ugliness

Finally, images are aesthetic. While words, certainly academic words, offer relatively neutral representations, images inevitably appeal to the aesthetic sense. The characters in the comic have their own personal looks, which make them more or less beautiful and contain aesthetic identity markers. For instance, the beautysts wear stylish jackets and designer glasses in cold blues and blacks, while the anti-beautysts are good-looking youngsters with hipsterish, colorful outfits. Daniel has a signature "hipster scarf" that he keeps even when transformed. Both the beautysts and the anti-beautyists are attractive-looking and well-groomed, which make for a striking contrast with some other characters, such as the overweight, balding plastic surgeon, and his first creation for the *Vague* contest: a copy of the face of fashion designer Donatella Versace as she looked after multiple surgeries.

All three elements of visual communication came to the fore as the story drew to an end. Daniel tries to become the new face of "ugly". But what is ugly? A more difficult question than one may expect. People who want to become (more) beautiful travel a well-worn path. While

they may have different tastes or preferences, they will usually do something that has been done before. Generally, they want to look younger, more polished and symmetrical, smoother and with more even features, and with their secondary sex characteristics more exaggerated. So, people who try to become more beautiful tend to conform to certain, rather specific standards.

But for becoming ugly, the choices are endless, and most of them have never been explored. This was reflected in discussions between the artists and the researcher. Should Daniel's body be changed, his face, or both? What would be the most radical statement? For instance, what about making Daniel very overweight? Our own research, and many other studies show that fatness is strongly stigmatized across western countries. So one of the options was to make Daniel very fat. Another option was to do something very drastic to his facial features, like a very big nose or bad skin. But in the end, we chose something truly unnatural: a multi-color patchwork "Frankenstein" look that could never exist in real life (see Figure 6). But with this, the reflection didn't end. Because is this really ugly? Given that we know that people disagree so much about faces, isn't it possible that some people find Daniel's new patchwork face the most beautiful they've ever seen?

Figure 6: A Picture of Ugliness

4.3 From Conceptual to Concrete

The third move we had to make: from conceptual to concrete. Academic analysis is about extracting patterns from the messy empirical world, and capturing them in general concepts. The challenge of making a webcomic was to bring out these general insights and concepts through concrete narratives, situations and characters. The comic revolves around three sociological

themes of a rather different nature: beauty as social construct and sociological topic; field autonomy and cultural production; and inequality (and what to do about it?).

The webcomic first and foremost presents a sociological perspective on beauty: not universal, unchangeable or biologically given, but instead socially variable and produced in institutions, including (but not limited to) the beauty industry. However, that it is socially constructed does not mean it is not real. The main sociological lesson of the comic lies in the protagonists experiencing how difficult it is to change such "constructed" beauty standards, and how difficult it is to give up on them. Even when they decide to "fight beauty", they cannot bring themselves to join Daniel in relinquishing beauty. Daniel's decision to embrace ugliness even leads to the end of their friendship.

Thus, the webcomics shows how socially learned standards become deeply ingrained — a second nature. They feel not only natural, but also are experienced as central to the self: what you think is beautiful defines who you are. Denaturalizing such learned standards by seeing them as socially constructed is a central lesson of sociology — but denaturalization is only a first step towards recognizing, and maybe changing their social consequences. Moreover, such standards often reinforce social inequalities, for instance based in gender. Throughout the story, the two men are more radical in their rejection of beauty, and more willing to give up on it, than the women in the small circle of friends. This is a translation of insights in the gendered nature of beauty: women are more likely to be judged on their appearance than men, so giving up on beauty would incur much higher social costs.

The second sociological theme made concrete in the webcomic is the logics of cultural production, and particular the notion of field autonomy. The logic of high fashion is like the logic of (post)modern art: rejecting beauty that is directly understandable to everyone, continuous with everyday life, towards a form of beauty that negates everyday beauty, or even negates the idea of beauty itself. The webcomic takes this autonomous logics to its extreme: Daniel's transformation into the ugliest man alive, who then becomes the poster boy of high fashion. In contemporary high fashion, the dividing line between ugly and beautiful is fluid and, well: vague. High fashion's idea of beauty is a constant exploration for something that is different: different from conventional ideas of beauty, different from other magazines, different even from what they themselves hailed as the new beauty standard only a year ago. In this search for aesthetic distinction, high fashion beauty has become increasingly distinct from what our inner ape desires. But for those in the know, the effect is aesthetically pleasing, in highly specific ways. It is the beauty of the unexpected. Of something that is so interesting that it makes us want to look again and again. The pleasing juxtaposition of a lopsided, strange face with a perfectly symmetrical, beautifully stylized photograph. In the visual echo of a patched, disjointed human face in a patched, disjointed fur of a cat.

Finally, the webcomic revolves around the core question (if not *the* core theme) of sociology as a discipline: inequality — and what to do about it? This theme is introduced at the very beginning of the comic. Daniel, Layla, Rodrigo and Amber learn that physical beauty is a resource: a form of aesthetic capital. People benefit from their beauty when they have it, and suffer from their ugliness. Like other forms of social inequality, physical beauty is socially constructed and influenced by wider societal inequalities based in class, gender, age or race (Hakim, 2010; Mears, 2014 & 2015). Powerful social institutions such as the beauty industry thus contribute to the reproduction of these inequalities.

The comic focuses not on the causes and consequences of beauty as inequality, but instead on the question of individual agency in the light of such systemic injustice. Academic sociologists do not agree whether people should oppose inequality, and if so, if and how this can be
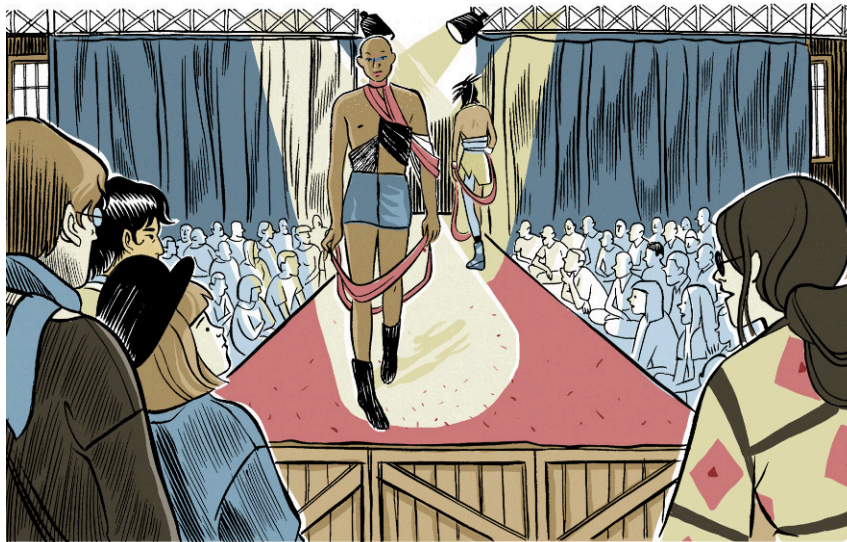
Figure 7: Blurring Lines between Beauty and Ugliness in High Fashion

done. In the original BEAUTY project, we tried to keep questions of justice somewhat to the background — aiming for more a Weberian "value free" approach that would allow readers to make up their own minds. However, there were rather heated debates about this within the research team.

However, most sociologists have found that in teaching sociology, research on inequality often leads seamlessly to questions of social in/justice. The comic foregrounds the ethical and normative questions, as the students go looking for ways to redress the social inequality produced or intensified by beauty standards. They research tried and tested ways of fighting inequalities such as raising awareness, supporting the underdogs or increasing diversity within the system. Three of them stop short when they are confronted with their own allegiance to beauty — and thus their allegiance to the system. Only one of them, Daniel, decides on a radical option: withdraw from the system, align with the excluded and become ugly. This is somewhat reminiscent of the actions of the communist and Maoist students of the 1970s, who went to work in factories in support of the proletariat (to the puzzlement of the proletariat). If beauty is privilege, then we should turn the tables. Power to the ugly!

In his press conference (figure 8), Daniel announces that becoming ugly is a way to expose the "trick" of the fashion industry. Implicitly, Daniel suggests that it is the beauty industry that is responsible for this particular form of inequality. In doing so, Daniel falls into a common trap: he looks for one particular organization to blame for all social ills, and if he can only transform this industry, the world will be better. However, while the beauty industry is very powerful, beauty has been a source of inequality for much longer, especially for women but also for men. Throughout history, royalty, saints, and other important people have been depicted in a flattering manner: they have to look good to convince the people of their special status.

The story ends with the age-old sociological question of structure versus agency. As Daniel's new look has brought him wealth and fame, it remains unclear whether he has managed to escape from the beauty regime, break the power of the beauty industry, or put an end to beauty-based inequalities. Layla, his ex-girlfriend, accuses him of working for "them" now, and he retorts "No, they are the ones who are going to work for me." Thus, the final frame leaves us wondering: will Daniel, the individual, managed to successfully change the

Figure 8: Exposing Beauty Inequalities

system from within? And will this lead to the end of this particular form of inequality?

5   Conclusion: Triggering the Sociological Imagination with a Webcomic

The making of the BEAUTY webcomic started out with the traditional question of science communication: how can we share research findings and insights with non-academics? Along the way, it became more like the meta-question of science communication: how can we make people think about our research questions? How can we invite people along in this process of discovery? How can we make people reflect on the importance of beauty in contemporary culture and in everyday experience, and even start their own investigations? In other words: how can we trigger people's sociological imagination?

The concept of the sociological imagination was coined by C. Wright Mills in 1959. In a scathing critique of standard sociological practice, Mills makes a plea for a sociology that makes "personal troubles" into "public issues". He writes: "the sociological imagination is not merely a fashion. It is a quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities." (Mills, 1959, p. 14). The notion of the sociological imagination has made it into virtually all sociology textbooks and intro to sociology courses, but not so much into the practice of academic research. The standard manners of academic publication and evaluation are not very well suited to triggering this "quality of mind". Making this webcomic showed us how alternative forms of science communication can stimulate new modes of thinking about the relation between "intimate realities" and "larger social realities", for academics, artists and for wider publics.

While making this webcomic, several things were gained in the translation into a narrative, visual and concrete form. Of the three translations, making the research into a narrative was the most dramatic intervention. It requires most creativity and invention from the artists, and also produced some things that seemed at odds with sociological reasoning. Notably, turning individuals into personifications of "field positions" and quests produced a logic of "the individual versus the system" which sociologists might interpret more as the expression of a certain domi-

nant thought flawed understanding of the social world, rather than an accurate representation of how the world works. Stories foreground agency, with tragic heroes (Daniel) and bad guys (Cecile Swernink of *Vague*) in which individuals are pitted against systems: "structure" comes to look like a large something outside of the individual. Moreover, stories like endings with closure and often a moral undertone, whereas social life is a continuous flow with no particular morality or end point.

The second translation, from textual to visual, was most productive: it led to hard, analytic thinking and debate, for instance in the discussion of how ugly would look, or what sort of visual elements should be foregrounded in characters. It involved thinking on a different plane — with more redundancy and polysemy, and new insights on aesthetics. Partially, this may have to do with the visual nature of the research topic. But it probably is a wider lesson. Thinking in a different sensory modality forces you to think through new things. Thus, the visual form is simultaneously a way to reach different publics and convey different kind of information, and to cast thought processes in a new light.

The third translation, from abstract to concrete, was most similar to other experiences of science communication: speaking to students, journalist or general audiences. It also comes closest to the suggestions of Mills to activate the sociological imagination. It is not a coincidence that in this comic, the sociologist is shown as a teacher, rather than a researcher. This sets the Beauty comic apart from the other ERCcOMICS, with academics in white lab coats, or setting off to faraway countries to make discoveries. Most of the ERCcOMICS were hard sciences or history: disciplines that offer truly new bit of information, and theories and concepts that are hard to grasp. Social science rarely can offer this type of novelty. Science communication for the social sciences is maybe more like pedagogy: to show how actual, concrete events and experiences are couched in larger, abstract, realities. And in doing so, make people recognize how personal troubles — such as concerns about beauty — are really "public issues".

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