



Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model

Ashley Mears

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Sociologist Ashley Mears takes us behind the brightly lit runways and glossy advertisements of the fashion industry in this insider's study of the world of modeling. Mears, who worked as a model in New York and London, draws on observations as well as extensive interviews with male and female models, agents, clients, photographers, stylists, and others, to explore the economics and politics—and the arbitrariness—behind the business of glamour. Exploring a largely hidden arena of cultural production, she shows how the right "look" is discovered, developed, and packaged to become a prized commodity. She examines how models sell themselves, how agents promote them, and how clients decide to hire them. An original contribution to the sociology of work in the new cultural economy, *Pricing Beauty* offers rich, accessible analysis of the invisible ways in which gender, race, and class shape worth in the marketplace.

Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model Details

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From Reader Review Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model for online ebook

Matthew Green says

This is, at times, a fascinating look at the modeling and fashion industry. Mears provides a great deal of sociological insight on how the modeling industry functions and what the lives and careers of models are like. My only critique is that at times the book gets bogged down and redundant, especially when spelling out the distinctions between the commercial and editorial modeling circuits. Nonetheless, this is some of the best participation observation research that I've read, and it makes a significant contribution to the sociology of work and economic sociology.

Mongolia Mendelsohn says

An informative read, but it's written more in the form of an academic dissertation - not the most engaging read.

Pam says

The author is a model and sociologist - and points her lens at the world of a fashion model, both from her own experience, and from interviews with others (mostly bookers, stylists, and models) in the industry.

Jennifer says

I liked this so, so much! It's really refreshing to have a book written so comprehensively, utilizing critics but not overanalyzing, talking about a world from within the bubble, but writing about it with a synoptic view from all sides of the coin. To compare this to something like "Girls in Pretty Boxes," which proceeded about the personal interview in a very haphazard, shock-value way, this one really comes on top. Not to mention it is about one of my favorite subjects forever, the world of modeling. Only thing that would have made it better would be: mentions of ANTM (if anyone wanted to write their dissertation on ANTM I would read it in a heartbeat; just putting it out there), color photographs, and slightly more engaging writing. Ashley Mears gets total bonus points for being absolutely gorgeous.

Medlibrarian says

PhD student works as a model to gain insight as she studies the fashion industry. That part is interesting, but really it's the economics that kept me enthralled.

E says

Useless, 10-word review: Writing drier than saltine crackers, but really opened my eyes.

Megan Norquest says

In no way should this dissertation have been inadequately forced into book form. It was difficult to identify an argument or research question in this work. Mears consistently contradicted herself and back tracked on any personal criticisms she may have accidentally let slip. This was akin to a child's book report on very limited sections of the fashion industry. If this were not some seemingly punitive form of advancement for my masters, I would have put it down immediately.

Jamie says

When, oh when, will people learn that no one wants to read a dissertation? This one has that classic dry, formulaic, rigid dissertation style and structure. Let me tell you what this study will do. Now I will provide some sociological discussion to show you that this is a legitimate academic study. Then I will tell you what I am going to tell you. Remember how I said I was going to tell you something? Well, now I'm telling you! Don't forget the methodology--let me talk about that some more!

Some publisher clearly thought this would be an easy sell, but you just can't package a dissertation as a paperback and expect anyone to enjoy it. You're going to have to put more effort into it if you want me to spend my precious free time reading this. I don't even want to read my own graduate work, let alone anyone else's, in my free time.

Not actually counting this as "read".

Anita says

Read this for research for a short story/screenplay. Interesting academic writing on the sociology of commercial versus editorial modeling. Although the focus is modeling and how "beauty" is determined economically, it seems like the social networking that produces "taste" in beauty extends across other fields that are similarly divided into "commercial" versus "prestige" styles. Prestige models, according to Mears, are often poor and considered more "freakish" or "uncanny" than "pretty." The commercial models are the girl next door/all-American types.

I was especially interested in the phenomenon of legitimacy in taste making : "As in 'The Emperor's New Clothes,' even if one does not believe in the legitimacy of a social order, one follows it on the belief that other people find it legitimate enough to follow, a classic condition of legitimacy noted by Max Weber." Nobody can quite pinpoint why a particular ugly-beautiful model in the editorial mode catches on and becomes "hot," but it seems to be social alliances and money that produce the hotness, rather than a formula based on visual perception.

There are some good observations, too, related to body thinness and racial diversity. Size zero models actually do not appeal commercially, black models are reasonably represented in the commercial world, but poorly represented in the editorial one - The prestige (elite) markets seem to be the ones that are worst in terms of women's sizes and ethnic diversity, even though it is common to assume the reverse, since the prestige side is more artistic and therefore associated with liberal, bohemian values.

Great discussion of "laissez faire racism" (the process of naturalizing social processes so that they seem natural and unproblematic) and the "high-end ethnic" look (minimal or maximum markers of racial difference, which Mears breaks down into ethnicity lite and exotic ethnicity).

Melissa says

My daughter was scouted two years ago (at the age of 14) by a large international modeling agency. Having previously known nothing of the world of modeling, I'm trying to educate myself as much as possible. While I agree with other reviewers that this dissertation could have been edited a bit better to transition into a book for non-academics as it was quite repetitive, it was helpful in confirming many of my suspicions about the industry. As long as we both (she as the model and me as her mom-ager) go into it with our eyes wide open, it should be an interesting ride.

Suzie Quint says

This fascinating book is Ashley Mears doctoral thesis. Since she'd been a fashion model, I can easily understand why she found this interesting enough to study. For my purposes, I was looking for something that would help me write about the world of fashion models with some confidence. This book gave me that, but then the second half of the book delves into inequities based on things like race and gender which was equally fascinating. I know I'll never look at those high fashion models the same way. There's just something wrong with an industry that worships at the feet of a 5'10"+ woman who weighs 117 pounds. These women are stick figures.

Malcolm says

From the outside, it seems so simple; models appear as if from the ether onto the pages of catalogues and fashion magazines, on catwalks and billboards encouraging us to buy the latest things, except of course that the catwalk clothes are unwearable, that the models have unattainable bodies and that the fantasy we're being sold is out of reach of all but the tiniest proportion – little more than the 1%, if that. There are few industries and occupations that spend as much time in the public eye, few that are the subject of such extensive critical and journalistic commentary, few that are as vaunted as sources of inexplicable celebrity as fashion modelling, and few that are despite all this commentary and critique able to be justified as part of the 'new' cultural economy that is providing a future for post-industrial, post-modernising capitalism. In short, fashion models occupy a complex and contradictory place in contemporary economies and societies – amongst other things, they are seen as vacuous and figures of contempt, replaceable bodies carrying new, late capitalism into its bright future and symbols of a patriarchal régime that keeps us imprisoned in a retrograde way of doing gender. They are also really, really big business, wrapped up inside a code of mystery where no-one really knows why it is any particular model seems to make it big. All this (and more) adds up to it being a

puzzle that there is so little serious scholarly work that explores the cultures and economies of fashion modelling. Ashley Mears' excellent book shows us just how important and useful research in this field can be.

Fashion modelling fits into so many contemporary scholarly debates and social concerns that an insightful academic text such as this one should be on a reading list for many of us concerned about issues as diverse as the precarity of labour, body projects, labour process, cultural value, making gender, the significance of cultural gatekeepers and the functioning of cultural economies, among other things. This is not a random list of current debates or issues, but part of the array of socio-cultural and academic debates Ashley Mears draws on. Be warned those of you looking for journalistic celebration or condemnation – this is a serious and in places demanding bit of sociology. It is scholarly with a sophisticated grasp of a body of sociological theory that for the most part remains implicit, framing and shaping the argument to structure its flow but without being pushed to the fore. This is almost certainly the result of Mears' approach to the fieldwork in particular and the study as a whole: she seems to have got out into the field, begun to explore the situation and let the theory required for the analysis emerge from the evidence. For some, this is a form of 'grounded theory'; in Mears' case it seems to be a form of philosophical pragmatism – use the theory that works. For this analysis, that is an approach that draws on work by Erving Goffman interwoven with material drawn from Pierre Bourdieu and Arlie Hochschild. From Goffman we get the idea of the presentation of self (and a 'backstage' area of work that sustains that presentation); from Bourdieu we get the operation of systems of cultural value; from Hochschild we get emotional labour; together they make for some great sociology. Despite all this scholarship, it is also a richly layered and engaging insider's view of a complex cultural industry (as a good ethnography should be).

At the heart of the analysis is the manufacture of 'the look', that mysterious thing that successful models have that seems to be little more than good luck in the genetic lottery that made that particular woman the tall, thin, classically beautiful occupant of the fashion week catwalk... except that's not what happens. Take, for instance, Kate Moss at 5'6" (1.7m in most of the world) with her slightly asymmetrical face that makes her distinctive rather than classically beautiful in the 'unattainable' idealised 'girl-next-door' manner of, say, a Kate Upton who is more likely to make Fashion Week news for the clothes she wore to lunch than on the catwalk. At its high-end – editorial rather than commercial work – the go-for look is 'quirky'; she's a bit gawky (or was at school). The key part of the problem though is that there is a huge number of 'her', with that 'can't-quite-put-a-finger-on-it' thing, and that very many of 'her' are signed to agencies, have been scouted in suburban shopping malls, Croydon streets or, in Mears' case, a lower Manhattan coffee shop and told they have a great look, but only a tiny proportion 'make it'. It is this process that Mears unpacks expertly and elegantly in this book, wrapped up in all the caution we in academia have of careful justification of our position.

The thing about 'the look' is that it cannot be measured, yet it is valued in such a way that it is given a price; sometimes that price is financial, sometimes it is symbolic – but it is always a price, it is always valued. In a capitalist economy, anything with exchange value is the product of labour and if there is capitalist labour there is a labour process: although she never uses this term, Mears has unravelled the labour process of fashion model making. This labour process has three components – models, bookers/agencies and clients (other fashion professionals mainly) – all of whom perform a different function and all of whom merit a close analysis based on an ethnographic approach that included several years in the 'field' working for agencies in London and New York. She turns her attention to each of these players, starting with the models, the 'front of house' of the industry and the things being 'made' to argue that their role is to be constantly at work on their body projects to enhance their body capital. Entry criteria to the occupation are low – models need to 'look good' and there is no programme of study as such although there is a huge amount of work involved in continuing to 'look good' – but crucial to success, in having 'the look', is the emotional labour in

maintaining the contacts, profile and personality that turn ‘looking good’ into (financially or symbolically) paying jobs.

The second group are bookers: for Mears this group is the core of the industry making models in that they produce cultural value. Bookers are, in Bourdieu’s terms, cultural brokers (or intermediaries). They act as bridges between models and clients, having a sense of who is best suited to which client for which campaign, shoot or event. In doing so they produce value by acting as a lynchpin who, in Mears’ terms, hold together the “social interactions, shared meanings and culture, and institutionalized routines to make uncertain actions a bit more predictable” (p247): that is, they make the ‘market’ work. Finally, there are the clients, as Mears’ calls them (reflecting again the influence of Bourdieu) the tastemakers. In this case ‘clients’ are a broad group including stylists, casting directors, designers, photographers and magazine editors. Whereas models are ‘front of house’, on stage, and bookers are clearly backstage workers, clients in this case are both, with some designers, photographers and editors being high profile public figures (less so stylists and casting directors) most ‘work their magic’ behind the scenes while also maintaining a tight network and information flows promoting looks, images, models and bookers – much of this economy runs on gifts and reciprocity. When taken together, Mears’ analysis and presentation of the interactions of these three roles in the cultural economy of fashion modelling give us rich insight to the operation of a seemingly mysterious cultural industry.

A key aspect of any labour process analysis is the politics of power in the workplace, and while the tripartite discussion of model-booker-client unpacks many of the structural questions Mears shifts focus for the final two substantive chapters to ask broader sociological questions about issues of ‘size’ – the so-called Size Zero debate (so-called because Size Zero only has meaning in the US) – or ‘race’ and what the modelling industry tells us about gender. Her approach to each of these is sharp, and for the Size Zero issue turns on the essential distinction between commercial (clothes catalogues and the like) and editorial/catwalk modelling making the point that much of the debate has centred on editorial it might have (and needs to) take on a very different slant if the focus is to be commercial. Running this debate alongside the question of ‘race’ however allows her to open up a key facet in the manufacture of ‘the look’: the imagined community of shoppers invoked by cultural intermediaries and tastemakers, routinely described as ‘middle America’, ‘Ohio’, ‘my mother’ and other invocations of a cultural ‘mainstream’ allowing her to enhance and enrich our grasp of the forces at play in the invention of ‘the look’ – who might appeal to a ‘mainstream’ in commercial modelling and who might have that edgy appeal to the cognoscenti and the cultural élite, to work well in editorial. In turning to gender, she might surprise some readers in that the issue shaping this discussion is why male models are paid so much less than women, and why it is so widely accepted. This discussion is fascinating both for the way it nearly all the players in the industry accept the disparity, the way that many of the men downplay modelling as a career and the way in her argument women’s higher incomes is part of their powerlessness and social marginalisation – that is, they are paid more because they exist to be looked at: it is counterintuitive and it is convincing.

If you’re still here after 1500 words, thank you. This book has an awful lot to offer those of us who work in cultural sociology and the sociology of work for three main reasons: 1) it takes seriously an investigation of the creation of value in the cultural industries; 2) in focusing on the labour process (again, my term not Mears’) we have a clear analysis of the politics of power in an industry where in some cases not being paid signifies greater status than regular high incomes (leaving the so-called supermodel to one side); 3) the focus on body capital and body projects means that much of what is here becomes transferable to other obvious areas such as acting or sex work as well as to less obvious areas (and this is my interest) such as to sport. Admittedly, there are major differences in these industries’ body projects but there are significant similarities (in my case, I am looking for ways into labour process issues in sport; I’ve got a whole bunch of better ideas as a result of this). On top of that, there is a really good methodological appendix exploring problematic

issues in this ethnography: I'll be using that with my students.

Completing a PhD and converting to a monograph is a *rite de passage* in many academic disciplines; in many cases the outcome is a major piece of work that is never likely to be a big seller but is for those of us in the field an important way into a new scholar's body of work in a way that can be developed in a more sustained way than shorter journal articles or book chapters. I read a lot of PhDs, and I'd read several published pieces by Mears before I came to this; they raised my expectations that I was due an important piece of work – those expectations have been realised. I also appreciated the recurring riff on glamour(ing) that runs through the text.

Xiaowei says

as an ethnography, this book is amazingly sociological not anthropological in the sense that it draws a good many sociological classics like Goffman and Simmel. I am more interested in this distinction of academic traditions of different social science subjects, though departing from its content. Sociology tends to view everything from the point of view of social constructionism, most clearly in the book the themes of aesthetic, fashion and beauty, which is not unproblematic. I would expect more of the review of the "essence" of beauty and fashion, which seems odd if they are deconstructed by a set of cultural powers at play.

Arnis Kadakovskis says

After a party at one model agency decided to understand what's behind the jolly and confident faces models and their agents (besides the coke, of course).

The takeaway: catalogue models are beautiful by rural mom and pop standards, they earn stable income doing dull work. *Edgy* look models are used by *haute couture* industry with unstable and mostly low pay. Agencies need the edgy models to keep the brand 'cool', so they keep and subsidize the edgy ones while there is still hope that they will be the next 'new look'.

Don't get into modelling as a man unless you're into really low pay and often homosexual abuse.

Karen says

I guess this was not meant to be a textbook, but it reads like one.
