

# Civilizational dissent at late 1990's: body, fashion and club cultures in contemporary society

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## Abstract

British fashion of the 1990s manifests a fin-de-siècle social anxiety. Facing a systemic crisis of culture, some designers embodied the sociological concepts of risk and carnivalization in their creations. This attitude is reflected in the emergence of themes such as the wasted look and abject aesthetics, epistemological solutions arising from a legacy of grunge experiences. Based on a documental approach, materialized in media and art works, to some British fashion shows of the 1990s, we will discuss in this article several aspects of the relationships between body, risk, carnival and fashion, focusing on the works of British designers and its manifestation in the hidden economies (club cultures scenes included), in which Alexander McQueen played a central role.

KEYWORDS: fashion, body, aesthetics, club cultures, Alexander McQueen.

## Civilizational dissident processes

When we look at punk fashion from the 1970s or British fashion from the 1990s, we can see that something very unusual was emerging. T-shirts with bones; ripped clothes; fashion shows with thousands of flies launched at spectators; an obsessive taste for the abject. That is, fashion was manifesting dimensions of the barbaric and repulsive. A veritable civilizational retrogress. It appeared that behavioral controls were absent from artistic creation. A critical reading of the fashion of these decades, which is the purpose of this article, may contradict these ideas. We are dealing with an informalization process (Wouters, 2004, 2007), indeed, one of the most important social phenomena in the 20th century. It was about relaxing emotional and behavioral constraints in social interactions, fostering greater tolerance for showing emotions. This slackening, paradoxically, refers to a civilizational process, as it implies the need for even more complex social regulation with new codes and mediators.

This was also the case of punk. An observer unfamiliar with ethos and group values of punk may think it is like a hallucination, but it is, on the contrary, a complex network of meanings and interrelationships, as well as the interiorization of a specific practice, the result of (sub)cultural socialization that enables individuals to know what is or is not expected of them (Guerra, 2014, 2016). In the nineteen nineties, Sarah Thornton (1996) considered nightclubs as centralizing hubs for endless marginal aesthetic experiences, whether in fashion, in the arts, in the theater or in music. The nightclub offered a measure of equality in such experiences, converging the most distinct cultural agents under a common banner. These cultures of taste transformed the night into a place of encounter, creation, recreation and exchange, generating creative feedbacks that collaborated with each other without ever losing the core of their own (sub)identity.

The same can be said in relation to the fashion of the 1970s and 1990s. It is necessary to observe the social context at their genesis and the social trajectories of their most visible protagonists, for example, Vivienne Westwood or Alexander McQueen. Here lies the crucial purpose of this article. In the first section, we analyze the resurgence of carnivalization in contemporary society and how the body and clothing have become a space for struggle. Then, we analyze the context at the origin of British fashion in the 1990s, especially in the context of late modernity (Giddens, 1991) and the risk society (Beck, 1992). Finally, we examine, in detail, the trajectory and the *œuvre* of the avant-garde fashion world in London, illustrated and exemplified mainly with the work of the fashion designer, Alexander McQueen (1969-2010). In do so, we explore his main aesthetic concerns as a unparalleled locus of dissent and carnivalization in a scene that – for the lack of a better word – we can call grunge (01), a term used to define a specific moment in twentieth-century music and fashion. Hailing from the northwest United States in the 1980s, grunge went on to have global implications for alternative bands and do-it-yourself (DIY) clothing (Bennett & Guerra, 2019). An example is the North

American band Nirvana. Their music is based on obsession and determination, feeding on the feeling of non-belonging (Arnold, 1993: 195-196). As Catherine Strong argues, "In a movement such as grunge, where authenticity and autonomy are closely aligned, gaining commercial success causes problems, and the tension and contradictions that commercial success brought for the movement signaled the beginnings of its demise" (Strong, 2011: 49). Regarding the greatest representatives of this movement, Nirvana, Simon Reynolds says: "The only explanation is that many people did not really realize how angry and alienated they were" (2007: 134), exploring their desire for revolution in a constant oscillation between anger and resignation. Nirvana represented a kind of collective unconsciousness of the generations that accompanied them, guided by an implosive fury and a certain dispersed idealism. In addition, they became important because they materialized an alternative and distinct proposal at a time when the musical scene seemed all very similar, because they did not seek to escape reality in a transcendent attitude, but rather because they confronted it. Kurt Cobain said: "I would rather be in a coma than get up and transport myself to the scene until I play, I would rather be confined to my little world and me. (...) All the daily pleasures that people find in conversation, the fun without feet or head, that sucks, I would rather be sleeping" (Kent, 2006: 270).

## Texts, pretexts and contexts

Sociology, as a constituent part of the human sciences, is made in the text with sociological thought and imagination existing purely in the abstraction of another world. They configure the amorphous and complex matter that will be embodied and systematized in textual production. Thus, the interested sociologist acts as a channel, through which a set of hypotheses and imagined universes must necessarily go in its generational process (Guerra, 2010). It is in the sociological text that abstract social thought takes shape and is empirically demonstrated and tested in the internal fabric of scientific writing. Based on this notion, the methodology we will employ in this paper is text and content analysis, inspired by Foucault's discourse analysis (1972), in which discourse is understood as symbolic power relations. In addition, by text we understand not only the written form, but also text-image – the fashion shows, the clothes, the works of art – in the tradition of visual ethnography that produces a certain correspondence between (optical) testimony and anthropological report (Pink, 2006). These techniques are used to explore collective meanings and representations, because, as Foucault (1972) argued, if we want to find the rules of concept formation, we have to look at discourses, or more specifically, at a given discursive field. Therefore, the research methodology we have followed is based on an extensive group of references: photographs, videos and interviews, which served to outline the subject, covering possible gaps that might arise.

Recovering the Eliasian debate on the civilizing process and Cas Wouters's (2007) notion on the informalization of the social, this theoretical framework has

been designed considering social risks and anxieties, as described by Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992), as catalysts for a carnivalization of bodies, events and experiences in the culture of the 1990s. It is based on the social imagery that sediments threat (real and presumed) as categorical in the experience of fin-de-siècle subjects.

The correlation between the debates of the time, i.e., themes that permeate the theory and sociology of fashion such as the wasted look, abject aesthetics and memento-mori, and the designer's creation will be examined on the basis of some fashion shows, for example, Alexander McQueen's *Highland Rape* (Autumn/Winter 1995) and *The Hunger* (Spring/Summer 1996). They bring specific pieces and stylings that corroborate this reading of polarization between risk and carnivalization in the social field. Additionally, we will occasionally refer to other cultural productions of the period to illustrate this issue, such as: Andrew Groves' *Status* collection (Spring/Summer 1998); Damien Hirst's *A Thousand Years* (2000); Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998); and Sarah Lucas' *Christ You Know It Ain't Easy* (2003). These serve to show that, more than a problem in fashion, the dyad risk-carnivalization can be empirically verified in several cultural productions of the 1990s and 2000s (see TABLE 1) (2).

TABLE 1 - Cultural events cited as illustrations of the research problems

<b>Cultural Event</b>	<b>Creator</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Year</b>
Highland Rape	Alexander McQueen	Fashion	1995
The Hunger	Alexander McQueen	Fashion	1996
Status	Andrew Groves	Fashion	1998
My Bed	Tracey Emin	Art	1998
A Thousand Years	Damien Hirst	Art	2000
Dante	Alexander McQueen	Fashion	1996
Christ You Know it Ain't Easy	Sarah Lucas	Art	2003

### *Another beauty: wasted look, abject aesthetics and memento-mori*

Society defines and builds the body. It is a space for struggle: each individual seeks to fight for and defend what is permissible or must be repressed. It is important to

stress, however, that we will not engage an in-depth debate here about the body and the social and performative functions of fashion. Suffice it to say, our analysis is part of a fracture point, the *fin-de-siècle*, which establishes another relationship between the subject and the beautiful. The ideal of the healthy body of the 1980s is gradually being replaced by an approach to the fashion grotesque which translates a certain sublime, an enchantment of the subject in the face of his own mortality (Evans, 2012). Langman (2008) considers the body as a space for domination and agency. Clothing considered acceptable and/or indecent is contingent on these spaces of combat. It also depends on the power structure in which the struggle takes place. In certain societies, such as Western ones, multiple forms of transgressive aesthetics have progressively become mainstream. Tattoos are a paradigmatic example. This had its genesis in the erotic valorization of the body, taken to the extreme, for example, in the *Playboy* covers in the 1960s and in the disruptive aesthetics of the punk movement in the 1970s. Nowadays, body modifications are increasingly visible, such as implanted horns or split tongues. Therefore, youth (sub)cultures embrace the styles that seek to fight the norms of what is or is not acceptable. This implies clashes with previous generations, which see these styles as grotesque or immoral.

The question here, though, is how should we understand the growing indulgence and appetite for transgressive bodily expressions? Langman (2008) considers that it is first necessary to establish a historical analysis of this phenomenon. Bakhtin (1968) found that there have always been moments of transgression since the Middle Ages. This is the case of the carnival. In the Middle Ages, it was a festival for the lower strata of the population, in which the world was turned upside down. In certain areas of Portugal, there was a mixture of the sacred and the profane, which led to the appointment of the “emperor of the madmen” (Martins, 1956: 131-155). The carnival can be understood as a form of cultural resistance to the values and lifestyles of the nobility. An ephemeral moment of utopia, in which an egalitarian society was possible. On the other hand, it was also a pressure valve, since it vented the frustrations built up in the medieval social structure. After a short period of euphoria, everything remained the same. This is the case of the carnivalization today. The various forms of bodily transgression only serve to appease the frustration caused by contemporary life (Langman, 2005). The greatest difference is that capitalist society has incorporated its own resistance and made it a business.

In line with Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), the promises of the Enlightenment led to the formation of fragmented and repressive societies devoid of emotional life. Far from the working conditions of the 19th century, many contemporary jobs involve suffering at work. Not only that, they involve dehumanization and corrosion of character, as postulated by Sennett (2000). However, unlike the 19th century, there is today an industrial culture that promotes a plethora of objects and goods that are supposed to make our lives better and more meaningful. As Marcuse (1991) postulated, it is nothing more than the sale of false necessities that do not provide people with genuine gratification. Repeatedly, it is a way of compensating the frustrations of contemporary social life.

These ludic identities, which resist the global society, increasingly focus on the body. They use body modifications and body art to confront the structures of power, as well as to give voice to the repressed. Likewise, body modifications are a response to the monotony of mainstream style. Tattoos and piercings have become forms of resistance, a revolt against modern capitalism and mass-produced identities.

For Langman (2008), it is a resurgence of the medieval carnival, a way to celebrate transgression that was particularly visible in the early years of punk. Thus, fashion and haute couture were opposed by an anti-fashion punk marked by grotesque images of violence, sexuality and transgressive obscenity. A style that articulated nihilism and the alienation of working-class youth. As Guerra (2019) tells us, with its aesthetics of the grotesque, punk tried to shock in multiple ways: the spiked hair, body modifications, leather jackets with spikes and swastikas, among other strategies, as a way of contesting society's values, a way of taking a stance and occupying public space. Likewise, it was a carnivalesque resistance against the commercialization of style, which, ironically, has not ceased to be economically appropriate.

In the 1990s, a new form of carnivalization emerged in British fashion. The name itself is a good indicator of what was intended: the *wasted look*. It emerged at a time characterized by the resurgence of fear of death and multiple events, such as the impact of AIDS or the genocide in Rwanda, which have become historical tragedies that crossed the social imaginary at late 1990s. Fashion followed these events and the early 1990s bore witness, primarily at a photographic level, to fashion images that were very different from the usual: photographs of sloppy models with alcoholic drinks and drugs scattered throughout decadent apartments (1). For Evans (2012), the fashion industry was directly flirting with death.

The idea of a wasted youth arises, involved in uncommitted sex, drugs and alcohol. Which seems incompatible with the dimension of the beautiful. But there is no real paradox in this new image composition. It is not the same beauty of the 1980s that is opposed to these risky scenarios and situations. In the 1990s, another kind of beauty emerged and broke the boundaries it had been imposed. A beauty that is in limbo and takes advantage of its final moments. As we have said previously, carnivalization is characterized by moments of transgression, and these moments gain predominance in times marked by the perception of the end of a cycle, the prevalence of narratives of decay and death. Thus, perhaps even more than in the 1970s with punk fashion, we once again find the ethos of carnivalization introduced into contemporary Western societies with grunge.

Wallestein reminds us of this (1998). When we look at photographs from the 1990s, we see thin, pale bodies in lethargic poses that seem to be recovering from extreme experiences. It is an abject aesthetic, that is, beings that give into these emotional experiences of great intensity, living them to their utmost, as a way to regain control of their existence. When we see these photographs, we see not only disappointment, but the most completed life experience. The debate raised by authors like Wallestein (1998) and Arnold (1999) concerns a narrow notion of beauty, in an approach that takes, above all, photography and fashion publications

of the 1990s. The enchantment and fetishization by excessive thinness, the use of narcotics and smoking represent a double negation: first of the healthy and turned beauty of the 1980s, and second of the confrontation with a traumatic real, crossed by risk. In this context, carnivalization assumes the dynamics of medieval dances macabres and the flirt with death as the most effective way to feel alive. An extreme, everyday carnivalization. That is why, we were part of something new with McQueen. Here was a creator who not only displayed clothes but staged emotion on the catwalk, whose very soul had been shaken by life and who knew how to shake people up as a consequence. The models wore black contact lenses, the way they walked, the tartan, the military influences, the purses bejeweled with skulls.

Therefore, in this context, agents such as Corinne Day, Kate Moss, Alexander McQueen and Andrew Groves, appear as totemic elements that reaffirm a way of experiencing and creating fashion in a social setting, in which trauma and pain are not sublimated, but assumed and used as central elements. They are equivalent to Nirvana and Kurt Cobain in music. It is undeniable that part of this transgressive attitude and the ways of dealing with cultural themes are reminiscent of the punk movement of previous decades and that there is much of this exasperation and identification in their productions. This generation not only re-enacts British fashion culture, but does so by referring to the social imaginary of their time on art, theater and especially in music and its scenes. As Monneyron (2014) argues, fashion as an expression of culture - historically dated and socially situated - not only accounts for a specular image of societal transformations, but also tensions it and causes, in the alternative, other ways of living that break out and spread from clothing to the elaboration of new economic trends that rises - first - in the youth communities (of music, of clubbing, of experimental art, etc.).

## Risks, limits, and hyper-reality

Since the 1970s, British fashion has developed a very fruitful relationship with youth movements and urban culture. This is a consequence of the impact of the punk movement, which established a constant redefinition in the imagination of British youth and their patterns of socialization and culturalization. Issues such as clothing, cultural and musical consumption, night outings and festivals, among others, become crucial dimensions not only in the subcultural construction for these groups, but also in terms of identity (Guerra & Bennett, 2015). The clothing is, above all, understood as a functional body wrapper, which can be changed from the extreme experiments of Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren at SEX: seen as an identity simulacrum, flags of affirmation and differentiation of this youth (Westwood & Kelly, 2016). At the heart of a total culture (which is born in music but extends to the broader scope of lifestyles) there is simultaneously a movement for the aestheticization of clothing (the black t-shirts associated with rock now appear remastered with chicken bones, condoms, and unconventional prints) and for its role as a conceptual reflection of these subjectivities.

These experiments started in the 1970s will find echo and refoundation in the British culture of the 1990s. The social context was identical: socioeconomic crisis, high unemployment rates, and low job prospects for the children of the working class. To this was added the increasing pace of change and the ubiquity of risks, global or individual. The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 and instead of a period of peace, the opposite occurred; there was a growth in globalized relationships, resulting from the development of information technologies, such as the Internet; and an increased polarization between the Christian West and the Muslim East, as can be seen in the controversy caused by Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. In only a decade, contemporary visual regimes were transmuted – from contemporary youth to the emergence of MTV, audiovisual circulation in the form of clips and VHS, the boom in television, the culture of celebrities – and a renewed awareness of death, due to the overwhelming crisis of HIV infection. Fashion (like music) would not fail to keep up with the change in sensibilities that this would cause. A new *fin-de-siècle* feeling emerged “The time and place could be *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, Paris of the 1930s, or 1990s London: each has a relationship to modernity and to technological change and its impact on sensibilities” (Evans, 2012: 5). Thus, in the 1990s, social traumas shaped a sense of fashion, bringing tension to their structures and changing the comfortable into dissent and resistance.

It is therefore not surprising that Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) postulate crucial assertions at this time. Giddens creates the concept of late modernity reflecting on the systems of representation of the self in contemporary times. In modernity, a number of changes have affected the entire globe and individuals in an intimated way. In addition, the world has become smaller. Distant events directly affect people's lives. Furthermore, in addition to being global, these transformations occur at a pace never seen before. The most prevalent concept in modern times is risk. And risk is clearly a modern concept, since it refers to a departure from the past and looks directly into the future.

Giddens (1991) also speaks of a 'manufactured risk' related to the advancement of knowledge about the world. Paradoxically, the development of new knowledge does not reduce risks, it empowers them. In addition, this manufactured risk refers simultaneously to human intervention in nature and to the constant social changes in modernity. Another consequence of modernity, and of growing risk thinking, is the decline of tradition. Individuals now have to make all kinds of decisions that until then were anchored in tradition. Beck talks about the risk society. We must remember that his work was published in 1986, following the Chernobyl disaster, and it is therefore not surprising to find a certain discouragement in his work. Scientific and industrial development gave rise to a true 'volcano of civilization', that is, risks that are no longer contained in time and space (Beck, 1992).

One of the peculiarities of these sociological concepts is that they were incorporated, in a short time, in the media and daily discourses. It is not surprising that risk (expressed here in the matter of pain, be it physical, sexual, emotional or social) was one of the main themes to be explored by the fashion world. Look at the models with bruises and torn clothes - in a clear sexual assault - that are sent to the catwalk with their semi-exposed vulvas in Alexander McQueen's *Highland*



*Rape* (1995) collection. Or the artistic piece *My Bed* by Tracy Emin, full of secretions and condoms, which resulted from the artist's depressive experience with sex and affection. A decomposing cow's head with thousands of flies around it, to reflect on death, a topic so popular in the 1990s. Alternatively, even Andrew Groves' stylistic work, *Status*, in which a model takes off her coat and released hundreds of flies on to the audience. In any case, these are more than works that provoke extreme reactions: in a society based on pain and risk, fashion and body are shaped in a pathological way.

Thus, a social history of fashion in the 1990s is inseparable from a restructuring of the very notion of body and the attempts to reconcile it with the real. Clothes, as a construct of the individual's affirmation, are, therefore, a metaphorical element of risk and pain. At the same time, sex and death are the main themes of the time. In other words, the tension between risk and carnivalization.

## Alexander McQueen: dissent, chaos, and dystopia

Alexander McQueen (1969-2010) was - perhaps - one of the most culturally important agents of this generation. He was part of the generation of working-class children who broke with the footsteps of their parents. Coming from the expanded teaching of fashion and art that English universities underwent in the late 1980s, the objects and experiences McQueen created were dissociated from old functional and aesthetic standards, and were postulated as cultural hybrids, in which artistic and technical aspects of creation seemed inseparable. According to Maureen Callahan (2014: 70), McQueen found himself in a very specific context: he and another group of avant-garde artists and designers proposed new cultural paradigms that naturally disrupted already consolidated aesthetic notions. A kind of response, very similar to the Romantic movement in the 19th century regarding the industrial revolution. That is, a reaction created from the fear that technology, and all the risks it involved, could swallow individual humanity (Figueredo, 2018).

Alexander McQueen was, on different occasions, nicknamed the fashion hooligan or enfant-terrible, simply for bringing instability to the heart of the British fashion world. Terms associated with McQueen by the fashion industry itself, indicate his potential to destabilize traditions and formats in force in this cultural field (Figueredo, 2018). He quickly became an opponent to the paradigms and systems that governed British fashion, creating clothes and fashion shows often characterized as anti-fashion due to the grotesque and shock they encompassed. The designer represented a major influence for his generation. McQueen established aggressiveness and informality as a British standard - post 1990s - of creativity and innovation (Figueredo, 2018). In a short time, however, he left the marginal and underground world to enter the canonical universe of high fashion. It can even be said that McQueen was later absorbed by the industry and its conglomerates, becoming a corporate designer whose vision and ideology responded, in some degree, to the capital invested in his name. Our interest here,

however, is the analysis of some of his initial creations, when the lack of funding granted him the freedom and excesses which made him an important agent of contemporary fashion culture. We will focus especially on two shows: *Highland Rape* and *The Hunger*. First, though, it should be noted that affirmation in McQueen's work appears in three distinct, yet intersecting dimensions: fashion shows, clothes and performance. In the first point of our triangulation, we think it is necessary to relate the practices of the fashion shows themselves and the theoretical notions aligned with them. For the designer, the fashion show was what arouses his creative interest, his ignition point; without the fashion shows, the clothes and the entire object universe related to them could not exist.

McQueen's fashion shows, identified by Duggan (2001) as "spectacles", had a clear theatrical dimension and can be discussed as a hybrid modality with another of her categorizations: the affirmation parades. For Duggan (2001), affirmation fashion shows are usually associated with a political or ideological message and are the ones that come closest to the artistic behavior of the performances. Initially operating in the marginality of this system, McQueen used these strategies to achieve publicity and circulation, often flirting with productions that oscillated between the spectacle and the affirmation and, in contrast, postulating his fashion production as something distinct, hybrid and *avant-garde*. Once the parade was conceived, the clothes and performances appeared as contributions that supported their symbolic values. These creations operated from explosive and sensational endings, analogous to music concerts, since the purpose was to ultimately give the audience a "strong sense of experience" (Duggan 2001: 249).

To this end, McQueen fused the elements that composed the fashion show and focused on its grand finale, where clothes, catwalk, lighting and models, all together, ratified his aspiration, the performative character of his production. Above all, these spectacular shows were very effective strategies in the field of marketing (Figueredo & Nogueira, 2016). There are data to prove it. After McQueen and his controversial fashion shows, London Fashion Week grew significantly in terms of exhibitions and other presentations: "Between 1993 and 1997, the London Fashion Week grew from sixteen shows and fifty exhibitions to fifty-four shows and more than one hundred and fifty exhibitions (...) Other designers appeared that season, and in the process they made London a center of experimentation" (Watt, 2012: 137-138), and a considerable part of this evolution is due to the media that McQueen attracts with his controversial fashion shows (Figueredo, 2018). Meanwhile, in addition to its social impact on London's youth, McQueen's work also restructured an entire aesthetic field in fashion, developing from his catwalk and his iconic pieces a contemporary visual repertoire.

Let us start with the analysis of *Highland Rape*. Responsible for his entrance into the international fashion consciousness, this was his first official collection at the London Fashion Week. According to Evans (2012), there is a wrong reading regarding this show, in which the focus centered on the accusation of misogyny and the celebration of rape. McQueen's intention, however, was more historical: he wanted to draw attention to the violent manner in which the Scottish uprisings were suppressed by England, as a form of "rape and genocide" (Evans, 2012: 142). It should be noted, here that the idea of genocide is extremely characteristic of risk

societies (Beck, 1992) and, in the 1990s, was consistently in the news following genocides in Bosnia, Rwanda and Chernobyl. The feeling of imminent threat stipulates population patterns and responses, whether cultural or behavioral (Beck, 1992). When societal groups, especially creative youth, feel continually threatened, they face a kind of collapse of the self (Giddens, 1991), producing, consequently, an interregnum, that is, the suspension of the old ways of living and producing and the inexorable need to create new forms of relationship with the world. The sociological dimension of risk became, thereby, a societal tension to be debated by this new generation of fashion designers, creating strains within traditional beauty - that one of healthy bodies at 80s - in favor of a sublime or a grotesque, which once experienced, reconfigures the subject of risk.

If, on the one hand, McQueen presented the models with torn clothes, exposed vulvas and breasts simulating an assault, on the other hand, in the designer's imagination *Highland Rape* expressed the figure of a warrior woman, displacing her from victimization and postulating her in the universe of resistance. There was no fundamental commercial appeal to this collection. Its function was ideological: the product was sublimated by the message to be transmitted. That is, the political protest flag was raised in the fashion show. There was something scornful about it, because for the first time it was incorporated into a canonical space in British fashion; McQueen perverted political protest aggressively, punctuating his collection as a sarcastic commentary on the historic atrocities of the English crown. The patterns in the collection were all of Scottish origin and many referred to the McQueen family's geographical origin in the Isle of Skye. Carefully cut following the tradition of English tailoring, these tartan pieces become a discourse in themselves: the Scottish tradition once again violated by English 'superiority' (Callahan, 2014). Analogous to the political protest, this collection also acted to update contemporary corporeality. The bodily digressions operated from exhaustion, excesses and morbidity in the photography of Corinne Day (the wasted look) find their parallel here. This body was broken, resized like a fashionable Procustian operation (3). The Bumster Pants (Figure 01) - designed by McQueen in the early 1990s and that appear in several of his collections. The pants operate a pornographic repositioning of the waist, revealing the part of the body that the designer found most provocative, the coccyx - presented in this collection, for example, were representative of this effort of clothing as a mechanism for redefining the body and beauty itself. The waist was rethought, displaced and appeared as the true revelation of the coccyx and pelvis, for McQueen "extremely erogenous and unexplored areas of the body" (Thomas, 2015: 106).

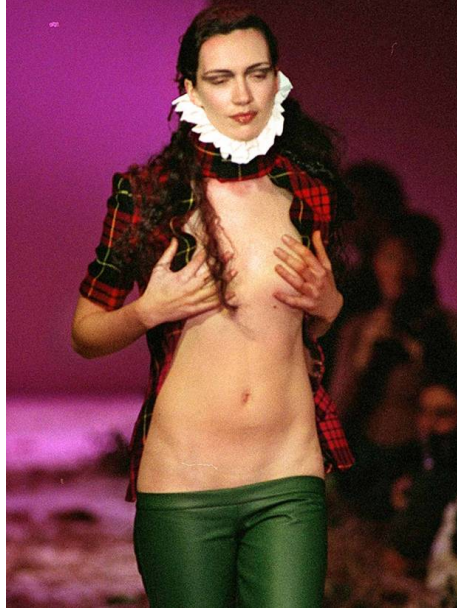


FIGURE 01 - Bumster Pants, *Highland Rape* (1995) (5).

About this collection, the British fashion editor Isabella Blow argued that it was “sabotage and tradition, beauty and violence”, a paradoxical and instinctive process that brought McQueen closer to the protagonist of the film *Peeping Tom* (1960) directed by Michael Powell, a photographer who “murdered women in the act of photography through a bayonet attached to his camera's tripod, transforming the object of the photo into the instrument of death” (Evans, 2012: 142). Although the controversies involved in this collection were numerous, McQueen reaffirmed his image as the *enfant-terrible* of British fashion, meanwhile suffered no restrictions or economic loss in the process, since the absence of a patron granted him escape from subservience to an industry already consolidated and with an official institutional image. McQueen could experiment as much as he wished and when he wished.

For McRobbie (1998), this highly ideological sphere of clothing is in line with two characteristic points of this generation. First, due to the characteristics of British art schools (which instill a set of values in the designers that leads them to have little or no interest in creating and sustaining structured economic businesses), they follow a specific logic in the artistic field, in which they first look for recognition from their peers through the shock and scandal caused. The second point, related to marginal economies, operates in the sense that such collections, when commercialized, will be absorbed by a very specific public, usually other cultural agents participating in these alternative scenes and occupying the same cultural and symbolic geography of the city. So many young people shared the same anxieties and flirted with similar ideologies. These individuals will discover products in these niches that will serve their needs for differentiation and political manifestation.

It should be noted that a few years later McQueen returned to the theme of *Highland Rape*, but in a more nuanced manner. In 2006, with *Widows of Culloden*, McQueen revisited his *Highland Rape* collection, taking inspiration from the last battle of the Jacobite Uprising and the Scottish widows, who after the defeat move

to the colonies in America. In a completely different phase of his career, this fashion show was guided by an idea of escapism, which perhaps can be understood as an escape from the designer himself, who was constantly assaulted by corporate demands. In *Widows of Culloden*, McQueen promoted the collection as a point of dissonance, a dreamlike space in which he was protected from such economic problems. Perhaps that was why the clothes were not frayed or torn, nor were the models covered in blood or looking exhausted. But even here we find flirtation with death, namely at the grand finale: in the center of the catwalk, a glassy pyramidal structure lit up at the end of the show to reveal a hologram of the English model Kate Moss wearing a flowing dress. The image rotated to greet the entire audience, only to disintegrate a minute later. Referring to common devices in the 19th century that could reproduce photographs of loved ones who have died through an intricate game of mirrors, Moss's incorporeal spectrum was both a memory of times gone by - perhaps of the designer's lost freedom - and an omen, like a Banshee - the female Gaelic spirit that heralds an imminent death - indicating that that old McQueen was succumbing.

The new possibilities of this body developed within other alternative scenes (music, fashion, arts), becoming hence one of the central themes for this generation. In *The Hunger* (Spring/Summer 1996), a collection following *Highland Rape*, McQueen once again explored the affirmative and subjective character of clothing. Inspired by the eponymous film directed by Tony Scott in 1987 and by the aesthetic of the punk band Sham 69, this collection was designed for a tribe of urban vampires (Watt, 2012). Similar to *Highland Rape*, incisions and cuts were designed to open the body to other uses. In a reference to the 1960s *Concetto Spaziale* series by the Italian artist Lucio Fontana, the clothes openings pointed however to a more morbid idea, that of continuity between inside and outside, content and continent, of surgical incisions and fluid changes, in the sense of Kristeva's (1982) abject aesthetics.

The aesthetics of the abject, quite recurrent in this period, is in line with what Kristeva (1982) defines as a category of (not) being: it is the condition of the definition of a pre or a post, that is, neither subject nor object, but before being the first (previously the separation of the mother as a psychoanalytic reference) or after becoming an object (like a corpse delivered to the state of putrefaction). The abject is visually recovered by this generation more vividly in the scenes of waste, in body fluids, in regurgitated foods and mainly in the corpse. It will be the clotted blood in Alexander McQueen's clothes, but also Damien Hirst's rotting cow (*A Thousand Years*, 2000); Tracey Emin's bed with semen traces (1998); or even the Christ of cigarettes by Sarah Lucas, metaphorically crucified on the English flag (*Christ You Know it Ain't Easy*, 2003), an allusion to the ordeal suffered by this generation in search of their livelihood. This fragmented, dismembered body, which often inhabits a post-mortem, became representative of this generation. Crossed by disease, death and delusion, the imagery of the 1990s will articulate the anxieties associated with risks, as well as the pleasures of a changing and alienated identity, that are at the heart of the rapid economic, social and technological changes in the last few years of the 20th century. This aspect will also be recovered in clothes, creating a paradigm in the trajectory of Western capitalist consumption.

Like the political-ideological flag raised in *Highland Rape*, *The Hunger* became a statement. Channeling youthful behavior in constant flirtation with death, this collection was a successful example of the cultural translation of the anxieties and fears that afflicted this generation. For one of the dresses in this collection, McQueen created two Perspex structures, of transparent plastic, and filled them with larvae collected from a fish carcass, covering them with transparent plastic and pressing the two parts of the piece on the model's body, like a putrid sandwich (4).

Technological advances, the fear of disappearance, the imminence of terrorism and chemical war, the new diseases that brought condemnation of sex and pleasure, ratified this melancholic and hopeless attitude towards life, as if it aimed to advance death as a kind of escape: once dead, this body will never suffer such a fate. The affirmation - or (re)affirmation - of this independence of the body that undergoes the most diverse experiences, consciously assuming its end, permeated the entire 1990s and was to be once again recovered in Andrew Groves' *Status* collection (Spring/Summer 1998), at the time McQueen's life partner. In this fashion show, Groves worked on the idea of illness, specifically that which brings internal ruin to a society consumed by images of external perfection, whose epitome is the beauty of supermodels. And what better example to describe all we have discussed in this article, all the risks associated with life in late modernity, than a model opening her coat and releasing 5,000 flies on the audience? The performance, *Flies trapped inside a Jacket* (Figure 02), in addition to causing horror, played with the idea that death was feeding on the model's body. Again, the balance between death and hedonism, between carnivalization and risk: the body becomes an open space for exploration and symbolic relations with death and the abject (Evans, 2012).



FIGURE 02 - Flies Trapped into a Jacket, Status (1998) (6).

## From catwalk to the club. From club to the catwalk

Risk - as a category of the social imaginary - manifests itself in different ways in societal anxieties, especially in the cultural practices of young Londoners reminiscent of the Thatcher Era. The different world crises - from the Cold War to the global HIV pandemic - produce reverberations in behavioral and sensitive patterns, in fact risk societies are consolidated (Beck, 1992). This set of existential uncertainties and contradictions ends up stimulating a cultural counter-response that is embodied in what Figueredo (2019) defines as the aesthetic of anxiety.

The aesthetics of anxiety corresponds to the specific ways that part of the creative youth - namely avant-garde artists coming largely from Goldsmith College and experimental designers from the recently remodeled Central Saint Martins - started to deal with certain themes. Simultaneous to an intense economic recession with low labor absorption, these unemployed young people felt free to try other forms of creation. Thus, in different degrees and formats, the aesthetics of anxiety appears in the works of some designers mainly in four visual trends: memento-mori, mortality-fetishism, the abject aesthetic and the wasted look (Figueredo, 2018).

It is important to note that, advised by a tradition of visual anthropology (Pink, 2013) and by a proximity (both physical and conceptual) between the agents of this generation, we think of these cultural products under a certain hybridization between art and fashion. Certainly, between these two instances of creation, there are quite distinctive distances, especially if we consider their consumption formats, but if we consider, from another perspective, their points of tangency - that is, the meeting places, coexistence and feedback between the disciplines - we perceive a striking similarity between its processes. We are dealing here, for example, with a complex movement that continuously mobilizes the means of creation. There is, indeed, a hybrid mode of art-fashion composition that is both conceptual (same themes of interest) and logistical (physical proximity and frequency). This approach is further evidenced by the incorporation of artists in different fashion shows - Tracey Emin for Vivienne Westwood (Crane, 1992) - or the constant visits and collaborations between artists and designers - McQueen with the Chapman Brothers - culminating in cultural products with a noticeable approximation: in this case, the installation *Tragic Anatomies* (1996), Jake and Dinos Chapman, and Alexander McQueen's *Bellmer la Poupée* fashion show (1997/98).

In fashion, in particular, in addition to the catwalk and provocative fashion shows, anxiety - caused by the imaginary of risk - unleashes the experimentation that is aimed at in the practical world through its experiential spheres, articulated from small businesses to the *fête nocturne*. If on the catwalk the risk - death, fear in the face of disease - appears in the larvae of McQueen (*The Hungers*) or in the live flies of Groves (*Status*), in everyday life it is structured through what McRobbie (1998) describes as hidden economies. Thornton (1995) had previously demonstrated that the youth cultural scenes of avant-garde are effective in emulating the formats of the economies of values and judgments of the dominant strata, thus, "they are subcultures since they are in a subaltern or underground position in relation to the dominant culture" (Gelder, Thornton, 1997: 4), but also

they create power microstructures, and this subcultural capital which is negotiated by its agents is not associated with an idea of class, and can, in the opposite way, erase or obscure class differences (Thornton, 1995). Therefore, in the negotiation of their specific capital, these youth clusters also tend to establish effective economies whose circulation and consumption is sedimented among their peers.

These new aesthetics mobilized and transformed into products find their target audience among visitors to Soho, an East London enclave that in the 1990s was suburban and impoverished. It will be in this neighborhood that several experiences imagined by this generation arise. From the small art galleries - Factual Nonsense, by Joshua Copstom and White Cube by Jay Jopling - to stores run by artists - The Shop - where Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas sold customized dirty T-shirts, origami made by cigarette packs and all sorts of abjectual objects.

Zoe Whitley, curator and researcher associated with Tate Modern, a specialist in contemporary British art, will review the importance of this new generation of artists and designers in reactivating the urban vitality of East London, and will delineate the first spasms of avant-garde art and fashion in direction to one, still precocious, monetarization. In her words "unrecognizable as the current fashionable enclave, the East End was in complete disarray: 193 Grove Road was one of the last rooftop houses of the neighborhood's before being demolished by real estate speculation", until a group of artists as Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, Jake and Dinos Chapman opened both, commercial and creative spaces in this place. For example, Emin and Lucas' The Shop "was part of Shoreditch's revolution [...] and "East London suddenly became the place to be" (Whitley, 2015: 171).

Soho (and the East neighborhood), strategically located in the transition with the city, has become a meeting point, converging for its streets and nightclubs a large part of this generation of creatives and as many representatives of the London underground scene coming of the most distinct city regions. There was a perceptible pendulum movement, during the day small ateliers and experimental galleries, some stores and artists restaurants; at night, however, Soho was transfigured as clubs opened: masses of young people crowded into the bars' doors awaiting the appropriate time to dance.

Attendants of this night scene of gay clubs, bars of alternative rock and other musical experiments, artists and particularly fashion designers used these experiences in a very particular process of feedback with their very own work. Alexander McQueen, Andrew Groves and John Galliano, for example, were responsible for a *club to catwalk* movement, in which they were inspired by the aggressiveness of the aesthetics of the night scene to compose their cultural products. We could reflect on this process by checking the many references in their 90s fashion shows to emblematic figures such as Divine David, Leigh Bowery and Stela Stlin (Knox, 2010; Watt, 2012).

The case of Alexander McQueen becomes quite illustrative of these relationships. A regular visitor to the London clubber scene in Soho, McQueen is an important catalyst in this process: the club culture found on its catwalk an extension, became a club couture (Guerra, 2015b). In the soundtracks, in the low lighting, in the decadent models, in the transgressive garments, the club lingered



on the catwalk in a daytime expression of itself. If the club to catwalk movement represented a trend of this societal group of young creators, the opposite was also seen. For McRobbie (1998), one aspect of these hidden economies was precisely the circulation of products and specific aesthetics between also specific groups, where at the same time the producers are consumers. McQueen, as a point of interest in this debate, therefore, represents this place of intersection, an area of convergence between the night fête and the creative industry.

McQueen was at the forefront of the Cool Britannia era: when Damien Hirst was in the headlines with his formaldehyde-dipped shark and the Oasis occupied the top of the charts and the led culture, associated with the pop Brit made a commotion around the world. McQueen's night outings and designs were much less inspired by the fashion and utopian style of the 1980s. There was in his experience and aesthetic production this appreciation of another beauty, a meeting of style that was a traumatic confrontation with reality. He absorbed this provocative attitude, a type of fashion that - given its roots - was born Molotov, dissident, ready to disturb the field of what industry said was beauty.

Recalling these dissident experiences, designer Ungless recalls his nightly wanderings alongside McQueen, when he says "We'd probably start somewhere near Soho, like the gay pub Comptons on Old Compton Street, do a little bit of a pub crawl (...) After - Comptons - then on to some not-so-savoury place, like a club called Man Stink. Oh my God! We loved that place! It was this really awful pub in King's Cross, downstairs in a kind of cellar. There were these tunnel catacombs where God knows what was going on, but the house music was absolutely fantastic", (Thomas, 2015: w/p). 'Unglesse would say on another occasion that Man Stink wouldn't exactly be on the gay bar scripts, especially for his more hardcore approach, "but that's exactly what McQueen loved, which was totally underground. It would have been in this very bar that McQueen had lost his entire Taxi Driver collection: with no money to pay for the headgear, the designer would have left the clothes at the door in black bags the next morning when he went to collect the pieces, the material had been taken away by the night rubbish truck. Those pieces were lost forever (Wilson, 2015).

Nicholas Townsend also recalls that McQueen was an avid consumer of amyl nitrate (poppers) and occasionally took ecstasy; his cocaine habit appeared late (2015). 'The designer wasn't much of an addict back then — he had a thing for amyl nitrate (poppers) and occasionally took ecstasy; his cocaine habit came much later. He didn't drink much either. '[McQueen's] tipples were cider,' Ungless told me. 'Seriously.' But he did love to dance and was quite good at it, too. 'We would go to a night called Marvellous in Brixton, which played Blondie and T-Rex and even disco, and we'd dance like crazy,' remembers his friend Nicholas Townsend, who performed under the drag name Trixie. 'And there was Popstarz [at the Paradise club in Islington] that played all that tacky pop, like Blur and some old punk, and he would camp it up and become a queen.' On Saturday nights, he'd sometimes continue on to the after-hours club Trade [at Turnmills in Clerkenwell]' (Thomas, 2015b: w/p). Townsend who performed in these spaces as the drag Trixie, was a constant user of the pieces in his collections.

One night in the early 90's, McQueen, his boyfriend - also designer Andrew Groves - and Townsend decided to get ready for a night at Kinky Gerlinky. McQueen's outfit was a precise shot in Galliano's fashion, a statement against a kind of creation that McQueen considered unrealistic because of its lack of humanity. He squeezed his corpulent body into a thick wool suit that his friend and encourager, stylist Isabella Blow, had borrowed from Galliano's latest collection. He put on a pair of chain slingbacks and a three-coloured hat made of cardboard wrapped in raw wool to imitate the piece the models used to wear in the 1993 Filibusters parade of Galliano. He wanted to be better than anyone else, Groves recalls. Better and more avant-garde than Galliano. The fabric of the suit was so rough that it made McQueen's nipples bleed, but the border had been made (Wilson, 2015; Berner, 2016). Today, internationally renowned designer Julian MacDonald who was McQueen's assistant in the 1990s, remembers that he once made him a turtleneck with transparent vertical panels that left his chest exposed. 'He named it "Get Your Tits Out",' Macdonald laughs. He told me that it reminded him of a fetish outfit he had seen in a club the night before' (Thomas, 2015b: w/p).

This brief ethnographic portrait of McQueen and other designers in the East London club scene points to a central question (see Guerra & Figueredo, 2020): in a circular process, the *club to catwalk* movement found its analogy in an opposite dynamic, *catwalk to club* - consumed by this audience (the Soho regulars) and used as a manifestation of a given distinctive subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996). It was common in these bars and nightclubs to see the plastic dresses and tire tracks from the collections Bashee (1994) and The Birds (1995) by McQueen, carried by figures such as the model Kate Moss and the fashion editor Isabella Blow (Watt, 2012). Aggressiveness and its aesthetic translation were also incorporated in the designers themselves: McQueen, for example, an avid visitor to these alternative scenes sometimes used rough pieces, with thorns, spikes, etc. as Nicholas Townsend, designer and regular, recalls that the pieces were so violent that they sometimes made McQueen's nipples and arms bleed. (Wilson, 2015; Thomas, 2015a).

In short, a "club to catwalk to club again" movement was identified. In itself a form of practical manifestation of subjectivities crossed by anxiety, a correspondence to the "collapse of the self" that we find in Giddens (1991) debates on risk societies. In the generation of avant-garde British artists and young designers, risk and trauma went beyond their personal instances and embodied - in blood, dirt, holes, bones sewn into clothes - their symbolic effectiveness: carnivalization was manifested in the fact those signifying instances are demonstrated in objective life. Living in the face of imminent disappearance and death, nothing else mattered (Evans, 2012), and their cultural products - consumed by them and their peers - not only became icons of this anguish but also ended up mobilizing their own economy, which although born underground, it was later absorbed by the mainstream: a reification of the assertiveness of its interpretations in the social imaginary and the capture of a zeitgeist.

## A reverse carnivalization?

We have talked previously about carnivalization and how it has existed for centuries, releasing inherent tensions within society, from the carnival of the Middle Ages to body experimentation today. If in the Middle Ages, the Carnival only lasted one day, today it is 'the world on the contrary', having become the norm. Perhaps this is why the catwalk is so much closer to the medieval carnival. Especially if we think about the fashion shows we listed in this article. They are the expression of a world in reverse, rather, the world of fashion in reverse, in which, even for a single day, the notion of beauty and perfection is subverted.

The spectators themselves participate in this carnival. As much or more than the designers. These are accused of shocking at all costs, but the spectators know what they are going to see and they are waiting for the shock. It is interesting, because we are dealing with the same molds of the medieval Carnival: the public appears to be surprised, to see their world turned upside down. In this case, a consciously abject Carnival, which exists to provoke repulsion. Nevertheless, everyone here appears to witness and participate in this carnival. A world in which the concepts of beauty have been altered, in which the models, epitome of beauty in Western societies, appear repulsive, where the clothes of the most expensive designers appear torn and dirty, where our sterilized society is confronted with secretions and flies.

In addition, we can ask: is not carnivalization a moment of madness, but also of happiness, in which we can be whatever we want? Moreover, this is where the world of British experimental fashion is distinguished, emerging as a reverse carnivalization. It is, rather, decompression in the face of social tensions. A place where the spectators go to watch representations of death, exemplified above all by memento-mori, where we watch, in a controlled and limited environment, the spectacle of death. As Damien Hirst used to say: "you can frighten people with a conception of death, or by reminding them of their own mortality, or you can still give them vigor" (in Townsend, 2015: 161). At a time when the world seemed to be moving towards the end, with the profusion of environmental catastrophes, diseases and genocides, perhaps that was precisely what the public wanted.

In carnivalization there is a desire to be-other. This can be seen in the *Dante* collection, in 1996, with the use of black masks with small Christs in ivory, crucified on the models' faces - a reproduction of the item used by Joel-Peter Witkin in his *Crucifix Mask* (Self-portrait, 1984). In this collection, McQueen played with masks, with faces covered and bodies cut out. Here the face appeared sublimated, covered with raw lace or in shades of black, and the jewelry that accompanied it - thorns, skeletal hands, horns - expressed "sexual violence inherent in objects, violence implicit in jewelry in its opening, piercing mechanisms" (Evans, 2015: 234). So, a fragmented image of the body (and identity).

To finish, McQueen stated that "My collections have always been autobiographical (...) they were like exorcising my ghosts" (Watt, 2012: 65). Our conclusion is that his collections did not exorcise only his ghosts, but that of an entire society, especially those who were going to see him. A society immersed in risk, in which dangers succeeded one another at an unprecedented pace. Concomitantly, in a Global North that had made death a taboo, a prohibited thing

(Ariès, 1974). For this reason, this celebration of death ends up holding the central character of this new form of carnivalization: for some, a way of exorcising ghosts; for others, a way of reinvigorating their lives; for others more, who knows, a way of escaping the thought of imminent death.

## Endnotes

1. See the photographic series produced in the 1990s by the British photographer Corinne Day. The photographs show excessively thin models, who look exhausted or ill, posed in apartments surrounded by empty glasses and overflowing ashtrays. This hungry and even pathological appearance is associated with the wasted look, an evolution of heroin chic from previous years (Wallestein, 1998).
2. About the English curriculum remodeling that allowed, in part, the emergence of a new generation of designers and artists (see McRobbie, 1998).
3. In Greek mythology, *Procrustes* had an iron bed in his exact size, and usually invited outsiders he received to lie down on the object. If the size of the guest exceeded that of the bed, parts were amputated, if they were slightly smaller, their limbs were stretched until they conformed to the size of the correlated object. In Lacan's reflection, fashion establishes the object of torment, demanding from man the adaptation of his body, his physical and emotional amputation.
4. This testimony, collected from one of the assistants who worked on the production of this fashion show, can be found in Thomas (2015a).
5. Source: independent.co.uk according to the CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 licence.
6. Source: vogue.co.uk according to the CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 licence.

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