

# Pricing Beauty

*The Making of a Fashion Model*

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## Entry

You've got a great look.

That was what he told me as I sat in a Starbucks in downtown Manhattan. I had come in search of a quiet table at which to crack open a social theory book, one of a number of texts I was assigned as a new graduate student in sociology at New York University. Instead I found myself seated across from a model scout who was handing me his card and telling me that I could be making a fortune as a fashion model.

While waiting in line for my coffee I overheard a man, flanked by two pretty young women at a nearby table, talking loudly about what it's like to work in the fashion modeling industry. He was in his forties, tan and balding; his two companions, who were listening to him intently, looked about twenty years younger. I took him to be a modeling agent out with two of his models, and I listened with feigned disinterest, having packed away my own modeling portfolio into my mom's attic just six months ago, content to start a new career in academia after what had been five years in the business, at first part time in college, mostly small stuff for local department stores in my hometown of Atlanta. Later, school vacations would be spent modeling in Milan, New York, Tokyo, and Hong Kong. It seemed a lifetime ago; I had just celebrated my twenty-third birthday, well past retirement age for a model, and the books weighing down my shoulders were a reminder of a new career ahead.

On my way out I passed their table, and the loud-talking agent stopped me: "Hey, which agency are you with?" The young women smiled at me.

I'm not with an agency, I told him. I quit modeling six months ago to become a full-time graduate student. He seemed to not hear me—"You're not with an agency? Why not?!" He began lauding my "look" and then asked for my phone number so that we could talk and he could "present" me to the agencies in New York. He introduced himself as Todd, a model scout, and he described his pretty companions as "girls" whom he had recently "discovered."<sup>1</sup>

Meeting Todd was simultaneously off-putting and intriguing. I arrived at grad school wanting to study the gender politics of beauty and the body, an interest that took root when, as a teenager modeling in New York, an agent told me to try to look as lean as possible. The going joke around his agency, he explained, was "Anorexia is in this season." As an undergrad studying sociology, I had fantasized about studying the modeling world from the inside, to determine how the industry arrives at such injurious beauty ideals. It's been a long tradition in the sociology of work and organizations to learn the ropes of an industry by working in it. But now, at the age of twenty-three, I was happily retired from a world in which I had been advised by age nineteen to lie about my age to seem younger. And yet here was this pushy scout, dangling a way for me to get my foot back in the industry's door.

Todd called regularly over the next few days and explained that his job as a scout was to scour North America in search of new talent for all the major New York agencies, which in turn would give him a cut of the commission for every successful new model he found. He lavished praise and extolled my potential to "make it big" in various articulations: "You have a very strong look, someone will like you. . . . I think you gotta real cool look, a New York look. . . . I'm super-selective. . . . You need outlets, can't study all the time. You can be a full-time student and full-time model. My top girls make \$10,000 a day."<sup>2</sup>

And, finally, there was his tantalizing promise: "I can make it all happen for you in a few hours."

Well that all sounded very good, but when looked at sociologically, Todd's world began to open up questions I had never considered asking. What is a "look," and how is someone like Todd able to see value in it?

#### MEET SASHA AND LIZ

The very words "fashion model" conjure up images of rich, glitzy women in luxurious clothes strutting down catwalks and posing for

world-famous photographers, the stuff of celebrity, fame, and fortune—glamour alive in the flesh.

Only it won't work out this way for the majority of women and men who enter the fashion modeling market. Consider two young women—I'll call them Sasha and Liz—making their way through modeling auditions in two fashion capitals, London and New York.

When Sasha was fifteen, she met a Japanese modeling agent at an "open call" audition in her hometown of Vladivostok, a harbor city in Southeast Russia. She can still remember the Polaroid picture the agent took of her: "I looked terrified!" She was invited to leave her grey port city that summer during school vacation to work as a model in Tokyo. It was an unlikely destination for a girl known as "Virus" at school for her thin body, so skinny in fact that she wore three pairs of stockings under her jeans to fill them out. Once in Tokyo she grew up fast, learning how to cook for herself, to budget her money, and to communicate in English, of which she could at first barely speak a word: "I remember standing outside the car asking my driver, 'Are you go me home?' He was like, 'What?'" She returned home with \$5,000 in cash, "big money," she says now with a sarcastic smile, to the surprise of her friends and family, who put the money toward home improvements.

About the time Sasha was making her first \$1,000, halfway around the world another teenager I'll call Liz was serving a plate of pasta to a couple of regular customers in an Italian restaurant in Pleasantville, New Jersey. The customers carried on with her as usual: "Oh, you should be a model!" The teen waitress, in her first job in her hometown suburb, demurred as usual, too interested in high school social life and sports. But the thought stayed with her until she moved to Manhattan at the age of nineteen to attend Baruch College, where she majored in nutrition, the cost of tuition defrayed by her middle-class family. In between classes, a scout stopped her on Fourteenth Street: "Have you thought about modeling?" This time, she said yes.

When I first met her at a magazine casting in New York, Liz was twenty-two years old, precariously balancing college classes with modeling castings, but doing neither activity well. Her grades were slipping, and she was perpetually in debt at her agency, which had advanced her the start-up costs of putting together her portfolio. Her teenage savings account quickly depleting, Liz made ends meet by waitressing and babysitting. She began to talk more and more frequently about moving to Los Angeles, a place, she's been told, where models can "cash out" on lucrative television commercial work.

Just as Liz contemplated leaving New York, Sasha was about to arrive. By the time she turned twenty-two, Sasha had traveled around the world, living in agency-owned "model apartments" for no more than three or four months at a time in cities such as Paris, Tokyo, and Vienna. After high school she attended a premier Russian university, only to drop out after one semester too enticed by the world's possibilities to sit still in a classroom. She made money too, as much as \$50,000 one year, enough to support herself and to send substantial remittances home to her family in Vladivostok. However, when I met her in London at an audition for a cosmetics billboard, she was, in her words, "poor as a little mouse," renting a room in a photographer's flat in East London at £120 a week and scraping the bottom of her bank account. She was embarking on yet another journey, to New York, where she hoped her luck would change and her "look" would catch on in the fashion world.

Here we have two young women, both with brown hair, brown eyes, and fair skin. They have similarly lanky 5'9" size 2 bodies. Both are twenty-two years old, though they can (and do) pass as teenagers. Over the next few years, both will attend hundreds of castings in fashion capitals around the world. They have probably walked past each other in line at casting auditions in New York, though one doesn't know the other. They are two out of hundreds of thousands of contenders around the world chasing one of the most widely shared dreams among girls and young women. Both Liz and Sasha know, as their sea of competition knows, that the odds of having the right "look" to become the next top model are stacked against them.

Triumph and failure in a culture industry such as fashion modeling are enormously skewed. As in art and music markets, in fashion a handful of people will dominate the top of the hierarchy with very lucrative and visible rewards, while the bulk of contestants will barely scrape by, earning a meager living before they fade into more stable and far less glamorous careers. So extreme is the success of the winners that economists call these "winner-take-all" markets.<sup>3</sup> How, among the thousands of contenders worldwide, is any young woman like Sasha or Liz able to rise from the pack to become a winning commodity? What makes one model's "look" more valuable than the thousands of similar contestants? And just where does its value come from?

Success in markets such as fashion modeling might on the surface appear to be a matter of blind luck or pure genius. But luck is never blind, nor does genius work alone. Behind every winner in a winner-take-all market such as fashion modeling is a complex, organized production

process. The secrets to success have much less to do with the models themselves than with the social context of an unstable market. There is little intrinsic value in a model's physique that would set her apart from any number of other similarly built teens. When dealing with aesthetic goods such as "beauty" and "fashionability," we would be hard-pressed to identify objective measures of worth inherent in the good itself. Rather, an invisible social world is hard at work behind the scenes of fashion to bequeath cultural value onto looks. The backstage of fashion reveals a set of players—models, agents, and clients—and the peculiar rules of their game that usually remain hidden behind the brilliantly lit runways, the glossy magazine pages, and the celebrated glamour of fashion.

This is precisely how glamour works: through disguise. Glamour, after all, has its roots in medieval Celtic alchemy. *Glamour* is a spell, a magic charm, that is cast to blur the eyes and make objects appear different from, and usually better than, their true nature.<sup>4</sup> As glamour is cast upon the model's look, all of her work—and the work of her agents, clients, their assistants, and their whole social world—gets juggled out of sight. This social world is enormously important in determining the realm of beauty and fashion ideals; after all, the relations of cultural production determine the possibilities of cultural consumption. Ultimately the clan define world of fashion teaches us about much more than beauty and apparel; it holds lessons for the nature of modern work, markets, decision making, and new forms of racial and gender inequality. We usually can't see it, but there is an entire world of work that goes into producing that which appears to be a natural state: a model's "look." This is its story.

#### THE LOOK

A look is not the same thing as a quality commonly called "beauty." Neither Liz nor Sasha is best described as particularly beautiful. Sasha has big brown eyes and a small face framed by brown bobbed hair. She resembles the *manga* characters out of Japanese comic books. Liz is very skinny with imperfect teeth, thick, dark eyebrows, and almond eyes. Both describe themselves not as pretty but, to use a term that comes up often in the industry, "edgy."

The first designers to use live models in the early twentieth century noted that an ephemeral quality was the mark of a good model. French courtier Patou noted in the 1930s that his favorite model, Lola, was not

necessarily beautiful. She sold clothes, Patou thought, because of her "great chic"—a seemingly spiritual quality.<sup>5</sup>

This ineffable quality is known as a model's "look." It is a special type of human capital—what sociologist Loïc Wacquant, in his study of boxers, calls "bodily capital."<sup>6</sup> Models sell this bodily capital to fashion clients, such as photographers, casting directors, stylists, and designers. Modeling agents, known as "bookers," broker the sale.

The term "look" seems to describe a fixed set of physical attributes, such as how a person actually looks. It's true that models conform to basic Western standards of attractiveness, for instance, youthfulness, clear skin, healthy teeth, and symmetrical features. Within this frame, they adhere to narrow height and weight specifications. The female model is typically at least 5'9" with body measurements close to a 34" bust, a 24" waist, and 34" hips. The male model is typically 6' to 6'3" with a 32" waist and a 39" to 40" chest. This framework is, as one stylist explained to me, a "good ol' formula" for a model.

But this formula does not, by itself, constitute a look. Beyond this basic physique, small and subtle differences lead clients to prefer one model over another. Models, bookers, and clients refer to these differences as a model's "look."<sup>7</sup>

Talking about the look proves exceptionally difficult for fashion insiders. Bookers and clients often grapple for the right words when asked to define a look. They struggle to explain that a look is a reference point, a theme, a feeling, an era, or even an "essence." A look is decidedly not the equivalent of beauty or sexual attractiveness. While bookers and clients talk about some looks as "beautiful" and "gorgeous," they are just as likely to value others they describe as "strange," "grungy," and "almost ugly." Bookers stressed the difference between people who are "just hot," that is, sexually attractive, and people who are appropriate as models, though the precise qualities that distinguish one from the other could best be described as "something special" or "something else."

Part of this "something else" is in the model's personality. Most models, bookers, and clients explain that a look is much more than the sum of a model's physical parts. It is the "whole package" of a model's being, including personality, reputation, on-the-job performance (including how one photographs), and appearance. In an industry predicated on appearances, personality is a surprisingly important factor for success. Alas, looks really can be deceiving.

I think of a look as a model's unique appearance and personality that will appeal to a particular client at a particular time, depending on the

product being sold. To see the value of any given model's look, one may not simply lay eyes on the model, for a look is not a visible or an objectively identifiable quality inherent in a person. The look is in fact a system of meanings, such as a language or a code, tied to a social evaluation system. People learn to read and decipher this code in order to see distinctions between one model and the next, as well as their positions within the bigger fashion picture. It represents not just a person or an individual beauty but also a whole system of knowledge and relations among people and positions connected within an industry.

Looks are a type of commodity circulating in what sociologists call the "creative" economy, also called the "aesthetic" and "cultural" economy. The cultural economy includes those sectors that cater to consumer demands for ornamentation, amusement, self-affirmation, and social display. Products coming out of the cultural economy are inscribed with high levels of aesthetic or semiotic content in conscious attempts to generate desire for them among consumers. They provide social status and identity over and above their utility functions, hence their value is fluid and unpredictable. Lots of goods make up the cultural economy, such as art, music, television and film, and fashion.<sup>8</sup>

Models' looks are a prime example of cultural products. They are pure aesthetic content and are subject to wild, rapid fluctuations in value, which means that the people working in the modeling market face a high degree of ambiguity. Given all of this uncertainty, how does a person become a marketable look, as models try to do in the modeling market? How do bookers and clients determine their worth? And, finally, how do broader cultural understandings of value influence the worth of any particular look?

#### MODEL WORLDS

An investigation into the production of a look leads us into a social universe that usually goes unseen. It is a universe where intimate social ties guide economic transactions, where the poorest-paid jobs are worth more than thousands of dollars, where deception is integral to getting things done, and where mundane, taken-for-granted assumptions have enormous ramifications for pop culture and its mediascape of runways, commercials, billboards, and magazines.

The first step to understanding this world involves a little reverse magic to bring invisible actors into light. While models reap plenty of attention as pop culture icons, no model gets far without the campaigning

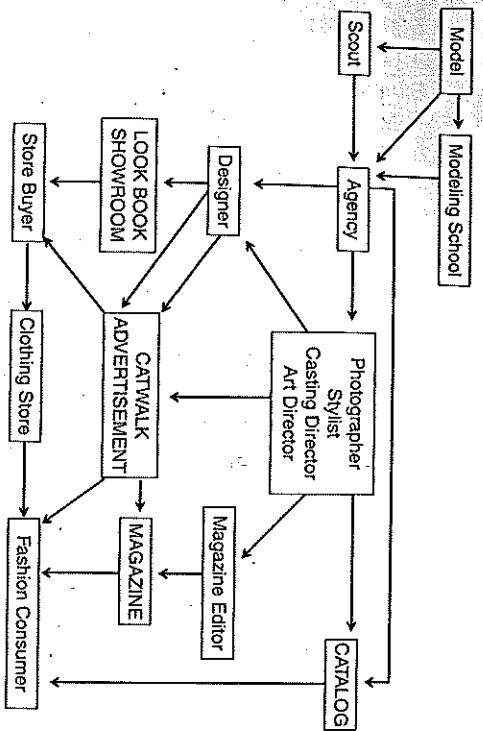


FIGURE 1.1. Production world behind the look

efforts of a booker and a few key clients. Networks of agents, scouts, assistants, editors, stylists, photographers, and designers constitute a production world that links models to fashion consumers. Scouts and agents “discover” raw bodily capital and then filter it to clients—photographers, designers, art and casting directors, stylists, and catalog houses. These clients “rent” models for short periods of time, maybe a few hours, days, or weeks, during which time they deploy this capital to appear in media outlets such as catalogs, showrooms, advertisements, magazines, catwalks, showrooms, and “look books,” which are booklets that feature a designer’s new clothing collection. In these media outlets, models’ images serve to entice store buyers and, ultimately, to seduce fashion shoppers, the final consumers of the look, into making a purchase, as shown in Figure 1.1.

Taken together, these producers constitute a world of backstage production, or an “art world,” as sociologist Howard Becker calls it (1982). In an art world, the talent is one piece of the art-making process, but talent should not be privileged as the gravitational center. Creative goods such as music, art, or books do not mysteriously emerge from individual acts of artistic genius. They materialize from institutions, organizations, industrial field structures, and the everyday routines of people at work.<sup>9</sup> A work of art is as much the product of a whole series of intermediaries and their shared norms, roles, meanings, and routines

as it is the creation of an individual artist. In other words, mundane processes of production are important in shaping culture.

An art world approach belies common sense; we’re used to thinking that the best people rise to the top of any market, as popular media accounts unanimously celebrate. It is tempting to think that models are lucky winners in some “genetic lottery,” as though their bodies were superior gifts of nature that automatically receive social recognition, and, indeed, some evolutionary psychologists echo this view.<sup>10</sup> Such explanations of the deservingly triumphant cannot account for the physical outliers—people such as Kate Moss, who at 5’6,” is short by model standards, or Sophie Dahl, who reached fashion fame at a size 10, rather heavy compared to her catwalk counterparts. Nor does talent account for the hundreds of thousands of similarly built genetic lotto winners who will never receive social recognition—people such as Liz and Sasha and the thirty-eight other models I interviewed for this book. Their stories make sense only in the context of a whole web of producers, the relationships they form, and the conventions they share.<sup>11</sup>

Thinking about looks as part of a world of production rather than as an individual quality called beauty allows us to see how aesthetic judgments materialize from a collaborative process. The look is the result of people doing things together.

### *The Rules of the Game*

Behind-the-scenes, participants may work together, but they do not necessarily work together harmoniously. Cultural producers struggle internally for power and recognition. Each is trying to “take all” implicitly at the expense of other contenders in a winner-take-all hierarchy.

These invisible players comprise a competitive world of high-stakes careers, and they calculate their steps according to two opposed logics: on the one hand, making money, and, on the other, creating art.<sup>12</sup> The producers most concerned with short-term economic profit are known as commercial producers. These models, bookers, and clients work predominantly in catalogs, television commercials, and print ads for goods such as toothpaste, electronics, and commercial clothing. Others are in fashion for fashion’s sake. They are known as editorial producers, and you’ll recognize their work in the high-end catwalks, magazines, and luxury-brand campaigns. Editorial producers follow an “anti-economic logic” by rejecting the pursuit of money, chasing after prestige instead.

That is, they are paradoxically willing to lose money in order to gain social esteem. This prestige may (but may not) pay off in the long run with huge financial gains. It is a gamble that underscores the entire undertaking of fashion; it is, as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would call it, a rule of the game of fashion.

Producers tend to separate themselves into two broad social networks: those that work in editorial fashion, and those in commercial fashion. Producers in each network, or each "circuit," as I call them, think about fashion in distinctly different ways; they face different risks, they define success differently, and they pursue different types of payments.<sup>13</sup> When looking at the same models before them, bookers and clients will see them differently; that is, they will recognize valuable looks in systematically different ways. To navigate these nuanced differences, all producers socialize with each other, watch and imitate one another, and cultivate social ties and friendships that form the basis of the fashion modeling market.

Fashion producers are constantly conversing, circulating gossip by phone, text, and e-mail, gossip that spills out of their offices and studios and into happy hours, dinners, and late-night parties around downtown Manhattan and central London. On more than a few nights I found myself sharing drinks with bookers and models well into the early hours of the morning. "That's part of our job," a makeup artist once told me when I complained that there were too many social events on school nights.

### *The Problem of Pricing Beauty*

Within their editorial and commercial circuits, bookers must figure out which clients prefer which kind of look, and both must determine how much models are worth. How do they determine the price of something as nebulous as a look?

Pricing is a particularly troublesome endeavor for cultural producers, because in most creative industries there is no clear correlation between price and quality. There are no standard price-setting indices that bookers use to figure out the worth of their models' time. A model's fee is contingent upon the meanings that bookers and clients make of his or her look, all of which vary among them and can skyrocket or tank over the course of one season.

The problem of pricing exemplifies a larger quandary faced by cultural producers, and, for that matter, people in any market. It is the problem of uncertainty, the inability to state in advance what one wants.

Modeling is like other "cultural" markets such as art, music, fashion, food, and film, where high uncertainty and inequality are the norm.<sup>14</sup> What makes these industries stand out from traditional sectors such as law, manufacture, and medicine is the exaggerated role of taste in determining value. A piece of art doesn't sell for its function but for its form, and that is largely a subjective matter, dependent upon the whims and sensibilities of buyers, critics, dealers, and the final consumers. In fashion modeling, bookers never know which looks will appeal to clients; meanwhile, clients never really know which models will be most successful in selling their products. This is because consumer demand is fundamentally unknown, a vexing fact of market life that advertisers and market researchers routinely attempt to remedy, but never with much success.<sup>15</sup> As the successful Hollywood screenwriter William Goldman once put it, "nobody knows anything" in a cultural industry. Because "nobody knows" what the next big thing will be, "all hits are flukes," and all flops are a surprise. Amid all of this uncertainty, fashion demands constant product renewal. The modeling market is constantly in flux, with "fresh faces" being "hot" one season and forgotten the next. Fashion is, after all, fundamentally about change.<sup>16</sup>

When faced with high levels of ambiguity—and no easy way to make decisions—producers are likely to turn to each other, relying on things such as gossip, reputation, shared histories, and conventions to make their decisions. All of this socializing and imitation has a cumulative advantage effect in which the "the rich get richer," exaggerating the inequality between the top and the bottom. Spurred by gossiping producers, successful goods accrue more success, while most entrants fail, leaving a wide gap between the winners and the losers.

The success of the few obscures what amounts to meager rewards for most. Linda Evangelista reportedly wouldn't get out of bed for less than \$10,000 at the height of her career in the 1980s, and in 2009, Gisele Bündchen grossed \$25 million in modeling contracts. Yet according to the *Occupational Employment Statistics*, in 2009 models earned an estimated median income of \$27,330.<sup>17</sup> Earnings among models within an agency are enormously skewed, with some models in New York earning over \$100,000 a year and others in debt as deep as \$20,000. Average earnings are nearly impossible to predict, as any model's monthly income can fluctuate wildly. That's because, in addition to being poorly paid, work in the cultural industries is structurally unstable and on a "freelance" or per-project contractual basis. These are, sociologically speaking, "bad jobs" akin to irregular work arrangements in the secondary-employment



sector, such as day laborers and contingent workers who piece together a precarious living.<sup>18</sup> These kinds of jobs require few skills and no formal education credentials, and the work provides no health or retirement coverage.

However, unlike other “bad jobs,” cultural production is rich in cultural status. Though the odds of making it big (or making anything at all) are low, modeling is regarded as very attractive work, especially for women. In American popular culture, modeling is glorified as a glamorous and prestigious career for young women, as evidenced in teen fashion magazines.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the entry criteria are low, which results in overcrowding, with a great deal of struggle for success. Though the probability is slight, the possibility of hitting the jackpot is so deceptively attractive that modeling attracts more contenders than it should, creating a flooded market characterized by a taxing elimination tournament, similar to prizefighting.

To see if they have the right look or not, models are subjected to a systematic process of selection, or “filtering out,” in which their agents arrange auditions or “castings” to meet prospective employers.<sup>20</sup> The job is, in effect, an intense series of job interviews with up to fifteen castings a day during busy seasons in major markets. The very few winners to emerge from the screening process can count their luck twice: once to enter the contest and again to win the prize. Models take these long odds against the clock of aging; from the day they sign up, their window of opportunity to “make it” is closing, especially for women. On average, most modeling careers last less than five years.

We now have the picture of a market that is highly volatile and turbulent, marked by uncertainty, imitation, inequality, and high turnover. Models attempt to embody the look, bookers scramble to find it, and clients chase the prestige of choosing it first. They are all vulnerable to losses as quick and enormous as their winnings, this is especially so for models. What determines if one model will rise to the top or settle at the bottom with the majority? Put another way, how do the goods in this market—the looks—attain value?

A look’s value, I will show, develops out of social interaction among producers in the editorial and commercial circuits of fashion.<sup>21</sup> First, producers socialize within the fashion circuit to get a sense of which models are valued by other producers; they also carefully watch how models are systematically “filtered out” at castings in order to ascertain signals (and there are plenty) of a model’s underlying worth. Top models result from an insular logic of distinction in the editorial world: in any given season,

a set of powerful clients will somewhat arbitrarily champion a young woman (and very rarely a young man), which sets off a chain of positive feedback in the market, thereby creating a “winner” of enormous economic value who is no different from the other candidates in any obvious way, aside from her having been deemed valuable by the right people at the right time.

#### WHY STUDY FASHION MODELS?

Fashion models get a lot of attention. We read about them in popular presses, sensational journalism, historical accounts, and cultural and media studies. They are frequently critiqued as symbols of systemic gender, race, class, and sexual oppression. Yet for all the concern over their many meanings, fashion models have yet to be taken seriously as workers and as cultural commodities.<sup>22</sup> Although new sociological territory, fashion modeling can teach us much about how the realms of culture and economy shape one another.

This book traces the production of value in the modeling market in four stages. Chapter 2 lays out the history and architecture of the modeling market, with its crucial distinctions between the editorial and commercial circuits. Chapter 3 examines the work that models do in their various and often feeble attempts to become winners. We turn in Chapter 4 to the tastemakers, those bookers and clients who together negotiate which looks are valuable. Finally, in Chapters 5 and 6, we will see how cultural ideas about race and gender more broadly shape which bodies are perceived as worthy.

#### *Working It*

It takes work to model. Models do to the extreme what we all do at our jobs and in almost every facet of our social interactions: they *work it*. Chapter 3 examines how models put their best faces forward, project an idealized version of their selves, and succeed or fail depending on their arbitrary appeal to dozens of potential employers. They are part of a growing workforce of “aesthetic laborers,” those workers whose bodies and personalities—the “whole person”—are up for purchase on the market. But unlike most workers, models do this without the guidance of a boss or the security of a safety net.

Though it has cultural cache, modeling is freelance work, meaning it is insecure and unstable. It is also, on the whole, low-wage work. Models



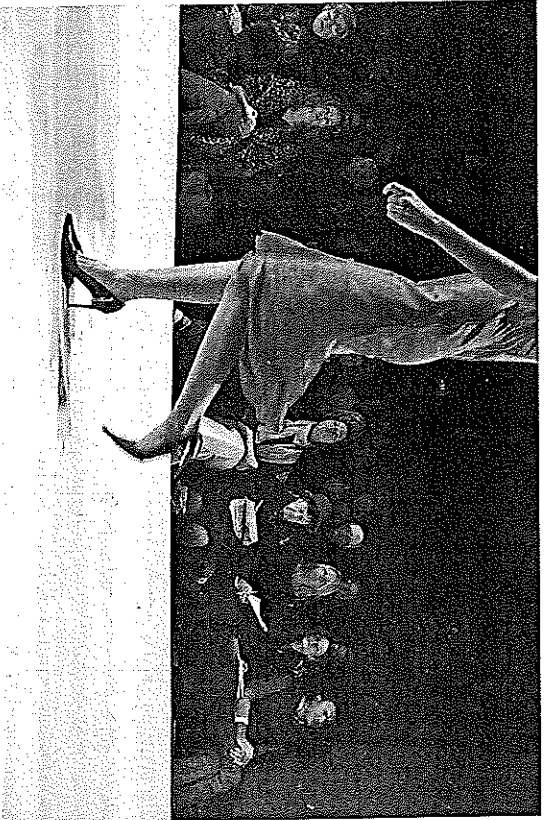


FIGURE 1.2. Front stage of fashion

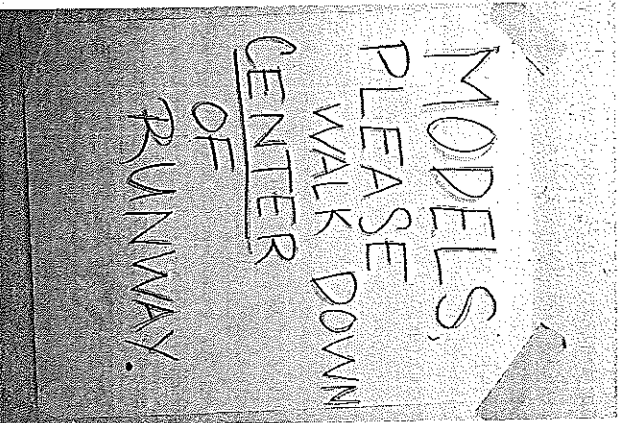


FIGURE 1.3. Backstage of fashion

are part of a growing trend of informalization in the labor market; they navigate their individualized exposure to a ruthless market just like day laborers, domestics, and other casual workers in the expanding informal economy.

*Brokering Culture*

Having observed models up close in their work spaces—from their foot-steps on the catwalk to their relentless diets—the next chapters zoom out to the cultural intermediaries who sell and buy looks. Chapter 4 examines how bookers and clients price models, a process that translates shared sets of cultural values into objective price value.

This translation of cultural into economic value has always been an important part of markets, but it is becoming more and more apparent to sociologists as the creative industries and “soft-knowledge”-intensive industries become central sectors of the economy. In London, for instance, creative industries accounted for about 800,000 jobs in 2007 with about £18 billion annual turnover. In New York the “creative core” of cultural production provided about 309,000 jobs (over 8 percent of all city workers in 2005), second only to London.<sup>23</sup> As of 2011, the fashion industry in New York alone employs 165,000 people and generates \$9 billion in wages, \$1.7 billion in tax revenue, and \$5.5 billion in sales each year, according to the city’s Economic Development Corporation,<sup>24</sup> which is to say that all of these industries matter. These are not marginal or frivolous sectors but are, in fact, huge engines of urban and, indeed, global economies.

The people who work in these industries are part of a new service class of “cultural intermediaries.” They are what sociologist Paul Hirsch (1972) has called “gatekeepers,” functioning as surrogate consumers charged with creating and disseminating aesthetic values, thereby shaping the wider field of possibilities of fashionable consumerist dispositions in the process. They play a crucial, if often an invisible, role in shaping the terrain of pop culture, from advertising designers, magazine editors, pop music producers, fashion designers and buyers, and art dealers.<sup>25</sup>

Even though we don’t see them, bookers and clients wield enormous influence over which looks we come into contact with around the world. But just how do they know which models to filter in and out? What do they imagine consumers want? To answer these questions, we’ll explore in Chapter 4 the cultures of production among bookers and clients, following their interpersonal relationships at the office to their

interconnected social lives that bind them throughout the city and around the world. Their acts of valuation are inescapably rooted in preexisting social categories of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

### *Representing Bodies*

Fashion produces powerful representations of idealized class, gender, race, and sexual identities. Chapters 5 and 6 examine how cultural values of race and gender set the terms for seeing some bodies as being worth more than others, for producers do not come to their jobs as blank slates but come seeped in culture. They draw upon and reproduce entrenched racist and sexist tropes of difference, but they do so unwittingly as they follow institutionalized production routines.

Models do much more than promote the sale of fashion. The model look promotes and disseminates ideas about how women and men *should* look. Fashion images are prescriptions for masculinity and femininity. Gender, we know, is a matter of active “doing,” not mere passive being; so modeling can be thought of as the professionalization of a certain type of gender performance, one that interlocks with race, sexuality, class, and other social positions.<sup>26</sup>

Plenty of scholars from cultural studies, media studies, and feminist and intersectionality theory have analyzed the cultural meanings of fashion images and advertising. Feminist scholars have made the case that images of fashion models represent the objectification of women’s bodies, defining and enforcing normative ideals of feminine beauty that disparage all women, especially working-class and non-white women.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, those women at the top of the display professions constitute “an elite corps deployed in a way that keeps millions of women in line.”<sup>28</sup>

To discuss fashion model images in terms of their effects and patriarchal intent is to deal with one important part of the story. But it leaves out the production processes behind those images. If you were to look at an advertisement for designer clothes, you would not see how little the male model earns relative to the woman posing next to him. When watching a runway show you would miss the age-old tropes of sexuality that designers consider as they dismiss black women for their catwalks. The perfect image on the page of a magazine captures but a single moment in time, effacing the work and the inequalities that lie beyond the frame. If modeling is the professionalization of gender performance, then it is a prime site to see the construction of masculinity and femininity, as well as race, sexuality, and class.

### *Making Markets*

Fashion is an excellent place to see the social side of markets because, as it turns out, how producers socialize with one another is explicitly tied to how they value a model’s look.

Markets are not very social, however, in orthodox economic theory. According to neoclassical economics, markets are made up of self-interested, rational individuals who follow the forces of supply and demand. In the case of those particularly “deviant” or anomalous markets such as art, economists presume fixed personal taste, thereby imposing abstract logics onto a complex social realm, or they ignore these markets altogether as being frivolous peripheral markets, too far from the core economy to be taken seriously.<sup>29</sup> But there is no such thing as an anomalous market. Rather, there are just different types of markets that are organized around particular sets of social relations. Those economists who are breaking away from neoclassical orthodoxy, such as behavioral economists, are making gains in connecting economic decision-making to human and group psychological processes.<sup>30</sup> By contextualizing economic action in its social environment, previously taken-for-granted categories such as price become processes, and values become outcomes of messy negotiations and contested meanings. This book ultimately is about the contested negotiation and social relationships that underlie markets—not just fashion markets or culture industry markets but *all* markets.

### ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE LOOK

To figure out what it means to have a “great look” in the modeling industry, I decided to accept Todd’s invitation to meet with the agents. I arrived at 9:00 a.m. at the Gramercy Park Hotel and stood beneath the marquee, sheltered from a dreary drizzle, awaiting Todd to make my big day. There was already a small gathering of young people—nine teenage girls and three boys and a few of their parents—and when Todd arrived in a raincoat holding a Starbucks cup, we eagerly stood around him in a semi-circle to hear his welcoming remarks.

Todd began with instructions for following him to meet the bookers at a dozen agencies throughout the next two days, and then he cautioned, “You’re all winners just for being here. . . . Just like anything else in life, it’s super-competitive, and it doesn’t come easy. They may spend five minutes talking with you and not really give a response, or

they may glance you over for thirty seconds and then really like you. I don't know. Don't ask me because I won't tell you." At this point a few mothers chuckled from under their wet umbrellas. I heard it as nervous laughter to offset their growing anxiety over what was beginning to sound like a hard day ahead.

"You're all winners" is an obvious prelude to mounting rejection, and it was a taste of things to come in my fieldwork.

Todd arranged meetings with several different modeling agencies, and, among them, the bookers at Metro were the friendliest and most sympathetic (at least initially) regarding my school schedule.<sup>31</sup> Metro offered me a contract outlining two terms, exclusive representation and a 20 percent commission on all of my future earnings. By signing I agreed to be represented exclusively by Metro in New York, and to pay the company a standard commission of 20 percent from my bookings, plus an additional agency fee of 20 percent of my rates that would be charged to my clients. In exchange they agreed to promote and manage my modeling career. In this self-employment arrangement, agencies arrange opportunities for models to work in exchange for a cut of their success, but they are not liable for models' failures. Metro's accountant explained as much when he handed me the contract: "Here's where we don't promise you the moon and the stars, but we'll do our best to get you there." Within six months, my bookers at Metro introduced me to the owner of Scene Management, an agency of comparable size and repute in London. Scene's director offered me a similar contract and an invitation to work with the company in London. Two and a half years would be spent in participant observation, or, more like "observant participation," working for both agencies, during which time I would participate in the full range of modeling work, including five Fashion Weeks, hundreds of castings, and dozens of jobs in every type of modeling work—catwalk shows, magazine shoots in studios and outdoors "on location," catalog shoots, and fittings in the showrooms of Seventh Avenue, New York.

The day I signed, I attended castings to meet clients. Shortly thereafter, I met with a director at Metro and explained my interests in writing a dissertation based on my experiences in the field. After some negotiations, such as keeping the agency and its employees' identities confidential, I began to record observations. The owner of Scene agreed to similar terms. Usually I kept a small notepad tucked in the back of my portfolio and jotted down phrases just after a casting. When most models were changing from high heels into sneakers in the elevator, I was

scribbling down notes. I normally transcribed all field notes within twenty-four hours, ending up with hundreds of pages of documents detailing each day.

As the project progressed, I became frustrated by the opacity of the casting process and how little information was made available to models about crucial decisions in their modeling careers. The terms for models' fees were unclear, and bookers sometimes explicitly instructed me not to discuss my rate with other models on the job, telling me that this was "nobody else's business." To figure out the logics of bookers and clients, I decided to interview them as well.

In my two years of modeling for Metro and Scene, I sat beside bookers at their table in the office, drank with them at their favorite pubs, and hung out with them backstage at fashion shows. As I was nearing the end of the participant observation phase of my research and withdrawing from modeling work, I formally interviewed a sample of bookers, managers, and accountants, speaking to a total of thirty-three employees: twenty-five bookers and six account managers, including two owners, in addition to two office assistants (identified in this book simply as "bookers" or "staff"). I recruited bookers and staff for interviews through my connections with Metro and Scene. These two samples of bookers and managers are representative of the array of staff members that one would encounter at any medium-size boutique agency in New York or London.

I then interviewed a snowball sample of forty models, twenty in New York and twenty in London, evenly split by gender, recruited from jobs and castings. Though there are disproportionately fewer men in fashion than women, I sampled an equal number of men and women for the interviews, because male models are rare voices and have received even less scholarly attention than their female counterparts.

To understand how casting decisions are made, I also interviewed a snowball sample of forty clients working in both cities. I recruited clients—designers, photographers, editors, stylists, and casting directors—whom I met at castings, backstage at fashion shows, or during photo shoots I attended. Thus while not a random sample, the clients in this study, like the models, worked across a wide range of status levels in the market, from middle-market catalog photographers to luxury-brand stylists.<sup>32</sup>

Like all fieldwork, this research required considerable time, which always seemed to be in short supply. From the moment I entered the field to my last few days, a sense of urgency was inescapable, especially

at the agencies. One of my bookers, Ronnie, was often seated at his desk with one hand scribbling onto a notepad, the phone cradled to his ear, and his other hand punching computer keys. Most days I was lucky to receive only one hectic voice mail instructing me to “drop everything” and “rush” across town to a “really important” casting or a last-minute booking. It was often followed by a second, irritation-filled voice mail within ten minutes, reminding me of the importance of the first message.

This made for difficult conditions when scheduling interviews. Models frequently cancelled interviews for last-minute jobs and castings. When it was time to interview one booker in New York, scheduled a week in advance, she bristled into the meeting room ten minutes late and announced, “Mears, you gotta make it quick!” Clients were the most difficult to track down, given their erratic transnational schedules. I conducted one interview with a renowned photographer in the backseat of his chauffeured limousine on his way to London’s Heathrow Airport en route to shoot in the States. But while scheduling proved difficult, I was surprised by the way models, bookers, and clients welcomed me into their offices, homes, and local coffee shops to generously share their time and stories.

This research was also, like modeling itself, physically and emotionally draining. There were daily brushes with embarrassment, humiliation, insecurity, rejection, and, more than a few times, anger. Scrolling through my field notes I am reminded time and again of such discomfords. There was one early morning at a casting for a body cream TV commercial in New York’s SoHo neighborhood—a couple of hours before I would enter a graduate seminar room on social theory—where I was asked to dance around a film set in short shorts alongside two models who looked perhaps sixteen years old. After a pause in the dancing, the casting director asked the two models to stay for another round of auditions—“Except you,” she quietly told me. “You can go.”

Standing outside on the street a moment later, I scribbled in my notepad: *Feeling too old for this, wanting to quit. Almost there.*

But the fieldwork lasted over two years, far longer than I ever expected, partly because, like the models I interviewed, I couldn’t seem to find a good time to quit. There were certainly dozens of moments, such as the body cream casting, when I wanted nothing more than to walk away from the project. And yet I too became seduced by the glamour of it all. I began to chase what Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin (2005) have referred to as the “Big Job.” I found myself excited with each new book-

ing and disappointed with each unresponsive casting. I became suddenly nervous when I met famous fashion photographers. I was actually giddy when I got the late-night phone call confirming that I would walk in a major Fashion Week show. I could not find a good time to quit the research because it always seemed like I was just around the corner from scoring my own Big Job. I signed up for this project with the goal of deconstructing a glamour industry, but I would find myself awestruck once inside. As an “observing participant,” I witnessed and also *felt* the modeling market from a vantage point rarely accessible to academics.<sup>33</sup> This book follows the rich ethnographic tradition of accessing the social world from within, complete with all of the wonder and brutality of living through it.

#### *Terms of the Market*

A few definitions of fashion modeling parlance are in order. The main activities in which models participate are “tests,” “go-sees,” “castings,” and “bookings.” When a client, such as a department store, fashion designer, or a studio that shoots for various catalogs, is available to see models, it is called a “go-see.” A “casting” is an appointment to meet with a client who has asked to see models for an upcoming job. When a go-see or a casting is a “request,” clients invite specific models, as opposed to a “cartle call” casting, to which all available models in town are invited. Clients typically sort through models from the first casting and invite only a few to return to a “callback” or “fit-to-confirm” casting.

Typically at go-sees and castings the client will greet the model, either one-on-one or in a group setting. Models show their “book,” or portfolio of pictures, and give the client a “composite card,” which has on it a sample of their pictures, their name, the name of their agency, and their statistics. A model’s “stats” include height, suit or dress size, measurements (bust, waist, and hips for women; waist, shirt, and inseam for men), shoe size, and hair and eye color. If interested, the client may take the model’s picture, have him try on a sample of clothing, take his picture with a Polaroid camera, and, for runway bookings, ask to see his cartwalk the length of the room and back. The model will usually leave a card with the client, bid farewell, and be thanked for coming. It is a quick, informal meeting.

After the casting, if the client wants to book the model for the job, then the client calls the model’s booker to place the model on “option”

for the job. An option is an agreement between the client and the booker that enables the client to place a hold on the model's future availability in rank order of interest, from first (strong) to third (weak) option. Similar to options trading in finance markets, the option gives the buyer the right, but not the obligation, to make a purchase. In the modeling field, options enable clients to place a hold on the model's time for twenty-four to forty-eight hours before he or she is actually confirmed for the booking. Unlike finance options trading, model options come free of cost; they are a professional courtesy to clients and also a way for agents to manage models' hectic schedules.<sup>34</sup>

"Tests" are photo shoots set up for the explicit purpose of making pictures to put in models' and photographers' books. "Bookings" are jobs such as photo shoots and runway shows. All of a model's daily activities, from testing to waiting in long casting lines, advance the goal of booking jobs. There are three main types of jobs: photo shoots for magazines, print advertisements, and catalogs; fashion shows on the catwalk, including Fashion Week; and showroom and "informal" fit modeling, where models try on garments in a designer showroom for a private audience of buyers looking to stock the racks at department stores and boutiques throughout the country.

*The Agencies: Metro and Scene*

Metro in New York and Scene in London are good sites for this research because they are both medium-size "boutique" agencies that rank among the roughly eighty or so "key" agencies around the world.<sup>35</sup> They are well-established agencies in the field, each with a broad representation of models who work in all sectors of the fashion industry, from high-end catwalk shows and campaigns to mass-market catalogs. Each agency has a handful of editorial superstars, one or two "supermodels," and a steady base of commercial models. At Metro, and to a lesser extent at Scene, models also work in informal and fit modeling, where the gritty production work happens and models try on newly manufactured clothes in an informal setting, such as a designer's showroom on Sixth Avenue.

Other "full-service" agencies in New York and in second-tier markets throughout the world represent a broader spectrum of looks, such as lifestyle, plus-size, petite, or ethnic models.

Metro has been in the business over two decades, represents over three hundred models (two hundred women and one hundred men), and employs over twenty people (primarily bookers and managers, with a

	Metro Models, New York	Scene Models, London
Size	Models: 200 women, 100 men 16 bookers, 3 accountants	Models: 100 women, 50 men 8 bookers, 2 accountants
Debt	Women: < \$15,000 Men: < \$2,000	Women: < \$6,000 (=£3,500) Men: < \$900 (=£500)
Models' Income	Women: \$50,000-100,000 Men: \$30,000-50,000	Women: \$28,000-\$80,000 Men: < \$10,000
Annual Billings	Several million dollars	Several million dollars
Boards	Editorial; Women ("Money"); Runway; Men Boards	Women; Men Boards

FIGURE 1.4. Metro and Scene at a glance

few accountants and assistants). Roughly seventy models are in town and available for work at any given moment. Scene has twenty-five years in the business, with about one hundred and fifty models on the books, one hundred women and fifty men. Halfway through this research, however, Scene discontinued its men's board, replacing the fifty men with women models, an economically prudent decision, as we'll see in Chapter 6. Scene staffs ten employees, including accountants. Bookers expect roughly twenty to thirty models to be in town, depending on the season.

Despite Metro's larger size, both Metro and Scene earned a similar gross sum of several million a year in gross billings (based on the 2006 dollar-pound exchange rate). While structurally similar, the agencies differ in size, a fact that reflects, in part, their respective locations in the fashion industries of New York and London.

*The Cities: London and New York*

Fashion, like other culture industries, happens in cities, because cities enable the kind of social interaction necessary for culture industries to function.<sup>36</sup> Modeling clusters into the major "fashion cities" of New York, London, Milan, and Paris, where biannual Fashion Week designer collections receive global media coverage. Beyond these "top-tier" fashion cities, dozens of competing cities use fashion as a means of city and nation branding to position themselves as competitive cosmopolitan



centers. A 2008 *New York Times* survey estimated 152 Fashion Weeks worldwide and counting, from Berlin, Antwerp, and Stockholm to Dubai, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, and Zimbabwe.<sup>37</sup> Geographer Elizabeth Currid argues in her 2007 book *The Warhol Economy* that a global city's competitive advantage lies in the size and success of its creative industries. This makes fashion models literally a way for cities to put their best face forward in the global economic order.

Although they are both global cities and fashion capitals, London and New York vary in their type of fashion market. As a result of post-World War II development trajectories, London fashion today is a weak commercial enterprise with a stronghold in creativity and artistic concerns of "fashion for fashion's sake," while New York is widely regarded as a business center for fashion commerce.<sup>38</sup> The geographic divide between fashion-as-art and fashion-as-commerce maps onto the two circuits of the fashion market, the editorial and commercial circuits. New York is a place where models seek commercial success, while London is understood as a creative hub, an opportune place for editorial models to amass prestige. While these distinctions are crude in practice—New York offers editorial opportunities just as London provides lucrative commercial work—they orient players' understandings of the global modeling market. Studying both New York and London, with their opposing orientations toward prestige and profit, enables a fuller picture of the commercial and editorial circuits.

#### GLAMOUR AND SOCIOLOGY

Over the next three years, while I'm "working it" as a participant observer and collecting dozens of stories from industry insiders, Liz and Sasha radically divert from their similar starting points. One of them will be jolted into the upper middle class, earning \$5,000 a day in catalog shoots and purchasing a home for her family, paid for in cash. She will rent a spacious apartment in downtown Manhattan, where she will study acting and prepare to enroll in college courses at an elite university in New York. The other young woman will end up broke and will move back home with her parents. She will forgo college entirely and work in showroom jobs for a few hundred bucks an hour here and there before training to become a yoga instructor. And though one of these two young women will advance economically on her journey through the modeling market, neither has a particularly glamorous story to tell about her work.

This is what glamour is all about—artifice and deception. If advertising is to entice consumers to purchase fashion and beauty products, then it is imperative that consumers do not see the amount and the kind of work it takes to promote their products. As Raymond Williams (1980) has noted, the qualities of most consumer objects are themselves not enticing enough to warrant purchase. They must be validated, he argues, "if only in fantasy, by association with personal and social meanings which in a different cultural pattern might be more directly available." This cultural pattern can be best described as magic.<sup>39</sup> Advertising is a magic system, and models are its magic wands.

Any magical act presupposes and produces a collective unawareness—ignorance, really—of its own arbitrariness.<sup>40</sup> Collective recognition of the look requires a collaborative misrecognition of its production, as though the look existed independently all along. So magical are cultural products that we see them in the realm of the spiritual, beyond the scope of scientific analysis. "You can't explain why someone likes you or not," a young male model from Paris once told me in London, regarding why clients choose him among the many other models for hire. "It's like, why do you like chocolate or coconut? You know, it's just in you. You can't explain it."

The sociological bet—and the stakes of this book—contends that, in fact, you *can* explain it. Beauty is neither in the model nor in the beholder. The value of a look lies in social relationships and cultural meanings that can be studied systematically. There is, in fact, an economy to this quality called beauty that models are thought to possess. Beauty, I will show, has a specific logic.

To unearth the relations of production in a glamour industry is to do the work of demystification. Sociology does this digging, this unearthing, of organizations and players and conventions that when put together constitute the social world. Sociologists demystify what may seem like miracles into mundane human interactions. In this way we are like hecklers in a magician's audience, the spoilers who reveal the backstage tricks, thus rendering perfect sense to what would be otherwise enchanted.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately we show the production of what appears natural. And this, I will argue, is *precisely* what gender, race, and class distinctions are—socially produced categories of difference that appear to be normal and natural ways of dividing up the world but are in fact products of a cultural system that legitimates and reproduces them.

In what follows I redirect the charmed gaze off of the glamour, moving out and away from the enchanted look in four analytic steps, beginning

with the fashion field and models' labor practices within it, moving on to the tastemakers' strategic networking, and ending with cultural norms of race and gender. This book is an invitation to go behind the curtain to discover the clandestine process in the making of a fashion model, for as Erving Goffman said, the vital secrets of a show are visible backstage.

## CHAPTER 2

## Economics of the Catwalk

By any measure, JD had a great first year as a model. As a sophomore university student living in his hometown of Manchester, UK, he caught the train to Kings Cross Station every week or so to shoot a booking arranged by his high-fashion modeling agency in London. He was twenty years old and making more in a month that he had earned all his life in part-time retail jobs. His first booking was a high-fashion campaign that paid £10,000 for one day's work. Not bad, considering he didn't even want to model, but he had gone along with his friends into a scouting competition.

JD saw modeling as a steady cash flow requiring minimum effort. It was "easy money," a term I heard often as models spoke of what appeared to be an extraordinarily favorable effort-to-rewards ratio, at least when looked at in the short term. Easy money just kept streaming into JD's bank account. He began to turn down campaigns that paid "only" £800 a day—"Stupid!" he says now. He might complain of such a paltry rate to his booker "Can't you just get me another campaign?" to which his booker would patiently explain, "Campaigns are hard to get, JD, not everyone gets them," but to no avail. JD measured a job's worth in monetary terms alone, and he couldn't get his head around working for "free".

"You know like they'd call me up like 'You got *Dazed and Confused!* You have to do it!' Well how much does it pay? Nuthin'? I'm not