NOTE: This is the synopsis of the proposal.
For the full proposal please contact the PI, Giselinde Kuipers

ERC Starting Grant
Description of Work

Towards a comparative sociology of beauty:
The transnational modelling industry and the social shaping of beauty standards in six European countries

BEAUTY

Principal investigator: Giselinde Kuipers
Institution: Amsterdam School for Social science Research (ASSR)
University of Amsterdam
Title: Towards a comparative sociology of beauty: The transnational modelling industry and the social shaping of beauty standards in six European countries
Short title: Towards a comparative sociology of beauty
Duration: 60 months

Abstract
This project aims to study how beauty standards – perceptions of physical beauty in women and men – are socially shaped. It will focus on the transnational modelling industry, an institution centrally concerned with the production and dissemination of beauty standards.

In four subprojects this study investigates 1. How standards of female and male beauty are perceived, shaped, and disseminated by professionals in the transnational modelling field; 2. How female and male models perceive, represent and embody beauty standards in their work; 3. How female and male beauty has been portrayed by models in mainstream and “high fashion” magazines from 1980 till 2010; 4. How people of different backgrounds perceive female and male beauty, and how their beauty standards are related to the images disseminated in modelling. Each subproject will be carried out in six countries: France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Turkey and the UK.

The aim of this project is to develop a comparative sociology of beauty: a theory of the social creation of aesthetic standards, as they are applied to the bodies and faces of women and men. By comparing these standards, both within and across nations, it aims to identify central mechanisms and institutions through which such standards are developed and disseminated.

This project is innovative in several ways. It is the first comprehensive study of the social shaping of beauty standards. Moreover, the four subprojects will result in an extensive account of production, products, and reception of a contested cultural industry: modelling. Third, it will draw together in novel ways theories about media, cultural production and taste formation; gender and the body; and globalization theory. Fourth, this project will make a major contribution to the study of cultural globalization. It analyzes a transnational cultural industry in different countries; and its comparative and longitudinal design allows us to gauge the impact of globalization in different national contexts. Finally, the project is innovative in its comparative, multi-method research design. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, the four subprojects will “follow” the entire process of cultural production and reception in an increasingly transnational field.
Section 1b: Extended Synopsis of the project proposal

1. Research objective

This is a proposal for a sociological study of beauty standards. Using a comparative and multi-method research design, this project aims to study how perceptions of physical beauty in women and men are socially shaped. How and why do beauty standards vary between and within countries? What are the central mechanisms and institutions in the creation and dissemination of such standards? To what extent do people accept or incorporate the beauty standards spread by media and popular culture? How are beauty standards affected by larger social and cultural transformations, such as changing gender roles, increasing ethnic and racial diversification, and the rise of global cultural industries?

The study will focus on the workings and products of an institution that in the eyes of many has become central to the creation of beauty standards in Western societies: the modelling industry. The study will be done in six European countries: three with a central position in the global modelling industry – France, Italy, and the UK – and three with a more peripheral position: the Netherlands, Poland, and Turkey. In four subprojects, carried out in all six countries, this project will investigate

- How standards of female and male beauty are perceived, shaped, and disseminated by professionals in the national and transnational modelling industry;
- How female and male models perceive, represent and embody beauty standards in their work;
- How female and male beauty has been represented through models as portrayed in mainstream and “high fashion” magazines from 1980 till 2010;
- How people in these six countries perceive female and male beauty, and how their beauty standards are related to the images disseminated in modelling.

The proposed project is the first comprehensive study of the social shaping and dissemination of beauty standards. Social scientists have paid scant attention to the way people perceive physical attractiveness, although this has important social consequences. Research consistently shows that people thought attractive by others are more successful socially and economically (Andreoni & Petrie 2008; Mobius & Rosenblat 2006). Thus, beauty conveys social status, and is connected with social inequality.

Several authors have argued that representation, physical appearance, and “good looks” have become increasingly important in economic and social life as a result of the shift to a post-industrial, service-based economy (Black 2004; Featherstone 1991; Peiss 2001). In the second half of the twentieth century, beauty has become a major economical sector. There are now industries devoted to producing and disseminating images of beautiful people, and with creating and maintaining “beauty” through cosmetics, bodily regimes and plastic surgery (Jones 2008; Scranton 2001). Critics have harshly denounced these industries for propagating unrealistic and unhealthy standards, especially for women, thus enhancing gender inequalities (Bordo 1993; Wolf 1991). Yet, despite the many claims about the effects of the beauty industry, no scholarly attempts have been made to systematically study the impact of the various branches of the beauty industry on perceptions of beauty in everyday life.

The aim of this project is to develop a comparative sociology of beauty: a theory of the social creation of aesthetic standards, as they are applied to the bodies and faces of women and men. By comparing these standards, both within and across nations, I aim to identify central mechanisms and institutions through which such standards are developed and disseminated. I expect the production and dissemination of such standards to take place increasingly across national boundaries. Hence, this project explicitly seeks to explore and theorize the impact of globalization – specifically transnational cultural industries – on beauty standards, by a combination of comparative and longitudinal analysis. The focus on the modelling industry enables the research team to follow the entire “production process” of such standards: from the selection by cultural producers and intermediaries, to the embodiment by models, to the images as they are disseminated in magazines, to the responses of audiences in an increasingly integrated Europe.

This project will be guided by the following central research questions.

RQ 1. How are standards of male and female physical beauty produced and disseminated by the transnational modelling industry? What are the central mechanisms and institutions involved in the creation and dissemination of such standards by the modelling industry?

RQ 2: How do people of different national and social backgrounds perceive the beauty standards of the modelling industry, and to what extent do they share these standards?
Innovation and potential impact on the field

This project is innovative in a number of ways. It is the first comprehensive study of the social shaping of beauty standards. Despite many claims about the social variability of notions of beauty and attractiveness, no systematic studies of this topic exist. Taken together, the four subprojects will result in an extensive account of production, products, and reception of a contested cultural industry: the modelling industry. There are few analyses of the production and reception of those standards by the media, and none of modelling, despite scholarly and popular criticisms of the media’s role in the shaping of beauty standards.

This project explicitly aims to develop a sociological theory of beauty. In doing so, it will draw together in novel ways theoretical approaches from various disciplines: sociology, media studies, cultural economy, and gender studies. This will open up new avenues for research and theoretical enquiry in these disciplines. This project is likely to make significant contributions to the following research areas: the conceptualization of national differences in comparative research; gender ideologies and inequalities; the sociology of the body; taste formation and cultural production; and the study of media effects.

Moreover, the project will make a major contribution to the study of cultural globalization. It analyzes the workings of a transnational cultural industry in different national contexts, hypothesizing that this industry is instrumental in producing “transnational repertoires of evaluation” (Kuipers & de Kloet 2009). In doing so, it will build on, but considerably expand, the new perspective on transnational cultural fields I have been developing in recent publications (Kuipers 2008; Kuipers forthcoming; Janssen et al. 2008a).

Finally, the project is highly innovative in its comparative and multi-method research design. It will be carried out in six countries, using a combination of various qualitative and quantitative research methods. In its methodology, this project expands on my current research on the import, translation, and reception of American television in four European countries. For the proposed project, I will further develop and refine the procedure of “following” the process of cultural production and reception in a transnational field. The significantly larger scope of this project will enable a more detailed and systematic study of each of the steps from production to reception – and in a novel and hardly explored field.

2. State of the art: Sociological approaches to beauty

A fertile tradition of research in sociology and related fields has studied the relationship between status and beauty. These studies have demonstrated that attractive people are more successful both socially and economically (Andreoni & Petrie 2008; Habermesh & Biddle 1994; Mobius & Rosenblat 2006; Mulford et al 1998; Webster & Driskell 1983). This is generally attributed to a “halo effect”: attractiveness produces positive expectations, and this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This paradigm makes a strong case for the social importance of attractiveness. However, it does not account for variations in beauty standards, and it assumes an overly simple unilinear causal relation between beauty and status.

The relation between beauty and status may also work the other way: signs of status often come to be regarded as attractive (Bourdieu 1979; Veblen 2001). Such effects are also visible in beauty standards (Banner 1983; Black 2004; Hunter 2002; Jones 2008). The process by which status characteristics are imbued with aesthetic value leads to downward diffusion of standards. This “trickle down” mechanism is central to historical analyses of beauty ideals (Banner 1983; Entwistle 2000; Steele 1985; 1996). These studies find considerable variability in beauty standards across time and place, for both men and women. These variations pertain to dress and grooming, but also to bodily shapes and sizes. However, although such historical studies convincingly argue for the variability of beauty standards, none of these studies attempts to construct a more comprehensive theory of the way such standards are shaped.

In gender studies and feminist theory, beauty standards are also interpreted as socially constructed rather than given. In this perspective, such standards are a form of control. The “beauty myth” reproduces gender inequalities by propagating unrealistic beauty ideals for women (Bordo 1993; Grogan 1999; Wolf 1991). Gender scholars – like popular discourse – generally point to the media as the main culprit in the dissemination of beauty standards. This has produced a wealth of studies analyzing gender representations in various media outlets (for overviews see van Zoonen 1994; Wykes & Gunter 2005).

In my view, current perspectives on beauty standards as socially constructed suffer from several shortcomings. Most of the work in this field is concerned with textual and visual analysis, deducing beauty standards from historical accounts or media images and texts. Hence, little is known about the way people employ beauty standards in their daily life, or how this relates to media texts or larger societal discourses about beauty and bodies.

Interestingly, recent studies of the modelling industry observe that notions of what constitutes a good model – male or female – diverge considerably from common notions of attractiveness (Entwistle 2002; Entwistle & Wissinger 2006; Mears and Finlay 2005). They explain this from the constant need for innova-
tion in the modelling and fashion field. In noting the gap between everyday beauty and models’ looks, these studies convincingly problematize the relation between the “edgy” and fluctuating standards of the modelling industry, and beauty standards in everyday life.

Moreover, studies on beauty as a social construction provide an unsatisfactory account of the mechanisms involved in the creation of beauty standards. They have a simplistic understanding of the way institutions like the mass media shape standards in everyday life, moving all too easily from media representations to real-life consequences for body images and beauty regimes. Hence, they make little effort to systematically theorize how institutions produce criteria for beauty, or how audiences respond to them. Finally, there is a notable lack of comparative studies of beauty standards.

3. Towards a framework for the sociological study of beauty in a globalizing world
This project will develop a comprehensive theoretical framework of the creation and dissemination of beauty standards. For this framework, I will draw on three strands of social theory: 1. Theories of cultural production and taste formation; 2. Theories of gender and the body; 3. Globalization theory.

Beauty as cultural production and taste formation
Cultural sociology explains taste variations from differences in social position (Bourdieu 1979; Lamont & Thevenot 2000; Peterson & Kern 1996). Hence, social studies of aesthetic standards map taste patterns onto social groups, looking for connections between taste and social background. Two broad mechanisms are used to explain the emergence of taste: 1. distinction and emulation, and 2. the creation, legitimation, and spread of standards and classifications through institutions. However, none of this work has studied how aesthetic standards are applied to physical beauty: people’s bodies and faces.

Many studies of taste, in different countries and many domains, find that social status influences taste patterns. Patterns of hierarchical distinction demarcate divides between high and low tastes (Bourdieu 1979), while processes of emulation lead to “trickle down” of standards. However, this high/low taste model has been criticized and modified in several ways. Comparative studies have found cross-national differences in patterning of taste, and in the aesthetic criteria central to national “repertoires of evaluation” (Lamont 1992; Lamont & Thevenot 2000; Kuipers 2006; Janssen et al. 2008b). Moreover, processes of distinction and emulation are not always hierarchical, and can be linked with social variables other than class, such as gender, age, or ethnicity. Taste patterns are increasingly associated with subcultures and lifestyles not necessarily rooted in status hierarchies (Thornton 1996). Subcultural styles are often noted for striking body adornments, flaunting their “alternative” beauty standards (Synnott 1993).

The second mechanism central to sociological studies of taste is the institutional creation and legitimation of standards. Aesthetic standards are legitimated, diffused, but also actively created by institutions in the cultural field (Bourdieu 1993; 1996; DiMaggio 1987; 1992; Peterson & Anand 2004). Hence, they are shaped by the dynamics of cultural institutions and the larger “fields of cultural production” in which they are embedded. The focus on institutional (re)production of taste is particularly useful for understanding national differences in taste patterns (Janssen et al. 2000; Lamont & Thevenot 2000). Rather than in ephemeral cultural factors, field theory places the formation of taste firmly in institutions. Hence, national differences in beauty standards are seen as the result of the dynamics of national cultural fields, the structure of which varies cross-nationally (Benson 1999).

Beauty standards differ from the artistic or cultural tastes typically studied within this paradigm. Standards for physical attractiveness are not explicitly disseminated through official “consecrating” institutions, such as the educational system. Hence, beauty standards may be less clearly related to class background and have less obvious “low” and “high” varieties. Instead, this project expects an important role for taste production and dissemination by cultural industries like modelling. Such commercial cultural institutions have different dynamics and may be related to social divides in very different ways.

Beauty, gender and the body
Unlike other forms of aesthetic appreciation, beauty standards are not only directed at the appreciation of outside objects or expressions, but directly applied to one’s own body. Hence, beauty standards are strongly embodied and gendered, and typically have a strong normative component (Black 2004; Synnott 1993). Therefore, I combine the perspective on the social formation of taste outlined above with insights from gender studies and the sociology of the body.

Notions of beauty are linked with wider discourses about bodies and bodily control (Black 2004; Bordo 1993; Entwistle 2000; Synnott 1993). In this perspective, bodily regimes are forms of control that reflect wider societal power structures, especially gender relations (Butler 1990). Particularly for women, beauty is central to a successful gender performance. For men, physical appearance is generally less impor-
tant, although bodily regimes for men are becoming increasingly strict and more aestheticized (Luciano 2002). Modelling work is characterized by especially strict body regimes, and pronounced and public gender performances (Entwistle 2002; Mears & Finlay 2005).

This perspective enables us to reconceptualize and refine the relation between beauty and social inequality, by pointing at the ways in which inequalities are connected with the human body. It predicts that gender is the main factor in the shaping of taste variations, and that beauty standards are highly morally charged – more so than other aesthetic standards. Moreover, national variations and historical shifts in gender inequalities will affect beauty standards. Through cross-national and longitudinal comparison of six countries with different gender regimes (cf. Haussmann et al. 2008), this project will investigate the relation between gender inequality and beauty standards.

Race also is an important factor in the relation between beauty, the body, and social inequality. Racial hierarchies influence beauty standards, both globally and within nations (Hunter 2002; Jones 2008). However, ethnic groups typically develop beauty standards particular to their own ethnic group. Hence, I expect the ethnic diversification of European countries to lead to diversification of beauty standards. Moreover, race and body type also affect perceptions of the beauty standards of the transnational modelling industry, which favors white, blonde, and blue-eyed (Jones 2008).

Finally, several authors have argued that physical appearance has become more important, for men and women, as a result of the shift to a post-industrial, service-based economy (Black 2004; Featherstone 1991; Peiss 2001). In post-industrial economies, people will attach greater importance to appearance, and will perceive beauty more as regime involving personal care, effort, and self-discipline. This perspective predicts an intensification and transformation of the relation between beauty and inequality, especially in countries with a strong service sector.

The globalization of beauty standards: transnational institutions, fields and repertoires

The final theoretical perspective I will enlist in the construction of my framework for a theory of beauty is globalization theory. This allows me to “transnationalize” the theoretical perspectives outlined above.

Cultural globalization leads to the emergence of a global network with multiple centers, and peripheries increasingly, but not exclusively, oriented towards these centers (Appadurai 1996; Castells 1997). This has caused the emergence and growing importance of transnational and global institutions (Flietstein 2004; Guillén 2002; Meyer et al. 1997; Pieterse 1995). These institutions do not supplant local or national organizations, but complement, and sometimes contradict and compete with them.

In this project, cultural globalization will conceptualized as the emergence of transnational “fields of cultural production” (Kuipers forthcoming; cf. Janssen et al. 2008). The production, dissemination, and consecration of cultural products occur increasingly on a transnational level. Inevitably, this leads to the emergence of transnational classifications, genres, and standards. Local modelling industries are increasingly embedded in a wider transnational field. Paris, Milan, and London are three of the “global cities” (Sassen 2001) of the modelling industry. I expect much of the innovation and change within modelling to be the result of the processes of distinction, emulation, and competition between such global centers.

This project will investigate how increasing globalization affects beauty standards, both for people working in the industry, and for “normal” people. A central hypothesis of this project is that the emergence of transnational fields leads to the creation of “transnational repertoires of evaluation”. However, national cultural production will not be completely eclipsed by transnational institutions. Through cross-national and longitudinal analysis, this project will allow us to gauge to what extent and how convergence of beauty standards occurs, both in the modelling industry, and in society at large.

An important empirical question is how transnational repertoires of evaluations are related to national standards. Do transnational beauty standards “push out” national conventions, and if so, for whom? Globalization is likely to lead to new intersections of taste and social background. Potentially, beauty standards will increasingly mark new status divides, for instance between young and old, or “locals” and “cosmopolitans” (Castells 1997; Sassen 2001). Hence, this project will lead us to explore new forms of inequality caused by globalization.

4. The four subprojects: Aim and methodology

This project will consist of four subprojects, carried out by four researchers: a postdoctoral researcher, two PhD students, and myself. Taken together, the subprojects follow the entire trajectory of images produced in the modelling industry – from cultural producers, to the models, to the images as they appear in magazines, to the audiences – in six countries. The four subprojects will be carried out in close collaboration, so that the results of one subproject can be used to formulate hypotheses and design research instruments for the other projects.
All four subprojects will be done in six countries. France, Italy, and the UK have central positions in the transnational modelling field. They each contain one of the “global cities” of the transnational modelling and fashion field: Paris, Milan, or London. The Netherlands, Poland and Turkey are more peripheral, and hence less likely to influence standards and classifications within the field. The comparative design of this project serves methodological as well as theoretical functions. Theoretically, comparison of the shaping of beauty standards in different contexts enables us to establish the relative impact of field-level and national-level variables. Moreover, cross-national and over-time comparison allows us to establish whether globalization and integration into transnational fields leads to convergence of beauty standards. However, comparison also serves important methodological functions, especially for the first and fourth project: each national case will be used to generate and refine questions and hypotheses, which can then be tested and further refined in the next fieldwork visit.

Project 1: Producing Beauty (Senior researcher, 2010-2015)
The objective of this project is two-fold. First, it aims to maps standards of beauty (and fitness for modelling, which may not be the same thing) used by professionals in this field, and to uncover these standards’ underlying logic. Second, it entails an institutional analysis of the modelling business in all six countries, and the national and transnational fields which they are part of, in order to study how standards and classifications are produced and disseminated. The data for this subproject will consist of interviews with cultural professionals and intermediaries involved in modelling. The interviews will focus on beauty standards as well as (trans)national field structures, and will use visual materials (Q-sort) along with verbal probing and questioning. The interview data will be supplemented by the analysis of documents and secondary materials, and ethnographic materials.

Project 2: Embodying Beauty (PhD student, 2010-2014)
The aim of this subproject is to study, through interviews and ethnographic observation, how male and female models perceive beauty standards (using the same methods/questions as project 1). More specifically, it will seek to understand how they represent and embody such standards in their work, and how they learn to enact and embody these standards. In the context of this project this embodiment will be conceptualized as a (learned and stylized) “performance” by the model, and as a “regime” to which models are subjected. The data of this project will consist primarily of interviews and ethnographic observations of modelling work including their training and body maintenance, the process of modelling and the posing for the camera and on the catwalk. The researcher will do interviews in all six countries. However, ethnographic observation will be concentrated in two countries: the Netherlands, and either France or Italy (depending on the PhD student’s language skills).

The main objective of this project is to look at the way male and female faces and bodies have been represented in fashion magazines in all six countries. This project will consist of a quantitative content analysis of advertisements and editorial content both in mainstream and “high fashion” magazines, between 1980 and 2010. It will compare not only cross-nationally, but also between national magazines and local franchises of international magazines (Elle, Cosmopolitan, Vogue). Hence, this project aims to analyze both national repertoires, and possible transnational convergence. A second objective of this project is to “translate” the logics and beauty standards uncovered in Subprojects 1 and 2 into measurable and quantifiable coding schemes. This subproject will require development of a codebook that will capture not only easily quantifiable variables but also more ephemeral aspects of style and modes of portrayal, for which this project will make extensive use of findings from the first and second projects.

Project 4: Consuming Beauty (Postdoctoral researcher, 2011-2015)
The aim of this subproject is to map beauty standards, their relation to social background, and their underlying logics in all six countries. How do people of different backgrounds perceive the beauty standards of the modelling industry, and how are these related to their standards for female and male beauty? Through a comparison across countries, this project will qualify differences and similarities between countries in the nature and patterning of beauty standards; and gauge the impact of globalization by looking for “transnational repertoires of evaluation.” Moreover, this project will be centrally concerned with the intersection between national and transnational beauty standards and aesthetic repertoires. For this project, an online survey will be done among a representative sample of at least 200 people in all six countries. In the second phase, in-depth interviews will be held with at least 50 people per country. These interviews will involve a Q-sort (images to be sorted according to beauty) as well as extended discussion of beauty standards.