

THE FANTASY OF UGLINESS IN ALEXANDER MCQUEEN COLLECTIONS (1992-2009)

HOW DID LITERATURE AND THE VISUAL ARTS INSPIRED ALEXANDER MCQUEEN TO MERGE SEX AND HORROR IN HIS OWN ART FORM?

LE FANTASME DE LA LAIDEUR AU TRAVERS DES COLLECTIONS D’ALEXANDER MCQUEEN (1992-2009)

DE QUELLES FAÇONS ALEXANDER MCQUEEN S’EST-IL INSPIRÉ DE LA LITTÉRATURE ET DES ARTS VISUELS POUR FUSIONNER LE SEXUEL ET L’HORREUR DANS SON TRAVAIL ARTISTIQUE ?

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Alexander McQueen (1969-2010) changed the fashion history and industry forever with his innovations and runaway shows that verged on performance art. His talent for tailoring matched the strong narrative and originality of his garments. Some of them were destined for commercial consumption and catered to the masses, but most of them were works of art grown from a vivid yet macabre imagination. He refused the common grounds of fashion to focus on themes usually ignored, such as fetishism, violence, death and mental disturbance. Therefore, he aimed to transcend the usual and reach for the sublime as he created a fantasy world out of his own tormented mind. His Romantic and Gothic-inspired work mirrored the anxieties of our times, and raised fashion to an art form on its own, thus prompting a reflection on the affiliation between fashion, the visual arts and literature.

Keywords: McQueen; literature; visual arts; aesthetics; body norms; fashion.

Alexander McQueen (1969-2010) a changé l’histoire et l’industrie de la haute-couture de façon irrémédiable par ses innovations ainsi que ses défilés qui touchaient à la performance artistique. Ses talents de couturier étaient égalés par la forte ligne narrative et l’originalité de ses créations. Certaines étaient destinées aux circuits commerciaux et répondaient aux demandes du marché, mais la plupart étaient de véritables œuvres d’art dérivées d’une imagination vive quoique macabre. McQueen refusait les lieux communs de la haute-couture et leur préférait des thèmes généralement ignorés tels que le fétichisme, la violence, la mort, ou encore les troubles mentaux. Ainsi, il espérait transcender l’ordinaire et atteindre le sublime en créant son propre univers, né de son esprit tourmenté. Son travail, inspiré par les courants artistiques romantique et

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gothique, reflétait les anxiétés de notre époque, et a élevé la mode au rang d'expression artistique, permettant une réflexion sur l'alliance entre la mode, les arts visuels et la littérature.

Mots-Clés: McQueen; littérature; arts visuels; esthétiques; normes corporelles, mode.

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I think there is beauty in everything. What 'normal' people would perceive as ugly, I can usually see something of beauty in it.
— Alexander McQueen

1. Introduction

“Beauty can come from the strangest of places, even the most disgusting of places”,¹ said the late Alexander McQueen (1969-2010). And, certainly, McQueen knew what he was talking about: within a few years, he became the great master of a decadent, almost repulsive, sort of beauty through his grotesque, and yet bewitching, collections that left their mark on the history of fashion.

The son of a taxi driver and a Social Sciences teacher, Alexander Lee McQueen, came from a modest social background. His own talent and hunger for recognition allowed him to move up the ladder from being a tailor in Saville Row to being one of the greatest fashion designers of our time. At the head of prestigious houses such as Givenchy and Gucci, as well as leader of his own brand, he marveled (or horrified) the world with his creations, which took beauty to a place not yet reached by other creators. Obviously, some before him paved the way to grotesque imagery, like Rei Kawabuko, with her ingenuous creations which shocked the Western world in the 1980s and later on.² Others were inspired by a rebellious spirit spewing from underground cultures, such as Vivienne Westwood and her punk-inspired garments; whereas designers like Martin Margiela, Thierry Mugler, and later John Galliano (McQueen's biggest competitor) knew how to put on a show that would “bemuse and confuse” the audience. Nevertheless, no one took ugliness as a starting point for their art the way McQueen did. His references plunged into history (particularly Scottish history, as he took great pride in his ancestry), as well as works of art from the novel to the movie, without forgetting paintings, sculptures, and the theatre. He was particularly fascinated by the Romantic and Gothic movements, which fused terror and sensuality through an emphasis on emotions, thus creating an indefinable feeling, the sublime, that transcended the commonly known human experience.

Indeed, the most peculiar characteristic of the art works McQueen chose as his references is the way they always set themselves at the nexus of sex (or sensuality) and horror. This bizarre alliance of death and eros might have been what entranced McQueen the most. He certainly was attracted to what was discordant, unpleasant, shocking, vile, transgressive, untrendy, vulgar, distasteful, frightening and uncomfortable; all in all, a kind of ugliness that grows from what we most fear. In all of that, he saw a particular beauty that transcended societal norms and made any woman look otherworldly. His work, though sometimes described as misogynistic, always strived to make women look as ugly as they looked beautiful, as menacing and dangerous as they were mesmerizing and sensual. He himself said: “I want to empower women. I want women to be afraid of the women I dress” (McQueen as cited in Watt, 2013, p. 59).

¹ From McQueen Twitter account reproduced in Collins, N. (12 February 2010) ‘Alexander McQueen’s Twitter Revealed Troubled Mind’, *Daily Telegraph*

² On Kawabuko’s work, see Granata, F. (2016). *Experimental fashion: Performance Art, Carnival and the Grotesque Body*, I. B. Tauris

Therefore, I aim to briefly analyse how McQueen translated this aesthetic found in literature and the arts through his own medium, thus creating what could be called “the fantasy of ugliness”, a fantasy so hard-hitting that it participated in the redefinition of bodily norms and beauty standards on an unexpected scale.

2. The use of horror and grotesque imagery

From a young age, Alexander Lee McQueen was attracted to the grotesque, the abject, and the horrific, reading Marquis de Sade’s *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* (1904) and Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume* (1986) as a student, watching movies such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and then admiring the performances of Leigh Bowery who was known for his elaborate costumes and stomach-turning shows. McQueen had a taste for things that most of us are afraid of: this sense of darkness fed his creativity and was then projected onto his work. Representations of fear, pain, and vice have always been common grounds of arts but McQueen brought them into fashion. Instead of rendering them glamorous, he celebrated their negation of all things considered beautiful, graceful, pure, or innocent, in line with Rosenkranz’s definition of ugliness: “Ugliness is no mere absence of beauty, but rather a positive negation of it” (2015, p.115). McQueen made his own eulogy of themes deemed ugly, scary, and obscene throughout our history, themes that were much explored by Gothic fiction such as “insanity, criminality, barbarity, sexual perversion” (Hurley, 1996, p. 6).

Therefore, it is no wonder that the very first collection he presented was named ‘Jack the Ripper Stalks his Victims’. The young designer was enthralled by the gruesome story of the serial killer juxtaposed to the wretched underground lives of the prostitutes; two themes considered rather crude by the fashion audience of the time. These characters have always been linked to ugliness in our imagination as Eco (2007, p. 261) explains that “labels like ugly and bad are applied to all those pariahs whom society cannot integrate or control or does not intend to redeem”. However, these same characters have been glorified by some artists, particularly during decadentism (Eco, 2007, pp. 350-352), a movement that most inspired McQueen. In their footsteps, McQueen did not try to make them beautiful or attractive to the public, he represented them in all their vulgarity. The show took place in July 1992 at London’s Kensington Olympia exhibition center and highlighted his talent for tailoring. The clothes were beautifully cut, but the fabrics used were trashed: “McQueen distressed the calico skirt with burn marks and papier-mâché magazine articles onto it (...), red paint was spattered liberally to denote blood” (Watt, 2013, p. 40). The inspiration was also fetishism, as he studied Victorian pornography found in books. The show was certainly not for the faint of hearts, for it was rebellious, and savage, deeply inspired by McQueen’s punk spirit. It is this mixture of the strange and the beautiful that allowed McQueen to be noticed by Isabella Blow, a journalist and a fashion icon, who will soon become his greatest mentor and most well-known muse. Again in 1992, with ‘Nihilism’, McQueen borrowed from horror movies to create a picture of revulsion and brutality that was hard to digest for many among the audience:

(...) models who look as if they have recently experienced serious traffic accidents, in sheer and sweaty cling-film knickers, with what appeared to be bloody, suppurating, post-operative breasts visible through muslin T-shirts, was rather a lot to take in the name of frocks. (Hume, 1993, para. 2)

The audience was even more filled with awe and disgust with the infamous A/W 1995-1996 collection entitled 'Highland Rape', for it was, as its name evokes, filled with a disturbing aggressiveness. McQueen sent down the catwalk stumbling girls in deconstructed, torn cloths and lace, dazed and partially naked. Correspondingly, the background music, loud and starting with a crash, could remind one of horror movies. Though it was criticized as being misogynistic and immoral, McQueen defended his work saying it recalled the violent history of Scotland during its oppression by England, and the death of its culture. The provocation in the choice of the word 'rape' highlights the desire of the creator not only to shock, but to awaken a sense of disgust in the audience who became, against their will, a series of voyeurs. In this way, the public was



Fig. 1 Alexander McQueen, *Highland Rape* (1995-6), photographed by Sølve Sundsbø

definitely left puzzled before the show: "a model appears (...) her special effects contact lenses turn her eyes completely black (...) A watch chain dangles from the pubic area of another model in a perfectly tailored tartan skirt" (Gleason, 2015, pp. 31-32). As would a performance art genius, McQueen compelled the public to become emotionally involved as the reaction was forced out of them, thus proving that fashion cannot be reduced to consumerism and pretty clothes. The ramifications of the show forced the audience to ponder on its aesthetics and moral values according to their taste, "defined as a special faculty that enables us to discern aesthetic qualities" (McNeil & Miller, 2014, p. 46). The collection was considered ugly because it went against the norms of taste at this time: it was neither harmonious, nor elegant, nor glamorous.

Moreover, it shocked moral sense and broke all rules: it was obscene. To achieve this, McQueen made sexuality meet horror in the way garments were cut: bumsters (pants cut so low that they hang just above the pubic area and reveal the bottom of the spine, a body part McQueen found most erotic), bleached at some places so it would look like urine stains, were coupled with torn-out tops that left the breasts bare and exposed to flashing lights. Yet again, the beautiful tailoring and exquisite fabrics merged with a repulsive imagery. One can only agree with the writer T. Blanks (2020) who explains that "beauty and horror were the twin poles of [Alexander McQueen's] design. He would make something beautiful and then corrupt it". This corruption was not merely in form (as an artist would portray a rotten fruit), it was "intentional" and "moral rule-breaking" (Rosenkranz et al., 2015, pp.12-13) turning it into real aesthetics, a work of art.

This ever-present conjunction of the sensual and the corrupted is reminiscent of Medieval representations, which influenced many of the Romantic artists McQueen was so fond of. Undeniably, religious imagery from Medieval times and more recent eras appears throughout his work, combining melancholia with terror, and torture with passion. Hence, the crown of thorns headpiece created in 1996 alongside jewelry designer Shaun Leane; or, much later, in 2010, the beautifully printed gauntlet that referenced Stephan Lochner's painting from 1440, *Altarpiece of the Patron Saints of Cologne*. His favored artworks depicted catharsis, salvation or persecution, showing a love for extremeness and the pathos of religious sceneries. This is best embodied by one of his greatest collections: A/W 1998 'Joan' (for Joan of Arc, a doomed figure of violent

times) revived brutal moments of our history through a Romantic and theatrical lens as McQueen closed the show with a model draped in blood-red beads and cloth surrounded by a ring of fire, turning this event into a performance art piece more than a fashion show. The other models walked down the runway wearing red contact lenses, severe haircuts (some were completely bald), and garments verging on armors, in a wish to reverse binary expectations. Looking through those archives, McQueen's fashion can definitely be described as subversive, and as an endless questioning of gender norms. There, he kept on shaping his ideal kind of woman, a woman that is both strong and threatening, vulnerable yet aggressive. For McQueen, these garments didn't make the woman a victim, they empowered her. McQueen's woman survived traumatic history, violence, and death, to rise to a new status that inspired fear in others. Consequently in A/W 2009-2010 'The Horn of Plenty', the tallest models were chosen to walk down the runway on platform shoes and grotesque makeup reminiscent of Bowery's and verging on caricature as it distorted the models face. One of them was wearing a dress made out of black duck feathers with huge shoulder pads looking like wings, echoing the Romantic symbol of death, the raven. Another was strapped in a jacket of black leather, metallic buckles and black fox fur, as if wearing a haute-couture fetishistic garment. The models deliberately went against the ideals of beauty of the time as they were the complete opposite of icons such as Kate Moss. This portrayal of women as dual, ambiguous, evil and sexually driven was in consonance with the femme fatale figure of gothic fiction. As Hurley (1993) states, the gothic woman is vampiric and subversive, genderless and masculinized through her behavior. McQueen's femme fatale is as deathly as she is desirable: she is both violent and hyper feminine, the archetype of the seductive woman for Gothic artists. McQueen's representation of sexuality is not campy nor light-hearted, nor is it subtle and glamorous: it stems from a desire to make people uncomfortable, to dissolve boundaries. It is so in the face, it almost becomes an aggression. This highlights McQueen's profound disgust towards innocence and passivity, as it was found among many Romantic artists who made violence and sexual pleasure relentlessly collide (Praz, 1951). This perception of sexuality was an obsession for McQueen and it ran as an underlying theme through all his collections. It all belongs to what R. Arnold describes as the "brutalisation" of the female body. She further explains :

(...) the powerful eroticism of the female form can be seen as threatening the spectator, teetering on the brink of violence. Their work emphasizes the dark side of sexual desire, revealing contemporary anxieties about the vulnerability of the body and the potential dangers of its possession, both visually and physically. They highlight western culture's obsessive voyeurism, with the female body under constant surveillance. (Arnold, 2001, p. 81)

This can be linked to one of McQueen's own explanations:

I think there has to be an underlying sexuality. There has to be a perverseness to the clothes. There is a hidden agenda in the fragility of romance. It's like a *Story of O*. I am not big on women looking naive. There has to be a sinister aspect, whether it's melancholy or sadomasochist. I think everyone has a deep sexuality, and sometimes it's good to use a little of it-and sometimes a lot of it-like a masquerade. (McQueen as cited in Bolton, 2011)

In this way, his work could be seen as the theatricalization of this brutal sexuality he was fascinated by; and, consequently, a questioning of our attitudes towards morality and social acceptability. Moreover, McQueen demonstrated that fashion was able to channel the complexity of human desires, as cruel as they may be, just like any other art form. As follows, violence and eroticism kept pervading his collections and left the pu-

blic either hungry for more, or completely bewildered by such display of what was considered vulgar or disturbing.

3. The metamorphic fashion inspired by Gothic and science-fiction literature

As a matter of fact, McQueen took the frightful fantasy of his work even further by demonstrating his capacity to transform not only the clothes, but also the fashion silhouette, in a wish to redefine taste and our representation of the human body. He wanted his audience to experience overwhelming feelings (must it be nausea) through an encounter with something that was completely estranged from them. This can be linked to the experience of the sublime, described as a “violent confrontation with an otherness” (Heymans, 2012, p.25). Ugliness and alienation can therefore be means of experiencing a sense of beauty that is completely unfamiliar (according to the definition of the sublime by Burke), just like a breathtaking landscape or beautiful work of art can do.

With this goal in mind, McQueen worked like a mad scientist on his garments, cutting clothes directly on the model in sharp snips, armed with his scissors.³ He would tear apart the finest cloths in an endless effort to achieve the image of perfection he had in mind. But the alteration of his clothes went further than the sheer cutting and tailoring: the designer took inspiration from nature, a common theme among Romantic artists who wanted to channel the sublime, in order to make women look, at times, more like creatures and monsters than actual humans, as if making his own fairytale reality (it comes as no surprise that the Brothers Grimm’s fairytales, grim as they are, were McQueen’s favorites). It is to be remembered that the figure of the monster is one of the most striking features of the representation of ugliness throughout the history of art (Eco, 2007). The monstrous definitely appeared through the A/W 1997 collection he created for Givenchy. ‘Eclect Dissect’ was inspired by H. G. Well’s novel *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) for its take on the mad scientist figure as well as the creation of hybrids or abhuman figures, defined as “a not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability” (Hurley, 1996, pp.3-4). Just like in Well’s novel, McQueen merged humanity with animality and added a tinge of exoticism: one model wore a porcupine-quill hat, another had her face obscured by pheasant feather, while some had body parts covered in fur. Furthermore, McQueen took inspiration from E. A. Poe’s poem *The Raven* (1845) in various ways. Firstly, “huge cages containing marvelous live ravens, mythological creatures of impending death” created a morbid atmosphere, deepened by the setting that was clearly drawn from the poem as “the floors (were) covered in Oriental rugs and tiger skins; decorated with medical specimens” (Watt, 2013, pp.122-123). Taking from Poe’s sense of gloominess and the Victorian era he lived in, McQueen referenced 19th century dressing and symbols of mourning with the use of deep purple and black, but also lace, veils, and dramatic dresses. This created a sense of melancholy through an odd combination of horror and romance as the collection “was about the women who returned to life, stalking the Givenchy runway as a series of spectral ‘cut-ups’ to haunt their killer” (Watt, 2013, p.122). The use of such ghostly figures

³ See, *Alexander McQueen - The Bridegroom Stripped Bare: Transformer*, filmed by Nick Knight in 2002.

introduced yet another feather of ugliness mastered long ago by Poe, the uncanny (Eco, 2007, pp.320-323).

McQueen maintained this sense of abnormality and strangeness by using animal-related garments (the mussel bodice of 2001, the plastic cast filled with worms of the 1996 collection...) and ornaments (such as the bird claw that appeared in his collections of 1992, 2001, and 2007) in a way that reminded the Decadent art obsession with morbidity and therianthropy, as well as taxidermic work as he often referenced British taxidermist Polly Morgan, thus demonstrating his love for extreme art. Among all of this, the use of fur in the late 1990s couldn't go without cries of protestation and accusations of misogyny, as wearing fur was linked to the submission of women, considering that "the notion of woman is invariably conflated with that of wild animal" (Arnolds, 2001, p.16). In the case of McQueen, it is almost confirmed as the use of furs, along with bones and feathers, helped prove the strength and aggressiveness of the kind of woman he wanted to portray. Likewise, he paralleled animals to sexuality: "Animals . . . fascinate me because you can find a force, an energy, a fear that also exists in sex" (McQueen as cited in Cabasset, 2010). This is best represented in the F/W 1997-1998 collection 'It's a Jungle Out There', as most of the models seemed "more predator than prey" (Gleason, 2015, p.47), wearing animal skins, claws, harnesses, horns and dangling chains on the face. It therefore comes as no surprise that the main reference behind it was, again, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, as it reflected on abhumanness, effects of disgust and estrangement (Hurley, 1996, pp.50-51) It is interesting to pinpoint the fact that the animals used by McQueen went against the usual iconography associated with women: instead of passive and docile animals, McQueen's women were associated with hunt birds and felines, powerful and aggressive animals traditionally linked to the male figure (Eco, 2008, p.205).

However, the metamorphic ability of his garments and models went further than the use of accessories: his reflection on human identity took on a modern twist as he started merging the natural and the artificial through technological devices. The 1999 'N°13' collection is a great example as he first took inspiration from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) through the creation of a corset with apparent stitches. In the same way, he created, alongside craftsman Bob Watts, a prosthetic leg made out of varnished wood, to fit model Aimee Mullins who got her legs amputated below the knee. This collaboration with a craftsman is reminiscent of the Arts and Craft movement that so deeply inspired McQueen for this collection. Like these mid-19th century artists, McQueen used natural elements such as colors found in nature, but also raw materials like wood, feathers, and leather, in order to transform them into practical works of art that refer to something else (Crawford names it association): one fantastical winged ensemble was entirely made out of paper and leather. Lastly, the Arts and Craft movement built itself as a critic of industrialism and the growing lack of hand-made objects. It was therefore very important for McQueen to rely, as always, on his tailoring skills to create intricate, yet sober, garments. The end of the show also conveyed this mes-



Fig. 2 Alexander McQueen, *Plato's Atlantis Dress*, photographed by Marcio Madeira (2010)

sage as two robot-like machines sprayed paint on the model Shalom Harlow who stood on a turntable, vulnerable and defenseless, in reference to artist Rebecca Horn's *Pain-ting Machine* (1988).

Finally, McQueen achieved the greatest metamorphosis with the last full collection shown during his life, S/S 2010 'Plato's Atlantis'. This collection was the epitome of his art: on top of revolutionizing footwear and changing the modern silhouette, it was the first fashion show to be shared on a greater scale, as it was live-streamed on social media, thanks to photographer and filmmaker Nick Knight. Referencing darwinism, the *Alien* series, apocalyptic times and submarine life, the collection premiered the Armadillo shoes, heavy heels covered in beads and iridescent paillettes that elongated the silhouette. Hybridation reached its culmination as models wore fake implants in shoulders and cheekbones (a violent extreme of plastic surgery), horn-like hair, bleached-out eyebrows, snake-scales covered garments, and 'jellyfish' dresses. The garments were made to disfigure the human body: there is no respect for symmetry nor proportion, provoking a sense of discomfort and alienation among the audience. There is a complete distortion of the natural through the emphasis on specific body parts. The mad scientist narrative and science-fiction inspiration were yet again present as the show looked like a laboratory and huge robot-like cameras filmed the models. The collection delivered a futuristic aesthetic evocative of alien life, in a particularly innovative way.

However, it was not about better change, but devolution, decay, the end of the natural, the victory of the artificial. This preoccupation with the reversal of evolution through the come back of monstrous bodies caused the supernatural to intersect with natural sciences, a subject most studied by Gothic fiction (Hurley, 1996). In this way, the collection impelled a reflection on the body: nowadays, what is a natural body? What can be considered organic? What is left to nature if it can be dominated by technology and the arts? Is an integration of species the next step towards the future? What is left of human identity? Indeed, the very notion of humanity was overturned as body norms were willingly altered. According to Eco (2007, p. 431), the post-human body nowadays best reflects the degeneration of our society, and therefore, a new meaning of ugliness.

This dystopia appearing in fashion form was well-received by the critics and it reached the general public on an unexpected scale as superstar Lady Gaga premiered her 2009 lead single 'Bad Romance' at the finale. Nonetheless, it is to be observed that if McQueen was trying to define his own sense of beauty, he still was making an effort to appeal to the masses as the waist was still severely structured and the clothes beautifully cut. Again, McQueen was inspired by horror, but not to the point of completely deconstructing the fashion body as Rei Kawabuko did, among others. Therefore, one might sense a limit to this edification of the ugly.

4. The recurring themes of *memento mori* and insanity

Finally, McQueen took inspiration from Gothic, Romantic, and Decadent arts and literature, for their thematics focused on decay, death, insanity and terror. McQueen was not afraid of confronting the darkness found in each one of us, thus creating a sense of awe among his audience. Ugliness exceeds physical appearance: it is the gear of the sick, or unhappy, soul (Eco, pp. 293-302). Illness and sadness pervaded his collections, as they pervaded the works of these artists.

Indeed, his innovations were built on his Neo-Romantic and Gothic references, yet tinged with modernity as he contrasted themes such as self-destruction, cruelty, and

mental alienation with the glamour of fashion. He always tried to be relevant to the context of his time, as he belonged to the generation who built its sexual identity under the shadow of the AIDS epidemic: the eroticism or sexual connotations found in his collection always clashed with the morbidity of the narrative (Thurman, 2011). In this way, the ‘Spine Corset’ used in the ‘Untitled’ collection of S/S 1998 is a beautiful example of this macabre and sadomasochistic aesthetic he found so intriguing. All the more so that, for this show, models walked under a yellow-colored rain that looked like urine — if it weren’t for his commercial deals, McQueen would have named the collection ‘Golden Shower’, a title full of erotic connotations and extremely provocative. This association of the macabre and the sexual, or the perverse, through fetishistic imagery, can be linked to McQueen’s love of Decadent writers and artists.

Through all of this, one might sense McQueen’s obsession with death, which clearly resembled the *memento mori* found in numerous medieval paintings. For instance, in the F/W 1997-1997 ‘Dante’ collection, obviously referencing *The Divine Comedy* of the Italian poet, McQueen made a plastic skeleton sit among the audience. *The Divine Comedy* is a masterpiece of the representation of ugliness as the diabolical (Eco, 2007, p. 81). McQueen created his own version of hell through religious imagery as well as he set the show in a church and made some models wear masks bearing a crucified Christ on the front, in reference to Joel-Peter Witkin’s *Self-Portrait* (1984). Mimicking doomed sinners, models walked in different alleys, crossing each other defiantly as if ignoring the possibility of repentance. As demons, they wore hats made out of antlers or feathers, a black unicorn horn, and bird-claw accessories, while a daring Debra Shaw stuck out a reptilian tongue. However, McQueen brought a modern twist to this classic work of art by linking it to a contemporary context, the Vietnamese war. Indeed, war images were printed on some garments, as a way to deepen the sense of gravity that impregnated the collection.

Death and madness were recurring themes in most of his collections, as if to reflect his own mental anguish (it is to be noted that McQueen dealt with depression and drug-use; his life was ended by his own hand). Again, McQueen used the theatrics of the shows, and not only the garments, to strengthen the narrative. For example, a feeling of paralyzing terror and restraint marked ‘La Poupée’ (S/S 1997), as McQueen took inspiration from artist Hans Bellmer’s fetishistic and dismembered dolls, and made Debra Shaw walk through the water that covered the runway with “her arms connected to her thighs by a metal frame” (Gleason, 2015, p. 45), thus creating disjointed, jerky, moves. Very often, his models were restrained by his garments and adornments (braces, bodices, towering heels, corsets, chokers, skin-tight skirts...), as if shackled. These constraints imposed on bodies resulted in yet another form of ugliness as the garments lacked functionality, deformed shapes and thus were obstacles to grace and elegance (Rosenkranz et. al, 2015, p.116). Could this be a denunciation of the prison beauty standards represent? Or simply the expression of a transgressive mind?

In S/S 2001 collection ‘Voss’, the prison, or the madhouse, is made real as models circulated inside a cube of glass built around a large dark box, their heads wrapped in bandages as if struck by insanity, blind to what was happening outside. One hour before the opening of the show, guests were made to wait, and sat before their own reflection, forced to contemplate their faces in the glass. The irony of the setting showed how grotesque McQueen’s shows and creations could be. It was a deliberate mockery. The show then became a full performance art piece as models were theatrically stumbling around and pressing their hands against the walls under the bewildered eyes of the audience. McQueen was greatly inspired by representations of madness during the Vic-

torian era, as well as the 1999 movie *The Green Mile*. Surrealism was referred as well as a model wore a jigsaw-puzzle around her neck.

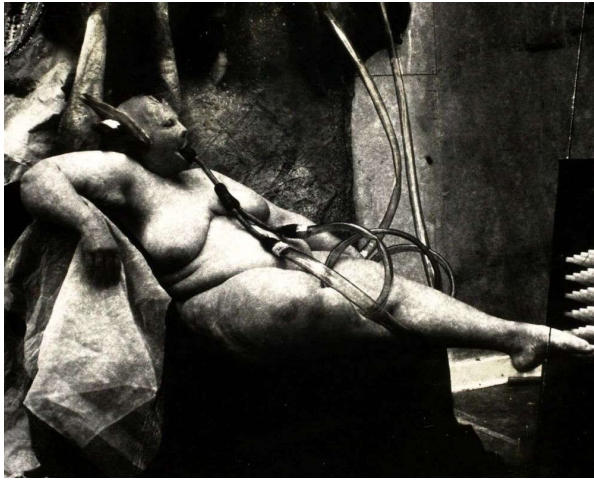


Fig. 3 Joel-Peter Witkin, *Sanitarium* (1983)

The finale propelled ‘Voss’ to the status of McQueen’s most memorable collection, as the dark box broke open, shattering glass pieces everywhere, to reveal the plump body of a woman lying down, breathing through a tube, her head encased in a metallic mask. Huge moths were flying around her, and grey cloths resembling shrouds were falling down the sofa she was on. The scene, almost perfectly similar to Joel-Peter Witkin’s *Sanitarium* (1983) and reminiscent of Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud’s art pieces, was definitely morbid. Michelle Olley’s body wasn’t conventionally beautiful, es-

pecially within the fashion industry standards; she wrote in her diary: “I am what most of them fear— fat” (Gleason, K., 2015, p.167). And McQueen knew very well about this fear considering the way his own body attracted the fat-shaming critics, even when he accessed fame and respect. The ugly can therefore be defined as the things we reject, the things we most fear; it is not objective, but a projection from the spectator: “what makes object themselves ugly is the recognition of the subject that they fail to conform to some ideal” (Rosenkranz et al., 2015, p.13). Conjointly, the show evoked disease, illness, as to mirror the downfall of society, the decadence of our times; it was, at the same time, a counterclaim of the depiction of health and beauty often hypocritically portrayed by the fashion industry. No matter the evolution of technologies and of the humankind, no matter our delusions and preoccupations, we are all doomed: mortality and decay, the deterioration of beauty and youth, is inevitable.

All of this raises the question of what is considered ugly nowadays and how McQueen helped defined that. One might guess that ugliness is now the recognition of what is evil and wrong in our minds and societies. Ugliness in form is not enough, it must be a projection of our anxieties, a denunciation or a reminder. It is recognized as ugly because it arouses inside of us fear and repulsion. Yet, the use of mediums such as fashion helps keeping a distance: horror and disgust become images, fantasies. That is why it is still attractive. As ugly as the show and garments may be, McQueen always managed to seduce the audience: the spectators could never look away. In that way, fashion becomes an art form, it is escapism, a catharsis. We appreciate it because it is exciting and fascinating. As Eco (2007) puts it, there is a growing dissolution of the opposition beautiful/ugly. McQueen is a great example of that process for he achieved a genial combination of the two while still questioning our values, our taste. That explains his everlasting influence on fashion, though his garments were, at times, considered unwearable, on the grounds that they were distasteful, vulgar, or too shocking. However, I am most convinced that high fashion should never become a trend, nor an accommodation, but it should always strive to be an illusion, a fantasy (or a nightmare), and foremost, a question mark, and never an answer in itself. Surely, McQueen achieved all of this and more.

5. Conclusion

Throughout his collections, McQueen mirrored the deepest fears of everyone, including himself. Horrific, brutal, and awe-inspiring themes were the trademark of his shows, not in a glamorous way like John Galliano has done, or in a rebellious, wistful yet lighthearted way like Westwood, but in an innovative aesthetics that merged sensuality with the disgusting, ugliness with the erotic. He achieved this through multiple layers, using symbolic imagery, direct references to art works, theatrics, unique fabrics, innovative silhouettes, and much more.

His work changed the industry forever, as he is still one of the greatest references of nowadays fashion students and designers, and was worn by many artists and celebrities alike. He took the grotesque to a new dimension, and created a sense of beauty for the ones that refused to fit the mould of pretty fashion. His influence penetrated pop culture as artist, star and fashion icon Lady Gaga wore garments such as the Armadillo shoes of 'Plato's Atlantis', the floral lace dress of 'Highland Rape' for her latest music video '911', or the red dress of 'Joan' for the 2009 VMAs. A friend of his in his last years, she understood his references as an avid fan of Leigh Bowery, theatre, and dark arts. In 2009, she was quoted as saying: "I have an obsession with death and sex. Those two things are also the nexus of horror films, which I've been obsessing over (...) That's what makes it so scary. Body and mind are primed for orgasm and instead somebody gets killed" (Lady Gaga, 2009, as cited in Gray, 2012), something that quite beautifully transcribes McQueen's work as well. Finally, she perfectly embodies the kind of woman he wanted to make clothes for: her grotesque imagery, influenced by pop art and performance art, combines glamour and horror, provocation and eroticism, as the music video for 'Bad Romance' perfectly demonstrates (most of the clothes worn in this video were given by McQueen).

In conclusion, his inner sense of darkness and great talent made the terrific and the ugly, the vulgar and the gruesome, an artistic statement through the medium of fashion. His work allows a reflection on the interrelationship of fashion, literature and the arts. What's more, it marks a shift in fashion's focus: plastic perfection and apolitical imagery are not enough, there is a demand for depth and new thematics that better mirror the anxieties of our time. Fashion now requires the audience's emotional engagement, thus making one wonder on the possibilities of high fashion becoming an art form on its own, a visual art form that shapes our culture and representations, projects our deepest concerns and changes. McQueen best concludes: "For me, what I do is an artistic expression which is channeled through me. Fashion is just the medium" (McQueen as cited in Bolton, 2011).

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