

Modelling Practice: The Inertia of Body Ideals in the Fashion System

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Abstract


This article addresses practice-based theories with the goal to show that they can contribute substantially to the understanding of fashion modelling and, consequently, of the social phenomenon of fashion in general. Fashion modelling is a key component of the fashion system, and fashion models contribute to the innovation of the clothing landscape in contemporary Western societies much more than assumed by common sense. Yet, some features of fashion modelling, such as the incorporation of the thin ideal and the affected gait of the models' walking on the catwalk, are puzzling if understood in the light of traditional sociological categories. If studied with the conceptual tools displayed by the practice approach, they appear as striking manifestations of the inertia that bodies, materials, routines, skills and meanings of the practice of fashion impose on its participants.

Keywords: Practice; fashion; fashion modelling; thin ideal; inertia; cultural intermediaries.

1 The Practice of Modelling and Clothing Landscape Transformations

Over the last two centuries, the fashion system has gradually become a leading force in determining clothing habits in Western countries first, then in many parts of the globalized world. In fact, this powerful economic and social system influences nowadays the rules of body communication and presides over changes in our clothing landscape. As it embraces some fundamental mechanisms of social cohesiveness, it has been extensively studied in recent decades, along with the main professions that it includes.

Fashion models, especially female models,¹ are among the most exposed figures in the system. As means of fashion communication, they are by definition public figures: they exist and work mainly on the media stage. Moreover, they practice a profession in some respects prestigious, much desired by many women and especially by the youngest. Since the selection criteria leading to fashion modelling

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1. In this article, I will exclusively deal with female modelling.

seem to be based (but we will see that in fact it is not so) on a socially appreciated quality like “beauty,” the professional success of a model is a particularly effective form of social legitimacy.

What is the actual contribution of models to the fashion system? Often models are considered in common discourses little more than self-propelled mannequins, hangers at the disposal of the manipulative art of designers, pattern makers, stylists and photographers (Mears, 2011, p. 182; Entwistle & Wissinger, 2012b, p. 4). But this is overly simplified. In the last two decades, a vast body of studies has focused on the social role of fashion modelling and highlighted that the models’ contribution to the continuous transformation of our cultural landscape is not marginal. I will summarize such body of knowledge in section 3.

However, not everything is clear and well understood in fashion modelling. Some aspects are still surprising or enigmatic. For example, it is not unusual for models to complain about the need to comply with very lean body measurements, those same measurements that have enabled them to conquer a privileged position in the field of fashion. Models feel they have to submit to an external and superior will that determines their physical appearance. However, if we try to determine where such will resides, it escapes the grasp and evaporates into thin air. This depends on the fact that it is not about the decisions of a particular social subject, but the power that a practice inadvertently exerts on all participants. I therefore argue that in order to understand this aspect of fashion modelling, as well as other features of fashion, it is necessary to resort to the concept of social practice.

My goal in this article is to address practice-based theories and show that they can contribute substantially to the understanding of fashion modelling and, consequently, of the social phenomenon of fashion in general. The idea is that by abandoning the points of view focused on human actions — individual or collective — and on social structure, and assuming a perspective based on practice as unit of analysis, the enigmatic features of modelling become more easily intelligible. Joining the practice approach means in this framework, at the core, accepting the idea that certain courses of action in human life are routinized for a community of practitioners. In relation to these courses of action (“practices”) the practitioners themselves are, rather than agents, “carriers” of the practice, interpreters of the routine. Classical sociology (Parsons, 1951, pp. 1–7 and 22–24; Schütz, 1955; Goffman, 1959) has accustomed us to think in terms of mutual expectations of behaviour: social interactions are determined by the expectation of others towards us and by our anticipation of the outcome of our actions (the self-reflected expectation). The practice approach makes it clear that in certain situations also the expectation that the practice itself exercises towards us, what the practice expects from us, is crucial. In stating this, “practice” does not mean the mere sum of other subjects participating in the same course of actions. It also includes the set of material configurations, embodied skills, norms and shared meanings that guide individual performances and ensure that they can be read as interpretations of a consolidated practice. The agent is never completely the subject of his or her practices, because the practices act in him or her through incorporated dispositions, the acquired schemes that inhabit our choices and our behaviours (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 166). As Andreas Reckwitz observes, in practices the individual’s actions, thoughts and desires

are necessary elements and qualities of a practice in which the single individual participates, not qualities of the individual. [...] A practice is thus a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood (2002, p. 250).

Following Davide Nicolini’s suggestion (2012, pp. 8–10), I prefer to refer to a practice “approach,” rather than theory, not only to reiterate that a unitary theory of practices does not exist, as Schatzki (2001, p. 2) already noted, but also to clarify that this perspective can turn useful for our purposes not as a unitary theoretical framework, but as a box of conceptual tools capable of opening up new perspectives on known phenomena. Different authors, such as Andreas Reckwitz (2002), Theodore Schatzki (1996; 2002), Elizabeth Shove (Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012; Shove & Trentmann, 2019) and Alan Warde (2005), offer different ways of thinking about social phenomena as expressions of practices in action.

In what follows, after summarizing what scholars have learned about fashion modelling, I will try to read it as a practice, in turn connected with other practices, some dispersed, such as dressing, others integrative, such as the fashion show. I do not aim to expand the body of knowledge we have about fashion

modelling, which is already very broad. My goal is instead to experiment with the application of a specific theoretical approach — that of practice — to a relevant and intriguing social phenomenon such as fashion. The reference to modelling helps to apply the new theoretical approach to concrete situations. I will therefore not present new empirical evidence and research results, except in few cases where this is particularly useful for the argument. Instead, I will refer extensively to the research that other scholars have already made available through their publications. Nevertheless, the discussion should make clear how the practice approach, in addition to already widely used theoretical approaches that span from Foucault to Bourdieu, from feminist theories to the traditional sociology of fashion, can broaden our understanding of fashion by providing new interpretative keys. Thanks to the contribution of the practice approach, some puzzling aspects of fashion modelling should become more easily understandable as outcomes of the dialectic between the inertia of practice and the behavior of its carriers. In this way, I hope to bring some useful elements to the discussion on the heuristic utility of practice theories when applied to cultural processes.

2 The Job of (Female) Fashion Models

Notoriously, a model walks on the catwalk and gets photographed wearing high fashion clothes. Her profession, however, is a bit more complex than that, with regard both to mere professional practices and to the function it performs in the fashion system. The purposes for which the fashion industry recruits models are basically three: fitting clothes in the production process; performing on the catwalk during the fashion show; doing photo shoots, which in turn can be for the production of advertising campaigns (for brands) or fashion editorials (for magazines). Not all models carry out all three activities. However, they are closely related tasks, because the clothes to wear during the fashion show and the shooting are the same, and are of the same size in which the design departments make the patterns for the fitting. They therefore imply that they are worn by the same type of body. This close link constitutes a rigidity for fashion modelling, since it imposes a standard body from which the individual model can hardly distance herself. Moreover, since the design process is extended over time, the models are also required to preserve a considerable stability in terms of shape and size over time. Notoriously, the models' body standard is very high and thin, corresponding to sizes 2–4 (USA), 4–6 (UK), and 36–38 (Italy), with white skin and Caucasian shapes.

Professionally, models are usually freelance and rely on specialized agencies that act as intermediaries with potential customers. Much of their working time is actually devoted to the construction of their public image (through a look book and networking activities) and wasted in endless waits during the customers' castings. Few models earn large sums, while most live on modest income. The average professional life is short, going for the most fortunate from 13/15 years of age to 20/25. High internal competition and the constant need for change by customers produce a rapid turnover that puts many models off the market prematurely. There are also differences between the main sectors in which the model industry is divided. The competition is heaviest and the longevity shortest in the circuit of "editorial" models, that is, those models that are primarily required by the fashion industry because they are characterized not by a formal, standard, familiar beauty, but by an intriguing, imperfect aspect, apt to capture attention. On the other hand, "commercial" models, mainly used for consumer goods advertising due to their regular shapes and reassuring appearance, experience less competition and greater longevity.

3 The Role of Models in the Fashion System

Before delving into how the practice approach can contribute to the study of fashion modelling, it may be useful to summarize some major acquisitions of fashion studies on this profession. Although produced within other theoretical perspectives, they facilitate the shift to the practice approach putting aside some common sense ideas about modelling and establishing an integrated view of the fashion system.

Fashion modelling has been extensively studied in recent times, mainly through ethnographic research. Along with intrinsic features (tasks, practices, networks), the function it also plays in the fash-

ion system and, more broadly, in defining the cultural landscape, has been investigated. In particular three researches conducted in parallel during the first decade of the century produced the major results. Joanne Entwistle (2009) first studied fashion modelling as a collective practice aimed at profiting from the fashion industry's need to use human bodies to qualify the goods. Since the quality of models that determines their success is not a somehow measurable "beauty" (not even through the classic measures of breast, waist and hips), but something very ephemeral and changeable like the appearance (the "look"), the model industry has focused on the need to stabilize the characteristics of the glamorous female body and select apt women to represent it. It is therefore a form of "aesthetic economy," an activity aimed at translating certain aesthetic characteristics into economic value. Ashley Mears (2011) described the modelling industry more systematically as a cultural industry, characterized by very high uncertainty when attempting to forecast the demand. Cultural industries normally have this characteristic: that taste has a preponderant weight in determining the value of goods. Since it is very hard to forecast tastes, the cultural industries (including fashion modelling) often follow a production model aimed at reducing uncertainty through a process of gradual selection of a few extremely successful products starting from a plethora of alternative creations (Hirsch, 1972). Finally, Elizabeth Wissinger (2015) focused on the work that all this entails for the models themselves, whose success cannot be separated from a huge effort that images and fashion shows, with their ephemeral and visual character, end up hiding. A work both material and immaterial (Lazzarato, 1996) constitutes the backstage of the outward appearance of the models. Thus, modelling is not limited to the capacity of qualifying industrial goods through visual culture, but actually involves self-commodification and transformation into a brand (Entwistle & Slater, 2012). Working on herself, the model shapes and circulates a certain image of woman, strongly contributing to stabilizing the hegemonic feminine ideal in our society.

Those studies have allowed us to get rid of some assumptions and prejudices about the role of models and acknowledge previously undervalued aspects of their profession. I will focus on two key theses stressed by those jobs (and other similar contributions, such as Czerniawski 2015, Kühl 2015 and Sadre-Orafai 2008).²

First of all, we can abandon the simplistic objectification of the models' beauty. It is a common belief that models are particularly beautiful women, and that their work consists in simply making their body available to fashion professionals. A body received as a gift by Mother Nature. This is misleading. As Ashley Mears effectively observes, the models she interviewed "were not mere lucky winners in some genetic lottery; they were fighters in an ongoing struggle against their bodies" (Mears, 2011, p. 91). The models' beauty is not natural, but naturalized: made apparently natural through a continuous artificial work of construction, revision, adjustment of appearance. Such appearance is what is normally called "look" (Entwistle, 2009, p. 6; Entwistle & Slater, 2012, pp. 24–26; Mears, 2011, p. 5), and is the result — for the models as for all of us — of a continuous work of manipulation on the body, i.e. on physical structure, makeup and clothing, but also on posture, behaviour, body language, consumption, life choices (Wissinger, 2007a and 2007b).

Regarding the physical structure, models must constantly meet the ideal parameters imposed by the fashion system: height, weight, breast, waist and hip measurements. These parameters are very rigid in their regulatory function, but very flexible in the models' daily practice, where it is common to lie about one's own measurements (Mears, 2011, pp. 91–92). In fact, models are continually exposed to the double request to conform to a common standard, and to have something unique that differentiates their look and makes it stand out from that of others. Like athletes and dancers, they use their corporeality as a form of capital (Wacquant, 2004).

On the behavioural side, moreover, models must be able to express a "personality" that gives their look a taste of uniqueness and exceptionality. Modelling implies not only the aesthetic work on the body, but also an emotional work (Hochschild, 1983) that enables them to express an intriguing personality by means of their simple appearance, their look (Wissinger, 2015, pp. 154–156). This concerns both the performance of typical tasks of their job (Mears, 2011, pp. 106–115) and everyday life, which for models in the age of social networks is never separable from work (Wissinger, 2015, pp. 162–184).

2. For an overall picture of the debate consider also: Czerniawski (2011); Entwistle & Wissinger (2006; 2012); Godart & Mears (2008); Mears (2008; 2012); Mears & Finlay (2005); Soley-Beltran (2004); Wissinger (2007a; 2007b; 2012; 2013).

With regard to this first aspect, it should be added that the definition of the look is carried out not only by the model concerned, but by the entire professional network engaged in the production of fashion imaginary. What the model embodies and transmits while appearing in a photo shoot is not her quality, nor her individual creation, but it is something that germinates by means of a multiplicity of processes involving different actors (Entwistle, 2009, p. 58). In other words: the aesthetic value of the model is neither natural nor designed. It is the result of the continuous negotiation of a community about her appearance, fashion trends, and the collective imaginary of a female body. Modelling agencies, for example, create a framework through their catalogues and categorizations (editorial, commercial, curvy). With their supervisory work, they then push the real models to adapt to that framework, conditioning their consumption (how to dress, which places to frequent, which networks to nurture) and, consequently, fostering the construction of a suitable *habitus*. Furthermore, the models' look materializes in a look book where some of their photographs are collected. Those photographs were taken during photo shoots directed by stylists with their own perception of the aesthetic value of the model, accessorized with clothing created by designers who followed their own ideas of fashion and femininity, taken by photographers in search of the best photographic output. The model's look is therefore the result of the work of a multiplicity of professionals, none of which aims at defining the model's look. When she meets a possible client (either through the look book or in person at a go-see or at a casting), she enters again into a complex social process of defining the aesthetic value. In fact, the client usually *does not know* what look s/he is looking for (Mears, 2011, pp. 123–127). What distinguishes a look from mere beauty is its ineffability. The look qualifies for “that certain something” that you never succeed in making explicit. This means that also the client's selection of the model is very random and depends largely on factors that are not aesthetic in nature, such as a dense network of relationships and conversations among the fashion system protagonists, good for aligning opinions and tastes (Mears, 2011, p. 10), and reputational dynamics, according to which the models gain aesthetic value through the reputation of the subjects who credited them (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006).

The second fallacy about models shelved by empirical research is the idea that they are more similar to fashion industry tools than professionals. Compared to dummies, which they replaced starting from the end of the Nineteenth century, they would only add the mobility of the real body, and therefore the possibility of studying the behaviour of clothes on a moving body. The underlying idea is that to modelling nothing is needed but a nice appearance and a good dose of patience: the designer, the pattern maker, the stylist and the photographer will think about everything else. Again, things are different, actually. I have already mentioned the importance of the model's “personality” as an ingredient of the look. Now I add that the personality of the model, too, is a fundamental ingredient in the production of fashion images, and therefore in the processes of clothing innovation in general. Doreen Small, former vice president of the Ford modelling agency, in describing the qualities displayed by the best models, said:

They understand the concepts, they can create amazing photographs, they project character, they project life [...]. I mean, they're genetic anomalies [...]. But really, really good models are really able to work it (quoted in Entwistle & Wissinger, 2012a, p. 182).

The most important quality of a model is to actively use her appearance and the related accessories in order to produce relevant meanings. The ethnographic observation of photo shoots shows that they are intrinsically collective activities, in which all participants contribute interactively to the production of the final result. The stylists I interviewed for a research dedicated to them have often emphasized the importance of the model and her look in the creation of fashion services.³ For example, one of them told me:

The model is important. The model accomplishes the editorial. Truly, the more models feel beautiful the more they are happy to do the shooting. [...] Anyway they must feel liked a lot by the photographer, and also by the stylist, and then it depends: some of them, like the

3. The investigation, which began in 2013 and is still ongoing, aims at exploring social and cultural features of fashion styling in Milan using a non-standard methodology based primarily on in-depth interviews, follow-up interviews and ethnographic observation. The main results are going to be published in Volonté (forthcoming 2020).

English ones – as for me, I always consider them the best ones, the smartest, most intelligent, having something extra, it is apparent, there is no question. Those ten that are at the top, there is a reason if they are there. [Of course] because they have a certain agent, but [also] because they have a certain mind. When there is no mind it is immediately clear, nothing comes out. I mean, there are “flat” women who don’t draw anything out of the picture (Female, 49, interviewed 14 November 2013).

If those who work with models have this kind of attitude, the equation of models with hangers, although justified by their origins (Evans, 2003), does not reflect the role that they play today in the fashion system. Therefore, scholars include them among the figures of cultural intermediaries who contribute to the co-production and circulation of clothing culture in our society (Maynard, 1999; Wissinger, 2012). Models belong to the leading fashion tastemakers. Not only the way in which they “interpret” the outfits on the catwalk or during photo shoots influences the clothing landscape, but also what they wear in everyday life, the places they attend, their cultural diet (music, food) enter the processes of negotiation and stabilization of fashions and trends. Like other figures of cultural intermediaries, models contribute to formulating culture in a capitalist market context. Of course, this is especially true for those models who have reached the status of celebrities. But as shown in the excerpt quoted above, due to the role they play in the fashion industry, all models have the opportunity to leave their mark on the creation and circulation of fashion imaginary. At the beginning of their careers they receive a strong socialization to the system, and they are instructed on how to shape and take care of their look. But later on, if they are not able to make their own original contribution to the mediation of meanings, if they disappear into the crowd of faces that populate the walls of modelling agencies, they will in fact not count for anything in the process of clothing innovation and therefore will be quickly shelved from the system, replaced by other models more skilled in the intermediation of taste (Wissinger, 2012, p. 161).

4 Shortcomings

If we look back at the three main activities of the models described above (photo shoot, fashion show, fitting), it is clear that this profession is key to the processes of generation of “clothing possibilities” in two complementary ways: in determining the garments that will be offered on the market, and in creating the fashion images that will circulate in the cultural landscape. Models are the bodies of fashion both in the circumstance of its production and in that of its representation. Entwistle and Slater (2012: 16) are therefore right in arguing that the habit of contrasting real bodies and represented bodies to describe the imagery of fashion is inadequate to understand what really happens. The model’s body is an element of mediation and unification of the fashion system, both because it is a constant crossing the whole process, and because it is a malleable constant, adaptable — to a certain extent — to changes in taste. In fact, it is constantly manipulated to stay in line with the changing aesthetic demands of the fashion world. In other words, the models find themselves involved in a loop in which on the one hand they define the features of the ideal female body and the standards of recognized beauty, and on the other hand they are subjected to the same ideal and must constantly work to adapt to it. This loop is difficult to explain through approaches that leverage individual agency or the constraints imposed by the social structure and the economic system, and requires a change of approach to be understood. This is where the use of the practice approach proves fruitful.

In particular, I will focus on two aspects of fashion modelling that the approach of practices can help to explain more accurately. The first issue concerns the fact that for a century now, and particularly in the last fifty years, the ideal of female body embodied by fashion models has been characterised by radical thinness. The sizes of the models are usually placed in the lower range of the adult size system (36–38 in Italy), while the prevalent sizes in population are decidedly larger (44–46). The most common explanations of this phenomenon, which refer to the aspirational character of fashion (fashion should offer to the ordinary woman a “dream,” misleading her into believing to be part of a narrative of beauty and glamour that in truth does not belong to her), are not convincing, if only because the fashion industry gives up in this way a significant portion of business. The second issue concerns a specific skill of models: walking the catwalk. Walking on the catwalk is an aspect of modelling where the discipline of the body

stands out. At an accustomed look, it appears natural and elegant. But if you look at the fashion shows with a detached gaze, for example by analysing them in slow motion on a site like FashionWeekOnline (<https://fashionweekonline.com>), it will not be difficult to notice in many cases a particularly affected gait, with the feet forcedly aligned along a single straight line, the knees unnaturally stretched in full, the hips excessively wiggling. Also in this case, the practice approach can help us understand a seemingly arbitrary and irrational form of body regulation, thus integrating the insights provided by other theories.

5 Inertia and Performance: Fashion Modelling through the Lens of the Practice Approach

Something that the practice approach can do very well is to understand the inertia of social behaviour. This has often been considered a limitation of practice theories. They have been accused of focusing too much on inertia and failing to adequately explain social change (Turner, 1994, pp. 78–100). Proponents of the practice approach have taken the accusation seriously and tried to argue (Schatzki, 2002, pp. 189–264; Warde, 2014; Hui, Schatzki, & Shove, 2017). Here, however, I am not interested in discussing whether the practice approach enables us to explain change, but to rely on the fact that it explains inertia very well. Inertia does not mean immobility; rather, it derives from the bond that every new action necessarily has with an array of actions, relationships and objects that pre-exist it. This bond acts in two main ways. It does so in the form of routines, habits, and conventions produced by reciprocal expectations of behaviour within the community of practice — what Barry Barnes describes in terms of “alignment” (Barnes, 2001, p. 25) and Joseph Rouse in terms of “mutual accountability” (Rouse 2007, p. 669). Or it acts in the form of embodied experience, a system of durable and transposable dispositions that generate new actions conform to “correct” practices, therefore reflecting the weight of the past on the individual him/herself (Bourdieu, 1980, pp. 87–91).

Moving the unit of analysis from the subjects that act (individuals and organizations) and from social facts (institutions) to practices enables us to understand not only why individuals normally find it difficult to deviate from the norm, fashion or habit, but also why they usually do not want to do it at all. Each practice is characterized at any time by a set of established understandings, procedures and objectives (Warde, 2005, p. 140). What needs to be done, how to do it and why are all aspects dictated by the practice, concerns that the agent has acquired in the course of his or her trajectory, while learning to practice it. There is no need to set rules that should be explicitly learned. Moreover, a practice incorporates in those who practice it ways of doing and thinking that, as incorporated, appear obvious, natural. This is particularly clear in the case of sports, as they channel the behaviour of sportsmen towards routines and standards. No skier who is even remotely experienced has any doubts about what to do when s/he goes skiing (Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016, p. 116). Where to go, how to dress, how to move, what to talk about are all aspects that come naturally even if they have nothing “natural.” This is possible because the practice has arranged the agent to act in a manner consistent with the practice itself, and this in various ways. To name just the most obvious ones, it has arranged the agent by incorporating in him or her a habitus, that is, orienting the body towards the “correct” practice and predisposing it to respond with the “right,” straight, adequate action to the requests that come from the environment (Bourdieu, 1997, pp. 170–175); it has also arranged the agent by immersing him or her in an environment of artefacts and infrastructures that exercise their agency over him or her, in the sense that they prescribe certain doings, channelling the behaviour towards some standards (Latour, 1992); finally, it has arranged the agent by setting the goals, i.e. determining the objectives to be achieved through practice, objectives that s/he can feel (and in fact usually feels) as his or her own, but which are set by the practice itself (Schatzki, 2002, pp. 80–85).

To summarize, the practices have therefore an inertia derived by the fact that in them individual goals, models and constraints must constantly deal with goals, models and constraints dictated by the practice itself (namely, by the fact of practicing that practice, *not* by the sum of other practitioners’ goals, models and constraints). Since this conflict endangers the possibility of practicing the practice (when individual goals, models and constraints prevail that are too heterogeneous compared to those of the practice, the

individual in fact ceases to practice, and simply does something else), it is not surprising that most times the goals, models and constraints of the practice not only prevail, but shape the individual goals, models and constraints. In other words, and borrowing Bourdieu's terminology (1997), the agent engaged in practice experiences to act in a world that is "taken for granted," that s/he inhabits like a garment or a familiar habitat. This presupposes agreement between the dispositions of the agent and the expectations immanent in the world. In general terms, it implies that the social order inscribes itself in the bodies in the form of dispositions attuned to the structures of the world, so that the individual knows exactly what needs to be done and when it needs to be done.

6 The Tyranny of Slenderness

The hegemony of the thin ideal in fashion is a valuable example of the power that inertia can acquire in a practice. The use of extremely thin bodies by the fashion industry has often been considered a cause of the tyranny of slenderness in contemporary society (Chernin, 1981; Bordo, 1993; Thesander, 1997). As a matter of fact, at the beginning of this century the use of almost anorexic fashion models has been widely stigmatized for a certain period because it was accused to reinforce the spread of anorexia among girls and young women (see e.g. BBC 2000). Today the discussion has shifted toward the issue of diversity and the problems generated by the homologation of the imagery and the discrimination of fat bodies caused by a media system (TV, cinema, advertising, women's magazines) that tends to represent almost only thin bodies (Wykes & Gunter, 2005). However, more than this is at stake. The tyranny of slenderness cannot be elicited and supported by cultural standards imposed by the media alone, it must be also backed by a powerful force of some kind. Otherwise, it would be hardly explainable why the fashion industry is subject to that tyranny too. Analysing the collections for sale by the major high fashion brands, it turns out that they are rarely offered in (Italian) sizes above 44, very rarely above 46 (more details in Volonté 2019a). And yet, according to statistics on the Body Mass Index (BMI) made available by the World Health Organization (WHO), more than one third of the Italian female population, and up to almost two thirds in some Anglo-Saxon countries, wear currently sizes over 46 (Volonté & Pedroni, 2014). The fashion system seems to voluntarily give up a huge portion of its potential sales. How is this possible? Can a simple cultural trend, a set of values embraced by the media, explain choices that have such an important economic impact?

This paradox, namely, the fact that the fashion industry gives up a significant share of business to remain faithful to the thin ideal, is less puzzling if we conceive the thinness of the female body not just as a cultural value to be pursued by agents within a community, but also as a practice of which women are carriers as well as professionals of the fashion industry. I argued this idea in a previous article (Volonté, 2019b). In fact, if we turn the unit of analysis from the subjects to the practice we discover a viscous system of doings, artefacts, routines and incorporations that channel the way individuals and organizations interpret and carry the practice. It becomes clear that the tyranny of slenderness in fashion is not due to single factors, but to the bundle of things, actions and situations which the practice consists in. It is not necessary, then, to blame, from time to time, the fashion designers' aesthetic choices, the marketing policies of the companies, the imagery conveyed by the media or the aspirational expectations of the consumers. None of these factors, taken in isolation, would reasonably be able to produce fashion's "great renunciation" of the world of fat bodies. Of course, designers "choose" to keep on designing exclusively on underweight bodies, but it is actually the practice of fashion that chooses in them by means of the way it is taught in the fashion schools they attended, the fact that, as a rule, the bodies provided for fitting by the model industry are underweight, the technical limits of the automated size grading systems (which are based on incremental grading concepts no longer functional above size 46), the aspiration of consumers to get or preserve a thin and youthful body, a sales network that displaces the stores that are specialized in plus size mainly in outlying districts and small towns, a fashion press that literally hides fat bodies. The same, of course, can be extended to the choices of those who plan the contents of fashion courses, those who develop the technologies of automated size grading, consumers, retailers and editors. As well as models.

Considered from this point of view, the thinness of fashion models appears differently. Models are not thin because this is an "objective" aspect of female beauty, neither because they follow an aesthetic

law, nor a constraint imposed by market needs, nor a cultural ideal shared by the fashion system. They are so because the practice of fashion modelling has incorporated not only the ideal, but the very fact of slim bodies, the routines of designing on thin bodies, the materiality of samples, and so on. The stimulating research by Ashley Mears (2010) on the reasons for the thinness of fashion models, later incorporated in the fifth chapter of her book *Pricing Beauty* (Mears, 2011), helps us go into more detail: I will rely on her empirical observations to interpret them leveraging the practice approach. Mears observes that the thinness of the models is considered an obvious fact by the professionals of the fashion industry, something taken for granted that does not require explanations. Models incorporate a naturalized vision of female beauty, shared by all those who practice fashion. If, however, they are urged to explain, agents, stylists and editors often attribute the responsibility for such situation to fashion designers: it is the designers who ask for very thin models, because — this is the most widespread rhetorical image — the models must perform the function of hangers. Clothes fit better on tall and thin bodies. The rhetoric of the hanger, however, must not deceive us. I agree that a thin body interferes less than a fat one with the shape of the garment it wears, but if this is the only reason for the thinness of the models I wonder why their average measurements have changed over time. The functional reason cannot be exhaustive. In fact, if designers are asked why they develop their designs in such small sizes, they answer — says Mears (2011, p. 184) — referring not so much to economic or aesthetic reasons, as to tradition: the sample size is the one they have learned to use at school, that of the dummy they use to develop their creations, that of the models made available by the agencies. Overall it must be the same, because in the hectic moments preceding the fashion show there is no time to make adjustments of the clothes on the bodies of models of different sizes.

Based on Howard Becker's (1982) theory of the art worlds, Mears traces all this back to the concept of convention:

As in other art worlds, the accomplishment of fashion looks requires conventions, shared ways of doing things. Conventions are especially important [...] for cultural intermediaries to navigate uncertainty and ambiguity in the production process. Conventions can also make the accomplishment of fashion difficult, should producers ignore them (Mears, 2011, p. 175).

However, if we reflect carefully on her data, we realize that there is much more here than just convention — which is anyway an important aspect of practices. In the field of fashion we meet aims, goals and ideals (the ideal of thinness, the goal of getting and preserving certain body measurements) established by the practice itself, learned and incorporated by the individuals while learning the practice and training in the practice, shared and naturalized by the protagonists of the field even against their own interests. We meet artefacts (clothes, dummies) that have incorporated the rules and routines of the practice into their form, stabilizing them and making them resistant to change thanks to the solidity of materials. And we meet bodies (the models' bodies, in fact) that through a hard and meticulous work have incorporated what the practice was imposing on them and have turned it into a disposition to appear and act appropriately. In addition to these elements, there are also aspects that Mears does not mention or discuss in detail, but which can equally be ascribed to the practice of modelling prior to the choices of individuals. For instance, there are specific doings and body techniques that have to be trained to be accepted in the field, such as the walk on the catwalk that I will discuss in the next section. There are instruction manuals that codify behavioural standards, such as the “how-to” books described by Wissinger (2015, pp. 146–161) that set standards, rules and best practices for those who wish to join the field. There are even moods that the practice prescribes to participants, such as the shame of having put on weight or, in the case of plus-size models, of having lost weight (Czerniawski, 2015, p. 95).

All this forms a bundle of activities that cannot be attributed to the participants' individual or collective choices, but in a sense constitute an external power that forces the agents:

Ask designers why they book skinny models and they'll reply that that's what the agents are providing. Ask agents why they promote skinny models and they'll reply that that's what the designers want. And around we go. As a structural organization system, the modeling market appears to be an external force to bookers and clients (Mears, 2011, p. 188; see also Czerniawski, 2015, p. 63).

However, this external force, which is external not only to bookers and clients, but also to models, is not extraneous and coercive towards them, but is accomplished through the performances of the participants in the practice. The agents carry the practice and by practicing it enable the practice to establish itself. Fashion professionals and consumers, including models, enable the practice of thinness to become a standard in our cultural landscape, so that the tyranny of slenderness is not perceived as a tyranny at all. The way in which they interpret the thin ideal contributes to perpetuate or modify it.⁴

Considered from the perspective of the practice approach, the paradox of the persistence of the thin ideal in the fashion system, and the role played by models in it, are not puzzling any more. What seemed to be a contradiction from an economic point of view and an irrational behaviour from a cultural point of view, is in fact a consistent expression of the inertia of a widespread practice.

7 Walking the Catwalk

The second feature of modelling that I will address with the support of the tools forged by the practice approach is walking the catwalk. The discipline of the models' body is what elicits interest here, since their walking on the runway goes far beyond having a generic habitus enabling behaviours that are appropriate to the situation and involves the acquisition of a specific technique of the body, similarly to what Mauss (1936) observed about the use of high heels.

As mentioned above, far from being mere natural phenomena, fashion models, as they appear to consumers, are the product of a huge effort, a demanding work that the models themselves, together with many other professionals of the fashion system, exert on their own body, their behaviour, and the images that portray them. This activity of construction of the look has become apparent to the public in the last decades thanks to the proliferation of television programs like *America's Next Top Model* that denaturalize beauty and emphasize the production practices on which it is based (Sadre-Orafai, 2012). Modelling implies a hard work of disciplining the body to make it fit the expectations of the system. In the initial stages of the career, this is an explicit, physical discipline regulated by awards and punishments. The model who wants to join the agency and be promoted with conviction by the agent has to comply with what he tells her to do about weight, make-up, hair style, clothing and even the identity with which she introduces herself (age, origin, body measures). Thus the appearance of the model is "normalized" in a look compatible with the demands of the system. Afterwards, however, the discipline becomes more and more internalized, based on the surveillance power of the gaze that, as Foucault taught (1975), is able to render the bodies docile and self-disciplined without the need of external constraints. The disciplining and normalizing gaze is not just the gaze of those subjects that are endowed with economic power (agents, clients). It is also internalized by the models, who compare their bodies to one another and anticipate the judgment of others, regulating themselves and learning how to comply with the expectations of the fashion system (Mears, 2011, pp. 98–103).

More specifically, walking the catwalk, too, is a doing learned through physical exercise guided by a reference community. For the fashion system, walking the catwalk is an art that must be trained and that involves, as such, rules of perfection. But for every single model the catwalk walk is the product of hours of apprenticeship according to rules imposed by the system and embodied — literally — step by step (Mears, 2011, pp. 107–108). How does this assimilation of an affected gait take place? How does the reference community manage to perpetuate a body technique chiefly justified by taste issues, which are changing by nature?

Our understanding of this issue improves if we conceive the body technique as a substantial ingredient of the practice of the fashion show. The fashion show is a highly distinctive case of practice. On a general level, it involves various interdependencies among the general layout of the catwalk, the gait of the models, the bodies of the models, the clothes displayed, the conventions of the fashion system with respect to sizes, current fashion trends, social hierarchies internal to the fashion industry and commu-

4. This aspect of the practice approach, which I cannot address here, helps support Entwistle and Slater's (2012) thesis that fashion models, unlike what is claimed by feminist interpretations of the thin ideal (Bordo, 1993; Hesse-Biber, 2007), are not mere tools for the control of female corporeity by a patriarchal capitalist system, but contribute with their own tastemaker activity to its deployment.

nication technologies.⁵ A fashion show implies a set of constraints imposed not by a single entity, for example, an authority, but by the multiplicity of human and non-human stakeholders that constitute a practice. Even authorities (such as the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture* in Paris and the *Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana* in Milan), despite their privileged position, are carriers of the practice and must respond to the constraints that the practice imposes.

However, the fashion show is a special kind of practice, in the same way as sports are: not only does it provide a know-how dictated by the practice itself, like all other practices (such as walking or dressing), but it also has a number of specific additional features. First of all, it requires a dedicated training: models do not learn how to perform in a fashion show simply by living, as it happens with walking or dressing. Second, it takes place at a particular time clearly demarcated from the rest of the day and in a delimited space with restrained entrance. Furthermore, its performance requires suspension of all or almost all other practices of the same kind: one either walks the catwalk or plays guitar. Finally, it establishes a community of practitioners whose primary social bond consists in the practice itself, not in other interests or affective relationships: models are not necessarily friends or political mates with one another. Such features equate the fashion show to several sports, arts, games and amusement practices that may be considered distinct entities, as suggested by Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012, p. 7). In fact, they are circumscribed fields of action and demarcated social spheres easily recognizable through some demarcation signs, such as the existence of instruction manuals, dedicated time windows, disputes about standards of excellence, and a specialized equipment (Warde, 2014, p. 291). Using a well-known terminological distinction drawn by Theodore Schatzki — and partially altering its meaning — I shall call entities of this kind “integrative practices” (Schatzki, 1996, p. 98), contrasting them with “dispersed practices” (Schatzki, 1996, p. 91), which are distributed across many domains of human life. While walking is a dispersed practice, walking the catwalk is an integrative one. In the case of integrative practices, according to Schatzki (1996, p. 99), particularly important roles are performed by “explicit rules” (precepts and instructions) and “teleoaffective structures” (ends, beliefs, emotions). In fact, whereas everyday walking does not usually have rules or particular purposes, and does not arouse particular emotions, walking the catwalk involves joining an entity in which rules, goals and emotions are essential.

Also in this case the, empirical material reported by Ashley Mears (2011, pp. 107–110) is very helpful. I will focus especially on the models’ walking on the runway. In a long excerpt from a self-ethnographic diary, the scholar tells her experience of long and frustrating hours of “walking lessons” made up of “odd exercises” “just to ‘isolate’ our hips” or “testing our confidence,” examples to be repeated, practical advice (“take larger steps,” “right shoulder is stiff”), emotional suggestions (“when I lead you, I want you to feel like Cleopatra”; “don’t charge at a man. Come to him. Flirt”). After the account, Mears concludes:

By working on the body, models are producing a new self, not just a physical surface. They are crafting sets of feelings and dispositions as well, what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*. Some models have an easier time than others enlisting this body/self project, but all explained in various terms that learning proper comportment, whether on the runway, at photo shoots, or at castings, comes through physical practice [...]. Learning to be a model is like learning any craft. It requires immersion in practice before moving from a conscious series of steps to a tacit knowledge so deeply ingrained in the body that it feels like second nature (Mears, 2011, p. 108).

Mears does not resort to the practice approach to explain fashion shows, but the elements she calls into question — starting from the concept of *habitus* — are all signals of the embodiment into a specific kind of body that is required by the practice of the fashion show. Models do not just learn a walking technique, but an integrative practice that contemplates, besides the body technique, a dedicated time (half an hour in preset weeks that occur twice a year), a circumscribed place, a specialized equipment (high heels), structures (the long and narrow catwalk, see Kühl 2015, pp. 78–82), doings (walking between two wings of public keeping the eyes fixed on the wall of photographers piled up at the end of the

5. See, for example, the study on the London Fashion Week by Entwistle and Rocamora (2006), who highlight a number of spatial, bodily and relational features typical of the fashion show practice, the outcome of which is reproduction of the hierarchy established in the fashion industry.

runway), meanings (the thin ideal), etc. The process of incorporating the adequate gait for the catwalk, as described by Mears, discloses the training of an integrative practice that besides the body technique prescribes a set of goals, doings, sayings and feelings that the participant must practice. By working on the body, she states in the excerpt above, “models are producing a new self.” They are crafting “feelings and dispositions” because training the technique of walking the catwalk also involves learning the fundamental affective structures of the fashion show. According to Mears’ observation, by training the gait models learn to feel “confident, sexy, powerful” (Mears, 2011, p. 108), they change the mode in which they inhabit their flesh, and meet the expectations raised by the practice. In a few words, they learn to carry the practice.

Thus, reading the fashion show as an integrative practice enables us to understand the models’ affected gait on the runway not just as a physical technique, a set of movements that are stable because incorporated in body habits, but as the manifestation of a much more complex bundle of forces that support each other in maintaining the practice. The model’s physical movement does not just reproduce an exemplary movement, but performs a whole practice. This means that the specific physical movement is not linked uniquely to the contingent bodily dispositions of the model, that is, to the fact that she has trained and incorporated that particular technique. The dispositions are in turn predisposed by the combined strength of all the elements that make up the practice: place, structures, equipment, doings, sayings, meanings, etc. The specific physical movement is linked to the model’s bodily dispositions as far as these are attuned to the physical and mental dispositions of all other human and non-human actors who participate in the practice.

8 Conclusions

I have argued that applying the practice approach to the professional and social figure of the fashion model enables a more convincing explanation of some phenomena that are otherwise puzzling. I have supported this statement with the discussion of two particular examples related to fashion modelling: the embodiment of the thin ideal by models and the peculiarity of their walking on the runway. In the first case, the practice approach makes it possible to highlight that the models’ thinness does not just meet an irrational and paradoxical ideal, but manifests an inherent character of the fashion system. In the second case, the practice approach encourages us to interpret the unnatural aspect of the models’ walking on the runway as the manifestation of a set of constraints that go far beyond the simple way of walking and concern their belonging to the fashion practice.

More in general, the practice approach allows us to focus on a social force that would otherwise escape the observer’s eye, namely, the power of practice. Some social phenomena cannot be explained through the traditional categories of sociological analysis. For example, the persistence of the ideal of thinness in the fashion system seems contradictory if analyzed on the basis of economic interests, individual beliefs or social structures. But if studied with the conceptual tools displayed by the practice approach, it appears as the striking manifestation of the inertia that bodies, materials, routines, skills and meanings of the practice of fashion impose on its participants. These, in turn, do not perceive such inertia as a constraint because they are the hosts of the practice, actual interpreters of what the practice expects to be done. The great renunciation by fashion of the potential profit coming from fat bodies is not a choice and it is not actually a renunciation, since fat fashion is not a possibility that the fashion practice currently contemplates. Likewise, the curious gait of the models on the runway is not a proof of style, and neither is it the curious movements of tango dancers on the dance floor. In both cases, they are the embodied manifestations of integrative practices, which impose not only certain patterns of movement on their carriers, but a complex amalgam of bodily movements, mental settings, artefacts, norms and everything else that contributes to implement the expectations of the practice towards practitioners.

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