

# To Exalt a Collection: Redefining Spectacle in Contemporary Fashion

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**Abstract**

In redefining spectacle, fashion designers have oftentimes resisted the term's traditional use and function in society—that is, in relation to mediated images in a consumer culture.

During the emergence of digital media and communications technology during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, fashion designers and artists expanded on themes of the spectacle in the way that images are ubiquitously delivered round the world via the Internet. In doing so, the spectacle became modified from its original use by the French philosopher Guy Debord in his theses *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) to include contemporary culture. Fashion has been seen to challenge historical notions of the spectacle by reevaluating images through uncanny illusions and the way in which they are represented but furthermore, the seasonal catwalk shows.

With the various designers evaluated, themes of the grotesque emerge to defy spectacle tradition and its relation to popular culture. By creating illusions in catwalk mechanics and manufacture to ambiguous identities and physiologies of the model body, the spectacle shifts from a relatable commodity form to one that is considerably foreign—moreover aesthetically deceiving, yet undoubtedly enchanting.

## **Introduction**

The concept of the spectacle underlies the premise of the seasonal catwalk show in fashion. Throughout the past 15 years (from 1991 until the current Fall/Winter 2014 season), fashion's use of the concept has revolutionized into uncanny representations that defy its traditional function—in overt displays of the ideal feminine, it encapsulated luxury and the keys to sexual yearning during the early 1990s from supermodel to celebrity. Contemporary fashion designers principally expressed through the spectacle of runway presentation their aspiration to a heightened, unrestrained aesthetic. But beyond the uncanny, they engaged deeply with other ideological and philosophical abstractions of the modern grotesque, which are revealed as dominant themes in the collections of Jonathon Anderson, Shayne Oliver, John Galliano, and Alexander McQueen.

Given the prominent role of the grotesque in modern image culture, there are surprisingly few significant studies on these issues in correspondence to the spectacle or in fashion. The foundations of the grotesque in art history and aesthetics, with their emphasis on ideated beauty—comparable to the predetermined catwalk beauties—set up a resistance toward the grotesque. There is, however, a recent phenomenological urge to redefine fashion's spectacle as an unprecedented disjuncture, stripping away the surface of familiar reality on the runway. The chapters that follow explore the rebellious undercurrent of the grotesque within contemporary fashion, as an aesthetic and a spectacle.

Fashion writers such as Valerie Steele and Caroline Evans have loosely discussed the spectacle in correspondence to the fashion show, though their observations have considered the concept as oppositional to fashion's tradition and the authors ignore modern conceptions of the grotesque. The extent of Steele's studies seem to culminate with fetishistic representations on the runway seen as alternative, or in opposition to ideal modes of fashion. Inasmuch, Evans explicitly refers to the concept of the spectacle in relation to fashion; however, her critiques end in 2003 and do not support claims of the grotesque as an ideological function in fashion's presentation. Evans does discuss various modes of expression that defy traditional spectacle pedagogy like acts of illusion and deception, which are presented in Chapter 1. However, neither Steele nor Evans' critiques are supported in an art historical framework (although both seem to argue that fashion is an art).

In the first chapter, *Spectacle*, fashion's exploration of the concept is outlined in relation to the seminal writings of Guy Debord. I use Debord methodologically in that I, like Debord, explain the spectacle as underlying the commoditization of mediated images, thus prompting consumption amongst a society's population. I bring forth Debord's critiques into contemporary society—a digital age—where the circulation of fashion's images has become ubiquitous to its followers and the general public. Among these images, arguably the most significant are those images broadcasted from the catwalk show, which we learn to be a brief instance for a designer to advertise his seasonal collection.

Staging a fashion production can be seen in light of Debord's use of the spectacle – from the celebrities seated in the front row to the mechanics of a runway.

There is a noticeable shift in the carrier of the spectacle around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in that the spectacle became more involved in fashion's performance than its celebrated consumers, namely the supermodels. However, in Section 1.5, I provide examples of spectacularized catwalk stages that challenge Debord's theories of the process in which images are consumed by a society. Through various crafted illusions on the catwalk, designers confuse reality and the way in which their spectators engage with an image—the function of the spectacle.

We can go a step further to add that the modalities described above are at play on the boundaries of a spectacle's image. Chapter 2, *Identity*, introduces themes of the grotesque in opposition to Debord's aesthetic of the spectacle. Frances Connelly defined the grotesque by what it does to boundaries, or perhaps more bluntly, "the grotesque is a boundary creature and does not exist except in a relation to a boundary, convention, or expectation."<sup>1</sup> The collections analyzed in Chapters 2 and 3 merge boundaries: Anderson and Oliver merge boundaries between male and female while Galliano's presentation subverts the expectation of both model and monster, merging horror with humor. McQueen created boundaries of his own in a constant struggle with boundaries of the known, the conventional, and the understood and thus created the boundless.

Chapter 2 specifies that the grotesque is a process rather than a thing. This is illustrated through the action of transfiguration and sex reassignment surgery, which has become a recent acceptance in the modeling industry. Few fashion designers have created collections that reflect the acceptance of this identification in

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Connelly, *Introduction to the Grotesque*, (2003: pg 4).

society by presenting the model body adorned in ill-fitted garments that are of opposing proportion. I introduce Hannah Höch as an artist figure to frame processes of the grotesque with her photomontages that merge the identities and physiologies of opposing sex and species. Höch's manufacture of the abject body furthermore progresses into a that of the monstrous body that is misshapen, ugly, and exaggerated.

Chapter 3, *Body*, elaborates on performative exaggerations of the model body as a critical point in analyzing grotesque functions. While Galliano's models represent Mikhail Bakhtin's "carnavalesque" descriptions, McQueen illustrates the malfunctioning body with his early collections. In vivid portrayals of the deranged, handicapped, and out-of-control bodies, his models portray what I call the "absent body." I conclude my research with McQueen, as his collections circle back to my explorations in Chapter 1, on our contemporary age of digital media and communications technology. McQueen's late infatuations with the absent body merge the boundaries of both man and machine in a way that arguably reflects society's manipulation of technology.

I strategically outline the tradition of the spectacle in correspondence to the tradition of fashion beginning in 1991 throughout Chapters 1 and 2. While moving onward, the spectacle progresses into fashion's uncharted territories by becoming a carrier of grotesque representations. The designers explored in this study redefine the function and also the aesthetic of Debord's "spectacle"; furthermore, these designers express modifications to Debord's critique that adapt to contemporary society.

## Chapter 1: Spectacle

### 1.1 *Introduction to Fashion's Spectacle*

In many fashion shows, designers strive to create a spectacle—an expression that has been loosely tossed around within the fashion industry in correspondence to the seasonal catwalk presentations—as to proclaim creative and financial support in the vastly growing business, which consists of consumers, editors, and store-buyers alike. The word spectacle designates a sight or show, and in French *spectacle* also means theatrical presentation. There are a number of methods explored on the catwalk that bring forth the spectacle as a visual commodity: one that is immediately consumed by fashion's followers. The French writer Guy Debord provides a theoretical springboard to fashion's fundamental product in his compilation of theses entitled, "The Society of the Spectacle,"<sup>2</sup> in the way that it transforms commercial venture into dazzling display, visualizing everyday life on the catwalk. However for Debord, the spectacle can be detrimental to authentic society because it is capital become image; suggesting that in a consumer society, social life is not about living, but about having. With a continual flux in stylistic trends from season-to-season, fashion followers oftentimes "have to" carry the latest Louis Vuitton handbag or Saint Laurent leather jacket to fit in with contemporary styles that are projected on the runway or nearby images.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Though these writings are not explicit to fashion's spectacles, they can furthermore be used to define many basic elemental products of the industry from the creative to economical ventures.

<sup>3</sup> Particularly with the constant change of designer directorship at fashion house establishments, consumers want to buy into the "new" brand. In the past year alone (2013-14), Raf Simons has taken the role of Creative Director for Christian Dior, Alexander Wang for Balenciaga, Hedi Slimane for Saint Laurent, and Nicholas Ghesquiere for Louis Vuitton.



The spectacle uses the image to convey what people think they need and must have. Consequently, social life moves further, leaving a state of “having” and proceeding to a state of “appearing;” namely the appearance of the image. This is perhaps one reason why some cultural critics described fashion as “‘capitalism’s favorite child,’ arguing that stylistic changes in dress are only explicable in terms of capitalist greed and consumer credulity, since the latest fashion is ultimately no more beautiful or functional than its predecessors.”<sup>4</sup>

Debord’s relevance to late twentieth-century consumer culture is limited by shifts in the nature of commodity and image in the electronic age—the society in which we currently live. Debord’s descriptions were rooted in a Marxist critique of the commodity form as economic object. However, the overarching transformations of the 1990s (globalization, new technology and new communications) radically altered its form and relation to society. As electronic media and global markets developed, information became a valuable commodity in its own right. In shifting constellations of the culture industries, fashion began to signify in a number of different registers, combining art and commerce into a single instance. Fashion theorist Caroline Evans offers a description of fashion’s tech-mediated images in response to Debord’s spectacle by explaining the processes in which the fashioned garment circulates in a network of signs as both “image” and “object.” The image is frequently the commodity itself, be it in a fashion show, magazine, website or even

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<sup>4</sup> Geczy and Karaminas, *Fashion and Art* (13-14). See Robert H. Lauer and Jeannette C. Lauer, *Fashion Power: The Meaning of Fashion in American Society* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981), chapter 2, “What is Fashion?”

an idea.<sup>5</sup> The seasonal catwalk show is arguably fashion's largest and most visually consumed commodity; an event that designers curate to communicate and advertise some transient idea or trend to consumers on a global scale.

## 1.2 *Commodity Fetishism*

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, fashion designers quickly took notice of their industry's instantly mediated processes, and started to expand on themes of the spectacle on the catwalk to seduce global consumers into the fantasy world they build as spectacular. In Karl Lagerfeld's most recent show for Chanel of Fall/Winter 2014, he constructed a massive super market installation within the boundaries of Paris' Grand Palais to serve as his unconventional runway.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly and perhaps unintentionally, Lagerfeld's show reflects upon consumerism seen in the way Karl Marx had defined it, as "commodity fetishism."<sup>7</sup> Ironically, Marx uses the marketplace as an example to illustrate that social organization of labor is mediated through market exchange: the buying and the selling of commodities (goods and services). So that in the marketplace, producers and consumers perceive each other by means of money and goods that they exchange, and as a twist on Marx, Lagerfeld explained his environment as "a supermarket where the rich can go and not feel out of place."<sup>8</sup> There were no bargains in these aisles and Lagerfeld had created decorative garments, which visually signify the wealth of his market's shoppers.

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<sup>5</sup> Evans, *Fashion at the Edge* (2003: pg 74)

<sup>6</sup> (FIGURE 1)

<sup>7</sup> Debord studies and rewrites Marxist theory to evaluate the consumption of mediated images in society. He furthermore relies on the critique of "commodity fetishism" to denote capitalism in relation to the spectacle.

<sup>8</sup> "Chanel Fall 2014 Ready-to-Wear Collection on Style.com."

After the show's finale, in which the models had collectively shopped around the supermarket in couture dress like a theatrical performance, elite audiences (celebrities, artists, editors, and the mega-rich) surrounding the space descended into the arena, bombarding the catwalk in a fashion frenzy as locust hoarders "consumed" any of the 100,000 grocery objects from the market's shopping baskets to fresh fruit; that is, if they could get the items past security. The objects were then amusingly incorporated into the dress of the show's attendees—one fashion editor in particular, had used a Chanel doormat as an accessory that she clutched under her arm similar to a handbag, undoubtedly yielding the attention of fashion's zoo of street photographers.<sup>9</sup> These accessories had convinced outsiders that Chanel actually produced its own brand of canned soup, much like Andy Warhol's proliferation of Campbell's own. The post-show images proved that accessorizing is one way to excessively consume fashion's objects.

Consumption of the material object propels the fashion industry, and oftentimes a fashion designer presents 5 annual collections, so there is a constant flux in commoditized trend. These seasonal developments create a craze amongst fashion's population—consumers seemingly obsess with the nouveau (the latest style): as a movement, political statement, or ephemeral luxury. Keeping-up with the latest style can be expensive and oftentimes requires an awareness of seasonal trend—with today's Alexander McQueen miniature-cocktail dress fetching nearly

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<sup>9</sup> Street-style photographs have become a recent web phenomenon, and few photographers have made substantial careers in documenting catwalk-show attendees' dress and stylistic aesthetic. Social-media followers instantly consume these images. And as representations, the photos oftentimes set trends for seasonal fashion.

\$15,000—it is like collecting art.<sup>10</sup> Of course, paintings and sculptures are also commodities, but art is generally perceived as “*transcending* its commodity status—in contrast to fashion, which seems to wallow in its commercial nature.”<sup>11</sup>

Lagerfeld’s presentation on the other hand, signified high fashion and art bound together in a single instance, and this image has been circulated through mediated (web) representations to fashion’s consumers, from instant-streaming videos to zoomed-in glamour shots. Even viewing his collection through mere images, provided an experience for the “separated” (online) spectator.

### 1.3 *Separation from Fashion’s Fantasy*

For Debord the spectacle is related to this concept of *separation*; by separating life from art and spheres of production from consumption, which involve spectators “passively observing the products of social life” through media.<sup>12</sup> He further implies that this can create “misrepresentation” from images circulated round media—subsequently, they become lost in translation. The catwalk is not an arena that demonstrates reality, and perhaps separation actually brings outsiders and fashion’s population closer to the industry’s products through representations. One of American Vogue Magazine’s fashion editors spoke similarly to this idea saying that,

“What Vogue is creating is a fantasy. Opening [the magazine] is like seeing a movie—don’t believe any of it and don’t think any of it is real. Those \$40,000 dresses you see in the magazine; we know there really is only one or two of them. People aren’t going to buy those clothes; instead

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<sup>10</sup> Dress available on net-a-porter.com

<sup>11</sup> Geczy and Karaminas, *Fashion and Art* (14).

<sup>12</sup> Debord: 25-26

they buy the \$50 perfume. We are promoting the fantasy to sell the products—it's a business.”<sup>13</sup>

Though the experience of interacting with Lagerfeld's *representations* may have been slightly modified or enhanced from the live presentation through a digital separation, they nonetheless brought spectators closer to the fantasy world, which he created to sell Chanel's seasonal aesthetic.<sup>14</sup> This experience was strikingly similar to entering the colorfully vibrant world that Andreas Gursky imagines in his “99-cent” diptych photograph, which comes across as a history painting, capturing the essence of today's consumer society. The work recognizes principals of the capitalist production process and its role in the cycle of consumption and manufacture. Gursky reveals these processes while Lagerfeld reimagines the opulent power of consumption as an advertising strategy to aid in the success of the Chanel Corporation—moreover, a visual encouragement of consumption. Gursky mentioned that, “art should not be about delivering a report on reality, but should be looking at what's behind something.”<sup>15</sup> Lagerfeld's show mechanisms, however remain hidden from audiences and press, as not to reveal his mysteries of mechanical processes and assemblages, because revealing this kind of allure indicates the manufacture of spectacular images.

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<sup>13</sup> *Boss Women: Anna Wintour 2000* (Christine Hall, BB1). Quoted: Plum Sykes, former contributing editor on fashion for American Vogue. Sykes later became a novelist, though still writing fashion with novels *Bergdorf Blondes* (2004) and *The Debutante Divorcée* (2006).

<sup>14</sup> His inclusion of Chanel sneakers rather than the typically presented stiletto had furthermore given his consumer a feel for the “grocery-shopping woman” (a woman on the run) that he aesthetically showcased.

<sup>15</sup> *Art Now NY Publication*

#### 1.4 *Spectacular Productions*

Lagerfeld's incorporation of art installation into his fashion performances provides further reasoning to label him as an artist to many editors and fashion theorists. Like at the House of Chanel, wealthy designers who are oftentimes financially backed by fashion house establishments like LVMH<sup>16</sup> have taken on a \$1 million approach to staging their runway spectacle through advanced mechanics and grandiose methods of theatricality. Furthermore, the catwalks have become increasingly more decorated with hypnotic neon light installations at Saint Laurent S/S 2014, to a smoking car crash that filled the center of the catwalk space at Givenchy S/S 2014. What's most extreme is the length and extent of these productions: Prada's women's Spring 2014 show, for example, was 7:55 minutes in duration, but approximately 20,160 minutes were spent on painting the show's mural—a charging visual element, which was then fabricated and reimaged onto expensively colored furs.<sup>17</sup> A Chanel spokeswoman disclosed that the stage for the Spring/Summer 2014 presentation took eight days to install and three days to de-install.<sup>18</sup> These designers have taken on the role of entertainment to transcend their presentation: not only as a commodity producer, but also towards the way that ordinary (familiar) commodities have become "*spectacularized*, objects to be looked

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<sup>16</sup> Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessey, whose many holdings include Givenchy, Dior, Louis Vuitton, Marc Jacobs International, Kenzo, and Loewe

<sup>17</sup> The mural was created by artists, Miles 'El Mac' Gregor, Mesa, Gabriel Specter, and Stinkfish. Illustrators Jeanne Detallante and Pierre Mornet had contributed as part of their 'In the heart of the Multitude' project (DAZED GROUPE ONLINE Feb. 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Harris, British VOGUE February 2014

at.”<sup>19</sup> Former CEO of Burberry, Angela Ahrendts critically discussed that, “we are no longer in the business of fashion; we are in the business of entertainment.”<sup>20</sup>

There is a divide that has been created between emerging and established fashion designers by means of presentational restrictions. Whereas a young designer (typically) stages a runway presentation in an attempt to build his brand through ready-to-wear collectable pieces (which aim to seek buyer attention and later grace the pages of glossy fashion magazines), the leading designer on the other hand, utilizes the catwalk show as an artistic expression—to sell an idea to consumers through myriad methods of spectacular presentation and performance.<sup>21</sup> “There is a kind of competition amongst these acclaimed fashion designers and houses to produce the biggest and most extravagant spectacle to sell their seasonal idea or trend,” Brandon Maxwell, fashion editor and stylist to Lady Gaga explained.<sup>22</sup> And selling this kind of fantasy has continued in the success of many large brands. Alexander McQueen is a prime example. The House’s two main women’s collections are constructed purely for image: sometimes only one of 25 catwalk looks is accessible to the global market, and the other 24 serve as aesthetical fillers—works of art, one could argue.<sup>23</sup> Though these kinds of shows are relevant to a brand’s success and attention, oftentimes clothing goes unseen because guests are too

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<sup>19</sup> Debord: Thesis 60

<sup>20</sup> Harris, *British Vogue* February 2014. Ahrendts is currently employed by Apple, but was notably one of the first to embrace live-streaming video representations of the Burberry collections to make the spectacle more accessible to a population.

<sup>21</sup> The fantasy worlds that invite spectators to consume products like perfumes rather than the actual fashion.

<sup>22</sup> Private interview, January 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Apart from the fashion show, the looks are accessible to consumers within white-wall gallery spaces. Alexander McQueen, for example was given a retrospective exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (NY) during 2010—over 600,000 attendees had visited the fashion exhibition.

fixated on their iPhones and the spectacular environment that surrounds them, so much that no one has really noticed any actual fashion until halfway through the presentation. Questionably, these presentations embody the spectacle as much as divert attention to the mechanics of the catwalk more than the material garment.

In fashion's history, there have been trends that issue a challenge to Debord's idea of the spectacle and suggest that it needs to be modified to accommodate contemporary changes in cultural context and communications technology. It can be argued that these challenges actually redefine a contemporary notion of the spectacle.

### 1.5 Challenging Debord's Spectacle:

The writer Susan Sontag argued that in the modern period, perceptions of reality have been shaped by the type and frequency of images we receive. She wrote that from the mid-nineteenth century "the credence that could no longer be given to realities understood in the form of images was now being given to realities understood to be images, illusions," and went on to cite Feuerbach's observation of 1843 on the impact of photography.<sup>24</sup> Debord also cited this observation at the beginning of *The Society of the Spectacle*, "our era prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, appearance to being."<sup>25</sup> To denote *representation*, there have been a handful of designers who reveal elements of production, furthermore providing an indication to an image's representation.

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<sup>24</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, (1977: pg 153)

<sup>25</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Feuerbach's observations were written only a few years after the invention of the camera. In *The Essence of Christianity* (1843), he proclaims that after the invention of the camera, society becomes "modern."



Like reality TV, the spectacle disguises these elements of construction, which is why fashion's backstage has become unquestionably off-limits to the public.<sup>26</sup> The viewer therefore trusts that these representations are truthful and accurate.<sup>27</sup>

Some designers, however, have revealed the mysteries of production, like Beijing-born Yang Li had with his Fall/Winter 2013 collection, which was shown in Paris. In his debut collection, Li had literally opened the doors to backstage, so that the spectator could observe all processes of completing a look before the models hit the runway. The backstage scene was also filmed and projected onto screens for audiences. This method of presentation accommodates to the live and online viewer simultaneously in that both are provided with the exposure of backstage grouping, by exposing a conventionally hidden assembly, so that audiences deconstruct looks before they appear on stage.

Perhaps one of "fashion's" biggest catwalk extravaganzas is the annual broadcast of the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show, which invites public viewers (via broadcast television) to indulge in the fashion spectacle with more backstage coverage than actual "fashion" since VS utilizes the show as a holiday marketing strategy rather than seasonal presentation). By doing so, the designer reveals an environmental divide between backstage and the forefront, similar to theatre. In a distinct recognition, reality is masked as soon as the model hits the runway—the viewer's eye. Specifically for VS, the backstage coverage becomes a spectacle in

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<sup>26</sup> Fashion's backstage is off-limits to spectators, with the exception of style reporters and celebrity guests of the designer.

<sup>27</sup> The writer, Mark Andrejevic uses Reality TV as an example of a mediated spectacle that viewers are known to trust as accurate representations of "reality." He calls these viewers naïve. Those viewers who are scornful of the naïve viewer are respectfully referred to as "savvy-viewers," acknowledging the elements of a spectacle's production (2004).

itself, in that it encompasses the chaos and disorder that is concealed for the show's private spectators—the live audience. In this particular instance, mediated images of the VS fashion show provide at-home audiences with “truthful” representations—from the model's perspective—as they are given the viewpoint of backstage as well as the catwalk.

Another example for what is the Italian menswear designer, Kean Etro with his label Etro. On one account, he recognized his tailors during a catwalk show, revealing the hands that work to craft an image. Etro's Fall/Winter 2014 Menswear collection culminated with a respectful acknowledgement to the men and women tailors, as they accompanied their towering male models down the runway. The juxtaposition of a stubby seamstress alongside her youth seemingly represented a kind-of parental relationship that explicitly demonstrated the creator and her offspring.<sup>28</sup> Etro created a spectacle by revealing the very people who work to maintain the illusion of the brand's image. These designers defy the Debord critique, proving that the spectacle can in fact embody (though not necessarily depict) reality through revealing elements of production and the manufacturers of images.

Thomas Richards in his book, “The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle 1851-1914,” suggests that even in contemporary society, the days of the spectacle are numbered and that, “it may turn out that the semiotics of spectacle played a transitional role in capitalist mythology.”<sup>29</sup> As new technologies of the image become embraced by society, it becomes important for designers to produce graphic runway images that can be transmitted round the

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<sup>28</sup> (FIGURE 2)

<sup>29</sup> Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England* (1991: 258)

world via electronic image. There are two designers in particular who first embraced the illusion of images on the catwalk, creating collections that ultimately distort the (live and online) spectator's ability to grasp reality or truth. The Turkish-born designer, Hussein Chalayan and Belgian, Martin Margiela both crafted elaborate tricks to confuse the spectacle's image, and the way in which spectators perceive reality.<sup>30</sup>

In Chalayan's Fall/Winter 1998 show entitled *Panoramic*, he created a modernist set involving a mirrored catwalk with a white wall background that provided discrete slits for models to visually disappear and reemerge during the act. The difference between illusion and reality was effaced, as model's bodies became mere patterns in a moving picture—the appearing and disappearing in the mirrored space. In the final moments of the show, Chalayan wanted to “camouflage the models” to show the loss of self through reflections, “and reflections of reflections, and thus to present the dissolution of self in infinity.”<sup>31</sup> In Chalayan's use of reflection to abstract reality and images in which the spectacle is traditionally represented, he created a problematized observation—spectators were disillusioned and unable to grasp “reality.”

Around the same time as Chalayan's reflection-collection, Margiela embraced Debord's idea of translating a mediated image, with his Spring/Summer 1999 presentation. In the finale of this show, Margiela sent out his show's technicians wearing sandwich boards with pictures of each garment rather than showing the

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<sup>30</sup> Margiela has never had his picture taken and remains backstage after his shows—all media is dealt with via fax—an anomaly in an industry that places enormous value on the image.

<sup>31</sup> Evans 2003: 74

actual clothes on the model.<sup>32</sup> The boards included dictionary-style descriptions of the clothes, such as “when not worn, the clothes are totally flat.”<sup>33</sup> In *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord developed the notion of *détournement*, a way of turning the spectacle back on itself and “reversing its normal ideological function.”<sup>34</sup> With Margiela’s technician-models “demonstrating” his designs, it could be argued that he is turning the spectacle back on itself. In relation to the reversal of function, the German modernist theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht introduced “Epic theatre” as a theatrical movement in which his goal was for audiences to always be aware that they are watching a play: “It is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from [epic theatre]: the engendering of illusion.”<sup>35</sup>

Turning the spectacle back on itself, or challenging spectacular images to resist fashion’s expression, does in fact create perpetual newness and change. And in many ways, this becomes a spectacle redefined. By revealing elements of production and tricking audiences into the spectacle’s illusion, it speaks to the way in which societies find truth in representation—perhaps even parodying these methods. In the following chapters, I will look at designers who elaborate on the (model) body as spectacle. There are many designers during the early 2000s and onward to present-day, who defy the spectacular model body, also raising a challenge to Debord and spectacle tradition. They craft the unstylish body and present it as fashionable—spectacular. Designers, Jonathon Anderson and Shayne

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<sup>32</sup> (FIGURE 3)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid: 80

<sup>34</sup> Jay, *Downcast Eyes* (1993)

<sup>35</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* (1964: pg 122)

Oliver present ambiguous bodies in their recent menswear collections, while John Galliano and Alexander McQueen pushed dramatic themes of the grotesque into aesthetical approaches to the fashioned body. These designers resist conventional attributes of contemporary society as a whole, by appealing to the notion of “otherness.” In doing so, they redefine or perhaps discover new proposals to fashion’s spectacle. It is firstly important to recall fashion’s preferred physiology.

## Chapter 2: Identity

### 2.1 Body as Spectacle (*Celebrating the Celebrity*)

“Media stars are spectacular representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the spectacle’s banality into images of possible roles”

-Guy Debord<sup>36</sup>

Fashion designers have long learned that celebrity sells, perhaps even more than sex.<sup>37</sup> The fashion industry has historically molded unfamiliar faces into the insta-famous. Gianni Versace acknowledged the magnificent power of the supermodel during the 1990s, and he changed fashion by presenting these women as idols of production—a new power elite. Versace, in his Fall/Winter 1991 presentation celebrated the supermodel as celebrity, but not merely for her economic value but as mediatized marketing accomplishments, which expand upon allure, style, and glamour. The four models to name were, Christy Turlington, Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista, and Cindy Crawford.<sup>38</sup> The 90s industrialization of fashion more or less manufactured these four young women into the status of individual celebrity-ness, marked by the mediatization of their public rather than real persona.<sup>39</sup> These women were desired on every count: every man wanted to sleep with her, every woman wanted to be her, and every girl wanted to grow up to be her. Supermodels were famous for being beautiful, but moreover, they were the ultimate dream of self-made success. The springboard to their fame was a popular song by George Michael entitled “Freedom 90,” in which the four starred in his

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<sup>36</sup> Debord: Thesis 60

<sup>37</sup> Business of Fashion Online: “For Emerging Designers, Celebrity Sells.”

<sup>38</sup> FIGURE 4

<sup>39</sup> Wheeler/Kerrigan et al., “‘Spinning’ Warhol.”

music video. This form of mediatization exalted their status from catalog model to super-woman.

The French Philosopher, Jean Baudrillard commented on the celebrity arguing that, “celebrity” is not a world of events, history, and culture, but “artifacts” produced from the technical manipulation of their medium.”<sup>40</sup> In support of Baudrillard’s claim, the supermodels were molded and created by the fashion designer and his creative affiliates. Genetically the models were perfect, and professionally they were outstanding. But they did not make it alone. The photographer Steven Meisel was a major catalyst behind Turlington, Evangelista, and Campbell.<sup>41</sup> He promoted them from the average model earnings of \$8 an hour to \$1.2 million contracts with fashions’ biggest labels, such as Calvin Klein.<sup>42</sup> As they became more and more sensational and publically relevant, the spectacle had become a carrier of their content: beauty and skill were only part of their success, as they “combined the role of the unofficial models of the Twenties, the wealth of the society women, and the celebrity of film and pop stars.”<sup>43</sup>

U.S. Vogue’s Editor-in-Chief, Anna Wintour aided in the emergence of the pop star, movie actress, and public persona into fashion’s limelight during the late 90s and early 2000s. She had put these familiarly mediatized faces on the cover pages of the monthly publication, recycling the supermodel by moving her from cover to center page. The magazine flourished because in many ways these stars were more familiar and accessible to the public—they had some flaws that made them unique

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<sup>40</sup> Baudrillard, J. (1998). *Consumer Society*. London. Sage.

<sup>41</sup> Harriet Quick, *Catwalking: A History of the Fashion Model* (1997: 153).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid: 153

<sup>43</sup> Ibid: 155

and relatable among societies. Oprah Winfrey, for example, graced the cover page of *Vogue* in 1998. Her bodily mold differs significantly from supermodel proportion, and her personality is far more graspable than those hypersexualized girls.

Debord's Thesis 61 explains that, "the decision celebrity must possess a complete stock of accepted human qualities. Official differences between stars are wiped out by the official similarity which is the presupposition of their excellence in everything."<sup>44</sup> He further elucidates that the celebrity must have admirable traits, "and the heroic image which gives an acceptable meaning to the absolute exploitation."<sup>45</sup> Winfrey undoubtedly is an acceptable candidate for celebrity-power in Debord's critique, from her philanthropic aid to daily telecast.

Designers acknowledged Wintour's strategy by incorporating the mediatized star as spectacular human representation. Unsurprisingly fashion's seduction and glamour convinced celebrities to support both emerging and established designers through publicity and fame. In fact, designers began to capitalize on their support and utilized the power of celebrity branding, much like Andy Warhol had in his factory days. The case of Andy Warhol is insightful in this respect, as a cultural figure who blended the worlds of art and celebrity. His achievement was an illustration of this process as a pioneering 'pop' artist who built his art and celebrity persona as a brand. Economist Celia Lury explained that Warhol had a "clear commercial mission of commodification and distribution" in society through his representations of cultural socialites.<sup>46</sup> In curating his celebrity existence, Warhol

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<sup>44</sup> Debord: Thesis 61

<sup>45</sup> Ibid: Thesis 64

<sup>46</sup> Lury, C. (2004) *Brands: the logos of the global economy*. London: Routledge



drew from ascribed celebrities such as Factory-girl Edie Sedgwick, and the achieved celebrity like Marilyn Monroe.<sup>47</sup> By building these celebrities' visibility, it satisfied the demands of the media and the public, generating growth, and increasing his awareness and consumer attention. Fundamentally, the commodification of human brands is the process by which people become things—Baudrillard had further claimed that celebrities “are not something to dream about; they are the dream.”<sup>48</sup>

The placement of the celebrity into fashion's business occurred in many different registers, and designers displayed these stars as models on the catwalk. In Jean-Paul Gaultier's Spring/Summer 1995 collection, Madonna, who was at the peak of her fame, appeared as his final model. During her flamboyant act on the runway, audiences roared with spectacular applause and admiration for the designer. The reciprocity between fashion designer and celebrity in this case results in a commodity that is acknowledged by consumer audiences—he gave her a look, while she gave him a profile. And even today, mega-stars are promoting designer brands and corporations by simply sitting alongside the catwalk or appearing in their campaigns. Today's most celebrated pop star, Lady Gaga has shared a similar relationship with various designers including Donatella Versace.<sup>49</sup> Her stylist discussed the power of the celebrity to fashion's business: “If, for example, Courtney

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<sup>47</sup> Warhol produced many different objects of art, but two of the most famous Warhol portraits are of Marilyn Monroe and Jacqueline Kennedy. Such Portraits formed part of his strategy of personal branding. In 1968, after he was attacked and almost fatally injured by Valerie Solanas, Warhol made a crucial change to his production of art; focusing on portraits of prominent and rich celebrities (Bater 1974). This had signaled a shift from his development of celetoids (branding them—Sedgwick for example—as celebrity), into celebrities by placing them within the mediatized world of the factory (Rojek 2001).

<sup>48</sup>Baudrillard, J. (1998). *Consumer Society*. London. Sage.

<sup>49</sup>Gaga was the star of Versace's Spring 2014 campaign, in which the celebrity is visually imagined as Donatella herself.

Cox is seated front row at a Saint Laurent show, you can bet that every handbag will be sold out the following day.”<sup>50</sup>

With high fashion’s representations in the hands of mediatized celebrities, emerging and established brands are becoming “mainstream” to society. Tom Ford, who worked at the helm of labels, Perry Ellis, Gucci, and Yves Saint Laurent<sup>51</sup>, was seemingly ubiquitous in fashion’s media, however it wasn’t until the mega-star-rapper Jay-Z promoted Ford to society’s limelight with one song entitled, *Tom Ford*.<sup>52</sup> In the song, Jay-Z compares the ecstasy-drug called “molly” to Ford’s tuxedos: “I don’t pop molly, I rock Tom Ford...” And in exchange, Tom Ford’s most recent collection of Fall/Winter 2014 paid homage to Jay-Z and his lyrics, with graphic sequin jerseys that the rapper has been seen wearing during performances.<sup>53</sup> Ford mentioned in an article to *Women’s Wear Daily*: “Who would not be flattered to have an entire Jay-Z track named after them? It’s a kind of validation of one’s work, as it means that one has really penetrated and made an impact on popular culture.”<sup>54</sup>

Other musicians proceeding Jay-Z have also incorporated fashion into their lyrics like the rappers Migos and Drake with their 2013 song entitled *Versace*. This fascinating relationship between fashion designers and their celebrity muses provides esteemed fame and acknowledgment to brands and fashion businesses from popular society.

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<sup>50</sup> Private interview with Brandon Maxwell, January 2014.

<sup>51</sup> (1998-2004, before becoming chairman of his own label, *Tom Ford* in 2006)

<sup>52</sup> From the album *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* (2013)

<sup>53</sup> (FIGURE 5)

<sup>54</sup> “Jay-Z Pens Ode to Tom Ford” (WWD: July 11, 2013)

However becoming “mainstream” in fashion can take on unstylish characteristics, in that consumers and designers want to stand out as being unique, oftentimes in distinct portrayals of the outcast. In opposition to fashion’s idealized body—the supermodel and the celebrated—designers have embraced other representations of the body that defy traditional conceptions of spectacularized body and function.

## *2.2 Introduction of the Grotesque*

It is surprising that the fashion industry has started to embrace alternative modes of expression that challenge the presumed universals of classical beauty—those 5-foot-10 skinnies that populate Paris’ fashion scene. Some designers including Jonathon Anderson, Shayne Oliver, John Galliano, and Alexander McQueen, have incorporated surrealist vocabularies and themes in their seasonal collections, visualizing certain kinds of abstraction that have been furthermore recalled by Debord as being seductive to the consumption of the spectacle’s representations. In particular, Debord mentions that, “sight is naturally the most readily adaptable to present-day society’s generalized abstraction,”<sup>55</sup> and a shortlisted group of 21<sup>st</sup> century conceptual fashion designers have reworked this idea of the visual abstraction into their aesthetic approach to style. And with doing so, they have revived modern conceptions of the grotesque, as seen in visual arts and language. The modern grotesque was first linked to the notion of “primitive” expression during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with an emphasis on an opposition to ideated

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<sup>55</sup> Debord: Thesis 18

beauty.<sup>56</sup> This included unlikely combinations that describe the “aberration from ideal form to create the misshapen, ugly, exaggerated, or even formless.”<sup>57</sup> Some fashion designers have incorporated shocking themes of the grotesque in presentation to exalt the purpose and function of their clothing—to sell a specific aesthetic to the consumer, which predetermines identity classifications within a contemporary society. Among these explored identities, we notice historically outcast societies including the transgendered, the handicapped, and the disillusioned body, however seen in a new fashionable light.

Frances Connelly suggests that the term is an aesthetic strategy that cuts across or against boundary categories.<sup>58</sup> By combining the primitive and modern, the male and female, the natural and man-made, grotesque images challenge fashion’s ideas of beauty and seduction. Art history scholar Maria Makela examined the photomontages of Hannah Höch to describe modern notions of the grotesque in the paralleled physiologies of her half-human images. Makela explained that, quintessentially modern in its dependence on the mass media, photomontage is “uniquely suited to be a handmaid of the grotesque.”<sup>59</sup> Höch crafted hybrid humans by fusing opposing human bodies with vegetation, though critics have considered many of them to be feminine. In their physical ambiguities and distortions through Höch’s procedures—cutting, slicing, and reconstructing—they take on characteristics of the transgendered body; a Weimar-era obsession of bodily deception. The Weimar-era was given its name by historians to the federal republic

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<sup>56</sup> Connelly, *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (2003: 1-2)

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*: 2

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*: 193

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*: 195

of Germany in 1919 (until 1933) to replace the imperial form of government, and many of Höch's montages were a response to the movement's contemporary discourse about the body, as presented in both the mass media and elsewhere.

During this time, Germany “was awash in attempts to blend in through plastic surgery, or attempts to erase history, bodily and otherwise.”<sup>60</sup> In similarity to contemporary fashion's embrace of cosmetic surgeries, mouths, ears, noses, even whole faces could be reconstructed to hide what had been—to furthermore appear “beautiful.” One Berlin doctor in particular, Jacques Joseph, had been considered one of the most influential cosmetic surgeons of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as one of the pioneers of a scarless procedure of removing bone and cartilage from within the nose.<sup>61</sup> He argued that psychic pain was real and damaging as physical pain, “and that individuals whose facial or bodily features set them clearly apart from others suffered intense emotional trauma that deserved amelioration.”<sup>62</sup> However, Joseph was praised for both his surgery and his compassionate view on the subject of aesthetic improvement, which made him immensely popular around Europe. However, during his practices in WWI, cosmetic surgery was not a luxury but a medical necessity to cure the malfunctioning body.<sup>63</sup> Joseph's standards of beauty were advertised in Germany's many illustrated

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid: 198

<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> Ibid: 204. Joseph worked as a surgeon during World War I for war survivors. Until 1922, Joseph began to take care of the disfigured survivors of the war with reconstructive surgical procedures. The Army stopped financing Joseph in 1922 and he went back to his practices.

<sup>63</sup> This refers to the surgical procedures that war survivors induced to enhance their appearance. The photographer Ernst Friedrich documented a collection of pictures and other visual materials, which attempted to illustrate the tragic human consequences of war, but also the political forces that produced and promoted it. *War Against War* (1924)

magazines. 1920s decadence, with its beauty-conscious environment became an issue in mass culture, as doctors began to practice extreme measures of surgical rejuvenations to the body by literally transforming the deficient into a fabrication of youthfulness.

In the 1920s, experiments of rejuvenation research had also been performed on Germany's homosexual minorities. The Austrian physiologist, Eugen Steinach believed that homosexuality was caused by abnormalities in the hormonal glands (testicular), and that proper procedure could turn homosexuals into heterosexuals.<sup>64</sup> This had been a consequence of the Weimar era belief that sexuality is congenital rather than socially determined. Artist Hannah Höch as well as today's fashion designers use the inherent androgynous body as a foundation for understanding sexuality, conceptualizing the conviction of the orientation as a "third sex."<sup>65</sup> This reimagined identity takes on characteristics of the model-body that become more and more indistinct (against norm), and thus a redefined grotesque body is born into our contemporary society on the catwalk and in popular culture.

### *2.3 The Proliferation of Trans-bodies*

In a counter to fashion's traditional embrace of the spectacle and its clamor, there have been recent representations of "otherness," particularly transgender trends: from unisex clothing to trans-body fashion models. In

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid: 208

<sup>65</sup> Magnus Hirschfeld, a sexologist during the Weimar era had lectured extensively about his conviction that homosexuality was a "third sex." Activist homosexual groups had argued against this idea, stating that the so-called perversion was in fact a result of nature, and should therefore not be punishable by the law codified as Paragraph 175 of the German legal code that forbade it (Makela: 208).

defying the supermodel's hypersexual representations within a society, major businesses have capitalized on ambiguous bodies and identities like, Barneys New York.<sup>66</sup> In Barneys Spring 2014 campaign, shot by the photographer Bruce Weber, the company recycled the catalog model and adopted a new breed for their advertisement about diversity, but not necessarily the kind you'd expect.<sup>67</sup> The campaign's title "Brothers, Sisters, Son & Daughters," wasn't about size, shape, or color but about gender identities, and the advertised models were all transgendered.<sup>68</sup> Alongside photographs of the subjects, members of their support networks were also featured (family, pets, friends). In a recent proliferation of transgendered minorities, artists and fashion designers have furthermore elaborated on these manufactured identities as a creative interest.<sup>69</sup>

Performance artist, Zackary Drucker has showcased her recently reconstructed body (through male-to-female sex reassignment surgery) in photographs and performances round the world.<sup>70</sup> Her photographic series entitled *Relationship* (2008-13), documents the intimate relationship with her also transgendered partner, Rhys Ernst in processes of transitioning bodies. Drucker and Ernst engage various elements of "self-fashioning," a term introduced by Stephen Greenblatt, used to describe the process of

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<sup>66</sup>A chain of luxury department stores, which houses the very designers previously and proceeding mentioned

<sup>67</sup> Bruce Weber is perhaps most acknowledged for his hypersexual editorial photo shoots of the supermodel and more specifically the male body, typically rendered nude with flawless physique.

<sup>68</sup> (FIGURE 6)

<sup>69</sup> The trend started with Lea T, a transsexual model who became the face of Givenchy and made the cover of various high status magazines.

<sup>70</sup> Drucker and her partner, Rhys Ernst have exhibited a photo series entitled *Relationship* at the Whitney Museum of American Art during the Whitney Biennial (2014).

constructing one's identity in public persona according to a set of socially acceptable standards.<sup>71</sup> Greenblatt had coined the expression to describe the process in the Renaissance era where upper-class men prescribed attire and behavioral traits, which inherently determined noble exercises. By representing themselves in the midst of shifting subjectivities and identities, the images become simultaneously “unguarded and performative.”<sup>72</sup> Collectively, Drucker's photographs become a narrative documentation of their romantic creation and collaboration. In Drucker's words,

“Our bodies are a microcosm of the greater external world as it shift to a more polymorphous spectrum of sexuality. We are all collectively morphing and transforming together, and this is just one story of an opposite-oriented transgender couple living in Los Angeles, the land of industrialized fantasy.”<sup>73</sup>

In an unusual case, the Dutch fashion model, Valentijn De Hingh was the subject of a nine-year documentary, which similar to Drucker and Ernst, recorded the processes and developments of her transition from male to female. The documentary begins with De Hingh as a young boy growing up in Amsterdam. This documentary is slightly more surreal than Drucker and Ernst's photographic representations, as De Hingh debated identity at an incomparably younger age (8-17). With long blonde hair, strikingly angular features and a tall, thin frame, one could never imagine that De Hingh was born a biological male—nor did she particularly look masculine at a young age either. And since her reassignment surgery in 2007, she has scored

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<sup>71</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980)

<sup>72</sup> Drucker/Rhys Artist Statement: 2014 Whitney Biennial

<sup>73</sup> Ibid



modeling positions on the catwalk of Maison Martin Margiela and Comme des Garçons, and has been photographed for glossy fashion magazines by the likes of Patrick Demarchelier.

Transgender studies scholar, Nikki Sullivan coined the process of changing one's sex to the opposing as *transmogrification*.<sup>74</sup> This process is characterized by distortion, exaggeration, and “unusual combinations;” how Connelly described the grotesque physique. Though the procedure, which Nikki Sullivan discusses is not a negative process that produces disavowed and abjected monstrous others but rather, she sees it as an expression of a fundamental human condition, “part of the process through which we all negotiate the boundary between self and other, and through which we perpetually transform ourselves in relation to an Other.”<sup>75</sup> It is important and ethical to refrain from Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque—“carnavalesque”—in this case, as it embodies expressions of the “freakish human,” though the process of transmogrification is an unnatural and strange condition; an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts. By dramatically altering the unmarked body, one could claim the process as self-mutilation. However, Sullivan resolves this argument by stating that, “we consider what we're not calling transsexual surgery as cosmetic surgery. In and through such a conceptual shift, maybe we would take the stigma [of transsexual surgery] away.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Stryker and Whittle, *The Transgender Studies Reader*.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid: 552

<sup>76</sup> Ibid: 556

Here 'trans' practices and procedures are not a means by which one moves from one sex/gender to the 'opposite.' Rather, they are an example of the many ambiguous and complex ways in which bodies are continually changed and changing—"organizing your body to suit your image of yourself...a therapeutic intervention."<sup>77</sup> Like Hannah Höch's photomontages, the trans-body deceives the world as a process of "(un)becoming" strange and grotesque, as both transgressive and conformist.<sup>78</sup> This idea shows that the grotesque process is more of an action than a thing. It is an operation of repulsion, anxiety, and reassessment of one's body. The following fashion designers have demonstrated the non-mainstream body to politicize its role in contemporary culture and society. In doing so, they craft ambiguous identities, thus disillusioning spectators of the model's predetermined physiologies. Like Chalayan and Margiela, through these illusions, the spectacle becomes conceptually redefined.

#### 2.4 *Vive la Différence: Dress and Gender*

The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated

-Judith Butler<sup>79</sup>

In history, fashion has been seen as an apolitical occurrence, separate from politics and decision-making. Nowadays, with the various social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, it has sought to politicize appearance as part of an overall politics

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> *Gender Trouble*, 1990: 148

of identity.<sup>80</sup> Fashion designers oftentimes use their seasonal collections to deconstruct characteristics of social identity according to class, age, gender, race, sexual orientation, or more simply, the politics of bodily regulation. Jonathon Anderson and Shayne Oliver, both contemporary menswear designers, are particularly interested in gender identification and androgyny—Anderson creates a kind-of contemporary London queer with his collections while Oliver puts on drag performances. Both designers inherently blur boundaries that mark gender identification by presenting menswear as womenswear and vice versa, though Anderson’s collections speak to sexual characteristics like genitalia as a signifier of sex, while Oliver re-imagines New York City’s 1980s drag ballrooms.

Postmodernists and multiculturalists marked identification of a person by gender as a key area where we rely on bodily signs to name someone as “male” or “female.”<sup>81</sup> However, the perspective of gender that is projected by these particular designers is influenced by culture, so that gender roles are redefined and open to challenge common conception—they represent a new group of fashion thinkers who disrupt the very idea of identity itself.<sup>82</sup> Queer theory similarly recognizes the politics of sexual identity, but it also reveals an undeniable *pleasure* of sexual politics, which is visible in both designers’ collections.<sup>83</sup> This has generally included outlawed practices of bondage, gay porn, and sado-masochism—a response to the

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<sup>80</sup> Tim Edwards, *Fashion in Focus: Concepts, Practices, and Politics* (2010)

<sup>81</sup> Robertson/McDaniel, *Themes of Contemporary Art*.(2005: 136)

<sup>82</sup> Simon de Beauvoir had claimed that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman and that “social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature”(1972). This accounts for the idea of gender socialization: that femininity is taught through products of social nature or how the individual is brought up—*casually constructed*.

<sup>83</sup> Nayak, *Gender, Youth and Culture* (2008: 157)

“puritanical zeal of the AIDS era which crystallized most evidently on the bodies of gay men.”<sup>84</sup>

Both Anderson and Oliver project a kind-of liberal “out and proud” motive in their menswear collections that project deconstructionist tendencies that unhinge gender and sexual politics from their subject’s ontological foundation. In doing so, their models portray themes of the grotesque body—in a way where gender becomes ambiguous to the spectator, also raising questions of a (deceivably) fetishized gaze: *are we looking at a man or woman?* Like Höch’s photomontage hybrid figurines, specifically in her work “Sweet One” (1926) where she features the torso of a male idol whose penis had been amputated to make way for a pair of female legs, these designers use various symbols to disillusion their spectators.<sup>85</sup>

Traditional fashion had represented the popular perception of stoicism: reinforcing a sense of time when ‘men were men and women were women,’ in other words when men *looked like* men.<sup>86</sup> The male designer had often projected his feminine as being characteristically glamorous, while the female designer sculpted her men to have hyper-sexualized qualities—take Donatella Versace, for example, who crafts tight swimwear and slim suits for her Italian muscle-men.<sup>87</sup> However, conventional masculine dress became a huge trend in ready-to-wear womenswear during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, giving women some opulent empowerment and authority—perhaps a response to glass-ceiling corporations—

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> (FIGURE 9)

<sup>86</sup> Edwards/McDaniel: 192

<sup>87</sup> Jonathon Anderson and Donatella Versace had collaborated on a *Versus* collection in 2013. It had fused hyper-sexuality with androgyny, casting an image of the trans-body as sexually explicit—men wore cropped turtleneck sweaters that were seamed by shiny gold safety pins.

but they were never considered to be lesbian or cross-dressers. Unsurprisingly, this is just the opposite for men dressed in womanly proportioned garments. Similarly seen in the universal icons used to distinguish male and female public lavatories, which almost invariably show men in separate-pieced garments and women in a skirt: “the fact that women wear trousers does not deter them from entering the door with the female icon, since these icons relate not so much to what men and women actually wear but to the clothing they are typically associated with.”<sup>88</sup> Clothing, in this instance, is the *only* signifier of difference, serving to predict femininity and masculinity.

### 2.5 J.W. Anderson Spring/Summer 2013 Menswear: *Age of Consent*

Jonathon Anderson, with his London-based label, J.W. Anderson conceives his ideal man as youthful, homosexual, and even forms of androgynous feminism at the same time. His Spring/Summer 2013 Menswear Collection entitled *Age of Consent*, explicitly debuted the aesthetic “other,” in a way that concerns the notion of identity politics: that identity is not neutral. The show had expressed a sense of the spectacle by introducing spectators with a new kind of sexual image—an ambiguity in stylized gender representations.<sup>89</sup> The collection spawned from the idea of “mothers sleeping with their sons”—that awkward child’s fetish that has become a sexual syndrome, *paraphilic infantilism*.<sup>90</sup> More so than reinforcing a set of

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<sup>88</sup> Linda Garber, *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory* (2001).

<sup>89</sup> It had furthermore put Anderson on the fashion map of designers to watch. This took the fashion industry some time to adjust to. In 2013 LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy) took a minority state in the company J.W. Anderson and had named Anderson creative director of Loewe.

<sup>90</sup> Corsini: 374

fetishistic symptoms, Anderson had proposed the concept of a “shared wardrobe,” in other words, a young boy in his mother’s organza and taffeta gowns. Not only were the fabrics foreign to menswear but also there was a moment where a model had sauntered by in an asymmetrical hot-pink double-breasted-like coat. The cut had nearly exposed his genitalia, although the sheer vibrancy of color was most scandalous. This was perhaps a cultural and social practice in itself: the common association, pink for a girl, blue for a boy.<sup>91</sup> Though this popularized notion is a recent historical invention: “in the early years of the twentieth century, before World War I, boys wore pink (‘a stronger, more decided color’ according to the promotional literature of the time), while girls wore blue (understood to be ‘delicate’ and ‘dainty’).”<sup>92</sup> And this is where Anderson saw fashion in “three months time.”<sup>93</sup>

Anderson admitted to having an obsession with unisex clothing, a consequence of growing up during the 1990s.<sup>94</sup> This kind-of obsession displays an overriding fascination with gender—playing around with boundaries of sexual difference. For Anderson, this fixation is translated into the dress men and women wear in everyday life, which also shows a concern to mark gender difference. The scholar Karl Schneegans argued the grotesque as a type of caricature exaggerated to the point that it attains a degree of impossibility—“an optical fantasy.”<sup>95</sup> And

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<sup>91</sup> In opposition to this WWI gender association, The Museum of Fine Arts Boston’s exhibit “Think Pink” attributes the color pink with femininity, claiming that perhaps no other color has as much social significance and gender association.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid

<sup>93</sup> The collections are available to the global market within 3-6 months after presentation.

<sup>94</sup> Calvin Klein had introduced CK One, a unisex fragrance during the 1990s.

<sup>95</sup> Connelly: 214

Anderson's clothes draw contemplation to the sex of the wearer so that it takes more than first glance to determine whether they are a man or woman.

His notion of the shared wardrobe also raises the idea of a shared dialogue and mind—that clothing is clothing, and it doesn't matter who wears it—what's his is hers and vice versa. One could suggest that this collection accounts for the female soul in a man's body—a late nineteenth century conception referred to as “inversion,” which spawned processes of transmogrification.<sup>96</sup>

In similarity to the 1960s free love, self-expression and spirituality attitudes, J.W.'s clan of neo-hippies approached the runway wearing matching wigs and maiden headscarves.<sup>97</sup> Their hemlines were elevated far above the knee and some gowns were translucent, revealing the masculine body—an unusual juxtaposition that sparked some negative criticisms toward Anderson's aesthetic and the label's projection of contemporary menswear.<sup>98</sup> Though, he is not demonstrating anti-fashion tendencies per se, but rather he is reconstructs menswear as a resistance of conservative masculine attire.<sup>99</sup> And his sheer gowns and hip-hugging trousers certainly exemplified this notion. His reconstruction of masculinity takes immense creativity and some practicality. And though Anderson is adamant on a distinct separation between the designer and artist, his works propose specific elements that align with artists who explore similar conceptual ideas. Similar to historical art

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid

<sup>97</sup> Hippie culture was by far the most influential of all social movements: “free love, self-expression and spirituality were woolly concepts that could incorporate pacifism and forms of androgyny” (Edwards: 193).

<sup>98</sup> Anderson embraces and elaborates on this criticism in his other various menswear collections, *Fall/Winter 2013, Spring/Summer 2014, and Fall/Winter 2014*. He quickly builds a reputation based on gender bending, or fusing menswear with womanly proportions.

<sup>99</sup> Anderson is regarded as a high-fashion designer

painting, the designer organizes his individual looks in groups—“diptychs and triptychs”—with slight modifications in color or cut. Some of these groupings were clearly womanlier than others, for example his presentation culminated by redefining an ordinary pinstripe suit: taking the garment from office to street. In this case, the leg became voluminous and oversized, and the single-breasted jacket was turned into a structural blouse. In another example, a knitted-diptych furthermore projected a feminine proportion and shape but with the illusion of male genitalia.<sup>100</sup> The knitwear was constructed to be form fitting and gesturally flamboyant in a way that his man’s physiotype was revealed via motility.<sup>101</sup> This image seemingly conjures that of Collier Schorr’s photograph entitled, “In the Garden (Karin in Grass),” 1996. In her photograph, the body of the model is displayed in the classic recumbent pose of the odalisque: that Orientalist fantasy painted by the likes of Goya, Ingres, and Manet, and depicting female conventions. The model wore makeup and a gauzy bra bound tightly across the chest, “yet displayed signs of “maleness” such as a short haircut, hairy legs, and underwear bunched at the crotch in a phallic shape.”<sup>102</sup> Schorr utilized this range of symbol-making strategies to distort her viewer’s perception of gender identity, but to also provide distinct visual parallels to reveal a “different body.” And Anderson expanded on Schorr’s visualization with his two knitted looks, by constructing an unfamiliar identity to build a multi-community of grotesque trans-men. Rather than

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<sup>100</sup> Marc Jacobs had shown a strikingly similar look in his most recent womenswear collection of Fall/Winter 2014—no masculine genitalia exposed, however many of his women were rendered bare-breasted.

<sup>101</sup> (FIGURE 7)

<sup>102</sup> Robertson/McDaniel: 136



Versace revealing her men's genitalia in a "sexy" and traditionally masculine way, Anderson's models defy hetero hypersexual attributes due to his womanly proportions and materials.

Anderson's following collection, *Fall/Winter 2013* further expanded on the tension of the individual and the social; a sense of oneself as the same and yet different to others, "as fitting in and standing out, and as shaped and yet creative."<sup>103</sup> By simply elongating proportions so that tailored shirts became men's mini-dresses, the designer deconstructed physically masculine attributes. Though his conception of "unisex" took on more feminine than sharable foundations. In opposition to Anderson's rather simplistic tactic to subvert masculinity through material and proportion, Shayne Oliver reinvents his man as woman, and his woman as man—exposing transgender classifications of his oftentimes already indistinct models.

## 2.6 Shayne Oliver's *Underground: Butch Queens of Hood By Air*

Shayne Oliver's label, *Hood by Air*, stands for the underground enthusiast: the liberated "other," who explores sexuality as a political statement, which concerns cultural perceptions of identity.<sup>104</sup> Oliver, with his most recent collection *Fall/Winter 2014*, provided attention to the late 1980s Vogue Movement, which had provided an inclusive platform for New York City's most outspoken outcasts: Afro-American homosexuals. In a time where AIDS had taken over New York's gay population, the relationship of homosexual to masculinity served to be problematic,

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<sup>103</sup> Edwards: 193

<sup>104</sup> Though, many of his marketable T-shirts found within the collection represent the trendy, street-wear savvy consumer—a population of heterosexual style-conscious men (and popularized musicians). This review is specific to Oliver's ready-to-wear garments.

challenging the social role of AIDS victims and affiliates. The position, on several occasions, led to a “sending-up” of masculinity itself as the hyper masculinity of clone culture: “where leather biker jackets were slung across naked and muscled torsos or skin-tight white T-shirts, whilst button-fly Levis clung to well-defined and accentuated cocks and asses that practically screamed sexual availability.”<sup>105</sup> This ended up as something bordering on self-parody. Drag queens and effeminists, meanwhile, had lost out almost altogether.

Fashion theorist Tim Edwards explained that the advent of AIDS had done little to challenge gay male imagery, if not worsen it “in terms of a dreariness of clones without hair, sun-tans, moustaches, muscles, and accentuated cocks: in short, clones without sex.”<sup>106</sup> However, drag queens regained significant attention in the late 1980s when the Vogue Movement was highlighted in the media. This movement referred to an underground network of posing and impressionist dancers taking place in New York and some other major cities where young, gay, and often black men would don the costumes and appearances of many cult icons, including Hollywood idols and some more contemporary, predominant images of femininity and masculinity. They paraded in front of audiences on the street or in bars and nightclubs, or in Shayne Oliver’s world, it happened on the catwalk.

Oliver’s collection was inspired by an idea that gender could be “put on and taken off,” in the way that drag queens prepare for their lavish performances, simultaneously dazzling and deceiving audiences. Oliver’s queens demonstrated this function by clothing that entailed half done-up zippers and Velcro-fastened

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<sup>105</sup> Edwards: 194

<sup>106</sup> Ibid: 195

pants.<sup>107</sup> In interesting juxtapositions of the fashioned body, Oliver was not out to disguise trans-identities, but moreover he was exposing their differences. For example, masculine models with scruffy facial hair wore pleated skirts, mini-dresses, and cropped tops. His use of accessories, specifically headdresses that were comprised of various different hair-extensions, furthermore contributed to the idea of this put-on, take-off symbol of identity.

Oliver appropriated the photomontages of Hannah Höch by creating extensions to his model's faces through collage technique. Rather than creating indistinct grotesques by combining vegetation with animal and human body parts, Oliver used magazine cutouts to paste on his model's faces as accentuations—reverting back to cosmetic enhancements and Weimer era rejuvenations. In interesting juxtapositions, these accentuations combined opposing ethnicities; for example one African American model had Caucasian cutouts pasted to his eyebrow, nose, and chin.<sup>108</sup> This furthermore provided a distinct visualization of drag queen disguises through elaborate cosmetic makeup art, rather than surgical procedures. Though Oliver notably included familiar friends on the catwalk including two trans-body performance artists by the names “Honey Dijon” and “boychild.”<sup>109</sup> The incorporation of these cultural artistic figures emphasized Oliver's aesthetic of trans identities and drag culture. His presentation concluded with homage to the *Vogue Movement's* various flamboyant poses, as his model-friends expressionistically

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<sup>107</sup> Similar to the Adidas “snap-pant,” these separate pieces could be easily fastened and removed for quick changes in outfit and function.

<sup>108</sup> (FIGURE 8)

<sup>109</sup> “Honey Dijon” is a NYC DJ who transitioned from male to female, while “boychild” is a NYC performance artist who appears masculine but is biologically female. The two have become NYC personalities in art society for their display of gender identity.

danced in the center of the catwalk as they would at a 1980s gay ball. They wore denim trousers and hair extensions, though without a garmented blouse, showing that these figures were male—revealing the faces behind drag deception.

Oliver advertised a kind-of foreign tribe to fashion's spectator, with a conceptual nod to typology and beauty enhancement in the context of 1980s NYC drag ballrooms. His collection, similar to the Vogue Movement, represented the constant struggle with boundaries of the known, the conventional, and the understood.

## Chapter 3: Body

### 3.1 *A Case of Disorder and a Cause of Disorder*

In a shift from the grotesque processes of transfiguration to defining ambiguous identities amongst trans-body minorities, the abstracted body has served as an aesthetical experimentation on the runway. As proliferations of the grotesque expand into different registers, the spectacle too, becomes undoubtedly reworked. To divert from ambiguities in cultural representations of body identity, fashion designers have reflected upon physical attributes and deficiencies to bring awareness to fashion's exclusion of outcast beauties. The fashion designers John Galliano and Alexander McQueen asserted fashion's spectacle in "upside-down" visual mannerisms to claim individual artistic recognition. Frances Connelly explains that artistic mannerism was "the confident assertion of the artist's right...to make something that was first and last a work of art."<sup>110</sup> The characteristics of mannerism play an important connection to modernism, as it emphasized a play of the imagination and individual virtuosity, which will provide strong parallels by which we judge these designers today.

To recall the supermodel, celebrated fashion models were seen as ideal women of self-made success and without doubt, objects of admiration. For some time now there has been a trend to interrogate the fashion model body as problematic and even malicious. Some literature concludes that the fashion model body is inherently *disorderly*, with situations of the model body in terms of physical

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<sup>110</sup> Frances Connelly (2003: 8)

ailments, such as *anorexia nervosa*.<sup>111</sup> The mediatized disciplined body of desire seemingly reached to impressionable girls, infecting them with disorderliness—a *case of disorder and a cause of disorder*.<sup>112</sup> In a report from *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, the Doctor Janet L. Treasure explained that the circulation of model images has created a “toxic” environment in which eating disorders flourish.<sup>113</sup> The model body is subsequently a disorderly body, and designers have long sculpted this cadaver-like build as a practice of spectacular beauty and seduction. And the visually malnourished body exemplifies a sort-of discipline that fashion designers have acknowledged as being admirable—ideal. Karl Lagerfeld has been criticized in the past for idolizing and showcasing the extended bodies of young impressionable girls.<sup>114</sup> Perhaps designers traditionally employed this physiological-type to represent an idea of *the other*, because fashion and reality refuse similar foundation.

The Italian performance artist, Vanessa Beecroft reflected on this idea in a few of her works. She has been known to combine elements of fashion and performance art, tied to her obsession with her eating disorder, exercise bulimia. Beecroft is seemingly unashamed of her obsession, though her art has been regarded to face shame—she is known best from employing female models to stand nude in a gallery space, oftentimes for hours while viewers voyeuristically gaze at the lean bodies. The models do not appear glamorous, but rather there is something grueling about them that Beecroft captures with the repetitive alignment of their ill

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<sup>111</sup> Angela Dwyer, *Disorder or Delight? Towards a New Account of the Fashion Model Body*, *Fashion Theory*, Volume 8, Issue 4 (405)

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>113</sup> Treasure, *British Journal of Psychiatry*

<sup>114</sup> Lagerfeld had notably dropped 92 lbs in 13 months in order to squeeze into Dior Homme skinny jeans.

bodies.<sup>115</sup> Themes of illness and trauma in Beecroft's works act as a dysfunctional manner in the "dys-appearance" of the visceral body. Art historian Christine Ross explains the dysfunctional body as a body both threatened and threatening; an "it" that reveals itself as something different...something stranger and harder to control. The body becomes absent and yet present in the manifestation of Beecroft's *symptom*. Thus fashion's traditional body of spectacularized proportion serves as a phenomenological body that can seem frightening and humiliating. The fashion victim emerged as something of a model trauma victim, particularly in reference to the traumatized look of the fashion model on the runway. Fashion's various protestors, streakers and activists have similarly argued against the fashion model body. And over the seasons, catwalk attendees have seen countless half-naked protestors holding signs reading "Anorexia."<sup>116</sup>

In another artwork by the artist, Maureen Connor entitled, "Thinner Than You" (1990), Connor used a tightly stretched dress form as a metaphor for the pressure American woman are under today to strive for extreme thinness. The empty dress could also be interpreted as an instance of the postmodern "empty vessel"—a body drained of the illusion of a soul. Subsequently, the drained body is at a loss of control or what should be called the "contingency of the body" and its failure to function how it is supposed to in a contemporary society (productive, healthy, and young). The manufacture of this dysfunctional body prefaces the notion of the "abject" body in relation to the grotesque: a metaphysical definition of

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<sup>115</sup> (FIGURE 10)

<sup>116</sup> DAZED AND CONFUSED

the woman as an unmaterialized or formless body.<sup>117</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin furthermore elucidates on the dysfunctional body as being “carnavalesque.”

### 3.2 Galliano's *Convulsive Beauties*

The Russian philosopher, Bakhtin described the carnivalesque as being monstrous, on the verge of becoming subhuman by subverting order or rationality. His focus of the carnivalesque reaches to physical attributes, particularly found in images of woman. Bakhtin's essays on the carnivalesque exalt the grotesque to repulsion and disgust by means of bodily disjunctions. The emergence of the carnivalesque is considerable influence in modern art proliferations of the grotesque body. John Galliano reflected on these convulsive traits with his Spring/Summer 2006 collection for his own label *John Galliano*.<sup>118</sup> With the spring collection, he presented an incredible human parade in Paris. He employed unconventional bodies to wear his garments, and they teetered between themes of the grotesque and unknown—at the very least, unknown to the catwalk.

His most unusual models consisted of dwarf-couples, identical twins, voluptuaries, and giants. Perhaps Galliano wanted to represent reality on the catwalk, resisting the accustomed conception of beauty. But his performers were exaggerated characters of commonality. And in a three-movement presentation, a cultural discourse that was more foreign than 3<sup>rd</sup> world came alive. In the first movement, Galliano had projected his version of a blind date. Either model entered

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<sup>117</sup> Christine Ross (2003: 281)

<sup>118</sup> At this time, John Galliano also served as the Creative Director for the House of Christian Dior, up until 2011 when he was arrested and fired over an anti-Semitic tirade in a Paris bar (February 25, 2011).



the catwalk from opposing doorways and took their first meeting in the stage's median, against a 1920s Art Deco backdrop. In the light of carnival juxtapositions, Galliano indulged. The conventional fashion-beauty was delivered beside her sugar daddy and the elderly conservative-elegance strolled next to her flamboyant cross dressing companion. Each individual model casted a distinct characteristic of *plaisir* in every lavish saunter down Galliano's cultural catwalk.<sup>119</sup> Some fashion was costume: necessary to the performance, however seemingly inaccessible to public grasp or desire—few men wore knit bell-bottomed long underwear, for example.

In a moment of amusement, one of Galliano's male harlequins had strolled the catwalk with his voluptuary. This image can be visually compared with a print produced by the German artist, Otto Dix, entitled *Visit to Madame Germaine's in Méricourt* (1924).<sup>120</sup> In this etching, Dix reimagined a less familiar image of WWI—the brothels that were accustomed by men of war as a place to escape from the devastating trenches. Even in an overtly sexual image, Dix embodied the grotesque—carnavalesque—in his caricature-like figures. He had included a voluptuous and exotic, yet disturbingly monstrous prostitute seated on the lap of her customer. She embodied everything grotesque, from her staggering proportion to her primitive resemblance to animalistic figures. Dix had rendered her as unflatteringly plump and majestically embellished in a rather intricate floral arrangement that fancifully decorated her all but frail figure. Her gown, which is unusually revealing emphasized her abnormally large breast that seems to devour

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<sup>119</sup> In "The Death of the Author" (1977) by Roland Barthes, he had described that *plaisir* is, "a pleasure...linked to cultural enjoyment and identity."

<sup>120</sup> This is one of fifty sketches from a compilation of war etchings—images from WWI (1924). (FIGURES 11/12)

her suitor's hand. Through an explicit gaze, she exuberated a kind-of sexual availability to the patrons who valued such female voluptuaries. And similarly captured in Dix's etching, Galliano's grotesque undercuts "all expectations of aesthetic pleasure we attach to viewing the feminine body."<sup>121</sup> Madame Germaine's prostitute also exemplified this notion through her unexpected "convulsive beauty" that is unordinary and truly the antithesis of any preconceived fantasy of early 20<sup>th</sup> century prostitution. Galliano's woman radiated a sensual mysteriousness, which was more visible than her male suitor, who performed a stern and emotionally uninvolved bodily persona.

The show's second movement, a classic *adagio*, was far from slow moving. Rather, Galliano's carnival became progressively more unique—in beige—but unmistakable. There were few uncanny proliferations of Diane Arbus' *twins*, though done in bizarre variations: brothers in gowns, young girl-twins dressed in their grandma's wardrobe and precious jewels, and the androgynous sibling dressed to match her brother's militant uniform.<sup>122</sup> In between these "identical" acts, mismatched couplings, particularly in sheer bodily proportion followed. These particular physical juxtapositions yielded laughter from the show-exhausted audience whilst a black-tie dwarfed man quickly walked next to his 6-foot-tall, long-legged visionary. Connelly described the grotesque as its own brand of dark humor, a humor absurd enough to make the "horrible bearable and to mitigate our responses of fear and disgust...merging horror with humor, challenging the

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<sup>121</sup> Connelly: 15

<sup>122</sup> Diane Arbus, *Identical Twins*, Roselle, New Jersey (1967) photograph

boundaries or propriety in order to attack the nationalism that created the result.”<sup>123</sup>

Galliano’s spectacle came together in his *finale*. Like a theatrical set, props-men disassembled and reinstalled a kind-of-campy show curtain for a more majestic, evening occasion. The clothing became more exquisite and romantic. And each model-pair had retold their overstated love story, as they expressed happiness during these final steps. One unusual love story consisted of a smiling geisha joined by her restaurant server. One could propose that she had picked him up from the bar, flirtatiously luring him into her divine quarters. To end the show, however, Galliano had exploited a vaguely familiar union. He had staged a dwarf wedding, and there was a sense of genuine adoration, as both individuals lit up with mutual esteem. The inclusion of the dwarf couple violates the standard or common biological and ontological concepts of model norm. And with that, the grotesque subverts our expectations concerning the natural and ontological order.

This moment had confirmed the moral of his show: to respect one another. With this show, Galliano conceived the grotesque woman as being obese or extremely short, and the unknown man as being very tall or slightly androgynous; perhaps unintentionally, some of his models were more monstrous than others. Though Galliano communicated a spirit that was profound and goodhearted—particularly for fashion’s material consumers. For his always-anticipated bow-sashay-bow after the show, a model puppeteer controlled marionette-Galliano. With his work at the helm of Christian Dior, maybe this had represented Galliano as

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<sup>123</sup> Connelly (2003: 4-10)

a puppet on a corporate string. This show, on the other hand, defied that idea and had liberated the designer into a new, more accepting realm of fashion. By doing so, Galliano redefined spectacular presentation by enchanting audiences with untraditionally seen catwalk models. In this case, he used the model body as a spectacle—turning the spectacle back on itself with images that resist fashion’s usual bodies. Alexander McQueen similarly used themes of the grotesque in his performances. However, the themes were far less uplifting than Galliano’s representations.

### *3.3 Alexander McQueen’s Absent Body*

Alexander McQueen’s account of the grotesque occurred in different procedures on the catwalk. Similar to the absent body (ill and dysfunctional), he had focused collections on trauma and bodily discontinuities, but he furthermore capitalized on the contrast between computer model and fashion model, between virtual and actual body. His performances circulated through the media images during the late 90s and early 2000s, providing horrific representations that have been considered to be aesthetically bizarre. The fashion shows were never ordinary, and they usually incorporated characteristics of the deficient body that were either rendered to be psychotic, diseased, or convulsive fusions of human and nonhuman components.

Though McQueen’s concepts for the catwalk were explored through painful themes and variations of the body, with intriguing yet unfriendly show titles like, “Highland Rape” and “The Hunger,” they moreover carried an aesthetic that was

unquestionably unapproachable, but the clothing was extraordinarily desired on every count. His models served more as actors than the traditional model norm, which consisted of sashays and various turns during processes of navigation on the runway. The models' unusual acts of debilitation gave life to the purpose and function of McQueen's dress in painstakingly disorienting situations. In a chronological evaluation, proliferations of the absent body as grotesque will progress from the dysfunctional (ill) to one that has been replaced by the biotechnological body.

McQueen's Spring/Summer 1997 collection entitled, "La Poupee" was influenced by the German photographer Hans Bellmer (1902-1975), who assertively dissected dolls and reconstructed them in a disorderly fashion (similar to Höch's photomontages)—they appeared to have been offspring of the mutated mother. There was a significant moment in the show when the African model Debra Shaw, performed an uncomfortable walk, constricted by shackles that connected her four limbs together. The walk was uncontrolled and restrictive, like a puppeteer had controlled her every gesture.<sup>124</sup> Her body can be argued to have been absent, in the way that her movement failed to correspond to a disciplined body and its day-to-day function. In similarity, the German artist Oskar Schlemmer created restrictive garments in his work "Triadisches Ballett" (Triadic Ballet) in 1922. Schlemmer transfigured his actors from the normal representation to geometrical shapes, which he had called his "figurine."<sup>125</sup> In this case the abstract geometry of the body was reimagined with a cylinder for a neck and a pyramid for the legs of his

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<sup>124</sup> (FIGURE 13)

<sup>125</sup> Oskar Schlemmer (FIGURE 14)

performers. For both McQueen and Schlemmer, constrictions of the disciplined body subsequently appeared to be physically absent—uncontrolled.<sup>126</sup>

McQueen's Spring/Summer 1999 show entitled, *No. 13* proposed the replacement of the physical model body with technology. This included robots and machines that performed human functions, which appeared with increasing frequency in Western art after the industrial revolution made machinery and machine-made objects common in everyday life.<sup>127</sup> The show ended with the model Shalom Harlow on a rotating turntable, wearing a white dress. She appeared physically fatigued and negotiated herself down the catwalk and stood between the two robot machines, which continually sprayed her with paint. The robots had complete control over her body, as she appeared to be consumed by fear and trauma during this act.<sup>128</sup> After the robots had more or less taken advantage of the model body, Harlow appeared more disoriented and delusional, as she dizzily exited. This image is comparable to an installation by the artist Rebecca Horn entitled *High Moon* (1991).<sup>129</sup> Her work included two mechanical guns firing paint at each other in a gallery space. The installation incorporated the theme of bodily vitality in relation to machinery as an external body. She had discussed the work by saying that, "my machines are not washing machines or cars. They have a human quality and they must change."<sup>130</sup> McQueen's finale acted as a *memento mori*, stressing the

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<sup>126</sup> McQueen's "La Poupee" collection was heavily criticized, as the image of Debra Shaw's restricted body reemerged images of slavery, which McQueen denied race affiliations.

<sup>127</sup> Themes in contemporary art

<sup>128</sup> (FIGURE 17)

<sup>129</sup> (FIGURE 18)

<sup>130</sup> Rebecca Horn, "They Bastille Interviews II, Paris 1993"

operation of the body in relation to the machine, and that the death of the human is very much different than that of a machine; “if a machine stops, it doesn’t mean it’s broken. It’s just tired.”<sup>131</sup>

Some of McQueen’s other collections project similar theories on the expiration of life, like his Spring/Summer 2004 show, “Deliverance,” which celebrated this idea in a reenactment of a three-part dance marathon, influenced by Sydney Pollack’s film from 1969, “They Shoot Horses Don’t They?” The first chapter showed women in pristine garments dancing the tango with their partners. By the end of the performance, the models and dancers developed an undeniably debilitating exhaustion while being dragged around the dance floor just as they were about to collapse.<sup>132</sup> The exhaustive process consequently rendered the body as inherently dysfunctional and formless, showing the abject body as a grotesque process rather than thing. This is what disease is about: the body acts independently of human will, even from consciousness. It is interesting to note that the artist Kiki Smith also puts into play a similar sense of loss of control in her work, *Virgin Mary* (1993).<sup>133</sup> About her work, Kiki Smith says: “that loss of function can seem frightening. But on the other hand, you can look at it as a kind of liberation of the body.”<sup>134</sup> What is being produced with McQueen’s show is a more performative conception of the body that simultaneously represents the ill-model as physically decaying while embracing the body to liberate inhibitions.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid

<sup>132</sup> (FIGURE 15)

<sup>133</sup> (FIGURE 16)

<sup>134</sup> Christine Ross, *Abjection: Performances of the Female Body*

In another staggering instance of McQueen's liberation of the model body, he employed girls to take on characteristics of the mentally deranged in the setting of a mental asylum with his Spring/Summer 2001 collection. The space for this show was unique in that, audiences sat behind a mirrored glass that forced them to stare at themselves for a whole hour. When finally lit from inside, the cube revealed itself to house demented models circumnavigating the space, and oftentimes pressing themselves up against the glass in an uncomfortable confrontation with the invisible spectator. Many models performed psychotic acts by flailing their hands, dramatically shifting their bodies in disturbance, and rapidly exchanging glares with one another. The mind, in this case, did not have control over the visceral body. There was an overt struggle amongst the models to regain health and consciousness. The absence of mind in relation to the body subsequently exemplified a physical randomness in performance and function. What becomes most important from this idea is not the recovery of the lost body or the discovery of a new body, but the quest for random "interrelationships between them," as an "abjected" liberation, yet a loss of control.<sup>135</sup> At the end of the show, all sides of another cube (within the space) came crashing down, revealing the naked body of a full-figured model whose face was masked while hooked-up to oxygen tubes—keeping her body alive and functioning.<sup>136</sup> She represented the same breed of grotesque that Hannah Höch created with her photomontage entitled *Strange Beauty* (1929), in which her figure

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 290

<sup>136</sup> (FIGURE 19)



is reclined in the classic pin-up girl pose but gazing out from myopic eyes set in a shrunken alien head—imagining the figure to be partly human.<sup>137</sup><sup>138</sup>

In McQueen’s representations of the absent body, he mindfully coexisted it with the present body. Therefore the body was not merely lacking. Its lack, failure, or loss of control was productive as it brought into play unpredictable disorganization and reorganization that led to its deterioration but also to its increase in complexity. McQueen’s career ended with a tragic suicide—perhaps an expression of his many infatuations with death and human complexity.<sup>139</sup> With his catwalk collection, McQueen exalted, if not reinvented the use of the spectacle in aesthetics and presentation. As a consequence, his label represented artistic mannerisms that proposed the fashion spectacle as something “other” than its traditional representations of beauty and glamour.

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<sup>137</sup> Maria Makela, 195

<sup>138</sup> (FIGURE 20)

<sup>139</sup> McQueen’s death was announced on the afternoon of February 11, 2010. In the morning, his housekeeper found him hanging at his home.

## Conclusion

Through fashion's innovative games with representation, the commodity form returned via the very structures that denied it; through the instability of the image in the modern period and its ambiguous role in the society of the spectacle.

In methods of revealing production and manufacture of the image, designers Margiela, Li, and Etro reevaluated processes of the spectacle—showing the commercial reality behind the spectacle: a reality that is glimpsed backstage and in the audience rather than on the fantasy catwalk. While other designers such as Anderson, Oliver, Galliano and McQueen relayed between bodies and signs, which could not be more explicit than in model body as a leading economic indicator (bioeconomies) and as mass-mediated spectacle. In artistic mannerisms of the grotesque, their bodies further incited wonder, something unknown and unaccountable as being spectacular: a dis-junction and interweaving of opposing elements that resisted unification. By reconsidering these identities and functions of the body, their collections retain excellence.

The shows evaluated were poised between the worlds of performance and commerce, where aesthetics and metaphysics compete with spectacle and illusion. With a distinct nod to a digital era, these designer-artists conceptually repurpose Debord's use of "spectacle" into an expression that accommodates to communications technology and the media platforms of today.

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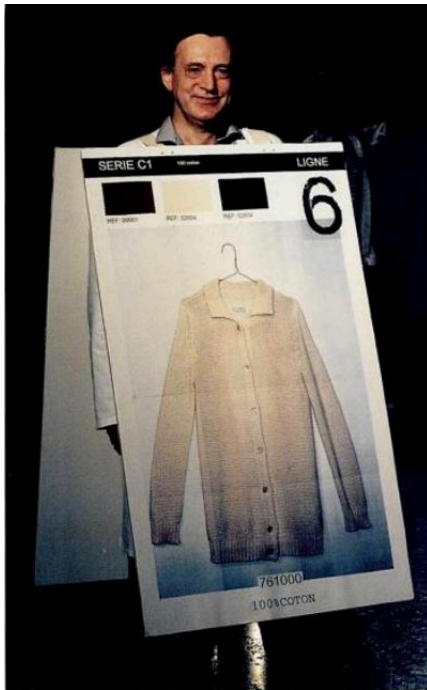
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## Figures



(FIGURE 1) Chanel Fall/Winter 2014



(FIGURE 3) Margiela Spring 1999



(FIGURE 2) Etro Fall/Winter 2014 Menswea





(FIGURE 4: Gianni Versace Fall/Winter 1991)



(FIGURE 5) Tom Ford Fall/Winter 2014



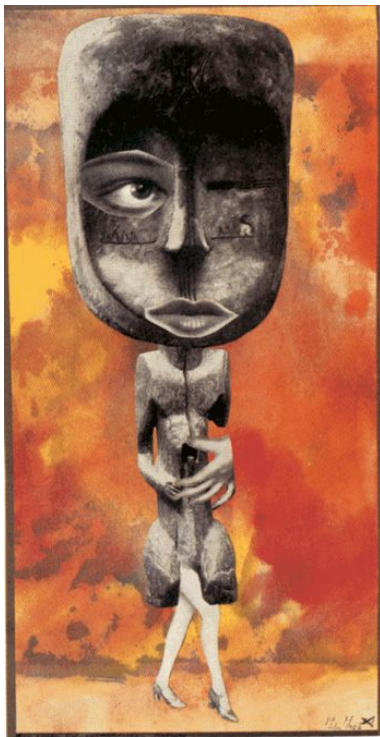
(FIGURE 6) Barneys New York Spring 2014 Campaign



(FIGURE 7) J.W. Anderson Spring 2013



(FIGURE 8) Hood By Air Fall/Winter 2014



(FIGURE 9) Hannah Hoch "Sweet One"



(FIGURE 10) Vanessa Beecroft Installation





(FIGURE 11) John Galliano Spring 2006 (FIGURE 12) Otto Dix, *Visit to Madame Germaine's* 1924



(FIGURE 13) Alexander McQueen S/S 1997 (FIGURE 14) Oskar Schlemmer, *Triadic Ballet* 1927





(FIGURE 15) McQueen: Spring 2004



(FIGURE 16) Kiki Smith *Virgin Mary* 1992



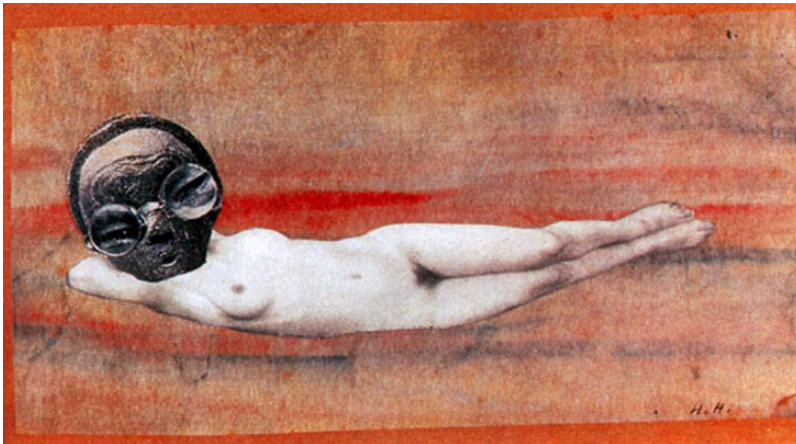
(FIGURE 17) Alexander McQueen S/S 1999



(FIGURE 18) Rebecca Horn *High Moon* 1991



(FIGURE 19) Alexander McQueen: Spring 2001



(FIGURE 20) Hannah Höch, *Strange Beauty* (1929)