AFTER COUTURE:  
CRISIS, COLLAPSE, AND THE FUTURE OF FASHION

by

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Abstract

“Like art itself, haute couture plunged into a process of ruptures, escalations, and profound changes that related it to the avant-garde,” writes Gilles Lipovetsky in *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy* (1987). Parisian haute couture, or high dressmaking, has long been regarded as a hallmark of the fashion industry. By contrast, ready-made garments—which prefigure modern fast fashion—are antithetical to haute couture’s association with original design and handmade craftsmanship. In response to this crisis of originality, the industry had to mobilize a legal arsenal to protect itself against plagiarists and imitators. As such, this thesis interrogates couture’s crisis of originality in the context of the industry’s litigation against fashion copies and counterfeits in the 1920s American fashion scene. Given this textured history, I maintain that the current crisis underpinning the industry is less a result of design copyright issues, as it has always had to safeguard itself against such counterfeits. Instead, I contend that the real crisis is the hyper-accelerated production mode that fast fashion champions. Against this backdrop, my thesis considers how this crisis of acceleration blurs the line between craftsmanship and design, as both processes undergo digitization, and fashion becomes increasingly dislocated from its late nineteenth-century roots in couture. However, the emergence of prêt-à-porter is a modern uprising against the hegemonic tradition of Parisian haute couture, and a prelude to modern fashion. Even though Anzia Yezierska’s *Salome of the Tenements* (1922) and Frédéric Tcheng’s *Dior and I* (2014) record a cultural structure of Parisian haute couture as the private, privileged space on one hand, and prêt-à-porter as the public space of modern, democratic fashion on the other. Yet, both texts deconstruct the false dichotomy between haute couture and ready-to-wear through democratizing fashion. This thesis argues that these two works of art invert couture’s cultural hierarchy and that modern fashion requires this
other mass-produced realm for itself to exist as someplace special. Thus, for couture to maintain the artistic, the haute, it needs to create its own *other*. Therefore, these texts not only disrupt fashion through avant-garde creation but also intervene in a broader conversation *after couture*.
Lay Summary

This thesis is a story that fashion keeps telling about itself—of its need to keep modernizing, and that fashion paradoxically needs the other for it to survive after couture. The novel and film consider the drivers of speed and disrupters of modern fashion that contribute to the industry’s crisis and collapse inherent since the 1920s. There is a blurring of the lines or collapsing boundaries between couture and ready-to-wear; the handmade and the machine-made. If one defines fashion by its history and origin as haute couture, accordingly, what is fashion’s new role in this changing digital landscape? The industry’s biannual Fashion Weeks are a prime example of both the speed at which fashion is moving and how couture is becoming increasingly more about other things: from the coveted front-row seat, the overlapping show schedules, and of course, the torrent of tweets and Instagram feeds. Fashion, indeed, is in crisis.
Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Sandy Young.
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*Soli Deo gloria.*
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After Couture: An Introduction

Fashion was conquered . . . by a modern revolutionary logic; it had its discontinuities, its infatuation with newness, but also its excommunications, its rivalries, the factional struggles that are endemic to the world of creators.


Fashion’s Exodus: A Background

Short-form media like TikTok and hourly newsfeed updates create an impression of an industry out of control—with couture in peril, ubiquitous crisis, and an overall outlook of collapse. In October 2015, *The New York Times*, *The Cut* (fashion and culture section of *New York Magazine*) and industry rag, *Women’s Wear Daily* all ran editorials highlighting a central concern of the industry: is fashion moving too fast? The exodus of seminal designers such as Raf Simons from Dior, Alber Elbaz from Lanvin, and Alexander Wang from Balenciaga in 2015 signaled a significant shift in the industry’s current climate. These editorials stressed that the lightning speed in which fashion is moving—both in terms of consumption and production—is killing creativity and resulting in burn-out for fashion designers. Speed, of course, is no stranger to fashion; designers, editors, and executives are always thinking six months ahead. However, the speed at which fast fashion—with its trend replication and increasingly rapid production cycles—is moving sends the entire industry into a hyper-accelerated mode. As such, this dizzying cycle, driven by its hypebeast culture, is a cause for concern for many industry insiders.

To be sure, this crushing workload is impossible for most designers. Nevertheless, the late Karl Lagerfeld—who creatively helmed Chanel, and whose prolific career defined modern luxury fashion—cautions in a *Women’s Wear Daily* interview: “If you are not a good bullfighter, don’t enter the arena.” Yet, other prominent fashion designers, such as Raf Simons during his
stint as Dior’s Creative Director, weigh in on the warp speed in which fashion is moving. In the same WWD interview, Simons notes that: “When you do six shows a year, there’s not enough time for the whole process,” he explains. “Technically, yes—the people who make the samples, do the stitching, they can do it. But you have no incubation time for ideas, and incubation time is very important.” The aforementioned articles in the fashion press articulate the anxiety about fast fashion’s effect on the industry: warp speed is the new black, and fashion designers are burning out because the acceleration within the industry comes at a high cost of this incubation period, as Simons points out.

Against this backdrop, this thesis considers how this crisis of acceleration blurs the line between craftsmanship and design, as both processes undergo digitization, and fashion becomes increasingly dislocated from its late nineteenth-century roots in couture. As a result, not only are the lines blurred, but the definition of couture is collapsing in and of itself. As production and consumption fashion cycles speed up, driving a frenetic spectacle and demand for new ideas, resulting in a pervasive burn-out and overdrive that underpins the fashion industry across various channels. In other words, the rise and speed of ultra-fast fashion, coupled with the hyper-accelerated demand and production cycles, is killing haute couture.

In arguing for the sartorial significance of these works, I suggest that Anzia Yezierska’s *Salome of the Tenements* (1922) records a cultural structure that is iterable, and easily taken up by later observers of the same sartorial scene, notably, Frédéric Tcheng’s, *Dior and I* (2014). These works of art are textual and visual representations of not only how their protagonists strive to emancipate themselves and their work from the cultural legacy of couture, but that these literary and cinematic accounts insofar intervene in a broader cultural conversation surrounding the crisis and collapse of the modern fashion industry. Likewise, this thesis contends that these
works of art illustrate the crisis of couture’s collapse that is internal to the fashion industry across decades and generations. Specifically, the novel and film feature a pair of modern designers that perform a reciprocal aesthetic: Sonya Vrunsky, on one hand, seeks to emancipate couture, making “beauty accessible for all,” while Raf Simons, on the other, strives to emancipate couture from what it has become—a cultural product of a hyper-accelerated industry, driven by out-of-control demand and upended production cycles of fast fashion.

**After Couture: Democratizing Fashion**

As a firm testament to the crisis and collapse of couture, there are only two French couture houses left in Paris: Chanel and Dior. Narrowing in on the fashion texts in this archive, Anzia Yezierska’s sartorial fiction, *Salome of the Tenements* (1922) and Frédéric Tcheng’s fashion documentary, *Dior and I* (2014) this thesis attempts to address the crisis that disrupts the modern couture industry. At first glance, the two works of art appear diametrically opposed as respective mediums in fiction and film; at different points in history, and bookends in the early and late twentieth centuries. Yet a closer look reveals a similar set of conflicts and compromises that unfold.

In a climate where French couturiers, notably Paul Poiret, were mobilizing a legal arsenal against the burgeoning American ready-to-wear market in the 1920s fashion scene, both Chanel and Dior, in fact, allowed wholesale copying of their original couture designs for the mass market. Perhaps ironically, designers such as Poiret (whom Yezierska references in her novel), who hired lawyers to protect their work ended up languishing; while designers like Chanel and Dior, who embraced an open fashion, and did not pursue legal action against copying, in fact, flourished. This leads us to consider what these texts are suggesting about the false dichotomy between prêt-à-porter and haute couture.
Even though Yezierska’s novel and Tcheng’s film are published and produced far from each other, and grapple with different manufacturing and production realities, they both create a world of a designer who champions the democracies of fashion. Specifically, the titular protagonist of Yezierska’s fiction is a forward-thinking designer who debuts a little black dress that records a new mode of production in fashion’s history: prêt-à-porter. Expanding on this, I suggest that Sonya Vrunsky’s little black dress prefigures Chanel’s LBD, which revolutionized fashion in 1926 with its debut.

Taken together, Chanel and Dior represent the two couture houses that engage with shifting consumer demand and contemporary technology. The fashion text and film both position themselves amidst this crisis, and work through their relationships with machine and handmade manufacturing. Yezierska’s novel, on one hand, deconstructs the notion that couture needs to be original, which is made evident in the production of prêt-à-porter. On the other hand, fashion critic, Elizabeth Hawes claims that America [in the 1930s] is “the only country in the world which can produce garments in masses. Any woman in America can buy a Chanel dress for whatever amount she has to spend.” In this manner, Hawes defines prêt-à-porter fashions as a middle-class copy of style, linking it to Chanel’s revolutionary logic, underlining that “Chanel is a style. A mode becomes demoded, [but] style never does” (Hawes 120).

To be sure, Chanel/Sonya’s little black dress which revolutionizes fashion in the 1920s continues to rally a democratic fashion throughout the decades. Chiefly, the pages of Yezierska’s work record something that is in the fashion moment that is iterable, and easily taken up by later observers of the same scene. Most notably, Chanel/Sonya’s radical legacy of redressing couture is evident at the latter part of the century, in Tcheng’s Dior and I (2014). Both artefacts discuss the democratization of fashion that cuts between couture and fast fashion: prêt-à-porter.
similar fashion, Raf Simons, ready-to-wear designer, steps into the world of couture and disrupts the industry through his modernization of Dior. Simons seeks to emancipate couture from the crisis of speed and disrupts the fashion industry with his revolutionary goal of creating a modern fashion that offers a sustainable luxury. This recalls Chanel/Sonya’s revolutionary goals of dressing thousands of women with a widely repeated fashion that starts from luxury.

Haute couture’s privileging of the exclusive appears to be antithetical to the readymade clothing which flooded the mass-market, threatening the integrity and fabric of the fashion industry, yet I suggest that couture has to make this other mass-produced realm for itself in order to exist as someplace special. To be sure, for couture to maintain the artistic, the haute, it needs to create its own other. Moreover, Charles Frederick Worth, as the founder of haute couture, also made a ready-to-wear line. In addition to his collection of couture gowns, he also made prêt-à-porter dresses and accessories. This leads us to questions the relationship and distinction between haute couture and the ready-to-wear. Perhaps these categories are not as distinct as we think, given the fact that readymades and couture are historically linked at their origin. In other words, couture incorporates ready-to-wear at its establishment, instead of exiling this modern mode of production. Read together, the chosen fashion text and film demonstrate that trying to find the middle path is, indeed, internal to modern fashion. In other words, I contend that prêt-à-porter is a viable alternative to fast fashion (prefigured by readymade clothing) on one hand, and couture on the other.

Given this premise, my thesis argues that underpinning Simons’ modern revolutionary logic is the crisis of acceleration, as a result of the rampant copying and mass-production in fast fashion. Viewed in this context implies that at the heart of both the film and novel are the crises of speed and originality; which are linked at this epicenter, and therefore, analogous to the
production modes of haute couture and prêt-à-porter. Therefore, ultimately both Sonya and Simons disrupt the industry in different ways—as in the cases of both the film and the novel—championing the democratization of fashion through this middle road that cuts between couture and fast fashion, in an industry after couture.

**Theorizing Fashion: After Couture**

Yezierska published *Salome of the Tenements* in 1921, five years before Chanel debuted her little black dress in 1926. Nevertheless, behind the seams of Yezierska’s sartorial text lie a fictional prototype which prefigures the little black dress that revolutionizes fashion. Building on this, Sonya/Chanel’s little black dress effectively disrupt the fashion industry as an art object that extends beyond the fictional space. Or, as Armen Avanessian has suggested, seemingly rallying the novel’s fashion rhetoric: “We are not just living in a new time or accelerated time, but time itself—the direction of time—has changed. We no longer have a liner time, in the sense of the past being followed by the present and then the future. It’s rather the other around: the future happens before the present time arrives from the future” (197). Therefore, Sonya/Chanel’s little black dress is not only revolutionary because of its emergence during the era of the New Woman as a harbinger of modern fashion, but also because it embodies modernity itself as a signpost of the future; not as a work of art that imitates life, but as life imitates art. Thus, the little black dress not only revolutionizes fashion in the 1920s, but also demonstrates fashion itself is revolutionary.

Building on this cyclical temporality, Ulrich Lehmann asserts in *Tigersprung: Fashioning History* (2000), fashion has the ability not only to reflect social change but is a modernizing force in its own right. According to Lehmann, a leaping tiger (a metaphor he borrows from Walter Benjamin) can be used to distinguish fashion as the cultural object that
alters our perception of history, as clothing has the agency to wield history. This is where I stage my intervention, to adopt Lehmann’s *Tigersprung* to read dress in my chosen fashion text and film. What is striking about Lehmann’s *Tigersprung*, is how he uses this metaphor to play with the concept of time. This thesis contrasts the involved process of couture creation with the crisis of acceleration in fast fashion production. In the slowing down and speeding up, Lehmann’s *Tigersprung* offers a helpful framework to read the different modes of fashion production, to further contextualize the little black dress with the broader cultural movement in fashion history, the rise of ready-to-wear.

Relatedly, in *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (2014), Elizabeth Wilson points out the significance of the 1920s as the birth of democracy, beauty, fashion, and consumerism—a shift from the prewar culture of restraint—and underpinned by the new economic, social, and technological progress coincided with the massive changes the fashion industry underwent during this modernist period’ (79). Relatedly, Lehmann notes that “the past is activated for the present and, significantly, in fashion design the present very quickly aligns itself with its own past. In clothes the latest trend is often regarded as passé the very moment it reaches a wider audience” (309). Concerned with the temporality of the fashion cycle, art historian T’ai Smith suggests that “The Trend—this phenomenon that subtends every aspect of contemporary politics, society, culture—is not especially specific to the present ‘online mind’” (191). In contributing her definition of the concept of trends, Smith builds on Paul Nystrom, who “mobilized the language of finance to discuss fashion trends and market cycles” (193). Chiefly, the business and marketing professor suggested in his published work, *Economics of Fashion* (1926) that “one could compare the movement of stocks with hemlines” (193). Interestingly,
Nystrom’s volume went to press the same year Chanel created the little black dress and
American Vogue published her iconic interview, declaring a new era in fashion.

The questions that arise from, and the anxiety of influence surrounding the 1920s fashion
scene are relevant today. Ultimately, given the industry’s current climate of digitization,
automation and acceleration, what are we losing when we consider the modernization of haute
couture? Are we losing the craft in couture, and how does this shape the fashion industry and
shift the role of the fashion designer? Along with disrupted timelines, the temporality of the trend
itself is called into question, as fashion critic and journalist Cathy Horyn has suggested that we
are dwelling in a post-trend era. In her insightful NYT article, “The Post-Trend Universe,” Horyn
assesses that “the way women dressed was governed by trends. But for lots of reasons, mostly to
do with economics and, inevitably, the Internet, the industry has moved away from that model.”

Taken together, these movements suggest the significance of 1920s as a pivotal cultural
moment in fashion—and the sartorial significance it has on the industry’s current crisis and
collapse. As such, I suggest that the 1920s ready-made, mass-produced market is a prelude to the
fast fashion industry today. Starting at this point in fashion history will illustrate the crisis
inherent in fashion from the first, which merely repeats the crisis of originality that arouse after
couture. Starting at the 1920s and looking at Chanel’s little black dress, dramatized by Anzia
Yezierska’s sartorial fiction, and contrasting the revolutionary aspect of Chanel’s language of
fashion with Raf Simons’ modern interpretation of couture cinematized in Frédéric Tcheng’s
frenetic spectacle, Dior and I (2014) to demonstrate how these eras are not only signposts of
each another, but in fact, couture’s crisis that was inhered from the first, repeats itself again in
this contemporary climate. In particular, Raf Simons’ failure to emancipate haute couture from a
hyper-accelerated timeline demonstrates the breaking point of the couture industry, that is upended by fast fashion’s out of control demand cycles.

More broadly, this thesis explains how the traditional trickle-down effect of haute couture has been conquered by a modern revolutionary logic, driven by speed, technology, and social media. Further linking this cultural development to the broader premise to demonstrate that we are not only post-trend but are slouching towards an era of post-Fashion. As such, the pervasiveness of fast fashion—both as a conspicuous driver of speed and disrupter of haute couture—creates a phenomenon where garments are being manufactured in overdrive, upending the fashion system, ultimately leading to the industry’s crisis and collapse. In other words, couture’s crisis that was inherent from the first, repeats itself again in this contemporary climate.

**Couture in Crisis: Fast Fashion and its effect on Haute Couture**

For a century, Parisian haute couture was the incarnation of the exclusive. Traditionally guarded by the most stringent of fashion sectors, Parisian haute couture was exclusively a French cultural product. As a legally protected institution, a specific set of rules and requirements was set for a fashion designer to be considered a couturiere, and for their work to be considered couture. Accordingly, designers that traditionally do not fit this definition were not invited into couture’s inner circle. Like couture itself, the atelier houses a strict hierarchy: the Paris-based haute couture workrooms are organized by specialization, known as *flou* (dresses), or *tailleur* (tailoring). Further, these ateliers are helmed by premières, or head seamstresses, who lead multiple teams and report directly to the couturière. The fashion house is charged with the requirement of crafting two haute couture collections per year, and each collection comprises a minimum of twenty-five distinct looks. The fashion calendar moves six months ahead: the
Fall/Winter haute couture is typically presented ahead of the season in July; and the Spring/Summer collection graces the runways in January, during the biannual Fashion Week.

By contrast, the influx of fast fashion, with its speed and instant gratification, invades the couture industry and builds acceleration across different channels. While readymade clothing contributed to an accelerated mode of production in the 1920s, fast fashion cycles take it one step further by feeding hyper-accelerated consumer demand up to the minute. Specifically, it is this phenomenon that drives the industry’s collapse, where production timelines supersede design incubation, resulting in the burnout of fashion designers who cannot keep up with the chaos, hype, and torrents of tweets. Also referred to as “McFashion,” fast fashion is analogous to fast food in the fashion industry. As new styles “swiftly supersede the old,” fast fashion retailers rapidly reproduce runway designs for the mass-market, making the latest trends widely available at an affordable price point (Becker-Leifhold 16). As new merchandise drops weekly, this fast fashion approach to copycat designs and offshore manufacturing ramps up clothing production cycles and consumer purchasing patterns, creating a “throwaway culture” that comes at the high cost of craftsmanship, quality, environmental and social concerns (20).

Traditionally, haute couture leads the fashion industry with a trickle-down effect to fast fashion. Haute couture, characterized by high dressmaking techniques, exclusively handmade by the atelier, showcases seasonal collections twice a year during Fashion Week: fall/winter in July and spring/summer in January. By contrast, fast fashion empires such as H&M and Zara release new off-the-rack styles on a weekly basis, disrupting the established fashion calendar by creating fifty-two micro cycles, further perpetuating a “make-and-waste” paradigm with their factory-made garments (Muthu 3). As fast fashion floods the industry it not only accelerates the industry but ultimately creates an inversion. This inversion is crucial, as I argue that fast fashion not only
upends the industry, but the speed at which it is produced also creates a hyper-acceleration which changes the whole fashion system. Couture is forced to bow down to the rapid production cycles that fast fashion champions, as Simons previously notes, there is a lack of “incubation” time, where the automated creation of clothing surpasses the speed at which designers can conceptualize new ideas.

While the rupture of fast fashion dislocates the tradition of haute couture, this thesis will illustrate that this crisis is, in fact, indicative of a hyper-accelerated mode of production cycles, driven by accelerated consumer demand. This crisis is inherent from the rise of readymades in the 1920s and, consequently, the beginning of the modern fashion industry’s crisis and collapse. As a result, fast fashion disrupts the industry at its core: disrupting the established relationship between clothing design and the manufacturing process. Yet, the emergence of prêt-à-porter, or ready-to-wear, in 1920s America is a modern uprising against the hegemonic tradition of Parisian haute couture, as a prelude to a modern and democratic fashion.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter One investigates couture’s crisis of originality by situating fashion narratives about Parisian haute couture within a larger cultural and historical framework and discusses how America’s interwar emphasis on economic, social, and technological progress coincided with the massive changes the fashion industry underwent during this modernist period. Beginning with an abbreviated overview of fashion’s history: from the inauguration of haute couture by Charles Frederick Worth to the rise of readymade clothing during the interwar years, and the integration of prêt-à-porter as a new mode of production, as fictionalized through Anzia Yezierska’s Salome of the Tenements (1921), whose titular protagonist stands at the forefront of this new mode. In a novel that is indicative of the tension between the original and the copy, the reader is invited to
interrogate couture’s crisis of originality through the main fashion object in the text: the little black dress.

This crisis is further textured by the fact that while some couturiers such as Paul Poiret mobilized a legal arsenal to protect their designs from plagiarism, other designers such as Chanel did not resist the counterfeits of her original designs—which ultimately leads us to question the relationship and distinction between haute couture and prêt-à-porter. Therefore, this thesis aims to position the text in a broader network of fashion’s history in the 1920s, a crucial, yet often overlooked aspect of the novel’s critical engagement. Specifically, Chapter One locates Salome of the Tenements in the history of Chanel, while Chapter Two mirrors Dior and I in the history of Dior to uncover the artists’ message purveyed through these fashion objects: the novel on one hand, and the film on the other.

Chapter Two continues this thread of democratizing couture in Frédéric Tcheng’s Dior and I (2015). Drawing on this, Tcheng’s fashion documentary invites viewer to consider the reciprocal relationships between haute couture and the readymade; the handmade and the machine-made in the context of prêt-à-porter fashions that flooded the industry and conquered couture with their modern revolutionary logic. As the film operates on several levels, this chapter casts light on how technology shifts the role of the modern fashion designer—to that of a stylist who assembles a look, rather than an artist who creates. Based on this premise, the whole fashion production is becoming progressively automated and digitized: from the design process, to manufacturing, to post-production, and the dissemination of desire through social media platforms. Built on this, the fashion documentary also investigates the warp speed in which fashion is moving. In another interview with Cathy Horyn for The Business of Fashion, Simons admits that he is “questioning a lot.” Referring to the now palpable sense that the overheated
runway system has reached a volatile tipping point, he adds that “I feel a lot of people are questioning. We have a lot of conversations about it: Where is it going? It’s not only the clothes. It’s the clothes, it’s everything, the Internet.” As the entire industry undergoes digitization and automation, is couture essentially an outdated mode?

Therefore, the fashion text and film ultimately disrupt the cultural narratives surrounding the industry’s contemporary crisis. Although they appear to be two different fashion objects in different times, they share the same revolutionary goals of democratizing fashion. By addressing the crisis and collapse that is endemic to the industry and the world of creators, they ultimately broaden our understanding of where fashion is, and where fashion is heading. Underpinning the industry’s burnout is the chaos, hype, and machinery that fast fashion proclaims, accelerating the breaking point of couture. In this landscape of hyper-acceleration, the industry is undisputedly leaping towards an era of fashion after couture.
Chapter One
Dressed in Democracy: Disrupting Couture
in Anzia Yezierska’s Salome of the Tenements

In 1926, Chanel creates the iconic little black dress: a style whose daring simplicity revolutionizes fashion. American Vogue hails the innovative design as an instant classic, writing, “The Chanel ‘Ford’ Dress, the frock that all the world will wear” (Lipovetsky 60). Two decades later, Chanel publishes her prewar creative vision in a 1953 interview with Vogue: “I am no longer interested in dressing a few hundred women, private clients; I shall dress thousands of women. But . . . a widely repeated fashion, seen everywhere, cheaply produced must start from luxury.” This new business model which Chanel executes juxtaposes two modes of production within fashion: the ateliers, which cater to the “private [couture] clients”; and the factories, which enable the “cheap [re]productions.” Yet, Chanel highlights a paradox: cheap reproductions “must come from luxury,” which contextualizes the ubiquity of her little black dress. Similarly, this paradox is also at the heart of Anzia Yezierska’s sartorial fiction, as she engages with the rise of prêt-à-porter in the 1920s American fashion scene through the main fashion object in the text, the little black dress. In this manner, Yezierska creates a world of a designer who walks in the middle, championing the democracy of fashion. Through this middle road, the novel illustrates that modern fashion is, indeed, reliant on this mass-produced realm as technology disrupts the industry and fashions the future.

In a collision of haute couture values and readymade rhetoric, Chanel’s little black dress intersects with Sonya Vrunsky’s creative design process in Anzia Yezierska’s Salome and the Tenements (1922). Given the chronological coincidence of Yezierska’s fictional little black dress (1922) and Chanel’s LBD (1926), I suggest that Sonya’s dress can be read as a prototype for its
historical counterpart. Historically, both dresses appear at the same time: a few years after war, in a period of industrialization and democratization. The Sonya model in Yezierska’s sartorial fiction is significant, because it not only dramatizes its historical counterpart Chanel’s little black dress; but insofar disrupts couture through its hybrid dressmaking techniques that rallies the rise of prêt-à-porter as a new mode of production.

In particular, the Sonya model, like Chanel’s Ford dress, interweaves the tensions between haute couture and the readymade. As a designer, Sonya desires a “beautiful plainness that only the rich wear. A dress that looks simple enough for the poor only that it’s different” (Yezierska 169). This democratic design explains the high demand of the little black dress, whose simplicity democratizes fashion by creating a universal style that is widely accessible. Expanding on this, three key scenes in the novel set up the reader to confront the crisis and collapse of couture through the central fashion object of the text—the little black dress—which I suggest intersects with the burgeoning historical rise of American prêt-à-porter and effectively disrupts the Parisian couture industry.

In the first part of this chapter, I illustrate how the novel sets up the dichotomy between haute couture and the readymades through Sonya's initial encounter with couturier Jacques Hollins in his Fifth Avenue atelier. Over and over again, Yezierska’s work appears to reinforce this bipolar divide, by having its titular protagonist violently rally against the ugliness of the readymades on Grand Street. Sonya’s solution to this crisis of trickled-down copies is to seek out an original couture gown, hand-made by couturier in his atelier. By contrast, Hollins’ “exquisite [couture] creations” are likened to works of wearable art by Sonya, who violently protests the “ugliness and gaudiness” of readymade clothing and demands that “democratic beauty be made accessible to all” (Yezierska 74).
However, while the novel repeatedly reinforces the binary between couture and the readymades through Sonya’s focalization, the way Sonya defines democracy of beauty changes as she navigates several sartorial crises pertaining to the issue of the readymades as plagiarists and imitators of haute couture. Notably, after attaining her original couture dress to impress her prospective suitor, an unexpected misprision takes place in Upper East Side businessman and philanthropist, John Manning's office. Moreover, the fact that Manning, a “born millionaire who comes down to the East Side to preach democracy,” misrecognizes a couture creation for a readymade is a pivotal point in Sonya's narrative (30). Underpinning this misprision is the fact that while Sonya finds that luxury expresses itself in its “simpler, more sympathetic line” (169) Manning, by contrast, defines a democratic fashion as the simplicity found in poverty. The novel depicts how, on one hand, Sonya’s pursuit of a “luxurious simplicity” is driven by conspicuous consumption, as she feels “superior to such menials with her Paris gown” when dressed in handmade couture (21). On the other hand, Manning’s vision of the “simple life,” is based on a “naïve” idealization of poverty, as he likes the “working girl in her working dress,” without “artifice to veil the grim lines of poverty” (74). As such, both Sonya and Manning possess a misguided view of an authentic democratic fashion. More importantly, this double misprision effectively deconstructs, or collapses, the false dichotomy between haute couture and the readymades.

Based on this premise, Sonya's creation of the little black dress at the novel’s climax ultimately positions her at the forefront of a new mode of production. While Sonya's first two sartorial crises involve encounters with male figures, Jacques Hollins and John Manning respectively, she independently overcomes her third, and final, sartorial crisis on her own terms. Given this, while Chanel is an icon with her little black dress, I suggest that Sonya is an
iconoclast, driven by her transformation from a conspicuous consumer of fashion to an avant-garde creator. Indeed, what begins as a war for Sonya against readymade garments that are machine-made and sold off the racks at significantly lower prices directs her unprofitable search for a democratic fashion into channelling the daring simplicity of the little black dress. Given this democratic design process, Sonya not only disrupts couture, but rallies a new mode of production. Further connecting this fictional text to the cultural moment, the emergence of prêt-à-porter, or ready-to-wear, in the 1920s fashion scene is a modern uprising against the hegemonic tradition of Parisian haute couture. As a prelude to the democracies of fashion, prêt-à-porter, as a revolutionary style resolves the crisis of the readymades by offering a new mode of production that creates an accessible luxury without compromising on design or craftsmanship.

In a departure from the hegemonic hold of haute couture, what starts as a war against readymades for Sonya, evolves into a revolution of a whole new mode of production: prêt-à-porter. Building on this, I argue that Sonya’s design not only produces a new democratic fashion, but effectively deconstructs the false dichotomy of haute couture and readymades. Couture, insofar, creates its own other to maintain its haute and artistic values. Given haute couture’s etymological association with high dressmaking, prêt-à-porter is viewed as the middle brow of dressmaking, a viable alternative that hinges between one-of-a-kind couture and mass-market readymades. Or, as cultural critic Elizabeth Wilson suggests, prêt-à-porter is the paradoxical intimacy between fashion and modernity because it “hinges between the elitist and the popular” (60). Further, Wilson claims that Chanel’s Vogue interview “announced the death knell for old-style couture” (89). Taken together, Sonya and Chanel’s little black dress expand and challenge the definition of haute couture with its association with the original and the handmade, and ultimately positions prêt-à-porter as the future mode of fashion, which the novel champions.
While literary critics who engage with Yezierska’s sartorial fiction such as Meredith Goldsmith and Katherine Stubbs who narrow in on clothing as a vehicle for class mobility in the sartorial fiction of Anzia Yezierska, I seek to pivot the conversation away from Thorstein Veblen’s thread of conspicuous consumption. More importantly, this maneuver mimics the protagonist’s own shift in thinking and approaches to fashion from one of a consumeristic desire “starving for beauty” to an inspired creator who seeks to democratize fashion. Indeed, Sonya’s little black dress—which I suggest prefigures Chanel’s Ford dress—does champion the values of democratic America, which Lisa Botshon and Catherine Rotternberg have demonstrated insofar how clothing and consumerism serve to Americanize the self-fashioning Jewish immigrant protagonist in the novel. In virtually all fashion and cultural studies scholarship on this novel, the spotlight is cast on categorically reading dress as a tool of self-fashioning in Yezierska’s work. Further, existing scholarship which discusses Sonya’s little black dress against the backdrop of the 1920s scene are filled with accounts of aspirants—women who are coming into the aestheticized world of fashion—and who, accordingly, use the models of consumption and mass production as a stepping-stone into a middle space. In other words, these critical trends read dress as a form of female agency, approaching fashion as vehicle for assimilation to American culture, or even semi-autobiographical, as Yezierska herself was an immigrant writer living in New York, akin to the novel’s titular protagonist. However, few have focused exclusively on analyzing the main fashion object in the text, the little black dress, in the broader context of transatlantic fashion historical developments in 1920s Paris and New York with the modernization of haute couture through the rise of prêt-à-porter as a new mode of production.

In a period of American industrial mass production, relevant accounts surrounding issues of labor and capital in fashion production direct the “Sweatshop Cinderella” theme which many
of the novel’s critics have discussed the dehumanization of the workmanship of the seamstress. Moreover, critics such as Susan Edmunds and Douglas Goldstein have highlighted the important themes of labor and capital in Yezierska’s fashion texts. In particular, Edmunds elaborates on the working girls’ labor culture and how women were “re-assigned various forms of domestic labor to the public sphere to escape oppression and enrich the common lot” (407). Edmunds rightly asserts that this shift “allowed women to assert new forms of leadership and independence under capitalism” (411). While these issues of labor and capital are valuable accounts, however, it is also important to update and expand the conversation to include analysis of how Yezierska’s early work of fiction is not only a sign of the times, but also signposts the modern fashion industry. Chiefly, these critics mimic the novel’s sartorial structure by reinforcing the bipolar divide between haute couture and the readymades. However, how do we reconcile the fact that both haute couture and the readymade are, in fact, made by hand (even if seamstresses are assisted by machines)? Given this premise, my thesis interrogates fashion’s crisis of originality and the dichotomy of these two modes of production that Yezierska initially sets up on one hand; and deconstructs, on the other, at the end of the novel.

My aim here is to position Anzia Yezierska’s Salome of the Tenements (1922) in the broader context of the history of fashion and its cultural moment: to mobilize the language of fashion in Yezierska’s work and expand the analysis of her sartorial fiction to include its impact on the fashion system. Built on earlier, the fictional little black dress foreshadows the revolutionary rise of prêt-à-porter in the 1920s that resolves the crisis of the readymades and democratizes couture. In this manner, Yezierska creates a world of a designer who walks in the middle. Chiefly, in a sea of mass-produced readymades, Sonya creates this modern pastiche, where the machine meets the hand, rather than replacing it. The result is a “plain and beautiful
dress… [that] dances” whose “singing lines” (171) herald a new age of prêt-à-porter in the 1920s era; epitomizing the agility, movement, and momentum that American fashion and modernity demand.


Sonya's initial encounter with couturier Jacques Hollins in his Fifth Avenue atelier demonstrates what French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky terms the "bipolar divide" between haute couture values which the sartorial fiction initially heralds. Hollins’ exquisite couture creations are likened to works of wearable art by Sonya, who violently protests the “ugliness and gaudiness” of readymade clothing. Accordingly, in Sonya's mind, beauty is only seen through the channels of Parisian haute couture. Driven by an impulse to only adorn herself with things that are beautiful, she refuses to “put clothes over her body that strangle [her] with their readymadeness” (27). Expanding this thread, Sonya describes herself to couturier Jacques Hollins as "a girl starving for beautiful clothes," as she bursts into his Fifth Avenue atelier, appealing to his artistry and demanding that he create a couture dress that will express her authentic self, charging it to his wealthy clientele (23).

Haute couture, or high dressmaking, began as a distinctly Parisian cultural product with English couturier Charles Frederick Worth setting up the first couture house in 1858 (Troy 53). Etymologically linked to its craftsmanship, the allure of haute couture lies in its custom fit, and exquisite craftsmanship, reserved exclusively for a discerning clientele. The premium that accompanies each garment reflects an involved process and hours of artisanal labor that goes into crafting each piece. As such, haute couture is a fashion object that embodies the exclusive in its privileging of the hand made, and association with the original design, genuine production, and “exquisite workmanship” (Yezierska 79).
Building on the power structure set in couture, Nancy Troy reports on the hegemony in *Couture and Commerce: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion* (2002), “those were the days when news editors held the front page for the telephoned word from Paris on the height of the hemline and the status of the waist” (Troy 85). Yezierska engages with this moment in fashion history through Hollins’ speech, as she pinpoints the founder of haute couture and the hegemonic effect of the line from Paris: “. . . The business of Paris of my yearly trips for new twists in style. Now fresh things come up in me. We’ll see what Poiret is doing, what Worth is bringing out this season. So many new ideas we’ll get for decoration and costuming from the painters’ exhibitions!” (Yezierska 177).

Given haute couture’s cherishing of the handmade, it is the human element, the couturier’s hand cutting the cloth, the originality, and one-of-kind character of the garment that sets it apart from the machine-made, mass-produced, off-the-rack attribute of the readymade. Chiefly, the human element central to the grand tradition of couture in terms of both design and craftsmanship, as its etymology suggests. According to the *OED*, haute couture, or “high dressmaking,” is tied to craftsmanship: couture occupies the same French root as *coupé* (to cut), gesturing to the sartorial acts that are present in the craftsmanship of couture. Thus, the couturier is quite literally “one who cuts [the cloth].” This definition of dressmaking opens two distinct issues surrounding readymades and haute couture which are crucial to understanding couture’s crisis: “craftsmanship” (the making, workmanship) contrasted with “design” (the ideas, conceptual work). It is crucial to distinguish design and craftsmanship, as they not only open up different categories of (from which different categories of analysis emerge) analysis, but also provide a framework for a nuanced understanding of the industry’s crisis of originality. Craftsmanship has to do with the sartorial acts of production, such as cutting the cloth and
stitching the threads; while the design is associated with sketching or conceptualizing the sartorial object.

In Yezierska’s novel, the bipolar divide between the differences in craftsmanship of haute couture and the readymade is further embodied in the figure of the couturier, Jacques Hollins, whose rise from Division Street tailor to Paris designer can be read as an allegory for the distinct worlds of haute couture and the readymade (17). Yet this allegory is textured by the fact that although the hybridity of Jaky Solomon/Jacques Hollins embodies the tensions of both modes of production, the designer eventually forsakes one for the other, solidified by his rebranding to Jacques Hollins. Hollins seeks to position himself as far away from the “Jaky Solomon [who] struggled blindly in a sweatshop as a designer in the dress trade to create clothes that would voice his love for color and line” (17).

In the previous chapter, “Shopping for Simplicity,” Sonya fails to find “something soft and formed on the lines” and cannot stand “the cheapness of these ready-mades” (15). Her aesthetic vision echoes Hollins’, who in his Division Street days, laments, “Why this futile search for color and fabrics that were only for the rich?” While Hollins continues to operate in old-style couture, reinforcing its hegemony as he caters to an exclusive clientele at his Fifth Avenue atelier: “More and more he was in demand by the difficult, rich customers whose friends had worn gowns of his exquisite workmanship” (79). By contrast, as a designer, Sonya democratizes couture as an author of style, to make beauty accessible to all.

Plagiarists and Imitators: Crisis of Originality

In The Empire of Fashion, French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky writes, “haute couture is without question the most significant institution in modern fashion. No other fashion institution has had to keep on mobilizing a legal arsenal to protect itself against plagiarists and imitators”
Thus, in few institutions outside of art, is the tension between the readymade and the original production as prevalent as in the fashion industry. Lipovetsky describes the “bipolar” divide between handmade couture and the mass-produced readymades that emerged during an era of industrialization. Haute couture, with its elegant lines, luxe fabrics, and characterized by its handmade quality and craftsmanship was not only a distinctive French cultural product, but also a legally protected term and institution, highly guarded by the Chambre Syndicale in Paris. The hallmark of the fashion industry, prized for its handmade element, and elaborate techniques which often include embellishments or intricate embroidery.

Couture’s privileged position relies heavily on its craftsmanship, and cultural assumptions surrounding its exclusive, handmade quality. In the ateliers, the cloth is cut by hand, as its etymology suggests (coupé, couture). In contrast to the high-end, exquisitely crafted garments, readymades are rapidly reproduced designs for the mass-market, making the latest trends widely available at an affordable price point. This readymade approach to copycat designs and automated manufacturing ramps up clothing production cycles and consumer purchasing patterns, creating a sartorial crisis that comes at the high cost of craftsmanship and quality, which Sonya repeatedly points out. By contrast, the “gaudy” readymade garments which flooded the American markets as a result of interwar industrialization, were antithetical to couture’s privileging of a handmade, custom fit, or as Yezierska’s protagonist protests, “I refuse to put clothes over my body that strangle me by their ready-madeness!”

As the novel depicts, Parisian couturiers appropriated the rhetoric of artists, viewing their creations as original works of art. Jaky Solomon muses to Sonya, “Dressing you has been art!” Thus, the language of couture is one that encapsulates the aura of authenticity, aesthetic value, and craftsmanship. As such, since haute couture provided a protected space for extraordinary
time and effort invested in turning creative visions into luxurious wearable works of art, it also had to safeguard against readymade counterfeits. It is important to note that design and craftsmanship issues are two distinct categories in fashion; design process considers the idea or style of the garment, while craftsmanship is the making of the garment. Given haute couture’s privileging of the handmade, this section discusses the originality crisis that the couture industry had to safeguard itself from.

In *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion*, art historian Nancy Troy illuminates this crisis of originality:

> . . . The ways which fashions were generated, celebrated, exploited, and compromised, is a problem that occupied not only fine artists but also those engaged in the production of haute couture. At stake in both domains is the originality, authenticity, and aesthetic aura of the individual act, which are essential to the establishment of any fashion. The problem is readily apparent in confrontation of the authentic object of fashion, the couture dress, for example—which, as mentioned above, is already reproduced from a generic model and adapted to the size and shape of the individual client—its pirated copy, and industrially produced commodity masquerading as original couture. (237)

The fashion industry’s response to this crisis of originality was the formation of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*, an association of Parisian couturiers founded in 1868. The association aimed to legalize haute couture to regulate the counterfeiting of styles. One of its prominent members, Paul Poiret, engaged in a public and extensive legal battle over the piracy of his designs. In fact, in December 1915, he sent a special cable to *The New York Times*, agitating for increased copyright protection:

> PAUL POIRET ASSAILS AMERICAN BUYERS; Issues Diatribe as Profession of Faith of New Dressmakers' Syndicate. "VULGARIZING OUR MODELS" Fifth Avenue Couturiers Accused of Stealing Styles and Clients and Cutting Prices. Special Cable to THE NEW YORK TIMES: December 19, 1915. PARIS, Dec. 18. -- Paul Poiret has just sent to THE NEW YORK TIMES a long document, signed "Le Syndicat de Defense de la Grande Couture Francaise," which he designates as the new organization's "profession of faith." Without alluding to the war, which is the real reason for reducing the couture market to a
minimum the profession of faith proceeds in amazing fashion to blame all of its troubles on America.

Poiret, with much fanfare, mobilized a legal arsenal to guard the tradition of haute couture. Although Poiret was savvy in appropriating the rhetoric of originality to make his claim, he failed to understand the commercial realities of couture that requires the other mass-produced realm to survive. Yet in the backlash against Poiret’s litigation, issues surrounding ownership and protection of intellectual property rights questioned the degree to which creative labor can be owned and monopolized. According to IPR law, it is not only designers that create designs, but legal formulations that have power to influence designs by defining what is protectable.

By contrast, unlike Poiret, Chanel did nothing to resist the wholesale copying of her couture designs, whose style gave aesthetic expression in the industrial and commodity character of the readymade in a manner antithetical to Poiret. With much foresight, she grasped that the industry was going through a crucial period of transformation, as a result of decades of rapid industrialization, mobilized by the factory’s impact on the textile industry, which gave birth to new modes of production starting from the 1850s and into the 1920s (Godley 3). The process of automation resulted in an acceleration of the speed in which clothing was being produced, resulting in copies and counterfeits in the form of readymades.

To be sure, Chanel saw this crisis as an opportunity. She understood that the industry needed to be progressive to grow—rather than clinging onto tradition, or fiercely guarding the ivory gates of Parisian haute couture. As a designer, Chanel understood that the key to staying relevant, was counterintuitively acknowledging the iterative nature of fashion and the cyclical temporality of trends. It is this modern approach to democratizing fashion, as well as the global economic trends beyond the industry, that contributed to Chanel’s longevity. Fashion, after all, looks forward. While Poiret tried to blame America for violating French haute couture, Chanel
understood these commercial realities and saw the tremendous cultural capital behind the burgeoning American wholesale, prêt-à-porter market, and tapped into it. In his reading of sartorial fashion as the paradigm of modern culture, Lehmann notes that “the vanguard of fashion perceives its own present almost as history, because constant changes in the clothing industry have been accelerated to such a degree that invention, quotation and outright copying only become distinctive through the imagery and significance of the designer rather than through the actual chronology of the fashionable novelty” (14), thus mirroring Chanel’s manufacturing model and her pulse on the industry.

Significantly, Chanel was not the only couturier who invested in a prêt-à-porter line. It is significant to note that Worth, as the founder of haute couture, also made a ready-to-wear line. In addition to his collection of couture gowns, he also made prêt-à-porter dresses and accessories. This leads us to questions the relationship and distinction between haute couture and the ready-to-wear. Perhaps these categories are not as distinct as we think, given that readymades are historically linked at the origin of haute couture. Despite the privileged position of couture and its association with the handmade, both couture and the readymade are made by hand—even if seamstresses are assisted by machines. Building on this sartorial comparison inverts the traditionally held hierarchy within fashion and complicates our understanding in which couture emerges as the superior mode.

It is worth noting that the legalization of haute couture was in part a reaction to the uprisings of readymades, whose trickle-down effect and outright copying produced a crisis that is central to couture’s crisis of originality. While high fashion designers such as Poiret demanded and argued for special protection by “capitalizing on imaginary association with fine arts and its residual aura of quality, importance, and value,” (Pouillard 346) the difficulty and complexity of
protecting innovation in fashion and design industries involves an entanglement of authorship with ownership and protection from piracy. In other words, the couture industry attempts to turn authorship into a commodifiable private property, yet protection of design and fashion creations is situated between high and low authorship, or “at the edge of intellectual property” (348). This enables and legitimizes the practice of cultural authority that attempt to freeze the play of difference in the public sphere (350).

While modern designers such as Chanel did nothing to resist the wholesale copying of her original designs, old-school couturiers such as Poiret, who sought litigation to protect the industry’s original designs, in fact, lost their creative currency and social capital. The unexpected outcome of Poiret’s legal efforts to protect his designs further challenges the assumptions held within haute couture and its association with the original. Further, the fact the founder of haute couture, Worth, also created readymade lines to complement his couture collections reinforces the intimacy between couture and prêt-à-porter. While the House of Chanel stands the test of time through its recognition that fashion itself is iterative, an emblem of both heritage and innovation, designers like Poiret remain shelved in obscurity. Their former glory faded in the dusty pages of fashion’s history, despite efforts to derail this shift by accusing American designers “of stealing styles and clients and cutting prices” (“Paul Poiret Assails American Buyers”) by appropriating the rhetoric of originality to make his legal and financial claim. Thus, taken together, Chanel and Sonya’s little black dress demonstrate that trying to find the middle path is, indeed, internal to modern fashion. Further, with Sonya at the forefront of this new manufacturing model, the LBD as a fashion object positions prêt-à-porter as a viable alternative to the readymades on one hand, and couture, on the other.
Couture in Crisis: Double Mispriision and Mechanical Reproduction

The Sonya dress that is “plain enough for everybody,” but also “distinctive enough to make it effective for any occasion,” featured in Anzia Yezierska’s *Salome of the Tenements* (Yezierska 162), is not the kind of garment one might expect to crown the sartorial fiction’s storyline. Yet, Sonya’s nondescript little black dress, with its “simpler, more sympathetic line” is precisely the fashion object which propels the plot forward (169). The novel’s titular protagonist, Sonya—like her real-life contemporary, Chanel—takes her first steps towards becoming a designer when she enters Ziskind’s workshop as a sample hand. By the time she debuts the little black dress, she abandons her socialite ambitions, and launches herself as a fashion designer; a departure from her initial consumerist approach to fashion, one that was misguided by Veblen’s concept of conspicuous consumption. Recalling her earlier declaration: “Talk about democracy! All I want is to be able to wear silk stockings and Paris hats like Mrs Astorbilt” (Yezierska 27).

In a novel indicative of the tension between haute couture and the readymade, the reader is invited to interrogate fashion’s crisis of originality through the art and fashion objects in the text. Haute couture’s privileging of the handmade is antithetical to this period of mechanization, where readymade clothing flooded the mass-market, threatening the integrity and fabric of the fashion industry, resulting in the dislocation of couture; later coupled with the rise of prêt-à-porter, signalling the democracy of fashion. The couture values of originality are further challenged in Yezierska’s novel through her engagement with fashion and art objects in the text. A key scene in Manning’s office where he initiates a conversation with Sonya about potentially hiring her to oversee the “department of dress” in his charity organization both reveals and challenges the cultural associations that couture heavily relies on. Sonya notices the understated
and luxurious interior design of his office, and in particular, “Mona Lisa hung over Manning’s desk” catches her eye (Yezierska 84).

Drawing on this, the Mona Lisa scene in Manning’s office is revealing because it unveils the way in which couture values work—and its association it with original works of art and haute couture—while simultaneously deconstructing it. Further, the primacy of this scene in is further established by the fact that it exclusively contains the novel’s title in its prose: “A Salome of the tenements striving to be Mona Lisa!” (Yezierska 85). First, we see haute couture values working in its traditional way with the replica painting. However, this reading is textured by the fact that Sonya, with untrained eyes, does not realize that the “Mona Lisa hanging over Manning’s desk” she beholds is, in fact, a reproduction. Perhaps ironically, Sonya commissions this forgery as her “patron saint,” striving to imitate her “cryptic, impersonal smile” (Yezierska 87). Sonya thus aligns herself with the replica icon, as she believes herself to be “a priestess of religion and beauty” and seeks to absorb the “austere perfection” of the Mona Lisa and the Upper East Side and high art values that it represents (Yezierska 66). Delving into the Old Testament allusions in the text—the Salome mythos as a dancing temptress—Sonya’s ironic worship of the Mona Lisa replica evokes the Israelites construction of the Golden Calf. In these two instances, it is not only an image; but a false image—an idol without an aura—that is venerated. Surprisingly, the text itself does not explicitly unveil the replica painting’s inauthenticity. Rather, it plays with the mysterious quality of the reproduced work of art and Sonya’s act of beholding the painting. This is where Sonya’s misprision occurs, the fact that she encounters the painting without the revelation that the piece of art is an imitation: “Her eyes turned beseechingly to Mona Lisa, but the picture seemed to grow cold and withdraw itself from her, under her very gaze” (Yezierska 87). Yet, this also becomes an act of iconoclasm as Sonya eventually denounces and breaks away
from the Mona Lisa painting: “Sonya felt like throwing the ink well at the smiling fifteenth century siren on the wall. ‘I hate her!’ Her voice rose in her throat, harsh with nervous tension” (Yezierska 90).

The misprision in “The Temple of Serenity” chapter operates on several levels. First, Sonya’s misrecognition of the painting leads her to strive to imitate an imitation, creating a double layer of mimesis. Second, the circularity of the gaze between Sonya and the subject in the painting creates an interesting parallel that reflects a doubled misrecognition from the previous scene. Sonya’s “beseeching” gaze directed towards the Mona Lisa is mirrored by Manning’s gaze towards her (and her garments), echoing Manning’s crucial failure to recognize couture, and in fact, he misinterprets it for a readymade in the previous chapter. This mirrored gaze reflects a loop and suggests the trope of gaze as consumption, which is further complicated by a double misrecognition. Sonya attaches high art value to the Mona Lisa, however, on account of her idealization of luxury, she fails to recognize that it is not an original work of art. On one hand, Manning possesses trained eyes and the pedigree to recognize couture, yet his inability to recognize the craftsmanship of couture is driven by his idealization of poverty. On the other hand, Sonya’s misappropriation of the painting ironically stems from a similar origin: her idealization of wealth and the privilege of the Upper East Side. For Sonya, handmade couture and original works of art are both markers of conspicuous consumption. Therefore, if a replica is misrecognized as an original work of art, while an original piece of couture is misinterpreted as a readymade, this misprision and double misrecognition ultimately leads one to question the legitimacy of the aura, or if there is anything essential in art. As such, something productive comes out of misrecognition, which blurs the boundaries between the original and the copy.
This double misprision takes place in an earlier chapter, “Manning Himself,” where philanthropist, John Manning arrives at Sonya’s “bare quarters,” and is surprised to see a “setting of a woman of culture and refinement and not a girl of the tenements” (Yezierska 73). Unbeknownst to Manning, this “effect of spontaneous beauty and simplicity,” had, in fact, taken Sonya “so many days and nights of ceaseless planning, the painstaking persistence of most studied artifice” (74). Manning is unaware of the painstaking efforts Sonya invests to transform her room before his arrival. In the earlier chapter, “Sonya Stoops to Conquer,” the novel’s protagonist is defeated by her room’s readymade quality:

The cheap, pitiful attempts at beauty [which] mock her. The flimsy curtains from the ten-cent store, whose color had once been concealed by the cracked panes, now flaunted their dusty cheapness. The faded pictures that covered the stained walls shouted their pretense at parade. (41)

In this manner, Sonya’s violent rejection of the tenement’s lack of democratic beauty is analogues to her vehement distaste of the readymade clothings that “strangle her” with their “gaudiness and cheapness” (Yezierska 15). The crux of this double misprision lies in the fact that Sonya believes luxury is found in simplicity, while Manning naively searches for simplicity in poverty. Contrast Sonya’s renovations with the earlier state of her apartment:

She had achieved the vivid simplicity for which she had longed all her life. Her personality breathed through the fabrics and colors with which she had surrounded herself. The white dimity curtains that looked so inconspicuously attractive cost ten times as much as the former gaudy prints. (65)

This “sensuous quietness” that Sonya had bought costs “more than a week’s salary.” On the other hand, Manning believes that “glory of poverty that enforces simplicity” (73). Without realizing the “struggle it had been for [Sonya] to meet him on this plane of harmonious beauty” (74), Yezierska teases the reader with Manning’s foolishness, by setting up this juxtaposition and double misprision, characterizing Manning’s misguided perspective that “little is needed to
create beauty. All that is needed is selective taste.” Indeed, the text seems to encourage this misprision as Manning “naively argues that beauty is not expensive,” inherently unaware that Sonya has indeed “signed away her future [to a furniture store]” to buy the tasteful comfort so enjoyed so lightly” (73).

Manning’s version of a democratic fashion based on charity and the “glory of poverty that enforces simplicity” not only blinds him to the “artifice” of Sonya’s interior design, but more importantly, his misguided philosophy sets up the misrecognition of Sonya’s haute couture dress (74). As artists are trying to get us to stumble and make errors, Yezierska’s misprision purveys an interesting scene where Manning fails to recognize an original couture dress, and in fact, he mistakes it for a readymade. The fact that a couture dress is misrecognized by a member of the elite class disrupts couture’s crisis of originality. Building on this, something productive emerges out of misrecognition as it blurs the boundaries between the original and the copy, which leads us to question the relationship and distinction between haute couture and the readymade.

As early as the 1920s, storied couture houses such as Chanel understood that modernism would continue to challenge existing modes and traditions. Further, Chanel’s design philosophy included the knowledge that the best way to preserve couture was to provide an innovative solution to the sartorial dilemma of the rise of the readymades through prêt-à-porter in the interwar years. Yezierska’s novel, which dramatizes this new mode of production, offers a prototype to Chanel’s Ford dress through the Sonya Model, as they both contemporaneously appear in the same period of mechanization. Further, as a fictional account, Sonya’s little black dress offers a new production mode that maintains a degree of haute couture, or high dressmaking values.
As new technology disrupts the industry, the production process becomes mechanized through mass industrialization in the 1920s American fashion scene. In response, Yezierska rallies the making or craftsmanship that is forgotten in fashion through Sonya’s creative design approach to the LBD. In this manner, she effectively creates a world of a designer who desires to skirt the aura, or replicate couture in a cut above the readymades. Sonya, like Chanel, does champion couture values, yet also wants to live in a place that does not prevent the democratization of fashion. Therefore, taking into consideration this dressmaking dilemma, Sonya’s reconciles the handmade and machine-made through the creation of avant-garde prêt-a-porter.

Prêt-à-Porter: A Modern Revolutionary Logic

Yezierska published Salome of the Tenements in 1921, five years before Chanel debuted her little black dress in 1926. Given this, perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of the novel is how it showcases a phenomenon of life imitating art with its own modern revolutionary logic. A century later, American Vogue’s international editor-at-large, Hamish Bowles, terms Chanel’s 1920s little black dress “fashion’s great equalizer.” Woven in a crêpe de chine fabric, its drop waist and straight silhouette reflected the mobility and liberty of the era; and later became the prototype for the modern cocktail dress. Further, its black design, a color traditionally associated with mourning or somber religious attire, was transposed into the de rigeur palette for a daring, cosmopolitan woman.

Building on this, Sonya’s fictional little black dress creates a new language of fashion that is both grounded and highly conceptual; a modern work that not only feels modern and directional, but its sartorial significance further signposts a fashion revolution in the 1920s American fashion scene. Accordingly, Yezierska artfully describes Sonya’s careful consideration
and workmanship in her creative design process. Here, the reader is invited to observe the

centrality of Sonya’s hand in the creation process:

She solved it by cutting the braid in half widths and inserting it edgewise between
soft folds, running it along under surfaces, so that a bare thread of it appeared,
lending richness to the shadowed parts of the dress. She pinned up her model time
and again, experimenting with every line over and over before. (171)

Drawing upon the etymological link between *coupé* and *couture*, Sonya cuts the cloth. She does
not merely drape the cloth over a mannequin but engages with the fabric in a tactile and visceral
manner: cutting, folding, and pinning the material. There is a violence in the sartorial act of
creation as she pierces and cuts away at the fabric to create her desired design. As a disrupter of
couture, Sonya performs a dual aesthetic; allowing the craftmanship of couture to inform her
work, but also pushing back to challenge the exclusivity of old-style couture. This is significant,
as a degree of the original human element is preserved in the production of the dress. By
contrast, the “itching shoddiness of readymades that blot out [Sonya’s] personality in garments
cut by the gross” emphasize the handmade versus the machine-made as one of the chief
distinctions between couture and readymades (Yezierska 33). More importantly, Sonya executes
a balancing act of simple, elegant lines—recalling her definition of luxury as simplicity—in
contrast to Manning’s misguided democracy of fashion—while bringing a modern energy and
revolutionary style which characterizes the LBD’s innovative creative design thinking.

Based on this premise, Sonya stitches together a new mode of production, disrupting
fashion through her creative design process by employing modern techniques into dressmaking.
In this manner, Sonya revolutionizes prêt-à-porter as a contemporary force, with the little black
dress as the distillation of her creative vision. Disrupting the industry, Sonya defies the fashion
ecosystem by positioning herself as an outlier at the beginning of her career. In her revolutionary
approach of re-establishing the codes of couture in her own language of fashion, Sonya succeeds
in mixing couture elements in a different way, creating a style that maintains loyal to its character, while updating it with a modern and casual luxury. Sonya’s story is also one of emancipation, as she pursues the little black dress with a creative liberty that breaks free from the confinements of couture and creates a modern and accessible luxury. Sonya’s avant-garde vision demonstrates a modernization of fashion, as prêt-à-porter emerges as the mode of the future.

Another prolific designer, and a firm testament of innovative design techniques that modernize fashion, is Chanel. Cultural critic Catherine Driscoll elucidates the modernity of Chanel’s design philosophy. Compare Chanel’s craftsmanship with the above passage on Sonya’s process:

In Chanel’s terms, movement within the fabric required softness that complemented the design’s hard lines and give in the fabric belied her style’s geometric edge by undermining the visible structure. Chanel blurred the boundaries of the flou (dressmaking) and tailleur (tailoring) by applying the dressmaker’s draped effects to her suits and coats and the tailor’s pattern-driven precision to her dresses. (145)

Sonya continues to push boundaries and blur the lines on couture; she invents her own fashion language, disrupting couture with her modern references. Lehmann notes that “Fashion solves this dilemma . . . by providing a dialectical environment in which any past object is potentially seen as historic, but at the same time serves as a basis for contemporary rendition, a novel version of an old form, revised for the latest trend, which in turn signposts the fashion to come” (301). In this final category, Sonya references her love for a modern and simple line, interposing two different art forms in a modern pastiche. Driscoll further elaborates that modernity and fashion meant to Chanel in her designing something so specifically from this philosophy. Taken together, Chanel and Sonya fashion the future through a democratic little black dress that cuts between couture and the readymades.
To be sure, Sonya’s vision for the “democracy of beauty” is a rallied response to the lack of design and craftsmanship in the mechanized reproductions of the readymades, which emerged from an era of industrialization (Yezierska 27). Through the designer’s attention to handmade details, prêt-à-porter differs from the readymades as it draws inspiration from couture in design terms and in terms of craftsmanship. This democratization of fashion holds couture values in terms of design and craftsmanship that goes into constructing the little black dress. Rather than restricting this degree of craftsmanship to an elite clientele, Sonya democratizes fashion by making it accessible to the public through a wholesale distribution model with established department stores. Combined with this upscale marketing and merchandising model, this positions Sonya’s dress a cut above the mass-produced readymades. The intersections between these different modes to demonstrate that a democratic form of fashion does, in fact, involve mechanical reproduction to achieve its revolutionary goals of dressing thousands of women.

Yezierska’s novel, which dramatizes this new creative design process, offers a prototype to Chanel’s Ford dress through the Sonya Model, as they both contemporaneously appear in the same period of mechanization, and offer a viable alternative to couture and the readymade. To be sure, the modern, uncut style of Sonya’s little black dress is a departure from the old-style grey couture designed by Hollins. Versatile and full of movement, the LBD democratizes fashion with its widely available style. In Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity, Elizabeth Wilson writes that “Chanel created the ‘poor look,’ the sweaters, jersey dresses and little suits that subverted the whole idea of fashion as display . . . the aim of this look was to make the rich girl look like the girl on the street” (Wilson 41). Reinforcing fashion’s cyclical temporality across decades, in terms of style and production, Sonya’s little black dress in the novel serves as a premonition for the future of fashion, as she “desires the wearer to have the joy of a dress that
could be slipped on in the moment, and yet give the luxurious sense of a fitted gown.” In other words, both Sonya and Chanel achieve this “beautiful plainness that only the rich wear. A dress that looks simple enough for the poor only that it’s different” (Yezierska 169).

“Democracy of Beauty”: The Frock that the World Will Wear

Nowhere are the conflicted perceptions of haute couture and the readymade more amply demonstrated in literature than in Yezierska’s *Salome of the Tenements*. Therefore, the strategic use of fashion and art objects in Yezierska’s sartorial fiction offer a treatise on the industry’s ambivalent crisis and collapse. Tracing the contours of prêt-à-porter as a new mode of production that maintains a “luxurious,” and “simple” design, despite it being a “widely circulated fashion,” (47) the rise of prêt-à-porter positions the Sonya model at the forefront of this new mode. Furthermore, Sonya’s LBD reconciles the false dichotomy of couture and the readymade through democratizing dress. As Yezierska explores this crisis of originality in her prose, she sketches an initial opposition between readymades and original works of fashion and art. However, I have argued that this binary begins to dissolve, as Sonya conflates both categories through the creation of the little black dress, offering an alternate reading to couture’s crisis. Haute couture values would lead us to think Sonya’s design lacks aura and has no aesthetic value, yet the privileging at the end of the novel of prêt-à-porter as a new mode of production effectively challenges fashion’s crisis of originality.

To be sure, the crux of the fashion industry’s resilience is its propensity to adapt—and this involves a degree of wholesale copying. Fashion critic Valerie Steele explains that Chanel, as a popular icon, represents a number of trends in the development of twentieth-century fashion: “Chanel was typical of the entire modernist movement. To the extent that she stands out, it is because she synthesized, publicized, and epitomized a look that many other people also
developed” (Steele 122). The synthesis of old and new, an open spirit of collaboration, is characteristic of a new look that emerged in this modernist period. Yet, while Chanel is a “icon,” Sonya is an iconoclast, on account of her emancipating fashion from the hegemonic hold of haute couture, as evident in the final scenes of Yezierska’s sartorial fiction.

Narrowing in on this final sartorial scene, Yezierska’s novel concludes with Sonya’s modern revolutionary logic that parallels Chanel’s radical approach to modernizing couture. As Sonya and Hollins prepare for their trip to Paris in anticipation of setting up their joint venture on Grand Street, Sonya expresses her desire for democratic dress: “Beautiful things should be for those who long for beauty. There are millions on the East Side dying for a little loveliness, and they never, never have it” (177). Hollins muses that Sonya has distilled him a new vision that disrupts his Fifth Avenue atelier. With an emphasis on the new mode of prêt-à-porter, consider how this new mode of production disrupts couture through its innovative design process in the following passages:

“Sonya, with your eyes I’ll see Paris for the first time. Not the Paris I saw when I was struggling with the last breath in me to get on. Not the business of Paris of my yearly trips for new twists in style. Now fresh things come up in me. We’ll see what Poiret is doing, what Worth is bringing out this season. So many new ideas we’ll get for decoration and costuming from the painters’ exhibitions”’ (177). When we come back from Paris, we’ll open up on the side a little shop on Grand Street . . . beauty for those that love it, beauty that is not for profit” (178).

In contrast to Hollins’ former business model, Sonya executes a new creative direction that shifts the sartorial conversation from commerce to culture. In this manner, Sonya, as the novel’s titular protagonist, stands at the forefront of the rise of this new manufacturing model. Instead of the “business of Paris,” Sonya and Hollins collaborate to democratize fashion with a diffusion line, a “shop of the beautiful” in the “midst of the readymades on Grand Street” that balances artistry
and commerce (178). Thus, the pair modernize couture, embracing an open fashion that imbues the industry with their own sartorial sensibility and revolutionary logic.

At the end of the novel, Sonya’s modern style embodies Chanel’s creative vision of “dressing thousands of women,” which she articulates in the aforementioned American Vogue interview. Yet, perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of the novel is how it showcases a phenomenon of life imitating art with its own modern revolutionary logic. While Yezierska’s novel was published in 1921, Chanel debuted her LBD in 1926. In both fictional and historical accounts, aspiring women who step into the aestheticized world of fashion, are able to champion a truly democratic fashion. Building on this by linking Yezierska into a larger history in the twentieth century offers an alternate reading of the text as an episode in the history of fashion. More broadly, the rise of prêt-à-porter also serves as a meta-allegory for the rise of New York City as an emerging fashion capital, as the epicenter of style shifted from the Parisian couture house to the street styles of New York. Thus, as prêt-à-porter conquers couture as the mode of the future, New York overtakes Paris with a new vibrancy as a modern fashion capital, fictionalized by the inauguration of Sonya and Hollins’ modern design studio.

This democracy of fashion is the zeitgeist of the new mode of production. Sonya’s little black dress—akin to its contemporaneous cousin, Chanel’s LBD—is not only a harbinger of modern fashion but also epitomizes modernity itself by subverting the hegemony of haute couture through its innovative design and production process. Therefore, Sonya’s little black dress not only revolutionizes fashion but insofar demonstrates fashion itself is revolutionary. If a modernist style (la mode, la modernité) involves a rupture from the past that seeks to create a new artistic style that simultaneously quotes and restyles tradition, prêt-à-porter decidedly
characterizes this pastiche, as a new mode of production that stitches together tradition and modern modes of dressmaking.

Navigating modern society in a woman’s body remains a fraught proposition in the most common and granular ways. Unequivocally, the little black dress became the decade-defining look of the 1920s that dressed and empowered the female body. In contrast to the flapper costume, the ubiquitous little black dress that popped up in private closets and on public streets found its reflection on the broader world. Taken together, Chanel and Sonya disrupt fashion with their signature style: waging a revolution with their little black dress for the everyday woman—and a war on undemocratic fashion. As such, the little black dress, as a fashion object, becomes a treatise on female identity—the uniform of the New Woman, who emerged in an era of democracy. Beyond a seasonal trend, the little black dress represents a shift in its embodied identity and the new sartorial landscape of prêt-à-porter. The LBD’s revolutionary logic encapsulates the social and vocational mobility—the pace and rhythm of modern society—that the new woman embraced with clarity. No longer restrained by trappings of tradition, the elegant lines and uncomplicated style of the dress is a pivot from the exclusivity of couture, resulting in an open fashion for quotidian women. Fashioning the future, Chanel and Sonya’s little black dress is every woman’s bugle call to making herself heard—setting its wearer apart as a discerning female, dressed in democracy.

As the fashion industry was initially disrupted by readymades in the 1920s, which operated in a trickle-down effect by copying high fashion designs—as I have suggested prefigure modern fast fashion. As intellectual property rights (IPR) law surrounding couture protection differ in each country, further complicating the transatlantic war against fashion piracy and counterfeit. Moreover, as case studies, notably Poiret’s failed public legal battle against
American buyers and fashion designers in the 1920s reveal, the industry indeed requires an adaptive resilience in embracing a democratic fashion which involves quotation and imitation. By contrast, Chanel’s business strategy of allowing wholesale copying signifies the “death knell of old-style couture” (Steele 89). In fact, Chanel’s marketing strategy of allowing wholesale copying of her original couture designs secured the longevity of her couture house. This business model was, in fact, adopted by avant-garde couturiers such as Christian Dior (the focus of the proceeding chapter) who played both sides of the industry with Dior’s licencing practices in the 1950s, following the success of his *New Look* as he sought to expand to international markets—ambidextrously legitimizing distribution channels across various markets, while also pursuing litigation over the piracy of his fashion designs by American couturiers. These two couture houses that engage with the demands of contemporary technology are, in fact, the ones that survive across time. In this present day, Chanel and Dior are the only two French couture houses left in Paris.
Chapter Two
Undressing Couture:
Frédéric Tcheng’s *Dior and I* (2014)

“He [Christian Dior] is a thousand workers, dresses, pictures in the press; and occasionally, a small revolution.”

*Dior and I* (2014)

At 30 Avenue Montaigne, Paris, the atelier is abuzz. It is April 2012, and Raf Simons is the newly-appointed Creative Director for womenswear at Christian Dior. The storied House of Dior is one of two houses that still operate in the grand tradition of Parisian haute couture, a testament to the couture’s contemporary crisis. It is worth nothing that Dior operates with its haute couture atelier, which has not left its iconic townhouse headquarters in Paris since Christian Dior founded the house in 1946; with its own in-house team of premières and seamstresses housed within the Trianon walls. It is this iconic team that stands, in anticipation, to welcome Simons to his first day at work.

Frédéric Tcheng’s *Dior and I* (2014) stitches together Raf Simons’ first season at Dior: from his inauguration into the storied couture house, documenting his revolutionary creative design process, culminating with his debut collection: Dior’s 2012 fall haute couture. This chapter traces the contours of Simons’ radical approach to modernizing couture during his three-and-a-half-year tenure at Dior. Expanding on Chanel/Sonya’s modern approach to democratizing fashion in the previous chapter, Raf Simons also disrupts couture through his innovative design process, the re-establishment of Dior codes, and employed modern techniques into the craft. In the 1920s fashion scene, and here again in this contemporary cultural moment, couture is opposed by fast fashion, in this case the hyperfast fashion made possible by digital technologies and production systems. In a hyper-accelerated industry, where demand trumps design, Simons’
debut haute couture collection for Dior, which features fifty-four looks, is scheduled to be completed in a fast-tracked timeline of eight weeks. This will be a challenge for Simons, a ready-to-wear designer; as haute couture and ready-to-wear operate on different timelines, as well as distinct design and production techniques. Given the industry’s present climate of automation and acceleration, what are we losing when we consider the modernization of haute couture? Are we losing the craft of couture, and how does this shift the fashion industry and role of the designer? As fashion moves Instagram-fast, the pre-established ecosystem of haute couture leading the seasonal look is being upended because of speed and technology, ultimately fashioning a new direction for the future of fashion.

In *Salome of the Tenements*, couture is opposed by and defines itself against the garish field of ready-mades. Here, ready-mades again define the horizon of couture, albeit ready-mades manufactured at speeds unheard of in the 1920s. In other words, in both cases, ready-mades are the *other* of couture. In both cases, accordingly, couture navigates a newly threatening future by incorporating that future into itself to stake out a new democratic middle ground. In this film, as in *Salome of the Tenements*, the modern designer finds a way forward by finding a middle ground between ready-mades and couture, disrupting couture while upholding its aesthetic values and reformulating them for a broader, more democratic swathe of consumers. In this manner, Simons redefines Dior as a contemporary force, with a democratic couture as the distillation of his creative vision.
Stepping onto Dior’s stage, Simons strives to emancipate couture from the public and the private crises conquering the Parisian house and the industry at large: a PR scandal involving its previous creative director, and a crippled couture industry, experiencing a dip in sales and buckling under the pressures of a hyper-accelerated consumer demand and production cycles. Further, as a fashion outsider stepping into the tradition of couture, Simons strives to emancipate himself and his work from the cultural legacy of Christian Dior. Through re-establishing Dior codes in his own language of fashion, Simons succeeds in mixing Dior elements in a different way, creating a style that remains loyal to the character of couture, while updating it for a modern Dior client. Yet, despite Simons artistic and commercial achievements, his departure from the brand after a short stint reveals the collapse of Parisian couture industry.

In line with the speed of fashion, Simons is immediately thrown into the world of couture the minute he steps into Dior. In a deliberate move by filmmaker, Frédéric Tcheng, the audience is simultaneously catapulted into a privileged, behind-the-scenes view of couture in *Dior and I* (2014). The audience quickly learns the anatomy of the atelier: the haute couture workrooms are organized by specialization, known as *flou* (dresses), or *tailleur* (tailoring).\(^1\) Further, these ateliers are helmed by premières, or head seamstresses, who lead multiple teams and report directly to the Creative Director. The CEO of Christian Dior, Sidney Toledano, is quick to point out that the two premières present, are arguably the most important women in the room. Yet,

\(^1\) Here, *tailleur* refers to a woman’s tailor-made couture suit, not to be confused with menswear tailoring.
Despite the prominence of the premières, the film does not depict Simons in conversation with any of the atelier staff. Simons’ creative direction and management the design team is mediated by Mulier, whose hand is the intermediary between Simons and the atelier; further distancing the couturier from the cloth, or the fashion designer from the tradition of dressmaking.

In line with the business of fashion, Simons gets down to work immediately. He has a lot to prove yet maintains a calm and exacting presence despite the fast-approaching storm on the horizon. As he steps into the role of creative director for womenswear at Dior, Simons and his team will have eight weeks to create a collection for Dior’s autumn/winter 2012 couture show. The learning curve is steep for Simons, as this is a completely different timeline and production mode for Simons, who admits an unexpected fact to the camera, “couture is new for me.” He does so in an unassuming, matter-of-fact tone. Simons is rare breed in the world of fashion designers, and Tcheng artfully captures his multifaceted talent in his film which chronicles Simons creative leadership at the storied maison. Tcheng’s documentary is filmed in an unpretentious style, one that is imbued with a quiet confidence and attention to artistic detail, mimicking the designer’s own character and approach to Dior.

In a Vogue interview, Tcheng sketches a parallel between his own creative dilemma in constructing the film and Simons’ crafting of his debut collection for Dior. Both art forms are subject to the crisis of acceleration and originality:

I see a parallel between the relationship that [Raf] can have with the founder of the house and the legacy, and the relationship that I can have with my subject. And it’s a struggle to establish the right distance and to honor your subjects, but also to honor your own voice. When I filmed the first scene of Raf meeting the seamstresses, I was actually meeting Raf for the first time through the lens of the camera…They had eight weeks [to make the collection], but I had eight weeks, too.
In a moment of meta-theatricality, the audience forms the third wall, as they meet and observe Simons creative process through Tcheng’s camera lens. In contrast to Tcheng’s unobtrusive filming style, the camera lens, an object that Simons is highly uncomfortable with, continues to be a motif throughout the film. Most notably, the film’s ending scene, where a cavalcade of camera flashes flood Dior’s 2012 haute couture runway show. Paris is influxed with a moveable feast of models, designers, makeup artists, photographers, buyers, journalists, and social media influencers. By contrast, Simons’ discomfort in the spotlight is tangible, as he takes the designer’s customary runway bow at the show’s finale. Tcheng muses, “the motif of the camera flash—intrusive, blinding, and exposing—kept on coming back to me. Maybe the camera does steal the soul.”

Building on this, Tcheng’s film is shot like a palimpsest, creating a montage of scenes that cut between the past, present, and future of fashion. He offers the audience an abbreviated history of Dior, beginning with the house’s inauguration in 1946 by Christian Dior, and paralleling its modern beginnings with Simons’ introduction to Dior in 2012. In a Director’s Statement for a UK press release, Tcheng elucidates:

I wanted to further explore the dialogue between the past and the present through cinematic means, and the voiceover of Christian Dior became an important narrative tool. I used it conventionally in the beginning of the film to narrate archival sequences, but as the film progresses, it shifts from the past to the present and becomes a commentary on Raf’s experience. The line becomes blurred. The audience peers through the looking glass. This mysterious connection to distant moments in history also inspired my desire to give the archival sequences a spectral quality. What else are movies, if not apparitions of ghosts long passed away? In haute couture, the first mock-ups of dresses are called toiles—which, in French, is also the colloquial word for movie screen. (5)

Tcheng seamlessly and unobtrusively documents behind-the-scenes of Simons’ debut couture collection for Dior, while inserts interviews with key figures in the company and fashion critics alike.
With this setting, the opening sequence juxtaposes Christian Dior’s *New Look* which debuted in 1947, with Raf Simons’ modern take on Dior in 2012. Accordingly, in his director’s notes, Tcheng emphasizes that while the film is “a testament to the power of traditions [and that] history repeats itself, Raf’s story would be one of emancipation.” The audience observes as Tcheng artfully crafts a narrative of Simons’ “emancipation” from the heritage and cultural legacy of Dior. Drawing a parallel to Yezierska’s Sonya, who desires a “democracy of beauty,” and achieves her democratization of fashion via prêt-à-porter, it is, in fact, significant that a prêt-à-porter designer steps into the world of Dior couture.

On several levels, the film operates as a treatise on how couture creates its own other in order to maintain its haute and artistic values. Like prêt-à-porter, traditionally viewed as the “other” in fashion, Cathryn Horyn points out that Simons was not the “obvious candidate [for Dior].” As a Belgian menswear designer for minimalist brand Jil Sander, Simons was no stranger to fashion; yet familiarity with his work was limited to editors and critics who covered menswear. Thus, Simons was a fashion outsider on two fronts. First, he operated in menswear. Second, the transition from ready-to-wear to couture would bring with it its own challenges as Simons himself does not fit the traditional mold of the Parisian couturier. Simons possesses basic working French competency, as the audience watches him struggle to communicate with his team on his first day. He begins hopeful, in French, then switches to English. Although the atelier is gracious, the audience can sense that this linguistic maneuver further places Simons as an outsider, or an *other*, to Parisian couture, an intrinsically French cultural product. Sidney Toledano, CEO of Dior, has mixed feelings about Simons’ modern approach to Dior.\(^2\) He muses

\(^2\) In November 2017, amid a wider executive reshuffle at French conglomerate LVMH, Toledano stepped down from the role and became chairman of LVHM Fashion Group, who is the parent company of Dior.
that under Simons’ creative direction, the atelier will witness a “Modern Dior.” Further, he candidly adds that, “as a token of modernity,” the atelier will address Simons as “Raf,” instead of “Monsieur Raf,” as per the tradition of couture.

Most strikingly, Simons is not formally trained as a designer, unlike creative directors of other storied couture houses, such as the late Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel who fit the bill of couturier and was classically trained the art of couture in the 1930s. In fact, Simons studied architecture before he broke into the industry with his own collection of avant-garde menswear. However, Simons’ expertise lies in creating minimalist, modern menswear. Moreover, his revival of the skinny black suit parallels Chanel’s revolutionary little black dress in the previous chapter, as both fashion objects can be viewed as case studies of couture modernizing and luxury democratising.

Simons’ avant-garde vision for Dior demonstrates a modernization of couture, as Simons himself is a modernist movement within Dior. Simons embraces his status as a fashion outsider, yet ironically, he is also the ultimate insider.⁵ Not one to play by the rules, Simons describes how he defies the fashion ecosystem by unwittingly positioning himself as an outlier at the beginning of his career, by “not following the pre-existing [fashion]structure” and choosing not to “follow the system” by not showing his collection on the runway for four seasons. Further, dual aesthetics come into play, as Simons challenges couture by bringing in modern techniques and references, and couture also challenges Simons with its legacy, character, and craftsmanship. In this manner Christian Dior/Raf Simons can be viewed as an analogous pair to Chanel/Sonya in the previous chapter. Dior and Chanel are fashion insiders, while Simons and Sonya are avant-
garde outsiders. Taken together, these two pairs modernize fashion, imbuing the industry with their own sartorial sensibility and revolutionary logic. Ultimately, the fact that a prêt-à-porter designer, without any classical training in couture, is stepping up to creatively helm one of the most established couture houses in the world is a nod to the collapsing boundaries between haute couture and prêt-à-porter.

*Monsieur Dior, Modern Dior?*

These tensions reside in Raf Simons, the first ready-to-wear designer to be inaugurated as creative director of Dior Couture. Diving into Dior, Simons has several crises to navigate: the brand’s PR scandal involving its former designer, John Galliano, the wider industry’s crisis of speed and acceleration, and his own task of preserving and reinvention couture. In a pleasing tension, Simons exhibits grace under pressure, navigating these seemingly paradoxical tensions. Here again, by juxtaposing the evolving craftsmanship, this chapter challenges and expands modern couture’s definition as high dressmaking and casts light on representations of the handmade and the machine-made in Frédéric Tcheng’s *Dior and I* (2014).

As the film brilliantly illustrates, mid-century Dior designs, most notably Dior’s *New Look* (1947), were sketched by hand. The house’s founder and couturier, Christian Dior, would be involved in a tactile process of couture creation: the cutting of the cloth (*coupé*). By contrast, as creative director for Dior (2012-2015), Raf Simons’ craftsmanship process is radically different. In a behind-the-scenes take Tcheng captures the fact detail that Simons does not sketch, nor does his hand touch the cloth. Instead, he relies on digitized archives of Dior designs, and creates a mixed media inspiration board based on images from past runway shows, color and fabric swatches. Simons, as a designer, is removed from the tactile experience of sartorial creation. His hand never touches the fabric while it is being draped on the model—his assistant
does that for him. In this manner, the role of the fashion designer, or couturier, is dislocated from its original etymological root (coupé, couture). Haute couture, the hallmark of the fashion industry, is prized for its handmade element, elaborate techniques which often include embellishments or intricate embroidery. In couture, the cloth is cut by hand, giving the garment a customized fit and silhouette. On the other hand, prêt-à-porter—as described by the Dior seamstresses who express their doubt of Simons ability to transition to couture—is more “cut and paste,” in contrast to the high-end, exquisitely crafted couture garments. The atelier never directly declares it, but through nuanced expressions and commentary, it is evident that the atelier wants to preserve the tradition of couture—and thus, ambivalent towards Simon’s vision to modernize Dior. This creative dissonance, the juxtaposition of classic and avant-garde couture, sets up the central tension for the film.

As fashion reflects the social changes of that era, Christian Dior insofar helped to transition a war-torn world into a new era through his New Look (1947). Although his craftsmanship and design process adhered to the rules of couture, his philosophy of design and business model and licencing agreements were all very modern. Dior waged a “silent revolution,” with his war on hemlines, as a Paris Match cover depicts. Furthermore, as the first Parisian couturier to grace the covers of Time magazine, the cover story of Dior holding a big scissors, establishes him as a traditional couturier with a visual representation of its etymology (coupé, couture), and also symbolizing him cutting away from the past and bringing about modern fashion and couture. Lehmann posits that:

Fashion solves this dilemma . . . by providing a dialectical environment in which any past object is potentially seen as historic, but at the same time serves as a basis for contemporary rendition, a novel version of an old form, revised for the latest trend, which in turn signposts the fashion to come.” (301)
To a modern audience, regarding a mid-century designer in retrospect, Dior’s designs may seem outmoded, with his associated with tradition, femininity, and the accoutrements of classic couture. Yet, in his time, Dior disrupted fashion in his own signature style.

In a century of fashion, the historical significance of Dior's Bar silhouette stands as a harbinger of a new era. As the film narrates, in 1947, Christian Dior started a “bloodless revolution” with a single collection: Dior's New Look. Fashion had taken a backseat in the war efforts, and the industry was in crisis. Given this global state of crisis and collapse, Christian Dior had the singular vision of interjecting femininity and glamour into post-war Paris. He achieved this through redefining the female silhouette through his iconic “A,” “H,” and “Y” lines. Notably, the highlight from the collection, the tailored Bar, an ivory jacket with a wasp waist and accompanying full skirt defined the modern look for women—a rallying cry for fashion. Carmel Snow, the editor-in-chief of Harper's Bazaar exclaimed that Dior offered fashion with a "new look." The phrase, picked up by the international press, christened the legendary new line in 1947.

However, in fashioning of the New Look, Christian Dior did not intend to start a revolution: “I didn’t mean to revolutionize fashion; I am a reactionary. Which is not to say I am backwards looking. We were coming out of a time of war, my personal sentiment happened to coincide with the sentiment of the times.” Yet, unexpectedly, with his intricate couture techniques, iconic silhouettes and elaborate finishes, Christian Dior single-handedly revitalized the post-war fashion industry. As the film brilliantly illustrates, mid-century Dior designs were meticulously sketched by hand. Christian Dior, as the house’s founder and couturier, would be involved in a tactile process of couture creation from its design and craftsmanship process: the hand-drawn sketches, the selection of decadent fabrics, and the
cutting of the cloth (coupé). There is an emphasis on the human element, the custom fit, and the primacy of the hand in the creation of couture.

By contrast, in 2012, as creative director for Dior (2012-2015), Raf Simons’ craftsmanship process is radically different. His revolution is intentional, rather than accidental. Simons’ first move is to modernize the design process, by creating what he calls a “permanent creative laboratorium,” next to the design studio. Toledano notes that this is a very “modern” design process. “Raf is a very visual person,” states Pieter Mulier, Simons right-hand man, “[but] Raf does not sketch. He prepares dossiers.” In trading dessins for dossiers, Simons modernizes the craft of couture and redefines the role of the designer. Notably, his hand does not touch the cloth. In fact, he relies on digitized archives of Dior designs, and creates a mixed media inspiration board based on images from past runway shows, color and fabric swatches. Simons, as a designer, is removed from the tactile experience of sartorial creation. His hand does not touch the fabric while it is being draped on the model—his assistant does that for him.

Further, the film does not depict Simons stepping foot into the atelier or communicating directly with the premières or seamstresses. Simons spends most of his time in his design studio, or “creative lab”, working on concepts. Any vital communication with the hands that touch the cloth are mediated through Mulier, further distancing Simons from the atelier—which the Dior team coins as the “heart of couture.” In this manner, the role of the fashion designer, or couturier, is dislocated from its original etymological root (coupé, couture). Thus, technology definitively shifts the role of the modern fashion designer—to that of a stylist who assembles a look, rather than an artist who creates. As such, couture is confronted with this new reality, and forced to redefine itself.
Language of Fashion: The Codes of Christian Dior

It is no secret that Simons’ design philosophy is antithetical to the Dior client. Dior has a very distinct design legacy, which Horyn—in reference to the typical Dior clientele—describes as being very “feminine,” favoring designs that showcase a “silhouette,” has a signature “shape,” and often includes “embellishments, romance, and extravagance,” that are iconic motifs of Dior. Given this, Simons disrupts Dior with his modern interpretation of the “codes of Christian Dior.” Guided by Simons’ creative direction, the romantic vision of Christian Dior—the sculpted silhouettes, the tailored Bar jacket, and the signature floral motifs that have become associated with the house—is injected with a modern sensibility. The undercurrent at Dior, under Simons’ creative helm, is the tension of balancing old and new; the past and the future. The codes of Christian Dior are a prologue to any designer that steps into his polished shoes. Simons’ charge involves a degree of ambidexterity: honoring the brand’s heritage, understanding the Dior clientele, while crafting space for creative updates, remixes, and collaborations. Director Tcheng further communicates this emphasis on collaboration in his press release, that he hopes to “ultimately reveal a cross section of Parisian life, in the tradition of great French social realists like Renoir and Zola” (6). How then, does Simons fashion a Dior that is distinctively his own—set apart from previous notable Creative Directors such as John Galliano’s theatricality, or Yves Saint Laurent’s youthful energy? Simons avoids quotation and goes straight to the original source: the digitized Dior archives to resurrect the original designs of the couture house’s founder and artistic director, Christian Dior.

Referencing Dior’s original codes of femininity, style, and glamour, Simons breaks his own codes by showing the fashion world that he is more than a minimalist menswear designer. In fact, drawing from his background as an architect, Simons adopts a structural approach to his
reimagination of Dior’s original fashion language. He begins with the Bar jacket, the most iconic piece of Christian Dior’s debut haute couture collection in 1947. Simons injects a modern sensibility into Dior’s heritage through these codes, as “the past is activated for the present and significantly, in fashion design the present very quickly aligns itself with its own past” (Lehmann 298). Simons discerningly opens the Dior Fall 2012 couture show with his updated Bar jacket, as the model glides down the runway in an effortless tailored suit. The unmistakable Dior bar jacket with its cinched waist and fitted silhouette, paired with modern cigarette pants. This is a deliberate move that not only aligns him with its original creator, but also a subtle nod to his own signature style as the menswear-inspired look is a self-referential trope to Simons’ sartorial revival of the skinny black suit in his own menswear collections in the 90s. Further, to open a couture show with a two-piece suit instead of the anticipated gown signals to the audience that Dior by Raf Simons will be unlike any other predecessor. This particular suit, as the film captures, was shockingly spray-painted black a few days before the show, as Simons decided against its original production in white, opting for a decidedly modern edge with fashion’s favorite nondescript hue, black. The motif of the tailored black suit continues to another look in the collection, where Simons again updates the house codes by transforming a couture gown into a top, modernized with black cigarette pants.

The film depicts Simons’ creative process, where he directs the original full-length gown to be shortened, and the team obliges, decisively cutting away layers of fabric and tulle. The couture top maintains the romance, embellishments, and elaborate techniques with its intricate embroidery and Dior’s signature floral motif; yet when paired with black cigarette pants, offers updated couture for a modern clientele. As a disrupter of couture, Simons performs a dual aesthetics; allowing couture to challenge his work, but also pushing back to challenge old-style
couture. A balancing act of referencing archival Dior designs, while bringing modern energy, allusions, and art into the couture house’s legacy. In a sartorial analysis of Simons’ debut collection, his designs can be divided into three different categories in which he interprets these Dior codes with his own language of fashion. The first category includes pieces such as the iconic Bar jacket, injected with a modern sensibility—it is noteworthy that the first five looks of his collection are Bar-inspired two-piece suits. In this manner, the Bar jacket is given a modern update, and even transformed into dresses or reimagined without its lapel. Further, drawing from German writer, Karl Gutzkow, Lehmann continues to locate *la mode* in *la modernité*, and positions fashion as a “pacemaker for modernity and constant indicator for change” (302). The second category showcases a tribute to Dior’s iconic design and craftsmanship, showing off the elaborate techniques that couture demands. For example, Look Forty-Seven is a direct translation, albeit a shortened hemline, of one of Dior’s iconic dresses. A repertoire of elaborate embroidery creates dimension, giving the illusion of variegation found in nature.

Similarly, the hand cut nature gives this dress its shape and silhouette, and the embroidery is enacted with specific instructions by Simons. With its wasp waist and full skirt, this couture gown bears the Christian Dior signature. Showcasing his ambidexterity as a Creative Director, Simons demonstrates how he is able to update Dior designs with his own hand, while also preserving icons of Dior’s legacy, notably the Vilmiron dress, created in 1947. The Vilmiron dress, in particular, is also featured in *The Metropolitan’s Museum of Art’s* 2016 exhibition, *Manus x Machina*, which focuses on the representations of the handmade and machine made in haute couture. A commentary from the House of Dior notes: “all too often, we forget that embroidery is still done by hand, just as it was in the eighteenth century. We can succeed in completely covering a dress with millions of sequins or beads placed one by one by
fingers that, especially in our mechanical age, seem as though they come from fairy hands.”

Tcheng’s film, much like Simons’ work, carries an undertone of ambivalence. There is, on one hand, a push for modernization; yet a deep reverence for the legacy of Dior. Simons simultaneously strives to respect that legacy, while crafting his own vision in his debut collection. Similarly, filmmaker Tcheng attempts to capture the moveable feast of fashion in his film, preserving what is left of its Parisian heritage, while at the same time, desires to “emancipate” Simons from the entrapments of the institution, and to give his work a personal and authentic voice against the backdrop of Dior’s legacy.

In a third category, Simons continues to push boundaries and blur the lines on couture; he invents his own fashion language, disrupting couture with his modern allusions and art. Lehmann notes: that “Fashion solves this dilemma . . . by providing a dialectical environment in which any past object is potentially seen as historic, but at the same time serves as a basis for contemporary rendition, a novel version of an old form, revised for the latest trend, which in turn signposts the fashion to come” (301). In this final category, Simons references his love for modern art, interposing two different art forms in a post-modern pastiche. Simons defines that modernity and fashion mean to him his design something so specifically from this philosophy: “The whole idea of juxtaposing something so specifically from that time with something so specifically from this time—that is for me already modernity in itself.” Like Christian Dior, who drew inspiration from women’s bodies sought to redefine the female silhouette, Simons’ goal is update this silhouette in a “more dynamic manner because I find women very dynamic now.” He emphasizes functionality and style in his couture creation, with the modern and political inclusion of pockets (a much lacking necessity in womenswear) and insists that even the structural heels that are paired with his couture can be worn comfortably by women, “without being supported by a
Chiefly, Simons is resistant to embrace his reputation in the industry as minimalist designer, he clarifies that although he did take on minimalist brand, Jil Sander, before coming to Dior, his design philosophy is, in fact, a departure from minimalism. Deeply influenced by his training as an architect, Simons’ work plays with unconventional shapes and structure, injecting a modern sensibility into established silhouettes. As such, it comes not as a surprise that to Simons, modern art and fashion speak the same language. Simons often plays with a dual aesthetics of art and fashion, most notably the Ruby Sterling paintings that were brought to life through an innovative printmaking technique, and transposed into wearable pieces of art. Here, Simons developed fabrics based on Sterling’s paintings, employs an innovative technique where the designs are printed on the individual threads with the help of technology before the garment is put together by hand. In this manner, Simons furnishes Dior’s silhouettes with his own avant-garde blueprints. Yet, even modern designers, such as Sarah Burton for Alexandra McQueen emphasize the primacy of the hand in the creation of couture, “In a way, the hand is being lost today. It’s important to me that a piece of clothing always feels like it has been touched by the hand at some point, even if there is a lot of machine work involved.”

However, despite Simons push to modernize couture, his craft, like the rest of the fashion industry, is subject to commercial realities and an accelerated climate of demand and warp speed production cycles. Simons expresses that while he is grateful for the opportunity to create his own brand, and take on other brands as creative director, his priority as a designer is the space to create, and laments that the current demand of the system compromises that creative space. As

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4 *NYT* chief fashion correspondent, Alexander Fury, asserts that “to a certain extent any womenswear collection, at any level, should be a treatise on female identity at that particular moment in time.”
fashion production is progressively automated and digitized: from the design process, to manufacturing, and post-production, resulting in hyper-acceleration, creative burn-out and collapse. Tcheng’s *Dior and I* highlights the warp speed in which fashion is moving. In a *Women’s Wear Daily* interview, Simons notes that: “When you do six shows a year, there’s not enough time for the whole process,” he explains. "Technically, yes—the people who make the samples, do the stitching, they can do it. But you have no incubation time for ideas, and incubation time is very important.” Articles in the fashion press express a similar concern on fast fashion’s effect on the industry: warp speed is the new black, and fashion designers are burning out because the acceleration within the industry comes at a high cost of this incubation period, as Simons points out. Here, Simons reiterates two distinct categories of analysis and issues surrounding fast fashion and haute couture which are crucial to understanding fashion’s crisis and collapse: “craftsmanship” (the making, workmanship) contrasted with “design” (the ideas, conceptual work). It is this lack of “incubation” time, rather than the rampant copying of original runway designs in fast fashion, that are central to couture’s crisis. This speed invades the couture industry and builds acceleration across different channels. The industry is being conquered by increasingly blurred lines, and a collapsing of boundaries as it is forced to redefine what is haute couture and the new order of business today.\(^5\)

\(^5\) Further, as Horyn asserts the “trendlessness” of fashion today, reiterating how haute couture as lost its former influence as the industry’s epicenter: “In the past, trends allowed every part of the fashion business to get a piece of the action. Department stores should sell their beloved “hot items,” magazine could assert their authority over readers and manufacturers could produce endless knock-offs. . . Now, though, every brand, every media outlet, is focused on creating its own universe, ostensibly for the people who want its products or to buy into a point of view.”
Business of Fashion: Warp Speed is the New Black

On account of Simons’ radical approach to modernizing couture, a simmering tension between couture and commerce runs throughout Simons’ artistic direction at Dior, a conflict in which he had a high personal stake. Perhaps he privately held a personal disappointment that he ended up being more of a curator of fashion than a creator. For Simons, to be held in the position of creative director for an established brand like Dior, brings the entrapments of legacy and expectation. Having to work within the confines of the Dior codes, Simons’ role as Creative Director positions him closer to an administrative figure; rather than a creative one. Simons’ role is more similar to a fashion editor or curator, where he selects styles from the design team, as opposed to sketching his own original designs. His work positioned him squarely at this intersection of artistry and commerce. Having to constantly negotiate his artistic ambitions with the commercial concerns for his couture collection was an area where tensions between Simons and the atelier surfaced.

A particular scene showcases this tension: it is the day of Simons first in-house showing, and the ten couture dresses that are to be viewed are nowhere to be found. It is later revealed to both Simons and the audience that the *flou* premiere was flown out to New York for a custom fitting and readjustment for a particular client. In a hushed, though heated tone, Simons stresses that it is not practical to give up a premiere for a private client, when the atelier is already running behind time for their debut collection. However, Catherine Rivièdre, Director of Haute Couture, states that executive decisions such as these, are precisely what allows couture to be sustainable. As one of the two houses that still does couture, it is these private clients that still allow the ateliers to run and preserve the heritage of Dior in a modern society. “Haute couture needs to earn money otherwise we can’t afford such collections and maintain such ateliers. It
happens to be profitable when a woman orders 350,000 Euros each season. I won’t say no if she requests a fitting.” She gestures with her hands, insinuating that they are figuratively tied, and adds with a wry smile, “you can’t have it all.”

Yet, with the seamstresses not having down time between collections and private clients, the balancing act of commercial and creative priorities becomes one that is fraught with much tension. The audience is invited to reimagine what defines couture and why might these qualities preclude commercial success? Similarly, how does a fashion house define profit and why might these qualities preclude a designer’s aesthetic value? Simons may have very particular criteria to bring these two seemingly contradictory figures into conversation. Therefore, as Tcheng has set out to tell Simons’ story of “emancipation” in Dior and I, one asks if Simons’ emancipation is achieved through his modernization of Dior, or in the fact that he left the Couture house in 2012 to start his own line, ultimately breaking free from the trappings of the Couture industry?6

Ultimately, the film illustrates, paradoxically, Couture must embrace technology and produce this other commercial realm in order for itself to exist as the artistic and the haute. A realm that has existed, in fact, as long as fashion is itself, gesturing again to Worth’s debut of haute Couture and ready-to-wear lines at the same time.

In his leadership role at Dior, Simons strived to balance culture with commerce; his own creative liberty with the house’s pre-established codes, to create Couture that is not only modern, but strikingly his own. Indeed, Simons created a language of fashion that was both grounded and highly conceptual, his work not only felt modern and directional, but it also contributed to a 60 percent rise in haute Couture profits since 2011, as Sidney Toledano, Dior CEO, reported to the French press. This was significant, as Couture remains a largely unprofitable business. By

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6 At present, Raf Simons is co-Creative Director for Prada (2021), along with managing his eponymous line, after leaving Calvin Klein (2016-2018).
contrast, Dior’s financial statements reveal that the brand’s profits plummeted following Simons’ exit. In this manner, Simons disrupted Dior as a contemporary force, with a democratic couture as the distillation of his creative vision. Yet, despite his creative and commercial success at Dior, Simons’ unexpected departure from the brand in 2015, signaled a significant shift in the industry’s climate of crisis and collapse, or perhaps a sartorial ideal that Simons has yet to achieve. While the film appears to present the binary relationship between haute couture and ready-to-wear, gesturing at the superiority of haute couture as a mode of fashion, Tcheng departs from this traditional approach through his representation of modern couture in *Dior and I*, inverting the traditionally held hierarchy between the two modes of production with Simons’ disruptions at Dior. Thus, the modernization of couture leads us to consider the increasingly blurred lines and collapsing boundaries that previously defined the fashion industry. Even with Simons’ hand in couture’s modernization, the demands of this warp speed are too much even for a modern Dior.

In closing, Anzia Yezierska’s *Salome of the Tenements* (1922) records a cultural structure that is iterable, and easily taken up by later observers of the same sartorial scene, as this thesis has sought to demonstrate with Frédéric Tcheng’s *Dior and I* (2014). Even though both *Salome of the Tenements* and *Dior and I* lean heavily on an understanding of Parisian haute couture as the private, privileged space, on one hand, and prêt-à-porter as the public space of the avant-garde and democratic fashion, on the other. Yet, taken together, these artists rally a new mode for the future of fashion. While Tcheng, like Yezierska, relies on similar cultural assumptions surrounding haute couture, as the previous chapter has also highlighted the extent to which these artists deconstruct the very sartorial models they appear to uphold through their works of art, complicates this understanding that has shifted throughout the twentieth century. At the end of
the film, couture remains a complicated question for *Dior and I*. The title of the film leaves the subject “I” open to interpretation: is the protagonist designer Raf Simons, director Frédéric Tcheng, or in contrast, the audience as we grapple with our own questions *after couture*? Such narrative details would seem to rehearse a scene that glorifies Parisian couture in its cultural legacy, yet while the film does indeed celebrate couture's heritage, in many ways, it also seeks an emancipation.
Conclusion: The Future of Fashion

The preceding chapters have discussed the crisis and collapse of the fashion industry. Contrary to popular assumptions that fashion’s crisis is attributed to issues of counterfeit and plagiarism in fast fashion, I have asserted that the industry is resilient, as it has always had to deal with copying and imitation on display. Whereas the real issue is the warp speed and acceleration which fast fashion champions, resulting in shorter production cycles where clothing is being manufactured at a faster rate than designed, creating a greater demand for new ideas. As the phenomenon of fast fashion has created a hyper-accelerated industry, which results in creativity burnout and the collapse of the couture industry. The warp speed creates an inversion on two fronts: the automated manufacturing process is now shorter than the design process, with designers working against corset-tight deadlines, this lack of incubation time results in creativity burn-out and an exodus of designers leaving storied fashion houses.

In arguing for the sartorial significance of these works in the context of fashion’s crisis and collapse, I have suggested that Frédéric Tcheng’s fashion documentary is a visual representation of not only how Simons strives to emancipate himself and his work from the cultural legacy of Dior, but that these cinematic and literary accounts insofar intervene in a broader cultural conversation surrounding the crisis and collapse of the modern fashion industry. Likewise, this thesis has suggested that these works of art demonstrates that the crisis of couture’s collapse is internal to the fashion industry across decades and generations. Specifically, the novel and film present a duo of modern designers that perform a reciprocal aesthetic: Sonya, on one hand, seeks to emancipate couture, making “beauty accessible for all,” while Simons, on the other, strives to emancipate couture from what it has become—a cultural product of a hyper-accelerated industry, driven by out-of-control demand and upended production cycles of fast
fashion. Like Yezierska’s sartorial fiction, Tcheng’s fashion documentary sets itself up as a story of emancipation. Simons, like Dior before him, desires to revise the past and create something new. While Sonya, ahead of Chanel, seeks to fashion the future through the revolution of the little black dress. Taken together, these two artists create a new modern story that fashion tells about itself. Indeed, the business of fashion is the industry’s prerogative to champion a new democracy: one in which couture is required to create this other realm for it to survive.

Therefore, ultimately expanding on the cultural structure that is inside twentieth-century fashion made evident in these two texts, the dual aim of this thesis has demonstrated that Chanel and Dior adopt a democratic approach to creative design and this business strategy positions them as couture houses that survive across time. More broadly, linking these works of art to their historical counterparts offers insights into the ideology of fashion across time and replicates conditions of conversations over the decades. Even though the conversation has changed so completely, these perennial sartorial issues continue to inform future conversations after couture.
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