Deconstructing Fashion's Ideal Body

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Introduction

Humans are the only living species who desire to clothe themselves in something other than the skin in which they have been born (Rudofsky 1971, p93). Throughout human history, clothing is and has been used as both a practical protection from the elements of the world in which we live, and also as a solution to the need for modesty (Wilson & de la Haye 1999, p1). As a result of societal civilisation processes arising in the Middle Ages in Europe, clothing evolved into what is recognised as 'fashion' (Lipovetsky 1994, p5). Fashion is underpinned by elements of a personal style and aesthetic which evoke the identity of the individual, or as Craik describes it, the "[construction] of a personal *habitus*" (1993, p2). Clothes therefore "perform a wide variety of social functions" (Wilson & de la Haye 1999, p1) including altering appearance as a means of emotionally feeling understood. Loschek makes a fine point in contending that during the human psyche's development, especially in adolescence, we construct our identities by comparing ourselves to others (2009, p161). In a contemporary world where from an early age we are exposed to an abundance of technology and imagery, we cannot help but be influenced by the agendas of the fashion industry in our quest for personal identity and understanding (Franklin 2010). Throughout fashion's history there has been much discussion of the integrity of fashion's image, its reputation and the systems of representation on which it relies. This essay shall look at the established existence of an 'ideal' fashion form, how it compares to lived experience and why real women are seduced by it. Furthermore, it will discuss the last several decades' efficacy in demystifying this ideal, providing examples of social critiques and satires of fashion which seek to mediate a polemic situation.

The model body

"[Fashion is] a form of seductive and beautiful coercion into believing in the miracle of perfection that awaits those faithful to its decrees".

This quote from fashion theorist Rebecca Arnold (2001, p89) summarises the fantasy world created by the fashion industry, a world of artistic flair and beauty that is supposedly available to every individual who buys into its glamour and makes every effort to fit her body to the image. It also resonates with Plato's theory of forms, which suggests there exists a perfection of beauty beyond this mortal realm to which all people and their creations aspire (*Symposium* 210E). De Perthius brings these ideas into the realm of creation and God, suggesting that in defying the natural we are attempting to "[emulate] the original creator" (2005, p 421). Blackman asks the question, "is there anything natural about the human body anymore?" (2008, p1) This question has significant implications for the fashion industry with regards to how the notion and portrayal of ideal beauty and perfection is shaping our identity. As Quinn states, "The ideal figure of fashion has never been the celebration of the natural, but the test of a woman's ability to resist it" (2002, p33), an idea parodied in Figure 1, in the blog *I Hurt I Am in Fashion* (2012).

The website *I Hurt I Am In Fashion* is one of few examples of fashion satire, a genre which seems to have recently blossomed. This blog, now a monthly contributor to *Jalouse* magazine, takes photographic images from regular fashion magazines and websites, and endeavours to satirise particular fashion systems, practices and schools of thought. As the website *Jezebel* states, "[this blog] takes note of the casual misogyny, overall crassness, and petty absurdity of fashion's imagery and offers a dose of corrective snark" (Sauers 2011). One petty absurdity which it satirises frequently is fashions' representations of various fragile feminine forms.
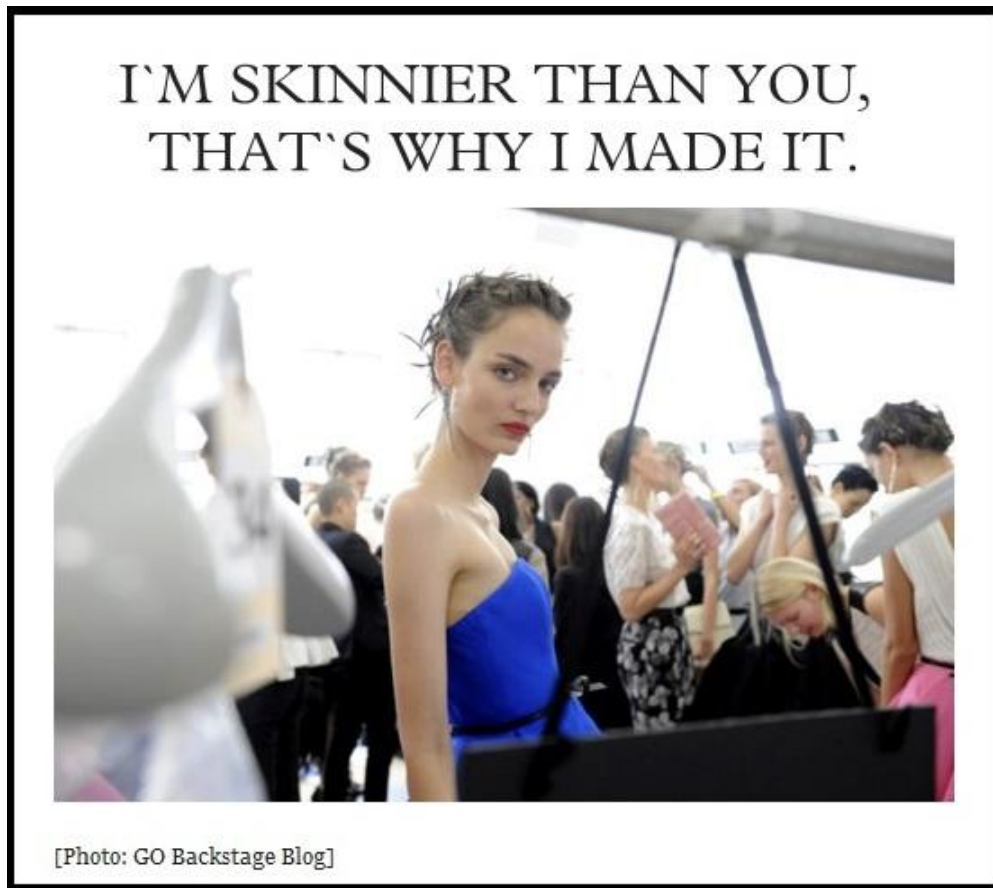
Figure 1: Blog Post, I Hurt I am In Fashion,
'I'm Skinnier Than You, That's Why I Made It', 2nd Jan 2012

Symptoms of this drive to manipulate our bodies have been seen historically in women through extreme dieting and corsetry. The 1980s brought with it the popularity of the gym and body manipulation through muscle building (Craik 1993, p115). In the last couple of decades women have turned to cosmetic surgery including breast and lip enlargement, and liposuction, all practices which theorist Bradley Quinn refers to as "engag[ing] in the eternal quest for an ideal shape" (2002, p33). Quinn goes on to state that beauty ideals in the twenty-first century align themselves with the status quo and that as women gain power and authority, they strive for bodies which reflect this (2002, p33). However, it could be questioned if Quinn's tenet is truly relevant in the contemporary world. Many ideals presented through the fashion industry over the last several decades and still currently, have portrayed women as sex objects, smoking or being in a fragile physical state, all glamorising acts which weaken the self through high-risk behaviour to our health (Arnold 2001, p48). While the era of 'heroin chic' may have passed us by, we cannot really state that the ideals of modern beauty reflect Quinn's notion of women in power. On the contrary, today's ideal is far from a healthy, established strong woman, but rather the

prevailing ideal still seems to be the body shape of a prepubescent girl which is unattainable through healthy means for any adult woman (Craik 1993, p88). It seems instead we pass through history with an endless array of detrimental addictions, from rib-breaking corsets, surgery, over-exercising, drug addictions to today's ideal which seems to be underweight bodies. A modern feminist philosopher, Susan Bordo goes so far as to say that for women "free and easy relations with food are at best a relic of the past" (in Jobling 1999, p127).

What is it essentially, is it that drives women of the contemporary, post-feminist world, to continue practices which comply to what feminist scholar Angela McRobbie calls "self-imposed feminine cultural norms"? (2009, p63) Fashion ideology is constantly asking us to warp and contort our bodies, to "submit to fashion's whims" (de Perthius 2005, p411) or as Bernard Rudofsky (1971, p112) puts it, "fit our body to the clothes", rather than the other way around? Rudofsky argues that although we have come far from corsetry and foot binding, "the belief that clothes are designed in good measure to punish the flesh never really lost its hold on us; in a way we are still doing penance for Adam's sin" (1971, p110). After all, as Arnold questions, what has the androgyny movement really achieved if an androgynous designer still places his models in high heels? And why is being unnaturally thin a gold standard placed on women alone? Is it a direct contradiction to Quinn's theory, because women are expected *not* to be strong and powerful, but to be fragile, and weak, projecting an image of submissive femininity, juxtaposed with the strong muscular male? (2001, p99)

In recent decades, there has been a problematic connection between the representation of supermodels and qualities that are not only unrealistic, but do not describe anything true about human life, "the cover girl's body is no one's body, it is a pure form" (Calefato 2004, p55). Society supposedly likes supermodels to represent a standard of beauty that is eternal and impossible, almost inhuman: seemingly perfect physical specimens who do not age, die, or suffer, "removing the traces of mortality, ageing and decay" (Arnold 1999, p489), a notion which Luible & Lindt (1999/2000) relate to a certain human desire to separate the body from the spirit. This idea is paralleled in Plato's *Symposium*, "a beauty which, in the first place, is eternal, without decay" (210E). In fact, an article from *BON International* 2010 magazine (Figure 2) describes the then latest collections more like "figures from a wax museum if not corpses" and make-up which makes skin as "waxy as a dolls'" (BON 2010, p38), which also aligns with Arnold, "clothing, make-up and accessories as artificial elements used to disguise the living flesh" (1999, p495).

Can youth be eternal?

Supermodels used to represent an impossible, eternal standard of beauty. But then time passed. Tyra Banks grew curves; Heidi Klum had children. The supermodels quite simply grew older, and thus were humanised. What a letdown! Ever since, preternatural beauties seem to be in short supply. Sure, there have been some candidates – Lily Cole, Nimue Smith and Lara Stone – but they can't quite seem to carve out a niche like the old supermodels. Maybe we're just tougher to woo – our feelings are still hurt after discovering that models lack that ethereal, ageless beauty in the first place.

   Instead, our new beauty ideal is the mannequin, always lovely and forever young. Her skin is dewy and glossy – which is precisely this autumn's signature look. At the A/W 2010 shows, Donna Karan's models glistened like film noir beauties, while Todd Lynn's looked more like figures from a wax museum, if not corpses. Flashy new moisturisers featuring the pearlescent effects we once mocked, highlighters with a moist-looking gloss or even good old-fashioned Vaseline make human skin look as waxy as a doll's. Maybe you can't stop time, but you can pretend ● CH

MAC Créme Brilliance makes skin glossy, while Giorgio Armani Shimmering Fluid Sheer provides a fresher moist look.

Figure 2: 'Can Youth be Eternal?' BON International, Autumn/Winter 2010, p38

This connection between death and the pedestal of beauty has been embodied by many fashion concepts, from malnourished models, to the wearing of dead animals. The cultural critic Walter Benjamin likened the mannequin to the woman seduced by fashion, "the modern woman who allies herself with fashion's newness in a struggle against natural decay represses her own reproductive powers, mimics the mannequin, and enters history as a dead object" (in Evans 2003, p186). Furthermore, Arnold quoted former US President Bill Clinton saying "The glorification of heroin is not creative, it's destructive. It's not beautiful, it is ugly. This is not about art, it's about life and death. And glorifying death is not good for any society" (2001, p48). Clinton's statement made in relation to the death of an addicted fashion photographer in the 1990s, but could equally be applied to unhealthy, underweight fashion models, which has come to a head in the past decade after the death of several catwalk models, prompting the world to debate the 'size zero' issue. If what we desire is a body of superhuman quality because we are afraid of being confronted with our own mortality (Arnold 1999, p495), there is a paradox in being seduced by models with such tenuous holds on their physical health.

In recent years, there have been efforts to diversify society's ideals of beauty, such as designers using 'plus-sized' models to make statements, as well as the rise of companies like All Walks Beyond the Catwalk founded by Caryn Franklin, which is a United Kingdom initiative to affirm the body image of people considered excluded from the world of fashion. All Walks is dedicated to working with photographers, designers and models to suggest there is beauty in a diversity of shapes, ages, skin colours, and everything that makes a human being an individual (AllWalks 2012). Age is one interesting point to consider, since fashion is "a performance for the young" (Arnold 1999, p492), and *of* the young if you consider the small age window of most fashion models. However, ironically the fashion business relies on consumption by women of all adult ages.

Figure 3: Photo, Rankin for All Walks Beyond The Catwalk, 'Snapped', Spring/Summer 2011

Similarly, Angel Sinclair, a former model herself, has started up two companies, Sinclair Model Management, and Models of Diversity, who are also dedicated to this cause, but go further, by including women with disabilities (Sinclair 2012), something that disability researcher Heiss (2011) would perhaps have appreciated. Speaking of efforts to display size diversity among catwalk models, after Myer's 2011 Big Is Beautiful Plus Size show, (Figure 4) the fashion journalist, Georgina Safe reported, "Frankly, why should we [include larger sized models]? Standard-size models, like Olympic athletes, are a genetically gifted species. Most consumers understand they will never look like them." (2011) This argument is on par with the slightly misinformed ideas of Derek Zoolander, the main character in the satirical fashion film *Zoolander*, that "Models help people. They make them feel good about themselves. They also show them how to dress cool... and wear their hair in interesting ways" (Zoolander 2001). Firstly, All Walks' Caryn Franklin contends that even an intelligent woman is not subconsciously able to critically separate the differences between the image presented and reality (2010) and even if she did, does its unattainability stop her from aspiring to that image? Secondly, while we are constantly exposed to the amount of effort to which Olympic athletes go to attain the level of physical being required for their achievements, the outsider does not see the radical, and often unhealthy, measures such as impulsive cosmetic surgery and extreme dieting, which models are assumed to take in order to maintain their image (Craik 1993, p80). Wissinger calls this the

idea of "aesthetic labor" including "dieting, working-out, tanning, looking after one's skin, shaving, waxing, plucking bodily hair, paying regular trips to the hairdresser, the beauty salon, the gym" and in fact that "several models we interviewed explained that the work on the self never stops" (2009, p282). In 1999, Jobling made the argument that although fashion models are "thinner than 95% of the population", we cannot assume a direct correlation between this "vocational anorexia" and the complexities of eating disorders suffered by the general population (p127). Yet there is in fact proof from psychological studies (Grabe, Hyde and Ward 2008), which links media representations of unattainable ideals of 'beauty' to mental health problems with regards to body image and self esteem. Fashion theorist Dwyer challenges this, contending that although the fashion body results in disorder it also produces a certain amount of aesthetic delight (2004). A question remains as to whether or not fashion is willing to sacrifice its aesthetic fantasy, and some of the financial rewards that go with it, for the moral well-being of a society with self-esteem? De Perthius concludes that fashion is unwilling to respond to the observers who "ask where are the non-slim, the non-young and those who are not able-bodied", because fashion's survival relies upon its "economy of desire" and therefore if fashion were to allow reality "in a gesture of politically correct egalitarianism" to take over its ideals, it would lose its power (2005, pp. 422-423).

Figure 4: Catwalk Photograph, Myer: Big Is Beautiful Plus Size Show, 2011

Perhaps the fashion industry is simply unaware of the extent of this power to subconsciously affect the self esteem of even the educated (Franklin 2010). If fashion is a forward-thinking design field, which seeks to create garments of beauty which seek to give individuals the ability to express "personal freedom and creativity" (Kaiser 1997 p473), why is the industry creating such a paradox by promoting imagery of such backward-thinking unsustainable bodies and failing to embrace individuality by airbrushing away the beautiful imperfections that make each one of us unique? (Franklin 2010) With the lack of diversity among tall, thin, symmetrical, Caucasian women on the catwalk, a statement by the feminist cultural critic, Rosalind Coward seems to ring true: "One thing that fashion is quite categorically *not,* is an expression of individuality" (in Arnold 2001, p89).

While there will always be discord between our own lives and those whom we consider to have affluence and success, we attempt to approximate them through desiring the assets we lack (De Botton 2004, p52). This can also be attributed to the discord between our bodies and those of the fashion world, which we try to approximate through wearing the same clothes. Arnold describes this as the "yearning for perfection of their own being through assimilating the ideals reflected in fashion photography and advertising" (1999, p491). "Clothing, as one of the most visual forms of consumption" (Crane 2000 p1) seizes upon insecurities and uncertainties in the life of the individual (Davies in Craik 1993 p204), a feeling which can be exemplified by the common phrase "nothing to wear" which actually means nothing suitable or appropriate to wear because of anxiety created through trying to "compose the appropriate social body" (Craik 1993, p204).

Philosopher Alain De Botton looks at this phenomenon of consumerism through a philosophical perspective and the idea that the constant advertising of material products creates the unattainable desire that material wealth will help one be perceived as affluent (2004, p52-53), a contention which Franklin (2010) describes as "rectify[ing] a Hopelessly Imperfect Existence [sic], with unnecessary purchases". Wissinger summarises the consumption of fashion as "seducing the public into believing that hope could perhaps be found in a jar, and true love and happiness might be possible if one just made the right purchases" (2009, p277). As this phenomenon is essentially setting oneself up for failure, it is hardly surprising that this is considered a significant cause of malaise in the middle class (De Botton 2004 p52-53), because

the consumerist ideal of fashion is an unattainable desire, another theory that resonates with the Platonic theory of forms (*Symposium* 210E).

These unattainable ideals presented in images underpin the theory that we are trying to fit our lives and bodies to the forms and ideals that are constantly shown to us, which in turn creates problems like extreme modifications of the body through eating disorders, over-exercising, and musculation (Kaiser 1997 p102-109). These problems are possibly most exemplified in the celebrity population of individuals with a heightened pressure to look and be "perfect", and enough time and money with which to dedicate themselves to that simple, superficial goal (Wissinger 2009, p283).

Perhaps the anxiety we feel is linked to the lack of diversity in fashion advertising as we cannot find enough similarity between ourselves and the 'ideal body' (Franklin 2010). Arnold argues that fashion "compulsively reveals unconscious anxieties and yearnings for the flesh it so tantalizingly conceals" (1999, p488). Ironically, perhaps fashion advertising is its own worst enemy, because studies show that people would be more inclined to buy a garment if they saw it on a body that had something in common with themselves, a belief firmly held by Franklin (2010) and exemplified in the primary research and opinions which Crane, 2000, provides us (p224-227). One example Crane questions, is the purpose of presenting a sexualised image of the female body if the goal is selling the clothes to women? (2000, p217).

Thanks to the invention of the internet, contemporary society is presented with a far greater quantity of information than any preceding generations. With a saturation of media coverage encouraging women to look past the ideal world and recognise the value and beauty of reality, we are simultaneously inundated with the agendas of fashion and advertising industries. Why then, cannot at least the *educated* woman deconstruct these fantasy ideals? (McRobbie 2009, p63-69).

Demystifying the Ideal

"It's hard doing a runway show. You're surrounded by 40 of the most beautiful women in the world. You see all your own imperfections and none of theirs'" - Cindy Crawford.

Rudolph in Craik (1993, p88) offers this quote from arguably the most famous model of her decade. The idol that we have all been drooling over, reading about and placing posters on our walls, looks in the mirror and sees imperfections, just like we do every day. This breaks down our fashion fantasy. It breaks down what the academic Mike Gane says,"Woman is never so seductive as when she adores herself... Around the mannequin is an intense narcissism, a paradigm of self-seduction. The woman becomes her own fetish and therefore, a fetish for the other" (Arnold 2001, p74). Craik's interviews (1993) are not limited to Cindy Crawford, either. A number of other high profile models, including Elle Macpherson, also admit to not liking the way they look. Is this the paradox of beauty, or an indication of Franklin's "institutionalised body dysmorphia [as] a default setting for all of us"? (2010) If the fantasy women we hold up on pedestals of beauty, do not see beauty in themselves, what hope is there for the everyday woman?

However, the reality of the human condition, means that we do age, suffer and die. The article in *BON International* says "our feelings are hurt after discovering that models lack that ethereal, ageless beauty in the first place" because "Tyra Banks grew curves, Heidi Klum has children" (BON 2010). But is this true? One of the major current Australian models, Miranda Kerr, has just had a baby. Are we hurt, or are we inspired by finding out she is 'real'? This question could be answered by considering Juergen Teller's photographs in 1996 of the model Kristen McMenemy (Figure 5), which do "depict the body as fallible, as open to pain and fatigue" (Arnold 1999, p489), yet of course, here we return to the hedonistic lifestyles of heroin chic. It seems we forever struggle to find a happy medium between an immortal body and one which glamorises pain and suffering.

Figure 5: Photograph, Juergen Teller, Model Kristen McMeneny, 1996

A certain amount of glamour surrounds the industry of beauty, and the desire of "living the dream" of becoming a model, exemplified by the copious amount of reality television shows such as *America's Next Top Model* (Wissinger 2009, p290-291). However, there lies a certain sad irony in the lack of interest by the industry in the personality and individuality of the model herself, she is "drained of any biological realities" (de Perthius 2005, p410). Wissinger affirms that only models with the status of 'supermodel' have any influential discourse with their stylists, designers and photographers (2009, p279-280). As previously mentioned, many models do not see in themselves the epitome of the ideal female body, it is only to others that she appears this way. The model Moncur said, "it's an addiction, because you exist through others' eyes. When they stop looking at you, there's nothing left" (Rudolph in Craik 1993, p91). Perhaps it is these feelings that lead to what Arnold describes as "long-held fears concerning the sanity of women who gave themselves up to sensuality and eroticism" (1999, p493). Models are often treated as objects, and have many a time been described as living 'coathangers' (Craik 1993, p82), which parallels this idea that their person is not really relevant to the world in which they are posing, "The model appears in this framework, this setting, but does not belong to it; her reality is only in reference to fashion" (de Perthius 2005, p410). This idea is portrayed in the photography of Phil Poynter "I Didn't Recognise You With Your Clothes On" (1998), Figure 6, where the figure of a man seduces the figure of a woman, only there are no figures - only the clothes are seen on an 'invisible' human body.

*Figure 6: Photograph, Phil Poynter, 'I Didn't Recognise You With Your Clothes On',
published in Dazed and Confused, 1998*

Poynter's image suggests the body itself has become obsolete in human desire and sexuality. It also parodies the objectification of the female body, and the use of overtly erotic and pornographic references in fashion photography. Furthermore, this work confronts a history of fashion systems which have perhaps been inundated with a "saturation [of] images of the human figure", and therefore the body is somehow obsolete from the presentation of the clothing; impalpable, yet somehow still present in the frame. It brings across the idea that it is no longer "the body that takes off the clothes - rather, it is the clothes that have removed the body" (de Perthius 2005, p415).
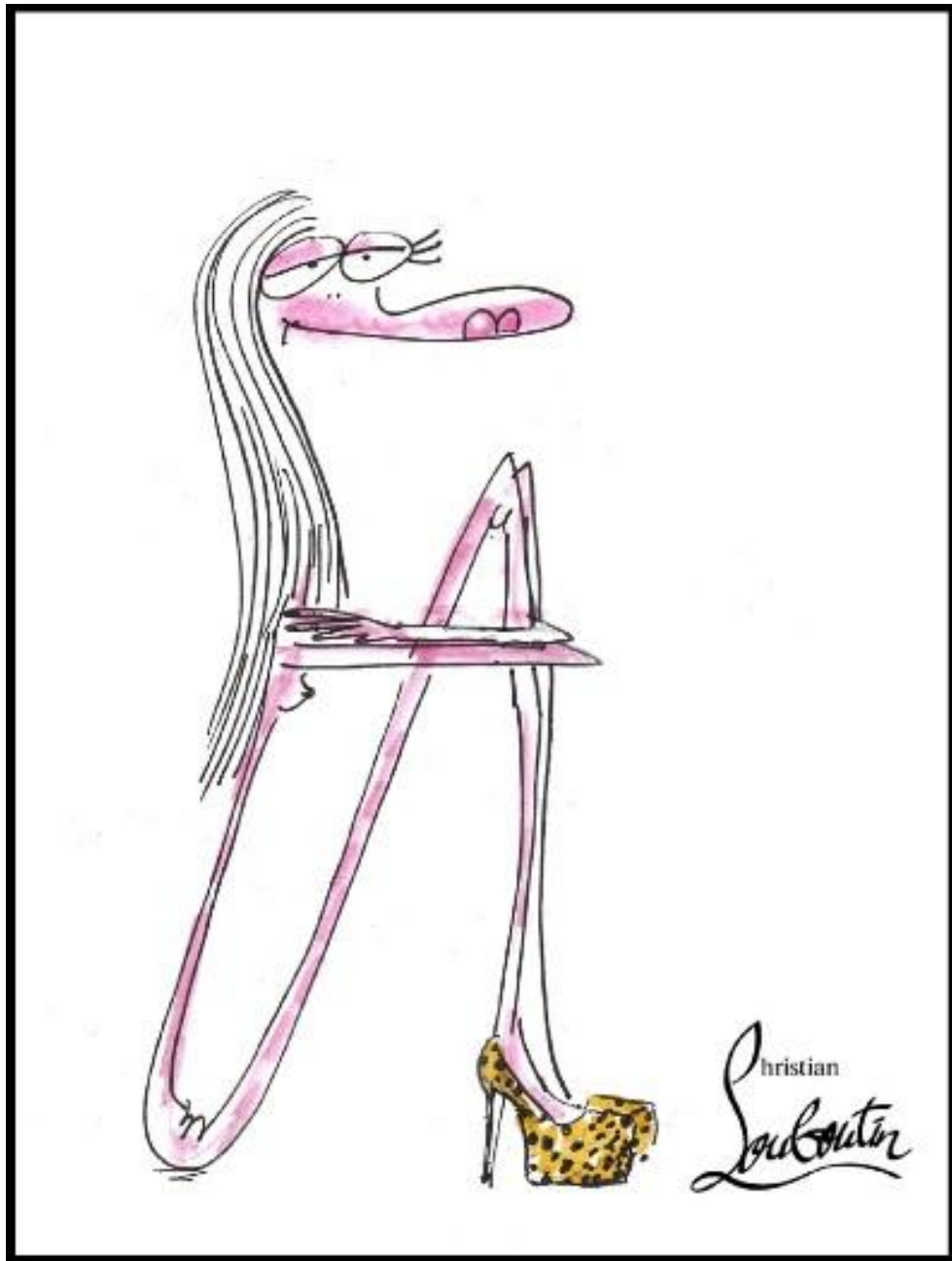
Figure 7: Cartoon, Neil Kerber, Polly Bean, the first Cartoon Supermodel

Poynter's photography suggests that the human form is reconfigured into fashion (de Perthius 2005, p415). Craik refers to models of specific decades as "caricatures" which reflect the "encapsulation of successive idealised 'looks'" (1993, p87). This notion can be linked to Neil Kerber's creation of cartoon supermodel "Polly Bean" (Figure 7), who does indeed encapsulate the bodily aesthetics of recent times (blond, extremely thin and Caucasian).
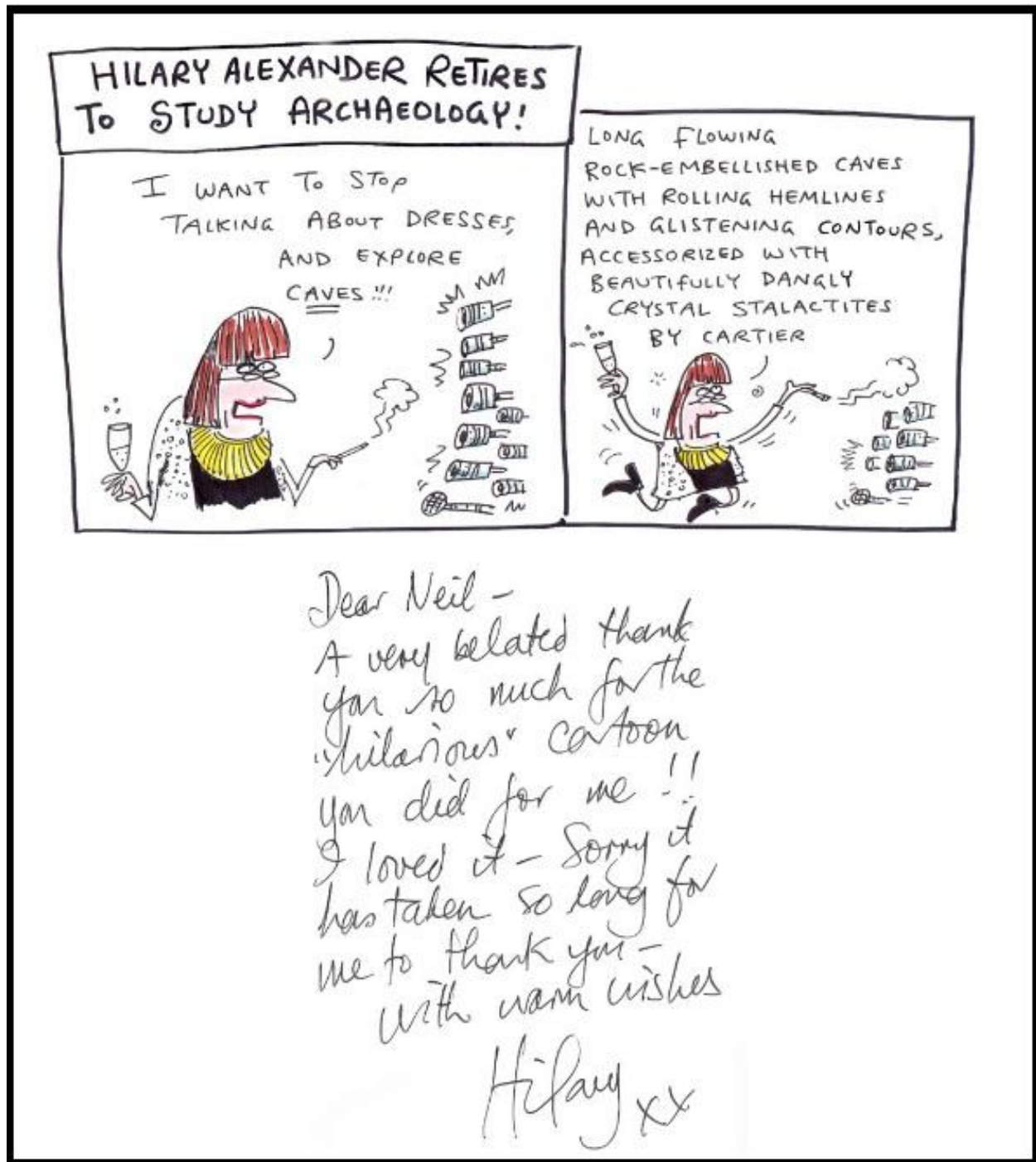
Figure 8: Cartoon, Neil Kerber, Hilary Alexander Retires to Study Archaeology

Polly Bean has flourished into a personage that the fashion industry has embraced and encouraged, as she has 'appeared' in Vogue magazine many times alongside top supermodels, and 'worn' the clothes of Louboutin and Burberry. Figure 8 illustrates the appreciation of Kerber's cartoons by Hilary Alexander, a prominent fashion writer. It is apparent that the light humour of the cartoons means there is a willingness in the industry to accept playful critiques,

and indeed Kerber won Joke Cartoonist of the year in 2011 (Alexander 2011). Polly Bean does epitomise several stereotypical qualities of the fashion model, as she is unintelligent, and perhaps does not know a lot about the world in which she travels far and wide to model (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Cartoon, Neil Kerber Polly Bean at Paris Fashion Week

In fact, many models have also struggled with the well ingrained stereotype that their image is all they have, that "by virtue of being attractive, [they] are dumb" (Hartman in Craik 1993, p85), exemplified in Figure 10, from the blog *I Hurt I Am In Fashion* (2012).

Figure 10: Blog Post, I Hurt I am In Fashion, 'As Far Back As They Could Remember They Always Wanted To Be Gangsters', 19th March 2012

This is also a prominent notion explored in the satirical film *Zoolander* (2001), which makes a mockery of the industry by exaggerating features of two prominent issues in fashion - the money-hungry world which will exploit workers, and the lack of intelligence of models who are pawns for the industry and will do whatever they are told. Derek Zoolander's lack of intelligence is exemplified throughout the film. One example that stands out is his desire to find a more rewarding lifestyle after the death of his friends by searching for something more in life than

being "really, really ridiculously good-looking" and perhaps opening the "Derek Zoolander Center For Children Who Can't Read Good And Wanna Learn To Do Other Stuff Good Too" [sic] (Zoolander 2001).

While the majority of fashion systems still look for uniformity in their models, there are several initiatives to promote diversity. Perhaps the most prevalent example is the life of Aimee Mullins, who had both her legs amputated at the age of one, and struggled through her adolescent life with accepting her disability. She managed to overcome her struggles by embracing the way she had to live, and finding the positives - which included world running records using prosthetic legs, having designer legs made for her by the late Alexander McQueen (Figure 11), and becoming a model to show off her 'leg wardrobe' (*The Moth* 2011). This is a story of inspirational personal strength and the acceptance of her own individuality, as she states, "when we can celebrate and truly own what it is that makes us different, we're able to find the source of our greatest creative power" (Mullins 2011). It also exemplifies Franklin's desires for the future of fashion, "Gosh darn it; what if there was excitement around Individuality? Difference? Otherness?" (2010) However, one must wonder if Mullins would have been so successful had she not also been conventionally attractive despite her disability.
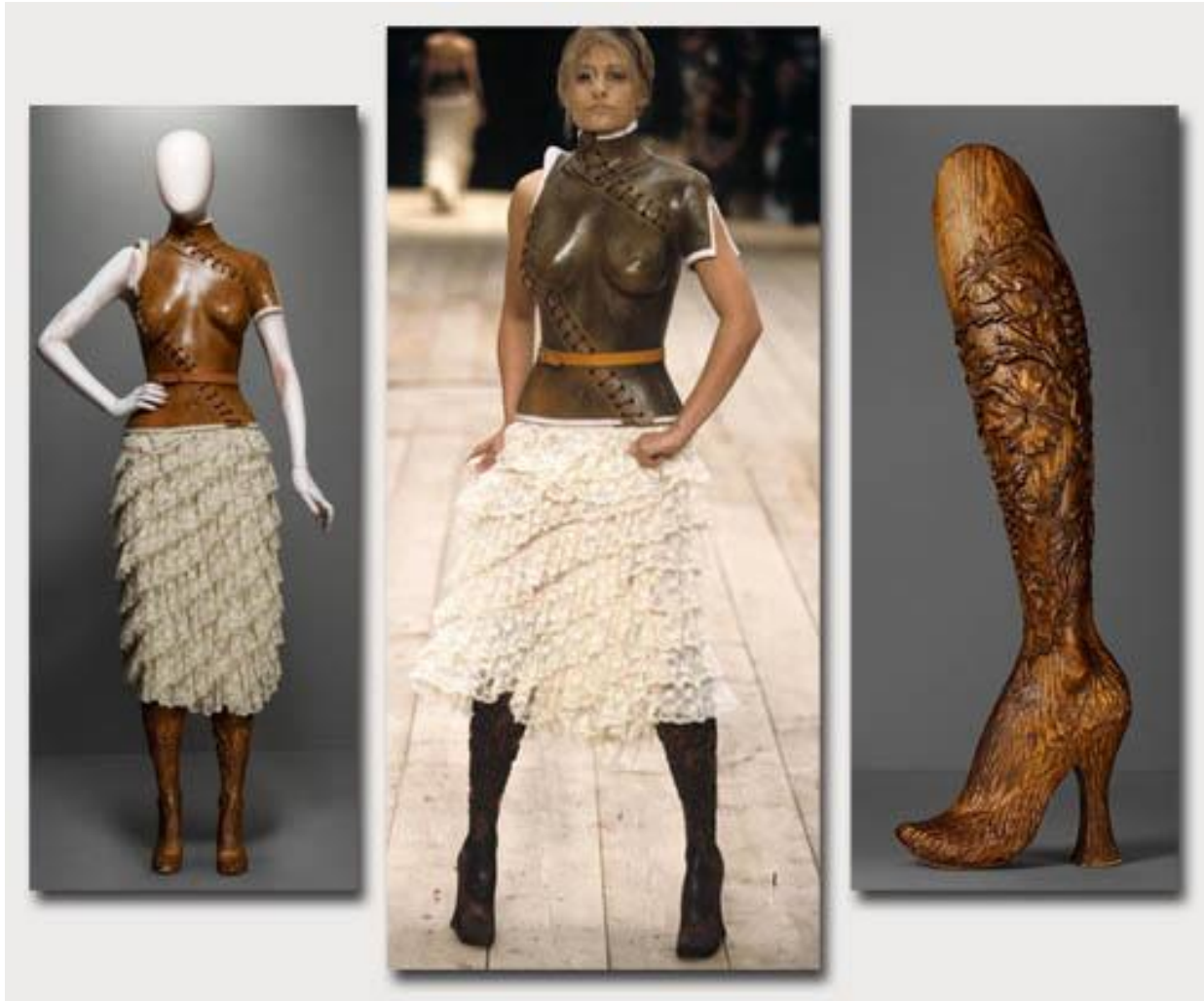
Figure 11: Photographs, Aimee Mullins in her Wooden Elm Legs, Alexander McQueen, 1999

In contrast to Aimee Mullins as a figure of inspiration celebrating her diversity and disability, a recent trend in fashion imagery over the last few years depicts models in ways which fabricate distortion and damage such as on wheelchairs, crutches, or wrapped up in bandages; comes across as ludicrous. This has been an issue satirised in Figure 12, by the blog *I Hurt I Am In Fashion* (2012).

Figure 12: Blog Post, 'Just When I Hoped Models on Crutches was a 2011 Idiocy, Style Singapore Brings Idiocy Again', I Hurt I am In Fashion, 15th January 2012

The issue of race in the modelling industry has put forward several interesting theories. Western stereotypes of beauty have always prevailed in fashion imagery. As Rudolph states, "in every country, blond hair and blue eyes will sell" (in Craik 1993, p87). Of course diverse ethnicities have been introduced into the industry. However as English-born Naomi Campbell, one of the most historically famous non-white models boldly said, people "resented the fact that she succeeded as 'a black tulip' rather than a 'typical English rose'" (Craik 1993, p87). Keenan described black model Donyale Luna as "the oddest woman ever seen in fashion" (in Cheddie 2002, p61), which does show a changing of the status quo, as this quote is hardly relevant today, yet there still persists a lack of racial diversity (Franklin 2010). Young (in Cheddie 2002, p71) speaks of the absence of the black woman from discourses of femininity projecting women as weak and passive, meant that they were being denied their femininity. Although this may be

true, studies show white women in the Western world have generally lower self esteem than those with darker skin tones, which Franklin associates with the stereotypical model in history in being white, and therefore white women are more consistently being shown unattainable images of what they ought to look like (2010). It is an interesting paradox with reference to Young's argument of denied femininity, that if this is indeed true; the lack of diversity in the modelling industry has actually served to protect those whom they historically were rejecting.

Figure 13: Photograph, 'Down Under', Models of Diversity

Companies like All Walks and Models of Diversity (Figure 13), seek to open the minds of society and steer the world away from the dominance of racism and hate, and instead towards equality and human rights. However, other initiatives to diversify the ideals of beauty have not been quite as successful. Estee Lauder launched its Idealist campaign in 2011 to promote ethnic distinction in models. Although the three models clearly do come from differing backgrounds, those are also the only distinctions about them, which directly coincides with Cheddie's studies that asserted "the black woman could only be considered beautiful if they were light-skinned" (2002, p63). It is doubtful that choosing one girl from each major racial demographic can attain the essence of true diversity, a concept which is far more complex than is presented in the Figure 14.

Figure 14: Advertisement, Estee Lauder, 'Idealist campaign', 2011

Diversity is likely more about state of mind and the ability to look at people as individuals, disregarding race, skin colour, age, size, disability, etc, and finding the beauty in who they are, essentially "freeing ourselves from beauty stereotypes" (Dove 2008) A campaign perhaps more sensitive to these particular issues, was Dove's campaign for Real Beauty, Figure 15, which Heiss (2011) admits, although she critiques the absence of women with disabilities in the campaign.

Figure 15: Advertisement, Ogilvy & Mather for Dove, 'Campaign for Real Beauty', 2008

In fact, so concerning has been the lack of body image self esteem among teenage girls of the Western world, that it has sparked much debate about the ethics of airbrushing images in fashion and tabloid magazines. Recently the Royal College of Psychiatrists in the UK has called for laws to be introduced that force magazines and newspapers to mark advertising images that have been airbrushed, thereby protecting the vulnerable who may not understand the impossibility of aspiring to a digitally enhanced physical perfection (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2012). Of course the debate in that advertising in its very essence is about projecting a dream in order to sell its merchandise (Craik 1993, p92). The psychoanalyst, John Carl Flügel might call this "creating a new world 'nearer to the heart's desire'" because of an "inability to find complete satisfaction with reality" (in de Perthius 2005, p407). The UK initiative has had several Australian responses, the most prominent being the raw 'untouched' images of the model Sarah Murdoch (formally O'Hare) on the cover of Women's Weekly in 2009 (Figure 16), and the naked photograph of Jennifer Hawkins on the cover of Marie Claire in 2010 (Figure 17), which brought the negative consequences of airbrushing in the public arena, and stipulated awareness and public discourse.

Figure 16: Magazine Cover, Sarah Murdoch, untouched, Women's Weekly 2009

Jennifer Hawkins' cover shoot was done to support the Butterfly Foundation, a charity which provides support to Australians with Eating Disorders and negative body image. However, one must wonder how successful these two magazine cover initiatives were. Although we can discern a few of Sarah Murdoch's wrinkles, she is still wearing make-up and she is conventionally beautiful. Even Helen McCabe the editor of Woman's Weekly magazine stated, "The one point I have to make is that this is possibly one of, if not the most beautiful woman in Australia that I've done this to, so the risk is not that high" (Narushima 2009). We must also

wonder why a foundation to combat eating disorder picked Jennifer Hawkins for the image of this campaign. She perhaps has some uneven skin tones in this image, yet this is still an image of 'Miss Universe' with "a body most of us would do just about anything for" (Marie Claire, January 3, 2010). This idea resonates with what the photographer Teller stated of the sanitised perfection of cover girl images, "I don't understand the retouching. They look like aliens to me", after all these women are supermodels, so why not show them how they are? (in Arnold 1999, p489). Both these magazine covers have caused quite a bit of debate among the Australian public, possibly because although the images may be un-airbrushed, it could be interpreted as patronising to hear these women feel good about who they are, for why should they not? They are both still part of the glamorised, and fantastical ideals of the feminine body.

Figure 17: Magazine Cover, Jennifer Hawkins bares all, Marie Claire 2010

Just about every image we see of the human face and body in the media today has been digitally manipulated in some way (Jones 2012). While many women admit to the fear of leaving the house without make-up on, Jones explores the phenomenon of cosmetic surgery as a means of rectifying insecurity (2012). These are perhaps examples of the desire to attain levels of digitally enhanced perfection, an example of the research at the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2012).
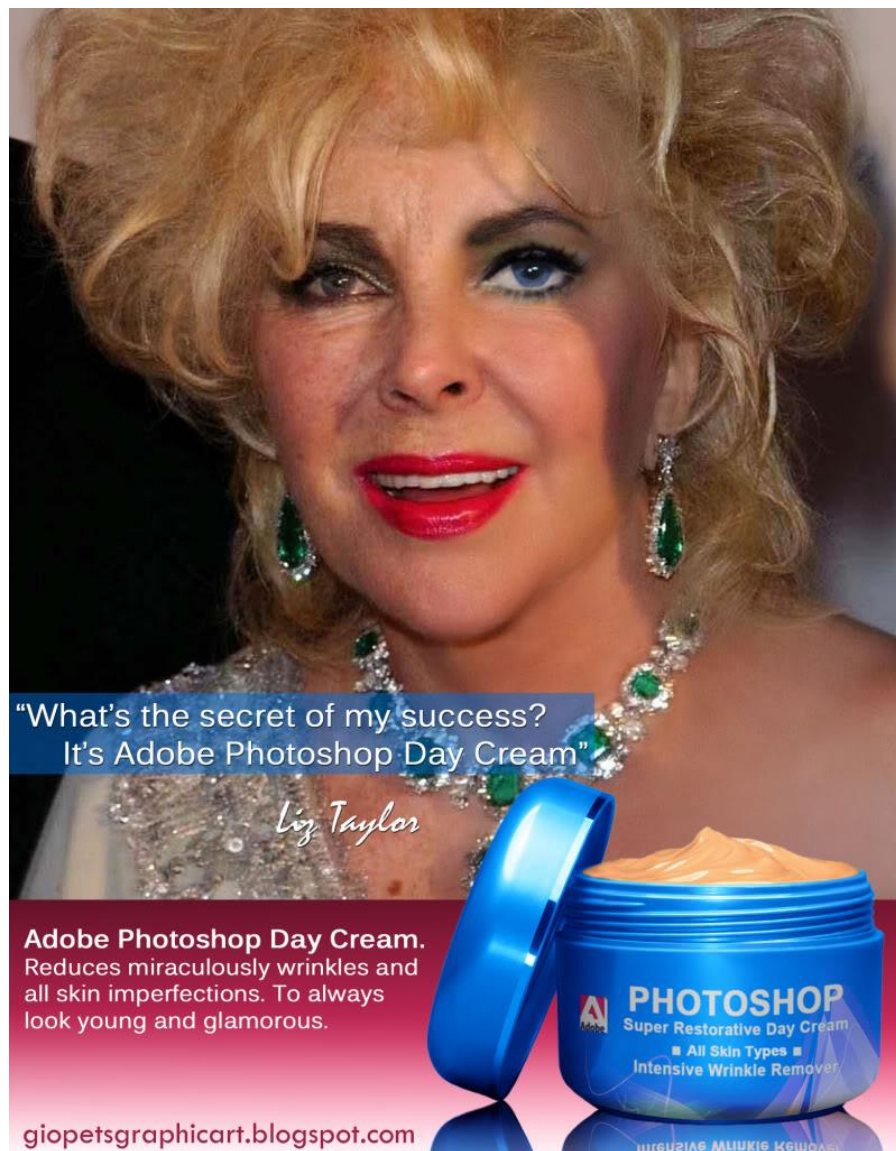

Figure 18: Satirical Advertisement, Adobe Photoshop Day Cream,
Giopet's Graphic Art Blog, 2010

This idea is shown in Figure 18, where the actress Elizabeth Taylor attributes her success to 'Adobe Photoshop Day Cream', showing the marked difference between the right and left sides of her face. This is a technique of satire called verisimilitude, where the fake image mimics real cosmetic product advertisements, to expose surreptitious realities and encourage critical thinking.

These are just a few of the myriad examples which have been pushing for positive body image and representations of real women prevalent in the media circuit in the last decade. Schools in the UK and Australia have recently begun teaching children about the realities of airbrushed images, but raising awareness of low self-esteem and the dangers of comparing oneself to unrealistic expectations presented by the celebrity and fashion world has been done at least across the last two decades (Dwyer 2004). Contemporary Western society has had no lack of campaigns, companies and promotions all seeking to deconstruct these ideal fantasies. Consciously, we can now be aware that what the world of media presents to us is nothing but a synthetic fantasy or as de Perthius describes, "in the synthetic ideal the body itself is moulded and transformed, drained of all that is natural or organic" (2005, p422). Jones affirms that the modern world does have an understanding of the differences between reality and the synthetic image, or what she calls the "two-dimensional" and "three-dimensional" worlds of beauty (2012).

Yet with all of these initiatives, and the push for critical thinking, why is the issue of this fantasy world still problematic and why are 8 out of 10 women still dissatisfied with their bodies? (Franklin 2010) The fact remains, the fashion fantasy world is extremely good at what it does. As Caryn Franklin wrote, fashion is "The Authority On The Way Clothes Look Best" [sic], and "the fashion consumer ranging from the intelligent and accomplished woman to awkward and enthusiastic pre-teen, cannot make the separation [from reality]. THE CLOTHES ARE ON THE BODY [sic], and all women receive fashion imagery into their lives on the very basis that it is a prescriptive ideal for the body too" (2010). Is it apparent that imagery is still a powerful tool of persuasion, which speaks volumes to our unconscious minds "as a source of authority and judgement" (McRobbie 2009). Furthermore, returning to consumerism, Arnold states, "the 'desire to desire' remains strong" (1999, p491). After all, the sociologist Erving Goffman speaks of the way in which we are all constantly trying to project ourselves a little better than the reality of who we are, and the fantasy of fashion is one of the most prominently available means we have to display societal idealisation (1959, p35).

Projecting a Fantasy

Is clothing the "armour of the modern world"?

This quote from Entwistle (2000, p120), refers to the trajectory of clothing from practical protection from the environment, to fashion, a kind of protection from certain aspects of the modern world, be it fear of judgement, or the desire to appear in a certain way. Many theorists have described fashion as a means of communicating identity (Entwistle 2001), but human beings often have strong desires, for many reasons, to flatter certain aspects of themselves and, hide other ones. As previously mentioned, Craik refers to the idea of creating the "appropriate social body" (1993, p204), which can cause anxieties when directly related to clothing - imagine having to meet your conservative grandparents and prospective boyfriend in close succession on the one day, what would one wear? This is an example of Goffman's long standing ideas (1959) about how humans portray through clothing, behaviour, language and a myriad of other functions, what he describes as a performance for our audience, namely, the people around us.

As this essay has argued, there exist certain idealistic forms presented to us through the fantasies of the fashion industry which we aspire to. Goffman's tenet is that we manipulate these forms, whether sexy, professional, strong, weak, feminine, and so on, to appear in a certain kind of way, to certain people (1959). Finkelstein affirms this, saying "The desire to be self-made, to have control over one's life and be free are not vanities of will but the everyday expectations of the modern, new individual" (2007, p132). Is therefore, Craik's "appropriate social body" simply a version of contemporary society's idealised form, varied slightly from one social occasion to another?

A question raised earlier in this essay was what the purpose was of presenting sexualised images of females in order to sell *to* females (Crane 2000, p217). Excluding of course the lesbian community, this question could be answered by the desire to embody the presented sexuality, to *be* sexualised, for the purpose of appearing so to men (Arnold 1999, p494).

A case study relevant to this argument, is the work of Ann-Sofie Back, which blurs the line between art and fashion, looking at concepts of masking oneself with clothing, and as Back

states "drawing inspiration from mine and other women's failures at achieving perfection and beauty" (in Granata 2007, p394).

Figure 19: Catwalk Image, Ann-Sofie Back, Winter/Fall Collection 2009

There is a general consensus that Back is considered as an avant-garde designer, at least in the first few years of her work, because rather than focusing on fashion as a commodity, she broke certain practical fashion rules in order to expose ironies present in fashion systems, and the superficiality of fashion which she felt she grew up with (Granata 2007). Her interest in fashion was spurred by ideas like Goffman's that "the individual... intentionally conveys misinformation[s]" (1959, p2). While many theorists have explored fashion as an indicator of identity, clothing being the construction of a personal cultural expression (Wilson & de la Haye 1999, p1), Back's work expresses the notion of fashion as a disguise or mask, "rather than its alleged 'authenticity'" (Granata 2007). Back's work explores the idea that every aspect of fashion is "a perfect lie, watertight, nothing left to chance" an example of which is her "faux

wasp-waist garments" which have a fake belt attached to the front which can be tightened to give a visual sense of thin-ness (in Granata 2007).

The concepts present in Back's work are not news, in fact society has a general understanding and awareness of "the power [fashion] wields in defining and communicating our identity" (Arnold 1999, p490), and that clothing acts as a "superficial gloss" (Craik 1997 p1). Individuals use fashion deliberately to disguise and flatter aspects of their identity. One example of which we are all familiar with is the thought process we go through when selecting what to wear for a job interview (Goffman 1959, p47).

"If you want to be beautiful and happy and to get a boyfriend, then you need to look like the models" (Hesse-Biber in Dwyer 2004, p410). This statement epitomises the understanding of what models in magazines mean to teenage girls, who try to "live according to an image that makes them deny their minds" (Friedan in Dwyer 2004, p410). This is an example of Loschek's theory that we construct ourselves through the observation of others, and therefore it can be inferred that through the presentation of an idealistic fashion world, and a society that does a lot but mostly fails at deconstructing fashion imagery, the presentation of our identities through fashion is not an accurate means of understanding another person. This idea is cemented by marketing academics Borgerson & Schroeder, who contend that advertising and images of marketing communication "shape, our understandings of the world, including the identities of its people and places" (in Heiss 2011). What we wear is now ridden with the anxieties of all these debates as Entwistle's argues, 'clothes cannot always be 'read'" (2000, p112).

It is not only the fashion consumer who feels driven to use fashion as a persuasive measure in order to embody a certain image and lifestyle. As Wissinger establishes through many interviews with models, the success of a model's career depends entirely on projecting a certain image and lifestyle (2009). Models go to great lengths to commodify themselves, with everything they wear, what parties they go to, who they befriend and how they look at all times, in order to produce a "self and demeanour that is attractive to hire", and indeed it only those models who construct this 'self' successfully and maintain it constantly, who will attain the status of 'supermodel' (Wissinger 2009, p280-281). The pressure of maintaining such an image is likened to that of what celebrities must do, that is, project a certain construction of identity at all times, "whether we encounter [Kate] Moss in a paparazzi shot or a fashion campaign, it is always a highly mediated encounter with an image, not the real person" (Wissinger 2009, p280).

The fact that both the model, the epitome of fashion's imagery, and the consumer of this idealist body both use fashion as a means to project falsification of identity in their lives, illustrates Dwyer's idea that the ideal body of fashion is both a "*case of disorder"* and a "*cause of disorder"* (2004, p406).

One female model stated, "you want to sell [your appearance] because you're your product; your appearance; which is different from who you are, it's hard to remember that it's just your exterior" (in Wissinger 2009, p282). This sentiment seems to concur with Jobling (1999, p135).

> "Finally it is as if the disjunction between interior and exterior spaces and the activities that take place in them has been unified by the scopophilic gaze of both models and the conflation of their desire to be both the looker/*voyeur* and the looked at/*surveillée*. Thus, we can observe fashion photography play with our own desires and fears and appreciate how the discursive body appears, as Barthes expresses it in *The Fashion System,* to represent the fundamental dilemma of all human existence, 'Who Am I?'".

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, we have been looking at systems of representations present in fashion imagery, which for a myriad of reasons, aspire to certain conventions and stereotypes of beauty. Although these ideals change along with the status quo, they remain 'perfect forms' which exist only outside the realm of reality, because fashion, and indeed any other product of advertising, needs to yield power over the society it attempts to seduce. Fashion's ideal imagery, as an extension of the human body, must therefore contort the body's natural harmony in order to appeal to the psychology of desiring what we do not yet possess. The current generation of consumers, through contemporary technological advances such as the internet, are exposed to innumerable images, compared to that of even two generations ago. Due to the multitude of these images, we are unable to consciously appreciate their subtle effects on our psyche, especially in youth, where it has been affirmed that we indeed construct our identities by comparing ourselves to others (Loschek 2009, p161). Although recent decades have seen many initiatives destined to encourage a critical deconstruction of everything we come across, they seem to have only partially succeeded, due to the nexus between fashion imagery's power, and the paradox in humanity that drives our hunger to attain even the unattainable (De Botton 2004, p52). Many designers, artists, and professionals in other creative fields have produced social commentaries, criticisms and satires of the fashion industry which have been well received but have still failed to shift the paradigm of the individual's quest for perfection. Clothing as a means to project one's identity to the outside world has become subverted by this quest, and therefore can no longer be read as a correct signifier of a "personal *habitus"* (Craik 1993, p2). Unless of course, this personal habitus is inclusive of the malaise felt by the Western world of constantly trying and failing to transcend the natural and arrive at an inhuman level of perfection. Society seems to clearly communicate a need for further demystification of idealism until there comes a time when each individual can consciously separate fantasy from reality enough to be at peace with themselves.

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