The fashion designer Christian Dior, actively designing under his name for only ten years, from 1947 to his premature death in October 1957, published a memoir, Christian Dior et moi, in 1956—published the following year in English as Dior by Dior, translated by Antonia Fraser. The book rehearses a split between the designer’s public and private personae—a split foretold in the French title, at least, which points explicitly to the existence of multiple selves.1 This split clumsily book-ends the volume, and is a trope that Dior returns to intermittently throughout the work. The prologue, “The Two Christian Diors,” establishes what is clearly intended to be the central affective theme of the work. There are, Dior writes, a public Dior and a private one. Toward the end of the book, when he returns to consider this split in light of the successful life story that he has narrated, he characterizes the two as the “great couturier” and the “shrinking nonentity,” even as he ostensibly ends the volume on an integrative note by claiming that reflecting on his life has allowed him to see that these two were mutually beneficial (194).

There is a powerful tension here between public celebrity and intimate personhood, one that is not unique to the fashion designer, to be sure, but which is expressed in distinct ways and with particular implications for the fashion industry and especially the haute couture sector, reliant as it is on the perception of a split between mass production and the rarified and artistic world of couture design (Troy). We are moved to ask what is at stake in this reiteration of the designer’s unsuitability for public life even as his work depends upon the cultivation of a very public role: that of guardian of public taste. And how does life writing mediate the coexistence of intimate and spectacularly public selves in the fashion industry?

The stakes of the tension between privacy and public visibility in the fashion industry were high in this period. The industry was (and is) motored by
visual spectacle, and in the post-WWII period of Dior’s work, this saturating visual effect—and its dissemination through the mass media—took on a new life. The glamour and opulence of fashion’s spectacles in this period were celebrated; after all, luxury fashion was seen as a welcome respite from the relative austerity of wartime, especially in France. But fashion’s spectacular play of surfaces has long had an underside: it raises suspicion and even scorn because of its connections to artifice. Artifice, of course, is associated with covering over, with falsehood, with dissemblance and deceit. Crucially, it is also gendered—it is feminine.2 The fashion designer of the early part of the twentieth century treads a fine line, after all.3 She or he must contribute to the forging of the spectacular phantasmagoria that fashion depends on, but must be careful not to lose the self to that fantastical play, lest consumers find that there is no bedrock to hold on to and become suspicious of a system of surfaces and ephemera. This context gives us a clue to understanding the kind of split self that Dior enacted in his writing. To preserve his public image as a genuine artist rather than a swindler who manipulated visual spectacles for profit, he needed to ensure appropriate distance between his private self and his public persona. He needed to make visible his “genuine” nature, his paradoxical longing for invisibility. Though from at least the 1930s on, all celebrities were under pressure to prove something of their “authentic” selves to readers (Cur-nutt; Dyer; E. Meyers), the stakes were heightened for fashion designers, who so visibly worked with surfaces and could find themselves called into question by the very activity that was at the same time the foundation of their fame. In essence, then, fashion designers were asked to demonstrate their split subjectivity in order to reassure the public of their authenticity and their artistry. No wonder Dior found it necessary to invoke so explicitly a second self. As we will show, however, this invocation of a split was fallible; try as he might, Dior’s insistence that there were two selves was not wholly convincing, and Dior by Dior must be considered, as must any volume of fashion designer life writing, as part of the broader branding strategy of the designer.

Dior is routinely cited as a pioneer in international branding efforts, and it is important to situate his autobiography, which appeared after ten years at the head of his business, as part of this history.4 Given this context, it also becomes necessary to consider the effects of Dior’s articulations of a private self-hood, and his longing for a peaceful retreat from the industry. Intentionally or not, his rhetorical work to distance himself from the all-consuming public gaze works in his favor, establishing him as a sympathetic figure and offering a point of connection with the reader/consumer searching for a portrait of authenticity in the context of an industry defined by its interrogation of the ideological preference for authenticity, and aligned instead with its opposite, artifice. While it may have ultimately been unsuccessful, the cultivation
of a split subjectivity, which allows for a picture of an embattled self trying desperately to survive against the incursions and indeed seductions of an artificial industry, thus serves a market function. Though such a self-portrait may accurately reflect the dislocation occasioned by trying to live the strange tempo of the fashion industry against the dominant, linear temporal ideology, its inclusion in the published memoir could reassure or pacify consumers who might otherwise be put off by fashion’s flagrant performance of its own frankly oppositional logic.

To work further through the implications of Dior’s split representation, we turn to the nexus of time and space in Dior’s representational archive, addressing how dichotomous conceptions of temporality and spatiality are woven together, enacted, and then overturned in significant passages of the memoir. We do this because the conceptualization of private personality interlocks with Dior’s representations of space—the spaces in which he attempted to hide himself from the world, in order to nourish and protect his “shrinking nonentity” (194). In turn, the spaces for the cultivation of self are, in effect, temporally weighted. These gardens and interiors function not only as retreats from the multiple gazes and pressures attendant upon the public self, but in their decorative style, they are also legible as temporal retreats from the pressures of modern life. Ultimately, such a reading of Dior’s archive reveals a tension: Dior presents himself as devoted to spaces for contemplation and self-renewal that seem to allow for an escape from the present upon which his professional success is predicated. The places that he chooses to detail, however—the interiors, in particular—are revealed to be more complex than that, and undermine the sense of pure privacy, pure retreat into another place or another time. In effect, this reading makes clear that Dior simultaneously occupied two different places and thus two apparently different “time signatures,” as it were, resulting in a conflict that is a foundational condition of the modern designer, and corresponding to the ultimate impossibility of maintaining a public/private split.

We are given a clue to this condition by the way that strict divisions between discrete times and spaces are muddied in the spaces he chooses to focus upon (as distinct times are muddied by the peculiarities of the fashion industry). In what follows, we read Dior’s invocations of place as a key to his sense of spatial and temporal location, a sense which recognized the impossibility of “pure” spaces and times even as he strove to impart to his readers a purity of spheres—past/present, country/city, art/commerce. Using passages from Dior’s memoir, supplemented by portraits from the press, which took up and reinforced this incomplete split, we argue that the fashioning of his persona testifies to a hybrid experience of time, space, and sphere on a number of different levels. In particular, Dior’s allegiance to Louis XVI interiors shows that his aesthetic preferences share significant temporal characteristics with the
time structures peculiar to the fashion industry. The complexity of this temporal status points to nostalgia, and in short, we suggest that Dior emerges as a nostalgic subject, a mnemonic mode characterized by a temporal complexity that accurately captures the delicate temporal-spatial positioning that he cultivated in his work. Recognizing Dior as a nostalgic subject makes plain the relationship of his memoir to the market function of the industry, and more broadly, to fashion’s “in-between” time.

DIOR’S WORK

After working for two other haute couture designers over the course of the previous decade, Dior presented his first collection—his “corolle” line, better known as the “New Look”—in February 1947. It was an instant sensation, and immediately established his worldwide fame. The collection was, famously, ultra-feminine; as Dior himself described it, it featured “rounded shoulders, full feminine busts, and hand-span waists above enormous spreading skirts” (23). It represented a major departure from the fashions of wartime, which had been produced under the constraints of fabric rationing and the use of new synthetics to replace fabrics, such as silk, that were not available at all. Those restrictions had led to shorter skirts, tighter tailoring, and what were deemed more “masculine” overall styles (styles also influenced by the growing need for comfortable clothing, as women took to the paid workplace in great number across the Western world during the Second World War). Dior loathed wartime styles, and was eager to return to what he saw as a more fantastical, softer, feminine look (22). The corolle line was also unmistakably historical; the New Look recalled (though not precisely) styles of an earlier era or eras. Dior was designing in France in the traumatized immediate postwar period, when what has been called a widespread historical amnesia set in, a collective turning away both from the physical horrors of war and privation and the reality of French collaboration with the occupying Nazis. There was an implicit temporal structure in his work, then, which mirrored broader structures of time in fashion. In moving away from the troubling immediate past, he returned to an imagined earlier era for fashion inspiration, visiting that past upon the present, as fashion has long tended to do.

THE STRANGE TIME OF FASHION, AND THE DESIGNER AS BOUNDARY CROSSEr

To understand the space-time relationship in Dior by Dior, it is imperative to analyze more deeply the temporal structure of fashion, for the “time signature” peculiar to this industry helps to contextualize Dior’s intertwined spatial and temporal rhetorics. Fashion has an unusual relationship to time. Relying on
conceptions of the new for its viability as an industry, fashion has been characterized as the materialization of change, a temporal phenomenon oriented in some ways to the present, but much more to the ever-receding horizon of the future. And yet, fashion is also obsessed with the past—the newness that drives it is “impure,” since it almost always references past styles (see Breward, *Culture*; Evans). Caroline Evans beautifully evokes this strange time of fashion: “[t]he traces of the past surface in the present like the return of the repressed. Fashion designers call up these ghosts of modernity and offer us a paradigm that is different from the historian’s paradigm, remixing fragments of the past into something new and contemporary that will continue to resonate into the future” (9). Further, fashion has been connected—most notably by Walter Benjamin—to death: in addition to being static commodities that take on a simulacrum of animation through their proximity to bodies, fashions “die” even before they can fully blossom, being superseded constantly by a next incarnation (8). As Ulrich Lehmann puts it, “[b]eing supremely realistic about its own limited life span, fashion continually proclaims the rift—through imminent death and rebirth—in the historical continuum” (230).

Fashion, that is, more than any other art form, traffics in the dissolution of boundaries between past and present, between temporal categories that are meant to remain discrete. In this sense, its structure runs counter to that of modern temporal consciousness, which is characterized by the development of a linear understanding of time in which past, present, and future are discrete, unrelated to each other. The past is to remain past, and—either by way of revolution or progressive development—the social world is to develop unidirectionally away from the past toward the future. The risk of being understood as mired in the past is grave, for rationality—post-Enlightenment modernity’s pre-eminent value—itself has a developmental logic: rational thought and social action are engaged in the necessary task of moving the social world away from the past. As Marcos Pison Natali notes, once a developmental ethos of progress toward freedom was established, a disciplinary mechanism applied to those who expressed an allegiance to the past; they were considered mentally unstable and even diseased, as the increasing pathologization of the term “nostalgia” shows (34–57). The result was an understanding of subjectivity as dichotomous: “unhealthy” subjects were mired in the past, while healthy subjects were attuned to the present.

Given the unique temporal structure of fashion, the fashion designer has an uneasy relationship to the dominant ideology of discretely bounded times. She or he must have an allegiance to multiple time signatures simultaneously. A figure whose work by its very nature interrogates carefully guarded boundaries between past and present, by enacting the haunting, cyclical visitation of the past upon the present, the designer thus becomes a border figure, standing
at the intersection of multiple times, revealing how past, present, and future brush up against, and indeed are deeply related to, each other. By its very nature this figure challenges the notion of health and productivity as dependent on discretely bounded times. In this way, modern fashion designers are quite unlike avant-garde, modernist artists, figures with whom, on the surface, they claim some similarities (Troy). The work of both rests on the apparent fetishization of the present, of the now. But modernist artists claimed an unfettered allegiance to the present, unconditionally separating the self from the past (although overlooking the ways that such a wholesale rejection is in fact a deep engagement with the past). Thus, much of the discourse of art and literature in the half-century preceding Dior was characterized by an explicit rejection of the past as weak, feminized, degenerate, and certainly obsolete. The best-known modern artists were able to maintain the appearance of a pure affiliation to the present, which fashion designers could not, as their work also constantly revalorized elements of the past.

As a figure who brings the past and the present into proximity, the fashion designer raises, and threatens, a related binary: that between art and commerce. Unlike modernist artists, who explicitly show allegiance only to art—though recent work in modernist studies has shown that, indeed, such artists were very invested in the market (see Jensen; Dettmar and Watt; Turner; and Jaffe)—designers must master both their self-professed artistry and the demands of the market. Indeed, it is the perception of artistic genius that the market buys when it invests in a designer like Dior, and so the fashion industry dissolves the ideological boundary between these two spheres, showing how they function to uphold each other.10

The fashion designer, then, occupies a tenuous position in the cultural imaginary, uncomfortably calling attention to the fallibility of some of the dichotomies that animate our understandings of cultural fields. In Dior’s memoir, these two, related binary oppositions—between art and commerce, and between past and present—are mapped onto the designer through his descriptions of a self split between private and public. Dior accomplishes this by relating the self directly to the spaces he occupies. The spaces he describes are complicated and layered, and he does not succeed, ultimately, in maintaining the distance between spheres—in keeping these two “halves” of himself apart. It is to his narration of a self in space that we now turn.

THE SPATIAL TURN IN DIOR: NARRATING THE SPLIT SUBJECT THROUGH PLACE AND INTERIOR

In his autobiography, Dior contextualizes his split subjectivity through a spatial metaphor. The two Diors—“public figure” and “private individual”—
exist as a consequence of his upbringing: he is half Parisian and half Norman (viii). He spent his early childhood in Granville, Normandy, and then the family moved to Paris, but still traveled back to Granville every summer. The Parisian half, he implies, is responsible for creating “the famous couturier,” while the Norman side, to which he claims a strong attachment, makes him detest “the noise and bustle of the world” (viii). Dior uses the third person to describe the half of himself that occupies the present/future, the Parisian, cosmopolitan Dior, “he” who “loves to revolutionize and to shock” (192). He then switches abruptly to the first person to describe the Dior who lives somewhat in the past, “in the simple tastes and habits of my Norman childhood” (192). In this way, he establishes an origin story for himself, one which can attest to the fact that his public and intimate personae are, indeed, separate: they emerged in different places.

Significantly, Dior narrates his life through invocations of specific places. Dior by Dior ends with a chapter devoted to detailing the story of his life before celebrity. Notably, this comes as the final piece of the memoir. “Probably the simplest way to give an idea of my own character,” he writes, “is to take you with me into various different houses where I have lived from childhood onwards” (167). He then proceeds to describe his childhood home in Granville: “I look back on it with tenderness as well as amazement. In a certain sense, my whole way of life was influenced by its architecture and environment” (167). As evidence of this lasting influence, he observes, for instance, “[m]y childhood was roughcast in a very soft pink, mixed with grey graveling, and these two shades have remained my favourite colours in couture” (169). He notes, too, that the house had a wrought-iron conservatory, and that when he moved to Paris in adulthood, his “first care was to find a house with the same feature” (169), establishing the ongoing emotional significance of the aesthetic that shaped his childhood. As he reminds readers wistfully (171), he was born in 1905, midway through the Belle Époque that lasted from about 1896 until the beginning of World War One in 1914.

Most of the lengthy description, though, is devoted to the interior of the home. Dior describes the house’s layout, and details each room, concentrating on specific features and historical styles—the house in Granville features an amalgam of Louis XV, Second Empire, japonaiserie, and Henri II, for instance. But even though he devotes the most descriptive space to the Granville home, it is the decorative style of his family’s first home in Paris that most moves him. “Our new house,” he writes, “showed its modernism by a resolute eighteenth-century style. It was there that I discovered and was conquered for ever [sic] by ‘Louis-Seize-Passy’ with its white-enamelling, doors with little bevel-edged panels, many window-flounces, macramé net curtains. . . . Nothing could be more welcoming, more warm, and at the same time lighter. Austerity of style
or judgement had not yet wrought its havoc” (171). Louis Seize (XVI) was the style in vogue in the second half of the eighteenth century, under the reign of the last French king of the Ancien Régime, who was executed by revolutionaries in 1793. Characterized by neoclassicism, it “moved away from the curves and organicism of the rococo toward an emphasis on geometric marquetry, involving trompe l’oeil, beautifully cut veneers of precious imported wood, delicate bronzes. It was still virtuoso, luxurious furniture, although often the materials were less rich than for either Louis XIV- or Louis XV-style furniture” (Auslander 70–71). For Dior, the embrace of this style signaled a very particular sense of taste, one characterized by its balance of luxury and simplicity—a balance reflected in his work in fashion.

Alongside his preference for Louis XVI interiors, Dior’s self-portrait reveals a preference for escape to particular kinds of places. Most notable is the flight from Paris. “Although it is true, as is often said, that one breathes in fashion with the very air of Paris,” he writes early in Dior by Dior, “I find that the peace and calm of the country is absolutely essential to me after a while, in order to reflect on the lessons which I have learnt in the city itself” (22).
Journalists often followed him to the country, and there is a plethora of interviews with him at his country home in Milly, accompanied by pastoral images of him working in the gardens there. As one critic noted in 1956, “Il trouve la l’isolement souhaité, aussi une atmosphère d’harmonie rustique qu’il a lui-même créée” [he finds there the longed-for isolation, in a rustic atmosphere that he himself has created] (Bertin 187; our translation). Dior, and others, show himself to be engaged in a conscious and self-directed cultivation of space for the flourishing of the person he calls “Christian Dior the private individual” (Dior 192). The constant spectacularizing gaze of the press, however, makes clear that this search for the private self is compromised, and calls into question the possibility of full retreat from the public eye. His private spaces are as mediated, as public, as any other.

For the modern celebrity, as J. Gerald Kennedy has argued, the problem of identity, and the question of split subjectivity, could be partially resolved through “a projection of personality” onto a space, whereby a certain constancy could be maintained in “the stable details of place” (qtd. in Curnutt 294). Certainly, Dior’s country retreats fulfilled this function, and as his fame grew, so did his professed desire to retreat deeper and deeper into the pastoral. He describes looking for his house at Milly: it “was to be neither a château, or a weekend villa, but a real rural retreat, a part of the countryside” (190). This desire to be “a part” of the countryside suggests the level at which he identified his private self with this milieu, far from Paris and even the suggestions of urbanity hinted at in “château” and “villa.” To be “a part” of the countryside inevitably recalls his childhood home in Granville, where for nine months the family would live in near isolation from the main town, cut off “like an island” (168), and set apart from social and commercial concerns. This yearning for a specific kind of privacy followed him all the way to Milly, where he expressed his wish to “become the neglected private individual again” (192). Perhaps most importantly in terms of his status as public figure, he suggests that time away from Paris, in various retreats, provides the context for his initial creative process, and the germination of his ideas. Thus Dior implies that his split subjectivity is necessary to his public success—his designs, the “electric shock” (62) of inspiration, come from his retreat to his private, secret self and surroundings, which paradoxically become harder and harder to maintain as the success of his designs increases. Nevertheless, the suggestion of constant retreat alongside his life in the spotlight is instrumental in reminding the public of the authentic, “shy” self behind the public persona.

The notion of space and subjectivity as mutually constitutive, expounded by theorists during the “spatial turn” of the 1990s, forty years after Dior’s death, is worth considering as a way to examine Dior’s complex and reflexive
relationship with his spaces. Certainly, the dominant conception of space that these theorists overturned—space as an innocent, empty container for human acts—seems to be refuted in Dior’s life writing. The spaces of his childhood are shown to have immutably constituted his subjectivity, which will spend its adulthood in a perpetual state of longing for these spaces. “In a certain sense, my whole way of life was influenced by [Granville’s] architecture and environment,” he writes (Dior 167). The fact that Dior did in actuality recreate the interior aesthetics of his childhood in both his adult homes and his design house suggests that this assertion of affinity with historical interiors is an accurate description of his affective choices. Cleaving himself in two by using the first person to indicate his childhood and interior self, and the third person to describe “that forbidding stranger—Christian Dior, couturier,” he describes the process of designing Maison Christian Dior at 30 avenue Montaigne: “I certainly did my best to provide him with an attractive dwelling: and in order that he might share as much of my past as possible, I chose to decorate his couture house in the colours which had dominated my Parisian childhood, and had since gone completely out of fashion” (20). Through the trope of two Christians, this hybrid of remembered interiors with contemporary commerce is linguistically constructed to reinforce the sense of a split between public and private. Yet by revealing that the intimate spaces of childhood structure the commercial spaces of his adulthood, Dior in fact calls attention to the impossibility of separating the two spheres.

**TIMING SPACE: THE COMPLEXITIES OF NOSTALGIA FOR THE FASHION SUBJECT**

Dior’s self-portrait is overwhelmingly place-based, but he also links space and time in his invocations of place. Dior used spaces to convey an understanding of a complex temporal layering that defied dominant understandings of time as linear, of past and present as distinct and unrelated. Dior understood that his attachment to particular kinds of places and their temporal indices did not make him straightforwardly conservative. As he wrote, “temperamentally I am reactionary, not to be confused with retrograde” (122). But secondary reports have long tended to read his attachment to specific kinds of environments as evidence of Dior’s conservatism and nostalgia. In Françoise Giroud’s characterization, “Conservative to the point of seeming reactionary, and sensitive to all change, which he loathed,” Dior “had a preference for walled gardens, enclosed beds . . .” (17). Crucially, contemporary observers linked his preference for specific kinds of historical interiors to the conservatism that people read in his fashions—an association that continues with his more recent biographers. Indeed, Dior himself conceived his fashion intervention as a
reaction to the more austere styles that had come to dominate during the war. His fashion was thus widely interpreted through a temporal lens that situated it as the preeminent vector of postwar nostalgia.

But to connect the temporal logic of Dior’s fashion to the Louis XVI interiors and rural landscapes that he preferred, and which he makes much of in his memoir, we must be alert to the clues offered by fashion’s unique time signature. For Dior the fashion designer, a simultaneous occupation of temporal and spatial signatures was almost a requisite for public success. In both Dior by Dior and in his conversation with fashion editors Elie Rabourdine and Alice Chavane, he provides an illuminating example of the imperative to design clothes for the summer season during winter, and vice versa: “We couturiers are like poets. A little nostalgia is necessary for us. We like to dream of summer
in the middle of winter,” he confides (Dior 61). Here, Dior romanticizes the temporality that he inherits from his industry, suggesting that the need to design “out of step” with time springs from an innate artistry and not the demands of the market for next-season clothing with which to ignite and propel consumer desire. Dior, we are suggesting, understands his position straddling multiple temporal registers, and attempts to juxtapose them in depictions of his daily life. His deep fondness for certain kinds of spaces—notably the Louis XVI interiors, as well as the gardens he cultivates in his country homes—bears witness to this sometimes pleasurable, but often anxious, emotional labor.

The interiors, in particular, lend themselves to analysis using fashion’s temporal logic. For Louis XVI interiors, as Dior himself notes, are themselves temporal hybrids. Consider again his characterization of the family’s house in Paris, which introduced him to the style: “Our new house, breaking with the Japonaiseries of Granville . . . showed its modernism by a resolute eighteenth century style” (171). Just like fashion, this decorative style referenced the past in order to mark itself as new. Louis XVI experienced a resurgence in the late nineteenth century that continued into the twentieth—the height of the Belle Époque. An abundance of sources from the period of Dior’s birth and early childhood reflect its reintroduction and worth; this was the height of its renaissance. Further, a look at the initial rise of Louis XVI in the early 1750s reveals still more temporal layers to this style. It emerged in the wake of the excavations of Pompeii and Herculaneum between 1710 and 1750, events which triggered a renewed interest in classical aesthetics that was quickly translated into furniture and interior design. And so, there was in interior decoration a phenomenon akin to what we see with fashion: an embrace of a style as “new” or “modern” even as its modernism derived from its accurate referencing or complete reconstruction of historical styles—a temporal compound that wove present and past so that their foundations become indistinguishable.

A Louis XVI-style circular table by Théodore Millet. Created in France during the period of the 1890s, it employs wood and gilded bronze as its primary and secondary materials, respectively. (Photograph by Claudio Bollansky; Jan’s & Co. Fine French Antiques, Inc.—Los Angeles. Reproduced by permission.)
There is still another layer to this complexity. During the renaissance of Louis XVI in the Belle Époque era of Dior’s youth, several commentators argued that any succeeding furniture style profoundly lacked originality (Lythgoe 179; Molinier 25). As Leora Auslander notes, “[a]rt historians often denigrate the impact of the Revolution on style, arguing that the Directory style was simply a continuation of Louis XVI style, and the Empire style was merely a sequel to the Directory” (151). Given Louis XVI’s unique temporal index—it emerged as a kind of eighteenth-century modern through its connections to antiquity, and was in vogue only until that supposed archetype of novelty, the French Revolution—this notion that it is really the epitome of originality is telling. The implicit corollary—that interiors have been in decline ever since the Revolution—could be easily metaphorized as a social comment. After all, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, interiors were imagined as extensions of selves and families—the social units that peopled them. As Rachel Rich writes, “[t]he home could be read by contemporaries as an outward sign of how well designed—and therefore respectable—were the inner lives of the house’s inhabitants” (49). And so, for the tasteful French subject, raised on a discourse of French aesthetic exceptionalism, French life in general could be seen to be in decline after the revolt against social distinction and hierarchy, and the institutionalization of equality, occasioned by the Revolution. Peter Fritzsche notes that “[i]t is difficult to overemphasize the extent to which the French Revolution disrupted Western conceptions of historical continuity”; he and others show that this revolution occasioned “a new vocabulary” for representing temporal change, a vocabulary which suggested the absolutism and the finality of the break between present and past (1596; see also Koselleck). The definitive identification of Louis XVI style as the last “great” decorative style before the social and political fall of the Revolution potentially reveals a nostalgia for the pre-Revolutionary era as the last time when design had anything “new” to say (a paradoxical conjunction of past and newness which itself demonstrates the interpenetration of times occasioned by the style—a stance shared by fashion). In the eyes of the generally conservative historical gaze in the period of the Belle Époque, this identification thus speaks to a yearning for what was imagined as the final cultural moment when civility and taste were truly respected.

Given these cultural politics of the Louis XVI revival, then what does it mean that Dior seized upon this style as an emblem, faithfully reconstructing it in his many homes—especially given his assertion that in order to know him, one had to be able to picture his houses? If we consider the interiors, and Dior’s gardens and rural retreats in general, as nostalgic spaces, the stakes of this sentiment become clearer. Contrary to what his biographers suggest, Dior’s conservatism is no simple nostalgia of the type that can be written off as
politically conservative yearnings for a simpler time. As recent studies make clear, nostalgia is not a mnemonic mode that isolates the past against the present, however much it may appear that way. “Nostalgia,” Steven Galt Crowell writes, “is not the same as wanting to return to the past” (95). As the philosopher Vladimir Yankélévitch puts it, the nostalgic subject expresses allegiance to “pastness” (passéité) rather than to a specific past: “l’objet de la nostalgie ce n’est pas tel out el passé, mais c’est bien plutôt le fait du passé, autrement dit la passéité” (290). Indeed, recent scholarship has overwhelmingly argued that nostalgia reveals a conversation between past and present, that nostalgic reflection is a response to the conditions of selfhood in the present and in the imagined future. It is a conversation in which subjects resurrect images of different selves, or other parts of the fragmented self, to respond in complex ways to demands placed on the self in the now. In this sense, nostalgia flies in the face of modernity’s dualistic time consciousness. Like fashion, it is a mode of engagement that necessarily interrogates the boundaries between past and present—however uncomfortable the nostalgic subject may ostensibly be with the porosity of those boundaries. Louis XVI furniture can itself be seen as a nostalgic object in the sense that during its first appearance, it mined ancient aesthetics as a reaction to the vagaries of mid-eighteenth-century decorative style and its concomitant social and political mores. Its revival, which Dior so thoroughly and lovingly took up, is also evidence of a nostalgic engagement with the past as a response to the conventions—industrialization of artistry among them—of early twentieth-century decorative arts. Dior was dismissive of the abstract conventions of aesthetic high modernism, arguing that the reason for his success was that “couture was weary of catering only to painters and poets, and wanted to revert to its true function, of clothing women and enhancing their beauty” (27). His own work—and in his mind, his success—were founded on a different vision, one that entered into a dialogue with the past rather than cleaving excessively to the value of novelty. Thus his concern to establish his most intimate spaces in the Louis XVI style, and more importantly his decision to represent these spaces as keys to his selfhood, foreground Dior as a nostalgic subject, but of a more complex sort than superficial dismissals of his nostalgic conservatism allow.

In fact, it is useful to understand Dior’s nostalgia as an act of imagination tied to a sense of place, as the work of Edward S. Casey suggests. For Casey—and for Dior—what matters is not so much a particular place, but the sense of self and world offered up by what Casey calls a “plenum-of-places”: a spatial register peculiar to nostalgia that exists somewhere between the narrow and singular space and the entirely open sense of universal, or meta place (378). Dior’s penultimate chapter narrates the self through place, to be sure, but crucially it does not invoke a single place as the seat of the self. Rather, he
describes a constellation of the various homes of his childhood—which is also a constellation of country and city, Granville and Paris. He effectively enacts for us the spatial complexity of nostalgic memory. Rather than understanding Dior’s decorating choices in his homes, gardens, and couture house merely as derivative copies of past rooms and houses, Casey’s concept of nostalgia’s imaginative dimension allows us to see the reconstructive and indeed creative work involved in bringing together the past and the present. Casey argues that what he calls a “world-under-nostalgement”

cannot be sheerly fictitious . . . but must incorporate one’s sense of being in a given place as given by memories; on the other hand, it is not the simple summation of those memories. Precisely as a world, it transcends what its constituents can contain as a mere set of elements. Only a creative or productive imagination can forge such a subtle and complex result. (368)

Dior illustrates Casey’s theory admirably. By bringing a sense of the places of his Belle Époque childhood into contact with the spaces—both public and private—of his life as a celebrity in the 1950s, which are constituted by the mobility and ephemerality of the fashion industry, Dior engages in an imaginative integration that belies and transforms the stasis ostensibly represented by the past.

Dior’s nostalgia, we suggest, follows from the temporal cues laid out by his industry, with its peculiarly ambivalent fetishization of the present, of the now. He makes clear throughout Dior by Dior that he finds the necessity of living in the present, as the fashion designer must do, to be a burden. He grudgingly wears the mantle of gifted interpreter of the contemporary spirit, as the couturier is imagined to be, setting it up as an essential obligation, but not one that he particularly wants. “Fashion is very logical,” he writes in a series of articles for the English magazine Modern Woman: “It is a reflection of a current reaction in the mind—almost before people are aware of it themselves. That is where the designer comes in. He must be sensitive to modern feeling—almost before it is felt!” (31). Notice the language of imperatives here: he must be sensitive to the modern. It is this role that is demanded by the public, and that corresponds to the public half of his persona. He submits, though with a tone of regret: “[w]e live in the times we do; and nothing is sillier than to turn one’s back on them” (Dior 52). But elsewhere, his rhetorics of space and time make clear that though he does not want to “turn his back” on the present, he is committed, as a nostalgic subject, to the temporal and spatial textures afforded by an introduction of the past into modern life. Though he claims at the end of the autobiography that he has progressed to a stage of harmonious integration of the duelling public and private aspects of himself, his forceful establishment throughout the book of a sense of nostalgic place—a place to
which he returns time and again—runs counter to this overt narrative of self-satisfaction and wholeness, as well as satisfaction with modern, public life.

Dior’s self-representation through the lens of Louis XVI is also a representation of himself in relation to the past. The complex temporal layering represented by this particular style, and by nostalgia more generally, points to conflicting demands on the self. It is as if Dior recognizes that his retreat into privacy and into the past can never be complete. He does indeed represent integration: of space and time, but also of public and private. Having given over his life to the fashion industry, he recognizes, and yet quietly protests against, its utter determination of all aspects of his life. Furthermore, the quality of his private spaces—large, impeccably decorated, and well-staffed—precludes the possibility of total retreat, as capital, the product of his public business, is needed to constantly upkeep the material conditions of the retreats themselves. This state of affairs, we suggest, accounts at least in part for a persistent melancholy affect in the autobiographical representation. Dior inadvertently reveals the ways that the couture designer calls attention to the fallibility of major ideological dichotomies, which puts the designer in a lonely and precarious position in a world that does not want to see those binaries challenged.

**THE ABSENCE OF NOTICE FOR DIOR BY DIOR**

The New Look inaugurated the career of a massive fashion celebrity, whose reach was truly global and whose visibility was such that he sparked protests in America (due to his initial lengthening of the hemline). Dior had an international profile, his clothes were worn around the world, and his licensing of his name to subsidiaries producing everything from men’s ties to pantyhose meant that he was ubiquitous. Generally, the press he received was overwhelming—it far surpassed the attention paid to any other fashion designer of the period. Given this, it is surprising that the publication of his memoir received virtually no attention. The French edition appeared in 1956. Aside from a review in *L’Officiel de la couture et de la mode*—“the prestigious in-house magazine of French couture,” as Christopher Breward puts it (“Intoxicated” 185)—which would be expected to run a piece on the book, the major French fashion magazines, newspapers, and literary reviews did not even mention it. The new book sections of *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro Litteraire*, which covered many other works by Dior’s publisher, never even noted the book, and certainly did not review it. When the book was published in spring 1957 in the UK and in September 1957 in North America, the reception was similarly silent. Out of half a dozen major daily newspapers, two major weeklies, and the two most influential fashion magazines in the United States, only two publications reviewed it. The book was not even advertised in these outlets—the same ones
that reported incessantly on his fashions and his pronouncements about style. Biographers of Dior pay very little attention to the book as well; none offer any details about its writing or publication, though authors enjoy quoting from it at length to build their portraits of Dior.

The astonishing absence of notice for this book tells us something about the cultural place it occupied, and the place the designer occupied in public consciousness. More than anything, it points to the divergence between the book and the fashions that Dior designed, which—though licensing did make the name much more widely available—retained their associations with haute couture, with a cultural elite. The book, on the other hand, smacked of commerce in a way that the clothing managed to avoid (even though Dior was a consummate businessman). The positive review in the Manchester Guardian Weekly inadvertently points to this reason for the silence about the work: noting that Western women obey the style decrees of Dior, Kay Collier writes, “they will be more eager than ever to toe the line after reading this book” (11). The publication of a conventional memoir by a businessperson—no matter how “artistic” the work was—could not be reconciled with artistic experiment; it was too closely bound up with the audience’s demands, published to speak to and capitalize on the mass market’s love for Dior. Even though the publication of a memoir in this sense constitutes giving the public what it wants, it is that very closeness to a fan base that called the product into question as a work of genuine literature. Artists, of course, are meant to work independently of the market and its demands. The publication of Dior by Dior, then, undermined Dior’s claims to pure artistry, even as he used the book to elaborate his claims to this position. The reception of the book put the lie to his implicit claims of two distinct and separate spheres.

Our discussion of place and time ends by considering the importance of designer self-representations in a comprehensive understanding of modern fashion. Though these texts are all but forgotten in a textual archive that is overwhelmingly dominated by the visual, they are invaluable in illuminating the stakes of modern fashion’s tensions between art and industry. Nancy J. Troy has shown this tension to be encapsulated in competing material rhetorics of the copy and the reproduction. The dominant question in the twentieth century became whether fashion, a highly reproducible medium, was “art,” if art is defined by its singularity, its opposition to reproducibility. Dior exemplifies the conflict between art and commerce in the modern fashion industry. Given his constant, anxious statement that his work is “art,” set against his business-friendly practices and his brand’s pioneering efforts in international marketing, a reading of Dior by Dior in the context of its potential reception suggests that the development of an accessible and “authentic”
artistic persona is integral in mediating the potential conflict between art and commerce by showing that the tension between them produces pathos for the designer. Dior’s own immersion in commerce is thus mitigated—albeit incompletely—by his claims of split subjectivity.

By suggesting that Dior by Dior was a commercial product, clearly we are moving beyond a naïve reading of the work as an “accurate” picture of Dior’s subjectivity, and a “key” to the fashion designer psyche. Yet, we do not want to suggest that the work reveals nothing about Dior’s emotional state. Indeed, we have tried to focus on the ways that the memoir’s invocations of space and time compel us not to see “accurate representation” and “commercial product” as polar opposites. To suggest, à la Casey, that Dior by Dior is imaginative work, is not to dismiss its commercial imperatives. Indeed, to identify the imaginative, or affective, dimension in what is so clearly a mass-marketed, commercial product simply reinforces the point that the work of a fashion designer cannot be neatly hived off into discrete categories of art and commerce. Dior’s garments were certainly artistic creations; by all journalistic and anecdotal accounts, he retreated into solitary life—the very picture of an “artist”—for six to eight weeks to design a collection that was defined by its marketability and profit potential. Uniquely among fashion designers of his period, Dior explicitly avowed that artistic labor and the market were codependent in his profession.16

Examining the spaces in Dior’s work, and their invocation of complex registers of time and of private and public, helps to reveal the broader condition of the fashion designer as a liminal figure, occupying space between multiple worlds. Of course, as we have shown, this split subjectivity that was so important in mediating the designer’s position was figured in terms of nostalgia, with its unique spatial and temporal dimensions. This is crucial, for as the recent critical turn on nostalgia has shown, it is a personal condition with deeply ideological stakes: its constellations of past and present intervene in modern time consciousness just as fashion does. Reading Dior’s memoir thus illuminates a number of tools that might be used in the development of critical, interdisciplinary methodologies in fashion studies. Not only does it turn our attention to the neglected terrain of the designer memoir, but nostalgia’s compatibility with the rhythms of fashion means that this critical framework has a close and almost organic relationship to the critical object itself. Further, because nostalgia is both a mnemonic mode with deep personal meaning and consequence, and also an ideologically rich intervention in public time consciousness, it helps to underscore the critical status of the fashion designer as a hinge between the personal desires and market functions that simultaneously undergird the fashion system.
NOTES

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Financial support for carrying out the research that led to this essay was gratefully received from the University of British Columbia Okanagan and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1. The strong influence of philosophy on the general public and in literature ensured that most educated French readers would be familiar, by the mid 1950s, with the concept that the self is split and multiplicitous, and would be readily able to assimilate a title that referred to the protagonist’s split subjectivity. The same might not be said of Anglo-American readers, which may account for the quite different—less jarring—title of the English edition.

2. For discussions of the history and the gendering of concepts of artifice, see Tseêlon; Valverde; and Constable.

3. Beginning in the late 1960s, with the surging of a youth culture around high fashion, a cultural space developed for designers who flouted authenticity and were invested in the creation of a spectacular, eccentric persona. Designers and style icons from Malcolm McLaren to Karl Lagerfeld to Jean-Paul Gaultier and very recently John Galliano (designer at Christian Dior from 1996 to 2011, when he was fired for anti-Semitism) have filled this role.

4. For an early analysis of this history, see François 221–29. Also see Perreau, and Pochna 236–40.

5. The immediate prewar months had witnessed a “feminizing” of the silhouette, albeit less dramatic than what followed after the war. This important but usually overlooked piece of information tends to be left out presumably because it intervenes in the narrative of radical reconstruction usually associated with Dior.

6. For an excellent discussion of the uses Dior made of the past, and the context in which this usage took place, see Palmer.

7. As Wilson puts it: “In a sense, fashion is change” (3).

8. Benjamin famously writes that fashion “couples the living body to the inorganic world” (8). A major section of the Arcades Project—Convoluto B—addresses fashion.

9. See Koselleck; Osborne; T. Meyers; Smith; and Gaonkar.

10. For an excellent discussion of the uneasy relationship between art and commerce in fashion, see Troy.

11. See especially Cresswell; Lefebvre; and Pile.

12. On the influence of the disinterment of Pompeii and Herculaneum, see Kimball 13 and Ivins 80–82.

13. See Keightley and Pickering; Boym; Fritzscbe; and Panchasi.

14. On the development of Louis XVI style as a political reaction to the governance style of the earlier monarch, see Auslander 68–74.

15. The connection between place and nostalgia has been forcefully made by Fritzscbe 1596 and Boym. Indeed, the connection to place was more essential than time in the initial definition of nostalgia in the late seventeenth century: Swiss physician Johannes Hofer first observed it in soldiers far from home. Fritzscbe and Boym develop this as a theory of nostalgia’s connection to exile.
16. Dior, for instance, confessed that he was involved in pricing his garments and in writing press releases (Dior 99, 95). In Talking about Fashion, he characterized the business side of a design house as integral because it freed the designer to concentrate on art (108).

**WORKS CITED**


