

Fashion Artifice: The Body Reconfigured

Key words: Rei Kawakubo / Alexander McQueen / body reconfigured / radical / symbolic violence

Abstract

*There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion.
(Francis Bacon 1561-1626)*

Why has the surface and the structure of clothing the body undergone such extreme changes over the last three decades? This paper will examine and trace the ways in which Postmodern fashion designers have appropriated the characteristic attributes of the radical, the ugly, the decadent and the distasteful and reconfigured a new body surface and silhouette. The incursion of such attributes has led to the development of extremely exaggerated practices that are highly radical in intention, especially when compared with traditional practices of haute couture.

This new abrasive aesthetic direction appears both in current haute couture and ready-to-wear designers' work, but is particularly pronounced in the radically innovative and original works of Alexander McQueen and Rei Kawakubo. What are the components of this new aesthetic? Symbolic violence, cruelty, malformation and displacement run through new fashion like a discordant note that swings between surfaces and structures. This trend seems to privileges the deformed and rejected over the elegant and accepted. Hubert de Givenchy, Yves Saint Laurent and James Galanos, to name a few, have proclaimed to lament the loss of elegance and traditional beauty which they consider has been replaced by an "ugly" aesthetic. I ask you to consider McQueen's torturous facial jewellery and models appearing as though caged or modelled on a Hans Bellmer doll sculpture. There is also his controversial Highland Rape collection that shows battered models with blood splattered and torn gowns. Additionally, Kawakubo's vision of the abject and the imperfect shows in her apocalyptic garments as evidenced in her Lace Sweater and Bump and Mind collection. One could argue that these types of new works might have arisen from a late Surrealist phenomena that was flavoured with a science-fiction ambience. It would seem that this paradigm shift in fashion has irritated and puzzled traditional couturiers.

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There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion. (Sir Francis Bacon 1561-1626)

The surface and the structure of clothing the body have both undergone extreme changes during the last three decades. Postmodern fashion designers have appropriated the characteristic attributes of the radical, the “ugly”, the decadent and the distasteful and reconfigured a new body surface and silhouette. The incursion of such attributes into contemporary fashion has led to the development of extremely exaggerated practices that are highly radical in intention when compared with the traditional practices of *haute couture*. In short, today’s frontline fashion designers use a visual mode that is transgressive rather than recessive.

The French *couturiers* Hubert de Givenchy, Yves Saint Laurent and the American designer James Galanos (Zinko 2006, para 5) to name but a few, have lamented the resultant loss of elegance and traditional beauty and see contemporary fashion as being overcome by what they consider to be an anti- aesthetic. This new abrasive aesthetic direction has arisen in much of the work of the current *haute couture* and ready-to-wear designers, especially in the innovative and original works of Alexander McQueen (1969-) and Rei Kawakubo (1942-),

What are the components of this new aesthetic trait? Symbolic violence, cruelty, malformation and displacement echo through new fashion like a discordant note that swings between surfaces and structures. It would seem that this trend privileges the deformed and rejects the over elegant and accepted. While, understandably, the significant paradigm shift in the world of fashion was disturbing to these more conservative designers – it was also disturbing and distasteful to Western society in general. Of course, Western society expected fashion designers to “break the rules” and create surprising fashion but nothing prepared the fashion world for the likes of Rei Kawakubo or Alexander McQueen. The shock of their collective works was akin to that of the Punks – signifying the abject, destroyed, aggressive and discarded. Ultimately, they created clothes that were deeply confronting to a jaded fashion audience. Forms of design inspiration of the traditional *couturiers* were brushed aside and collections were imbued with heavily loaded conceptual symbolism. This type of symbolism was not easily understood or embraced by the fashion followers, as it was more in keeping with artistic endeavour in the fine arts. Questions such as “are McQueen’s or Kawakubo’s creations

fashion?” began to mirror similar queries in which the art world asks “is Damien Hirst’s installation of a cut in half pig in a vat of formaldehyde art?”

Pivotal pieces of this fashion trend are, for example, McQueen’s torturous facial jewellery and models appearing as though caged or modelled on a Hans Bellmer doll sculpture. There is also his controversial Highland Rape collection that shows battered models with blood splattered and torn gowns. Additionally, Kawakubo’s vision of the abject and the imperfect shows in her apocalyptic garments, such as her *Lace Sweater* and *Bump and Mind* collection. It could also be argued that all these types of new works might have arisen from a late Surrealist phenomena that is flavoured with a science-fiction ambience.

Interestingly, this paradigm shift in fashion design has occurred in direct relation to the dramatic changes in the teaching practices of art and design schools. Currently, these recent practices stress new values and promote the detailed exploration of non-traditional forms of inspiration. They actively promote the “pushing of the aesthetic boundaries” of fashion design. This came at a time when the majority of fashion designers felt that they had enormous difficulty in meaningfully contributing to the Modernist fashion lexicon or of adding to the list of new pattern shapes for garment pieces in the manner of a Madeleine Vionnet or a Cristobal Balenciaga. As a result, many contemporary fashion designs create garments that are “concept heavy” and, instead, move along Postmodern lines. The concepts are highly varied but in the main they rely heavily on formal appropriation, the use of non-traditional fashion materials and synthesise atypical historical fashion styles drawn from the wide-ranging area of dress, the wider world of installation and performance art. These new ways of examining fashion have provided the current range of designers with vehicles that are channelled, perhaps even endorsed, to fully express their personal philosophies and aesthetics. It is a well known fact that the major *couture* houses, especially those of Givenchy and Dior, have given their respective design director’s instructions that focus on making the fashion houses noteworthy in a media environment – one that is already heavily saturated with fashion. Shock, novelty, ephemeral outrage and visual surprise became new hallmarks – at least for media events, launches and openings. Using shock tactics and exploring fashion elements drawn from disintegrating mores, decadence, disaster, violence and cruelty permeate the collections of Alexander McQueen to a profound degree. His collections see-saw through a bricolage of historical dress, Surrealist motifs and horror film contexts. Caroline Evans in her recent publication entitled *Fashion at the Edge, Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness*, writes of the characteristics of much of

McQueen's collections, which stem from his infamous second show entitled *Nihilism* of 1993. She argued:

This collection set the tone for others over the next few years. Their mood was doomy and lost, savage and melancholic, yet also darkly romantic. In them McQueen developed an aesthetic of cruelty culled from disparate sources: the work of sixteenth and seventeenth-century anatomists, in particular that of Andreas Vesalius; the photography of Joel-Peter Witkin from the 1980s and 90s; and the films of Pasolini, Kubrick, Bunuel and Hitchcock. (2003, p.141)

These relatively esoteric sources are full of sensorially rich impressions that relish the hidden and the dark – the interior of the body as engraved by Vesalius (1514-1564) in his *book De Humani Corporis Fabrici (On the Fabric of the Human Body)*; the confronting fetishism and grotesque imagery found in Witkin's (1939-) striking photographs; the tense and provocative films of Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975); the solemnity and unconventionality found in Stanley Kubrick's (1928-1999) films such as *Dr. Strangelove* of 1964 and *A Clockwork Orange* of 1971; the odd imagistic juxtapositions found in Luis Bunuel's (1900-1983) compelling films such as *The Charm of the Bourgeoisie* of 1972 and *Belle de Jour (Woman of the Day)* of 1967 and the dark and deep psychological forces at work in Alfred Hitchcock's (1899-1980) films such as *Psycho* of 1960 and *Vertigo* of 1985.

Significantly, these attributes outline a new visual map of inspiration for contemporary fashion design and they distinctly inform McQueen's work and aesthetic directions. It is worthy of note that McQueen's aesthetic directions do not belong to the world of what might be called first order inspirations, such as the fall of fabric, the drape of a cloth or the visual match of colours and textures – as most Modernist designers did. McQueen's design imagination is drawn from a second order of inspiration – that is, it relies primarily upon already realised elements and images that exist in other's works, whether they are films, books, photographs and engravings. What draws McQueen to this second order of inspiration is his search for sensation and feeling, another component that is at the opposite end of the anaesthetic. In other words, while McQueen's works are sensation-driven, they are not "sensational" in the sense that they were made simply to shock or cause controversy. This sensation-based approach makes McQueen more like an artist or a sculptor, in that the viewer is invited to recover and relive the sensation that inspired the creation. Furthermore, McQueen's creations are credited with being highly

original and new, since personal sensations are deeply innate and cannot be poached or copied by others.

In McQueen's notorious *Highland Rape* collection of 1995, the symbolic cruelty comes in the form of torn and tattered clothing worn on battered and blood-splattered women. His conceptual collection was called into serious question by the press as well as mainstream society. The clothes were cut up and destroyed in parts in this collection, causing further controversy. The over-riding concerns centred upon two premises: that this was not fashion and it was not what women wanted to wear. To the artistically-minded, McQueen's explanation that the collection commented on England's rape of Scotland and not of the rape of women was sufficient to allay alarm, but to the outside press and public it was seen as a nightmarish and self-indulgent presentation.

While McQueen is seen as a deep thinker and an explorer of new territory in fashion - it just so happens that his highly imaginative bent is also controversial. His collections are demonstrable vehicles for his feelings of anger and outrage. To understand McQueen's psychological make-up his comments on anger give a hint about his innermost thoughts: "There's beauty in anger, and anger for me is a passion." (Wilcox 2001, p.96) His irreverent behaviour towards the fashion establishment is implicit in his collections' themes and outputs. He is fearless and keen to shake it to the core. However, underlying McQueen's showmanship and inventiveness for visceral fashion realisation, he is a designer of high skill as he is an expert pattern-maker and tailor – he is noted for his surgical precision in the tailoring area. His work is also noted for sharp, impeccable tailoring that is as good as that found in the works of Cristobal Balenciaga and Thierry Mugler.

Accessories have always played an important part in fashion and they were worn mainly for beauty and the enhancement of the face, hair and garment. However, McQueen's body sculpted jewellery seems at odds with these purposes and they almost play with sensations of sublimated agony. Two prominent jewelers have worked with McQueen. The English jeweler Shaun Leane and the Australian Sarah Harmanee have produced memorable but shocking pieces for his collections. Harmanee produced *Finger Horns* and *Knife Headpiece* for Autumn/Winter 1997-8 collection for Givenchy. Frightening and nightmarish Gothic styled pieces. In a similar vein, Leane produced torturous head, mouth and body pieces, such as, *Thorn Arm Vine and Face Thorns* Autumn/Winter 1996/1997,

Mouthpiece Spring/Summer 1997 and *Hoop Earrings and Mouthpiece* Autumn/Winter 2000 -

1. Leane is a close friend of McQueen's and their collaboration began in 1992. McQueen has stated that Leane "captures the feeling of my work and aesthetic of the time we are in... (his work is) full of structure and finesse, crafted to perfection". (V&A 2005, para 3)

It is worth noting that it was common practice for many of the *couturiers* to give a collection a title that hinted at the inspiration integral to the garments. In the late 1940s to '50s, Christian Dior gave his collections names such as *La Corolle* (the *New Look*), the *Zig Zag*, and the *Vertical Line*, or *Tulip Line*. In the 1990s, McQueen's collections were given the titles *The Hunger*, *Golden Showers* and *It's a Jungle Out There*. The titles are revealing of the styles: Dior's are linked to grace, elegance and femininity, while McQueen's are provocative, outrageous and connote horror – a type of graveyard glamour. Clearly, a major shift in design form and sensibility had occurred and arguably, McQueen was one of the most prominent to ride this new wave. Dior and his contemporaries could never have imagined that fashion would be based on anything other than the ideal of a beauty aiming for perfection. By contrast, in McQueen's work it is the imperfect that is admired. His demonic women are often masked, fetishised and look like aliens, warriors or what Angela Carter described as "woman monsters." (cited in Evans 2003, p.153)

For Rei Kawakubo, of *Comme des Garçons*, clothes are more akin to sculpture than to clothing itself. She has been one of the most influential and iconoclastic fashion designers of the last thirty years. Her debut on the Parisian fashion circle is now legendary because of her remarkable collection, which challenged traditional beliefs, modes of practice and the values of the 'then' current Western styles of fashion. She has dedicated herself to this new provocative practice ever since. Her collections are an anthology of garments designed and consciously created with flaws, dramatically oversized, in the main monochromatic, warped and asymmetrical. These deliberately defective garments celebrate the imperfect and rejected rather than the perfect, fitted and accepted Western modes of dress of the Eighties. From the outset her work was disregarded and attracted back-handed compliments such as "Hiroshima Chic" (Betts 2004, para 1) and "anti-fashion." Surprisingly, her aesthetic aims and approaches are deceptively simple and she sees herself as being influenced by the everyday and she believes that her popularity owes much to a current interest in "newness". Kawakubo, ever dissatisfied with preconceived ideas, has continued to take on new challenges. (Nii 2005, p.504)

Kawakubo's famous *Lace Sweater* of 1982 is a complex amalgamation of sources of inspiration: the Surrealist sensibility of Elsa Schiaparelli and Salvador Dali's *Tear Dress* and the torn and discarded refuse dress of the Punk subculture (Martin 1987). Also it may be noted that the sweater embraces the attributes of poverty, the rag picker and the displaced or homeless. (Koda 1985) It has the superficial look of a shredded and shabby garment – it was a sophisticated product with holes being knitted on the machine, not cut up after the completion of the product. Undoubtedly, in part, this related to the Buddhist view that beauty was seen in the imperfect, a concept which was foreign to Westerners. Bonnie English, fashion historian and Australia's expert in late twentieth century Japanese fashion commented upon the impact that Kawakubo and her collaborator Yohji Yamamoto had since the early Eighties:

The work of Yohji Yamamoto (YY) and Rei Kawakubo (*Comme Des Garçons*) has had an undeniable impact upon western fashion since the 1980s. Yet these designers have critiqued, and even insulted, western haute couture traditions. In their postmodernist design work, they celebrate their cultural heritage quietly in conceptual terms, whilst blatantly denying any phalliccentric notions of glamour, sexuality or gender. They besieged the industry with their unconventional fashions and their work was described as being 'uncompromising' and 'uncategorisable'. (2003, para 1)

Kawakubo continually aims to reinvent fashion, disregarding Eastern and Western design and construction conventions. In her significant *Bump Meets Mind* collection, she did this by using what may be called the three "Rs": restructuring, resurfacing and reshaping the silhouette and form of the garment. The initial reaction was one of uncertainty because of the natural body's potential for deformity. The bumps or lumps of her fashion design possibly allude to enlarged cysts and dowagers' humps. The visual distortion of the body by the inclusion of padded cushions gave an eerie naturalness to the form. Kawakubo's philosophy is about exploring the possibilities of dress through an intellectual questioning of accepted standards of dress and aiming for seemingly shapeless forms that were almost independent from the body.

During the Fashion Institute of Technology's seminal exhibition of 1987 in New York entitled *Three Women: Madeleine Vionnet, Claire McCardell and Rei Kawakubo*, *The New York Times* journalist, Bernadine Morris, placed Kawakubo in exalted company and reported the following:

The women are Madeleine Vionnet of the Paris couture, whose work dominated the 1920s and 1930s; Claire McCardell, the leading sportswear designer in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, and Rei Kawakubo, the most inventive member of the Tokyo school of design, who began attracting attention from the fashion world in 1981. Each designer defied the conventions of clothing construction of her time and each has pointed the way to new fashion directions. (1987 para 2)

The new fashion direction taken by Kawakubo led to garments that are biomorphic, billowing and bulging. In them we see fashion that is only very loosely aligned with the contours of the human body and the garments seem to take on a life of their own. Their ample folds, valleys and mounds of fabric speak of a new sculptural sensibility. Importantly, they seem to be carried rather than worn. Kawakubo described her work in the following way: "Not what has been seen before, not what has been repeated; instead, new discoveries that look towards the future, that are liberated and lively." (Fukai & Suoh, 2005 p.648)

Like McQueen, Kawakubo's garments use a second generation order of imagery that recalls the large winter kimonos of her native Japan, especially those that came equipped with bags, cushions and padded shoulders, seen in many of their famous woodblock prints. More significantly, Kawakubo's work owes something to the biomorphic forms found in the paintings of the Spanish artist Joan Miro (1893-1983) the French artist Yves Tanguy (1900-1955) and the Spaniard Salvador Dali (1904-1989), especially in his 1930s etchings for the book *Maldoror*.

In *Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed*, Harold Koda wrote about the biomorphic image of the *Bump Meets Mind* collection. He points out that:

Kawakubo questions the notion of symmetry as an essential component of healthful and attractive physiques. For her, beauty appears to reside even in an asymmetry that evokes the presence of pathologies. Kawakubo's design underscores the fact that the uneasiness precipitated by her aesthetic does not simply derive from its distortion of the natural form but rather the asymmetry she introduces. (2003, p.113)

Kawakubo's fashion design embraces ideas of an "anti-fashion" in that it rejects the look and finish of traditional high fashion. In her work one can find asymmetry, large folds and pleats that are unconventionally placed, exposed stitching, coarse layers, the use of "found" fabrics, the

use of tears in material and the incorporation of contrasting textures. Kawakubo also bases her work and thought upon concepts that govern her work. For instance, her collection entitled *Broken Brides* of 2005 was characterised by a melancholic mood that pervaded the models' white powdered faces, their satin pantsuits and velvet boleros. In more controversial terms, her 1995 collection entitled *Sleep* showed men's pyjamas, with printed numbers being worn by underweight models with shaven heads – the link to the World War II, concentration camps and the Holocaust was lost on none who saw the collection – the result was outrage. Natalie Khan in her paper *Catwalk Politics* argued that:

The problem with the use of such emotive imagery lies in the apparently casual manner in which it is done ... As a form of radical catwalk, such shows are attempting to be measured against something larger and more important than fashion. Fashion's supposed superficiality becomes a product of protest – a form of declaration, concept and contemplation. (2000, p.117)

The issue driven works of McQueen and Kawakubo have provoked outrage and introduced subjectivism to the world of high fashion. Their creations are transgressive and show the dark underside of a practice that once relied upon an over refined and commercially driven market. Their imaginative works aim for an artistic authenticity that presents a bracing antidote to an overly sanitised world. For McQueen and Kawakubo, the fashion show as artistic performance is paramount to the presentation of their work – in contrast with the past, these creations and events have something to say. So much so that, unlike the past, many ensembles are not meant to be worn and subsequently they are sent directly to a museum. The works of McQueen and Kawakubo turn the once unacceptable into the acceptable and the lines between sensation and shape, between idea and form and between art and fashion become increasingly blurred.

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