Woman in love, artist or entrepreneur? The edifying, mystifying life of Coco Chanel

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to show the representation of entrepreneurship in movies (blockbusters) as a source of influence on popular representations.

Design/methodology/approach – The author uses semiotics to contrast dominant representations in popular movies about Chanel with the reality of her professional life as can be found in archives about the fashion world and couture workers.

Findings – The changes in the account of the entrepreneur’s success may disregard important elements such as the importance of collective work and the role of social history on entrepreneurial ventures.

Practical implications – Is entrepreneurship really a source of information in the general representations of what it is to be an entrepreneur and what explains the success and failure of entrepreneurial ventures when we observe that popular representations are so far away from what research can describe and interpret using primary data?

Originality/value – By displaying the discrepancy between entrepreneurship theory and popular representations, especially in the movies, one may be able to grasp some of the reasons why entrepreneurship needs more in-depth analysis of actors’ representations in relation to the image of popular entrepreneurs in the public eye.

Keywords Art, Entrepreneurship, Fashion, Representations, Semiotics
Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Coco Chanel famously said: “Fashion passes, style remains.” She demonstrated this view by creating a line of clothes that is easily identifiable, a classic of worldly elegance. Hundreds of pictures and thousands of columns have made her designs popular in the media. Powerful women tend to wear Chanel, associating their name with the brand and sporting its style, becoming one more on the long list of Chanel belles. In her time, Chanel seemed to be very-well aware of that fact, posing as a female erudito luxu, arbiter elegantiarum, a famous role in Western culture, personifying a system of representations well suited to the happy few. Avoiding the fate of Brummel, she skillfully used all available fabrics to build herself a durable robe for posterity. Chanel is credited with creating “a style” and this creation is the source of the successful strategy of her entrepreneurial venture.

Style is described by Barthes (2006) as the heart of “the system of fashion,” part of an ensemble combining real clothes, writings on clothes (in fashion magazines) with their inscription within a broader symbolic system made up of the connotations of dress codes in society. Semiotic analysis, embedding material objects into a social value system, also shows the role of fashion and style in framing social interactions. If building a fashion empire requires a high degree of entrepreneurship it is also highly
specific in that most choices include an aesthetic dimension. What seems to be missing here, however, are the concrete work practices that unify the entrepreneurial venture with its artistic vision.

Recently, new approaches to entrepreneurship (Hjorth and Steyaert, 2009) have encouraged combining different views, among them semiotics and textual exegesis, to look at all kinds of ventures. Different kinds of stories (Hjorth, 2004a, b) should make entrepreneurship projects richer than mere business plans; yet, in many ways it is a territory that is quite alien to aesthetics because of this system of values. What people still associate with entrepreneurship is economic performance. So, what is interesting about entrepreneurship in relation to aesthetics is that it relates the materiality of productive work system to various layers of representations associated with the figure of the entrepreneur or the nature of the transaction.

Going back to Barthes, we suggest that this new avenue for research, looking at the aesthetics of entrepreneurship, may be explored in the fashion industry to learn more about the nature of value creation and value in general. Fashion ventures are associated with creativity and entrepreneurship. In an age where creative industries are often presented as one of the most promising sources of entrepreneurial ventures and innovation, there is an urgent need to describe and interpret this “creative” phenomenon and in particular, how art and economic values can coexist. To do so, one should examine the creative, artistic nature of value creation in entrepreneurship, but should also analyze how values shape and legitimize a vision, that of a creator, involving other people at work. Then one should look at its trace as a collective memory. In our view, this creation and its transmission have so far remained almost entirely unexplored, possibly because collective memory does not seem to link art and style with productive work. We explore this question by using a specific example.

In this paper, we take the case of Coco Chanel as a real-life character who became an inspiration for a movie character. Three biopics have recently been released, and have had considerable success. At the heart of each movie is Coco’s passion for fashion. This passion is related to the revelation of a unique gift for art and its public recognition. Despite many differences, all the movies build a representation that corresponds to the ideal figure of the entrepreneur as a self-made (wo)man. However, I believe there is more to reality than what success stories reveal. In line with Barthes, semiotics may prove helpful here to deal with this symbol of fashion success.

In an attempt to “bring work back in” (Barley and Kunda, 2001) and to look beyond the story-telling and imagery of entrepreneurial myth-making, we explore Coco Chanel’s work and life. According to André Malraux, the “Empress of Fashion” was said to be one of the three figures (together with De Gaulle and Picasso) that the world would remember about twentieth century France. She was one of the Times’ 100 personalities of the twentieth century. Celebrating the woman behind the brand, in 2008 and 2009, three successful biographical movies portrayed Coco Chanel. We use these three movies, contrasting them with biographies and historical accounts, to describe and interpret the dominant representations of a successful female entrepreneur. Despite different stylistic choices, all the stories seem to agree in portraying the heroic figure of a self-made woman who created a fashion empire at the cost of her personal life. We interpret these choices using semiotics and textual analysis to complement three more traditional approaches: entrepreneurship, feminist studies and narrative approaches. The goal is to analyze the influence of everyday life cliches on these approaches.
More specifically, in contrast with the popular story that the movies and the brand web site convey, we point out three missing dimensions behind the Coromandel screens of sentimentality, artistic friendship and feminine solidarity: business deals based on personal contacts, working conditions in haute couture and the fashion industry and the importance of public image and its codes in women’s life as part of the “tournaments of value” (Appadurai, 1986) of modern times. This raises question about the role that aesthetics should play in telling us more about entrepreneurial ventures, work and society.

I. Questioning the traditional figure of the entrepreneur

Many aspects of the entrepreneurial phenomenon have been explored in relation to a theory of action. In contrast with more set traditions such as economics, psychology and sociology, aesthetics brings to life different aspects that may have been overlooked and in that regard, biopics prove interesting in their visual approach to entrepreneurship. However, in my view, the aesthetic view of entrepreneurship helps us pay more attention to the way representations are constructed (1) and to the implicit range of skills required, which may help demonstrate the ability of certain kinds of people to undertake entrepreneurial ventures (for instance women) because of their knowledge and ability in aesthetics (2). Finally, aesthetics may be related to story-telling and the impression management accomplished by telling a pleasant tale (3). However, by uncovering the influence of aesthetics in shaping our view of entrepreneurship, we must also be aware of our own technique in using aesthetics to look at entrepreneurship. With no clearly exposed method, the anesthetization of entrepreneurial ventures may come with a heavy price.

1. The aesthetic side of entrepreneurship

Pointing out the aesthetic side of entrepreneurship is a way of insisting on the creative nature of new ventures. It moves away from more traditional approaches, which would tend to focus on business models and entrepreneurial figures to uncover implicit representations in relation to values.

For instance, both Schumpeter (1934, 1944, 1991) and Drucker (1985) point out the story and the actors behind the entrepreneurial project. The plot is one of “creative destruction” and the exploitation of a market opportunity. Although the stage has been set for a specific type of plot, it may need to evolve and include other types of actors and plots. Whether one talks about barefoot entrepreneurs (Imas et al., 2012) who strive to survive or about marginalized women, the story becomes enriched with more than just the challenge of obtaining funds and finding clients. The entrepreneurial project creates a tension between their different social roles (at work and at home, in their society and outside) and it may involve cultural changes (Guerrier, 2004; Gherardi, 1995) so as to express different value systems. Aesthetics allows us to look at the contradictions inherent to entrepreneurship without necessarily considering them a problem in the first place.

For instance, remembering de Certeau (1997) and his criticism of frozen representations in discourse, may encourage us to take a more practice-oriented view of entrepreneurship looking at it as a form of everyday bricolage. The position of the entrepreneurial venture in its specific time and space, its intentions in relation to its location should be read as a genealogy of values. This would involve challenging the
ready-made tales (often combined with such artifacts as PowerPoint slideshows and road-show business plans) by paying more attention to the actual performance of the entrepreneurial venture. This in turn may provide more information about the real profiles of entrepreneurs (Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006) and include a greater variety of profiles and skills. Two related ways of identifying specific differences, involving aesthetics, are feminist studies and narrative approaches.

2. A bigger picture for the entrepreneurial profile
One very good example of aesthetics in relation to the performativity of the role and the importance of the voice and the body is the case of women entrepreneurs of Moroccan origin in The Netherlands (Essers and Benschop, 2007). Reflecting about this experience as a researcher, one of the field-workers (Ellis, 2009) was able to capture traits of the woman entrepreneur that are often missed if one is only considering her as a silenced voice. In her efforts to impose herself in a world so far dominated by men, she is both in a position of inferiority compared with masculine professionals (Ortner, 1974) and, as an entrepreneur taking charge, in a position to play the part of the “phallic woman” (Butler, 2000; McRobbie, 2009) in particular towards other men and women who are interacting with her as employees. In that regard, power issues between co-workers at work, between communities (at work, at home and in the public space) can be as complex as gender issues and one should not be dis-embedded from the others and given priority. Using aesthetics could be a way to justify the specific power relations some women impose upon others, but it can also be a way to introduce more socio-material dimensions and to situate interactions in time and space. This makes a more varied range of stories.

3. Stories about entrepreneurs: looking at the making-of
Working on entrepreneurs, both Czarniawska-Joerges (1997, 1998) and Gartner (2007) pointed at the importance of narration to better understand meaning through the way stories are composed. It seems that, although their approach to story-telling is different, both authors think that having different tales and different styles is important if we are to go beyond the stereotypes and myths introduced by representations. Although this is the reason why social analyses diverged from arts in the first place (Nelson et al., 2000), one may nevertheless use text analysis and exegesis to show that, in some of the representations commonly taken for granted in management and in particular, in entrepreneurship, one may still find a great deal of the stylizations and clichés that appeal to lovers of romance and kitsch.

This can be especially true in creative industries and fashion, where so much of the prestige and reputation of the products and services is related to their image. Skillful and stylish story-telling is compulsory to the point of being part of the brand.

Admitting that stories are (at least partly) fashioned for this effect, we may also better identify the role of aesthetics in relation to power issues. Since, as pointed-out by Lounsbury and Glynn (2001), stories are part of impression management and help define value during a road show, they are addressed towards an audience and they are meant to convey a specific message. However, the relationships between past events, the projected future and ongoing implementation of the plan are not simple to relate because of the range of people involved with different points of view. Generally, within a competitive field, an ordering of specific tales occurs and a common story ends up being transmitted, ideally shared by all. However, to better understand entrepreneurship and
what it represents in society, one should be able to understand what the story is made of, in other words, to link representations to values (Graeber, 2001).

There are different aspects of such stories and, generally speaking, the story of the typical entrepreneur does correspond to a specific style of storytelling (heroic tale) (Riot, 2006) and includes specific metaphors (Drakopoulou-Dodd and Anderson, 2001). We may also identify boundary objects and symbolic stages, which characters pass through. Finally, the voice and the point of view from which the story is told also matter, because they correspond to specific stylistic genres and they influence understanding of what the characters do and what their environment does to them. They also shape the scenario and the pictures making up the mimesis. As we shall presently see, and as Barthes (1967) also pointed out, popular representations tend to favor novels and romances. Their type of structures influences the repertoire of characters and actions, and defines a universe of values. It is interesting to see how, in the case of the Coco Chanel biopics, this genre combines art and business by promoting the passion and ambition of a woman. Consequently, in using aesthetics, one may add a dimension that is crucial to identifying the specific features of an entrepreneurial venture but also a dimension used by key actors to hide the reality of practices and work conditions.

II. Methodology: combining tales and images, reality and imagination

Our material is principally made up of secondary data on Coco Chanel, and we focus on three movies of the “biopic” genre.

To look at the composition of movies as a specific format of representations, images in movement, we use semiotics, which is common to several models of film analysis (Daney, 2012; Labarthe and Lounas, 2011). Semiotics, or the study of signs, involves combining text analysis (exegesis) and picture analysis in a multilevel message, the denoted (explicit) and the connoted (implicit). As such, it is at the meeting point of different traditions such as art history, comparative literature and philosophy. By insisting on the iconic nature of representations and their codes, one is also borrowing from a long religious tradition.

For instance, to capture representations and to dissect dominant representations made of symbols, rites and texts, many authors (Pink, 2006; Pink et al., 2004; Rose, 2007) insist on using a multidisciplinary approach to look at what can be seen and the narrative behind. One complex object of analysis is the creation of a “grammar of style” with its codes and variants.

As it happens, many of these authors have been influenced by the semiology tradition illustrated by Roland Barthes. His semiotic approach considers the specific characteristics of images and texts (Barthes, 1967) as systems of signs. Namely, he perceives a strong correspondence between the universe of discourse and the universe of visual images. To analyze them, he places them in a specific historically and materially situated background. Consequently, he looks both at the structure of an artwork and at its details, putting it in a context of production and a stylistic tradition.

In line with this approach, I first insist on the materiality of each movie and on the conditions under which it was produced. I then look at the genre of each narrative. In particular, we look at the type of storytelling used to account for the entrepreneurial venture of Coco Chanel. One initial problem was to deal with the “biopic” genre namely one that confuses facts and fiction, taking liberties with reality to provide a meaningful portrait of a popular figure. This genre is often favored when dealing with famous
entrepreneurs, since going into their everyday business would probably fail to convey the nature of their inspiration and the impact of their activities on society. Our view is that popular accounts such as biopics are received by the audience as something like “real-life stories” as part of a large ensemble including stories that are more or less “true-to-life.”

This view is supported by the nature of stories: even realistic accounts are constructed as a narrative, so the distinction between fiction and reality is a challenging one to define. There is logic in telling a story that goes beyond accuracy and fiction:

To argue [...] that the writing of ethnography involves telling stories, making pictures, concocting symbolisms, and deploying tropes is commonly resisted, often fiercely, because of a confusion, endemic in the West since Plato at least, of the imagined with the imaginary, the fictional with the false, making things out with making them up (Geertz, 1988, p. 140).

Although the fact may be hard to accept, the power of fiction cannot be denied. Consequently, the stuff that stories are made of is more accurately described in terms of combinations. It includes descriptions (mimesis), action (diegesis) framed by a particular point of view (voice) (Table I).

What interests me in the nature of the “biopic” is the liberty taken with the original historical accounts to make a good motion picture that corresponds to models that have proven popular with the audience (for instance romance). These choices seem to be influenced by the aesthetics favored by large movie studios: polished neo-realism (Cavell, 1979) as a tool for entertainment but also the dissemination of ideas. For instance, people learn their profession through imitation (Czarniawska-Joerges and Rhodes, 2003, p. 203). This explains the influence of strong plots and the role of subversive counter-stories, rewriting dominant versions by selecting different representations. Consequently, to better understand the versions of an artistic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mimesis</th>
<th>Diegesis</th>
<th>Voice (perspective and intention)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taussig (1993) referring to Auerbach (2003) describes a combination of a direct reflection of a socio-cultural environment (picture, final impression) and an orchestrated device to create a “real effect” (representation, tool)</td>
<td>Ellis and Bochner (1996) insist that using visual data changes the nature of the picture described within the descriptive text and the interpretation</td>
<td>Pictures extracted from real life or from a movie such as a biopic are considered as emblematic (Dougherty and Kunda, 1990; Schwartz, 1989) symbols of the whole. These pictures are present on official web sites and in press-books and combined with discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose (2007) and Stanczak (2007) insist on the stylization of pictures in line with the opposition of “real life experience” and artifice in the representation of management (Hancock, 2003, 2005) Visual research should also be critical and take into account the impression management orchestrated by the use of pictures</td>
<td>Gartner (1988) insists on the need while researching entrepreneurship to take stories into account in terms of construction and narrative forms</td>
<td>Silverman (2006) points out the ability of visual methods to insert data for the reader to see and identify different layers of “real”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hancock (2003, 2005)</td>
<td>In cultural and artistic ventures, pictures have great importance in sharing feelings and emotions about the nature of the production</td>
<td>When presenting their results, researchers should be aware of the potential of mixing multimedia data to convey a richer range of impressions to the reader</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table I.
entrepreneur suggested by the three biopics, I decided to document their initial material: the work and life of Coco Chanel.

I triangulated the data by combining the information contained in the three movies, their official press reviews and the textual references for the scenarios as well as other biographies documenting the life of Coco Chanel and women of her times (in particular workers and ordinary women). My key material is the three biopics on the character of Gabrielle Chanel: Coco Chanel (Duguay, 2008), Coco Before Chanel (Fontaine, 2009), Coco & Igor (Kounen, 2009), each of which is based on biographies of Chanel (Charles-Roux, 1981, 1989; Delay, 1983; Madsen, 1990; Morand, 1976).

I also relate the movies to available documents on Chanel today, press reviews, communication tools such as Karl Lagerfeld’s short movies (available on the web site) and Prigent’s (2006) documentary on the preparation of the final Chanel show in the seamstress’s rue Cambon workshop.

Finally, I collected historical data about couture in France after the industrial revolution from 1900 to 1939. I was especially interested in the relationship between Coco Chanel and great industrialists, for instance the Balsan family (Mery-Barnabé, 2010) and the Wertheimers. The rich documentation of the history of fashion (Boucher, 1965; Grau, 2007; Müller, 2008; Steele, 1999, 2005) allowed me to identify the nature of innovation and the type of entrepreneurs in relation to the Parisian work force and working conditions in the industry. By combining these three dimensions (story, image and voice) I hope to provide a contrasting synthesis of how representations popularize famous entrepreneurs for very large audiences. In this particular case, artistic talent and inspiration is associated with the loss of the personal emotional balance of the key character: Coco Chanel, the entrepreneur.

III. Three popular biopics about Coco

In my analysis of the material I collected, I focus on three movies that were enormously successful. After describing their features as cultural objects (1), I analyze the plot (diegesis) (2) and finally focus on the key symbols and images (mimesis) they contain (3). My goal is to capture the common patterns and differences between the different movies so as to better picture the character of Coco Chanel, the embodiment of the successful fashion entrepreneur in popular culture.

1. Three movies: one plot

The three movies I shall be looking at are similar in many ways: they benefitted from a large production budget and a very large audience, millions of people around the world saw them. They were released at about the same time (2008-2009) and they received critical acclaim. They are also all successful, mainstream productions with popular actors and models and typical features (drama-romance) and last about 2 hours (Table II).

The three productions celebrate the 100th anniversary of the opening of the first Chanel boutique in Paris in 1910. The movies are historical reconstructions and are “biopics”, mixing biography and epic forms.

Broadcasted on a very large-scale, all three movies proved highly successful around the world, which shows the appeal of fashion in different cultural traditions in line with the popularity of fashion magazines. It is also a reflection on the celebrity of this successful entrepreneur and the considerable budgets parallel those of traditional
communication campaigns by Chanel, although here each project is independent from “maison Chanel” (in terms of copyrights).

However, the fact that all three movies are biopics should not hide the fact that they adopt a different approach and are variations on the life of Coco Chanel. They all claim to tell the “true story” of Coco Chanel, and thereby to explain the success of the entrepreneur through her life story. However, they explain this success differently. To highlight these differences, I now provide a short, matter of fact “entrepreneurial style” account of Coco Chanel’s venture as a reference for the three “biopic” variations (Table III).

All the movies present a limited period of the life of Coco Chanel, mostly focusing on her love life and the beginning of her business. It is important to understand the early years and the foundations of an entrepreneurial venture, so these are quite interesting documents. However, for the purposes of this research, the obstacle is that in all three

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Periods</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth and education</td>
<td>Chanel’s parents work selling clothes and sewing. They live in rural France and are poor, and Chanel ends up as an orphan in a convent. She then makes a living as a seamstress and as a cabaret singer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start-up</td>
<td>Chanel is supported by rich sponsors (love money) to open her prêt-à-porter boutique in Paris. She opens stores in seaside resorts. Her venture is successful because of First World War and its disruption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>Diversification into haute couture, perfume, cosmetics and accessories (jewels) via a series of partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decline</td>
<td>The Front Populaire and the Second World War causes Chanel to close her shop (the perfume is still sold)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebirth</td>
<td>After the war, Chanel rises again at the head of the firm supported by her US partners (cosmetics industrialists) who are interested in perfume sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-rebirth</td>
<td>After Chanel’s death, Karl Lagerfeld revitalizes the brand in the 1980s after a long period of decline. He uses Coco and her life as an inspiration</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table III.
movies the business venture is essentially just the context and the setting for Chanel’s love life. The message, to me, is that Chanel’s emotional life shaped her style and that of her house much more than the everyday work of her team.

2. Variations in genre and narrative styles
So far, the storyline of the three biopics is surprisingly similar (in line with the brand’s corporate communication as it appears on the web site and also in various publications and shows). However, in terms of genre and style, biopics present several differences.

The three biopics correspond to different versions of the same reproduced reality. Comparing the three variations makes it easier to see how they all recreate an “allegory” of Gabrielle Chanel, in relation to an existing, highly successful enterprise: a luxury brand associated with elegance and style. However, each movie selected a different aesthetic (Table IV).

All movies chose Coco’s love life as the fulcrum for her enterprise; they also insist on her leading role in producing the “Chanel style;” the fashion associated with Chanel is embedded in her life. The emotional and aesthetic dimensions of the venture materialize the vision, and the nature of this vision depends on the figure of “the woman.”

Despite these similarities, one may still note differences in genre: one is a tale of experience (a girl from 5 to 30), the other is a romance between two famous figures whereas the last production is a TV serial orchestrated around the revenge of the older Coco in 1953. The corresponding styles are also divergent. One movie is deliberately “expressionist” and describes Coco as the queen of Parisian fashion, patron of artists, whereas the two others insist on the “moral value” of her success, as an entrepreneurial success based on creative destruction (the end of the old fashion world, embodied by

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Coco Before Chanel</th>
<th>Coco &amp; Igor</th>
<th>Coco Chanel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>Bildungsroman (tale of experience)</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>Serial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements of style and patterns</td>
<td>Classicism</td>
<td>Expressionism</td>
<td>Romance (soap)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harmony: Black and white</td>
<td>Contrast: Black and white vs colors</td>
<td>Opposition: Rich and poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Simplicity (rich and poor)</td>
<td>Old timers vs innovators</td>
<td>Men and women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Androgyny (man and woman)</td>
<td>Dissonance and excess in relation to passion vs sickness-melancholy-weakness and service</td>
<td>Good and evil (adjuvants/opponents)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Style (nature and artifice, horses vs cars)</td>
<td>Both Coco &amp; Igor triumph in creating an unforgettable artwork (The Rite of Spring) and imposing it on the public. Art survives the end of their love and makes it last forever</td>
<td>Workers and idle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>Coco finds her vocation through a man who loves her and sees that she has talent and a unique destiny</td>
<td>Coco comes back to work in 1953-1954 and she endures hardship as she always had throughout her life (orphan, exploited, and losing the love of her life). Her second collection is a triumph. Her life is a source of inspiration and explains why she is a leader</td>
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Table IV.
a series of characters in the Coco’s background). Yet whereas Coco Chanel is intent on picturing the heroin as a nice girl with a difficult life, Coco Before Chanel presents a more contrasted picture of the character. She is tough; she swears, lies and displays signs of rebellion against the social system. This difference is, however, smoothed out by the very polished visual treatment of the topic, which is quite similar to the two other biopics: a naturalistic-realistic historical reconstitution. To achieve this aesthetic balance, all three movies also use the same diegetic type: an omniscient voice and a chronological narrative.

As illustrated in Table V, voice and focus (lens, zoom) (Nicolini, 2009) impose a traditional view on characters, presented essentially as transparent, stable beings submitted to a series of trials as in a fairy-tale.

In all cases, the diegesis orchestrates this series of trials as a sentimental game ruled by fate (love at first sight and death). However, this strict narrative frame is balanced by mimesis and descriptive pauses where the visual impact of images (stadium and punctum) is exploited. Scenes and images provide a fine-grained view of each movie and, as such, they point at the composition of the representations underlying the structure of the diegesis.

### 3. Sentimentalism and aesthetization: the two-edged frame of tales and images

As is traditionally the case in movies, the central action is created by a string of exemplary situations and turning points presented in scenes (Cavell, 1981; Daney, 2012). As illustrated in Table VI of the three movies, the scene selection is quite similar in that it favors intimacy and assimilates the resolution of the heroin’s love life with her professional success.

The comparison of the three movies in Table VI highlights the fact that all three movies portray only certain scenes in Coco Chanel’s life and, because they are mostly interested in the young woman, they ignore the same events. There are lots of tears (traces of the main character’s emotional life (Cavell, 1996)) in the three biopics, because they are structured as a series of personal losses for Coco: loss of her parents, loss of her lovers. All the scenarios seem to conclude that, although the heroin’s private life is somehow a failure (she ends up alone), this was the price to pay for her exceptional

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene Selection</th>
<th>Coco Before Chanel</th>
<th>Coco &amp; Igor</th>
<th>Coco Chanel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>External focus, omniscient view of characters</td>
<td>External focus, omniscient view of characters</td>
<td>Double focus combining a neutral, objective voice and the voice of Coco Chanel recalling her youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Coco, from 8 to 30 Key episodes with a string of scenes, omissions (years and months)</td>
<td>Coco, from 30 to 75 Key episodes with omissions (ten years, a few month, 50 years)</td>
<td>Coco, from 8 to 70 Key episodes with omissions justified by flash-backs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Rural France and the countryside, Deauville and Paris Indoor settings (intimacy) contrast with crowds (horse races, theater, fashion shows)</td>
<td>Contrast between the house (intimacy) and the stage (The Rite of Spring and the fashion show)</td>
<td>Contrast between the fashion house rue Cambon and France’s past (rural and Parisian)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table V.
### Table VI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childhood trauma</th>
<th>Coco Before Chanel</th>
<th>Coco &amp; Igor</th>
<th>Coco Chanel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coco is left with her sister in the Aubazine convent as an orphan</td>
<td>Child hood trauma</td>
<td>Absent except in Coco’s interest for Igor’s children, especially a little girl she dresses in black</td>
<td>Coco’s mother dies in front of her; she ends up in the convent and finds a job as a seamstress. <em>The poor girl wants to escape her condition.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song and origin of the name “Coco”</th>
<th>Coco Before Chanel</th>
<th>Coco &amp; Igor</th>
<th>Coco Chanel</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With her cousin, Coco sings in a low-key cabaret (French: “beuglant”) where she meets Etienne Balsan. She is singing a simple song with an erotic double-entendre “Coco”</td>
<td>Song and origin of the name “Coco”</td>
<td>Coco is already well known in Paris</td>
<td>Coco is noticed by Balsan as she is singing “Coco” and he treats her as his possession. As a result, she decides to set up her own business. She ends up in misery because her Paris business is failing.<em>Coco is a fragile creature despite all her courage.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social humiliation</th>
<th>Coco Before Chanel</th>
<th>Coco &amp; Igor</th>
<th>Coco Chanel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coco is kept by Balsan and depends on him. She is forced to sing “Coco” again. She refuses to marry him when she falls in love with Capel. She maintains she will never marry</td>
<td>Social humiliation</td>
<td>Coco has risen to be a star but she still works continuously and counts her money. Igor tells her she is just a popular milliner, not an artist, to which she retorts that she is more famous than he is</td>
<td>Coco is humiliated as a seamstress and then as Balsan’s mistress. She finds comfort in horses (nature) and hats (culture and creation). Boy’s support is crucial to Coco’s success (assumption that the problem is the rigidity and decadence of French society because of the idle classes)<em>Coco is a feminist.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inspiration: Chanel stealing from the world around her</th>
<th>Coco Before Chanel</th>
<th>Coco &amp; Igor</th>
<th>Coco Chanel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coco meets high society people and offers to share her fashion creations (androgy nous, unadorned and provocative) Her boutiques in Paris and Deauville are very popular</td>
<td>Inspiration: Chanel stealing from the world around her</td>
<td>Coco finds an embroidered Russian shirt (roubachka) in her rival’s cupboard. She decides to use the idea and make it hers, namely sophisticated. <em>The Coco style means good taste (beyond class culture).</em></td>
<td>Coco observes various places where fashion is on display: horse-races, balls, seaside resorts. During the war, Coco creates practical dresses for women and becomes prestigious.<em>The Coco style means both practical and romantic.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Death of boy Capel and reaction of Chanel</th>
<th>Coco Before Chanel</th>
<th>Coco &amp; Igor</th>
<th>Coco Chanel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coco learns about the death of Capel, and chooses to go and see the site of the accident. She then creates the little black dress and other dresses</td>
<td>Death of boy Capel and reaction of Chanel</td>
<td>Creation replaces love (sublimation)</td>
<td>Coco learns about the death of Capel, and chooses to go and see the site of the accident. She then creates the little black dress and other dresses.<em>Working for others is Coco’s vocation (in line with her education by nuns).</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
professional success. Even when she is old, Coco, played by Shirley McLaine, seems to find her inspiration in her youth, when love was the focus of her life. Yet when we examine Coco Chanel's life more closely, we see that it lasted more than 70 years, and that the two world wars were major events. Two movies select moments before the wars, or between them. The third movie follows two collections (1953 and 1954) and includes flashbacks in chronological order. Some of the six flashbacks are introduced

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SBR 8,3</th>
<th>Coco Before Chanel</th>
<th>Coco &amp; Igor</th>
<th>Coco Chanel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting with artists</td>
<td>Coco has attempted to be a singer and fits costumes for actresses/courtesans (backstage). She is still involved in light low-key shows. Cultural studies would approve the mix of cultures</td>
<td>In the second sequence, Coco attends the scandalous opening night of Diaghilev and Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring. She is amused Coco is part of an elite avant-garde movement (future recognition for cubism and modernism) Chanel goes back and forth from her villa near Paris (where Stravinsky and his family are living) and her shop. She inspects everything; obviously she works all the time as she chain-smokes. But she is roguish with everyone (all classes included). Coco is essentially a genius and a highly sophisticated creator. She succeeds on her own</td>
<td>Coco increasingly surpasses Paul Poiret (presented as old style and bad taste) by using actresses and the media. She becomes a fashion icon. Coco is in line with the demands of her time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moment in boutique (Chanel at work)</td>
<td>On several occasions, Coco is presented drawing dresses and costumes. She is rather a lonely figure and no conflict with her workers is presented. In the story, Coco designs dresses for herself and her friends, inspired by simple people’s dresses and then copies are made. Coco is essentially authentic. She succeeds on her own</td>
<td>Coco is presented as a good person, supported by other women in contrast with the meanness of her boss (a woman in a provincial town) when she was a seamstress. Coco is essentially a nice person with a great destiny. She receives the support of clever businessmen to succeed</td>
<td>Coco is presented as a good person, supported by other women in contrast with the meanness of her boss (a woman in a provincial town) when she was a seamstress. Coco is essentially a nice person with a great destiny. She receives the support of clever businessmen to succeed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation of Chanel No. 5 in Grasse</td>
<td>The scene is not included Objects appear as convenient inventions to fit the needs of a modern, free woman</td>
<td>Coco invents the perfume, with Ernest Beaux as a contributor. She gives it her name as a sign of her appetite for fame and for power Object as a must The event of the fashion show is paralleled with the second opening night of the Rite of Spring. She is therefore an artist, a partner of artists and a sponsor of other artists. She uses other artists as an inspiration for her arts. She replaces Misia Sert in the patron’s loggia Fate: ascension</td>
<td>Coco invents the perfume, with Ernest Beaux as a contributor. She is still desperate about boy’s death Object as comfort In a series of flashbacks (beginning of each sequence) in 1953 and then in 1954 Coco refers to the past as a source of legitimacy for her comeback. She convinces her business partner and friend, Paul Wertheimer Fate: happy-end after ups and downs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chanel in the staircase, contemplating her collection as it is shown to the public</td>
<td>Coco is happy at last as she smokes her cigarette at the top of her staircase. From now on, she remains backstage Fate: ascension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
by old black-and-white films showing the streets of Paris. However, the choice to stage her early life, then youth, then life at Etienne Balsan’s, then life with Boy Capel (including the war period), then the end of her life together with Capel’s death results in numerous distortions. The main silence concerns Coco Chanel’s life in her 40s and 50s, especially the Second World War during which she played a very controversial role. Recently (Vaughan, 2011), she has been portrayed as a Nazi spy, and a drug addict, aspects which, contrary to her (reported) homosexuality, are not acceptable today. However, some of Chanel’s most controversial dimensions are not totally absent from the movies, but are conveyed by indirect means: mimesis.

4. The complementary frame to diegesis: mimesis and the evocative power of images
Despite the telling silence of all three plots, many of the exceptional aspects of Coco Chanel’s life are alluded to using images instead of being simply ignored. These aspects are often related to Chanel’s core business: aesthetics and more specifically, fashion. Like any true artist, Coco Chanel’s gift is potentially dangerous for herself and for others, and this romantic dimension is not absent from the biopics. Once again, this message is depicted in surprisingly similar ways in the three movies, to the point that it seems to complement the uniform frame of the diegesis.

In a sense, the story of Chanel’s life must be contextualized: the key periods of her life are the same, so similar events happen. Yet the mix of informative details is also complemented by a series of “images” which also appear in Chanel’s official communication, for instance the recent clips by Karl Lagerfeld. There is nothing surprising in this: pictures (mimesis) complement the narrative (diegesis) either by illustrating the facts (studium) or by introducing emotional pauses (punctum) (Barthes, 1981). But in this specific case, their combination constitutes a synchronic frame that complements the diachronic steps of the chronology, and both these are quite similar in all three movies.

To investigate this surprisingly similar framing and consistent with Barthes’ (1981) dichotomy (stadium/punctum), I present a selection of “official images”. I have attempted to identify Chanel’s symbols that are common to all movies, and their specific treatment in each movie.

The first images that one views before seeing the movies are the movie posters. They were accessed via the web site IMDb (internet movie database) an online resource of movie images from the whole world. On each movie’s main page, it presents one or two posters and a synopsis[2].

All three posters focus on Coco, as the heroin of the movie and they show her face in close-up. However, the face is treated quite differently. The first picture is a close-up view of actress Audrey Tautou who was also the current face of Chanel. The character is deliberately androgynous and natural (green grass in the background) and she seems to be walking forward, looking at her future path in a determined way. This picture reflects the psychological treatment of the evolution of the main character, in the tradition of the bildungsroman[3].

It should be noted that another poster was selected for the French audience, because French law is more tolerant of cigarettes and sexually explicit images for a wide audience, as the director explains in her commentary on the movie. Dressed in white pajamas Coco sits in a white bed, smoking and staring in front of her. In this image, the dominant black-and-white theme that is portrayed in the movie is much
more present and the poster is closer to Tautou’s Chanel ads. The resemblance between the two women (with pearls) contrasts with the boyish nature of the ads, focusing on youth and androgyny (pajamas, shirt and waistcoat). Consequently, one wonders whether professional success is associated with sexual equality or if it is implied that if they want to succeed women have to adopt masculine standards.

The “Coco & Igor” poster illustrates the romantic involvement of the two characters, thereby justifying the genre “romance” in the movie database category (as opposed to the category “drama” selected for the two other movies). The two characters are embracing fondly but one can see only their head and shoulders in profile and in soft focus. The picture is representative of the intimate feel of the movie, focusing on the psychology of both lovers, and balancing their parallel evolution.

The Coco Chanel poster has an art-deco black and gold background, with a picture of Shirley McLaine (Chanel at 70) in the center. Dressed in black and white with a beret, she stands out as the “Empress of fashion”. The picture is reminiscent of a musical, and it may very well be a reminder of the famous musical, Coco, initially staged in Broadway in 1969. This approach illustrates the resilience of the woman, insisting on the length of her career and her passion for her craft.

All three movies are presented to their audience as shows that bring together film stars, glamorous costumes and settings, and, most of all, a love story. However, the first poster (in its French version) hints at the non-conformist nature of Coco Chanel’s life, as told by her biographers. In an allusion to her liberated sexuality, the source of many professional encounters, Coco is presented in a bed and in man’s pajamas. Her smoking a cigarette may also be a reference to her drug addiction.

Some of the specific symbols present in the posters are also recurrent in the movies themselves. They convey the main messages of the story, repeatedly acting as “puncta” of the movie, identified by Barthes as the specific characteristic of cinematic work. Barthes specifically links it to the “obtuse” response in the spectator, a kind of emotional sensemaking prompted by impressions ending up in a specific frame to evaluate one’s perceptions.

One recurrent image is that of the couple, showing the importance of love in Coco Chanel’s life. However, this image is so common to movies of this sort that it fails to characterize the movie by combining “studium” and “punctum”. The only signifying different is, in my view, the Japanese poster for the movie Coco & Igor, which pictures the two characters in two universes: Coco, sitting in her loggia as a patron of the arts, and Stravinsky working on his piano. This choice describes two objective roles (studium) but it also provides a true picture of their relation in the movie: Coco needs Igor’s work if she is to win her social battle[4].

On the contrary, Table VII lists visual elements about Chanel that recur to the point when, in my view, they create a complementary, synchronic frame, unifying the images within the moving picture.

The last visual element mentioned in Table VII, the brand, represents a well-known phenomenon in marketing: product placement. Each movie is clearly an opportunity to display the famous perfume Chanel No. 5. However, it seldom occurs that three movies are so entirely immersed in a single brand and its universe. Consequently, the movies, as a showcase and an entertainment, closely resemble one of Chanel’s productions. The museum shows regularly displayed all over the world are smaller scale examples of these productions. One of them, a homage to Misia Sert
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black and white, pajamas and androgynous dress</th>
<th>Studium</th>
<th>Punctum</th>
<th>Meaning as interpreted by the author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chanel is changing fashion by taking inspiration from totally unrelated universes (men, professional dress); her lovers give her inspiration</td>
<td>Chanel was different; her originality is presented in relation to her origins and position in the world Chanel also had a different relationship with men; she was their equal</td>
<td>Radicalism, avant-garde, purism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearls</td>
<td>Chanel launched the fashion of “costume jewelry” in high society with extremely (impossibly) large stones. Playing with representations is a way of liberating women</td>
<td>Chanel is creating her own kingdom and at the same time, creating more than a tie, a harness to her prestigious work. She is chained to creation like the nuns with their rosary (in the beginning of the movie) have given their life to the house of God Chains (often associated with scissors) are a restraint. Consequently, they are both a valuable asset and a curb to freedom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigarette</td>
<td>Flappers started smoking like men at that time and this was highly controversial</td>
<td>Chanel is surrounded by the smoke of scandal (because of her liberated love-life and her drug addiction). This possibly influences her when she creates artificial paradises</td>
<td>Transgression, relation to death (visible in cigarettes) is such a strong symbol that it explains why some of the posters were banned in some countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirror stairs</td>
<td>Chanel designed her “boutique” as a symbol of her belonging to the modernist avant-garde. The stairs can remind us of “Nu descendant un escalier” and the research into moving pictures by Cubists. All three movies document the original store in the rue Chambon</td>
<td>Chanel sits at the top of the “stairway to heaven” like some sort of Pythic figure, master of time and of the heavenly bodies</td>
<td>Up and down the social scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C (name and logo of the brand)</td>
<td>Imposing a brand means finding symbols and Chanel herself borrowed images from her childhood (in the convent) to do so</td>
<td>The immediate recognition of the brand brings about emotional memories in viewers familiar with the products</td>
<td>Identification of the venture, the house, the woman founder and each product emanating from that ensemble</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** For copyright reasons, pictures complementing the text (Table 1 and others in the following parts) are available online on the author’s personal web site in creative commons: http://elenriot.typepad.com/blog/2013/08/coco-chanel-comments-on-3-movies-with-pictures.html. Note that the online version presented online is substantially different from this original paper, because I do not retain the copyrights on it; I warmly invite my readers to go to this address and interact so as to create an open space of knowledge sharing and exchange. I am confident readers interested by issues of control over representations, popular culture and creative industries will be eager to join; pictures (Table 4, Table 5, Table 6) are available on the author’s web site.
(Chanel’s best friend and famous muse of that time), was on display at the Musée d’Orsay (Paris) in 2012.

A complex combination of diegesis and mimesis, Chanel’s name itself has become a symbol that sentimentalism (story) and aesthetization (image) combine to make a unique emblem for women. As a symbol of the brand, it is a recurrent figure throughout the three biopics, as if to convey the idea that Chanel’s fate was in some way predestined. Gabrielle Bonheur Chanel became Coco Chanel (possibly her nickname when she sang in a cabaret), Coco and, as a brand, C, present on every item manufactured and sold by the firm. This symbol is ever-present in all three movies. Here is one example of how the transformation operates: the movie Coco Before Chanel rightfully insists that “Coco” initially signaled her low status: it was the nickname of a “grisette” (little seamstress as was popularized in such creations as the opera “La Bohème”). The character’s ability to enhance this name and make a place for herself in society is presented as related to her charisma, transcending class. Such is the magic power of this story that it may possibly do the same for adepts of the brand. Coco certainly thought so, to the point where it seems she created her own legend to insist on it. However, just as she kept romanticising her life, she also proved very lucid in explaining the success of her enterprise and the rules of business in society. References to class and power are explicit in her choices and in her comments. She also mentioned how fashion works and what kind of work is involved in producing and selling it. As we can see, the analysis of the movies does not allow for such additions: it combines the linearity of a life-story with the recurrence of symbols as presented in Table VIII.

Next, by referring to secondary sources in a different way than the movies, I hope to “unfreeze” the story of the entrepreneurial venture and dissociate it from the brand. I present more dimensions of the Chanel business venture and then try to explain why these dimensions are ignored and more generally, why it is not easy to communicate on the most important aspects of entrepreneurial work through aesthetics.

IV. Findings: the moving picture of a woman entrepreneur and a story of details

The notion developed by each of the three movies is the same: the entrepreneurial success of Coco Chanel came at a price: it was Chanel’s marginality and her being denied a “normal” family life, first as a child, then as an adult woman. The success of her venture is explicitly linked to her ascetic dedication to work and her need to overcome her losses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childhood</th>
<th>Youth and love</th>
<th>Businesswoman</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black and white</td>
<td>Nuns’ habits at the convent and her outfit as an orphan</td>
<td>Coco borrows men’s clothes (tuxedo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearls</td>
<td>Nuns’ rosary</td>
<td>Coco is given presents by her lovers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigarettes (forbidden)</td>
<td>Father’s habits (transgressing social and family codes)</td>
<td>Coco transgresses social codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C brand and emblem</td>
<td>Religious symbols at the Aubazine convent</td>
<td>Coco finds her style and impresses others with it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table VIII.
She creates a consistent frame, based on clear symbols. In that regard, aesthetics and visual representations such as biopics contribute to the understanding of entrepreneurship. However, in the three movies, a sentimental account of personal success overrides the broader picture, and in particular, the role of a collective body of organized people at work.

One may easily understand why all three movies misrepresent Coco Chanel’s life; in the same way as fashion magazines (as part of the firm’s communication) and some of her biographies select a rather flattened figure of Chanel who is identified with the brand. The story must be entertaining and the character avant-garde (meaning controversial in a controlled way) so as to fit in with a specific image and identity[5].

I consider that this stylization in the three movies creates a common frame mixing sentimentalism and aestheticism. The aim is to make the story entertaining, yet it seems to limit the audience’s ability to understand Chanel as an entrepreneurial venture. The idealization of the founder’s talent and personality ends up overriding socio-material and practical dimensions, which are essential to understand entrepreneurial ventures. In the following section, I provide additional information on some of these dimensions, because I believe they are essential to understand the role of Coco Chanel as an entrepreneur. Here my purpose is to show at least some of the “messiness” of this business and the way fashion is continually co-produced. To do this, I contrast the ideal (as presented in the movies) and material data. Instead of insisting on Chanel’s class (style) I dwell on the role of social class in shaping fashion (1). In addition to her now much exposed love life, I focus on Chanel’s specific role at work and her obsession with work (2). Moreover, I see Chanel’s role as related to her opportunistic behavior, an important dimension of entrepreneurship (3). Finally, I stress the survival of the Chanel house and the role of Chanel herself, becoming a figure of her own making to serve her business (owned by others) (4). These socio-material dimensions would probably create another type of story with different aesthetics.

1. Coco’s natural class and social class

Fashion aims at distinction. In the movies Coco is described as someone who “naturally” had class (as a habitus) (Bourdieu, 1984), thanks to her skill of properly identifying and using signs (Barthes, 1972). Consequently, she helped other women in this important task of aligning themselves with high society. However, movies tend to essentialize this skill whereas biographers and historians tell us a different story. Coco was in fact working for the happy few in a period when the codes were being revolutionized. The leisure and working classes were changing in nature, causing fashion in large cities to take on more importance (Simmel, 1973). So what gave Chanel her importance was that she contributed to building a system of class that the brand (in my view) still supports today: the modern fashion system depends on concepts and an implicit display of values that need at all times to appear new (the French call it “l’air du temps”), in opposition to tradition (Barthes, 2006). My opinion is that this construction needs to be carried out purposefully by someone who understands keenly the importance of fashion, in a society where elites change and dominant coalitions fluctuate.

For instance, Chanel referred specifically to class and rank throughout her discussions with her biographers. She was herself acutely aware of their impact on social interaction and power relations. In later life, she was quoted as saying of some of her partners:
Those Grand Dukes were all the same – they looked marvelous but there was nothing behind it. Green eyes, fine hands and shoulders, peace-loving, timorous. They drank so as not to be afraid. They were tall and handsome and splendid, but behind it all – nothing; just vodka and a void (Chanel, in Delay (1983, p. 112)).

As a woman entrepreneur, Chanel seems to have posed as part of the “new class”, a population of hard-working, self-made men and women. However, her reputation was made by spending time with the idle classes, especially the British royals. Indeed, most of her life was spent in the company of the “happy few”. It seems they were her source of inspiration as much as she was theirs especially since she introduced them to all kinds of characters, including artists.

Quite typically of an entrepreneur, Chanel was adaptable and mixed the influences of various social classes in her work. She made the most of the opportunities created by the disruption of society by war and revolution. In the Anne Fontaine movie, Coco wears a striped fisherman’s shirt (marinière) with a very long string of pearls (sautoir) as a symbol of her ability to recreate symbols. In fact, what appears now to be a brilliant inspiration should have been contextualized (war shortages, women at work and men at war) to make sense of Chanel’s practical choices: make the most of what one has and recreate signs of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), not with material but with arts and craft. More specifically, Coco was both a go-between in multiple “happy few” worlds and their herald abroad: it was possibly the small-scale universe most of her customers were attempting to copy with her guidance, and which was in turn copied by others in workshops or at home using sewing patterns and fashion magazines.

Here is one example of the importance of brokerage in Coco Chanel’s entrepreneurial business. Despite climbing the social ladder, Coco was somehow an interloper in high society, so when she made encounters, friends and enemies (sometimes both) referred to her social origins. In Charles-Roux, the choice of eloping with the Grand Duke rather than Igor Stravinsky was interpreted by her (jealous) friend Misia Sert as a consequence of her popular origins: “Coco is a little seamstress so she prefers a Grand Duke to a Genius” (Charles-Roux, 1989, p. 115). In fact, Chanel was the lover of both men, and shared interests and projects with both whereas most of the people around her belonged to a more specific group (artists, workers, socialites, old-new money). As we shall presently see, this points at the role of strategy in governing Chanel’s choices. Exposing this would tend to downplay the aura and the role of inspiration and taste, and insist more on conformism and power issues in relation to class and gender (Goffman, 1977).

In my view, she was essentially an entrepreneur and a businesswoman and this is why we remember her now. Consequently, we should bear in mind other dimensions and facts when reflecting upon Chanel as a social actor than as the founder of a successful brand.

2. Coco’s love and business deals
Contrary to what the biopics tend to focus on, it seems that the center of Coco Chanel’s life was work, a typical feature of entrepreneurs. Coco’s work, however, was not essentially physical, although she did spend a lot of time designing collections. In fact, she coordinated the people who did the physical work. Neither handwork nor design are particularly glamorous and entertaining: the first is repetitive and involves a team whereas the second is not easy to grasp, since it is mostly mental.
Judging by what fashion historians and biographers tell us about her activity, it seems that what Chanel essentially thrived in was a very particular kind of work that is characteristic of innovative entrepreneurship, the art of assemblage, opportunity and carefully judged risk-taking. For instance, compared with many other seamstresses who launched their business at the same time, Chanel started in a fairly original way. Initially she did not have a particular reputation or a strong network within the profession. Instead, she was sponsored by love money, her two lovers competing in a kind of “tournament of values” (Appadurai, 1986). They provided her with love money, a location in Paris, textile suppliers (Etienne Balsan’s family owned very large factories) and shared their network of socialites who became Coco’s clients.

Contrary to the script favored in the biopics, Coco was not essentially a small-scale milliner with few skills and a great deal of talent. In fact, given the very competitive hierarchy of women workers in haute couture (petites mains, premières et secondes d’atelier) based on hard work and virtuosity (Audoux, 1987), it is hardly likely Coco would have risen so far if this had been true. Since Frederick Worth (in the 1860s), the field of haute couture had already been institutionalized and it was centralized in Paris where a long tradition of art and craft existed (for instance in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine). In this world, Chanel was initially an outsider with “ideas” and probably “taste.” At the time, couture became an open field only in wartime, when all the prestigious maisons closed[6].

Judging by the history of fashion in the 1910s, all kinds of styles were acceptable, and customers could already access “ready-to-wear” items in catalogues or in the Bon Marché (shopping mall in Paris pioneering large retail stores). Singer sewing machines had already conquered the world, and women would often make a lot of the family’s clothes at home. So in this specific context, Chanel went up market, targeting actresses and courtesans, who managed their looks professionally and competed on the social stage. They were visible in fashion magazines and could spread fashion to more conservative and more popular circles.

Looking back at this environment, it seems very unlikely that Chanel “freed” these women from their corsets and thus created a successful brand, which is the central thesis of all three biopics and also the official story of the Chanel brand. A safer hypothesis would be to argue that Coco’s success was built on a series of disruptions brought about by women as a result of the disappearance of existing “worlds” and the emergence of the modern age. Timing is essential because these changes were prompted by war.

In such a changing environment, Chanel proved a very talented strategist, a fact that is downplayed by the biopics who present her choices as mostly intuitive and emotional. One may even hypothesize that a great deal of Chanel’s love affairs and friendships were dictated by her professional aspirations, or if such was not initially the case, in the end it became so. She was always on the lookout for new trends, sources of inspiration and rare resources such as skills and high-quality raw materials.

Throughout her career, she used her social network in high society, first the Belle-Epoque provincial aristocracy and its garrison-town culture (horses, cabarets and light-entertainment), then the cosmopolitan intelligentsia in artistic Paris (with many immigrant artists like Diaghilev, Stravinsky, Picasso, Dali and many less famous around them), the royals (Russian, British, German) and the emerging stars of the movie industry in Hollywood and in Europe. These social groups were connected by key individuals (for instance Etienne de Beaumont, the Grand Duchess Alexandra Pavlova, Bendor, Misia Sert) who were close friends and associates of Chanel’s.
Here we can see both a series of disruptive changes and continuity in the world Chanel was immersed in when creating her fashion. This chain of events is an important complement to the industrial value chain to understand the specific work of an entrepreneur – both creative and adaptive – in relation to a specific environment.

3. Coco’s talent and her opportunism

As a contrast to the sentimental version of Coco’s life, I propose to relate four important episodes of Chanel’s success story in a different way. Because the biopic version is romanticized, it downplays historico-social circumstances and insists on intimacy and feelings. This tends to decontextualize the venture and promote the entrepreneurial character of the founder in capturing opportunities.

After providing a longitudinal picture of this entrepreneurial venturing process, I detail the main episodes of the business development of the Chanel house as a result of the founding mother’s strategic choices (Figure 1).

The similarity of moves and the strategic choices behind them must be illustrated in more detail to be fully understood. We identify four key episodes where the choices made by Coco Chanel create or strengthen the competitive advantage of her fashion house.

Episode 1: the war changes women’s dress

Initially Chanel saw the First World War as an opportunity for her low-key fashion; Poiret called it “luxury wretchedness.” She proved unconventional in using industrial fabric for haute couture with her Jersey factory, observing that during wars, women still sought elegance, but of a low-key type, that allowed a more active life. Maintaining that fashion after the war was a great advantage since the price of fashionable minimalist dresses did not go down whereas more material (labor, fabric, equipment, stores) was available. Chanel created her haute couture collection re-inventing the minimalist, practical style she had defined in her
first ready-to-wear jersey collections. She was now in a position to hire some of the best seamstresses for whom all the houses were in competition.

She then used her financial wealth accumulated during the war to impose herself as a leader in haute couture between the two world wars. For instance, after the Russian revolution, she used a sudden supply of cheap labor for modeling and lace confection to upgrade her offer of dresses through a partnership with the Grand Duchess Anna Pavlovna who had created a lace workshop.

**Episode 2: the perfume Chanel No. 5 introduces an industrial cycle.** After taking the risk of launching a perfume (Chanel No. 5) using a formula created by a talented chemist (Ernest Beaux) who had been derided by perfumers because of the novelty of his conceptual, stable scent, Chanel created an industrial partnership with the Wertheimer brothers who owned the cosmetics firm Bourjois. They later created a series of products under the brand name Chanel. At the time, the factories employed thousands of workers and the perfume became Chanel’s “cash cow.” This move may be called a diversification because meanwhile, Coco was still working on her collections in the rue Chambon in a more artisanal way.

**Episode 3: Hollywood ventures initiate the international focus of Chanel.** After the 1929 Wall Street crisis, Chanel was contacted by the Diamond Producer Association to create a major show displaying Chanel jewelry creations (prices were down). Chanel used the pool of talents and reputation she had gathered when she had been selling imitation jewelry in the 1920s. She also benefitted from the skills of jewelers working in the place Vendôme. During her one-year stay in the USA at the invitation of Sam Goldwyn (who offered a billion dollar deal for Chanel to dress Hollywood movie stars in the USA), Chanel contacted American suppliers and distributors. She was already famous in American Fashion magazines; Vogue had documented her collections and her work in ballet and theater productions with the “Ballets Russes” and contemporary artists such as Cocteau, Picasso and Dali. As a result of her interviews and travels, the “maison Chanel” based in Paris was exporting on a global scale, whereas the production was still local.

**Episode 4: the post-war collections reinvent the brand to sell the perfumes.** In 1953, the Chanel revival was orchestrated to counter Dior and continue to support the perfumes and cosmetics that were at risk of falling out of fashion. In later years, she was famous for her sober classics and she openly criticized what she perceived as the decadence in woman fashion, especially trousers and mini-skirts. She worked as a symbolic figure in the rue Cambon, although she had sold her shares to the Wertheimer brothers. After the war however, she was much less involved in designing the dresses whereas her faithful team was still at work making the garments.

These four episodes show the importance of workers and business partners throughout the life of the house of Chanel. Furthermore, each move includes groups of actors in different worlds (crafts, arts, cosmetic industry, entertainment) that overlapped with fashion. It is often very difficult to identify who introduced an invention or an innovation.

For instance, in the movies, the end of the corset, the little black dress and trousers are presented as Coco Chanel’s gift to her fellow women. Yet the history of fashion (Steele, 1999, 2005) shows us that such is not the case, and in many instances, Chanel appropriated and radicalized inventions that were not her own. The biopics, focusing on Chanel’s character, may be accused of denying the existence of a fashion system with its...
conventions (Barthes, 1967; Lipovetsky, 1994). The work system is based on productive value chains in a social field made up of power relations and domination (Bourdieu, 1993). The movies mostly display a consumption system (du Gay, 1996), and so aestheticize the organization for the show. Workers’ voice would be discordant in such narratives (Boje, 1998). Chanel’s fame comes from an entrepreneurial venture, and socialites and artists are important to her success, but keeping them apart from the sphere of work (Barley and Kunda, 2001) widens the gap between reality and fiction in viewers’ representations of fashion. It symbolically recreates in the past the present secluded existence of the upper classes (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot, 2007a, b) isolated from productive forces whereas Chanel was not, as we shall see.

4. Coco’s artists and workers

According to the biopics, Chanel used entrepreneurship to settle her scores with her difficult life, since she was of modest origin. This self-made woman story is presented in reference to the social ladder and the upper classes. However, it should also be considered in another light: that of her relations with co-workers. Having been poor, having been a seamstress, a dancer in a cabaret and then the girlfriend of dandies might have proven inspirational (as illustrated in the movies); yet we know little of how it shaped her entrepreneurial skills in managing an organization.

Referring to everyday practices as creative resistance in de Certeau (1984), Hjorth (2005) offers a different aesthetic perspective for entrepreneurship. Instead of glorifying individual talent and personal achievement, they explore collective, popular sources of entrepreneurial ventures as a form of resistance against the existing power relations in society. In some ways, the early life of Coco Chanel corresponds to such a trend. However, very soon, the success of the Chanel house became based on traditional work systems. Chanel had a reputation for being a tough and demanding boss, depicted as being an “old style” manager by her biographers (Charles-Roux, 1989; Delay, 1983; Morand, 1976).

Scenes showing labor relations in the periods depicted in the movies (1910-1936) show the life of workers (Castel, 1991) and the control exercised over them by entrepreneurs, as well as the predominance of feminine labor (Duby and Perrot, 1990-1991; Omnes, 1997). It is true that women were often employed in the textile industry. In couture workshops, a very conservative female hierarchy had been observed for years and other women entrepreneurs like Jeanne Lanvin (Barillé, 1997; Picon, 2002) proved more active in implementing social reforms. Chanel made her feminine workforce work hard and she was reputedly severe on the quality of finish of each garment. For instance Chanel, observing the 1936 strikes from the windows of her apartment in the Ritz, viewed them and the Popular Front as a scandal. Attempting to use the war laws to avoid paying wages due, she closed her workshops (possibly retaliating against strikes and the breaking of machines, possibly because of her experience of 1914-1918 when Parisian houses had gone bankrupt), firing the 300 seamstresses of the Paris workshop.

Taken in more detail, Chanel’s entrepreneurial moves in managing her business can be read as a very convincing illustration of entrepreneurs as opportunity seekers skilled at brokering networks. Throughout her life, Chanel appropriated knowledge and skills from very different traditions, which she rejuvenated and celebrated with a keen sense of timing.
First, she learnt about fashion in the French Provincial Military Aristocracy when it was a very important element of sociability. Fashion was a power issue, defining a parallel hierarchy of women similar to that of the army. There were strict codes for many activities. Alluding to Chanel’s influences, Charles-Roux mentions the influence of the Catholic Church and the English style in horses and sports; their relation to actresses and “grisettes” (milliners who were the mistresses of young men) as a parallel world to family obligations (described in Stendhal, Puccini, Feydeau and Proust) with alternative aesthetics and values. Chanel reinterpreted the codes when this small universe collapsed as a result of the First World War. As a result, she made a fortune and was also freed from her inferior position in that culture. All her life, she contributed to glorify its vestiges. One of their remains was her friend and collaborator Etienne de Beaumont’s nostalgic bergamasques.

Chanel used this “retro” inspiration as she used the popularity of Russian culture (Music, Dance, Lace and Perfume) after the Russian revolution. She hired immigrants as her models and as her workforce, especially for laces and embroideries, after she had admired their work for the Russian Ballet.

This is how she gained access to the artistic world, Modernism and Cubism. Working with artists on shows and being a patron of the arts were competitive advantages as she competed with fellow fashion designers for artists: Schiaparelli stole Dali from her, just as Chanel had stolen artists and workers from Paul Poiret. Designers competed to set the tone and to be at the center of attention.

Part of Chanel’s opportunism is her sense of timing. The women “liberated” by Chanel were not just any women, they were high society women reacting to social changes that challenged the rules of the past century; trousers, the little black dress, the flapper with her bobbed hair and the use of tweed and men’s clothes as an inspiration were not Chanel’s invention. Rather, she popularized them when it was first acceptable and then more or less expected to adopt the trend.

Finally, Chanel used social conventions and in particular, gender relations, as a background for her activity. This shows a very good understanding of her environment in an age where seduction became a very important activity for men and women in modern urban society. To exist socially, both sexes had to work at their external appearance.

The art of fashion consists in creating objects but also inventing events and rituals as a stage for interactions and trades in society. There are, in particular, key moments such as “tournaments of values” (Appadurai, 1986; Moeran and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2011) where stakes are admittedly high since reputation and worth are at stake. Consequently, the “house” and its brand are symbols, which reflect the ambivalence of gender relationships, combining objective class alliances and struggles over divergent interests and values. The history of luxury objects shows how symbolic their trade can be, during strategic interactions for instance.

This is because men and women create specific solidarities such as the “female support systems” mentioned by Goffman (1977, p. 305) yet in society, peers and family clans also create other types of coalitions, based on class. In such coalitions, men frequently pose as protectors of women:

[...] through one ritualized gesture or another, males are very likely to express, albeit fitfully, that they define females as fragile and valuable, to be protected from the harsher things of life and shown both love and respect (Goffman, 1977, p. 308).
Chanel gave men and women many opportunities to play their parts successfully. She made a point of exemplifying the seduction of her creations by acting as a model and seducing men, and she displayed the men she seduced celebrating her with gifts. One important asset was her ability to consistently do so even as she grew older.

5. Coco and the Maison Chanel: branded
Finally, I would like to relate the three biopics to the non-entrepreneurial Chanel, a woman who, like the actresses in the movies, played the role of Coco for professional reasons. The difference was that professional actresses generally have a chance to alternate roles and do not have to compete with previous versions of themselves over time. So strict is the role imposed by the identity of the brand that it becomes somehow rigid. It is so pervasive that it seems to have created a frame for episodes and images, which is surprisingly similar in each biopic, despite the different production teams.

The theme of the brand as a frame or an addiction limiting individual autonomy was even used in one of Chanel’s most popular communication campaigns picturing a sulking young woman as a sparkling bird in a golden cage[7]. The ad for the Chanel perfume, Coco, reads as an ironic reflection on the use of fashion by women: it is both a pleasure and a constraint, a source of power and dependence. The ambivalence of the character (a young lady bird in a cage) contrasts with the dominant view of Chanel as embodying the “free, self-assured, mature woman” who was professionally successful and reached a position of power by freeing other women. There seems to be a paradox in Chanel’s black and white fashion house today, keeping women aligned with a fashion conceived some 100 years ago. Besides, both semiotics (Barthes, 2006) and symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1977) perceive fashion as a reflection of social conventions in relation to traditions. This demands constant attention and very few designers and models have remained in business for long. Such is the case of Chanel; and this is why it is interesting to observe the transformation of an entrepreneurial venture such as Chanel’s and the changing role of the founding figure.

Chanel’s later life, after 1954, when she was past 70, was spent promoting a brand which was no longer her own. Coco Chanel became the ambassador of the Chanel house and her address was rue Chambon, above the retail outlet and near the workshops. She had already sold her shares, but chose to spend the rest of her life in the milieu; and she was used for public relations. Although this is often presented as a unique success and the sign of a rare passion, it may also be the challenging case of a person glorifying a cult based on the image of her past. In praying at that altar, she further legitimizes and strengthens the brand. As a young character sporting new clothes, her fictional embodiments in the biopics (artificially) recreate the aura that manufactured products lack (Benjamin, 1936 [2008]).

Yet, the fashion industry might only be harboring this worship of the past, and both movies and the brand imprison Chanel in her house and brand as a Sybilla[8]. Here, the cage is not made of gold as in the 1990 ad campaign. It gives one the impression that Chanel was never in a position to be independent from her work, and that at one point she became trapped in her role as a gifted professional. A lot of descriptions insist on her fastidiousness and her fear of having to change her habits or settle for a less than perfect choice in every detail of her life. The fame attached to some of her wit, her habits and her personal objects seem to have exposed her to the core. As she aged, this
insistent gaze left the empress somehow naked since she had to “overplay” her persona in the media to support the prestige of her “maison”. This house was her home and she was expected to be there to look after others. This is quite a paradox for the symbol of feminine emancipation.

It has already been pointed out that the ideal of the “house” can be a false ideal of harmony, a role imposed on women in addition to their professional life (Héritier, 2007). By associating women with “home” (in a “house”) like the goddess Hestia, it created for them a role as ideal wardens (Burton, 2003) safe-keepers and also prisoners (Vachhani and Pullen, 2011), it was still true in the American media in the 1960s (Goffman, 1977) and, if the three biopics are to be believed, the situation has not much changed. Coco still stayed in this house but had no home, since she lived in a hotel room navigating from her office above the rue Cambon boutique to her bed.

I would even venture that both the house and the particular role of Chanel became more and more disembodied and symbolic as the original momentum of “modern fashion” faded away. Chanel created her first collection in the age of the invention of style, when dressing oneself became more than a sign of social status and a function, but a deliberate expression of one’s individuality (Postrel, 2003). She ended her career in the 1970s, at the peak of semiotic analysis, and from that moment on, Chanel became the incarnation of a conceptual approach to fashion. The popularity of the following quote by Chanel: “Style remains (universal concept) if fashion (ephemeral matter) passes” show the importance of a conceptual approach to fashion among fashion designers. Accordingly, the biopics seem to follow the line defined by Karl Lagerfeld as an intellectual designer. Just as Lagerfeld has played at being the reincarnation of Chanel as a performance, the Chanel characters in the biopics are greatly influenced by Karl Lagerfeld’s communication choices for Chanel today[9].

Because of the interweaving of fiction movies in the fashion media system, the claim that Coco Chanel liberated women by caring for her clients might be challenged. I see her role as one not so different than those tricks Goffman describes when salespeople want to “cool the mark out.” whenever clients feel really challenged. Coco Chanel’s role is obviously more ambivalent than that of a good fairy helping women to be free and none of the women shown in the movies seem in a position to take a step in that direction[10]. The movies sometimes hint at this by insisting on her suffering and her dark side. Yet the dark side of Chanel’s fashion might go beyond her specific case, and refer to the need to fill an inner void with objects. Consequently, this dark side of entrepreneurship would be directly related to Chanel’s edge in doing business. In fact, as a fashion entrepreneur, she orchestrated a series of strategic moves that made women dependent on her products: she made them prestigious and available in small and large quantities, and she used the mimetic desire of less affluent, lower class women to rapidly commoditize each new invention so that more affluent women would have to buy new clothes all the time. Therefore, to be “ahead” of fashion, richer affluent women had in fact to “follow” Chanel’s fashion. For this, the increasing role of the mass media was a key influence, portraying Chanel herself as a model, the Red Queen of her own fashion. She continued playing that role as she grew older, even when she had sold her shares to her business partner.

When one studies closely images of Chanel dressed by Chanel and always at work on her famous stairs adored with its series of looking-glasses, one may interpret Chanel as an assemblage of “clichés” from the twentieth century that do not quite make
a person, at least, not a heroic character in a biopic. Although she popularizes the quintessential, sophisticated French woman, this popular figure is but a fiction of the global age[11]. In archive texts and images, the Chanel house is a collective task force, a mix of classes, a mix of gender and national identities, and one that has no name. Gabrielle Chanel, prisoner of Chanel fashion, remained in the service of the “Maison” she had created until the end of her life. Many of her ideas were borrowed. Most of her dresses were made by others. Her figure and her words have been appropriated by the brand’s communication, and presented as a “magic spirit” just as wearing Chanel No. 5 is associated with some kind of extraordinary charm.

Conclusion
The life of Coco Chanel as it appears today in popular culture is a success story, that of a woman who found compensation for her love life in a professional success. This business was also prestigious: it meant being at the heart of fashion. The story is both edifying, associating sacrifice and genius, and mystifying, since in the end it insists on intuition and feelings. This aesthetic view is an interesting variation on entrepreneurship, yet it downplays the conscious choices made by the heroin, a skillful entrepreneur in relation with other actors in society.

In depicting Coco as a victim (she was an orphan, she lost the love of her life), the three biopics we have been studying emphasize the resilience of the heroin, making it easy to identify with her character. However, a more accurate representation of her strategic moves would possibly prove useful, especially because of the movie’s influence on millions of viewers, who may want to imitate Coco Chanel and use their talent to launch a business.

In terms of narrative plot, it would be useful to offer a different account of the life of Coco Chanel, for instance in the “unanimist” style illustrated in French literature by contemporaries of Chanel’s such as Jules Romain, who attempted to describe new group lives in the city. This would be especially important to acknowledge the fact that entrepreneurship is a collective venture. In terms of imagery and mimesis, biopics tend to epitomize key moments so they focus on “acme moments”, whereas a more day-to-day description might be more accurate. For instance, Steyaert calls for more focus on “the prosaics of entrepreneurship”. Combining it with a belief that “creativity is [...] not an exceptional condition but an everyday occurrence” (Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006, p. 13) means we should pay more attention to the entrepreneurial community and embrace all possible sources and types of creativity.

Although it is undoubtedly entertaining, the popular “success story” downplays the messiness of entrepreneurship and the role of historical disruption on new ventures. I would insist on some specific dimensions, which are crucial if we are to better understand the aesthetic dimension of entrepreneurship but do not fit with the frame of a prestigious brand. First, I observe that Coco Chanel was skillful at making the most of scarce resources, her simple style being easy for millions of home seamstresses to reproduce. She was always on the lookout for new, rare resources and she would fit outfits in a form of bricolage directly onto women’s bodies. The rhythm of creation, diffusion, imitation and new creation was frequently disturbed by events of the time (wars, the Russian revolution, economic crisis) and fashion was a mirror of changes on the social stage. The importance of momentum in defining aesthetics and business should not be downplayed because the industry has now stabilized and institutionalized itself in strong brands.
Second, the system of production in luxury as we know it emerged in the 1920s. Chanel first used the skill of very talented seamstresses to produce the dresses and then a system of goods via industrial partnerships for prêt-à-porter, perfume and cosmetics. Consistent with the product placement strategy used by luxury brands, the “social life of things” (Appadurai, 1986) is idealized in the biopics[12]. Yet I believe understanding the role of each worker in the production system and his or her rewards and working conditions is also important. Coco Chanel paid great attention to it, and made choices that are interesting to contrast with the present situation of the luxury industry and fast fashion based on outsourcing via a network of global workshops.

Aesthetics in entrepreneurship is associated with artistic inspiration. However, by idealizing artists, the movies devalue the collaborative nature of both art and fashion productions. By focusing on the craft of Coco Chanel (making costumes for real life and for shows), one can see how she managed to become part of artistic projects who mixed various influences from arts and traditions. The convergence between Chanel’s “side activities” as an art sponsor and a socialite and her core business disappear if one identifies her work with that of a sculptor or a painter. Consequently, isolating “famous figures” such as Chanel means we ignore the transformative nature of art groups and work on representations and values. This ignorance mirrors the movie industry and creative industries in general where firms/studios select star directors and actors and sell copyrights via different channels. However, more and more, active viewers may want to see behind the screen, especially since they plan to be more than just customers of ready-made images.

An active and critical audience will be interested to see how Chanel is to be remembered in the public eye: by her life rather than by her works. Her character becomes an emblem of “the modern woman” and “the fashionista” as part of a large impression management program by a group investing in its cash-cow brand: this involves prestigious standards such as those conveyed by love and art as opposed to volumes of sale and hard work. But it is even more interesting to see why, of all people, Coco Chanel should be the twentieth century artist everyone remembers. Not only is Coco made the equal of a figure like Igor Stravinsky. The wide public success of the Chanel biopics contrasts with the relative oblivion of most of the contemporary artists Chanel met and worked with. By a curious twist of fate, Chanel the entrepreneur is considered as an artist whereas less entrepreneurial figures are forgotten in an age when famous artists must manage their career as a brand name.

Notes
1. Coco Chanel owned and cherished these precious pieces of furniture.
2. For copyright reasons, pictures complementing the text (Table 1 and others in the following parts) are available online on the author’s personal web site in creative commons: http://elenriot.typepad.com/blog/2013/08/coco-chanel-comments-on-3-movies-with-pictures.html. Note that the online version presented online is substantially different from this original paper, because I do not retain the copyrights on it. I warmly invite my readers to go to this address and interact so as to create an open space of knowledge sharing and exchange. I am confident readers interested by issues of control over representations, popular culture and creative industries will be eager to join.
3. Ibidem. Illustrations (Table 2) are provided on the internet web site of the author.
4. Ibidem. Pictures (Table 3) are available on the author’s web site.
5. Another reason is that key biographers were mostly socialites. So they contextualize and provide much more detailed accounts of Chanel’s life and her way of managing her business. The parts that interest them less are the work dimensions, which are also absent from the movies. It should not surprise us that, as movies traditionally do, the three biopics present a stylized view of Coco Chanel’s life focusing on key events. What is more surprising, however, is that they all focus on episodes when Chanel appeared to be a victim.

6. It seems that, unlike most milliners and “fashion houses” where women were very active, but followed tradition, Chanel was original because she diversified by seizing opportunities to be different in what was perceived as an unconventional way. For instance, she used her acquaintance with Etienne Balsan to sell ready-to-wear clothes in her hat shop during the war, benefitting from the collapse of the Parisian market (deserted by its clients). This was made possible because Balsan and Capel provided love money for her first shop in the most fashionable Paris district and then in seaside resorts, Deauville, Biarritz and then Cannes, which were locations for the international elite.

7. Ibidem. Pictures (Table 7) are available on the author’s web site.


9. Another illustration of this purposeful relation to the past is the exhibition about Chanel No. 5 in the Palais de Tokyo (Paris modern art museum) picturing Chanel as an inventor celebrating women.

10. However, the three movies fail to identify modern women, like Coco Chanel, as performers (Butler, 1993, 1994, 1999) playing with conventions (Grove-White, 2001; Lieberman, 2000). This can be explained by the role of movies as part of the “tournament of values” in the world of fashion (Moeran and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2011) where large brands compete. Their reception is part of a very pervasive media discourse (Moeran, 2006), movies being but one variation of that everyday communication about women’s images.

11. In particular, the role of the “traditional” French culture in all three biopics may point at a trouble in cultural identity, since: “Verbal and ideological decentering occurs only when a national culture sheds its closure and its self-sufficiency, when it becomes conscious of itself as only one among other cultures and languages. This new awareness will then sap the roots of the mythological sense of language, based on the notion of an absolute fusion of ideological meaning with language” (Bakhtin quoted in Todorov (1984, pp. 66-67)).

12. This is also partly the case in Prigent’s (2006) documentary on the maison Chanel under the rule of artistic director Karl Lagerfeld.

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Woman in love, artist or entrepreneur?


Further reading


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