

# Performing the risk: four contemporary obituaries in Alexander McQueen

---

**Henrique Grimaldi Figueredo**

State University of Campinas Campinas,  
SP, Brazil  
henriquegrimaldfigueredo@outlook.com  
orcid.org/0000-0002-6324-4876

**Translation by Amanda Mazzoni  
Marcato**

Master's student in Arts, Culture and  
Languages  
Federal University of Juiz de Fora

---

**Abstract |** This article discusses the hybrid creation of British designer Alexander McQueen from his relational aspects with the theatre and performing arts. Starting from this expanded notion, we discuss how the social imaginary of risk is appropriate as a plastic material in the creation of some of his fashion-performances throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

**KEYWORDS:** Performance. Stylist-artist. Alexander McQueen.

---

**Performar o risco: quatro necrológicos contemporâneos em Alexander McQueen**

**Resumo |** Este artigo discorre sobre a criação híbrida do designer britânico Alexander McQueen a partir de seus aspectos relacionais com as artes do espetáculo e artes performáticas. Partindo dessa noção expandida, discutimos como o imaginário social do risco é apropriado como matéria-prima na criação de alguns de seus desfiles-performances ao longo dos anos 1990 e 2000.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Performance. Estilista-artista. Alexander McQueen.

---

**Performar el riesgo: cuatro necrológicos contemporáneos en Alexander McQueen**

**Resumen |** Este artículo analiza la creación híbrida del diseñador de moda británico Alexander McQueen a partir de sus aspectos relacionales con las artes escénicas y performativas. A partir de esta noción ampliada, discutimos cómo el imaginario social del riesgo es apropiado como material plástico en la creación de algunos de sus desfiles-performances a lo largo de las décadas de 1990 y 2000.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Performance. Diseñador-Artista. Alexander McQueen.

---

Submitted: 05/20/2020

Accepted: 11/04/2020

Published: 20/11/2020

*I find beauty in the grotesque,  
like most artists - Alexander McQueen*

## Opening notes

The turn of the centuries carries a dreamlike dimension. In these moments of transition, there is the production of societal expectations that become temporarily structuralizing of relationships and influences the community cultural productions. Be it a youthful hope or a paralyzing anxiety in the face of uncertainty, there is something characteristic about these moments of transition. From apocalyptic theories to the contingencies of a future redeemer, the turn between centuries carries the potential of restarts and conclusions. When the British sociologist Caroline Evans researched the creation of young Londoners in the late 1990s, it is not completely surprising that she found a recurrence of processes, themes and interests, that is, a constitutive homology between different spatialities and social realities in a *fin-de-siècle* feeling: "it could be Vienna at the end of the century, or Paris in the 1930s, or even London in the 1990s: each of them has a relationship with modernity and technological changes through their impacts on sensitivities" (EVANS, 2012, p. 5).

In these moments, other forms of creation emerge. Some are idyllic - tensioning a pragmatic real and rehearsing different possibilities of existence - and others somewhat agonistic, confronting the experience of the real and producing a culture of trauma, that sees in the generational wound the raw material of the sensitive<sup>1</sup>. We are interested in this second trend, that is, as in the imminence of a set of risks - real and imagined - and notably serious political, economic and social conditions, a group of creators - and in particular the British stylist-artist Alexander McQueen (1969 -2010) - appropriated to the structural anxieties of their generation as a primal module of creation, using a performative approach in fashion to communicate the concerns and unrest of British youth in the 1990s.

Methodologically we will start from a set of debates that inscribe McQueen's production sometimes as a performance, sometimes as a spectacle, getting closer - in countless moments - more as the operational modes of visual arts or performing arts than to the dynamics of fashion market. Herewith this debate, we will discuss how the risk - within a sociological tradition - is changed into an element of visual research, guiding the theme and the fruitive plastic composition of his work. The application of content analysis will be inspired by Foucault's discourse analysis (1972), in which discourse can only be understood as long as the elaboration of symbolic power relations. As a text analysis, therefore, we understand not only the digressions about its written form, but also text-image - the fashion shows, the clothes, the performance - in the tradition of a visual ethnography that produces a certain equivalence between (optical)

---

<sup>1</sup> This is what we can see in the discussions punctuated in the works of Slavoj Zizek and Hal Foster, for example, about the modes of cultural production, sometimes pointing to a confrontation with the real, sometimes through an escape from it (ZIZEK, 1991; FOSTER, 2013).

testimony and anthropological report (PINK, 2006).tre testemunho (ótico) e relato antropológico (PINK, 2013). It is important to note that the concept of performance and spectacle that we adopted in this reflection intersects three propositions: (1) that one of the English art theorist and curator, Andrew Bolton (2011) in defense of a 'living art', which mobilizes a 'vital energy' conditioned to the manifestations of the corporeal Other with reverberation in its audience; (2) the concept of hybrid existences and performativity articulated by the French sociologist Bruno Latour (FIGUEREDO & ALMEIDA, 2018) who understands the behavioral transformations of sociotechnical subjects, that is, when confronted with the world and the objects that surround them (clothing catalyzes a way of being); and (3) the notion developed by Melim of "live actions shared by an audience, who refuse to leave evidence [...] or actions of the same nature that leave traces from a series of remnants, other forms of unfolding of these procedures "(MELIM, 2008, p. 8). It will be the articulation of these techniques and concepts that will allow us to discover collective generational meanings and representations, since, if we want to find the rules of concept formation we have to look in the speeches, or more specifically, in a given discursive field (FOUCAULT, 1972).

### **Fashion as a performance and the fashion designer as an artist**

The French sociologist Frédéric Monneyron, in his research on the social imaginary, uses fashion as a heuristic example in the description of the related components between current thinking and cultural production. For him, fashion is not a random and autarchic movement, it develops in close harmony with the present imaginary, constituting itself as a privileged object to unveil the complexity of the social field. In this perspective, fashion assumes a double functionality, if on the one hand it translates as a representation of the imagined components of society, additively it converges a certain premonitory dimension, anticipating a new way of being. In this second perspective, fashion emerges as a simulation - or emulation - of an unprecedented social arrangement, experiencing its viability which can be transmuted as a rule - in a way of being current - in a short period of time ( MONNEYRON, 2001; BUENO, 2010).

We can link this reflection to that punctuated by curator and researcher Ginger Gregg Duggan, who argues that the end of the 1990s represents a turning point in the forms of representation and presentation of fashion characterized by a narrowing of the art / fashion phenomenon, "with greater reach in its effect when it results in fashion productions that communicate through performance art "(DUGGAN, 2002, p. 3). Young designers use different sources of creation - political activism, performance art from the 60s and 70s, Dada performances and from the Fluxus group, theater and popular culture - completely transforming the catwalk: "the result is a new hybrid performance art almost completely disconnected from the traditionally commercial aspects of the clothing industry "(DUGGAN, 2002, p. 4).

Since the mid-1990s, designers such as Alexander McQueen, John Galliano, Hussein Chalayan and Andrew Groves, have gained notoriety for

fashion shows that are interpreted as a sequence of images of dreams or fantastic visions, cultural products that are born before as a performance production rather than a commercialization device. Fashion shows appear as smaller and more ritualistic, there is a direct allusion to the installations of artists like Rebecca Horn and Ann Hamilton, or even to the political satires of Leslie Labowitz and Suzanne Lacy. The boundaries between art and fashion are blurred, and unthinkable concerns are created: "Is it a fashion show or a happening? Is it a dress or a sculpture? Is this a boutique or an art gallery?" (DUGGAN, 2002, p. 4).

In the perspective of ontological tension between the disciplinary fields of art and fashion, five types of new fashion shows can be identified: spectacle, substance, science, structure and affirmation. Each of these categories carries a series of distinctive elements and specificities. Our focus here is on the first of these types, the spectacle, which Duggan argues that promote a dimension orbiting between theatricalization and performative elaboration of culture, and in which Alexander McQueen can be listed as a lively participant.

The spectacle fashion shows rehearses a departure from logic (clothing as a functional item) and approaches a certain modern dynamic of art (disinterested aesthetic experience) that is manipulated through four fundamental pillars: type of model, theme, location and conclusion (performance). Although the basic motivation is marketing, "designers created performances firmly rooted in the historical precedents of the theater, (...), which contributes to further blur the boundaries between fashion, art, theater and performance (DUGGAN, 2002, p. 10); in this way, the connections between the natural spaces in each of these disciplines are constantly strained, the concepts scrambled, and the discursive practice itself is corrupted. Art magazines bringing criticism of fashion shows, newspapers covering these shows in their "culture and art" sessions, fashion editors sharing the front-row with curators: the conceptual fashion movement starts to translate itself "easily within the scope of contemporary museums and galleries" (DUGGAN, 2002, p. 14).

It is not by chance that directors and managers of important museums like Andrew Bolton - Metropolitan Museum of New York - describe McQueen's work from a hybridization, approaching him to recognized and legitimate creators in the artistic field of the performing arts:

Highly theatrical, his fashion shows strongly suggest an avant-garde type of performance or installation art. In a recent article, the artist Marina Abramovic described performance art as having "vital energy", and paintings and sculptures as having "static energy". With McQueen's presentations we are dealing with this vital energy. Like performance art, the power of his performances reverberates in the audience's emotional engagement. As a designer he was unique in this ability to make his audience react intensely to his presentations; McQueen once said, "I don't want to make a cocktail, I prefer people leave my shows and throw up" (BOLTON, 2011, p. 18).

Sam Gainsbury - producer of most of McQueen's shows since 1995 - in an interview to Bolton, confirms this idea that ties McQueen's fashion to performance. When analyzing the preponderance of the show over clothes, Gainsbury describes the centrality that performance assumes in the designer's creation, "McQueen could never start a collection until he had an idea or concept developed for the show, (...), for him, the parade was not only critical in its creative process, it was the catalyst for creation" (BOLTON, 2011, p. 18). The fashion show is, therefore, what arouses McQueen's creative interest, it is his ignition point. Clothes and the entire objectual universe that surrounds them, appear only as secondary elements, structures that help in the materialization of a larger discursive and symbolic equation.

The designer himself would affirm this in an interview "For me, what I do is an artistic expression which is channeled through me. Fashion is just the medium" (MCQUEEN apud BOLTON, 2011, p. 4). Since fashion is "just the medium" by which artistic concerns are expressed, McQueen becomes, in the words of Cathy Horyn - a critic of the New York Times - "a great fashion designer who is not only making beautiful clothes, but also responding, as an artist, the horror and insanity in contemporary culture" (CALLAHAN, 2015, p. 227). Therefore, adopting the designer's theatrical production as a form of performance art, we witness a transubstantiation of it: the artist's status is claimed by the fashion designer producing a hierarchy of his creation in relation to his peers. A symptom of a *fin-de-siècle* feeling, at the same time as the cause / consequence of this turn, the designer as an artist represents another cultural modality to be observed and studied, first because of its circulation - which is both symbolic and commercial - but also for its media and transnational role, becoming a cultural agent of relevance for the artistic production of the new century in a correspondence [and to some extent in a reconciliation] between pop culture and legitimated culture, between museum and the street, between kitsch and tradition, aesthetics and economy.

If we return to Horyn's positive criticism of McQueen, we can raise some questions of substantial importance: If the designer is an artist and responds to the horrors of contemporary times, what catastrophes are these? Moreover, how is this insanity transferred to the sensitive aspects of the performance (fashion show)? We think that one of the possible answers is the discussions focuses on the sociological idea of risk as a catalyst for community cultural manifestations, that is, from the collapse of the self, others modes of presentation emerge and themes that are also displaced, now, moved from the marginality of debates to their centrality.

### **Risk and artistic production: possible correspondences**

A social history of British fashion in the 1990s is, in some instance, inseparable from a sociological notion of risk. When we intend to analyze part of

the cultural production developed in Great Britain - namely in London - in the 1990s and 2000s, we must have something in mind. Children of the Thatcher era<sup>2</sup>, the fashion designers and artists of this period were inserted in a troubled context: contemporaries of the massive consolidation of TV and the emergence of the internet, experienced the expansion of the visual regimes of their time. Also crossed by a new awareness of death (the global HIV pandemic; the genocide in Rwanda; the "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia) and a structural fear of disappearance (technological advances; the imminence of a nuclear war; the collapse of the world market, cloning technologies); such agents were shaped by the cultivation of social anxiety that will be answered plastically in their creative productions. To this context we could add the speed of change and the ubiquity of risks, global or individual. The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 and unlike an expected period of peace, the opposite is true; they were experiencing the growth of globalized relationships, the result of the development of information technologies, and the increasingly polarization between the Christian West and the Muslim East, rightly described in the book *Os Versículos Satânicos*, by Salman Rushdie. It will be at that moment that fashion becomes a central player, developing a categorical role in the construction of images and meanings, as well as in the articulation of ideologies and anxieties (GUERRA & FIGUEREDO, 2020).

It is, therefore, not surprising that Giddens and Beck postulate crucial assertions at this time. The first one wedges the concept of late modernity reflecting on the systems of representation of the self in contemporary times. In modern times, a number of changes have affected the entire globe and the most intimate of individuals. The world has become apparently and noticeably smaller; distant events directly affect people's lives (GIDDENS, 1991). The concept of greater predominance in this modernity is, of course, the risk. And the risk is clearly a modern concept since it refers to a departure from the past and looks directly into the future (or rather, a substantial complicator of the future, an imminent danger).

Giddens also describes the idea of a 'manufactured or presumed risk', which is related to the advancement of knowledge about the world. Paradoxically, the development of new knowledge does not reduce risks, it enhances them. In addition, this manufactured risk refers simultaneously to human intervention in nature and to the constant social changes in modernity. Similarly, Ulrich Beck argues about a risk society. It is crucial to remember that his eponymous text was published in 1986, following the Chernobyl disaster, so therefore a certain dismay and tepidity in his work cannot be ignored. Scientific and industrial development originated a true 'civilization volcano', that is, risks that are no longer contained in time and space and start to act objectively on societal relationships and sensitivities (BECK, 1992).

---

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady, was British Prime Minister between 1979 and 1990. The social context of English avant-garde fashion of the 1990s has its genesis in the economic and labor crisis of young creative children from the working class, remnants of their monetarist and neoliberal policy.

If for Giddens (1991) the risk is subdivided into two sensitive dimensions: the assumed (imagined) and the realized, the composition of the subjects orbits - according to their historical and social realities - from one pole to the other, and those coordinates that are themselves scriptwriting in the objective existences of socialized subjects. In addition to the actual occurrence of the catastrophe, the imminence of the act, that is, the presumed risk, ratifies the same type of effect on modern subjects, being, in certain moments, incisively worse. The expectation before the disaster is causing a collapse of the self and the genesis of a melancholy that will be manifested in their cultural productions. Thus, for Evans (2012), what is significant when reflecting on the risk-culture relation, is the way fashion creates an articulation of contemporary concerns about the self and the world, that is, as fashion (responding to the imaginary of risk, imaginary that is simultaneously, in Monneyron's argument, reflex and premonition), will act in the plastic and sensitive translation of social concerns and excitations.

In this way, a culture of trauma emerges in the exploration of physical and psychological wound that would dominate much of the fashion, films, art, theater, photography and music of the 1990s. It was the melancholy weeping of Kurt Cobain, the seductive experience of Twin Peaks, by David Lynch, and The Silence of the Lambs, by Jonathan Demme; it was also the containment of the larvae in a cow carcass in A Thousand Years (1990), by Damien Hirst; or even a swarm of five thousand flies trapped in a coat being released on the public at Andrew Groves' Status (1998) fashion show; the messy bed with semen traces in Tracey Emin's work My bed (1998); or the semen-filled necklace - potentially deadly - by Simon Costin (Incubus Necklace, 1987); the Christ of cigarettes crucified on the English flag in the work of Sarah Lucas, the faecal paintings by Chris Offili, the live larvae trapped in the corsets of the models in Alexander McQueen's The Hunger (1995) fashion show. Just as the Romantic movement at the end of the 18th century represented a reaction to the industrial revolution, this new disarticulation of the beauty of fin de siècle - as described by Callahan (2015) - was the collective movement (of fashion, but also of the arts, music, from the experimental theater in Leicester Square) towards the narcotic and the morgue, an expression of ancient anger and despair.

The risk was, therefore, translated into an aesthetic of anxiety - which is the materialization of cultural modes of production and consumption, namely the artistic, coordinated by an agonistic restlessness in the face of risk (FIGUEREDO, 2019) - becoming an epistemological solution of crisis that allowed this generation its self-analysis. Faced with the societal dismay of a hopeless youth, McQueen as a contemporary creator becomes an excellent example that allows us to illustrate such issues, namely, to discuss how risk - real and presumed - is transformed into performance for fashion creation. How it is done and under which strategies are powerful questions that help us to unravel the current imagination and the importance of the creator for his peers and also for future generations. If for the curator of the Victoria & Albert Museum, Claire Wilcox, "the Alexander McQueen fashion show has always been the highlight of any fashion week, due to its format much closer to a performance manifestation

than to the traditional catwalk exhibitions" (WILCOX, 2015, p. 7), this is due precisely to a well-made translation of the current contemporary imagination into the field of fashion and performance, generating identification, affectation and agreement.

### **Aesthetics of anxiety: four contemporary obituaries in McQueen's performances**

McQueen was certainly the fashion designer who best knew how to translate the anxieties of his time to the catwalk. The refinement of this operation has unfolded in hundreds of publications, comments and reports produced during the 1990s and 2000s. The attention that production received from the media - specialized but also from ordinary newspapers - can be interpreted in part as an identification of community feelings that - although they were at different times shocking or repulsive - found a certain resonance in social instances. Not inadvertently the historian and journalist Maureen Callahan (2015) claims that McQueen was the first fashion designer whose death was felt as a great cultural, generational loss, on the same level as the suicide of Kurt Cobain or the accidental deaths of Heath Ledger and River Phoenix.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of McQueen's work lies in the fact that this creator has more or less homogeneously covered the aesthetic trends of his generation through his fantastic endings and catwalk performances. It is important to note, however, that when we affirm the existence of an aesthetic of anxiety (expressed as a symptom of an imaginary of risk in the 1990s), we do not mean that cultural production was based on a uniform aesthetic but rather that themes and ways of dealing with risk, although different, converged to a common point. The aesthetic of anxiety is therefore the set of different aesthetic trends mobilized by the feeling of risk, and which, regardless of whether they focus on one theme or another, diagnosed the same feeling of cultural malaise in the late 20th century. Among there are so many different aesthetic trends in this period, we can highlight four: *the wasted look, mortality-fetishism, abjectual aesthetics and memento-mori*.

Although each of these currents turned to specific discussions (illness, death, excesses, etc.), they indicated a common denominator in the ways that youth treats the risks - real and presumed - constituting a mode of epistemological solution for the British culture from the 1990s. They represent, therefore, true contemporary obituaries, obituaries from a world in crisis that in the youth imagination was ready to fall apart. A social symptom of the exasperation and fear that went through all this youth, the modus operandi of the English avant-garde culture in general - and of McQueen in particular - allows us to see the conditioning between risk and creation, object and subject, matter and performance.

---

<sup>3</sup> Alexander McQueen committed suicide on February 11, 2010, in his London apartment, a few days after the death of his mother Joyce.

Moving forward with these questions, we will describe each of the aesthetic trends most practiced by English fashion of the period, illustrating them in the creation and concretization of performances on the Alexander McQueen catwalk, and thus corroborating the arguments that inscribe him as a producer of real *happenings* or theatrical experiences that competed with the works of artists like Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, being - in the words of Callahan (2015) - "impossible to say which was more provocative and vulgar" (CALLAHAN, 2015, p. 91).

The first of these trends - the Wasted Look - was also the one with the greatest recurrence in British fashion devices in the 1990s. It appears in the editorials of Rankin and Henrik Halvarsson in 1996 for Dazed & Confused magazine depicting lethargic models in public bathrooms after suggestive sexual encounters; in skeletal bodies in lethargic poses positioned in urban settings in Corinne Day's photographs surrounded by drinks, cigarettes and drugs; and even in Benetton's sales campaigns on its teen jeans line. Fashion theorist Rebecca Arnold (1999) synthesizes this trend in her article *Heroin Chic* as "sex, death and ambiguity are the main themes of our time" (1999, p. 285).

The *wasted look* work a repositioning of the body and contemporary beauty in an environment crossed by risk. The body, sexy and healthy in the 1980s, is slowly being sublimated by another, decadent and in the process of disappearing, "the creation of the perfect body is refuted at the expense of another, brutalized, destroyed body" (ARNOLD, 1999, p. 295). This change in the subject's substance is directly associated with the collapse of the *self* in the face of risk, that is, at the moment when uncertainty becomes the only possible and the scripts and plans of living seem directly threatened by death and illness, the transformation of beauty goes in the direction of a resumption of power by the individual, crystallizing contemporary notions of excess - of drugs, of sex - as the most real experience, the most immediate sensation (ARNOLD, 1999).

Katherine Wallestein corroborates this description when she says that that starving, insomniac, feverish, fatigue look that flirts with danger, with death, "an appearance associated with drugs, with fasting, with sex, with emotional experiences of great intensity, and with the dangerous excitement of the night, it actually speaks of the highest experience of living" (WALLESTEIN, 1998, p. 140). There seems to be a constitutive paradox in this conformation: how does the flirt with death actually translate into a life drive? One of the possible solutions lies exactly in the experience of risk as a disruptive in the scripts of living, that is, in the moment when social anxiety is aggravated by the continuous presence of risks (real, such as the possibility of HIV infection, the condemnation of sex as pathological; but also presumed, East / West tensions, death by terrorism, etc.), the subject that seems to count on his own destruction, reconciles himself with death and experience the excess to feel alive one last time. Excess is the key word here, it is what produces the aesthetics of wasted, of the waste of life, of a tangent point between the death drive and the irresolute will to live.

It is not by chance that works of art and fashion in this period that deal with the poetics of excess: Tracey Emin's tent, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*

1963-1995 (1995), sewn with the names of everyone who shared the bed with the artist; or a silver necklace with pearls and semen by Simon Costin, bringing to his chest the epitome of excess, the semen - an element that represents life - now transmuted into a sick and toxic vector. McQueen will also use the aesthetic of the *Wasted Look* to compose one of the most talked about fashion shows of his career: Voss (Spring / Summer 2001), presented in the 2000s, right after the turn of the millennium.

In *Voss* we can perceive the manipulation of the aspects of the show to compose the idea of performance as described by Duggan (2002): the theme, the models, the scenario and the closing act. Working from the poetics of excess, McQueen incorporates the *Wasted Look* in the theme (in the embedded testimony of the extreme experiences of involuntary hospitalization, of hospital environments, of madness, the beauty "becoming more psychotic and dysfunctional" (EVANS, 2012, p 95)) as well as in the progressive erasure of sexual characteristics: hair made invisible by tight bands, breasts hidden by disconcerting volumes and unusual materials, the color of the skin is also rectified: the reddish tones of healthy subjects are replaced by pale makeup, almost nonexistent, which tends to an olive green. The performance starts even before the start of the fashion show. There is no catwalk. In the center of the space there is just a big mirrored box. McQueen starts the show with a considerable delay, purposely made so that the guests were forced to face their own reflection. Facing his own reflection, seeing others face themselves or denying the idea of reflexivity when looking in the distance, McQueen saw his audience progressively become uneasy. This cruel but particularly potent scenario is made significant by the fact that its audience consists mostly of professionals in the fashion industry, or as journalist Sarah Mower described them "the meeting of the highest arbitrators of vanity" (MOWER, 2001, p. 162).

The moment the presentation begins, McQueen reverses this situation by stimulating his audience's voyeurism while forcing models inside the box to be uncomfortable with their self-reflexivity. For ten minutes, these models - transformed into solitary performers - stage for themselves, for their own reflexes, a self that is extremely intimate, and oscillates between the domestic universe and mental asylum. In *Voss*, as clothes become progressively more disturbing, the daily narcissism of the fashion universe expressed in her models begins to sound more psychotic and dysfunctional. With their heads wrapped in bandages the interpreters of this metaphorical asylum appear highly fetishized through the materials used in their costumes: shells, feathers, wood, common materials in doctors' offices, a brocade kimono with growing vegetation and long sleeves tied on its back it symbolized a type of straight jacket, those used to contain violent psychiatric patients. Here, McQueen reduced observers and performers to objects in the tradition of Lukács and Marx's descriptions of the commodity fetishism in which people live their relationships with others through objects, trapping human emotions in things (EVANS, 2012; THOMAS, 2015).

The performance ends when a box in the center of the metaphorical psychiatric space opens to reveal the English fetishist writer Michelle Olley

wearing a breathing mask, reclining on a sofa made of long bovine horns and covered by living moths (FIGURE 1). Inspired by the work of Joel Peter Witkin, *Sanitarium* (1993), which featured a middle-aged woman wearing the same breathing mask connected to a monkey; the focal point of this show resides in this idea that stresses beauty and horror, embracing a polymorphic perversity that fuses sex, madness, and a beauty that fades through excess, the *wasted look*. When approaching these ambivalent measures, Voss recovers what Theodor Adorno says is intrinsic to the phantasmagoria effect: "the conversion of pleasure into disease is a denouncing trait of phantasmagoria, [...] phantasmagoria is infected from the outside with the seeds of their own destruction. Within the illusion, disillusion prevails" (ADORNO, 1981, p. 94).



FIGURE 1 - Voss, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2001. Gatlift Road Warehouse, London, 09/26/2000. Source: vogue.co.uk

The abject also appears in this performance, "a dress whose torso covered with sheets of blood for laboratory use, [...], suggested the fragility of life: 'There is blood under each layer of skin', McQueen would talk about this piece, metaphorizing T.S Eliot's axiom, '*the skull beneath the skin*' (TOWNSEND, 2015, p, 159). The aesthetics of the abject, the second aesthetic trend of that period, is in line with what the philosopher Julia Kristeva 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 rather before being the first (previously the separation from the mother as a psychoanalytic reference) or after becoming an object (like a corpse delivered to the state of putrefaction) (KRISTEVA, 1982).

The abject is what triggers disgust, it is the fascination with everything that is borderline, with regurgitated food, with body fluids: blood, semen, urine. It also denotes the tension that Lacan finds in what he calls *les corps morcelé* (FUSS, 2002), that is, in the fascination of broken and open bodies cause in the subjects. In Untitled (Spring/Summer 1998) - initially entitled Golden Shower, a reference vetoed by its sponsor at the time, the company *American Express* - McQueen operates the abject on the catwalk. With a collection of mostly white pieces, the models were dispatched to the catwalk under a golden shower, a reference to the sexual practice of urinating on the partner. Something similar occurs in *The Hunger* (1995) with models wearing corsets of perspex, a transparent plastic, filled with live larvae in allusion of addlement of bodies. In Joan, another 1998 fashion show, the abject resurfaces in red clothes as if they were dyed with blood and more properly in its closing, alternating the sacredness of a sanctified incarnation with the "transcendence of a demonic reincarnation" (SPOONER, 2015, p. 154). The supplication of Saint Joan of Arc, burned at the stake by the French inquisition, becomes the horizontal element of all other references: the obsession with the Russian imperial family, the Romanovs, through the reproduction of the murder photographs of the children of Czar Nicholas II by the hordes of revolutionaries; and the paintings *Still life with lobster* (1631), by Jan Davidz; *Dead Rose* (1721), by Jean-Baptiste Oudry and *Virgin and Child Surrounded by Angels* (1450), by Jean Fouquet. Exploring the fantastic trauma through what he calls "the real London, the club scene, the homeless" (THOMAS, 2015, p.261), McQueen experiences a kind of performative necromancy summoning creatures in latex dresses, black leather, short bangs and red opaque eyes, physiological consequences of hell sulfur. The catwalk simulated solidified black lava and had the performance of a faceless model surrounded by a circle of fire as a *grand finale* (FIGURE 2), an experience of "vast magical conflagration" (ADORNO, 1981, p. 90) - terminology that philosopher Theodor Adorno used to describe the apocalyptic effects of phantasmagoria - the performance of the fashion show appears eclipsing its parts, avoiding the fragmentation of the act (clothes, soundtrack, lighting, models, makeup, etc.) in favor of the action itself . In the same way that the German composer Wagner's operas seek to "hide production through the external aspect of the product" (ADORNO, 1981, p. 85), McQueen sublimates the technical values of his creation through the growing aspects of his theatricality.



FIGURE 2 - Joan, Alexander McQueen, Autumn/Winter 1998. Gatlin Road Warehouse, London, 02/25/1998. Source: vogue.co.uk

The third of these aesthetic trends, and perhaps the one that appears most theatrically on the catwalk of the English designer, is what the fashion theorist Efrat Tseelon identifies by "*mortality-fetishism*", that which regulates the body through surgery and diet, from the persecution of the hypertrophic, creating a similarity between beauty rituals and death (TSEELON, 1995, p. 108). This trend is partly in line with what we previously exemplified as a *wasted look*: in the persecutory character of extreme experience - and in the absence of self-care - provoke another kind of beauty and flirts with the fatal. It appears in McQueen's performances through two complementary processes. Firstly, in the ordering processes of the bodies (the wounds, extended necks, mouths covered and wide open by pieces of jewelry) illustrated in the *Bellmer La Poupée* (Spring/Summer 1997). Inspired by the dysfunctional and amorphous beauty of the dolls created in the pre-war period by the German sculptor Hans Bellmer, the designer dispatches the models to the catwalk with metallic elements that sometimes left their mouths open and dripping saliva, sometimes they attached arms and legs demanding a different way of walk.

In Deliverance (Spring/Summer 2004), we can see the second possibility of this trend. In a fashion show inspired by the movie *They shoot horses, don't they?* (1969) by Sidney Pollack on dance marathons in the USA during the Prohibition period, McQueen creates a performance that goes beyond twenty minutes, a very long time compared to other shows of the time. Models were mixed with professional dancers from the French group Les Child, and the presentation corrupts the traditional model of the fashion show by reformulating the experience as a dance performance. The notion of mortality-fetishism resurfaces in the recommendations given by the designer: there is no exact time of presentation, neither scripts, everyone must dance to exhaustion, until the body gives way.

It would not be an exaggeration to identify in Deliverance a possible

Thanatophilia<sup>4</sup>, which operates as a death drive, and at the same time emulates a certain sadism. In the three acts that make the performance, the energetic music already denotes the project's proposal - the aesthetic of exhaustion: models dancing to physical exhaustion, compulsively, the staggering bodies moved perhaps for a death desire; or yet an allegory of macabre dances in the medieval period generating a sadistic dimension in the receiver, the testimony of something torturous or spooky to be watched silently. There is also an approach to those works of Sound Art from the 1970s, namely the creations of the German Helga de la Motte-Haber and the constitution of a sound space that create an approximation between visuality and an internal vibration in the viewers. Deliverance represents the perfect metaphor for social exhaustion, a last and irresolute moment of Dionysian ecstasy in the face of an imminent disappearance.

Tensioning the threshold of life and death, the last, and perhaps more recurring aesthetic trend of that moment that converges and crystallizes the others, can be identified as the impetus for the production of contemporary memento-mori. For the imaginary sociologist, Eleanor Townsend, *memento-mori* are images and motifs whose purpose is to remind the viewer of death. In this period, they will be present in the work of *Young British Artists*<sup>5</sup>, in the pieces written and performed in Leicester Square, in the grunge music that arises from the despair of this youth, in the creation of filmmakers dedicated to fantastic horror and in the celebration of directors like Alfred Hitchcock; in fashion, "McQueen drinks directly from this rich tradition, [...], repeatedly proposing visual intimations mortally contrary to the glamour of fashion" (TOWNSEND, 2015, p. 159).

In shows such as *Banshee* (Autumn/Winter 1994), *Highland Rape* (Autumn/Winter 1995), *Dante* (Autumn/Winter 1996) and *What-a-merry-go-round* (Autumn/Winter 2001), the theme of death is appropriate to compose the performance. Whether in reference to the Gaelic spirit that foreshadows a fatality to happen, in the images of death produced by Don McCullin in the Vietnam War and used as prints in *Dante* or in the carousel of horrors created in 2001 with the models dragging skeletons arrested in their heels, the death - happened or presumed - provided plastic elements for externalizing a generational trauma. In *Widdows of Culloden* (Autumn/Winter 2006), McQueen proposes a kind of continuation of his *Highland Rape* collection from 95. On that first occasion, bloody models, frayed and torn clothes, vulvas exposed in an allusion to the English crown genocide over Scotland during the Jacobite Uprisings. In *Widdows of Culloden*, the theme is the widows left by the war and the absence of loved ones producing cultural artifacts and specific methods of treating grief.

<sup>4</sup> Term referring to the Greek god Thánatos, personification of death, and widely worked on in psychoanalytic theory. In the 1990s, Thanatophilia can be characterized by a desire for lean bodies, the consumption of drugs and cigarettes, and exhaustion, themes that will emerge in art and fashion and are associated with the idea of Heroin Chic (ARNOLD, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Generation that converges a group of contemporary artists to this same generation of fashion designers. Many had a certain proximity - an example of McQueen and the duo Jake and Dinos Chapman - and worked with approximate themes, see the constant references to death in Damien Hirst and pathological sex in Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas (FIGUEREDO, 2018).

Referring to the common devices in the 19th century that allowed the holographic reproduction - through an intricate game of mirrors - of photographs of loved ones who have passed away, the final performance of this show included the production of a spectrum inside an allocated glass pyramid in the center of the catwalk. The specter of the English model Kate Moss created in this performance end is at the same time the remembrance of a lost past, of other people, devoured by time; but also a kind of omen - a Banshee, as in its collection of 94 - announcing a kind of ontological and generational death.

The elaboration of contemporary memento-mori finally equalizes the set of aesthetic trends of that period. Death, the last barrier in life, the only possible certainty in a scenario of structural uncertainties, becomes a generational motto, being cultivated and glorified in different cultural interpretations. The creator's fascination with death as a performative dimension was such that in conversation with friend and producer Sebastian Pons, in 2009, McQueen would have suggested that he was developing his latest collection, and inspired by Voss's mirrored box he would kill himself at the end of the fashion show, which this would be his last performance (THOMAS, 2015).

### **Final notes**

The descriptions of the performative fashion shows and the problematizations created from these collected testimonies represent, in fact, a possible investigation of the hybrid practices between fashion/theater/performance that are so characteristic of McQueen's work in the 1990/2000. He is just one agent among many who have used this expanded format to communicate their generational concerns to the general public. If we analyze the fashion shows of other avant-garde designers of the period, we will see very similar issues, some of them - for example, designer Hussein Chalayan - even departing from fashion to establish themselves as visual artists or performance artists, they sign sets and costumes for theater, as well as ballet and opera production.

The perception of these creations as theatrical or performance art is not just and irresolutely a notion stipulated by the empirical observation of theorists eager to digress about substantial changes in the cultural field; they are present in the reports of their viewers, the media, the critics, and most importantly in the testimonies collected from their models, transmuted into actresses and performers. Debra Shaw recalls that as soon as she entered the catwalk, she felt she was transformed into someone else. Like her, Erin O'Connor - McQueen's model who was on many occasions the interpreter of her closing acts - describes how for each look she developed a different persona. In Voss, for example, for the two looks used, she catalyzed two different performances.

You are giving your permission, (...), to get lost at that moment. So, I walked on water, I was enveloped in flames, I was suspended in the air dressed as a geisha, (...), we were not using objects, they became part of us and who we really were. It was actually a

performance and I understood that, (...), if you ask me what I did, I couldn't tell you, I really didn't have much control at that moment (EVANS, 2012, pp. 199-200).

Differently from proposing an axiomatic defense that categorically inscribes McQueen's work as a performance, the purpose of this reflection is to punctuate a provocation, that is, to develop a debate that allows us to glimpse how the transforming essence of theater and the body arts can - at a time when porous borders (ZOLBERG & CHERBO, 1997) - to be appropriated by other cultural practices, providing them with the paths and energy for their reinvention.

Whether as an object of analysis of phenomena such as globalization and the internalization of culture; remodeling structure of sensitive social organizations; activism and modes of resistance; cultural and emancipatory codes; political struggle or ethical problematization; visual pleasure strategies or youth societal projection; fashion in its relational aspect with the performing arts and theater emerge as a rightful sociological object, allowing us understanding the configurations and symbolic disputes in society. If we understand these elements under what Monneyron (2001) discuss as a mirrored and premonitory dimension of the social field; McQueen's fashion performances simultaneously represented a subjective - objectively elaborated - way of treating generational traumas, transforming the concerns and risks of an entire group into visuality and social performance, but also another way of rewriting culture as a social practice, paving the path to hybrid arts in the 21st century.

## References

- ADORNO, Theodor. **In Search of Wagner**. Nova York: Verso, 1981.
- ARNOLD, Rebecca. Heroin Chic. **Fashion Theory**, vol. 3 issue 3, 1999.
- BECK, Ulrich. **Risk Society**: Towards a New Modernity. Londres: Sage, 1992.
- BOLTON, Andrew. **Alexander McQueen**: Savage Beauty. Nova Iorque: Met Publications, 2011.
- BUENO, Maria Lúcia. Por que ler...Frédéric Monneyron? **Revista D'Obras**, São Paulo, v.4, n. 10, 2010.
- CALLAHAN, Muareen. **Champagne Supernovas**: Kate Moss, Marc Jacobs, Alexander McQueen e os rebeldes dos anos 1990 que reinventaram a moda. Rio de Janeiro: Fábrica 231, 2015.
- DUGGAN, Ginger Gregg. O maior espetáculo da Terra: os desfiles de moda contem-

porâneos e sua relação com a arte performática. **Fashion Theory**, São Paulo, v. 1, n.2, jun. 2002.

EVANS, Caroline. **Fashion At The Edge**: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

FIGUEREDO, Henrique Grimaldi. Por uma sociologia do excesso: a moda inglesa entre o narcótico e o necrotério. **Anais do 15º Colóquio de Moda da ABEPEM**, 2019.

FIGUEREDO, Henrique Grimaldi; ALMEIDA, Thamara Venâncio. Diálogos sociotécnicos e existências híbridas: a abordagem de Bruno Latour aplicada à performance na passarela de Alexander McQueen. **CES Revista**, v. 32, n. 2, 2018.

FIGUEREDO, Henrique Grimaldi. **Entre padrões de estetização e tipologias econômicas: a economia estética na moda contemporânea a partir da passarela de Alexander McQueen (1992-2010)**. Dissertação de Mestrado. Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, 2018.

FOSTER, Hal. **O retorno do real**. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2013.

FOUCAULT, Michel. **The archaeology of knowledge**. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.

FUSS, D. A moda e o olhar homoespectatorial. In: BENSTOCK, S.; FERRIS, S. **Por dentro da moda**. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2002.

GIDDENS, Anthony. **Modernity and Self-Identity**: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

GUERRA, Paula; FIGUEREDO, Henrique Grimaldi. Prosopografias clubbers em São Paulo e Londres: moda, estilo, estética e cenas musicais contemporâneas. **Revista Tomo**, n. 37, v. 1, 2020.

KRISTEVA, Julia. **Powers of Horror**: An Essay on Abjection. Nova Iorque: Columbia University Press, 1982.

MELIN, Regina. **Performance nas artes visuais**. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2008.

MONNEYRON, Frédéric. **La Frivolité Essentielle**. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001.

MOWER, Sarah. Politics of Vanity. **The Fashion** n. 2, spring/summer, 2001.

PINK, Sarah. **Doing Visual Ethnography**. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2013.

SPOONER, C. A Gothic mind. In: WILCOX, C. **Alexander McQueen**. Nova York: Abrams, 2015.

THOMAS, Dana. **Gods and Kings**: The Rise and Fall of Alexander McQueen and John Galliano. Nova York: Penguin Books, 2015.

TOWNSEND, E. Memento Mori. In: WILCOX, C. **Alexander McQueen**. Nova York: Abrams, 2015.

TSEËLON, Efrat. **The Masque of Femininity**: The Presentation of Woman in Every-Day Life. Londres: Sage, 1995.

WALLESTEIN, Katharine. Thinness and Other Refusals in Contemporary Fashion Advertisements. **Fashion Theory**, vol. 2, issue 2, 1998.

WILCOX, C. Edward Scissorhands. In: WILCOX, C. **Alexander McQueen**. Nova York: Abrams, 2015.

ZIZEK, Slavoj. Grimaces of the Real. **October** nº 58, Cambridge, 1991.

ZOLBERG, Vera; CHERBO, Joni Maya. **Outsider art**: contesting boundaries in contemporary culture. Nova York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.