***‘If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.’***

**Covid, couture and the 1%**

*Jonathan Faiers*

**Abstract**

The current pandemic is demanding a radical reconceptualization of fashion. In the context of an unprecedented economic decline, the collapse of physical fashion retailing and a fundamental interrogation of previous clothing consumption patterns, can the same be said of haute couture luxury fashion? Taking the current couture season’s promotional films as a starting point, this article discusses whether couture and its clientele has been forced to adapt or remains largely unaltered since couture’s establishment in the nineteenth century and as represented in literature.

**Key words**: Haute Couture. Charles Frederick Worth. Display. Privilege. Zola.

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**Day1:**

Wake up in Seville and get ready for Gambattista’s ballet class. Choose powder pink organdie ruffles, metres and metres, big 60s hair, part Marisa Berenson part early Dolly Parton. Those flower masks get in the way though. And white horses.

Shopping with Giorgio in the Palazzo Orsini, Milan.

Casting session for Olivier now at Azzarro. Act dreamy in sequins and strass. Décor - Hall of Mirrors, blurry split screen *nouvelle vague*.

Take Alexandre Vauthier clubbing at Le Palace – a remix of Cerrone’s *Supernature* the perfect late 70s soundscape.

**Day 2:**

Meet Daniel Roseberry and work on the surreal body beautiful, paying strict attention to Elsa’s fitness regime, of course.

On to a session of paint balling with Charles de Vilmorin, his parrot and the ghost of Niki de Saint Phalle (and Rebecca Horn and McQueen and Charles Jeffrey and….).

Just time to get Pat McGrath to apply gold face paint and rush off to Rome and the Galleria Colonna for Valentino. Stay upright on all of that polished marble and in those platform wedges. So glad Pierpaolo wore his mask: “It’s not a caftan, or a poncho.

It’s a shape”.[[1]](#endnote-1)

House party (and jumble sale) at Ronald Van der Kemp. ‘Behind Closed Doors’ and on the roof, and in the lobby. Shows us his new paintings – ‘ethical dada’.

After party. Get real with Area and Precious Lee “every type of body is beautiful”[[2]](#endnote-2) as long as you fling on 500,000 Swarovskis.

**Day 3:**

Appointment with Christian for a tarot reading, then it’s off to the château to dig up Roger Corman and the *The Masque of the Red Death* (without the fun). Meet yourselves (both of them in the bathtub). The usual crowd, Maria, the Hanged Man, the Devil, the Moon, the Papesse. More white horses, and so much brocade, so nineteenth century.

Get lost in Kim Jones and the Fendi girls’ shiny new mirror maze. To pass the time join Demi and Adwoa’s reading group - book of the month Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*.

Mingle with the guests at Virginie’s wedding, venue – parents of the bride Coco and Karl’s ‘little’ Grand Palais in the country. (Bring your own horse).

Shopping for fungi and ocean plastic with Iris in the “wood wide web”[[3]](#endnote-3) and feel connected.

After finding the abandoned munitions factory, V&R’s ‘couture rave’ is pretty tame, more silent disco than acid house.

This imaginary couture spring 2021 diary was inspired by viewing the latest season’s collections as online videos, widely available on a variety of platforms. These films’ accessibility, suggestive of proximity to the exclusive world of haute couture, have been understood as presaging a democratisation of couture. Indeed, many of its creators have promoted the global pandemic and the necessity of presenting collections online, as offering a much needed and overdue corrective to the business of luxury couture fashion. Time spent in lockdown has, it appears, focussed many of couture’s biggest players on rediscovering a new meaning in the slow, labour intensive creative process that results in the vesitmentary extravaganzas now represented on film, reaching new audiences, if not consumers. Typical is Giorgio Armani’s pontification that couture “*represents the pinnacle of creativity and sartorial skill, but is a world available only to very few. Today, through the democracy of the Internet, we are able to offer a front row seat to everyone*.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

This of course is nonsense, these fleeting moments, evanescent visions of impossible luxury are not invitations, we are merely voyeurs without even the glimpse of the front row worthies typically seen in the backgrounds of the static runway shots that traditionally disseminate haute couture’s proceedings to a wider audience. A possible exception to this being Chanel’s presentation in the Grand Palais where as a result of the camera work of the film’s director Anton Corbijn we are inserted periodically amongst the small group of socially distanced Chanel ambassadors, a chance to occupy one of the many vacant gilded chairs, until the film catapults us back to reality, or at least to a realisation of the unreality of film by finishing, as it had started, in black and white. Our fantasies of being part of Chanel’s celebration of survival in a time of plague, exposed as nothing but a construct.

 Insert Fig. 1

These tantalising visions although brought to us by the latest technology flash back to a similar series of fashionable spectacles captured in words some 150 years earlier, to a time when Parisian Haute Couture was in its infancy. Émile Zola’s 1872 novel *La Curée*, usually translated as *The Kill,* published just four years after the founding in 1868 of the organization which still regulates haute couture today, the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne, opens with a scene set in the Bois de Boulogne. The passage in effect is a description of a fashion parade for the super wealthy, consisting of a procession of immaculate horse drawn, state of the art carriages, accompanied by ostentatious liveried footmen carrying their exquisitely dressed owners preoccupied with seeing and being seen. In a novel replete with detailed descriptions of dress, this first encounter with the story’s fashion-obsessed heroine Renée is typical

“*Renée leaned forward to look, resting her hand on the low door of the barouche. Over a gown consisting of a mauve silk polonaise and tunic, trimmed with wide, plaited flounces, she wore a little coat of white cloth and mauve velvet lapels, which made her look very smart. Her strange, fawn-coloured hair, like the colour of fine butter, was barely concealed by a tiny bonnet adorned with a little bunch of Bengal roses.*”[[5]](#endnote-5)

Zola’s novel provides a portrait of Paris convulsing under the systematic programme of modernisation known today as Haussmannisation. The neurotic and dissolute Renée, wife of the relentlessly avaricious property speculator Aristide Saccard appears throughout the many scenes of luxurious dinners, balls, carriage rides and promenades in a series of dazzling haute couture outfits, in which she becomes a vestimentary symbol of the excess, promiscuity and greed that underpin the foundations of this new Paris.

Reading the novel today with its relentless attention to the details of fashion, to the wearing of fashion and the creation of fashion by the ‘genius’ couturier Worms, a thinly disguised caricature of Charles Frederick Worth , the acknowledged ‘father of haute couture’ (more of whom shortly), produces a similar, if ultimately more memorable, experience of ‘death by couture’, as watching this current season’s couture films.

There is, however, a crucial difference between Zola’s world and the imaginings of today’s filmmakers, and that is the visibility of couture’s consumers. Renée and her fashionable clique are haute couture’s clientele, unlike the models, super or nearly super, that wear the clothes in couture film, who are of course ideals. The exhibtionary architecture of Haussmann’s Paris provided Zola with the perfect setting for the novel’s many scenes of the public display of privilege. Broad avenues, and boulevards, landscaped gardens and a domestic architecture of transparency making full use of the newly available large expanses of plate glass, showcase the fashionably wealthy, fashionably enjoying themselves for the gaze of onlookers, couture being an essential part of this display of conspicuous consumption.

At its peak around 1947 when Christian Dior presented his ‘new look’, there were calculated to be some 20,000 couture clients worldwide consisting primarily of European aristocracy, and the wives of bankers and billionaire U.S. industrialists. Figures such as Nan Kempner whom Dian Vreeland thought the only chic woman in America and Barbara (Babe) Paley fashion icon whose second husband William S. Paley was the founder of CBS. Today there are between only 3 to 4000 haute couture clients in the world, the figures are vague as many of those wealthy enough to afford today’s haute couture also demand absolute discretion and anonymity. A proportion of society far more infinitesimal than the much discussed one percenters, these are the incalculably wealthy.[[6]](#endnote-6) Today’s couture customers are more likely to be found in China such as fashion philanthropist, heiress and Giambattista Valli fan Wendy Yu, Russia, India, Latin America and especially the Gulf; Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar including Queen Rania of Jordan and Shaikha Moza bint Nasser. Even before the pandemic these newer couture customers would more than likely see the clothes privately when presented to them at exclusive individual showings in hotels or presaging recent developments, online.

Economist Thomas Piketty in his influential *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* suggests that “*The inescapable reality is this: wealth is so concentrated that a large segment of society is virtually unaware of its existence, so that some people imagine that it belongs to surreal or mysterious entities”’[[7]](#endnote-7)* With a few notable exceptions, haute couture’s clients are similarly ‘*surreal or mysterious entities*’ largely unknown, unimaginably wealthy, possessed of riches untouched by the recent economic global crisis brought about by the Covid-19 Pandemic. A distant reminder of the age of the visible super wealthy occasionally surfaced before the pandemic in figures such as heiress and fashion muse Daphne Guinness, scion of the brewing dynasty and Celine Dion the Canadian singer and notable haute couture collector who in her regular media-ready, red-carpet, pre-Covid appearances communed with Zola’s fictional clothes-obsessed counterpart Renée also given to head turning entrances:

*“Renée’s entrance provoked a murmur of admiration. She was really divine. Above a tulle skirt, decorated at the back with a cascade of flounces, she wore a bodice of pale-green satin bordered with English lace, caught up and fastened with large bunches of violets; a single flounce adorned the front of the skirt, and bunches of violets held together by garlands of ivy, fastened a light muslin drapery. Her head and bust appeared adorably gracious above these regal, richly elaborate petticoats. The dress was so low-cut that her nipples were almost visible, while her arms were bare and she had clusters of violets at her shoulders: she seemed to emerge quite naked from her sheath of tulle and satin…She was wearing a necklace with pendants, of perfect transparency and on her forehead an aigrette made of sprigs of silver set with diamonds. She stood for a few moments on the threshold, magnificent in her dress, her shoulders shimmering in the light like watered silk.”[[8]](#endnote-8)*

As invaluable as Zola is as a reference for how the super-rich of the latter half of the nineteenth century dressed, his understanding of how this unabashed flaunting of wealth and privilege was fundamental to the society he so ruthlessly interrogated is as prescient now in a climate of economic upheaval and transformation as it was to the period he was writing in. Piketty, whose preferred authors are Balzac and Austen notes that *“These and other novelists depicted the effects of inequality with a verisimilitude and evocative power that no statistical or theoretical analysis can match*”[[9]](#endnote-9) and later suggests that unlike today’s super rich the display of wealth and privilege was unapologetic and *“in a sense, a minority was chosen to live on behalf of everyone else, but no one tried to pretend that this minority was more meritorious or virtuous than the rest.”[[10]](#endnote-10)* An intrinsic part of that minority’s sense of entitlement was to be extravagantly well-dressed.

Much was made prior to the pandemic of not only the death of fashion, or at least the need for a radical rethinking of current systems of fashion consumption and production, but of the need to return to the principles of the couture tradition. Lidewij (Li) Edlekoort the influential trend forecaster in 2015 released her *Anti\_Fashion: A Manifesto for the Next Decade*, subtitled *Ten Reasons Why the Fashion System is Obsolete* in which she mourns the decline of fashion design suggesting that the celebrated fashion designers of the past were able to change society by introducing new silhouettes, new postures and new forms of movement, but that today's designers, however, more and more recycle trends from the past. Later in the manifesto she goes onto predict that couture will make a comeback, occupying the void left by fashion: "*After all it is in the atelier of couture that we will find the laboratory of this labor of love. Suddenly the profession of couturier will become coveted and the exclusive way of crafting couture will be inspiring all others*."[[11]](#endnote-11)

The pandemic and enforced isolation has to a large extent rendered one of the principle functions of fashion; to construct and display our identities, whether aesthetic, economic, or subcultural to others via our choice of clothing, if not obsolete, at least partial, as we struggle to project those identities in the limited space of the screen. There has, conversely, also been a rise in the consumption of lower priced online clothing, presumably enjoyed in absentia of the physical act of shopping and perhaps out of sheer boredom, clicking on and purchasing fashion taking its place alongside ordering meals online and endless channel surfing as part of the daily routine of lockdown. Accompanying this for some, the rediscovery of the value of existing garments, especially their emotional significance alongside a resurgence in domestic craft techniques such as embroidery and knitting has stimulated a new appreciation of the materiality of fashion, its fabrication and its tactile pleasures. All of which would suggest that once the current crisis abates and it is possible to socialise once again there will be an inevitable reaction to months of isolated dressing for comfort and a re-found desire to dress, if not necessarily to impress, but to establish a new relationship to the clothes we wear based on sensory pleasure and the appreciation of technical skill, which returns us once again to the world of haute couture.

Insert Fig. 2

As suggested at the beginning of this text, many haute couture designers have suggested that along with the rest of the fashion industry the pandemic has hit them hard, and that designing and creating couture remotely, having to reduce the number of skilled artisans typically employed by couture houses and the lack of physical contact between client and designer has presented enormous challenges. The political and social expediency of maintaining this message is obvious when much of the ready to wear fashion industry as it existed before the pandemic has already started to fade from memory. But beyond the Covid rhetoric it seems that for the haute couture consumer, Piketty’s ‘surreal’ and ‘mysterious entities’, the fabled 1%, it is, if not business, at least inherited wealth, as usual. While seclusion and social distancing has now become our ‘new normal’ in order to keep free from infection, for the incalculably wealthy seclusion, remoteness and distance from the public has always been the preferred option. The elite social groups (bubbles perhaps?) amongst which these beings customarily circulate are hermetically sealed, their borders patrolled, and within which they continue life as normal inoculated against harm having already received long ago the vaccine of privilege. Giambattista Valli, a favourite of many of today’s most ardent couture devotees, is perhaps less disingenuous than some of his colleagues confessing when asked whether he was able to sell any of his signature extravagantly layered and ruffled ball gowns from the Fall 2020 collection (the first lockdown couture season) *“Did I, did I, did I! I have some very extraordinary Chinese clients who are looking for these statement moments. It’s also working really well in the Middle East, and there’s commitment in Europe. Haute couture can always be adapted to demand.”*[[12]](#endnote-12)

Haute couture’s apparent stasis, its imperviousness to change inspired the title of this article taken from *The Leopard*, Tomasi di Lampedusa’s celebrated novel of defiance in the face of cataclysmic change set during the *risorgimento*, the unification of Italy that occurred during the 1860s. The novel’s most famous line “*If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.”*[[13]](#endnote-13) Seems especially pertinent when considering not only haute couture’s privileged consumers many of whom have no doubt consolidated their economic position and power during the pandemic, but to the couture industry itself, which in order to maintain its clientele has modified at least some aspects of its working methods. Garments now typically take even longer to produce as a result of distanced working methods, and this increased intensity and duration of labour involved in their production of course only increases their eventual cost and perceived value. Similarly, the availability of couture via the films produced during the pandemic discussed previously, while promising a new accessibility to this elite world only reaffirms the privilege of those for whom haute couture is a reality rather than just a digital imaginary, Lampedusa’s “*few hundred people who made up ‘the world’, never tired of meeting each other, always the same ones, to exchange congratulations on still existing*”[[14]](#endnote-14)

Insert Fig. 3

The myth of the creative genius of couture has, it seems, also managed to survive untouched by the pandemic judging from the pronouncements still made to accompany the recent Covid couture seasons. It is tempting to see a parallel between Zola’s caricature of the couturier Worms in *The Kill* and some of the more esoteric declarations made by contemporary designers, such as Pierpaolo Piccioli, the creative director of Valentino, concerning his designs for spring 2021. Piccioli discussing his latest collection which he dubbed *Code Temporal* suggests “*The narrative of the collection is the collection itself”* and continues that*“To me, the essence of couture is the ritual, the process, the care, the humanity*” and when discussing a white cashmere cape offers “*It’s not a caftan, or a poncho. It’s a shape*.”[[15]](#endnote-15) In Zola’s novel, the creator of Renee’s extravagant outfits is the great Worms, a thinly disguised caricature of Charles Frederick Worth. Worth popularly regarded as the first true couturier, or the father of haute couture, (although other scholars would suggest that Hippolyte Leroy predates Worth as , in effect, the grandfather of couture) started his career working for textile companies in England in the 1830s and 40s during which he also studied paintings in the National Gallery acquiring a detailed knowledge of historical dress, which he would eventually put to good use as a couturier, and in his process of self-fashioning, an acute awareness of the importance of image that seems remarkably pertinent to the promotion of couture today. To bolster his image Worth affected a sort of painterly get up, including large velvet caps after the painter Rembrandt, reinforcing his reputation as an artist rather than mere dress maker. Relocating to Paris he eventually opened his own dressmaking business in 1858.

Combining many of the features now recognised as essential to the production, consumption and dissemination of contemporary haute couture, Worth is credited with being the first couturier to present seasonal collections created by himself, rather than according to individual clients’ wishes, of using the most opulent and costly materials, presenting his creations on live mannequins, combining a distinctive sense of ‘fashionability’ as well as an expert knowledge of historic costume which he skilfully incorporated into his distinctive designs and promoting himself and his house by being perhaps the first dress designer to use identifiable garment labels. We can also see in Worth the origins of the fashion designer as artist, as creative genius, a construct already promoted so effectively by Worth that Zola’s readers of the time would recognise in the character of Worms (his very name reminiscent of death and decay) the real couturier Worth, the philosophical tortured genius, an unchanging role model for today’s couturiers whom it is not too difficult to imagine in the following two passages written in the nineteenth century:

*“After a few minutes the master, as if gripped by inspiration, sketched in broad strokes the work of art he had just conceived, exclaiming in short phrases:*

*‘A Montespan dress in pale-grey faille… the skirt describing a round basque in front…, large grey satin bows to bring it up on the hips…, and a puffed apron of pearl-grey tulle, the puffs separated by strips of grey satin.”*

*“But at other times inspiration was slow to come. The illustrious Worms summoned it in vain, and concentrated his faculties to no purpose. He puckered his eyebrows, turned livid, took his head in his hands and shook it in despair, and, beaten, throwing himself into an armchair, would mutter in a pitiful voice: ‘No, no, not today…It’s impossible…You ladies expect too much. My inspiration has completely dried up.’ He would show Renée out, repeating: ‘I can’t relate to you this morning’.”[[16]](#endnote-16)*

Looking at the recent spring 2021 couture collections online during the current crisis, one is struck both by a sense of mortality and survival. The procession of impossibly costly and exquisitely crafted garments are destined to be worn by phantoms, beings unseen, unknown and to all intents and purposes non-existent. For these ghosts, as Giorgio Armani suggested “*The quest for beauty is eternal*” and so these opulent shrouds that flicker across our screens, offer glimpses of an imaginary domain untouched by the tidal wave of suffering and death that the real world is currently submerged by. For these dazzling shades their afterlife of excess goes on, the orders continue to be placed and the display of silken privilege endures and whether in contemporary Qatar, Shanghai or 1860s Sicily

“The ladies’ dresses would arrive from Naples in long black cases like coffins, and there would be an hysterical coming and going of milliners, hairdressers and shoemakers; of exasperated servants carrying excited notes to fitters.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

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**Illustration captions and credits**

Fig. 1 *Room for one more at Chanel?*

Still from promotional film for Chanel couture Spring-summer 2021(Screengrab author’s own)

Fig. 2 *Uniting the divided self at Dior?*

Still from ‘Le Château du Tarot’ promotional film for Christian Dior couture Spring-Summer 2021 (Screengrab author’s own)

Fig. 3 *Socially distanced Pierpaolo*

Still from Code Temporal promotional film for Valentino couture Spring-Summer 2021 (Screengrab author’s own)

**Notes**

1. Quoted in Valentino Spring 2021 Couture report by Sarah Mower, 26/01/2021. Vogue.com

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<https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/fashion/shows-trends/g25978918/best-couture-fashion-week/> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Émile Zola, *The Kill*, 2004, p.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Alice Cary in her 2020 article ‘The Lowdown on the World’s Most Notable Couture Clients Past and Present’ suggests ‘regular couture clients are thought to number just 4000’ see <https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/gallery/couture-clients> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 2014, p.259. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Zola, 2004, pp.20-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Piketty, 2014, p.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. p.416 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Quoted in ‘Li Edelkoort publishes manifesto explaining why “fashion is obsolete”’ by Marcus Fairs, 02/03/2015, Dezeen.com

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13. Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard,* 2007, p.19. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. p.162 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
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16. Zola, 2004, pp.91-92. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Lampedusa, 2007, p.163 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)