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**Summary:** In this article, I plan to reflect on the pedagogical challenges I've faced in my first semester of teaching fashion studies material at Parsons, speaking specifically to the challenges I've overcome in leading my junior seminar, Supermodel: Beauty, Fashion, and Performance, and in devising a new undergraduate fashion theory elective. In doing so, I will provide an overview of Fashion Studies as a newly-emerging academic field and outline the reflections that other scholars have published thus far.

While the aforementioned will serve as a broad foundation for my paper, my primary focus will be on my own experience. In contributing my perspective as a teacher of undergraduate MFA students at Parsons to this conversation, I will pose the following questions: What challenges do my students face in working within a discipline and in a manner that is so different from their own practice? What is the most effective way to introduce students to fashion theory and criticism? What issues are students most drawn to? And finally, how might classes such as mine influence students in reflecting on their own practice as designers? The purpose of this article will thusly be to foster a dialogue between Fashion Studies scholars as well as with other academics who work and research in interdisciplinary fields.

**Keywords:** education - fashion history - fashion studies - fashion theory - pedagogy.

[Summaries in spanish and portuguese at page 127]

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## Introduction

In 2009, scholars, researchers, and students convened at the University of Warwick to discuss the emerging discipline of fashion studies at a one-day workshop entitled *The Future of Fashion Studies*. At this workshop, the attendees sought to reflect on the present

state of the field, to identify sources of funding, to propose potential partnerships, and to establish new relationships with other institutions and academic fields (McNeil, 2010, p. 106). Among other things, the organizers noted that “notwithstanding its interdisciplinarity, the study of fashion as an academic subject remains weak, particularly in universities.” (McNeil, 2010, p. 106) While great strides have been made in the field in the past four years—including the establishment of the MA Fashion Studies program at Parsons the New School for Design and the matriculation of the first cohort of fashion studies PhDs at Stockholm University—the field is still widely misunderstood at the graduate level, to potential employers, and within the fashion industry at-large, and is virtually nonexistent at the undergraduate level.

However, with the inaugural class of Parsons MA Fashion Studies students entering the workforce and filling positions as teaching assistants and lecturers, it is becoming evident that we as academics are in the midst of a significant tide shift with The New School seeking to more closely model its curriculum after conceptual European fashion design schools, introducing students to fashion not only as design practice, but as theory, image, object, and text as well.

Teaching fashion history and a seminar entitled *Supermodel: Beauty, Fashion, and Performance* within the department of Art and Design History and Theory at The New School, I was given the platform as a first-year adjunct faculty member to introduce fashion undergraduates to the canon of fashion theory and criticism. In preparing the semester’s curriculum, I found myself more than eager to wear the hats of historian, sociologist, and cultural theorist all at once so as to pay due diligence to the interdisciplinarity of the field. Yet by the same token, I’ve also found myself overwhelmed by the enormity of this task.

In this article, I will reflect on the pedagogical challenges I’ve faced in my first semester of teaching fashion studies at Parsons, speaking specifically to the challenges I’ve overcome in leading my junior seminar, *Supermodel: Beauty, Fashion, and Performance*, and in devising innovative and engaging methods to teach fashion studies to unacquainted students. In doing so, I will provide an overview of fashion studies as an emerging academic field of study, and outline the reflections that other scholars have published thus far.

While the aforementioned will serve as a broad foundation for my paper, my primary focus will be on my own experience. In contributing my perspective as a teacher of undergraduate fine arts students and designers at Parsons to this conversation, I will pose the following questions: What challenges do my students face in working within a discipline and in a manner that is so different from their own practice? What is the most effective way to introduce students to fashion theory and criticism, and what methodologies are best suited for doing so? What issues are students most drawn to? And finally, how might theory-based fashion studies curriculum aid students in reflecting on their own practice as designers? The purpose of this article will thusly be to foster a dialogue between fashion studies scholars, designers, and other academics who work and research in interdisciplinary fields about the most effective, engaging, and memorable ways to introduce undergraduates to the field of fashion studies.

## The study of Fashion then and now

Upon entering the field, many young scholars of fashion studies suffer something of an identity crisis as they struggle to locate themselves within the wider academic community. With only a few programs dedicated to the field globally and a small, widely dispersed network of emerging scholars, this can often be an isolating experience that can leave one feeling as if she is embarking into uncharted territory. Rebecca Arnold suggests that this problem arises from the fact that existing work within the field is too often overlooked “in the desire to claim that a course, methodology or theory is ‘new’ rather than part of a mature and developed area of study,” which can be “unhelpful for students...who struggle to contextualize their own work.” (McNeil, 2010, p. 108). Falling victim to these circumstances, a classmate and I felt compelled to coauthor an article entitled *Fashion Studies at Parsons: What is it Anyway?* (Downing and Kurrenaya, 2010) within months of joining the MA Fashion Studies program at Parsons The New School for Design. We published this article in an attempt to articulate what fashion studies is to our peers at The New School, as well as to explain why it should not be discounted by scholars working in more entrenched disciplines.

Reflecting on the proceedings of the 2010 academic conference entitled *Locating Fashion Studies*, which was held at The New School and which sought to locate the MA Fashion Studies program within the New York Fashion community as well as to celebrate the program’s inaugural semester, my coauthor and I mused about where we might locate the study of dress and fashion within academia, and what tools and sites students and researchers of fashion might be well served in investigating. The short answers to these questions, we found, are anywhere and anything, respectively, as the mere idea of fashion is a tremendously expansive category that encompasses everything from matters of dress and personal adornment to the complex ways the fashion system operates both locally and globally.

Yet, upon reading the piece, our advisors noted that it was perhaps time to move away from these initial inquiries—that fashion studies needn’t continually justify its place within academia as this act in and of itself serves to discredit the discipline. Instead, they argued the scholarship that had emerged out of programs like ours, and that which had been published in journals like *Fashion Theory* and *Vestoj*, spoke volumes about the sheer potential of the field. As they saw it, the time for rationalizing and validating the legitimacy of fashion studies had passed with the closing remarks of the 2009 conference at the University of Warwick. In short, they were of the opinion that fashion studies was no longer an emerging discipline, but merely one that had not yet earned the recognition it well deserved.

Many scholars working within the field, however, find the task of having discussions and writing about the field’s past, present, and future as well as delineating its methodologies, compiling its core texts, and forging bonds with fellow scholars to be a vital undertaking. As Louise Wallenberg has pointed out, the present goal of young fashion studies scholars should be to establish a common methodology that serves to bridge the tremendous gaps that exist between new scholars entering the field from diverse backgrounds, as none

currently exists (McNeil, 2010, p. 108). Additionally, as Rebecca Arnold has argued, “Many lecturers and courses do not use the term ‘fashion studies,’ and that we therefore need to ask what the difference is between fashion studies, dress history, and fashion history.” (McNeil, 2010, p. 108). Thus, the task of the young fashion studies scholar is twofold: first, one must work with her peers to, as Wallenberg suggests, establish a common methodology. Second, as Arnold suggests, our task should also be to acknowledge what fashion studies borrows from its sister disciplines of dress history and fashion history, but also define what makes it unique.

Responding to Arnold’s call for clarification, what then can we identify as the principal differences as well as overlaps between these three related fields of study? Lou Taylor dates the emergence of the first dress history texts to the late eighteenth century when small volumes of wood-engraved and aquatint illustrations of contemporary dress were marketed toward the wealthy. She goes on to explain that within these texts, “curiosity about the foreign and the strange was as intense as ignorance was rife” with the publications fetishizing images of the “noble savage,” reflecting the imperializing and nationalistic impulses of the period, and placing images of peasant dress adjacent to the costumes of the European aristocracy to illustrate class hierarchies. (Taylor, 2005). Key texts of this genre include Thomas Jeffreys’ four-volume *Collection of Dresses of Different Nations, Ancient and Modern* (1757 and 1772) and Michel François Dandré Barçon’s *Costume des anciens peuples* (1772). (Taylor, 2005). Roland Barthes explains that the purpose of such texts was to enable “the historian to establish an equivalence between vestimentary form and the general mindset of the time or of the place.” (Barthes, 2006). While these early texts were narrow in scope and specific to the period in which they were compiled, they have nonetheless set a precedent for the historical study dress as image-based and encyclopedic in nature. Today, these volumes take the form of expensive and lavishly photographed and illustrated coffee table books. Of these texts, Breward has written that while they “place the products of the fashion system firmly in the role of the desirable commodity or art object,” they are “sometimes truer to the rapaciously commercial spirit of the culture in which directional fashion is produced than any number of more abstract ‘academic’ treatises.” (Breward, 2003, p. 11). Even so, such texts both old and new serve as invaluable resources for historians as well as appealing entryways into the field for young scholars and laypeople alike.

In the present day, however, dress and costume historians endure a great deal of criticism or even general dismissal within academic circles as their focus is centered primarily on “questions of construction, style, and patterns of usage,” and because the majority of their work occurs in museums, archives, private collections, and behind the scenes in the entertainment industry. (Breward, 2003, p. 11). Furthermore, “The discipline has often been criticized for producing hemline histories that neglect considerations of context and meaning for the seemingly less enlightened concerns of provenance and influence.” (Breward, 1995). However, fashion studies owes much to these scholars, curators, and collectors as their work paved the way for the “establishment of academic courses relating to the history of fashion,” academic journals and magazines, and professional organizations. (Breward, 1995)

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars began to shift their focus from mere description to using fashion as a starting point for sociological, cultural, and psychological inquiries into the nature of human behavior. The primary focus of these scholarly inquiries had to do with how, why, and amongst whom fashion trends emerge, and what those fashionable moments said about culture at-large. Key texts that ushered in this change, and are still of great relevance today, include Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) and Georg Simmel's *Philosophie der Mode* (1905). Although these texts did not have much of an impact on the study of dress until nearly sixty years after their original publication, Lou Taylor suggests that they were integral to the development of "debates about the functions of dress and fashion" as well as to "the three diverging approaches to the study of fashion," which include the descriptive, the object-focused, and the theoretical. (Taylor, 2005). Comprising the building blocks of the study of the history of fashion, these texts not only detailed the history and appearance of dress, but sought to explain the who's, why's, and how's of fashionable, western dress over time.

Fashion studies as a field unto itself did not emerge until the 1980s when Elizabeth Wilson published *Adorned in Dreams* (1985), which cemented fashion as a legitimate area of study in approaching fashion and its impact on culture from a feminist perspective. In examining fashion and dress through the dual lenses of sociology and women's and gender studies, *Adorned in Dreams* is a core text within the fashion studies canon for the manner in which demonstrates the sheer potential of fashion studies as an interdisciplinary field, as well as for its readability. For these reasons, Wilson's text sits at the top of MA Fashion Studies summer reading list for incoming students.

Additionally, the rise of conceptual fashion in the 1980s—which on the surface appeared abstract and highly esoteric at times and needed the keen eye of fashion scholars to unpack its myriad meanings—can be cited as further abetting the formation of the field of fashion studies as it "has triggered new analytical debate[s]" that have spawned studies emerging from the fields of culture and gender studies, and have further served to entrench fashion studies within the ivory towers of academia. (Taylor, 2005). Here, it is important to distinguish between a field and a discipline: whereas an academic discipline possesses its own canon of core texts as well as its own unique methodologies, a field's strength exists in what it borrows and adapts from other disciplines. Furthermore, as Breward has written, "Informed by the concerns of anthropology, psychology, linguistics, sociology, and cultural studies, this new body of [fashion studies] work complements those specialized aspects of fashion culture that have been completed within the fields of social, cultural, and economic history," furthering that its "very existence points to a profound shift in attitude amongst historians whose profession has not always been so open to suggestion and change." (Breward, 2003, p. 9) And it is here, at the intersection of many different disciplines, at which the field of fashion studies exists.

In responding to Louise Wallenberg's request for new scholars entering the field of fashion studies to establish a common methodology, it is vital to first identify who these scholars are, where they are working, and what their mode of study can contribute to fashion studies. The importance of this undertaking should not be underestimated. For, as I wrote in an article in 2010, "Working with someone within the same field but with a different

disciplinary background, we may have a collective terminology but disparate criteria defining it. If this remains unchecked throughout the collaborative process, it can lead to splintered, fragmented research.” (Downing and Kurennaya, 2010). The imperative here will be to reach out to other programs dedicated to the study of fashion at the graduate level. American graduate fashion programs –and especially those based in New York City– have been churning out highly skilled designers and academics for many years. Chief among them are the Fashion Institute of Technology’s Textile Studies MA and New York University’s MA Costume History program. However, while the former is known for the readiness of its graduates to enter jobs as curators, exhibition designers, and textile conservators, and the latter for its graduate’s firm grounding in history, the Parsons MA Fashion Studies program is the first dedicated solely to the interdisciplinary study of the culture of fashion and fashion theory. The potential for collaboration between the three universities is tremendous; unfortunately, however, these bonds have yet to be forged. Under these circumstances, the novelty of the MA Fashion Studies program’s approach is certainly part of its draw for prospective students, but it can also present challenges for students and educators alike who can at times feel as if they are working on a desert island. However, while fashion studies is a small field with few practitioners, it is nevertheless extraordinarily expansive. As fashion studies is interdisciplinary by definition and boundless in its scope, entering into new research sites –especially as a young scholar with few mentors to turn to for guidance– has at times proven unwieldy for my colleagues and for myself. As scholars working and teaching within fashion studies, our work necessitates that we examine fashion as object, image, text, and practice, thereby continually reassessing the very definition of fashion and imbuing the term with necessary academic gravity. In this manner, the young scholar must be prepared to continually reinforce the legitimacy of fashion as a site for academic investigation. Furthermore, the simplest of inquiries can often times take the intrepid researcher to unexpected places and unfamiliar academic disciplines. Therefore, the well-rounded scholar must at once be a historian, a sociologist, and a cultural theorist as well as a sound writer, a competent ethnographer, and a gifted researcher. As Wallenberg for suggested, it is for these reasons that it is vital we as scholars establish a common methodology. Until then, students of fashion studies must be many things at once.

To illustrate the many hats that a student of fashion studies must wear, take for example the core curriculum of the MA Fashion Studies program. In the first semester, students take one theory-based course that introduces students to the emerging canon of fashion studies literature, and one historical fashion course that examines the manner in which fashion is mediated in print, on film, and in the museum. During the second and third semesters, with the final thesis due date rapidly approaching, students are immersed in methodology, taking two courses that aid students in pinning down an approach to their subject of interest. Methodologies introduced during these courses include the interview process, long-term ethnographic study, and material culture analysis. Thus, establishing a single fashion studies methodology may be a nearly impossible task. Rather, it may be more fruitful for professors and students to acknowledge the fact that fashion studies may lend it self incredibly well to a variety of research approaches. Although covering such

a wide array of methodologies from different academic fields and disciplines may seem unwieldy to outsiders, the program's diverse faculty with backgrounds in cultural studies, art history, fashion and design history, and anthropology, among others, not only makes this task manageable but has yielded one extraordinarily diverse inaugural class, with the second graduating class soon to follow. Nevertheless, many of my peers as well as my students felt frequently bogged down in matters of methodology leaving them asking, "Where's the fashion in fashion studies?"

As Christopher Breward has observed, sometimes the fashion can indeed be quite literally absent within fashion studies. Writing in 2003, he reflected that there is a "divorce of theory and practice" in fashion studies because of the tendency of academics to dissociate the materiality of fashion from its economic realities (Breward, 2003, p. 11). In short, many professors and authors choose to ignore the thrust of contemporary fashion trends, the impact of celebrity culture on fashion, and high street shopping behaviors, among other things, in favor of more esoteric scholarly jargon and theory so as if to add gravity to the subject. As Breward has pointed out, his rift has recently "been thrown into sharper relief by the general expansion of debates on fashion in the wider community." (Breward, 2003, p. 11). Many of these debates have arisen from the general public's increased access to fashion through so-called "fast fashion," street style, fashion blogs, live-streaming runway shows, and popular fashion exhibitions like the Costume Institute's *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* of 2011, which have brought the once-opaque mechanics of the fashion system into high relief. While this also means increased access for students of fashion studies, it can also call into question the role that they play within this system. Two questions that my peers and I frequently returned to was whether or not the industry really needed a bunch of scholars scrutinizing, theorizing, and investigating its every move, and of what consequence our findings would be to the fashion-consuming public. Speaking to this confusion, Breward continues,

Tensions between different approaches to the study of fashion are thus legion in all their variations, and the medium of dress seems to bring out the prejudices of academics, journalists, curators, and designers in a particularly concentrated form. For the potential student of the subject such a state of affairs must be confusing and alienating...Perhaps one of the weakness of the newly emerging field of fashion studies is a tendency to address fashion in a singular manner, as a cultural sign, as a designed consumable, or as evidence of broader historical and social processes. These facets [have been] rarely considered simultaneously which is a shame, because harnessing the benefits of seemingly divergent works promises fresh insights and productive arguments. (Breward, 2003, p. 14)

While this may have been the state of affairs in 2003, the MA Fashion Studies program saw a form of fashion studies that was truly interdisciplinary brought to life. Yet, as a full-time student, the task of wearing the many hats of the fully interdisciplinary fashion scholar was challenging, to say the least; furthermore, as a newly-minted professor of

fashion theory and history, the knowledge I accrued in my MA and my passion for the field have been tested in more ways than I could have imagined. Namely, I have dealt first hand with the rift that exists between fashion and fashion theory in being tasked with the responsibility of making fashion and all of its social, cultural, and historical baggage meaningful to students who spend the majority of their time at the university engrossed in their own work. To them, fashion is a consumer product and historically, Parsons has been complicit in furthering this idea. Only until very recently, the university and its alumni have been widely perceived as being a factory for churning out the next great American ready-to-wear designer Claire McCardell and Donna Karan. As such, students have been less interested in the theoretical than the marketable. With fashion studies making inroads at the undergraduate level through elective courses, how then are we as educators to bridge the substantial gaps that exist between theory and practice?

### **Supermodel theory: teaching fashion studies**

In his report on the 2009 fashion studies conference at the University of Warwick, Peter McNeil, in reflecting on comments made by Giorgio Riello, aptly notes that “‘fashion,’ to students is often an empathetic direct understanding of self that does not require history,” while further questioning, “How do we address this as teachers?” (McNeil, 2010, p. 109). In numerous enrichment workshops, and over countless cups of coffee, my colleagues and I have ruminated on this same question. While there are no easy answers, we have come to several important conclusions about what our goals as teachers of fashion studies should be. Principally, in teaching elective theory courses to design students, our present objective should be to weave theory into the curriculum in a manner that not only makes the fashion studies canon accessible to students, but in a manner that resonates with them as designers. Rebecca Arnold echoes this sentiment explaining that “it is important that students gain understanding of the wider history and histories of the subject, so that they do not overlook important sources and methodologies,” and furthermore that “if a certain amount of content is not delivered, then students cannot go beyond their own experience of life and fashion and that this can limit the teaching program.” (McNeil, 2010, p. 109). In short, the well-devised fashion studies course should borrow from the disciplines of dress and fashion history, draw on the current state of the fashion industry to keep the content relevant, and insert fashion studies methodologies where appropriate. Most importantly though, a fashion studies course should seek to recontextualize fashion so as to upset the unproblematic and rather glamorous perceptions many young students have of the fashion industry.

In the fall of 2012, I was given the opportunity to teach a course entitled *Supermodel: Beauty, Fashion, and Performance*. The course had been written by a popular adjunct faculty member and was a perennial favorite amongst fashion design students seeking out a writing-intensive elective to fulfill their degree requirements. The course description reads as follows:



This undergraduate seminar, “Supermodels: Beauty, Fashion, and Performance,” explores the world of high fashion modeling as a site to interrogate the cultural politics of race, beauty, health, and gender. Focusing on the period from 1960 to the present, this interdisciplinary seminar examines supermodels and the world of high fashion as a complex site of performance, beauty, and cultural politics. Questions we will explore include: How did fashion modeling shift from a poorly received profession once likened to prostitution to one that now provides Hollywood celebrity? What are the politics of race, size, and gender in the fashion industry? How do models represent changing ideals of beauty, sex appeal, and gender? In what ways are fashion modeling and fashion photography related to performance? Finally, what is queer about the catwalk? At the end of this course, students will have a sharpened understanding of fashion and supermodels as part of a billion dollar industry that reflects and shapes anxieties of race, gender, and beauty (Parsons, 2012).

As proposed by Arnold, this course adheres to the above criteria in that it draws from history in its examination of the evolution of the modeling industry, gives a nod to popular culture, and incorporates the interdisciplinarity of fashion studies by addressing issues of race, gender, performance and material culture. Nevertheless, devising a way to interweave all of the course’s disparate elements in a cohesive fashion while keeping the content engaging for design students remained a challenge.

Even the required course readings –quite literally the building blocks of the course– presented their own challenges. With the 2009 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition *Model as Muse* serving as the basic organizational model that the course would follow, the accompanying coffee table book was assigned as the core text. As a text book, it seemed ideal because of the thoughtful manner it traced the rise and evolution of the fashion model over the last two hundred years while still taking themes such as celebrity, beauty, and race into consideration. Yet at nearly eight pounds and brimming with lush full-color photographs and illustrations, requiring students to purchase the expensive tome did not seem a viable option. Grappling with similar issues, Caroline Evans has made an impassioned plea “for ways to be found to ensure that fashion scholars could access cheaper avenues to reproduce images” so that a diverse format could be achieved that bridges the considerable gap between bland theoretical texts and image-heavy glossy coffee table books. (McNeil, 2010, p. 109)

Relying heavily upon digital slide presentations brimming with images of models, clothing, and fashion spreads, I chose to forego *Model as Muse* as a core text, and instead assigned a combination of short theoretical texts, autobiographical readings, and newspaper clippings each week. In doing so, I always tried to keep in mind that my students were not fashion studies majors, but designers, and thus the readings needed to resonate with them on a personal level so as to stay true to my goal of bridging the considerable gaps that exist between fashion and theory. While this was a labor-intensive process, it was a necessary

evil as there exists no comprehensive fashion studies reader about the supermodel, nor for many other niche fashion-related topics for that matter. For example, during the class in which we discussed the recent surge in popularity of plus-size modeling, we read selections from plus-size model Crystal Renn's autobiography, *Hungry* (2009), a scholarly article entitled *Disciplining Corpulence: The Case of Plus-Size Fashion Models* (2011), and a 2010 *New York Times* article entitled *Triumph of the Size 12s*. Although the weekly reading requirements were diverse and often plucked straight from popular culture, with upwards of sixty pages of reading per week lumped on top of the workload of several time-consuming studio classes, I became accustomed to many of my students arriving to class having not so much as glanced at the day's readings.

While the course was designed to be a discussion-based seminar, I found myself in the trying position of forcing discussion out of my students on more than one occasion, and so I quickly reverted to lecturing for much of the two hour and forty minute class. While I first attributed their indifference to a lack of preparedness, I quickly realized that I had perhaps set the bar too high. In writing the syllabus, I had not only assigned between fifty and seventy of pages of reading weekly, but much of that reading consisted of primary theoretical texts with no clear direct relationship to fashion or modeling, such as Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993), and dense scholarly articles from highly regarded, peer-reviewed journals such as *Fashion Theory*. Without explicitly forging the links between the images on my slide presentations and their weekly readings, I was falling victim to Elizabeth Wilson's concerns about the way theory is frequently deployed in fashion studies in what she calls a "magpie" approach, or a manner in which theory is mentioned unreflectively and in passing and thereby reduced to "simple formulae." (McNeil, 2010, p. 109). To remedy this, I began to incorporate brief reflective writing assignments to be completed both at the beginning class and as homework after class. Worth few points and with few explicit guidelines about word count or style, these brief, prompt-based writing assignments not only encouraged the students to think about the day's texts analytically, but they also improved the classroom atmosphere in several ways.

First, when assigned at the beginning of class, they helped me assess whether or not the students had grasped the week's key concepts and operated similarly to a pop quiz in that they encouraged students to complete the readings in advance. Second, when assigned after class to be due at the beginning of the following week, they created continuity in the subject matter from week to week, and also encouraged them to reflect on and internalize the course content outside of class time. Furthermore, the assignments worked to improve nearly every student's writing ability, both in terms of clarity and style, over the course of fifteen weeks, which undoubtedly helped them in the completion of their final papers.

Coupled with the weekly writing prompts were a variety of assignments that reflected the multitude of methodological approaches within fashion studies, and also introduced students to disciplines that they had yet to encounter during their time at The New School. Drawing from the discipline of film studies, for example, the midterm required that they write a film review that unpacked the role of dress within the movie's plot and

with regard to character development, while a visit to New York Fashion Week at Lincoln Center required that they immerse themselves in the culture of New York fashion and street style not unlike an ethnographer. The greatest success of the class, though, was their final project. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Madison Moore of Yale University, the creator of this course, who had originally devised this final project and without the support of whom the class would not have been a success.

Divided into three parts—a seven-page research paper, a creative magazine spread, and a presentation—the project tested their abilities as writers and researchers, but also appealed to sensibilities as designers, draftsmen, and artists. Furthermore, this project required a great deal of collaboration in the spirit of fashion studies as an interdisciplinary field in that the students worked in groups that I had chosen in advance. In creating these groups rather than allowing the students to self-select their partners, I was self-consciously seeking to push them outside of their comfort zones as well as to mimic the circumstances of the workplace in which you must oftentimes work alongside coworkers from diverse backgrounds and with whom you may share little in common. For example, one group may have been comprised of a fashion designer, a photographer, and a creative writing major. However, I did not choose these groups before doing an anonymous survey amongst the students of topics that were of potential interest to them (options included, among other things, gender, sexuality, race, weight, beauty, and celebrity culture), so that the groups—while having little in common on the surface—would have a great deal of overlap in their scholarly pursuits.

While each student was expected to complete the research paper on his or her own, the creative magazine spread was a collaborative effort from conception to execution, and through to the presentation. With few guidelines, the magazine assignment required only that they engage with and a topic from the syllabus in creating a four-to-six page magazine spread. Balancing both image and text on the cover, the final product was to closely resemble a glossy fashion magazine. As a writer untrained in the graphic arts, part of me felt uncomfortable in assigning a creative project for the final for fear that I wouldn't know how to monitor their progress, offer any kind of technical guidance, nor accurately assess their final product. However, my fears were quickly put to rest when I saw the enthusiasm with which they began the planning process and the effort and time they put into the project's final execution. Energized by the idea of directing their own magazine shoot from start to finish, most students took advantage of the considerable resources they had acquired (including designer samples of clothing, studio space, and camera equipment) and connections they had forged through summer jobs and internships. In the end, their magazines had an impressive professional appearance to them—so much so that they could have easily passed for an authentic publication—but also problematized in ingenious and intelligent ways many of issues we'd identified through the course of our class discussions (See Figure 1, nextpage).

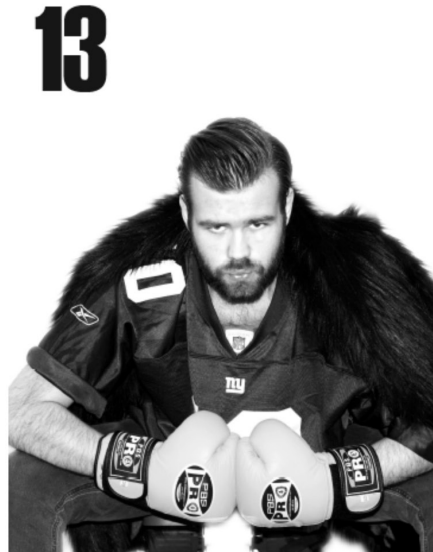


Figure 1. Examples of Final Project Magazine Covers, December 2012. Source. Students works.

Through this project, all of the students left the class with a deepened understanding of fashion modeling's relationship to culture, while many, if not most, of the students had reassessed their own personal relationship to and impact on the profession as budding designers. Upon entering the class, many of them had declared their love of, and in some cases infatuation with, supermodels like Cindy Crawford and Linda Evangelista, while others expressed their doubts that the profession of fashion modeling had any real impact on culture. Some students even knew an impressive amount about the models' biographies as well as the broader history of the profession. Upon leaving the course, however, many expressed the fact that their love of modeling and supermodels was no longer unconditional as the class had celebrated both the beautiful aspects of the industry, but also complicated those that had an uglier impact on society and culture.

While Rebecca Arnold has argued that students should receive a broad historical overview in fashion studies courses in order to truly grasp the deep influence that fashion and culture have on society both past and present, bridging historical analysis with matters of culture, theory, and criticism proved to be one of the greatest challenges that my students and I grappled with throughout the semester. While some students expressed their desire to learn more about modeling's origins, I felt the periods during class that were dominated by dense historical lectures that followed a traditional image-based format not unlike art history lectures were the most onerous for both the students and myself. Instead, where my students seemed most engaged was during our frank and informal conversations after lecture during which I allowed them to discuss and debate the week's readings on their own terms, thereby forging those valuable links between fashion studies and their own practice as designers. In the interdisciplinary spirit of the field of fashion studies, these moments of collaboration –moments in which the gaps were bridged between theory and practice– during which everyone brought something to the table were by far most indicative of the sheer potential of the field at the undergraduate level.

## Conclusions

In this article, I sought to build on existing scholarship that seeks to identify the current state of the field in addition to recounting my own experience in devising a methodology for teaching fashion studies at the undergraduate level. In doing so, I addressed the challenges my students faced in working within a field and in a manner that was so different from their own practice as artists and designers. I also explored the most effective ways to introduce students to theory and criticism while providing them with an adequate historical foundation on which to build. Finally, while taking into account my own troubles with locating myself as an emerging scholar within the field, I considered how and in what ways design students might be able to incorporate fashion studies into their own practice. While some are of the opinion that we as teachers must work to divorce the critical study of fashion from the students' personal relationships with the fashion system, I would like to instead propose that we utilize those bonds to bridge the considerable gaps between fashion and theory as Breward has suggested.

In his oft-cited text, *The Language of Fashion*, Roland Barthes argues that fashion is a language comprised of signs that we can read and write. (Barthes, 2006). And while fashion studies is a field that certainly gets its strength from the rich and abundant texts that comprise the canon, it is also one that –at its roots– is based on a complex visual vocabulary that spans the globe and encompasses both high and low culture, past and present, and which is highly alluring. While some have perceived the economic realities of the fashion system and the diverse backgrounds of the field’s practitioners to be a detriment to the establishment of a common methodology in fashion studies, perhaps the diversity of fashion itself in its many incarnations –as material, image, object, and text– warrants the use of different methodological approaches. As Christopher Breward has written, and as is quoted above, perhaps one of the field’s weaknesses is in its tendency to address fashion in a singular manner. In the end, fashion studies may be well served in embracing its collaborative strengths such as those like I witnessed in my undergraduate seminar.

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**Resumen:** El artículo se propone reflexionar acerca de los retos pedagógicos experimentados por la autora en su primer semestre como docente de diseño de modas en Parsons, y relata específicamente su experiencia tanto en el dictado del seminario *Supermodelo: belleza, moda y performance* como en la elaboración de una nueva teoría de la moda. El escrito se propone ofrecer una visión general de los estudios de moda como un campo académico emergente y delinear las reflexiones que otros investigadores han publicado hasta el momento. Si bien lo anterior sirve como sustento del trabajo, el enfoque principal apunta a la propia experiencia de la autora quien se plantea las siguientes problemáticas: ¿Cuáles son los desafíos que enfrentan los alumnos en el trabajo dentro de una disciplina y de una manera que es tan diferente de su propia práctica? ¿Cuál es la manera más eficaz de introducir a los estudiantes a la teoría de la moda y la crítica? ¿Qué temas atraen más a los estudiantes? Y por último, ¿cómo las clases pueden incentivar a los alumnos a reflexionar sobre su propia práctica como diseñadores? El propósito de este artículo es fomentar un diálogo entre los estudios académicos de moda, así como con otros académicos y de investigación que trabajan en campos interdisciplinarios.

**Palabras clave:** educación - estudios de moda - historia de la moda - pedagogía - teoría de la moda.

**Resumo:** O artigo propõe reflexionar sobre os retos pedagógicos experimentados pela autora em seu primeiro semestre como professora de design de modas em Parsons, e relata especificamente sua experiência tanto no ditado do seminário *Supermodelo: beleza, moda e performance* como na elaboração de uma nova teoria da moda. O escrito se propõe oferecer uma visão geral dos estudos de moda como um campo acadêmico emergente e delinear as reflexões que outros pesquisadores publicaram até hoje. Se bem o anterior serve como sustento ao trabalho, o enfoque principal aponta à própria experiência da autora quem se faz as perguntas: Quais são os desafios que enfrentam os alunos no trabalho numa disciplina e de uma maneira que é tão diferente da sua própria prática? Qual é o modo mais eficaz de introduzir aos estudantes na teoria da moda e a crítica? Que temas atraem mais aos estudantes? E por último, como as aulas podem incentivar aos estudantes a reflexionar sobre sua própria prática como designers? O propósito deste artigo é fomentar um diálogo entre os estudos acadêmicos de moda, assim como com outros acadêmicos e de pesquisa que trabalham em campos interdisciplinares.

**Palavras chave:** educação - estudos de moda - historia da moda - pedagogia - teoria da moda.

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