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## The Field of Fashion Materialized: A Study of London Fashion Week

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article, based on two studies of the fashion industry examines one of its key institutions, London Fashion Week (LFW). Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, we argue that this event is a materialization of the field of fashion. We examine how LFW renders visible the boundaries, relational positions, capital and habitus at play in the field, reproducing critical divisions within it. As well as making visible the field, LFW is a ceremony of consecration within it that contributes to its reproduction. The central aim of this article is to develop an empirically grounded sense of field, reconciling this macro-structural concept with embodied and situated reality.

### **KEY WORDS**

appearance / body / Bourdieu / field of fashion / visibility

**B**ourdieu's field analysis has provided invaluable insights into the macro-structural make-up and structuring logic of fields (see, for instance, Bourdieu, 1993a; Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975). However, while field is an abstraction defining differentiated positions and position-takings within a particular social arena, it should also be thought of as an embedded reality, an idea too often obscured in the French thinker's highly systemized analyses. The central aim of this article is to develop a more empirically grounded sense of field that pays attention to the way it is constituted and practised through embodied action. Interrogating the way in which one key event in the fashion calendar, London Fashion Week (LFW), operates within the British field of fashion, we argue that field theory is invaluable for understanding key micro-processes and institutions within fields.

Traditionally beginning in New York and ending in Paris, 'fashion week', also known as 'the collections', showcases the up-coming season's prêt-à-porter clothing. As one stop in this international circuit, LFW comprises a large exhibition of designers' work in the manner of a trade show but also, more famously, a series of catwalk shows covered by the world's press. This event is an important moment within the life of the industry. Widely featured in the press, it is also big business: LFW is a major promotional opportunity for British fashion designers. While we attended different fashion weeks, and observed different participants as part of two separate projects (discussed in more detail later), in subsequent discussions we were struck by our remarkably similar observations. We both noted how, in bringing together the key people whose work constitutes the wider field of fashion, LFW mapped out, quite literally in spatial terms, all the key agents and institutions within the field of fashion. These key people include designers, models, journalists and buyers from stores around the world, fashion stylists and celebrities, as well as less important figures, such as fashion students, who exist on the margins of the field.

This led us in the direction of Bourdieu's field theory, which allowed us to capture the role and socio-temporal orchestration of the event. In this article we argue that LFW operates as an embodiment of the wider field of fashion: it is an instance of the field of fashion materialized or reified, 'that is to say physically realized or objectified' (Bourdieu, 1993b: 161). Thus, in bringing together the field participants into one spatially and temporally bounded event, LFW renders visible, through its orchestration, wider field characteristics, such as field boundaries, positions, position taking, and habitus. This rendering of the field is key to understanding LFW as a critical moment in the life of the field as a whole. Despite its ostensible aim to simply showcase next season's fashionable clothing, we suggest that LFW's main function is to produce, reproduce and legitimate the field of fashion and the positions of those players within it.

Our article reconciles two moments of Bourdieu's academic biography: that informed by his ethnographic work at the beginning of his career and, later, his focus on field theory (see Robbins, 2000: 1; Swartz, 1997: 118 on the stages in Bourdieu's work). While Bourdieu is concerned to pay attention to both structure and practice, his field theory errs too much in the direction of a structuralist analysis that neglects to fully document the ways in which fields are reproduced through the enactments of agents in daily practice and localized settings (Crossley, 2004). As Boyne (1993: 248) argues, field is a 'macro-structural concept'. Our article aims not only to demonstrate the appropriateness of Bourdieu's field theory, but also to extend it to analysis at the level of embodied practice.

After detailing our empirical studies, we move on to define Bourdieu's field theory, foregrounding some of his key concepts and discussing them in light of the field of fashion. We then set out to examine the material realities of this field as realized during LFW, focusing on two critical aspects. These correspond to different spatial dimensions also constituting the main articulations of our article. We first examine the entire layout of LFW and the way in which borders

and boundaries of the field of fashion are made manifest in this setting, particularly the physical barriers that are erected around the event itself in the form of gates, gatekeepers and tickets, allowing the field to appear to itself through its materialized enactment. We then move into the more intimate space of the catwalk theatre, where relationships and positions are mapped out, reproduced and legitimated. Here we examine the importance of field participants appearing to one another: the importance of seeing and being seen on the front row. The performances of these participants within this space allows for examination of the ways in which fashion capital and habitus are enacted as part of the performances of these individuals that reproduce field identities and positions in this very public arena.

## Methodology

This article is based upon fieldwork from two separate projects: an ESRC-funded ethnographic study of womenswear fashion buyers in a major London department (fieldwork conducted between March and September 2002), and a study of fashion journalism (ongoing at the time of writing). The first study is an ethnography of buying strategies and decisions. Three buying managers were shadowed at store meetings and on buying trips in London, New York, Paris and Milan during the fashion weeks. Fifteen semi-structured interviews with key store people were also conducted. The other study comprises semi-structured interviews with 32 journalists, the shadowing of one journalist during LFW (September 2003) and the observation, over the course of one month, of the editorial production of a fashion magazine. The broader aim of both projects is to unpack processes of cultural mediation, interrogating the ways buyers and journalists act as intermediaries between the fields of production and consumption. However, as our chosen methodology of ethnographic interview and observations demonstrates, the specific embodied and situated logic of fields only becomes apparent during fieldwork, and our discussion highlights this throughout.

### I. Defining the Field: Boundaries and Access

Bourdieu's concept of field aims to overcome the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism in an approach he has characterized as 'constructivist structuralism' (Bourdieu, 1994: 122). He first elaborated the notion of field in the 1960s in his work on literature at a time when researchers in France were split between two dominant intellectual traditions: structuralism and Marxism (Pinto, 1998). It is to escape the opposition between these two approaches, 'to bypass the opposition between internal reading and external analysis without losing any of the benefits and exigencies of these two approaches which are traditionally perceived as irreconcilable' (Bourdieu, 1996: 205), that Bourdieu opted for the notion of field as a methodological tool. It reminds the researcher

'of the existence of social microcosms, separate and autonomous spaces, in which works are generated' (p. 181).

Such social microcosms are structured by specific properties, relations and processes in which 'individuals or institutions [are] competing for the same stakes' (Bourdieu, 1995: 133). While all fields have their own internal rules that must be adhered to as in a game (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1996: 99) by all participants – Bourdieu calls them players – they all are 'structured spaces of positions' informed by 'invariant laws of functioning' and 'universal mechanisms' (Bourdieu, 1995: 72). The field of fashion, like all fields, is a system of relations and, as Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1996: 96) observes, 'to think in terms of field is to think relationally'.

The field of fashion has its own players, responsible for making, marketing or retailing clothing. This field can be mapped out in terms of relations between particular key institutions and agents, the way Bourdieu himself recognizes in 'Le Couturier et sa Griffes' (Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975), where he looks at the structure of the French field of high fashion in the 1970s, focusing more specifically on the relative positions of designers and couture houses. Similarly, the British field of fashion is made up of a hierarchical system of relations between key designers, magazine publications and shops. In the absence of couture houses, British fashion designers jostle for position on the international stage, with many of them securing top positions in French couture houses (for example, McQueen at Givenchy and McCartney at Chloé in recent years). In the realm of publishing, key institutions are the 'established' players, such as *UK Vogue*, but also 'newcomers', such as *Pop*. In retailing, stores such as Selfridges, Harvey Nichols and Browns dominate the field of high fashion and have contracts to sell exclusive designer ranges. LFW mirrors these hierarchical relations of the wider field of fashion, thereby reproducing them.

Indeed, the first point to note about LFW is that only those players already belonging to the field (that is with an acknowledged position within it) can gain access to the event. In this way, the field of fashion, like all fields, is 'a place wherein some people who fulfil the conditions of access play a particular game from which others are excluded' (Bourdieu, 2000b: 55). This is made particularly visible at LFW. The event is a physically enclosed space that only a select few are allowed to enter, rather than an open-to-the-public exhibition like the 'Ideal Home' or 'Chelsea Flower Show'. The dividing line between inside and outside is not only very strongly drawn but mirrors and reproduces the boundaries that exist around the wider field of fashion.

The issue arises in all fields as to who belongs to the field, that is, the issue as to what constitutes its boundaries, 'often invisible' (Bourdieu, 2000b: 53). Such boundaries are 'a stake of struggles' (p. 42), the struggle to define its legitimate members; here the significant ones being designers, journalists, buyers and other 'producers of the meaning and values of the work' (Bourdieu, 1993a: 37). During LFW the boundaries Bourdieu talks about are rendered visible and materialized in the whole apparatus of gates and gatekeepers that allow or deny entrance to the field and preserve the 'effect of enclosure' (Bourdieu, 2000b:

58). The main boundary that is erected between the inside and outside of the field of fashion as realized during LFW is the long gate supervised by two keepers in uniforms who only let in those armed with a pass. Insiders march confidently towards the gate in the knowledge that they will not be stopped while outsiders are left standing outside.

Through the enactment of these boundaries, clear limits are established between the outside world, the world of 'laity' to borrow Bourdieu's (p. 52) analogy, including all the hopefuls waiting outside the tents on the King's Road to catch a glimpse of this world, and that of the 'clercs' (p. 52), or, as the press often calls them, 'fashionistas'. As Tseëlon (1995: 134) notes:

The temple of fashion though is not open to everyone and only a carefully scrutinised set of fashion editors, photographers, buyers, distinguished clients and celebrities are allowed into the inner sanctuary. Access to such an event and the seating plan draw a political map of social success and a complex web of interests.

The LFW site at the Chelsea Barracks is comprised of two tents; an exhibition hall, which houses a larger number of designers on individual stands in the manner of a trade show, and a catwalk theatre, where the spectacular fashion shows that are widely commented on in the press take place. The former is a space for the business of fashion, the latter for the art of fashion. This division between art and commerce mirrors the wider field of fashion, where, as in the field of cultural production more generally (Bourdieu, 1993a), these are separated out and awarded different status. This physical separation between the two activities reproduces a critical division within British fashion between fashion as 'art' and fashion as 'rag trade' (McRobbie, 1998). Drawing on Bourdieu, McRobbie notes how 'art' and creativity carry greater value than commerce, which, at least in the context of British fashion, is disavowed by many young designers. LFW, as the bi-annual event supporting British fashion, reproduces this division from the wider field. The 'creative' and 'artistic' are celebrated through the privileging of the fashion catwalk to the detriment of the 'commercial' exhibition, which receives little press coverage.

Yet, as Bourdieu and Delsaut (1975: 22) argue, the field of fashion is 'situated at an intermediary position between the artistic field and the economic field'. During LFW this position is made clear: while the distinction between art and commerce is translated into the planning of the space discussed above, the commercial dimension of fashion is not hidden, that is, it is not totally disavowed. As Bourdieu (1993a: 75) also observes, 'the disavowal [of the "economy"] is neither a real negation of the "economic" interest which always haunts the most "disinterested" practices, nor a simple "dissimulation" of the mercenary aspects of the practice', and this is made visible during LFW. While commerce is materialized distinctly from the creative process, it nevertheless is shown as complementary to it. During LFW the separation between the two tents, that is the separation between the subfield of art and the subfield of commerce, is bridged, potentially at least, by the physical movement of fashion players, such as buyers and journalists, between the two spaces.

As academics we found ourselves confronting, on a daily basis, the physical boundaries of the field and the separation between ‘laity’ and ‘clerics’ (Bourdieu, 2000b: 53) in our status as both insiders and outsiders to the field.<sup>2</sup> We secured access to the event through our claim to be doing research on the fashion industry and through the connections (i.e. social capital, which we discuss later) we had already established with journalists and buyers in the course of our research. This information granted us an entry ‘Pass’, which meant we could easily move in and out of the physical environment of LFW. However, since our presence in the field was temporary, lasting only for the duration of our research, and since we were not ‘industry’ insiders, we were acutely aware that we remained outsiders and the fragile nature of our claim to be there was sometimes brought to the fore.

Once inside the site we had to confront yet more boundaries. Our entrance ticket only allowed access to the site and the exhibition tent, but to gain entry to the hallowed arena of the catwalk theatre and pass through the roped area outside the theatre necessitated negotiating more boundaries to secure tickets to individual shows. With these tickets in short supply, this proved a difficult task. In the case of the journalist’s project, the journalist being shadowed secured most tickets, although her power to distribute these arbitrarily meant it became important to secure tickets independently as well. In the case of the buyers’ project, tickets had to be secured independently, since allocations were so few within the store.

Field players in all fields are endowed with different amounts of capital, while different capitals are effective ‘*in relation* to a particular field’ (Bourdieu, 1995: 73). Bourdieu talks about ‘specific capital’ (p. 73). We shall call ‘fashion capital’ the capital specific to the field of fashion. Like all field-related capitals, it is made up of economic and cultural capital (which we discuss in ‘Seeing and Being Seen’ later) and social and symbolic capital. In terms of securing access to LFW and fashion shows, social capital is ‘what ordinary language calls “connections”’ (Bourdieu, 1995: 32). A high amount of social capital allows one to move freely within the social network of field participants. In the field of fashion, social capital is essential to the acquisition of tickets to shows (knowing who to contact and how; in our case, the PR agencies of designers, using our research and connections to buyers and journalists). A high degree of social capital buys one access to after-show parties, or to the designers themselves. One’s social capital cannot be dissociated from one’s symbolic capital – one’s status in a field. As Bonnewitz (1998: 43–4) notes, symbolic capital ‘is only the credit and authority bestowed on an agent by recognitions and possessions of the three other forms of capital’.

Our ability to secure access *without* the aid of the people we were shadowing was an indicator of our ability to find our way into the field; to locate its players and gatekeepers, and mobilize capital. In other words, once inside the show tent, we could potentially increase our capital. To be spotted by buyers and journalists outside a show waiting to go in – holding the precious ticket prominently – or seated in the catwalk theatre itself undoubtedly signalled our

social and symbolic capitals and thereby helped lend some weight to our research and our position in the field. Since as researchers we were often made to feel less powerful than the people we were observing, these symbols of our own status helped to maintain our position vis-a-vis our informants, indicating that while we might be academics, we had connections.

However, we were excluded from the 'big' shows, such as Julian McDonald's, where tickets are scarce and dependent upon being a known and influential player, that is, someone with a high symbolic capital. Our relative lack of social capital also meant we were excluded from the social events, such as the private 'after-show' parties, that run alongside the shows. There are, therefore, even more boundaries within this field: indeed, there are boundaries within boundaries. The social functions work to exclude everyone but the select few belonging to the 'inner sanctum'. As Tilberis (1998: 397) notes in her fictionalized account of fashion shows, most parties have at least 'three cordoned-off areas for minor, major and middle ranking VIPs'. Lacking sufficient fashion capital to gain entry to this inner sanctum meant that we were clearly positioned as outsiders to these social functions.

The ticket, as suggested above, is one of the main badges of affiliation within this field. By brandishing a ticket for a show, one indicates insider status: it is the material evidence of one's presence in the field of fashion, a visible sign of belonging for others to see en route to the exclusive space of the catwalk theatre. The invitations themselves convey this sense of exclusivity in their design and materiality; at once a passport to the elite event of the show but also trophies to display – they are usually highly visible. Often of a large size, too big to be kept in a small bag, some are of high quality, with a design that aims to convey the mood of the collections. The Boyd Spring–Summer 2004 invitation came accompanied by a smiley badge and whistle, both attached to a bright green cord to be wrapped around one's neck.

However, not all tickets are created equally. There are tickets for seats and tickets for standing, and these place allocations mark out and reproduce field positions within the confined arena of the catwalk theatre as discussed in more detail later. It is in this way that the theatre itself becomes a microcosm of the entire field. Seat tickets are more valuable and come with a row number. Standing tickets mean waiting in the standing queue. This waiting is a significant activity during the shows to the point that it has become part of the shows themselves. So, while the actual shows last around fifteen minutes, waiting an hour or more for it to start is not unusual. This elaborate orchestration of time mirrors the hierarchies of the world of fashion itself. Only those with the maximum amount of status in the field have the power to keep others waiting and the most notorious of these are celebrities and major dignitaries. Time is critical to the analysis of practice; the temporal structure of practice 'is constitutive of its meaning' (Bourdieu, 1997: 81). As Bourdieu (p. 106) goes on to observe, 'time derives its efficacy from the state of the structure of relations within which it comes into play'.

A hierarchy of time is, in effect, enacted, which conveys the social hierarchies at play in the field of fashion, the expression 'being fashionably late' aptly capturing here the socio-temporal structuring of the field as materialized during LFW. As a commodity capitalized on by the fashion industry to sell the latest fads and the power to be 'ahead of the game', time is also symbolically capitalized on by some fashion players during the collections to signify their high status, that is, their dominant position at the head of their field. Moreover, the arrival of particular VIP participants is much like that of royalty: not only do they tend to arrive later, but the show cannot start until they are seated. One young model, discussing his encounters in the fashion industry, described this world as being like a 'medieval court' in its complex social hierarchy. This was very much confirmed by our observations of the organization of each individual show.<sup>3</sup>

As these observations at LFW demonstrate, fields have real material presence and are not abstract entities or disembodied spaces. Events such as the one we observed are opportunities for fields to materialize and reproduce themselves. LFW, as a major event, and the more exclusive social functions enacted around it manifest the boundaries of the field and mark out clear parameters between the inside and the outside. This has the effect not only of rendering the field an actual space, but also of reproducing the identities of those within and serving to legitimate their positions through the ways in which they appear *as* insiders. It is to the significance of appearing as an insider in the field that we now turn.

## II. Seeing and Being Seen: On Field Positions

### *Visibility and Membership*

Much debate has taken place recently about the future of fashion shows (see Cartner-Morley, 2003: 3). While shows seem ostensibly about the selling of clothes, in fact they are largely redundant as trade events since they occur too late in the season. Indeed, most of the buying happens beforehand in studios (p. 13). As Italian designers Dolce and Gabbana note, 'the product has been sold at least two months beforehand' (cited in Cartner-Morley, 2003: 13). Yet, as Cartner-Morley (2003: 13) observes, it would seem that 'most in the industry remain wedded to the catwalk concept'. When asked 'why fashion shows?' one journalist described them as a 'tradition', while another, referring to the debate about the redundancy of shows, observed that 'there is a definite argument for that. There's no real reason for us to go and look at all this stuff.' However, the shows have remained critical to the work of buyers and journalists. For journalists, fashion shows represent news and they constitute stories, while they help buyers to understand the designers' vision. Kawamura (2004: 62) goes further to suggest that it is through practices such as the collections 'that the particular groups of fashion elites *reproduce themselves*. Organizing fashion shows is not only a trade event but also a *cultural event*'

(our emphasis). Developing Kawamura's point further, in the remaining part of the article we detail some of the ways in which fashion shows articulate and reproduce fashion culture. In particular, we suggest that one of the major purposes of the fashion shows is to see and be seen and, by one's being seen, one's position in the field is reproduced.

Once part of the ceremonies of consecration of the bourgeoisie (Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975: 32), fashion shows, we would argue, along with Kawamura, are now important for the consecration of key players and their reproduction in the field of fashion. In a similar vein, Bourdieu (2000b: 66) notes how, in the field of politics, 'an important part of the actions politicians accomplish has no other function than to reproduce the system and to reproduce the politicians by reproducing the system which ensures their reproduction'. In the field of fashion, as in the field of politics, and to paraphrase Bourdieu (p. 67) on the latter, many practices are motivated by the desire to reproduce the very system that guarantees the existence of its members. Thus, during fashion shows not only are 'the conditions for the efficacy of the label' produced and reproduced (Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975: 21), but so are those for the efficacy of the work of fashion participants such as journalists and buyers. During fashion shows creators are created but so are the roles and positions of the players in the field. Accardo (1995: 32) notes how journalism 'is mainly evaluated against the accumulation of symbolic capital (with the related material advantages), against peer acknowledgement, against public notoriety and social *visibility*'. This process points towards 'the established significance of the collections as social institutions for the controlling elites of global fashion culture' (Gilbert, 2000: 9).

Thus, while Khan (2000: 117) argues that catwalk shows' only purpose is for them '*to be noticed*' by the media and the public more generally, they are also for its participants to be noticed by other participants themselves. As Accardo (1997: 51), drawing on the work of Bourdieu, notes, to have a distinct existence means not only to exist physically but also socially, 'which means *for others*, to be recognised by others, to acquire importance, *visibility*'. It is significant that the most powerful players' presence may actually be in the form of absence: when someone as important as Anna Wintour, the editor of US *Vogue*, decides not to attend, her absence is noted and commented upon by the press: her absence is visible.

This emphasis upon visibility and mutual recognition points to the important way in which LFW facilitates intersubjectivity, essential to the maintenance of the field itself. By collecting everyone who is 'anyone' in the field, LFW renders subjects visible to one another and places them in meaningful relation to each other. This visibility produces a sense of 'intercorporeality': as Crossley (1994: 27) observes, 'we belong to each other by belonging to a common *visible* world'. 'Belonging' is important within this particular world, and spatial arrangements of the visual field of fashion encourage this sense of shared belonging and intercorporeality. Belonging is also signalled and reproduced through shared tastes and dress styles: one's whole embodied appearance

signals membership of the 'fashion set'. As visibility is key, we turn to the orchestration of looking in the spatial layout of the fashion show.

The catwalk theatre is a particularly visible realm where identities are created through very visible performances, which in turn constitute part of the way in which struggles in the field are played out. The staging of the catwalk show is a staging of the gaze; the gaze of the participants sitting in the audience, who are at once its object and subject. This gaze contrasts with that of the models, distant and detached, a gaze that does not watch, that is not there to see but only to be seen. As Foucault (1977, 1980) demonstrates, physical space produces particular regimes of looking. However, unlike the panopticon (or indeed, the conventional theatre), the gaze circulates *around* the space rather than emanating from a central point so that all players are both subject and object of the gaze in the game of visibility. This is because the catwalk, or 'runway', stretches out into the audience who sit in a rectangle around it. This relationship of stage to audience allows for the 'struggle for visibility' to be played out between participants who become part of the spectacle as one's eyes are directed across the stage to the bodies seated on the other side. In such an auditorium, one becomes keenly aware of being watched in turn, while observing the audience constitutes part of the spectacle of the show. Since the fashion show itself lasts only a matter of minutes, watching the audience take their seats provides the show with much of its drama. Thus, the conventions of seating at the fashion show, sitting opposite other members of the audience, encourage a gaze of mutual recognition as well as being central to the experience of the show as spectacle. Also, again unlike relations within the panopticon, visibility in this arena translates into power: the more powerful bodies are the most visible on the front row.

The seating plan around the catwalk maps out the power relations between players within the field. A field is 'a system of differences' (Accardo, 1997: 45) and its structure 'is a *state* of the power relations among' its players (Bourdieu, 1995: 73). This translates, in the field of fashion as materialized during an event such as LFW, into the physical arrangements of the show itself, where differences are visibly mapped out onto the space itself. The seating arrangement renders in spatial form the different sub-fields of practices within the field, with, for instance, buyers and journalists allocated to different areas. Indeed, one journalist, when asked a question about buyers, used space as her reference, stating 'we are here and they're there', while illustrating her idea with a movement of the arm that signalled the distance between two areas of the catwalk theatre, that is two areas of the field of production of fashion. Similarly, photographer Roma Pas (cited in Persson, 2003) notes how 'it's funny that hierarchy can be understood in terms of visual conditions'. He adds that a similar hierarchy informs the placement of photographers:

I met a couple of guys who had the job of placing tape on the podium to mark the best spots for catwalk photographers. [...] Within no time the whole surface was covered with crosses of tape and the photographers came and found their spot. I think it's interesting that hierarchy can be seen as a pattern in the most literal way.

While the hierarchical placement of photographers creates a spatial ‘pattern’ on the floor, the same is true of the rows of seats. One’s position within one’s respective field of practice is built into the system of rows. On the front row sit the most important participants, such as influential journalists and buyers, dignitaries and celebrities. At the time of fieldwork, these included journalists such as Suzy Menkes from the *International Herald Tribune*, Susanne Tide-Frater, the then Head of Fashion Direction at Selfridges, as well as numerous celebrities. This position on the front row renders their power and influence visible to everyone in the auditorium since, as Pas (cited in Persson, 2003) notes, ‘the light from the catwalk shines only on the front row’. Front row participants are, therefore, very much part of the spectacle. Beyond the front row are allocated seats for less important players. The furthest reaches are designated as ‘standing’, and in this area are those without much power and influence, such as particularly resourceful fashion students. Finally, in terms of the spatialization of the field itself, it is significant that the physical labour of making the clothes, and the less orderly nature of preparing for the performance, is kept ‘hidden’ backstage. The show preserves the illusion of fashion as art, the product of individual genius, and obscures the effort involved. It thus contributes to the screen which, Bourdieu (1995: 138) argues, is placed in front of the fashion system to allow for its ‘magic’ to work and its ‘ideology of creation’ to be reproduced.

#### *Performing (in) the Field: Fashion Habitus and Capital*

Although the actual publicity machine will render the participants visible beyond the field, to the fashion consuming public, visibility in this often claustrophobic arena is about visibility in relation to one another, impressed upon the participants through the permanent exchange of gaze. This gaze is a scrutinizing one, as Kondo, in her study of race, fashion and theatre, recounts. While waiting in the French Cour Carrée du Louvre for the shows to start she notes (1997: 103):

Never have I seen a gathering of such intimidatingly stylish people. It’s not simply what they’re wearing and the aplomb and arrogance with which they carry themselves, but the fact that everyone is checking out everyone else. Who’s who, who’s wearing what, assessed by an audience that knows exactly which designer, what year, the exact price. *We are, I suppose, performing for each other.* (emphasis added)

This idea of performance acted out for knowledgeable others recalls Bourdieu’s (2000a: 70) comment on the position of men in the Kabyle house whose game of honours, he notes, is ‘a sort of theatrical action, accomplished in front of others, informed spectators who know the text and all the stage movements, and are capable of seeing the slightest variations’. In the confined space of the show area, both outside, as Kondo discusses, or inside the theatre at LFW, as in the confined and highly symbolically loaded space of the Kabyle house, one is on display and performs for others. Thus, if seating allocations are central to one’s field position, so too is one’s appearance, which is made visible in this public arena.

To perform effectively within any field one needs to have accumulated the appropriate capital and mastered the field's habitus. These two, while closely linked and overlapping within any particular field, are conceptually distinct from one another. Capital in Bourdieu's sense refers to skills, knowledge and connections, exchanged within the field to establish and reproduce one's position (see, for instance, Bourdieu, 1996), while habitus refers to deeply embedded, pre-reflexive capacities and competencies that are practical and embodied (Bourdieu, 1997). These two are intertwined and mutually reinforcing: one's capital in any particular field is, in effect, worn on the body, articulated by one's bodily habitus. While all fields are enacted and reproduced through habitus, in fields which are in some way *about* the body (such as the field of fashion, but one could include the fields of dance, acting, or sex work, for instance) the body is placed centre stage. In other words, the field of fashion is one where the appearance of the body is absolutely critical, in contrast to fields where sublimation of the body and its appearance are central, reflecting the demand to 'transcend' the body in order to 'get on' with one's work in organizations (Hearn et al., 1989; Mills and Tancred, 1992) or simply to forget one has a body, as the model of the traditional academic would have it.

Important to the field of fashion, then, is the ability to articulate recognized forms of fashion capital and develop an appropriate fashion habitus so that one's body actually looks like it belongs. We have already looked at symbolic and social capitals in the field of fashion. Critically important also is cultural capital. This includes one's knowledge about, for instance, the history of fashion, but also about up-and-coming designers and trends. It also manifests itself in educational credentials in the form, for instance, of an academic title from an institution highly valued in the field. However, significant for the reproduction of one's position in the field (and performance at events such as LFW) are the objectified forms of cultural capital in the guise of clothes and accessories from fashionable and exclusive brands, all highly dependent on one's economic capital.

Over the course of our research both buyers and journalists reiterated the importance of their dress in the conduct of their work. As one buyer put it, 'I feel such pressure to look the part, that sort of inside myself I rebel against it, and don't. And also, I can't afford to. But you do feel massive pressure, especially at the times of fashion shows.' Similarly, one journalist observes: 'it [the show]'s the biggest most traumatic moment especially because I don't have money to buy the bag'. She adds, 'so you know my way is I have to be really clever so I'm going to wear sneakers or you know I just do it my way, I'm not going to wear a cheap copy. You see all these kind of snobbish things go into you'. Finally, bodily demeanour and carriage are also part of one's performance in the field: in the field of fashion, examples would include one's weight – a thin, toned body being a fashionable body – and one's bodily ease during an event such as LFW. Kondo (1997: 103) captures something of this habitus in her description of the 'aplomb and arrogance' with which the 'intimidatingly stylish people' of the fashion field put together their appearance. Herself an outsider,

her description would suggest she was not quite at ease with this habitus (something that we also found in our fieldwork experience). Indeed, bodily ease is acquired only through prolonged presence in the field and the mastery of its habitus, a mastery made flesh, carried on and by the body and internalized as the proper way to present oneself, and which the buyer and journalist mentioned above express in their use of expressions such as 'I feel such pressure', and 'things go into you'.

This emphasis upon the body in the field is not just articulated through clothing, but is enacted through bodily performances, such as gestures and greetings, that help to make the system of field relations visible and constitute part of the field's habitus. The 'air kiss,' in particular, is a very characteristic greeting within the field of fashion. Quite a theatrical act, it is sometimes accompanied by exclamations or greetings, kissing sounds and touching of hands on shoulders or waist. It is also an example of the way in which the body mediates social relations in this field. Two things are accomplished with this kiss. First, the air kiss requires a bodily proximity that signifies proximity between players in the field and, therefore, belonging and membership. In other words, it is a performative gesture that renders visible otherwise abstract field relations and positions, and, in the process, enacts and reproduces one's social capital. When such an air kiss occurred between one of us and two important buyers, while waiting outside the Westwood show in Paris, it signalled a significant moment (at the end of the fieldwork). It demonstrated something about our position in the field that we were, at least temporarily, recognized and worthy of public recognition by these important players, visibly signalling we had acquired a certain amount of social capital. Second, the air kiss is a bodily expression that renders visible the field's habitus, its 'mother tongue', that is, the 'grammar, rules and exercises' (Bourdieu, 1997: 67) embodied by the fashion players. Since fashion is a practice *about* the body and its presentation, bodily ease and the ability to display it – 'showing that one is "at home" in the field' inhabited (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1996: 128) – are an important part of being a player in this field. The air kiss is part of the culture of the field, allowing for performative enactments necessary to the continued presence in the field and field participants.

The 'air kiss' illustrates the performative nature of the habitus and the way in which otherwise intangible qualities of fields are reproduced through embodiment. As Bourdieu (1997: 57) states, 'it is through the capacity for incorporation, which exploits the body's readiness to take seriously the performative magic of the social, that the king, the banker or the priest are hereditary monarchy, financial capitalism or the Church made flesh'. Indeed, fields are reproduced precisely through the specific forms of embodiment demanded by them. This emphasis upon the performative enters into the accounts that buyers and journalists gave of their practice. For example, one fashion journalist observed that during the fashion shows, 'you have to look the part'. The theatrical metaphor draws attention to the performative presence of field participants during the collections and 'the incessant work of (theatrical) representation,

through which agents produce and reproduce [...] at least the appearance of conformity to the group's ideal truth or ideal of truth' (Bourdieu, 1998: 142). Another journalist observes how 'appearance becomes very important' as a way of representing 'the editor, publisher and everyone else', i.e. her publication. In other words, one's appearance does not simply mediate one's individual position but institutional position as well. Similarly, buyers also stressed the importance of appearance as part of their role as 'ambassadors' for the store. Indeed, not looking the part can have significant implications for one's career trajectory. One buyer noted how winning contracts with the exclusive fashion brands depends upon looking suitably fashionable, since the buyer, in representing what was, in her case, a 'fashion forward' store, has to embody this image to attract the brands on her buying trips. Failure to embody the image could, eventually, cost her her job.

Thus, in the field of fashion, it is critical that one's body articulates fashion capital, position and status in the field. These field-wide demands are felt most acutely during LFW precisely because it materializes or objectifies the field, rendering visible, through the staging of the gaze, field positions, status and power, as discussed above. In sum, these experiences point to the way the body acts as another boundary marker in the field. As these experiences suggest, the boundaries of the body are important for marking out insiders and insider status of the field itself: bodies demonstrate they belong, they are 'inside' through their appearance, and this appearance is essential to the reproduction of the key players whose careers depend upon it.

## Conclusion

In this article we argue that LFW renders visible the boundaries, relational positions and capital at play in the wider field of fashion. We discussed the ways in which the boundaries of this event mirror the boundaries of the wider field, allowing access only to those defined as players in the field. Within the event itself, the spatial arrangements also reproduce critical divisions and hierarchies within the field, most notably, the division between art and commerce, and between the different players themselves. The relational positions between players are, however, most visibly reproduced within the confines of the catwalk theatre, where hierarchies of time and space are enacted that replicate the power held by different players. As well as making visible the field, LFW is a ceremony of consecration, to quote Bourdieu (2000b: 66) again, 'reproducing the system which ensures their reproduction'. With LFW having little to do with the selling of garments, the shows function to promote the work of designers but also the field's players. Physical presence, that is, being seen in the field, gives witness to their field membership. It is for this reason that we argue that the presence of the players in the field is a performative one: their appearance, bodily manners, indeed their habitus, being critical to the reproduction of their position within the field. This is reinforced by the orchestration of the gaze,

especially within the catwalk theatre, where everyone, but especially the main players on the front row, is subject and object of the gaze of others. Here the body itself is a signifier of field membership.

Throughout this article, then, we demonstrate the value of Bourdieu's field theory for understanding real institutional settings and their role in the reproduction of the field they belong to. Fields are not merely abstract spaces of positions but can be seen as embodied spaces of practice. This attention to fields as enacted through material settings puts field theory *in situ* allowing us to reconcile field theory and fieldwork, two key moments in Bourdieu's work, but which he himself does not fully reunite.

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## Notes

- 1 Both authors contributed equally to the article.
- 2 When the research was conducted one of us was an London College of Fashion member of staff. While this connection certainly helped in some respects, membership to one of the institutions in the field of fashion does not grant membership to its other institutions. Thus, the researcher was an outsider to the specific institutions of fashion journalism and LFW.
- 3 Interview data gathered in the course of fieldwork on models in 2001.

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