

How do fashion designers reflect women's social anxiety through extreme portrayal of violence and brutalized bodies in the 1990s?

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Torned-apart clothes, blood-stained stages, and ghostly-pale cheeks, the fashion world in the 1990s was a stage for provocation experimentation, where designers pushed the boundaries of conventions in pursuit for artistic expression. However, the works featuring violent and brutal imagery sparked controversies within the critics for departing from the polished standards of previous decades. For the designers, the portrayal of brutalized female bodies in the late 1990s serves as a critical response to the hyper-idealized standards of femininity prevalent in 1980s and early 1990s fashion. These depictions challenge the unrealistic expectations placed on women's bodies during that era through emphasis on the real human experiences, reflecting a collective societal anxiety towards the relentless pursuit of perfection and the subsequent yearning for authenticity.

In the extravagant landscape of 1980s fashion and early 1990s, women found themselves at the forefront of a cultural and societal revolution, empowered to express their desires and pleasures through bold fashion choices. Madonna, in particular, is an icon who subverts “stereotypes of objectified femininity by wielding flaunted sexuality as a badge of strength rather than submission.”¹ As noted by Arnold, Madonna's embodiment of sensual fashion offered women a new agency that allowed them to revel in the sexuality of their own bodies. This sentiment is presented throughout this time period. For example, in Dolce&Gabbana's

¹ Arnold, Rebecca. 2001. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety : Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century*. London: I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited. Accessed April 6, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Fall/Winter 1991 collection, fashion became a playground for exploring and celebrating sexual attraction. The look in figure 1 utilizes a playful juxtaposition to show sexual attraction. The model wore a black jacket which covered her arms, but the jacket's huge neckline exposed the wearer's neck and chest, revealing the tight silk camisole, or bustier, worn underneath the jacket. The camisole is reminiscent of a nightgown, and the length of the jacket is very short, exposing the model's black stockings underneath, including areas that would normally be covered by a skirt or shorts. It is clear that this look utilizes the intimacy of dress to serve for eroticism. Nevertheless, behind this image of empowerment were anxieties. The constant exposure of the eroticized body "blurred the boundaries between public and private spheres,"² reinforcing stereotypes of a desirable body and exacerbating the fears surrounding female sexuality. For men, this fear is for the "nature of female sexuality"³ and the rising of women's social status. In comparison, this fear is much more complicated for women. Although women were empowered by the opportunity to show their sexual desire and pleasure in the display through fashion, the stereotypes of women presented in the overly perfected images redefined modern femininity, as polarized as either "virgins" or "sluts."⁴

As more women transitioned into professional roles, challenging traditional domestic expectations, the concept of modern femininity underwent a transformative redefinition within the fashion industry. In this case, femininity was portrayed as a mixture of sexual desirability and financial independence, creating a new set of overly idealized expectations for women. In this era, fashion "lures [sex] ever deeper into the inorganic world."⁵ However, the expectation to

² Arnold. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety : Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century*. 2001.

³ Arnold. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety : Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century*. 2001.

⁴ Arnold. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety : Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century*. 2001.

⁵ Arnold. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety : Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century*. 2001.

fulfill these ideals pressures women, giving rise to the success of violent images within fashion. The depictions of brutalized bodies served as a challenge to the notion of eternal perfection, instead emphasizing the raw nature of the human experience through themes of decay, pain, and immediacy.

In Alexander McQueen's Fall/Winter 1995 collection, "Highland Rape," the theme of "realness" emerges as a bold commentary on women's anxieties and the violence inherent in patriarchy. The collection's emphasis on violence and destruction, symbolized by torn and distressed fabrics, exposes the physical and emotional violence experienced by women (Figure 2).⁶ Moreover, the delicate lace and coarse textures creates contrast, which reinforces the theme by presenting the conflict between vulnerability and aggression. The models are styled with messy hair and smudged makeup, adding to the sense of chaos and turmoil.⁷ Tartan is also a vital element in this show, it serves as a symbol of Scotland's history of being "exploited" under English colonialism.⁸ The leather corsets and harnesses also highlight the feeling of bondage and control. This runway challenges audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about gender dynamics and societal norms. McQueen created an analogy of women and Scotland, which allows male audiences to be more able to understand this pain and struggle, rather than being trapped in the limitations of gender biases. "The romanticization of the Scottish satorial identity is reflected in the way in which Scottish nationhood and identity has been produced, repupopsed,

⁶ Maldonado, Veronica. "Alexander McQueen, Fall/Winter 1995." In Fashion Photography Archive. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. Accessed April 6, 2024. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350934429-FPA431>.

⁷ Maldonado. "Alexander McQueen, Fall/Winter 1995." 2015.

⁸ Rashba, Margot. 2021. Fashioning scotland: Alexander McQueen and the politics of national identity. Ph.D. diss. Tufts University, <https://login.libproxy.newschool.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/fashioning-scotland-a-lexander-mcqueen-politics/docview/2544262275/se-2> (accessed April 6, 2024).

and redeveloped from eighteenth century into the contemporary period.”⁹ This process of altering one’s identity is similar to women’s unsettling identity crisis, which has been controlled by patriarchy and their different expectations of women’s roles.

In the context of Alexander McQueen’s “Highland Rape” collection, the portrayal of brutalized bodies evokes fear and introspection rather than the sinful pleasure derived from gender exploitation. A key element contributing to this effect is the models’ expressions and attitude, which is calm and resilience rather than victimhood. By presenting the models as both strong and devastated, this contradictory ethos allowed McQueen to transform them from passive victims into active accusers of violence.¹⁰ This deliberate choice challenges viewers to confront the harsh realities of misogyny and patriarchy, fostering a sense of solidarity and empathy rather than voyeuristic pleasure.

In the exploration of realness within the realm of fashion photography, distance is a significant factor that can alter the message of the picture from eroticism to intimidation.¹¹ Distance is necessary for eroticism to exist, it solidifies when it is distant. In contrast, when it is close enough to the viewer, the subject becomes transparent and intimate, which loses the vaguely desirable parts. In Juergen Teller’s photography of model Kristen McMenamy, where she becomes quite literally transparent in front of the viewer. Her body, including private parts,

⁹Rashba, Margot. "Fashioning Scotland: Alexander McQueen and the Politics of National Identity." Order No. 28494414, Tufts University, 2021.

<https://login.libproxy.newschool.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/fashioning-scotland-alexander-mcqueen-politics/docview/2544262275/se-2>.

¹⁰ Arnold. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety : Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century*. 2001.

¹¹ Laing, M. (2010). Politics, Truth, and Female Identity in Fashion Photography. In J.B. Eicher & P.G. Tortora (Ed.). *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: Global Perspectives*. Oxford: Berg. Retrieved April 26, 2024, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/9781847888594.EDch101619>

are exposed closely to the camera (Figure 3). The viewer can examine each raw detail of the body of a usually idealized being. “In the 1990s this was a precarious balancing act between eroticism and violence,” Arnold states, “models were to be rationalised and provides major shown in ever more brutal images that both flaunt and fear the anxieties of decay, disease and physical abuse.”¹² In this case, each raw and authentic detail of McMenamy stresses the decay of her, demonstrating women’s love and hate for the unavoidable changes as a human being. Teller’s work challenges conventional notions of glamor by eschewing timeless perfection, denying the viewers’ voyeurism hiding behind the distance of glamor.¹³ Instead, the model’s awareness and defiance confronts viewers, she “is aware of our prying eyes, defies us to eroticise her.” This refusal creates a sense of closeness, challenging viewers to reconsider their perceptions and understandings in the intimidation from unfiltered beauty, a real person.

Despite challenging norms with intimidation, designers such as John Galliano and Rei Kawakubo opened another path, which is expanding the connection between “body” and “identity,” showing women’s anxiety by altering, or even distorting, these two elements. In John Galliano's autumn/winter 1988/9 collection, the models were styled to emphasize their “artificial status,” with “deathly, pallid make-up, lips and eyelids stained with dark shades that evoked the silent film stars of the 1920s.”¹⁴ Despite the appearance of empowerment through “strong imagery and masculine tailoring,” their “phallic” strength is disjointed by the forced “otherness” of the styling.¹⁵ This tension between empowerment and otherness highlights the complex identity of modern women during this era. While women were approaching men in social status

¹² Arnold. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety : Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century*. 2001.

¹³ Arnold. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety : Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century*. 2001.

¹⁴ Arnold. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety : Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century*. 2001.

¹⁵ Arnold. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety : Image and Morality in the Twentieth Century*. 2001.

and adopting symbols of masculinity, such as phallic tailoring, the unavoidable sense of otherness illustrates their confusion and struggle in defining their new identity.

Similarly, in Rei Kawakubo's Comme des Garçons Spring/Summer 1997 collection, she links women's bodies with the concept of a grotesque body and challenges traditional notions of bodily boundaries. The concept of grotesque body and classical body is suggested by Mikhail Bakhtin, in which the grotesque body is characterized by its openness to the world, spilling over well-defined bounds, while the classical body is depicted as sealed and finished.¹⁶ Kawakubo transforms dress into the body, blurring the lines between fabric and flesh by the swollen, distorted, and organic silhouettes (figure 4). The use of unconventional materials and exaggerated proportions enabled Kawakubo to reinforce the idea of the body as a mutable entity rather than a "closed" entity. She reveals the fragility and vulnerability of the body under the pressure of societal norms, illustrating women's confusion and the need to refute the "final, strictly limited" classical body in favor of an unrestrained form.

Overall, the portrayal of brutalized female bodies by fashion designers in the late 1990s serves as a critical response to the idealized standards of femininity prevalent in the preceding decades. This theme continues to resonate today, seen in the success of John Galliano's recent Maison Margiela Artisanal Show. He returned to the process of creation in the 1990s, which values the message more than the business. In the recent decades, "the money has won," in which the "Producers are stronger than musicians, galleries are stronger than painters. And big groups are stronger than designers."¹⁷ In the recent decades, big brands choose to make mild,

¹⁶ MILLER, PAUL ALLEN. "THE BODILY GROTESQUE IN ROMAN SATIRE: IMAGES OF STERILITY1." *Arethusa* 31, no. 3 (1998): 257–83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26309667>.

¹⁷ Friedman, Vanessa. "In Paris, a Return to the Grandeur of Couture." *The New York Times*, January 31, 2024.

even pointless arguments in order to stabilize their guests. For example, Chanel and Dior's runway displays of dreamy vacations favor surface-level decorations over carefully planned and researched designs. They are beautiful, but disconnected from reality. In fact, people are dealing with rapid technological and social development and chaos. We are as surprised and frightened as people were in the late 90s. We are anxious about our new identity and our future, longing for the pioneers like McQueen and Kawakubo to break the bubble of fashion's whitewashed reality, and instead vent people's true feelings through thought-provoking, perhaps even brutal, designs.

Featured images:



Figure 1: Dolce and Gabbana. Dolce and Gabbana, Fall/Winter 1991. Retrieved May 4, 2024, from <https://www.bloomsburyfashioncentral.com/image?docid=iid-fpa-17767161991>



Figure 2: Alexander McQueen. Alexander McQueen, Fall/Winter 1995. 1995. Accessed May 4, 2024.
<https://www.bloomsburyfashioncentral.com/image?docid=iid-fpa-1220718>



Figure 3: Artsy. "Kristen McMenamy No. 3, London by Juergen Teller." Artsy. Accessed May 4, 2024. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/juergen-teller-kristen-mcmenamy-no-dot-3-london>.



Figure 4: Comme des Garçons. Comme des Garçons, Spring/Summer 1997. 1997. Accessed May 4, 2024. <https://www.bloomsburyfashioncentral.com/image?docid=iid-fpa-1917298>

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