Queerness in Parisian Maisons de Haute Couture

A ficto-critical approach to belle époque boutiques as queer(ed) spaces

Abstract - This work aims to infuse theoretical knowledge of queer space to further the understanding of the history of luxury retail stores. It analyses certain spaces of a metropolis inconspicuously connected to the history of fashion, by taking three Parisian boutiques of influential designers in the *belle époque* as examples of the origin of *maison de haute couture* culture: *maisons* Worth, Paquin and Poiret. In a pioneering attempt, while combining queer historical literature with a ficto-critical approach, this work strives to clarify the ties that bind queerness and boutique history together. Interactions between architecture and queerness are sought out in books and articles on queer space, such as the eponymous literature of Betsky (1997), and linked to fashion historical literature, i.a. Joseph (2014), Steele (1988, 2013) and Vänskä (2014). The findings of this thesis exemplify the knowledge gap that seems to be present in the connection between interior space, fashion and queerness. Moreover, the theoretical framework of what queer space entails, is employed to show the evocative qualities of the discussed boutiques, using definitions of closet and mirror space, fabricated fantasies and collections as queer modernist interiors. Despite the fluid definition of queerness complicating the forming of rigid answers, this research contends that there is a multiplicity of indications connecting queerness to the boutiques of the *belle époque*.

Key words - queer space, boutique, belle époque Paris, maison de haute couture, interior space, queer phenomenology

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As I walk.

As I walk the streets of Paris, I fancy myself a flâneur, as Baudelaire agreed with me.

As I walk in the footsteps of someone who walked through Paris before me, I listen attentively, as it is all too clear to me what stories are hidden in nuances.

As I walk in the footsteps of someone who walked in the footsteps of someone who walked through Paris before me, I think, as the stories form my own image of a period that relates and will continue to relate to the here and now, to me.[1]

1 This is a self-written fictional narrative inspired by Mireille Roddier's chapter in *Writing Architectures: Ficto-Critical Approaches* (Frichot & Stead, 2020). Using similar sentences, she articulates the literary journeys that are made through multiple periods and media to come to a closer understanding of the stories she reads and writes.

(Re-)Writing Queer History

Through walking in Paris, one is able to notice the streets littered with stories, which were discarded, trampled and forgotten. Wanderers can find these forgotten stories, pick them up and help rewrite these stories into existence. The stories that are deviant from the regular, that are uncertain or that are self-constructed, form an image of what it was to be queer[2] during the *belle époque* when virtually all stories damned such a perspective. A queer perception of space can offer us freedom from the imprisoning characteristics of the modern city. It consequently opens possibilities to understand the spaces full of sensuality which live only in and for experience, through people, spaces, and how people present themselves in this space (Betsky, 1997). In this space, it is possible to act as your desired self, 'performing' either to reassure your identity or resist the internalised expectation of what 'essentially should be' your gender identity (Butler, 1988). Presenting oneself in a specific manner becomes a way of communicating through one's clothing, in an attempt to reach like-minded individuals. As society takes it for granted that fashion and social distinction are intertwined and bodily representation is the vessel through which this is upheld (Aspers & Godart, 2013), a particular fashion allows for queer ways of resisting imperative norms by representing identity and body in space (Vänskä, 2014).

This work strives to add to barely existent literature written on the topic of queer architecture and its relation to fashion, to increase the understanding and integration of queer theory in both fields. Taking Paris as a city unequivocally connected to fashion, interactions with architecture and queerness are sought out in books and articles on queer space (i.a. Betsky, Bonnevier, Ahmed) and on queer fashion (i.a. Joseph, Steele and Vänskä). The findings exemplify the knowledge gap that seems to be present in the connection between interior space, fashion and queerness. These findings also point to how this may have shaped an ever-changing spatial function such as that of the boutique. This specific form of retail, also referred to as a *maison de luxe* (Debenedetti, 2021), is the place where the elite can enjoy their opulent existence by getting fitted with new haute couture regularly.

As a starting point, Charles Frederick Worth is found as the originator of the *maison de haute couture*[3], opening his boutique on 7 rue de la Paix in 1858 (Stempniak, 2019; Joseph, 2014). The latter source helps track down Worth's fashion's queer roots (Joseph, 2014), motivating to further investigate the interconnectedness of the topics of the *maison de haute couture* and queer design. Although Stempniak uses Sara Ahmed's (2006) literature on 'queer phenomenology' to describe the corporeality that is pertinent to fashion and consequently its relation to space, the use of the term 'queer' is then not found anywhere in Stempniak's dissertation.

2 I refer to 'queer' here in a similar way that Sara Ahmed (2006) describes it. In her introduction for *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 'queer' is simultaneously referred to both as off-line, oblique or deviant and to describe non-heterosexual practices as a form of social and sexual contact.

3 Although Worth's boutique can be deemed a *maison de haute couture* since its origin in 1858, the title became official in 1868. That is the year in which Worth initiated the Chambre, a governing body that regulates which boutiques or *maisons de luxe* are allowed to grant themselves the title of *maison de haute couture*. This Chambre later evolved into the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, which is still active today (Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, n.d.).

No direct sources on queerness or queer architecture and its relation to boutiques, or synonyms of it, have been found. Betsky (1997) underlines throughout his entire work the connection of queerness and its ties to the middle class, naming merchants, tradespeople and clerks as examples of professions. Sinfield (1994) further substantiates this relation, more so directed towards gender, by stating that "If manliness produced wealth, [homosexual] femininity might show how to consume it elegantly, and how to be a finer human being and more effective citizen." (Sinfield, 1994, p. 53). Additionally, a literature review by Farmer (2004) states directly that the *belle époque* (1871-1914) was a notable era of same-sex sexual cultures for the then 'pleasure-capital' of the Western World. This period is therefore more specifically of interest to determine the connection between queerness and the development of boutiques.

Could the reason for the lack of connection made between queer (design) theories and the evolution of boutiques in Paris be due to a lack of research, or was the influence so insignificant? This work strives to answer that question through the following thesis question: "To what extent has queer space shaped *maisons de haute couture* in Paris from 1858-1914?" The dates used in the research question correspond to the opening of Worth's boutique and the end of the *belle époque*.

Through my research, I will search for connections, such as that of Worth, to queer design. What other influential designers have been a part of a *maison de haute couture* and in what way has queer phenomenology impacted their workspace? In this research, it has to be taken into account that queer theory is still an upcoming field of research and this greatly influences the information available, especially regarding the earlier periods in the scope of this research. A queer ficto-critical approach is taken in this research to provide broader knowledge on the topic while being aware of possible cultural homogenisation in the discourse that is currently present. The next paragraph will explain the theoretical arguments for such an approach and what this entails.

The first chapter sets out the queer spatial network of *belle époque* Paris and gives a broader context of the city and period. This chapter also provides current knowledge available on queer cultural production in the boutiques of Paris. Three influential fashion designers of this period are discussed more elaborately. In the second chapter, a theoretical framework of queer space is set out to be able to bridge the knowledge gap towards 'boutiques' and to get a more general understanding of why boutiques could be deemed queer spaces. Betsky (1997), Bonnevier (2007) and Ahmed (2006) will help conceptualise what queer architecture and theory are so that similarities between their definition and the spatial aspects of the boutique as found in literature can be compared. The third chapter gathers the information from both the first and second chapters to connect it to literature that describes the physical and social environments of several boutiques. By doing so, the framework set out in chapter two, what is to be a queer space, is applied to the *maisons de haute couture* of chapter one to further dissect how boutiques presumably became or were designed to be queer spaces. The conclusion of this work will help to clarify the available knowledge on boutiques as potentially queer(ed) spaces. In doing so, attempts are made in connecting the scholarship of this research to existing current research to envision possible further explorations of the topic.

A queer ficto-critical approach

Reacting to the general knowledge gap that seems to be present in the queer storylines of boutique origins, a ficto-critical approach seems appropriate. As Jose Muñoz has argued "The key to queering evidence, and by that I mean the ways in which we prove queerness and read queerness, is by suturing it to the concept of ephemera." (Muñoz, 2009, p. 65). This tendency towards critical fabulations is further reinforced by Saidiya Hartman's (2008) interpretation of Lisa Lowe's statement in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*:

> The conditional temporality of "what could have been," according to Lisa Lowe, "symbolizes aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science and the matters absent, entangled and unavailable by its methods." [(Lowe, 2006, p. 208)]
>
> Hartman, 2008, p. 11

Through reading this paragraph and connecting it to Muñoz, it becomes clear that there is evidence for an approach to a literature review in which ephemera can help fill in the absent perspectives that were previously unavailable due to the methods and approaches of that time. Further arguments for using such an approach can be found in the analysis of queering fashion by Vänskä (2014). In her article, she cites two authors who describe, to varying degrees, similar ficto-critical approaches, albeit with different designations: Teresa de Lauretis and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. De Lauretis would have seen queer as an alternative method of inquiry through which heterosexist assumptions can be critiqued to better establish what constitutes theory and knowledge. Queer theory can be seen and understood as a means of resistance to counteract cultural homogenisation in dominant discourses (de Lauretis, 1991). This method of inquiry would later be taken up by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who saw both 'paranoid reading' and 'reparative reading' as implementations of it. In this regard, 'paranoid reading' stems from some suspicion that there are silences, gaps and insinuations left open in cultural readings as a result of the marginalisation of non-heterosexual experiences. On the other hand, 'reparative reading' is a more positive form of critique: "It aspires to repair existing knowledge and show the wide spectrum of reading possibilities." (Vänskä, 2014, p. 449). Using both de Lauretis' broader queer definition and Sedgwick's analytical definition, a queer ficto-critical approach emerges, which will be applied in this work.

In Mireille Roddier's chapter in *Writing Architectures* (Frichot & Stead, 2020), there is an instance in which it is already visible that this ficto-critical approach can apply to the research time and place of this work.

> As I read, I walk through the boulevards of nineteenth-century Paris as a man - failing to recall that I am a woman in the twenty-first century - subject to the deafening noise of the street as well as to the seductive sight of the tall slender widow whose path I briefly crossed, and whose glance poured life into my being.
>
> Roddier, 2020, p. 130

Using a ficto-critical approach, Roddier interprets the story of a brief encounter with an unknown woman, a tale of 'love at first sight', as a way of subordinating herself to and internalising a presumed normative point of view from that time: the male gaze. It is not only a way of critiquing literature from a specific era but coincidingly reflecting upon one's own perspective that influences the way the literature is interpreted. That is the aim of the queer ficto-critical approach I wield in this work. This approach is infused in this work through the personal poetry of queer feelings as well as through the reading of several fictional literary sources.

Belle époque Paris and its queer veins

To be able to determine the queer influence on Parisian boutiques, a better understanding of the general queerness present in Paris is needed. Amy Wells-Lynn stated in her geocritical approach to three female writers in Paris: "Linking real desire to real geography is a way to realize the desire." (Wells-Lynn, 2005, p. 103). To what extent can the fashion capital of Paris be seen as a valuable topic of queer theory and what are the factors, and in particular in what spaces, that contribute to the homosexual cultural production during the *belle époque*? Even if boutiques were hotspots of queerness, they were presumably not the only spaces of queer expression in the city. Therefore, several literary sources are used to shape a network of spatial containers of queerness of which the boutiques form a part (figure 1). To answer these questions, a more general context of the *belle époque* Paris is set out to map the queer spaces in it.

Farmer (2004) discusses that the *belle époque* (1871-1914) meant economic growth for the city of Paris and a reputation as the capital of the new modernity. This reputation was based on technological and cultural innovations. Under the direction of Napoleon III, Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann instructed entire neighbourhoods to be torn down and their inhabitants to be evicted to make way for the erection of monumental and spacious streets and buildings (Steele, 1988). Steele articulates the importance of more specifically the rue de la Paix, the rue Royale and the area surrounding the place Vendôme, all home to the smartest and most expensive fashions. The agglomeration of these highly fashionable places was deemed the inner city of the 'kingdom of fashion' from within which the 'decrees of the sovereign' were issued (Steele, p. 137), referring to the master *couturiers* of that era: Worth, Doucet and Paquin (Berry, 2018). In his book, *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin (1988/2002) goes as far as to say that the widening of these streets was necessary to fit the abundance of crinoline worn by the bourgeoisie. Through his cynical interpretation of the city's history, he points to the apparent relationship between fashion and urbanism of Paris in the era of Haussmann.

Balducci (2017) states that the widened streets, boulevards, allude to the origin of *flânerie*, a way of experiencing one's surroundings while walking. This concept of *flânerie* originates from the work of Charles Baudelaire: *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (1964), in which the *flâneur* could be described as the observer of the Parisian scene, a passionate spectator. His[1] eye for contemporary fashion would enable him to distinguish the modern urban subject from the people from other times or places outside of Paris. The *flânerie*, the act that turns most aspects of everyday life into a spectacle to be seen, is preferably done at a slow pace. It is even described in referral to men walking their turtles (Benjamin, 1988/2002), as this performance not only enables the *flâneur* to take in his surroundings but also realises his desire to be embraced by the gaze of other *flâneurs* (Pollock, 1992).

1 Balducci (2017) states that the *flâneur* as originally described by Baudelaire is rarely critiqued. Moreover, she suggests that Baudelaire's authority and its corollary, the male gaze, have been continually reinforced (such as in Benjamin's *Arcades Project*).

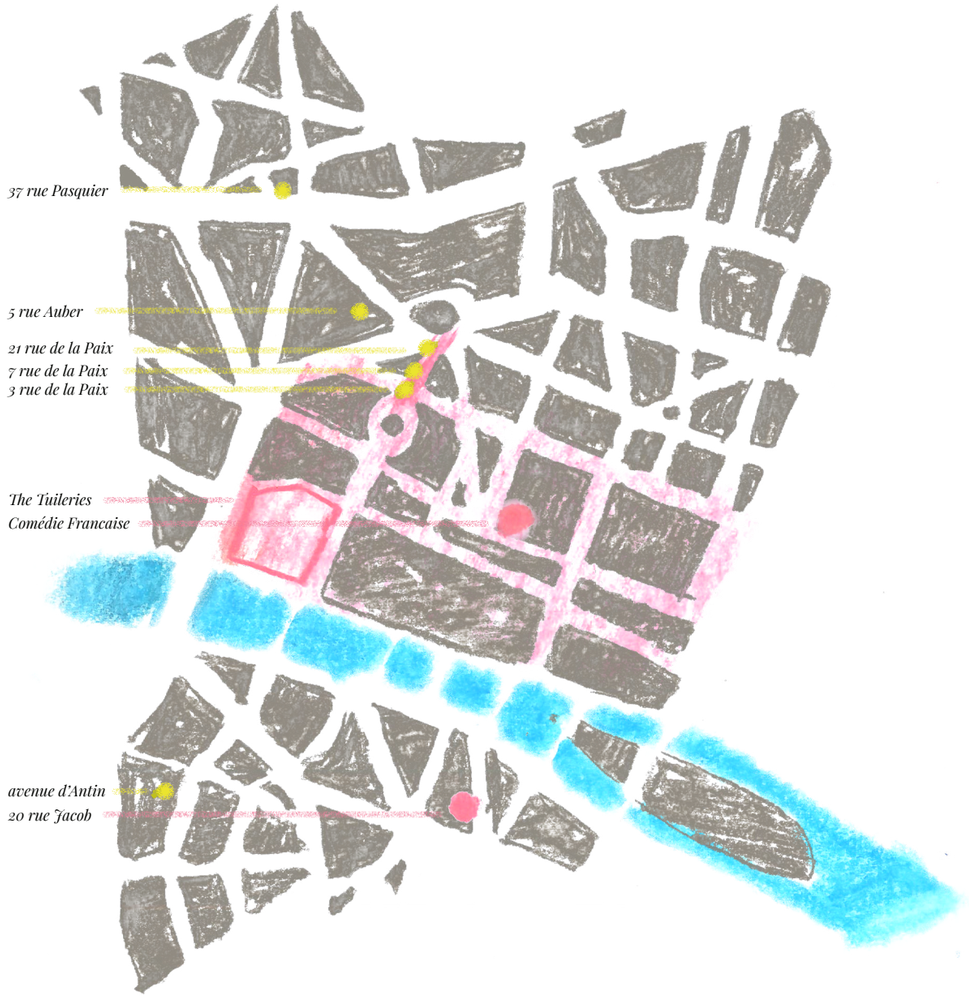

Figure 1: Suggestive map of *belle époque* Paris showing boutiques (yellow) and literary 'queer' spaces (pink). Work by author.

As derived from Jean Béraud's painting of the *Avenue Parisienne* (figure 2) the *flâneur* had numerous possibilities of positioning himself at a vantage point from which he could people-watch; benches, horse-drawn carriages, café tables, balconies, etc. In these positions, *flâneurs* are able to spectate everyday life as it happens around them, while simultaneously becoming a part of it themselves. Consequently, as Balducci (2017) puts it, *flânerie* puts these men at the centre of attention in a similar way to the goods on display in the shops along these same boulevards. However, it is important to note that according to Benjamin (1988/2002), the *flâneur* is not at home in either the metropolis he wanders or the middle class he desires to gaze upon. He is home in the crowd, which forms a veil before him and beckons him to be immersed in the phantasmagorias of the city: landscapes, streets, rooms, et cetera. According to Benjamin, these sequential images of places and people, either real or in fantasy, lead to a culmination in the stores of Paris.

Next to the aforementioned developments, Paris' reputation also relied on the characteristics of the hedonistic nature of social and erotic bohemianism. According to Farmer (2004), the expanding city was an unfolding place of homosexual cultures. It is, however, important to note that the freedom with which homosexuals could express their love for one another in public has been scarce, especially in the period of interest. Joseph (2014) reads into Labouchère's *Diary of the besieged resident in Paris* (1871) as a way of understanding that powerful men such as Labouchère were able to contribute to the criminalisation of homosexuality in the public space in nineteenth-century Paris. Despite this lack of freedom, multiple literary sources highlight the presence of homosexuality in the culture of Paris.

Figure 2: Jean Béraud (1877).
Avenue Parisienne [Oil on canvas].
Private collection.

Régis Revenin (2006) explains that the Haussmannisation of Paris opened up the previously barely-lit streets and turned them into open boulevards less suitable for homosexual cultural production, thus facilitating repression. This led to homosexuals abandoning the public spaces and finding new spaces for their identity and culture in private and semi-public spaces. Farmer (2004) names salons, bars, cafés and bathhouses as venues that make up the underground network catering to homosexual encounters among men and among women. Both Albert (2006) and Van Casselaer (1986) also note restaurants, specifically brasseries, as lesbian meeting places. Van Casselaer draws on Léo Taxil's *La Corruption fin-de-siècle* (1891) to explain that most overt 'lesbian soliciting' happened in the street, in public parks and restaurants, but that it would not surprise Taxil if it happened in other places or at other times of the day. Bonnevier (2007) states that there is an international reputation for sapphic love in the *fin de siècle* context of Paris and its artistic revolt. Her writing follows the Parisian adventures of Eileen Gray after her departure from Ireland to Paris, the latter of which provided an opportunity to join the social women's circles that included regular appointments at Natalie Clifford Barney's feminist literary salon. One of the writers who frequented her salon, Radclyffe Hall, was of interest to Amy Wells-Lynn (2005). In West-Lynn's reading of *The Well of Loneliness* by Hall, notes of real street names are used to write into reality the possibility of expressing female sexuality in these real spaces. Examples of the spaces found through this ficto- and geo-critical approach are the Comédie Française, the Tuileries, the Louvre and rue de la Paix. The latter is home to multiple boutiques, among which the first *maison de haute couture*, of Charles Frederick Worth (Clouzot, 1923), but also boutiques of Jeanne Paquin and Jacques Doucet (Berry, 2018). Therefore it seems plausible that queerness would be apparent in the surroundings or interior of these boutiques.

Joseph (2014) specifically reads into the context of the boutique of Charles Frederick Worth, by reviewing Labouchère's work. Labouchère, as interpreted by Joseph, pinpointed how the *couturier* Worth could be distinguished as a homosexual[2]; his ways of sitting and speaking, and how he conversed with his female clients. Joseph approaches Worth's 'Temple of Fashion' as a place where the absence of heterosexual erotic endeavours seems evident. They sketch a scene in which the *couturier*, presumably Worth himself, appears "remote […] from the erotic interest in women that is courtship's prerequisite" (Miller, 2003, p.15). Worth's 'non-heterosexuality' lends itself to be a characteristic of a proper *couturier* as George Sala (1882) implies that a heterosexual would be energised by a fascination partially defined by lust (figure 3). Adding onto queer effects located in Victorian fashion (Marcus, 2007), Joseph appoints striking similarity between the 'female cruising' as described by Marcus and the situations generated in Worth's boutique: "The pleasures that Worth's clients found in observing one another were compounded by the pleasures they (and he) found in being observed by him, and in observing one another being observed by him." (Joseph, 2014, p. 271). Therefore Worth's boutique can be considered an exemplary container of queerness.

2 Steele (2013) paradoxically states that there is no evidence of Worth's homosexual identity, bringing up his heterosexual marriage and two sons as strong, but not certain, rebuttals. Simultaneously, she refers to Oscar Wilde, whose similar marriage and two sons were found to be perpendicular to his blatant confessions to homosexuality.

Do you look at me the way I like to look at you?
I love the way he looks at you and
I would like it if he directed those eyes at mine,
too.

Continuously yearning for one another, but together
only in this place, without fear,
I long for eyes like his and yours, not to meet mine and
connect our sights,
but to linger right here.

Figure 3: Sala, G. A. (1882). Illustration from *Paris Herself Again in 1878-9*. 6th edition. Vizetelly.

Although several literary sources define Worth as the most preeminent dressmaker of the period (Stempniak, 2019; Steele, 1988; Joseph, 2014), less is known about what Steele (1988) presumes to have been the foremost *couturière* of the *belle époque*: Jeanne Paquin[3]. Her boutique was located on 3 rue de la Paix, just five doors further from Maison Worth (Clouzot 1923). It raises the question of similar clientele with similar intents visiting both Worth's and Paquin's boutiques due to the proximity between the two addresses. Julia Westerman (2019) dissects the patrons and the interior of Paquin's boutique in her dissertation on the *couturière*'s significant contributions to fashion history in the *belle époque*. Westerman's analysis of Henri Gervex's *Five Hours at Paquin* (figure 4) concludes the lack of agency that male figures seem to have had in the boutique of Paquin. She points out the painterly ways that Gervex employed to diminish the prominence of the male figures. The five men depicted are either cornered, drawn smaller or simply overshadowed by the animated and opulent appearances of the twenty-two women. Westerman states that through an analysis of this painting, the boutique of Paquin can be understood as a space of freedom for the women in it, a wholly female space. However, a female space does not yet make a queer space, at least not in the definition of queer as referring to homosexual practices. The hypothetical queerness of Paquin's boutique will be explicated further in the third chapter using the theoretical framework of the second chapter.

As introduced earlier, rue de la Paix was not only home to the boutiques of Worth and Paquin but also the *maison de luxe* of Jacques Doucet on No. 21 (Clouzot, 1923). Although Doucet had made a name for himself and was named frequently in the same breath as Worth and Paquin as influential designers, he is most commonly known for taking Paul Poiret, a young designer, under his wings from 1898 onward (White, 1973). After experiencing welcoming freedom and abundant appreciation at the House of Doucet, Poiret also followed an apprenticeship at the House of Worth in 1900. These two immaculate mentors prepared Poiret to make a name for himself when he started out his own business, first on 5 rue Auber in 1903, then moved to 37 rue Pasquier in 1906 and eventually settled in an estate on l'avenue d'Antin in 1908 (ibid.). According to White, Poiret's daring, controversial designs not only paved the way for contemporary fashion and luxury stores to evolve but also anticipated the greater freedom women would demand in terms of work, social life and fashion. Seeing as Poiret stayed an apprentice of Worth for a considerate period, his interactions with clientele were ostensibly influenced by Worth's ways. In reading his diary, White states that Poiret believed the *couturier* was to excite the imagination of the public through the collecting of exotic spices and savours, in the form of artefacts and art pieces, with the aim of serving fashion, coquetry and women. Although Poiret's compassion for the female gender is clearly explicated, there are no instances of homo-erotica at his address similar to Worth's boutique as discussed by Joseph. However, using theoretical definitions of queer space and knowledge of Poiret's boutique on avenue d'Antin, Poiret could become a valuable figure in understanding the connection between the *maison de haute couture* and queerness. This proposition will be developed further in the third chapter.

3 The oblivion into which Madame Paquin has fallen is especially contrasting to Worth's fame when looking at women's journals of the time, which state Paquin as the 'world's greatest fashion authority'. Fashion historian Jan Reeder suggests that Paquin's fame may have been overshadowed by her fellow dressmakers, Worth, but also Jacques Doucet and Paul Poiret. In this suggestion, Reeder signals that Paquin's gender might have something to do with the lesser amount of attention that Paquin has received over the years. (Steele, 2013).

A less direct telling of boutique sapphism, if that may be defined so directly, is elaborated upon by Léo Taxil (1891, as cited in van Casselaer, 1986) and Ali Coffignon (1889, as cited in van Casselaer, 1986). Coffignon wrote the essay on *La corruption à Paris* to verify the menace that homosexuality poses for the lively city of Paris in an attempt to evict his friend's tenant that held presumably homosexual festivities in the apartment building he rented out (Wilson, 2002). In a similar way, Taxil tried to eradicate lesbianism in Paris by exposing *lupanars*, brothels, as spaces where underage girls were wounded in sadist sapphic practices (Taxil, 1884). Van Casselaer (1986) rebuts Taxil's proclaimed knowledge on lesbianism as 'dangerously limited' as it was based on ill-revised works of Coffignon and originally Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet's *La Prostitution dans la ville de Paris*.

Taxil (1891, as cited in van Casselaer, 1986) described the tale of Lucienne, a woman collecting her *trousseau*[4] the day before her marriage to a wealthy gentleman. Upon entering a shop, both another customer and the saleswoman took a lively interest in Lucienne. It was the shop owner at last who succeeded to approach Lucienne, as she had taken note of her address after her purchases. The shop owner had intrigued Lucienne enough to be let into her house, after which they arranged to have lunch at the shop owner's place. Upon this third meeting with one another, Lucienne did not return to her intended husband-to-be until a month after their proposed wedding day. Lucienne, who seemed to be in a disorderly state, explained to the man to whom she was engaged that she had no further intentions of marrying him or longing for a protector. She had presumably been caught up in one of the two greatest bands of lesbians, *la bande Friedland*[5], where she had experienced hitherto unknown sensations and was immersed in decadence. According to Taxil, these bands can be understood as veritable lesbian academies generally consisting of ex-inmates of *lupanars* who function as procurers responsible for corrupting young girls. Coffignon (1889, as cited in van Casselaer, 1986) describes a similar story in which a young woman becomes infatuated by a saleswoman with whom she flees from her fiancé and takes refuge on the outskirts of Paris. While both Taxil's and Coffignon's aim was to describe the proclaimed corruption through lesbianism that brought upon the decay of French civilisation, they hint convincingly at luxurious fashion stores as facilitators of sapphic interactions.

4 A bride's clothes, linen and other belongings collected before marriage (Oxford Languages, n.d. -b).

5 The other great band of lesbians being *la bande Marceau*, both named after the addresses of their leaders (van Casselaer, 1986).

I am the canvas over which she drapes her art,
painting my true colours
into a portrait of quiet love.
In her atelier, I am blossoming into and becoming
this still life of forbidden fruits.

Figure 4: Henri Gervex (1906), *Five Hours at Paquin*. [Oil on canvas.] Private collection.

Closet, confection, collection

As noted in the previous paragraph, a boutique as described in the case of Maison Worth is indeed connected with queer culture and catered more towards female voyeurism. Additionally, the aforementioned sources state the socio-situational aspects of the shops as the enabler of sapphism or homosocial interactions. This chapter aims to describe how this concept of female cruising, and perhaps general queerness, in boutiques can be understood in the sense of queer architecture. To what extent does the (interior) architecture queer these spatial containers or is the opposing statement true, in which the sociality of the function is the main driver that influences its surroundings? Or is there a tertiary hypothesis, in which the boutique is simply a container of queer voyeurism where both the architecture and the queer expression are entirely detached from one another? A theoretical framework of queer architecture in relation to fashion is set out in the following paragraphs.

Starting with describing the general concept of queer architecture, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* by Aaron Betsky (1997) serves as a pioneering work of understanding queerness and how architecture is used and designed to give way to emerging sexual patterns. Although Betsky's work is a foundation of queer space theory, a review by Van Buskirk (1997) points out that there are inconsistencies in the way Betsky uses the term queer: it is sometimes used to explain a context that would be more accurately described as "homosexual" or "gay". Additionally, Van Buskirk points out Betsky's focus on queerness in spaces that are only accessible to white, middle-class gay men and therefore only gives a limited idea of what queerness could envelop in the field of spatial theory. Nonetheless, a generalised concept of what queer space seems to be is derived through critical reading and by determining the applicability of the various contexts discussed by Betsky and how they apply to the framework of this thesis.

> If queer space starts in the closet, it forms itself in the mirror.
>
> Betksy, 1997, p. 19

With these words, Betsky aims to describe how queer space is inherently connected with interiority and reflexivity. The closet is considered a place where one can define oneself, constructing an identity out of the collection of clothing and accessories. According to Vänskä (2014) her reading of *Epistemology of the Closet* by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991)

> …the closet is not a concrete space but a discursive one, characterized by public secrets, silencing, and euphemisms. It produces interfaces, where private and public, visible and invisible are separated from each other.
>
> Vänskä, 2014, p. 452

In this citation, Vänskä refers to the figurative closet that is a metaphorical storage of homosexuality. The link between the literal and figurative meaning of the closet can be elaborated upon through Henry Urbach's essay "Closets, Clothes, disClosure" (1996) which discusses the two meanings of closets. He states that the closet, defined as a storage space that houses things that threaten to soil the room, is not so different from the closet, defined as a social order that ascribes normalcy to heterosexuality. Their similarity can be found in the related way of defining and ascribing meaning to space. The closet is generally a 'site' of storage that is simultaneously separated from and connected to the spheres of expression and repression: spaces of display. The adjacent rooms depend upon the closet in the same way the closet depends upon them, turning into an amalgamation of exclusion and definition of identity. In expanding the framework of the closet space, Urbach adds that there is a space ranging in proximity to the closet, where the actual changing of clothes, ergo of identity, happens: the 'ante-closet'. Although the ante-closet still raises one's awareness of present social codes, inequity and violence that influence sartorial expression, it forms an enclave in which the expression of a multivalence of sexualities and identities is further enabled (Deleuze, 1988).

The definition of this closet space is influenced by the presence of mirrors, as their absence might require reliance on imagination and memory of how one represents themselves and thereupon how others will interpret it (Urbach, 1996). Mirror space is described as the opposite of conventional architecture. Where conventionally built architecture functions as a fragment of a utopian world we build new every time, queer space just brings us back to ourselves. Often invisible, queer space uses mirrors to both affirm and confuse ourselves (Betsky, 1997).

Both 'closet' and 'mirror' are indisputably connected to how humans define themselves through their clothing. Therefore it would serve this research to further determine fashion's potential inclination towards queerness during the era and the related spaces under investigation. In *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* by Steele (1988), the disguise of homosexuality through fashion is described in the hand of novels by Marcel Proust. According to Steele, the psychological revelation through clothes and simultaneously the use of clothes as masks both played a significant role in Proust's works. Proust describes the love interest of his protagonist in *Within a Budding Grove* (Proust, 1919/1960) as dressed not only with the aim of comforting or adorning her body but as a textile translation of a whole civilisation, both delicate and spiritualised. Proust's characters seem to notice the secret details that are woven into the fabrics of the aristocrats, only to be sought out by those with similar secrets. Fashion, therefore, was deemed a language through which homosexuals could communicate while still adhering to the constraints of heterosexual norms; masculinity was spoken in dark colours and stiff fabrics while femininity found voice in lightness, brightness and ornamentation (Steele, 1988).

Although Proust's fiction and Steele's interpretation of it guide readers into a clear understanding of how fashion objects could function as communication media, a clear context of the conversations in which they are used is to be provided. Sara Ahmed (2006) suggests in her introduction to 'queer phenomenology' that the objects we inhabit spaces with might help us understand how sexual orientation could be a matter of residence. Betsky (1997) alluded to a similar connection between interiority and orientation, while this orientation was more so a general desire than one of sexual intent. He explains that through the decorating of one's own world so that one can be more introspective, for example through mirrors, one can find a place for oneself in the world and through ornamentation, another fantasy-full environment is opened up within the world that provides a cushion between one and the world.

> This realm of fantasy and froufrou,
> a confection as sweet and addictive as love,
> binds me tightly. Here, I am confined to myself, I
> confide to myself secrets which are held hostage
> from all others, but me and my mirror image.

Bonnevier (2007) discusses more directly how this concept of interiority and sexual orientation happens among women. She takes Natalie Barney's literary salon, 20 rue Jacob in Paris (Hillairet, 1963), as an example of a counterargument to the statement that women are constrained to create a room of their own within a structure built by men. In Barney's salon, a dissonance in heteronormativity was created through a network of people, actions and physical architecture, comparable to how Ahmed (2006) explains 'disorientation'. It is a space in which things, particularly bodies, are fleeting. The whereabouts of such spaces are further to be determined through David Hummon's review of *The Great Good Places* by Ray Oldenburg. In his review, Hummon (1991) reads into the definition of 'third places', such as salons and stores, as something outside of the order of the home or the workplace. Instead, it is a space that functions as a critical mediation structure to facilitate certain community life outside of the private domestic or impersonal work realms. Hummon concludes from Oldenburg's research that most of these third places have been relatively sex-segregated and the privilege of men. A salon as described in the case of Natalie Barney is an example of a virtually[1] sex-segregated third place that is the privilege of women. In connecting the works of Bonnevier, Ahmed and Oldenburg, one could argue that salons and similar disorienting spaces serve as a middle ground, between domestic and commercial, where communities gather informally and ephemerally.

1 In *Adventures of the Mind* (Barney, 1992) collated letters from Marcel Proust to Barney are telling of Proust, a man, visiting the salon as well, while other sources describe it as a utopic female space (Wells-Lynn, 2005; Albert 2006).

In Betsky's understanding of the development of queer architecture, connections are drawn to late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century designers such as Thomas Hope and Percier & Fontaine. Their designs are described by Betsky as "this queer space of tents" (Betsky, 1997, p. 66) in which archaeological collections were on display. This style of feminised classicism with exhibitive qualities became subsumed in the middle-class culture of the nineteenth century after which queers themselves incorporated and elevated this to their own style of modernism. "They began to collect so voraciously that the collections took over the architecture." (ibid.) In doing so, queers were presumably setting a stage that was able to outperform their heritage or even social status.

To summarise the theoretical framework of what makes a space queer(ed) is to be aware of the varied definitions of 'queerness' and thereupon how 'queer space' could be defined. Queer space can define one's identity while one is aware of the disguise of their queerness. It can be where one has the opportunity to further develop how this identity can be represented sartorially but it can also be the space in which domesticity and commerciality come together and become a tertiary function, an intermediary space that enables ephemeral get-togethers. In learning from Steele, Proust and Ahmed, it becomes clear that not only space but also the objects in it can carry (repressed) queer meanings. These objects can become a visual culture-producing queer space that forms a buffer between the user and the outside world. This space can be fantasy-full or abundantly embellished, or a space of display in which the collection and ornamentation become most prominent. Concludingly, the hypotheses posed in the introduction of this chapter are neither fully confirmed nor refuted, but are further unravelled nonetheless. Perhaps all three questions may be true in the sense that queer space might not adhere to only one definition, as does the term queer itself. Queer space then is able to confirm one's own queerness as well as to enable interactions that are deemed queer in the bilaterality of its definition, simultaneously and independently.

Domesticity and queer intimacy

To further elaborate on the blurred transition boutiques could create between public space and domesticity, this section will delve further into the latter to unravel how this practically manifests itself in the interior. This focus on domesticity is based on recent research by Debenedetti (2021), as he stated the following:

> Luxury brands also have a specific relationship to home meanings, as evidenced in their French name maisons de luxe (i.e., luxury houses). … More so, in French, the word "maison" refers to both the house (i.e., the spatial aspect of a dwelling) and the home (i.e., the symbolic aspect).
>
> Debenedetti, 2021, p. 306

Although Debenedetti focuses on luxury houses in the twenty-first century, the connection to *maison* and what that could imply for the function of these spaces is a reason for further analysis. The term *maison de luxe* was first used in *Annuaire-Almanach du Commerce et de l'Industrie* in 1888 referring to a shop that sold leather goods, curtains and fans. The French term 'boutique' is derived from the Greek *apothēkē* which translates to 'from a place for putting things' or simply 'a store' (Oxford Languages, n.d. -a). There is however little to no scholarship on the meaning of *maison* in relation to *haute couture*, which makes it more valuable to analyse the relationship between *maison* or domesticity to the fashionable culture discussed in this work.

Betsky (1997) directly discusses the relationship of domesticity to queer architecture, more so focused on the way men and women have different associations with it. According to Betsky, the home has always been associated with women while the orders of architecture were associated with men. In referring to postmodernism, those who mixed and matched the elements of 'home' and 'architecture', Betsky states that through the combining of both, a self-conscious stage is created. As 'home' is feminine and 'architecture' is masculine (as the society defined them) the combination of the two forms an inconspicuous identity; non-definitive and queer. This terminology of space as a stage harkens back to the description of the queer space of tents and displays as described by Betsky in the previous chapter.

Upon reading through *House of Fashion: Haute Couture and the Modern Interior* (Berry, 2018), a link between domesticity and boutiques is drawn, this time more directly. Indeed, Berry cites that the shops of Worth, Doucet and Paquin can to some extent be seen as an emulation of aristocratic homes. An earlier paragraph in Berry's work reveals more details about what he may associate with this reference. In referring to Worth's boutique, Berry implies that it is an exemplary space of nineteenth-century decorative excess as would be seen in homes of that era. The domesticity in Maison Worth is further enforced as it forms a contrast between the intimate environment of his salon and the emergence of the more impersonal department store as a new public shopping space.

Moreover, Freyja Hartzell (2009) goes as far as to say that the private bourgeois interior transformed into an oasis lined with velvets and linens in which tactile infatuations come into fruition. This space was juxtaposed against a background of Haussmann's paved and glazed Paris, which seemed cold and resistant to intimacy. Hartzell, therefore, contends that certain desires, previously denied or repressed in public, could be gratified in the comforting interior of a space such as the boutique. In this process of gratification, Hartzell argues, there is a certain connotation of suspense. Berry (2018) elaborates upon this by describing the suspenseful climax that is wandering through Worth's boutique to arrive at last in his excessively mirrored salon (figure 5).

> In order to view Worth's garments in the salon, the couture client first mounted the crimson-carpeted stairs to the first floor. Here, they would pass through a series of showrooms displaying fabrics; one dedicated to black and white silks, another to colorful, a third of velvets and plushes, and then finally a chamber of woolens, before entering a larger room with a wall of mirrors and garments displayed on wooden mannequins.
>
> Berry, 2018, p. 31

Figure 5: Salon interior of Maison Worth.
Roger-Miles, L. & Agie, G. (1910). *Les Createurs de la Mode.* Paris: C. Eggimann.

In this description of the interior qualities, it is clear that textiles played a great part in the building up of suspense, in line with Hartzell's theory, as do the mirrors in the finale of phantasmagoria. In studying the evocative capabilities of textiles, Millar & Kettle (2018) conclude that draped fabrics are not only materially sexual but that cloth in general is fundamental to the desire to look and be looked at, of voyeurism and exhibitionism. More directly, Millar & Kettle state that the erotica of cloth is fulfilled through the ambiguous and unnamed anticipation accompanied by it, similar to the rooms as fabricated phantasmagoria in Maison Worth. Berry further dissects Worth's salon, through the words of Worth's archive curator Valerie Mendes, and analyses that this mirror space was not only necessary for the culmination of the *couture* patron's journey through the boutique, but it served an essential functionality to the *couturier* himself too: to consider his creation all around. Nonetheless, in connecting the theoretical framework set out in the second chapter, Worth's mirrored salon has direct indications of the mirror space as described by Betsky. While the salon shown in figure x can be understood as a space for fitting, tailoring and maintaining contact with the client, it also has a certain resonance with the ante-closet space as defined by Urbach. Worth's boutique serves as the closet storing the repressed feelings of his clientele through the sapphic interactions, simultaneously defining these women's identities in the ante-closet and mirror space of the salon. The intimate interior of his boutique isolates the ephemeral cultural production from being exposed to the rigidity of the streets of Paris.

Although Berry states Maison Paquin to be an example of a boutique that refers to aristocratic domesticity too, Westerman states the opposite: "There is a sense of traditionalism in the designs as well as in the interior, but not a sense of stuffy aristocracy." (Westerman, 2019, p. 19-20) and "While the space in Gervex's painting is an interior one, it is not a domestic space." (ibid., p. 20). This may seem directly opposite to Berry's statement, but through critical reading of Westerman's dissertation, this could be understood with different connotations. Paquin's boutique is indeed not aristocratic in the sense that the clientele solely consisted of the elite members of society, as a lot of the less noble suffragettes gathered there as well. However, a majority of patrons were still of an upper-class or other higher social position, i.e. actresses, which enabled them to frequent such luxury stores (Steele, 2013). The absence of domesticity as described by Westerman can most probably be understood as distant from the general context of homes in which women from this period most often resided.

In reading Paquin's boutique, her space could be seen as a facilitator of homosocial interactions between like-minded women. Furthermore, Paquin established herself as a pioneering figure in the way she promoted her business, namely using herself as the model of her own brand. This impacted the way other female designers would later market their designs by representing their clientele through themselves (Westerman, 2019). By contrasting herself with the marketing strategies used at the time, she created an atmosphere of triumphant femininity within her practice that attracted a certain clientele of youthful, sensual and independent women. Paquin was focused on orchestrating an experience catered towards the female consumer, enabling patrons to become the vision of *la Parisienne* as Paquin envisioned her: flirtatious, sensual, upper-class and above all: self-made. Her boutique could be considered a facilitator of homosocial interactions between like-minded women which is in contrast to the apparent homo-erotical situations in maison Worth. All things considered, Paquin's boutique is understood as an innovative spatial constitution created by and for women. Referring to the theories of Bonnevier, Ahmed and Oldenburg and how it is depicted in Gervex's painting it seems that this space fits the criteria to be a disorienting 'third place'. Moreover, the title of the painting, *Five Hours at Paquin*, alludes to the proposed ephemerality of these primarily feminist meetings. Therefore, one could consider this space queer in the sense that it serves as an 'oblique' space as Ahmed (2006) described it, while still being full of homosociality.

Contrary to Worth and Paquin, Poiret had a boutique that could be described as an extensive display of his eclectic collections. Berry (2018) states that Poiret was known for off-setting himself against the aristocratic domesticity present in the boutiques of his rivals. His boutique consisted of collections of exotic, archaeological artefacts in between which his sleek and innovative garments were elegantly displayed. Poiret, therefore, considered his boutique a 'total collection of art'. Perhaps Poiret could be valued as an even queerer space due to providing an alternative to the already relatively queer spaces of Worth and Paquin. Additionally, White (1973) narrates the experience of walking through the *couturier*'s establishment on avenue d'Antin.

> He showed his collections in three connecting salons carpeted and curtained in redcurrant color, decorated with huge mirrors, and opening out on the serene greenery of the garden. A grand, formal, widely curving staircase descended from the fitting rooms to the central salon; but to produce the shock of a sudden appearance, Poiret had his mannequins enter the first salon directly by a very small door.
>
> White, 1973, p. 50

The description of successive spaces that are draped and carpeted and copious with mirrors is reminiscent of the phantasmagorias of Worth's boutique. It is therefore safe to say that Poiret was not only inspired by Worth's handling of customers but probably his usage of phantasmagorias in building up the suspense along the customer's experience of the interior too. Poiret's love for connecting exotic artefacts with the display of his costumes in relation to the collection as a "total work of art" (Berry, 2018, p.36) reminds of Betsky's explanation of queer modernism in which the collections took over the architecture. It is therefore imaginable that Poiret, an avant-garde designer at the time, paved the way for queer modernism to flourish.

Excavation in conclusion

Concluding this work, an answer is to be given to the research question: To what extent has queer space shaped *maisons de haute couture* in Paris from 1858-1914? As alluded to in previous chapters, the fluid definition of queerness complicates the forming of rigid answers to open questions. However, as the findings in this work have shown, there is a multiplicity of indications connecting queerness to boutiques of the *belle époque*.

Using the *maisons de haute couture* of Charles Frederick Worth, Jeanne Paquin and Paul Poiret as examples, the theoretical implications of what a queer space could be in their temples of fashion are explicated. Closet and mirror space, a cushion between fantasy and reality and blurred transitions from domesticity and commerciality; the translations of queer space into physical space are numerous and diverse. It seems however that in all three of the pioneering and most eminent boutiques of the *belle époque*, the theoretical concepts of queer space are ostensibly present. While Worth's boutique elongated the space for flâneurs and sapphists to inhabit in his phantasmagoria of fabricated, intimate spaces and to find the apex of gazing in the mirrored salon, Paquin's boutique shows a more subtle inclination to queer space through her realisation of an overtly feminine space in which the queerness, obliqueness, is apparent in its disorientation. Thirdly, and perhaps most interesting to elaborate research upon, Poiret shows an amalgamation of queer spatial cues, deriving from Worth and his own pioneering collections that make up his boutiques.

Taking Poiret as the epitome of Art Deco influence and with that an astounding connection to modernism (Rubio, 2008), further scholarship might reveal the way in which he triggered the fast-paced development of luxury stores of the *fin de siècle*. Shields-Rivard (2021) shows possibilities of connecting the Art Deco movement to a style related to sapphic spaces in her analysis of specific *galleries-boutiques*. Poiret's vision of the luxury store as the connection between *haute couture* and art seems to especially have potential as academic research in the field of boutique history. Joy *et al.* (2014) contend the establishment of luxury brand stores as art institutions, in line with Poiret's definition of the couturier's destiny.

As this work purely focused on turn-of-the-century Paris and three boutiques within it, this research most definitely only reveals a fragment of what queer space could have meant for the development of boutiques. Later eras and equally important fashion metropoles are to be researched, as well as certain artistic movements such as Art Deco and the Arts and Crafts movement[1]. In studying different periods and the queerness hidden in them, caution should be taken with regard to the meaning of 'queerness'. As alluded to in an interview with Betsky (Kolb, 2017), there is a possibility that the definition of queer architecture as described by Betsky in *Queer Space* does not endure into our current century anymore. Furthermore, as Van Buskirk's review of *Queer Space* already revealed, an apparent focus on cis, white, middle-class homosexual perspectives is clear in his work. Thereupon, this work's core also centres on these identities, due to available knowledge on both boutique clientele as queer space theory. Accordingly, it would be extremely valuable for research to establish a queer space theory that deepens knowledge on the underexposed identities that make up the umbrella term that is 'queer'. Moreover, the connection of queerness to commercial and capitalist spaces could be further crystallised in a similar way that Riach & Wilson (2014) and Vitry (2021) have proposed, stating that there is a possibility of queering spaces by resisting their embedded capitalist or relative normativity. It would also be of importance that the 'cultural weight' that is ascribed in this work to the designs and boutiques of Worth, Paquin and Poiret is to be reviewed, comparable to Lucey's (1996) justifiably critical review of Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century*.

Nonetheless, this work forms a pioneering attempt in connecting the scholarship on queer space to the underdeveloped knowledge on boutique interior history. In this way, a more detailed foundation is laid, starting from the proposed point of origin. By critiquing existing knowledge and discovering hidden knowledge, stories and experiences of what queerness entails are to be deducted and re-written as "queer space [...] is a site not only of fascination and promise, but the outcome of many years of critical excavation." (Garrity, 2007, p.4).

Writing these queer spaces filled with hidden biographies into existence has taught me a sliver of the rich history of queerness and enabled me to re-evaluate my own interpretation of what it means to be queer in this century. This work has formed my own image of a period that relates to and will continue to relate to the here and now,

to me.

Inner child, whose cries are wild but still
my flesh and mind
resonate. Softens his whines
but not able to offer him the will,
to admire him in the mirror and unwind.

1 Betsky (1997) describes that queer influences are discovered in the development of the Arts and Crafts movement. This queerness was presumably established as a combination of a theory about objects with evocation of a place that established a sellable and livable setting.

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