Aesthetic objects on display: The objectification of fashion models as a situated practice

Sylvia M. Holla
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract
This article unravels the process of objectification by empirically examining a social context where it occurs almost incessantly: fashion modeling. Drawing on an ethnography of fashion modeling in Amsterdam, Paris and Warsaw, I argue that objectification is neither ubiquitous nor one-dimensional: it takes place in specific social contexts and unfolds itself differently under different social conditions. Moreover, objectification is not unidirectional: it is done by and happens to both men and women. By taking an experiential perspective which involves models’ subjective responses to being objectified, I call into question theoretical arguments of objectification pertaining to disempowered subjects, and the assumption that objectification is inherently negative or immoral. Instead, I argue that objectification is socially rooted in institutions and specific situations and that this matters considerably for its varying forms, levels of intensity and the emotional and practical responses it evokes in people. This does not imply that objectification is less compelling as a process, or easy to avoid. Objectification might be all the more effective exactly because the process is embedded in different social contexts, and adapts itself accordingly.

Keywords
Aesthetic labour, beauty standards, docile agency, experience of self, fashion modeling, objectification

Introduction
To put it disrespectfully, a model is just a coat rack. A dress up doll. Like an architect has a piece of earth to build on, for me the model is the contour of my creation [...]
They don’t have to be very skinny, just straight, without very pronounced forms.
(Lucy, Amsterdam fashion designer)

Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it’s caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But, because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 163)

Amsterdam fashion designer Lucy objectifies the models she works with, describing them as ‘things among things’: bodies, coat racks, pieces of earth to showcase her designs, the products of her individual, creative subjectivity. This article unravels this process of objectification by empirically examining a social context in which it is almost incessant: fashion modeling. I argue that just as there are many ways in which people can be used or seen as things, objectification is a multifaceted process, experienced in a wide range of ways. Unlike in early feminist literature, in this article I suggest that objectification is not necessarily a bad thing: models working for Lucy may enjoy their work, may even be proud of being ‘a coat rack’.

Objectification has been studied extensively in (social) psychological, sociological and feminist studies. In the latter, it is often interpreted as resulting from an (internalised) male gaze (Mulvey, 1975; Chapkis, 1986; Bordo, 1993; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997) and has frequently been conflated with sexual objectification: women are reduced to sexual instruments to be used or looked at by others, predominantly men (Coy, 2009). In early feminist theory, objectification was attacked as harmful and immoral because of its dehumanising effects (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1987). Contemporary feminists like Gill (2003, 2007) and McRobbie (2008) continue this, interpreting women’s positive accounts of objectifying experiences as misguided, even as examples of false consciousness. For them, celebratory accounts of being looked at or sexualised are instances of internalised misogyny (Cahill, 2012: x), or caused by consumerist ideology.

While all these studies tend to reduce objectification to a common, generalisable, negative phenomenon, philosopher Ann Cahill argues that rather than seeing them as an a priori negative event, detrimental to the self, objectifying experiences are better understood ‘as often crucial elements to a flourishing sense of self’ (2012: x). I follow this line of thought in an empirical analysis of objectification. Acknowledging that objectification is an integrated aspect of social interaction enables an empirical interrogation of the idea of objectification as ‘good or bad’. I also look at how fashion models subjectively experience objectification (cf. Mahmood, 2001), and in doing so I draw on Martha Nussbaum (1995), who unpacks the notion of objectification into at least seven distinct forms to explore objectification in situated, institutionalised practice.

Building on Mears’s (2011) ethnographic work on the creation and valuation of ‘looks’ in fashion modeling, I further argue that modeling is an extreme case, a field where objectification happens almost continuously. However, there are different forms and levels of intensity under different conditions: objectification may entail models being treated as only a body, unacknowledged as persons; being highly
replaceable; or not being seen or heard at all. My analysis shows that, in many cases, while being objectified is not an enjoyable experience, it is not fundamentally bad, and more ‘active’ forms can be experienced as empowering, potentially productive to the self.

Drawing on an ethnography of fashion modeling in Amsterdam, Paris and Warsaw, I demonstrate that objectification is neither ubiquitous nor one-dimensional, but rather takes place in specific social contexts, unfolding differently under different conditions. I argue that instead of being unidirectional, objectification is done by, and happens to, both men and women. At the same time, female models often face different kinds of objectification simultaneously and experience it as more challenging. Thus, rather than the practice of objectification, it is the subjective experience of it that is gendered.

Considering how being objectified is subjectively experienced leads to a theoretical exploration of what it means to be objectified. Although fashion modeling is often associated with oppression and victimisation, in society modeling is a high-status profession and, more importantly, models do not see themselves as victims. Here an experiential angle enables a move beyond theoretical discussions about power and agency.

Theories of objectification

Objectification has been theorised by feminist scholars who have engaged with displays of, and gazes upon, women in particular (cf. Mulvey, 1975; Rubin, 1975; Dworkin, 1981; Chapkis, 1986; MacKinnon, 1987; Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Van Zoonen, 1994). This article responds to several controversies arising from these by integrating insights from Nussbaum’s (1995), Butler’s (1997), Cahill’s (2012) and Mahmood’s (2001) analyses of objectification, subjectivation and subjectivity to enable new questions about objectification as a socially situated practice. I relate objectification to three issues: first, the subjective experience of objectification; second, its genderedness; and third, its multifaceted and situated nature.

According to Cahill, feminist thinkers have paid little attention to objectification by means of direct, empirical analysis (2012: 1), often employing the concept without explicit or detailed articulation of its meanings. In fact, most research and theorising broadly defines objectification as a negative event, emphasising its de-humanising effects. For Fredrickson and Roberts, objectification is ‘the experience of being treated as a body, valued predominantly for its use to – or consumption by – others’ (1997: 174). Similarly, Bartky states that it occurs when ‘a body is separated from a person, reduced to the status of instrument or commodity, or regarded as if it is capable of representing the entire person’ (1990, cited in Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997: 175). Dworkin (1981) and MacKinnon (1987) argue that instrumentalisation undermines individuals’ ability to decide what is valuable and to find ways to realise and promote this value, leading to the reduction of individuals to the status of things without autonomy or subjectivity, that
exist solely to be used, and possibly violated and abused, by others. This denial of humanity makes objectification immoral (Papadaki, 2010: 17, 21. For more agentic depictions of women on display, see: Rubin, 1975; Chapkis, 1986; and Mears, 2011). Other accounts, usually from (social) psychology, repeatedly demonstrate how objectification has negative psychological outcomes, including, but not limited to, disordered eating and low self-esteem (Noll and Fredrickson, 1998; Muehlenkamp and Saris-Baglama, 2002). Some scholars, however, have found people finding pleasure in being objectified, as, for example, when it occurs in appreciative or sexually arousing ways (such as Strossen, 1995; Mears, 2011).

Much of this work makes a strong case for objectification as disempowering and highly unfavourable. However, from Cahill’s perspective, being perceived and treated as an object is inevitable, precisely because the human self is embodied. Our subjectivity is material: we are body-subjects and -objects. Feona Attwood notes that the exposure of the body – male and female – has become so central to forms of popular representation and individual self-expression (2010: 2) that presenting oneself as an object, and being perceived as one, has become inescapable. Cahill also argues that the experience of being an object, a bodily being whose material appearance arouses the (for example sexual) interest of another, is potentially enhancing to one’s sense of self (2012: x). Building on these, this article considers the possibility that being (seen as) an aesthetic object with aesthetic meaning might contribute to feelings of self-worth, legitimacy and acknowledgement. By considering models’ subjective responses, whether negative or positive, objectification becomes an empirical question. Some theorists of postfeminism reject this, arguing that objectification today also involves tricking women into accepting or even celebrating their own objectified status. According to Gill, objectification today is disguised as sexual subjectification (2003: 5), giving a (false) sense of being ‘knowing, active and desiring’ while actually marking a shift from ‘an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze’ (Gill, 2003: 104, cited in Attwood, 2010: 2). McRobbie too argues that new forms of constraints and regulation of popular and consumer culture are concealed under a ‘quasi-feminist vocabulary’ that uncritically celebrates the proliferation of female ‘freedoms’ (2008: 548). However, this perspective denies the (female) subject agency and excludes the subject’s voice (Duits and Van Zoonen, 2006: 114). The claim that women are deceived into believing that they have individually and freely chosen their own situation – by patriarchy, neoliberal ideology or, as McRobbie sees it, by a ‘quasi-feminist’ discourse – is a claim to ‘know better than the subject’, rendering women unconscious of their own oppression.

Following Mahmood (2001: 225), I believe that empirically studying subjective experience is especially important when these practices are precipitately considered objectionable from an outsider perspective. This is generally true for fashion models, who are easily depicted by outsiders as subordinate to a restraining beauty system. Their job may be hard, but as high-status individuals and holders of aesthetic capital, they may not experience their work as merely oppressive.
Models’ emotive reactions are fundamental to how they practically respond to objectification. Possibilities for dealing with objectification are enabled and created by institutional and situational contexts. In Butlerian (1997) terms, while objectification entails a power relation that may dominate the subject, it also forms the conditions for dealing with it. Interpreting Butler, Mahmood argues that agency is more than a synonym for resistance: it is the capacity to resist, endure, suffer and persist (2001: 217). Again, whether objectification is met with resistance, cooperation, escape or indifference is a matter for empirical investigation. This analysis therefore starts from how objectification occurs in relation to both the emotive and practical responses of fashion models.

The second debate addressed here is objectification’s relationship with gender. Objectification is generally associated with femininity, and authors like Mulvey (1975), Dworkin (1981), Chapkis (1986), MacKinnon (1987) and Bordo (1993) have argued that the objectified position is mainly held by women, because in patriarchal societies men have the power to subjectively watch and define (cf. Papadaki, 2010: 19). Objectification is thus gendered and unidirectional, happening to women and done predominantly by men, and, when done by women, a consequence of internalising the male gaze. Consequently, (social) psychological research tends to focus on how female objectification comes about in mass media, and how it affects women’s self-perceptions (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Harper and Tiggemann, 2008). Feona Attwood critiques this, arguing that explaining bodily display merely as an index of male sexual fantasy or female discomfort is simplistic. In fashion modeling, an industry dominated by women, men can also become objectified and women can be the objectifiers. Since who objectifies whom and how should be empirically investigated (Attwood, 2010: 2), this article considers both female and male models.

The third debate concerns multiplicity. Objectification is frequently depicted as a one-dimensional process, entailing being reduced to only a body, or, in the case of women, to a mere sexual body. While various, mainly feminist, scholars have demonstrated how objectification coincides with sexualisation of female subjects (Gill, 2007; Coy, 2009), other studies emphasise its multiple dimensions. Van der Laan (2015), for instance, shows how visual objectification occurs in multiple, distinctive forms, of which sexual objectification is but one. She also identifies ‘decorative’ and ‘disengaged’ objectification, which relates to a model’s aesthetic/decorative function – their ‘thingness’ and lack of personhood – much more than to their being a sexual object (Van der Laan, 2015: 163, 166–167). Following this, this article asks whether objectification in practice has multiple dimensions, and how these take form under different social conditions. I draw on Nussbaum’s (1995) work on objectification in literature, and her seven forms: instrumentality, where the object is a tool; denial of autonomy, where the object is treated as lacking in autonomy and self-determination; inertness, where the object is treated as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity; fungibility, where the objectified is treated as interchangeable with other objects of the same type or of other types; violability, where the objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary integrity, as
permissible to break up, smash and break into; ownership, where the object is treated as something owned by someone else, to be bought or sold; and denial of subjectivity, where the objectified is something whose experiences and feelings are irrelevant. In cases of one or more of these seven ways, which can overlap and co-occur, Nussbaum argues that we can speak of objectification (1995: 258).

Nussbaum’s idea is a useful starting point. Since different conditions and forms of objectification might arouse different subjective – practical and emotional – responses, acknowledging the diverse forms allows exploration of the possibilities for various subjective experiences of, and practical engagements with, objectification.

The field of fashion modeling: an extreme case of objectification

In contemporary Western societies, increasingly focused on appearance and aesthetics, fashion models have become prominent cultural icons as symbolic carriers of beauty ideals (Brenner and Cunningham, 1992; Mears, 2011), while being simultaneously critiqued. Popular news media, for instance, attribute both positive and negative characteristics, describing models both as beautiful, glamorous and natural, and also as artificial, effortless, obsessed, unhealthy or superficial. Within modeling itself, models are rarely seen as ‘icons of ideal beauty’ but predominantly as physical surfaces to be showcased and improved, subjected to the scrutinising, critical gazes of surrounding professionals. Agencies measure models’ hips, waists and chests, and only after the beauty standards have been met and a successful ‘look’ has been created are the models given praise and admiration. However, whether the appreciation is positive or negative, inside or outside the field, models ultimately fulfill a primary role of ‘aesthetic objects on display’, to the world and to professionals around them.

The model’s job is, in essence, to be looked at. They enter and exit various situations in which they are objectified and objectify themselves: castings, agency visits, on sets before cameras, on runways, at home in front of the mirror. They are, however, not objectified to the same degree in all situations, nor all of the time.

Models are selected on the basis of the industry’s aesthetic conventions of whiteness, slenderness, height and youthfulness, their bodies purposefully disciplined and monitored. They preserve their object status through aesthetic labour (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006), involving diverse practices, from invasive ‘body technologies’ (Wesely, 2003) like plastic surgery or dietary hormonal therapy, to more quotidian body practices like shaving, ‘watching your food’, sleeping enough, drinking water and exercising (Holla, 2016). The aesthetic goals are set by professionals other than the models: fashion designers, agents (‘bookers’), photographers, stylists and fashion clients. While the structure of the field and the profession makes models prone to objectification, the asymmetrical power relations are subjectively experienced in different ways, with situational dynamics playing an
important role. The subjective experience depends on how and where the objectification happens, and by whom: backstage by other professionals; front-stage by wider, more or less informed audiences; or at home, where models are their own critical observers.

The empirical context of fashion modeling is a strategic case to understand objectification in practice as it is a central activity in the field: objectifying images, objectifying professionals and (self-) objectified fashion models simultaneously produce each other (cf. Mears, 2011). Drawing on the experiences of male and female models, this article unpacks objectification, asking how it is institutionally and situationally entrenched, and how is it subjectively experienced.

**An ethnography of experience and practice**

This study uses in-depth interviewing and participant observation. Between March 2011 and March 2013, I interviewed thirty-six models in Amsterdam, Paris and Warsaw, cities in the transnational field of fashion modeling. I also spoke to fashion photographers, bookers, fashion designers, magazine editors, stylists, make-up artists and a fashion modeling coach. Most informants were recruited during fashion events, with some recruiting further informants from their social networks. This chain-referral sampling allowed insights into the social network connecting these actors and provided access to people who might otherwise have been unreachable.

In terms of selection, as far as possible I paid attention to factors likely to influence informants’ practices and experiences, such as gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, city and position in the field (commercial or high-end). However, as variation in fashion models is limited by conventions of gender, class, age and ethnicity, the informants consisted mainly of young, tall, slim, mostly white fashion models, most of whom were female (twenty-two, or 61 per cent). Interviews lasted between one and two hours, were recorded with the informants’ permission and mostly took place in restaurants and cafes in the city centre. Relevant themes, topics and issues were identified by transcribing and inductively coding all the interviews.

Participant observation was an additional method to make the process of aesthetic production, and the strategic decisions and interactions between models and beauty producers involved, comprehensible. Most observations were made in the presence of my interview informants, often during fashion shows. Backstage I observed models’ professional practices and interactions with, for example, stylists, make-up artists and hairdressers. I also engaged in various body practices with models, especially those discussed during the interviews, like eating, drinking and exercising, which showed how models ‘do beauty’ outside official working hours.

All observations were recorded as field reports and analysed along the same lines as the interviews. These complementary sources resulted in comprehensive, ‘thick descriptive’ ethnographic narratives and situational accounts of the practices and experiences of a wide variety of informants. This provided a person-centred, experiential understanding of fashion modeling from the viewpoints of persons in particular situations (Hollan, 2001).
Neutral body-objects on display

Castings, where fashion models present themselves to clients, typically designers or fashion label representatives, are the primary professional situation where models are simultaneously objectified in multiple ways. A model’s job search typically begins here. In preparation, agents (usually women) sometimes advise models to downplay personal taste and style: ‘When I started at my agency in the Netherlands, I was an alternative looking girl. They wanted me to adapt how I dressed. Because, when you visit a client, you must give the impression that you are a *model*, not just a pretty girl wearing baggy pants’ (Keesje, 23, Amsterdam). Fashion professionals like bookers, stylists and designers use metaphors like ‘canvas’, ‘dress up doll’ and ‘coat hanger’ to describe models’ function as objects. Models themselves use similar terms: ‘I think saying whether you’re beautiful is a difficult thing. I know I’m pretty, but [...] Well, I’m just a good, neutral basis to work with’ (Jolanda, 22, Amsterdam).

You have to be pretty natural, you can’t show up at castings wearing thick eyeliner and red lipstick, because then you’re already too much a character. You must always give the impression of a clean slate, that they can form you how they want to. But you must also adapt to the specific customer. If someone wants a tough girl, and you arrive in a sweet flowery dress, some clients simply cannot imagine how you can be different. Their lack of imagination is unbelievable! (Chantal, 22, Amsterdam)

Neutrality allows clients to ‘imagine’ various possible looks. For other beauty producers too, uniformity and neutrality are beneficial to the creation of new fashions. Models are thus required to be ‘chameleons’ (Soley-Beltran, 2004: 317), with a stable, neutral look ‘to show a million different faces’ (Katrina, 26, Warsaw). Modeling for eight years, Keesje explains: ‘I have a pretty expressive face. I can look very different in one picture compared to another. You could easily think it’s someone else [...] You need to be adaptive to the situation. To look very different. That makes you work a lot’ (Keesje, 23, Amsterdam).

The beauty standards of this ‘neutral basis’ are incongruent with how many models wish to look. Chantal distinguishes ‘industrial’ demands from her own ideal. Although considered beautiful by others, she feels that her looks are inconsistent with ‘who she is’. Her subjectivity, her sense of self, is compromised:

I’ve always been jealous of black girls with afro hair. Precisely what I am not. I just don’t like this very white, pale skin. But this look is very dominant in fashion, which is very discriminatory [...] a kind of uniform everybody has to adhere to [...] When you become a model, you think: of course I must be pretty, because I’m a model. You represent something, beauty. But my own ideal is different. The beauty that I have in the eyes of others is just not who I am. (Chantal, 22, Amsterdam)

The demand to be a ‘blank slate’, to downplay personal style, can be seen as a denial of autonomy (Nussbaum, 1995). Clearly, if a model cannot look as she
wants, her self-determination is limited. By being chameleons, models cede part of their autonomy, limiting their space to define and make choices. While this form of being objectified exists in service-providing sectors – flight attendants, counter staff and shop floor workers are all required to adjust both looks and behaviours (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001) – models work in an industry characterised by constant change and renewal. According to fashion designer Lucy, ‘Fashion’s a hungry monster […] the tempo of renewal is terrible. It’s like a big war’ (Lucy, 25, Amsterdam). Models continuously deal with different clients with different demands, resulting in constantly changing guidelines (Neff et al., 2005). To survive, they have to be ‘fresh’, flexible and adaptive. The requirement of adaptability and continuous flexibility is exactly what is defined as chameleionism.

Another form of objectification that models are constantly subjected to is replaceability, Nussbaum’s ‘fungibility’ (1995: 257). Due to the constant influx of aspiring models, staying ‘fresh’ becomes ever more arduous. ‘New faces’ constantly appear, eager to replace ‘old’ models. In response, modeling industries have ever shorter cycles, models are recruited ever younger, competition increases and chances of rejection rise. The pressure on models to present their freshest, cleanest, most ‘mouldable’ manner increases: ‘The annoying side is having to attend castings, where there are many younger boys. And you sit there, and then this beautiful boy comes walking in, looks at you, arrogantly, with a smirk, you know. That’s rather unpleasant. It’s such a meat auction. Every time you sit there, with like, a hundred pretty boys. You become very self-conscious’ (Victor, 21, Amsterdam). Paradoxically, models also have an interest in displaying uniqueness as this improves their chances (Mears, 2013): ‘You have to show some character somehow. Those other guys on the casting were like, empty. There were 250 boys. But I had this attitude… so they picked me’ (Brett, 22, Amsterdam). At the same time, body practices like dieting, exercising or grooming actually diminish individuality and differences. Ultimately, models work hard to look like each other, further reducing their competitiveness and increasing their replaceability.

Since models cannot really differentiate themselves through outward appearance, they employ emotional labour strategies. Victor purposefully manages his emotions, projecting a charming, easygoing personality: ‘As a model I’ve learned I have to be social. You can’t just show up as your grumpy old self. If you have a bad day, get over it, or don’t go. You must give those people the impression that you’re a nice, laidback kind of person to work with’ (Victor, 21, Amsterdam). This emotional labour is, however, only occasionally successful. Clients are often uninterested in personalities. At castings models are often required to be silent and motionless. This implies and causes inertness: during castings they are passive objects, to be watched and judged (Nussbaum, 1995: 257). Jolanda recounts:

My agency in Paris gave me a lesson on how to behave during castings, like a role play. So, I introduced myself, and they said ‘oh that’s nice of you, but not really necessary’. It was too much. Like it doesn’t matter who you are. I was too smiley, too
enthusiastic for Paris. At castings you really have to feel what’s the right thing to do, and adapt yourself to those situations. It’s pretty hard. (Jolanda, 22, Amsterdam)

So, besides personal clothing styles, models’ speech is often interpreted as ‘noise’. While at some castings a limited – relaxed, upbeat – version of personality is acceptable, at others a model’s subjectivity is deemed entirely irrelevant. This dis-interest is Nussbaum’s denial of subjectivity (1995: 257).

Castings organise models as lined-up objects for sale, implying they can be hired and temporarily owned by clients. That models become ‘possessed’ by others is ownership, another of Nussbaum’s seven ways. Castings, a large proportion of models’ time ‘on the shop floor’, are, significantly, referred to as ‘cattle calls’. Usually overcrowded, they involve fierce competition and considerable chances of rejection. Competition with many other, similar looking models, reminds models of their interchangeability. Besides, modeling is project-based, making it highly unpredictable (Neff et al., 2005). Clients can ‘take an option’, ‘opting out’ at the last minute free of charge. The rationales are seldom shared, rendering models unable to understand what they need to change. This replaceability causes perpetual uncertainty and feelings of powerlessness. High-end model Rita, from Warsaw, recounts how she was left uninformed till the last minute:

I was going to do a show for [a designer] in Paris. Backstage it was all very sophisticated. There was no food and it was kind of not done to say, like, ‘hello, how are you’. There was this tension. So I’m waiting for a fitting, I’ve taken off my clothes. I’m naked with all those people around me. You try on a dress but it’s not clear if they want it, because they don’t look at you. So I start walking around, showing the dress. But you cannot really do this, it’s not how it works. You’re supposed to wait like a beautiful mannequin. Then, they take off the dress in front of everybody, and you wait for one, two, three hours, sitting there naked, because you don’t know if you […] will show the dress. I try to cover myself but you must wait, you cannot get into your own clothes again. You have to stay available. And I was hungry. At a point you’re supposed to eat something. And then finally someone comes to tell you the dress is already on somebody else. But you still wait around, something might still happen […] After four hours of waiting and changing, this casting guy came to me, saying ‘oh, don’t worry, here you have a sweet. You can go home now, we aren’t using you for this show’. He gave me a fucking sweet! I didn’t even get to know why they didn’t want me. (Rita, 27, Warsaw)

For models, who are often denied basic insights into creative decisions, their work is full of surprises. Understandably, they experience this as neither enjoyable nor exciting.

**Physical scrutiny and violability**

Using Nussbaum’s seven dimensions, the previous section demonstrated that fashion models are objectified incessantly, simultaneously, in different ways.
As different forms of objectification pile up, the experience becomes more persistent. When models’ subjectivity is unrecognised to the point of feeling invisible, it weighs on them. Even when their presence is acknowledged, their appearance is often contested. Agents, clients and designers stress physical imperfections, suggesting practices of improvement to ‘make it work’. Being physically scrutinised is experienced as an integral part of the job: ‘Skinny, skinny, skinny. They just want me to be more skinny [. . .] I am the most skinny person I know, of all my friends! I don’t think it is nice. They measure me and say I must lose weight. I am too fat’ (Nancy, 20, Warsaw). Maintaining a strict boundary between one’s own body and the altering creative hands of other professionals is not feasible for models, and their bodily boundaries are inevitably exceeded when a look is collectively created. While models carry out body practices like dieting and exercising in private, on the set they are ‘worked upon’ by others. In Paris, I observed four fashion models backstage, chatting and fiddling with mobile phones. Stylists and make-up artists interfered to adjust or apply something to their bodies or faces without ever asking. In fact, the models were never verbally addressed. Although none of the work was explained or discussed, the models knew exactly what was expected. Efficiently, almost automatically, they adopted the right posture to facilitate the restyling of hairdos, the updating of make-up or the taking of photographs, not appearing the least distressed about ceding part of their bodily autonomy or becoming ‘violable’ (Nussbaum, 1995: 257). Instead, they appeared resigned to temporarily abandoning their physical boundaries.

In some cases, however, aesthetic requirements exceed personal boundaries, impairing physical integrity. Lynn recounts:

I have many beauty spots on my face. It’s a problem. My agency wanted them removed by a plastic surgeon. But my friends and family said ‘that’s what makes you you, don’t do it’. I was also like, they use Photoshop for just about everything on a photograph, so why not remove my beauty spots digitally? Then I can keep them. Surgery will leave scars anyway, so they’ll have to brush that away too. But they didn’t accept this, so they removed me from their files. (Lynn, 19, Amsterdam)

Objecting preserved Lynn’s bodily integrity but also led her to involuntarily and prematurely quitting modeling.

Violability shows how other professionals view models: as tools, thus foregrounding models’ instrumentality (Nussbaum, 1995: 258). Monique, a Parisian booker, reduces models’ bodies to their use-value, describing them as ‘practically no more useful than a coat rack [porte-manteau]’. This can lead to models like Macy internalising this:

My appearance is a means. It’s not my own accomplishment, I’m born this way. Intellect is something that you can develop, you can work on to accomplish something. Looks are just genetics. Of course you can work on your appearance, like going to the hairdresser, getting your eyebrows plucked, going on a diet. But for me,
4 kilograms more or less is not what makes me more beautiful or ugly. Either way, I still have an unnatural weight, so it’s not really something to be proud of. (Macy, 21, Amsterdam)

Macy takes no credit for her looks or success. Interestingly, this also exempts her from personal accountability in cases of failure, protecting her against criticism or rejection. This suggests that objectification as self-instrumentalisation is a strategy to cope with being a critically scrutinised aesthetic object, susceptible to failure.

**Gendered experiences of objectification**

Although both male and female fashion models are objectified, female models are more preoccupied by it, and refer to it more often during interviews, expressing vexation. Male models speak of it less, and when they do, seem to experience it less problematically. Brett, for example, has little difficulty with being put ‘up for bids’: ‘My picture was in the *Cosmopolitan*, with a little story. It was funny, people could bid money to get a date with me. I was totally fine with that, except, I didn’t want to go out with a guy. But of course, the highest bidder was a guy! I kinda knew that was going to happen’ (Brett, 22, Amsterdam). While this is objectification as ownership, Brett seems unoffended, even describing it as ‘funny’, because although he would have preferred a woman, he feels it was for a good cause, the proceeds going to charity.

While Rick from Amsterdam is less indifferent, he has learned to be apathetic towards people disinterested in his subjectivity, and also sees benefits in being appreciated for his looks:

They only treat you that way because of your looks, which feels kinda weird. But on the positive side, I also get many things done because I look good. You know, I’m always open to getting to know people for who they are, whether it’s a lady cleaning the toilets at McDonald’s or a fashion company director. But in this industry people judge you only based on your exterior. And they assume I’m stupid. I think that’s a shame. In the beginning this worried me, but now I don’t care anymore. Everything is fake. Those people are fake and not that important anyway. (Rick, 28, Amsterdam)

Joey tells how, compared to female models, male models have more opportunities to resist:

Amongst guys there is less competition. Most girls are pretty young and inexperienced. They have to sell themselves in a super competitive industry and many are really insecure. They should try not to get overruled all the time by those fashion people who think the world of themselves. If you disagree with something, go against it […] There was this stylist telling a girl to go topless for a sexy picture. Obviously she wasn’t comfortable with it. But for girls, when things go too far, it’s far more difficult to say no. The competitive pressure is very high for them. So they do it anyway.
I’ve never really experienced that myself, but I think this happens a lot to girls. (Joey, 24, Amsterdam)

Joey correctly signals that male and female models operate in different market segments, with different levels of competition. Female models experience at least two forms of objectification to a greater extent: they are more replaceable (fungible), and consequently, more violable. So, while all models experience objectification, female models are likely to experience a wider variety of forms, have fewer resources to resist them and therefore tend to experience it more problematically.

**How objectification becomes bearable and pleasurable**

As models can experience objectification as unpleasant and even dehumanising, they try to cope in several ways. First, they resist feelings of alienation by redefining their work as ‘active performance’ instead of as ‘passive appearance’ (Mears, 2011):

> Posing comes naturally, I’m not shy in front of the camera. It’s like acting, especially on a bad day. There are only a few faces they want, like smiling or sensual. But they never want to see a sad face! I work with memories to change my mood, to manipulate what I express on a picture [...] Modeling is a good way to practice to become an actress. (Manon, 24, Paris)

This framing allows models to protect themselves from the uncertainty and criticism inherent in their job: in case of rejection, it is their performance that falls short, not their entire ‘embodied selves’ (cf. Mears, 2013: 138). This armouring strategy is similar to how Macy instrumentalised herself.

Second, models can use withdrawal, separating their emotive, ‘feeling self’ from their physical body, an almost ‘Cartesian move’ (Gillies et al., 2004). Nahima, a former high-end model from Paris, sometimes achieves this through cocaine. Her account of how professionals around her respond is illuminating: ‘It was like I was there, but at the same time I wasn’t. And it turned out that they “so loved my look”. To see this absence in your gaze, the arrogance and indifference you convey when you’ve done a line. So in the end, me and everybody on the set benefited from it’ (Nahima, 32, currently living in Brussels). Magdalena from Poland, who is modeling for a *haute couture* fashion show in Paris, also uses withdrawal. Unlike in a regular runway show, here, models stand motionless on a stage, statue-like, for about twenty minutes each time. Afterwards, Magdalena tells me about her physical discomfort: standing still for so long wearing high-heeled shoes caused cramps in her limbs. Nevertheless, she is not particularly bothered because she escaped by withdrawing: ‘I let my imagination run free, by making up all kinds of stories. And later, when I’m alone, I write them up. So actually I’m creating things in my head while I’m standing still. And nobody sees it, it’s like, my little secret’ (Magdalena, 19, Warsaw). In Mahmood’s terms, Magdalena exerts ‘docile agency’: rather than passivity or abandonment of agency, her withdrawal involves effort, exertion and
achievement, and indicates a certain malleability while carrying out the skilful practice of being an aesthetic object on display (2001: 210). Withdrawing helps Magdalena to endure situations where being an object is dreadful. A year later, in Warsaw, Magdalena proudly tells me that her stories have been published.

Models do not, however, need to act out creativity on a completely different plane. Under certain conditions, being objectified coincides with creative practice, giving a strong sense of empowerment. Models can find gratification when they can ‘work it’ before a camera, for example: ‘I feel beautiful when I feel like “okay, I did a good job”. There was this difficult photo shoot, where they wanted some new qualities or some new attitude. So I had to work. The whole thing needed some extra preparation. Finally, this shoot changed me. I learned new things and I got people’s acceptance, even their adoration’ (Kathy, 21, Warsaw). Kathy is encouraged by the photographer to ‘show him what she’s got’. By actively and creatively contributing, Kathy feels acknowledged as a skilful subject. She takes an active part in her objectification, which, in her experience, changes her for the better. In Cahill’s terms, her objectification enhances her sense of self (2012: x). Jolanda describes similar feelings of empowerment:

I just had a shoot for ELLE. For me that was like, wow! And I noticed how much more self-assured I had become from my experience in London. I did everything that came to mind, and just worked it. I gave it all, and it went very naturally. It was a beautiful moment. Finally I achieved that I could pose, naturally and with self-confidence. It was really very nice. (Jolanda, 22, Amsterdam)

The runway show is the ultimate situation where models experience excitement, pride and empowerment as a display object. Liberated from the scrutinising gazes of stylists, agents, designers and make-up artists, a model’s power position is completely inverted. During those few minutes under the spotlights, models are subjected to the appraising, usually admiring, gazes of a broader audience of fashion consumers and devotees. As Victor exclaims: ‘Yes! On the runway, it is just my time to shine!’ (Victor, 21, Amsterdam).

While walking runways is nerve-wracking, it also gives an adrenaline rush. The shows are often complemented by loud, rhythmical music directing the tempo at which models walk. At the end of the catwalk is the ‘pit’, full of – mainly male – photographers, their cameras snapping at the models, who usually pause to pose, to shoot looks, making sure the photographers get a good shot. The audience is in darkness, the only light is on the runway. Models rarely smile or make eye contact with the public while walking; instead, all eyes are on them.

Being regarded with praise and admiration gives powerful, positive feelings. Understandably, models are drawn to, and draw energy from, such situations. Katrina from Warsaw even reports intense feelings of relief: ‘When you’re on the runway, then you can just forget about all that. It is almost like giving birth! You go through all that trouble, just for those few minutes of walking’ (Katrina, 26, Warsaw). Walking a show involves walking in high-heeled shoes without
stumbling, maintaining a confident physical comportment and keeping a straight face. Like models who speak about ‘working it’ during photo shoots, runway models describe walking as a skilful practice, requiring training. The objectification that certainly occurs becomes bearable, even pleasurable, as it coincides with experiences of being acknowledged as skilful, creative subjects.

For objectification to become less tedious and more enjoyable for models, three modes of objectification must be absent: being treated as passive or inert, not being acknowledged as a subject and being denied one’s autonomy. Unfortunately for most models, especially ‘new faces’ with little experience, this is rare, although experienced models have the leeway to ‘work it’. Keesje (23, Amsterdam), who calls herself ‘a fossil’, can make suggestions about lighting techniques and make-up: ‘I know my face by now, so I know what works. These people trust me if I say something is probably not going to look good’.

Conclusions

Analysing the extreme case of fashion modeling, this article empirically demonstrated how objectification occurs in professional practice, shedding light on objectification as a multifaceted, situationally and institutionally embedded practice that is experienced in a range of ways. In line with Nussbaum, objectification manifests itself through various distinct but related forms, a multiplicity most observable at castings, where different forms accumulate and coincide with the scrutinising gazes of clients, making it an unsettling experience.

This article contributes to existing feminist perspectives, arguing that objectification is often, but not inevitably, related to subordination. However, it is not necessarily unpleasant: when models perform as aesthetic objects on a runway, they feel admired, empowered and proud. While this demonstrates the importance of the gaze, it also highlights the importance of the body in practice under different conditions. When models actively engage in being objectified (Cahill, 2012) through creatively and skilfully ‘working it’, they feel appreciated, fulfilled and empowered, even when treated as things. Objectification thus potentially contributes to a ‘flourishing sense of self’.

This study raises new questions about subjectivity and selfhood. The multiplicity of objectification in this specific institutional context raises the question of objectification in nonprofessional, private settings, as well as in other work settings, where objectified people may have fewer resources and less symbolic status than models, whose ‘aesthetic capital’ makes their objectification a source of profit.

This analysis leads to reconsideration of the effects of objectification: how do people subjectively experience viewing the images of objectified models? Like the experience of models, the consumption of objectifying images is a situated, multifaceted process. This may lead to self-objectification, as social psychologists have argued, but even this may be experienced and enacted in different ways. The subjectivities provoked and produced by fashion’s influential visual culture are worth considering from an ethnographic, experiential angle.
This article also contributes to studies of aesthetics. While in feminist literature, objectification is often equated with sexualisation, this study shows how models are predominantly aesthetically objectified. This is consistent with the findings of Kuipers et al. (2017) that all models, male and female, are increasingly objectified in fashion photographs, but not necessarily in a sexual way. While aesthetic objectification is central to fashion modeling, the ‘aestheticised body’ is also of growing significance in society at large, as it becomes a job qualification in post-industrial ‘aesthetic economies’. Future research could consider aesthetic objectification in relation to recent aesthetic economies (Entwistle, 2002).

Models are high-status individuals and, ultimately, symbolic holders of aesthetic capital. Although they do not necessarily see themselves as victims, from an outsider perspective their practices are easily depicted as a surrendering of power. Investigating how models emotionally and practically respond to objectification – a process which Cahill considers part and parcel of social interaction – shows that models enact ‘docile agency’ (Mahmood, 2001). Unlike explicit resistance to subordination, this entails subtler forms of coping. For example, when objectification is troublesome, models engage in self-instrumentalisation or withdrawal, or redefine their work as acting. All these strategies involve the construction of a ‘split self’, containing a personal, emotive, authentic, creative self, and a physical, instrumental, emotionless, malleable self. Such a ‘Cartesian move’ helps models to cope. The willingness to endure annoying situations, to suffer when work is stressful or demeaning and to persist in acquiring skills, are powerful ways for models to deal with objectification and to be successful.

Finally, this experiential perspective, which involves models’ different emotional and practical responses, calls into question theoretical arguments about the objectification of disempowered subjects, and assumptions about objectification being inherently immoral. Objectification is socially rooted in institutions and specific situations. This matters considerably for its varying forms and levels of intensity. Besides, it can be experienced in diverse ways by different people. This does not make objectification less effective: situations of collaborative social action (in this case, collective aesthetic production) are by no means less successful when people have different subjective experiences of them (Mol, 2008). Thus, this study does not imply that objectification is less compelling as a process, or is easy to avoid, but rather that objectification might be all the more effective because it is embedded in different social contexts, and adapts itself accordingly.

Acknowledgements
I thank the editors and reviewers of Feminist Theory, as well as Giselinde Kuipers, Olav Velthuis and Rachel Spronk, for reading multiple versions of the manuscript and for their helpful feedback on how to improve it.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: ERC Starting Grant BEAUTY 241073.
References

Attwood, Feona (2010) ‘Through the Looking Glass? Sexual Agency and Subjectification Online’. In: Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (eds) New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity. London: Palgrave, pp. 203–214.

Bartky, Sandra Lee (1990) Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression. New York: Routledge.

Bordo, Susan (1993) Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Brenner, Jennifer B. and Joseph G. Cunningham (1992) ‘Gender Differences in Eating Attitudes, Body Concept, and Self-Esteem Among Models’. Sex Roles, 27(7–8): 413–437.

Butler, Judith (1997) The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Cahill, Ann J. (2012) Overcoming Objectification: A Carnal Ethics. New York: Routledge.

Chapkis, Wendy (1986) Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Coy, M (2009) ‘This Body Which is Not Mine: The Notion of the Habit Body, Prostitution and (Dis)Embodiment’. Feminist Theory, 10(1): 61–75.

Dworkin, Andrea (1981) Men Possessing Women. New York: Perigee.

Duits, Linda and Liesbet Van Zoonen (2006) ‘Headscarves and Porno-Chic: Disciplining Girls’ Bodies in the European Multicultural Society’. European Journal of Women’s Studies, 13(2): 103–117.

Entwistle, Joanne (2002) ‘The Aesthetic Economy: The Production of Value in the Field of Fashion Modeling’. Journal of Consumer Culture, 2(3): 317–339.

Entwistle, Joanne and Elizabeth Wissinger (2006) ‘Keeping Up Appearances: Aesthetic Labour in the Fashion Modeling Industries of London and New York’. The Sociological Review, 54(4): 774–794.

Fredrickson, Barbara L. and Tomi-Ann Roberts (1997) ‘Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women’s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks’. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 21(2): 173–206.

Gill, Rosalind (2003) ‘From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Resexualization of Women’s Bodies in the Media’. Feminist Media Studies, 3(1): 100–106.

Gill, Rosalind (2007) ‘Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility’. European Journal of Cultural Studies, 10(2): 147–166.

Gillies, Val, Angela Harden, Katherine Johnson, Paula Reavey et al. (2004) ‘Women’s Collective Constructions of Embodied Practices Through Memory Work: Cartesian Dualism in Memories of Sweating and Pain’. British Journal of Social Psychology, 43(1): 99–112.

Harper, Brit and Marika Tiggemann (2008) ‘The Effect of Thin Ideal Media Images on Women’s Self-Objectification, Mood, and Body Image’. Sex Roles, 58(9–10): 649–657.

Holla, Sylvia (2016) ‘Justifying Aesthetic Labor: How Fashion Models Enact Coherent Selves’. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 45(4): 474–500.

Hollan, Douglas (2001) ‘Developments in Person-Centered Ethnography’. In: Carmella C. Moore and Holly F. Mathew (eds) The Psychology of Cultural Experience. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 48–67.
Kuipers, Giselinde, Elise van der Laan and Elisa Arfini (2017) ‘Gender Models: Changing Representations and Intersecting Roles in Dutch and Italian Fashion Magazines, 1982–2011’. Journal of Gender Studies, 26(6): 632–648.

MacKinnon, Catharine A. (1987) Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mahmood, Saba (2001) ‘Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival’. Cultural Anthropology, 16(2): 202–236.

McRobbie, Angela (2008) ‘Young Women and Consumer Culture: An Intervention’. Cultural Studies, 22(5): 531–550.

Mears, Ashley (2011) Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Mears, Ashley (2013) ‘Made in Japan: Fashion Modeling in Tokyo’. In: Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wissinger (eds) Fashioning Models: Image, Text and Industry. London: Berg, pp. 134–156.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1964) The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Mol, Annemarie (2008) ‘I Eat an Apple: On Theorizing Subjectivities’. Subjectivity, 22(1): 28–37.

Muehlenkamp, Jennifer J. and Renee N. Saris-Baglama (2002) ‘Self-Objectification and its Psychological Outcomes for College Women’. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 26(4): 371–379.

Mulvey, Laura (1975) ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’. Screen, 16(3): 6–18.

Neff, Gina, Elizabeth Wissinger and Sharon Zukin (2005) ‘Entrepreneurial Labor Among Cultural Producers: “Cool” Jobs in “Hot” Industries’. Social Semiotics, 15(3): 307–334.

Noll, Stephanie M. and Barbara L. Fredrickson (1998) ‘A Mediational Model Linking Self-Objectification, Body Shame, and Disordered Eating’. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 22(4): 623–636.

Nussbaum, Martha C. (1995) ‘Objectification’. Philosophy & Public Affairs, 24(4): 249–291.

Papadaki, Lina (2010) ‘What is Objectification?’. Journal of Moral Philosophy, 7(1): 16–36.

Rubin, Gayle (1975) ‘The Traffic in Women: Towards a Political Economy of Sex’. In: Rayna Reiter (ed.) Towards an Anthropology of Women. New York: Monthly View Press, pp. 157–210.

Soley-Beltran, Patricia (2004) ‘Modeling Femininity’. European Journal of Women’s Studies, 11(3): 309–326.

Strossen, Nadine (1995) Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women’s Rights. New York: Scribner.

Van der Laan, Elise (2015) Why Fashion Models Don’t Smile: Aesthetic Standards and Logics in the Field of Fashion Images, 1982–2011. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Van Zoonen, Liesbet (1994) Feminist Media Studies. London: SAGE.

Warhurst, Chris and Dennis Nickson (2001) Looking Good, Sounding Right: Style Counselling in the New Economy. London: The Industrial Society.

Wesely, Jennifer K. (2003) ‘Exotic Dancing and the Negotiation of Identity: The Multiple Uses of Body Technologies’. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 32(6): 643–669.