

Leisure Reflections No 53: Fashion Modeling: A Dramaturgical Analysis of an Amateur-Professional Art

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The dramaturgic metaphor has had a long history in the social sciences being, most recently, especially popular in sociology and its symbolic interactionist wing. Dramaturgical analysis dates to a framework established in the 1930s by Kenneth Burke, which he used for analysing literature. A brief history of how his ideas entered sociology is provided by Charles Edgley (2013), and includes recognition of Erving Goffman's version of dramaturgical thinking (most notably Goffman, 1959). As Brissett and Edgley (2006, p.3) define it: "Dramaturgy is the study of how human beings accomplish meaning in their lives. It is not primarily interested in what people do, nor what they intend to do, nor even why they do it, but how they do it that is the dramaturgical curiosity." The expressive and dramatic dimensions are thus at center-stage in this approach.

Goffman in his dramaturgic analyses made wide use of the theatre and its terminology,

famous among his metaphoric concepts are "front stage," "back stage," "role distance," and "performance." I will follow his lead in the present exploration of how fashion modeling is enacted, doing so under the heading of amateur-professional modeling as theatre. How does dramatic terminology used as a metaphor illuminate modeling as a leisure and work activity?

As far as I can tell fashion modeling has seldom been examined as an activity, in particular as a leisure and work activity (but see Lee et al, 2019). Therefore let me theorize here that runway and photo models in this activity display and thereby promote clothing and, in so doing, may be understood as engaging in a kind of amateur or professional commercial theater. That is, they present their apparel ("costume") on a "runway" (stage) or against a photographer's backdrop, according to a script (walking along the runway while making prescribed bodily movements), and then acting it out by actually making these movements. The goal is to sell apparel, bodily adornments, or fashion services. Moreover, some sort of *maquillage* may be required. There is no speaking part here, which however, is not essential in theater (cf, miming, various walk-on roles). Compared with conventional theater,

rehearsals are minimal, for experienced models know what they must do on the runway and directed by the organizer of the show to mount it wearing their apparel. It is likewise for posing during photography sessions.

Modeling as an Amateur/Professional Theater Art

Models start as amateurs in certain of the arts of theater. That is, they learn to present their apparel or other product (eg, rings, earrings, hairstyle, make-up) to an audience of photographers, journalists, designers, and buyers of garments and products. Since these people have a commercial interest in what the model is displaying, the model is therefore not an entertainer but rather a link in a chain of business transactions.

As in all serious leisure these amateurs meet its six qualities (Stebbins, 2007/2015, pp. 11-13). The first is that they put in significant *effort*, as manifested in, for example, properly walking along the runway, holding numerous poses in a photoshoot, and applying effectively on themselves the required make-up. Second, they find that they must *persevere* at perfecting these activities. Third, amateurs find a *career* in their serious leisure, mainly shaped by growing knowledge, skill, and experience in the core activities of modeling. This career may carry the participant into professional status, into work that is essentially serious leisure for which a significant part of that person's livelihood is gained from modeling (for a discussion of such "devotee work," see Stebbins, 2004/2014). For example, industry insiders teach novices a host of vital skills as they develop a book of pictures, learn how to walk on the runway, move for the camera, and interact with clients, and develop a resume. Intangibles like poise and presence are also fostered to increase chances of success in this competitive industry.

As a fourth quality, the serious pursuits are further distinguished by several *durable benefits*, or tangible, salutary outcomes such activity for its participants. They include self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, self-fulfillment, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, agreeable social interaction, and a sense of belonging. These benefits result from pursuing the art of fashion modeling, doing so according to effort, perseverance, and career development.

Fifth, each serious pursuit is distinguished by a unique *ethos* that emerges in parallel with each expression of it. An ethos is the spirit of the community of serious leisure/devotee work participants, as manifested in shared attitudes, practices, values, beliefs, goals, and so on. The social world of the participants is the organizational milieu in which the associated ethos – at bottom a cultural formation — is expressed (as attitudes, beliefs, values) or realized (as practices, goals) (Stebbins, 2018). According to David Unruh (1979; 1980) every social world has its characteristic groups, events, routines, practices, and organizations. It is held together, to an important degree, by semiformal, or mediated, communication.

A social world contains four types of members: strangers, tourists, regulars, and insiders (Unruh, 1979; 1980). The strangers are intermediaries who normally participate little in the leisure/work activity itself, but who nonetheless do something important to make it possible. In modelling they include, for example, the photographers, journalists, designers, garment buyers, and agents. Tourists are temporary participants in a social world; they have come on the scene momentarily for entertainment, diversion, or profit. These strangers also become the tourists of the model's social world. The regulars routinely participate in the social world; in serious leisure, they are the amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers themselves. The insiders are those among them who show exceptional devotion to the social world they share, to maintaining it, to advancing it. Included here are the world's "supermodels," as well as highly experienced and respected local participants.

The sixth quality — participants in serious leisure tend to identify strongly with their chosen pursuits, leading to an *identity* that springs from meeting the other five distinctive qualities.

The Modeling Career

According to Effron and Lieberman (2011) "everyday" professional models employed by an agency made on average \$42,560 a year, with an average hourly wage of \$20.46, as based on data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. They note, however, that about 18 percent of then models are self-employed and sometimes take part-time assignments. Thus there is considerable variation from the average wage. The world's top supermodels, say the authors, pull in much grander salaries. *Forbes* reported that the top three highest paid models included supermodel Gisele Bundchen, [age] 29, who made \$25 million last year, followed by 'Project Runway' host Heidi Klum, 38, with \$16 million in earnings, and Kate Moss, 36, with \$9 million. The usual practice for managers and agents is to deduct anywhere from a 10 to 20 percent commission for each job a model lands, which includes television commercials and print and online advertisements.

Most working models start their careers at age 16 (Effron & Lieberman, 2011). At this point they are amateurs. For those striving for professional status, they must eventually have "a book," a portfolio of photos of their best shots, commonly developed by their agencies or managers. According to the Better Business Bureau, fees vary, with models typically paying \$750 to \$1,000 for this service. Neophytes commonly participate in courses, workshops, and camps, where they learn the basics of their leisure/work passion.

More recently the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) states that the employment of models is projected to show little or no change from 2016 to 2026. This occupation still attracts many applicants, and competition for jobs is projected to be strong. By May 2018, the median hourly wage for models had dropped to \$11.43.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) describes modeling as a leisure/work activity. Models:

- Display clothing and merchandise in print and online advertisements
- Promote products and services in television commercials
- Wear designers' clothing for runway fashion shows
- Represent companies and brands at conventions, trade shows, and other events
- Pose for photos, paintings, or sculptures
- Work closely with photographers, hair and clothing stylists, makeup artists, and clients to produce a desired look
- Create and maintain a portfolio of their work[i]
- Travel to meet and interview with potential clients[iii]
- Conduct research on the product being promoted—for example, the designer or type of clothing fabric
- Answer questions from consumers about the products.

The BLS says further that nearly all models sign with modeling agencies, which represent and promote their models to clients in return for a portion of that person's earnings. Models typically apply for representation through an agency by submitting their photographs to its website or by attending open casting calls and meeting directly with agents. Nonetheless, some freelance models avoid signing with agencies. Instead, they market themselves directly to potential clients and apply for modeling jobs directly. Yet, most clients seem to prefer to work with agents, making it difficult for new models to pursue a freelance career.

The BLS points out some of the career strategies that led to success in this leisure/work activity. Thus, to ensure that an agency has a good reputation in the modeling industry, models should research it before signing. A model's choice of an agency is also important for advancement: the better the reputation and skill of the agency, the more assignments a model is likely to get.

Because advertisers often need to target specific segments of the population, models may want to specialize. For instance, petite and plus-size fashions are modeled by women whose sizes are respectively smaller and larger than those worn by the typical model. Models who are disabled may be used to model fashions or products for consumers with disabilities. "Parts" models have a body part, such as a hand or foot particularly well-suited to model products such as nail polish or shoes.

Models appear in different types of media to promote a product or service. These enthusiasts advertise products and merchandise in magazine or newspaper advertisements, department store catalogs, or television commercials. Increasingly, models are appearing in online ads or on retail websites. They also pose for sketch artists, painters, and sculptors.

Models often participate in photo shoots and pose for photographers to show off the features of clothing and other products. Models change their posture and facial expressions to capture the look the client wants. The photographer usually takes many pictures of the model in different poses and expressions during the photoshoot.

Models also display clothes and merchandise live in different situations. At fashion shows, they stand, turn, and walk to show off clothing to an audience of photographers, journalists, designers, and garment buyers. Other clients may ask models to interact directly with customers, as in retail establishments and department stores where the latter sometimes display clothing directly to shoppers while describing the features and prices of this merchandise. At trade shows and conventions, models show off a firm's products and provide information to consumers. These models may work alongside demonstrators and product promoters to help advertise and sell the merchandise.

Models advance in their careers by working more regularly and getting selected more frequently for assignments that offer higher pay and greater exposure. A few of them eventually appear in well-known magazines, print advertising campaigns, commercials, or runway shows that provide such exposure. At the occupational level fashion models are, in the language of the serious pursuits, free-lancing, devotee workers.

Conclusions

The preceding pages have presented an introduction to the leisure/work activity of fashion modeling, framing it in the serious leisure perspective and raising some research questions about this applied amateur/professional art. One question is whether there is anything in it related to casual and project-based leisure, as in, say, a one-off living room style show by the neighborhood girls around age 10 to 12. Or, is not trying on some of mommy's clothing an instance of casual leisure? Does not the motive to enter formal training as a neophyte sometimes root in such experiences? Or does attending a fashion show with a parent provide the spark the adolescent needs to seek formal training.

The social world of modeling, including as it does such gatekeepers as agencies and managers offers the uncommon opportunity to study the commodity agents who operate in certain amateur/professional fields (on these agents see Yoder, 1997; Stebbins, 2020). The agents in fashion modeling can augment or retard a model's career and, given this power, are subject to accusations of favoritism and bias by those under their control. The present article serves as an invitation to mount a full-fledged ethnographic study of this activity as leisure and work activity, as an applied art. This has not been done, though Ashley Mears (2011) has examined it ethnographically from a gender perspective.

Endnotes

[1] Models must create and maintain an up-to-date portfolio, which is a collection of the person's previous work. They also need to develop a composite card containing the best photographs from the portfolio, in addition to his or her body measurements. Both portfolios and composite cards are typically taken to all casting calls and client auditions.

² Many models work part time, often being faced with unpredictable work schedules. They must be ready to appear at a show or attend a photo shoot on short notice.

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