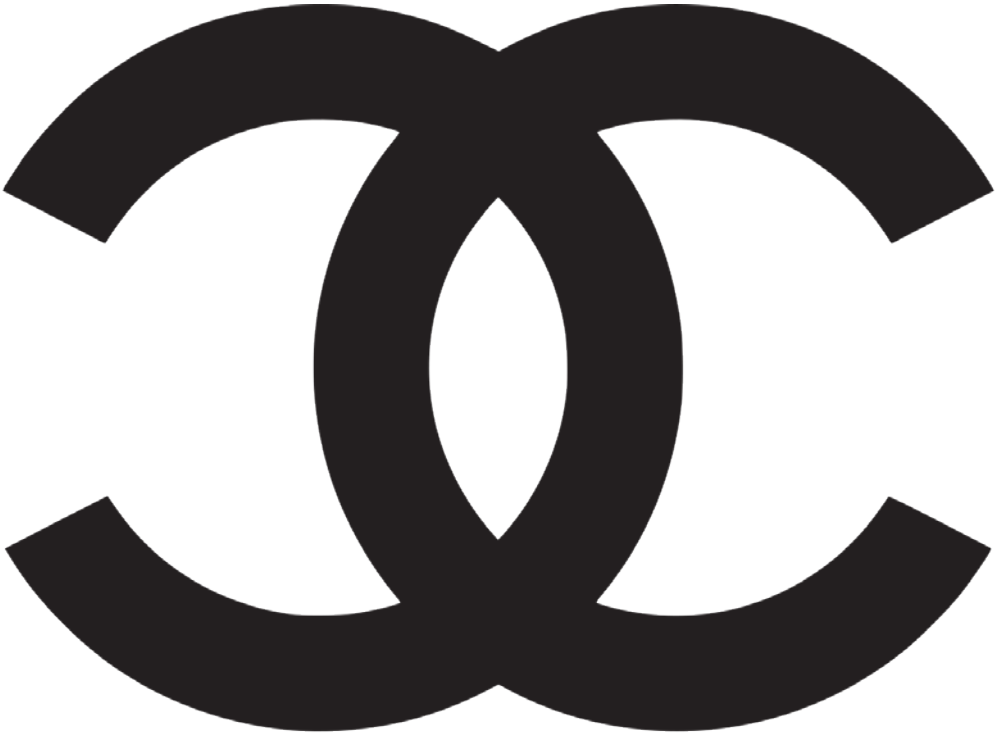

This bulletin started life as a book review entitled "In Her Fashion: Lisa Chaney's *Coco Chanel*," published in *The Los Angeles Review of Books* on March 26, 2012. A new beginning and end have been tacked on here.

A splendid list of accomplishments frequently attributed to Coco Chanel: utility, ease of movement, the New Woman unburdened of corset. Masculinization! Casualization! Skirt suits, wool jersey, sunbathing, sportswear, and the bob.

Never mind that Chanel was first to none of these novelties. All of these and more are hers, folded into a little black dress whose economy of line is invariably praised as either Classic or Modern. She is the enduring icon of a historical moment and, as her fans would have it, "transhistorical" style, unrivaled in stature by any of her contemporaries working in a similar vein — Jeanne Lanvin, Madeleine Vionnet, Jean Patou, or Madeleine Chéruit. From the outset, Chanel's celebrity depended on conflating the woman and the dress: her life and her clothing echoing each other's meanings, evincing lifestyle fantasies for a world reborn.

The contours of the icon are familiar enough — and still the hagiographies accrue. The past few years alone have seen a stack of books — at least seven since 2010 — and three biopics devoted to *Mademoiselle*. Animated by the mythological directive to retell, they attest as well to an urge to humanize a figure long burdened with embodying an age, to touch the wound behind a dark, exquisite stare. But it's no easy task, as any devotee will tell you. A celebrity for half a century, Chanel took great pains in crafting her myth and obscuring certain passages of her life. Self-conscious about her writing, she corresponded infrequently and with little expression and did not keep a journal. Instead, she left us a wealth of aphorisms — "A woman has the age she deserves" — clever, often contradictory, and revealing nothing of the aphorist. "You cannot read her expression," observes one recent biographer, poring over a pile of photographs. In these images Chanel is usually alone, "a solitary woman, the elegant lines of her face impassive, her eyebrows arched, a cigarette in her hand, its smoke rising like a decoy." And it is precisely this inscrutability, the enigmas — "The mystery of complexities!" in the words of Paul Morand — that ignite the fancy of her expositors, those who would bare the soul of this witty, laconic, imperious woman.

But even if the person remains largely unknowable, Chanel the celebrity, the *couturière*, is less opaque. We have her career and business model, her brilliant craft of persona, thousands of designs, and her seductive

lifestyle modernism. Only in relation to broader aesthetic and political currents can any sense be made of her life and designs; only then can we move from the mythic to the historic.

. . .

Gabrielle Chanel was born in 1883 to a family of artisans and small merchants from the Cévennes. Enduring the early loss of her mother and abandonment by her father, at 11 she passed into the care of nuns, and came of age in Moulins, a lively garrison town on the Allier whose economy and daily life revolved around the large military presence. The officers, pillars of political reaction in the Third Republic, brought to Moulins certain employment opportunities without which Chanel might never have stumbled into her famed career. She altered uniforms; performed at La Rotonde, the local *café-concert*; and became mistress to a succession of well-bred lieutenants.

Those who produce representations of Chanel's life tend to relish this moment in particular. It's not just that the constraining options faced by working-class women in the *fin de siècle* make a wonderful foil for her rags-to-riches ascent; they are drawn to the prurient delights of the *demimonde*: a dizzying classification system of women whose survival, and very occasional abundance, depended on their bodies — *la fille libre*, *la fille en carte*, *la cocotte*, *la biche*, *la lorette*, *la grande horizontale* — shading into other spheres — the cabaret, the theater, and the music hall. This composite milieu of prostitutes and performers (its upper strata, in particular) fascinated society women, and often dictated fluctuations in style. Adolf Loos, writing a decade before his epochal "Ornament and Crime," seized on the novel migrations of taste among late 19th-century European women: no longer the territory of the well-born, "the leadership in women's fashion belongs to that woman who has to develop the most sensitivity to the awakening of sensuality: the coquette." Or, as Maxime du Camp put it a generation prior, "One does not know, nowadays, if it's honest women who are dressed like whores, or whores who are dressed like honest women."

Chanel may or may not have worked in some form of prostitution to supplement her earnings as a performer and a seamstress, but it was as

an *irrégulière*, a kept woman, that she would navigate her way to financial independence. At 23 she was entertaining guests instead of audiences, passing long days of diversion at one chateau or another. Chanel would eventually grow bored with all the revelry then call on lovers to fund her entrepreneurial ventures. Initially, she entered business as a milliner, but turned to daywear in 1911, opening her first boutique in Paris. Others soon followed: Deauville in 1913, and Biarritz in 1915. There, she waited out the war.

By the armistice, Chanel had gained renown for the casual sophistication of her knits, *marinière* blouses, and slouchy cardigan skirt suits in jersey and tweed. "The First World War made me," she said. "I woke up in 1919, and I was famous." That same year the House of Chanel gained membership to the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture Parisienne.

Of all the novelties associated with Chanel's early designs, perhaps none is more glorified than her introduction of wool jersey and other inexpensive fabrics previously beneath the reach of luxury clothing. "Feel," says Anna Mouglalis, a cocksure, seductive Chanel in the 2009 movie *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*. "Jersey. Feel how soft it is, comfortable," she repeats as she presents her sleeve to Mads Mikkelsen's guileless, buttoned-up Stravinsky. Determined in part by shortages during the war, Chanel's recourse to humble materials, as with her baggy jackets and sweaters, in fact extended the casualization of women's wear already underway before the first trenches were dug. According to legend, these pliable textiles and loose-fitting forms that offered unprecedented female mobility sprang from a utilitarian ethic. "I have given women's bodies back their freedom," she said. "That body perspired in formal clothing, beneath the lacework, the corsets, the underwear, the padding." This morality tale is reiterated in every discussion of Chanel, from *The Gospel According to Coco Chanel* to the catalogue of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2005 exhibition. In *Coco Before Chanel*, also from 2009, Audrey Tautou as the plucky young orphan, as yet ignorant of her fate as "the exterminating angel of 19th-century style," observes with befuddlement and mockery the cumbersome finery of the ladies of the *belle époque*. Four decades later, she's still at it: Shirley MacLaine, a brassy Chanel in the midst of her 1953 comeback, in *Coco Chanel*, asks an unfortunate interlocutor in a tightlaced

Top to bottom: Shirley MacLaine, Anna Mouglalis, and Audrey Tautou as Coco Chanel

dress, "How can your brain function when you're wearing that?" while a flashback offers a scene of the burgeoning designer (Barbora Bobulova) tossing a corset out the window.

Freeing women from the whalebone prison of the 19th century, Chanel not only reflected, but actively fostered social change. "I was working toward a new society," she would say retrospectively of her early years in fashion. "A busy woman needs to feel comfortable in her clothes. You need to be able to roll up your sleeves." Chanel's sentiments about the need to forge an emancipated, working woman were shared by many on the right, fearful for the nation's future. "For women the situation can never be tomorrow what it was yesterday," said Henri Robert, lawyer and nationalist mouthpiece. "The reign of the woman-doll, ignorant of life and difficulties, happy to let live and be pampered, is over." But, of course, women HAD been working, not least in the textile industry. Female workforce participation in France reached 30 percent by the 1880s, 40 percent by the early 1920s, and, anyway, Chanel designed exclusively for a small reserve of women who most certainly did not work. In order to squeeze into her eveningwear, adequate really only to Chanel's body type — the new, flat, straight feminine ideal — many of her clients, most perhaps, resorted to the corset, which was indeed for sale at her boutique at 31 rue Cambon. Rather than utility, Chanel sold the LOOK of utility. As across the fields of visual culture, *haute couture* fantasies of function entailed a rejection of prewar ornamentation and acquiescence to the vitality of the machine. *Vogue* dubbed the little black dress "the Chanel Ford," while Léger observed that the mechanical object was "slowly subjugating the breasts and curves of woman."

We glimpse the real impact of the war on Chanel's designs in their reflection of the shifting tastes of French elites and the cultural reformulations that marked the dragging years of the war and the early 1920s. Simplicity, order, and precision became the slogans for a return to France's classical and rational essence. The *rappel à l'ordre*, the call to order that rang through the arts, echoed revanchist political rhetoric, demanding the purge of foreign, especially German, contaminants. The avant-garde excesses of the prewar years would be tamed by the moral purity of the national style. Increasingly, the fashion press found in Chanel the condensation of these French verities of simplicity and

reason: muted colors, beige and black, a straight silhouette, and reductive geometry. Chanel offered the woman of means the chance to embody this new classicism in sleeveless knee-length dresses that draped from the shoulders like ancient robes.

Even more than updated antiquity, the Chanel name came to denote the cult of youth and sexual license of the *années folles*. At 40, she was the *garçonne*. See her swagger through *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*, her hands shoved in her pockets. The slouchy, slightly insolent schoolgirl posture of her sweaters and jackets mirrored her own carefree lifestyle, thoroughly documented by the press. As *Vogue* noted in 1923, her dresses

made those who were wearing them look so young. There is not only a Chanel collection, there is a Chanel "style" made of youth, suppleness. [Its] somewhat sporty, yet very feminine look met the needs of our time so well that women adopted it with enthusiasm as soon as it appeared.

But the very meaning of youth was subject to competing claims. On the one hand, the protrusion of youth into the French imaginary issued from a perceived transformation of social mores, especially for young women. This, in turn, was met with either prurience or anxious handwringing. Others looked to the upcoming generation (vastly depleted by the war) and saw the promise of return, a salve to national weariness. The two images of youth—sexualized or redemptive—were not so much at odds as imbricated. Still, on occasion some subtle negotiation between the two might be required, as when Jean Cocteau insisted—falsely and almost certainly disingenuously—that Chanel and other women had only bobbed their hair to make wigs as a fundraiser for wounded French soldiers.

Cocteau was a fervent admirer of youth. He was also the great accommodator of classicism and modernism, and Chanel was an obvious choice to design the costumes for his *Antigone* in 1922, a production he described as "a photograph of the Acropolis taken from an airplane." They collaborated again, two years later, when Chanel dressed the dancers of the Ballets Russes in sportswear for *Le train bleu*. Set on the first-class-only train between Marseilles and Paris, the production offered a celebration of

luxury, leisure, sport and, as Cocteau put it, "hardhearted modern youth that pushes us around with impertinent contempt. Those superb girls who stride past swearing, with tennis racquets under their arm, and get between us and the sun." A fine consolidation of all the current passions of Paris, *Le train bleu* allowed Sergei Diaghilev to dispel any suspicion that the fevers of exoticism lingered in the Ballets Russes. As one critic crowed, "The Russian ballet is no longer Russian: the cool, quiet, utterly distinguished colors of the ballet are as French as it is possible to be."

In fact, Chanel found herself surrounded with Francizing Russian émigrés. In addition to Diaghilev, Serge Lifar, and other members of the Ballets Russes, there was, of course, Stravinsky, whose affair with Chanel became the subject of a 2002 novel (adapted for the big screen seven years later). We open with Chanel at the 1913 premiere of *The Rite of Spring* (which she may have attended), rapt even as the audience devolves into its famous "riot." By the time of their fling — seven years later, over several months — she has become a success and remains among the few who appreciate the Russian's genius. In fact, it had been Nijinsky's choreography that caused the uproar at the premiere, while Stravinsky's score received mostly positive reviews. The *Rite* garnered near universal acclaim with a concert performance the following year. But the point, of course, is the creative equivalence between these modern lovers — both harbingers of radical newness in their respective fields. The film crosscuts between the two modernists at work: she coolly stitching, he madly working out his piano transcription for the *Rite*. That composition, however, was seven years behind him. Instead, the *Symphonies d'instruments à vent* and *Les cinq doigts*, the works Stravinsky did complete during their affair, marked a stylistic shift for the composer, away from the Russian nationalism of the previous decade, toward something more universal, a world away from the frantic rhythms and dissonances of the *Rite*. These compositions serve as a virtual textbook for musical neoclassicism of the 1920s, and were often praised by critics in precisely the same terms as Chanel's designs: ordered, simple, youthful and up-to-date. Modernism for Stravinsky, as he would say a few years later, was the preserve of "composers who spend all their time inventing a music for the future," and who "only intend to provoke the bourgeoisie and to achieve what pleases the Bolsheviks."

Chanel also kept company with a circle of impoverished aristocrats who had fled the Revolution: Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich (another lover) who had plotted to assassinate Rasputin, and a coterie of duchesses and countesses. Through the latter, in 1921, Chanel set up a workshop where Russian women would embellish her dresses with subtle embroidery. Although not alone among couturiers in her turn to embroidery in the early 1920s, Chanel's use of traditional, Eastern ornamentation entailed a sly reintroduction of the exoticism of Paul Poiret (whom she had dethroned), sublimated into detail. Rather than a sartorial "return of the repressed" or the Dionysian lurking within the Apollonian, the needles of her Russian atelier pointed the way to detailing as a site of delicate but exuberant ideological play. In phenomenally expensive garments made of inexpensive materials—what Poiret bitterly called her *pauvre de luxe*—class signifiers condensed and scattered into stitching, gilt buttons, and braided trim. These, in turn, played off the accessories that completed the Chanel look: costume jewelry, strings of fake pearls, or real and fake jewels worn together. A confounding of high and low, the Chanel look hinged precisely on the ability to know the difference—that is, on not confounding at all.

Yet the logic (and the game) of the Chanel look centered not on the distance between bespoke and mass-produced, but on the alchemy of valuation that transformed fake pearls and machine-woven jerseys into luxury commodities. No material too humble, no design too simple to be rendered opulent by the force of class relations and a confidence that things become their descriptions. By freeing surplus value from artisanal craftsmanship, Chanel's *pauvre de luxe* signaled a shift in haute couture, a herald of the multi-billion dollar luxury goods industry of our own era, in which proliferating brands produce apparel of a quality generally indistinguishable from down-market wares. In *Le Poète Assassiné*, Guillaume Apollinaire satirized exactly this, the emergence of the Midas touch of the luxury commodity. "This year," explains Tristouse Ballerinette (based on the painter Marie Laurencin, whose portrait of Chanel the designer declined):

fashions are bizarre and common, simple and full of fantasy. Any material from nature's domain can now be introduced into the composition of women's clothes ... Fish bones are being worn a lot on hats. Steel, wool, sandstone and the file have made an abrupt entry into the vestmentary

arts … Fashion … no longer looks down on anything. It ennobles everything. It does for materials what the Romantics did for words.

All this ennobling posed new problems. In the early decades of the 20th century, a shadow industry of couture copyists emerged, selling mass-produced knockoffs to middle-class department store shoppers, especially in America. Couturiers then faced the question of whether or not to authorize authentic copies — the antecedent to the designer ready-to-wear line — a dilemma that art historian Nancy J. Troy has related to the questions of original and copy in modernist visual arts. (Remember that Duchamp borrowed the term "ready-made" from the apparel industry.) Chanel, unbothered by these mass-market replicas, sometimes even invited copyists to her shows. For one thing, she had less at stake financially in her designs. From its launch in 1921, the perfume *N5* generated the bulk of her profits. But she also recognized that "fashion does not exist until it goes down into the streets." Popular imitation and dissemination only substantiated the exclusivity of her garments, whose value depended not on the cost of production, but on the cultivation of celebrity, the strength of the Chanel name, and the force of social stratification.

This was her moment, her decade. Paris in the 1920s, such a rich vein of platitudinous nostalgia: and it is there and then that so many iterations of the Life of Chanel collapse personal and historical mythology. But all the clinking of champagne glasses and defenestrated corsets belie the facts of conservative forces prevailing in France in the so-called *Années folles*, and not merely in the cultural configurations glimpsed above. Chanel's decade witnessed a vast dissolution of trade unions and the political left, and a backlash against the feminism of the prewar years. Indeed, for women in particular these were bleak times. A reinvigorated cult of domesticity reigned within the bourgeoisie, while working-class women, as always, struggled under the double burdens of patriarchy and capitalism. Whatever employment gains they had made in metalwork and munitions during the war quickly evaporated.

By the 1930s Chanel was backing away from the formal, "architectural" designs she had pioneered. Most observers agreed that she ceded primacy in this period to the "Surrealist" Italian designer Elsa Schiaparelli, with

whom she enjoyed a publicized rivalry. At the same time, she responded to the deepening depression and sharply polarized public life in France by retreating into quaint revivalism: bodice dresses, taffetas, large bows, and puff sleeves. These years also saw her affair with illustrator and journalist Paul Iribe. In his conservative nationalist satirical journal, *Le Temoin*, he based his depiction of Marianne, emblem of France, on Chanel (both in features and in dress—that is, when she wasn't naked and violated at the hands of communists). Chanel, meanwhile, continued her flight into nostalgia. In the face of the Stravinsky Affair, right-wing riots, and a Popular Front victory, she brought out *tricolour*-themed evening gowns and a modest full-skirted peasant look. Imagine, then, the bitterness of the betrayal when her own workers participated in the great general strike of May–June 1936, a treachery not soon forgotten. Three years later, without warning or compensation to her 2,000 employees, she shut the House of Chanel.

She would not design another stitch for 15 years, and then only returned from her Swiss exile and unshuttered the House of Chanel because sales of *N5* were dropping. For another couple of decades, she turned out updated variations on the skirt suit and the little black dress, now recast as timeless essentials. Like nearly every couturier in the 1950s, Chanel also launched a ready-to-wear line.

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The conventions of the Chanel legend, established well before her death in 1971, ossified with the appearance of Morand's biography, *The Allure of Chanel*, five years later. Following his brief and exuberant introduction (he compares her to Nemesis and Joan of Arc), the book consists of Morand's transcriptions of her reminiscences, jotted down over conversations in the winter of 1946. They were old friends from Cocteau's circle and both recently found themselves in "self-imposed exile" in Switzerland. She "was unemployed and with nothing to do for the first time in her life, and champing at the bit." He must have felt a similar malaise—his dinners with Proust long behind him, his service to the Vichy regime more recently cut short, while his role as father figure to the far-right anti-Existentialist literary movement, the Hussards, still lay a few years off.

It was Morand's *Allure* that crystalized the Chanel of contradictions: tough, capable of cruelty, but a passionate lover. Beneath the callous, deep pain, a reveler with a multitude of famous friends, yet always alone: "My life is the story — and often the tragedy — of the solitary woman." All three of the recent films linger on this isolation, two of them offering morose scenes of the young Gabrielle dropped at the orphanage. This recurs throughout the library of Chanel mythology: the original trauma found in childhood. "At the age of six, I am already alone," Morand reports her saying.

Don't mistake this gloominess for frailty; melancholy fueled the designer in her furious creativity. In some instances we glimpse a tyrannical Chanel, mad with drive, possessed of a radical vision, and indifferent to those around her. When a trio of employees approaches her to ask for a raise in *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*, we understand, as she brusquely tells them to get back to work, sadness behind her acrimony, we can forgive such behavior among those with a higher calling. Such depictions really amount to adoring portraiture. Above all, we are implored to respect her ambition: Steve Jobs in a little black dress.

If her solitude tugs at the heartstrings, her equally celebrated social life fascinates. The biographers rehearse an impressive roster of writers, artists, and millionaires whom Chanel counted among her friends. We see a montage sequence of costume balls, banquets, and retreats to the Côte d'Azur for a decades-long, champagne-soaked frolic with *le tout Paris* as caviar spills from tureens and Josephine Baker moans in the night. But the real object of enthrallment is the long list of lovers: Reverdy, Dalí, Picasso, Visconti, Duke of Westminster Hugh Grosvenor (said to have been the richest man in England), and the rest.

The story, repeated many times in the catalog of Chanel biographies and fictionalizations, that her lovers influenced her designs — tweed from an Englishman, embroidery from a Russian — comes not from a desire to deny her anything, but rather from an insistence that there was love in those dresses. Still, the obsession among enthusiasts for Chanel's love affairs with rich and famous men reveals the contradictions at the heart of a myth that rests at once on individual ambition and romance. We are asked to marvel at the new morality of the new woman and to lament

that she could never keep a man. As they come and go, the men don't merely populate the recounting of her life, they often structure it: The Stravinsky Period, The Reverdy Period, The Grovesnor Period.

Among these guys who got away, two stand out: Arthur "Boy" Capel, the voluptuary son of an English financier, and Abwehr officer Baron Hans Günther von Dincklage. Running about a decade each, these proved the longest of Chanel's relationships. If we follow the model of marking each phase in the life of Chanel by the appearance of a new lover, these two conveniently bookend her significant creative period. It was the Capel years, through the First World War, that witnessed her emergence as a designer, while the affair with Dincklage began a year after she shut the House of Chanel in 1940.

The former, by most accounts (including Chanel's own), was the love affair that really mattered. Not only because the playboy underwrote her business in the early years and made important society introductions, but because he is said to have truly understood her. She never got over him. Yet, reading even the most thoroughly researched accounts, he emerges as a *bon vivant*, businessman, and little else. What can really be said of their relationship? They were in love. They took lovers. They lived well. They made money. They went to the beach in Normandie and on the Bay of Biscay. Surely, more than a shared passion for leisure and a healthy profit motive bound these two together, but in all the Chanel biographies one is hard pressed to identify anything so distinctive.

The affair with Dincklage, on the other hand, has understandably been the subject of some controversy. While for years Chanel was thought guilty only of *collaboration horizontale*, an offense for which thousands of French women suffered public humiliation after the war, recent evidence has shown that her Nazi entanglements went quite a bit further. She appears in Abwehr records with a number (F-7124) and a codename (Westminster) and traveled with Dincklage to Berlin to meet SS intelligence chief General Walter Schellenberg. In 1944 she embarked on a bizarre effort to negotiate favorable peace terms for the Germans, trying to exploit her connection to Churchill, with whom she'd gone fishing and boar hunting before the war. The war years also saw Chanel's unsuccessful attempt to use Nazi Aryanization laws to gain sole ownership

of Parfums Chanel, which she co-owned with the Jewish Wertheimer brothers.

Much of this information emerged with a pair of biographies in 2012, Hal Vaughn's *Sleeping With the Enemy: Coco Chanel's Secret* and Lisa Chaney's *Chanel: An Intimate Life*. The question of Chanel's collaboration —in these two works and in the subsequent media coverage— tended to produce either extenuation or bland, gawking disapproval. The latter characterizes Vaughn's book, which, as its title suggests, portrays Chanel as a traitor. Chaney opts for the mitigating take, concluding that Chanel was essentially apolitical and only out of naiveté got drawn into associations with such unsavory men. She just needed to be loved, to feel safe. At 57, she sought comfort and survival in the 44-year-old Dincklage; and besides, everyone collaborated on SOME level, didn't they? It's a flimsy argument, and a mendacious one. Life in occupied France was indeed desperate, and many struggled just to feed themselves and keep warm. Chanel lived at the Ritz. The point is not that one needs to condemn Chanel for shacking up with a Nazi and then, having fled France after the war, shacking up with him again in Switzerland. There are no political stakes in denouncing collaborators from the rostrum of the 21st century. The callousness and circumvention of the apologists is a direct result of subordinating history to personality.

Chanel only ever appears as a historical subject insofar as events directly touch her life and only to the extent that an author can conjure a mood of *beau monde* gaiety, rattling off the attendees from one party to the next. It's always Chanel and HER World, never Chanel and THE World. The impetus in the cult of Coco is to discover *the woman behind the icon.* But an icon is evocative and mute. Behind it lie banalities. She, no doubt, was aware of this: "May my legend gain ground, I wish it a long and happy life!"

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