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INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 2 / 2022

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FEAR, DESIRE, DISGUST  
AND THE IDEAL FEMININE  
IN THE WORKS OF ALEXANDER  
MCQUEEN AND JOHN GALLIANO**

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# WOMEN AS OPEN WOUNDS: FEAR, DESIRE, DISGUST AND THE IDEAL FEMININE IN THE WORKS OF ALEXANDER MCQUEEN AND JOHN GALLIANO

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## Abstract

Starting from the notion of the Ideal Feminine, this paper discusses the representation of trauma and the portrayal of women as open wounds in the designs of Alexander McQueen and John Galliano. Particularly, I explore how the McQueen's *Deadly Woman* and Galliano's *Doll* question the boundaries between mortality, sexuality and decay. By examining the relationship between fear, desire and disgust in the aesthetic representation of the wounded fashioned body, I argue that in their works disgust functions as an empowering emotion, contributing to the perception of the aversive fashioned body as a feministic act.

## Keywords

Femininity. Wound. Disgust. Aesthetics. Body.

## 1. Introduction

The depiction of grotesque female figures in the contemporary history of fashion is a phenomenon related to the changing perception of female sexuality and body. Alexander McQueen and John Galliano are the most characteristic examples of the deviation from the traditional, sexualized representation of femininity. In this essay, I examine the notion of the Ideal Feminine in the works of McQueen and Galliano in the context of Feminism and Negative aesthetics (as part of Everyday Aesthetics). The Ideal Feminine is a protean term that refers to the “perfect” versions of femininity, which evolve through the years and are based on social, cultural and aesthetic standards. This notion is mainly related to the portrayal of woman in her most idealized form, in terms of beauty and attractiveness. The designers, who were inspired by the violated bodies of women, their fear, their sexuality and their wounds, question the ideal feminine, by using disgust as a reaction to the well-established stereotypes of femininity. My aim is to explain how the designers contributed to the construction of the imagery that depicts femininity and, by association, women as open wounds. The wound, usually an external opening on our traumatized body, is strongly associated with the danger of infection and the emotion of disgust. Nonetheless, wound as an opening is also associated both with fear (internal organs, death) and desire (the female genitals, the idea of

penetration). In addition, the feeling of disgust towards the wound is related to decay and the fear of death, an emotional reaction to the inevitable of human mortality (Nussbaum 2004, p. 91).<sup>1</sup> The questions that I attempt to explore are: (a) how the notion of the ideal Feminine is approached by Alexander McQueen and John Galliano, (b) how fear, desire and disgust are related to the female body as an aesthetic locus and (c) how the aesthetic violation of femininity by McQueen and Galliano is seen as a feminist act.

The relation between fear, desire and disgust is applied in the framework of Aurel Kolnai's idea of *macabre allure* (Kolnai 2004, p. 42). Kolnai states that, while disgust is an emotion that evokes repulsion, at the same time draws our attention. The earliest source that refers to the appealing nature of disgust is Plato's Leontius (Rep. 4.439e ff.). Plato describes the repulsion that Leontius felt as he was not able to take his eyes off the executed corpses (Lateiner and Spatharas 2017, p. 11). Efi Kyprianidou, in her analysis of macabre allure states that what is naturally disgusting "traps" the attention, intrigues the curiosity and attracts the subject. Disgust has a paradoxical and ambiguous relation with its object, as fear is an avoiding behavior that alienate us from the disgusting object, while disgust avoids the disgusting object but stays attached to this (Kyprianidou, forthcoming). Sara Heinämaa also refers to the connection between desire and disgust, explaining that "disgust alternates between repulsion and attraction and is able to combine instantaneous, even violent rejection with persisting fascination" (Heinämaa 2020, p. 9). The feminist perspectives of this triangle are found in the work of Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (1980), where she explores the relationship between the female body and the *abject*. Explaining the connection between the fear of the violation of our physical boundaries, the disgust that this violation evokes and our desire to stare at it, Kristeva reinforces the idea that the wound with blood does not signify death, but it is "what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death" (Kristeva 1982, p. 3). Following the feminist approach, Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* also engages the emotion of disgust in the understanding of the sexuality of the young girl, arguing that disgusting practices are linked to her fear of male dominance and her sadomasochistic tendencies (De Beauvoir 2008, p. 492). The aesthetic perception of the wounded body is explained in the context of Richard Shusterman's Somaesthetics, in which he states that the "purely corporeal can be uncanny," an idea related to the female body as a wound and its feminist perspectives. Particularly, in his essay *Somaesthetics and "the Second Sex,"* Shusterman explores the relationship between the aesthetics of the body and the feminist theory of de Beauvoir, explaining that the female body belongs to the woman but, at the same time it is strange to her (Shusterman 2003, p. 124). Martha Nussbaum in her book *Hiding from Humanity* discusses the emotion of disgust in relation to specific groups (such as women, homosexuals, Jews et al.), that are attributed with animalistic characteristics

in an attempt of privileged groups to “step further away from being animal and mortal themselves” (Nussbaum 2004, pp. 107-108). In addition, she argues that there is a specific type of “misogynistic disgust”; femininity is associated with disgust, fear and desire through sexuality. Caroline Evans in *Fashion at the Edge* analyzes the concept of wound in the context of fashion, explaining the aesthetic function of trauma, the pleasure derived from the repulsive imagery of femininity and the relationship between disgust, the traumatized woman and clothing as a protective armor (Evans 2003, p. 145). She also analyzes the relations between mortality, “interiority” and the female body, quoting Jonathan Sawaday and stating that “the body’s interior is a Medusa’s head that speaks directly of our own mortality and that, regardless of the sex of the body, interiority is first feminized and then sexualized in representation” (Evans 2003, p. 224).

Alexander McQueen’s and John Galliano’s careers centered around darkness, violence, abuse and controversy. McQueen was born and raised in London. During his school years, he faced many difficulties because of his appearance and his homosexuality. Just like Galliano, his upbringing was homophobic and violent, as his father was against gays and his sisters were victims of abusive relationships. Both designers studied in Central Saint Martins and, while they shared a common British heritage, McQueen disagreed with the theatrical attitude of Galliano’s style. McQueen’s design identity had been shaped by abuse, murder, fetishism and pornography with lots of historical references. What was important for him was people to know that there was a reasoning behind every design, every garment and every collection -every collection had a story to tell. When he became creative director of Givenchy and moved to Paris, the fashion community there was not satisfied by the savage way he approached couture. In McQueen’s philosophy, individuality was more important than being accepted. While his brand thrived, McQueen struggled with obesity, anxiety and drug abuse. On February 11, 2010 he was found dead in his apartment in London. What he inspired him was what he destroyed him and vice versa.

John Galliano, raised in London too, was, unlike McQueen, a “superstar” and a “party animal.” He belonged to one of the coolest gay fashion movements, the New Romantics, in which dressing with extravagant costumes and posing outrageously were part of their identity. His life was balancing between creation and overindulgences. His career was characterized by several ups and down, as Galliano became fashion’s “enfant terrible.” He abandoned London as he believed that fashion was dead there and moved to Paris. Almost immediately, he embraced the French culture and the French audience loved him. As he became the creative director of iconic fashion houses, Givenchy and Dior, the designer was trying to stay real and at the same time loyal to the brands’ identities. His “couture in steroids” was inspired by mental illness, dark themes and women portrayed in the most sexual way possible. The designer gave great emphasis to the presentation of the dominating side of the sexualized woman. He did not just dress women

with very sexy clothes: he highlighted the role of the desirable woman in the framework of pleasure and seduction by exploring her different sides.

Overall, Galliano, by romanticizing oversexualized types of women, and McQueen, by resolving the victimization of them, presented alternative versions of feminine ideals. The body lives in a tight symbiosis with the dress and, as a result, the depiction of wounds on the dress is inevitably associated with the wounded femininity. The wound is the result of trauma, an opening, a hole, a cut, a gap, a source of bleeding. In what follows I examine how the models, as the representation of femininity on the catwalk, do not only bear those wounds but they are portrayed as wounds themselves in the designs of McQueen and Galliano.

## **2. McQueen's Deadly Woman**

The purpose of McQueen was to redefine the way femininity is perceived through fashion. For McQueen, women seem to become stronger by facing what are traditionally taken as “weaknesses,” being their body, their sexuality, their vulnerability, their bodily products, and by adopting masculine characteristics. Their sensuality remained subtle, while their sexuality was not directly linked to any kind of satisfaction. Eroticism in McQueen's work is more associated with fear, since his clothes' purpose was not to conceal femininity but to make women less vulnerable to men, by using their sexuality as an armor. The concept of wounded femininity is a theme that characterized his work since his personal life was scarred by abuse and violence. McQueen's heroines were survivors of violent and deadly events, strongly associated with Deathliness and trauma. His women were usually portrayed as victims of rape (see *Highland Rape* collection), warriors, horror heroines, asylum inmates or dreadful hybrids.

The idea of the wounded female body in McQueen relates to the themes of deathliness, sexuality and aversion. The wound in the work of McQueen functions as *memento mori*, a reminder of our mortality and the inevitability of death. For the designer, death was a part of life, melancholic and romantic at the same time. Ana Finel Honigman mentions that McQueen preferred to repel than just attract; in McQueen's words “I am about what goes through people's minds, the stuff that people don't want to admit or face up to” (Honigman 2021, 72). In addition, she states that his garments had “an internal hourglass, where their fading beauty represented all of our waning vitality” (Honigman 2021, p. 86).

A characteristic example of the representation of woman as an open wound is two outfits from Alexander McQueen's Spring 1996 collection named *Hunger* and inspired by the erotic vampire movie of the same name. The first one is a pencil, semi-transparent white dress with an upright cut from the bust to the hips. The cut is exaggerated by a black, fog-like print around it, which exposes the skin under the dress's opening. In the same collection, another outfit of

McQueen is provocative enough to elicit disgust; a see-through, worm-filled bodice. The bizarre top seems to keep the worms trapped in place between the skin and the garment, while the bright red leather skirt underlines the connotations of blood.<sup>2</sup> Both looks remind us of a wound that got infected and, in the end, decayed. In 2021, the brand of Alexander McQueen released the Anemone Collection, which was inspired by the anemone flower. Particularly, a white dress with an abstract anemone print gained controversial feedback about the depiction of the flower, since many people commented that it seemed like bloody wound. Among others, a user of Twitter platform claimed that “it’s distasteful and gives me slavery vibes of a woman being raped or having a fucc’n abortion or something. That’s all!” (@madetherealone, November 21, 2021). Indeed, the dress resembled a bleeding wound and for this particular reason was heavily criticized.

McQueen rejected the representation of woman as fragile, wearing frilly, fancy dresses: he was interested in “the woman whose sexuality was dangerous, even deathly, and for whom, therefore, male desire would always be tinged with dread” (Honigman 2021, p. 145). Her portrayal as an open, decaying wound and, in the end, as a decayed body full of worms is a reaction to the traditional representation of sexuality in fashion. In this context, the female body does not represent a wound, rather than it becomes a wound itself. The designer places the audience in front of their biggest fear, which is not Death itself, but the body in putrefaction. The see-through white dress with the “black” opening in the center reveals the details of the female figure, but the attention is drawn to the cut. The figure is not sexualized in conventional terms; Judith Watt in her analysis of the outfit comments that “the overlayer (of the dress) is cut away vertically and surrounded by black, bearing more than a passing reference to female pudenda” (Watt 2012, p. 59). The cut, being a reference of female genitals or an open wound, leaves the body exposed for any kind of penetration or contamination. Moreover, the worm-filled top is an imagery of the uncanny: it is disturbing, causing aversive responses, since the body is in actual touch with worms, which are traditionally associated with the decomposition and the idea of the corpse. In the case of the Anemone dress, the red flower print in the waist area is, according to creative director Sarah Burton a reference to “the healing powers of nature...Anemones are the most ephemeral flowers.” Furthermore, the concept of the ephemeral can be interpreted in the context of the wound and the fear of death. The vulnerability of the (human) body is associated with the decay, which is represented by the wound and is considered as the source of the abjection. It has been argued that disgust (in this case the disgust provoked by the wound) functions as a coping mechanism of the fear of death (Terror Management Theory), which contributes to the repression of stressful thoughts related to mortality, decay and death (Rozin 1987; Nussbaum 2004; and Kyprianidou, forthcoming).

McQueen characterized himself as a hopeless realist. He had a peculiar, almost obsessive relationship with death. Dana Thomas comments that he loved surreal violence, but his purpose was not to belittle women. The designer himself stated that he was trying to “promote women as leaders” (Thomas 2015, p. 236). The fear of death has been the inspiration behind the image of the powerful female. The women that faced death, in McQueen’s eyes, have been identified with deathliness. The signs of death were marked on their skin and their clothing, in a “theatrical staging of cruelty,” as it is described by Evans. In addition, she refers to the armored body and the compulsion to repeat the trauma (Evans 2003, p. 237). Based on that theory, the female body is armored because it has to be protected from violent masculinity; but the victims’ bodies were not always shielded, and their previous wounds remain present.

Deleuze, analyzing the three types of women described by Masoch in *Venus in Furs*, refers to the figure of the cold woman, who is between the opposites of pagan sensuality and sadistic sensuality and was considered by Masoch as the ideal female (Deleuze 1991, p. 52). The hybrid of the Grecian woman, a paganistic prototype of the hetaera or Aphrodite and the sadistic woman is a female that does not deny the existence of feelings but disavows the sensuality and tends to ice-cold sentimentality. Deleuze states that the trinity of the masochistic dream is constituted by the cold/icy, the maternal/sentimental and the severe/cruel (Deleuze 1991, p. 51). In McQueen’s work, the ideal female was close to Masoch’s ideal: she was portrayed as someone that “men wouldn’t dare lay a hand on her,” cold and distant while she was balancing between hetaerism and sadism (Deleuze 1991, p. 50). She was not a sexual object nor a sexual predator and her sexuality was a weapon against men, not a way to seduce them. Her beauty and her femininity were overshadowed by the fear that she evoked. According to Masoch’s theory, the medium between the concepts of Hetaerism and Sadism is the woman torturer, “a mixture of fear, revulsion and attraction” (Deleuze 1991, p. 50).

McQueen’s woman is evolved to a dreadful subject, whose purpose was to keep men at a distance and not to attract them, by using her sexuality as a defense. The dominance of woman was the outcome of the transition from prey to predator and, at the same time, the conversion from being afraid to being fearful. Femininity in McQueen’s designs was concealed: his ideal woman was macabre, an echo of the fears that the designer wished to exorcise. Most of all, she was an allegory of Death, and a threat to masculinity.

### **3. Galiano's Doll**

Galiano presented female sexuality as a tool of pleasure that could be used in favor of women. The designer replaced the idea of woman as a sexual object with the concept of the desirable woman that takes advantage of her sensuality and sexuality. Galiano’s themes evolved around

sexualization with lots of fetishistic connotations, with models dressed like prostitutes and dominatrices. Similar but not identical to McQueen, he used the representation of trauma/wound usually as a reminder of the power of sexuality. In his collection *Freud/Fetish* presented among others a bleeding Antoinette (a beloved persona as we will see later) and a “hanged” woman holding her own hanging rope (a very psychoanalytic outfit) with distinct indication of trauma around her neck. His intention was to present a distorted version of feminine ideals (the doll, the queen, the romantic heroine), challenging the standards of beauty and elegance.

Galliano’s perspective on the ideal female is actually a critical response to the representation of the female body as a sexual object. The oversexualized images of Galliano’s women have a common characteristic: their faces and their postures are similar to those of dolls, with their porcelain skin and their rigid movement. The doll, as a concept, refers to an idealized version of the woman, which is so perfect as unattainable in reality. For Walter Benjamin, fashion created a dialogue between carnal pleasure and the corpse; the mannequins, standing as dead bodies, functioned as a symbol of the perversity of fashion and were identified with the provocative exposition of female sexuality (Benjamin 1999, pp. 62-63, 694). Benjamin, quoting Henri Pollés, states that “Mannequins become the model for imitation and the soul becomes the image of the body” (Benjamin 1999, p. 78). Behind doll’s perfection is its uncanniness: while the doll-like female is beautiful, her image is distorted. According to Freud, the uncanny is usually associated with fear, since it is unfamiliar or unknown (Freud 1919, p. 2). In his essay *The Uncanny* from 1919, Freud mentions that an example of uncanniness is the doll, as it has the form of living human beings, but it lacks life (Freud 1919, p. 5). Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* refers to the doll in the analysis of childhood toys. She explains that the young boys use their phallus as an alter ego to explore their subjectivity, while girls have not an embodied alter ego. Therefore, the young girl uses the doll as an alter ego and takes care of it, in the same way she wishes to be taken care of (De Beauvoir 2008, p. 401).

What evokes the feeling of uncanniness is the sense of uncertainty that the doll creates, as it is a familiar image in an unnatural concept. In addition to that, Freud also linked the uncanny with repression. For him, “the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that undergone repression and then emerged from it” (Freud 1919, p. 15). In Galliano’s work, the female sexuality seems as a strong counterreaction to the masculine fantasies. Almost ironically, Galliano’s women seem to have come from a sexual fantasy, yet they are no longer a part of it, since their appearance is twisted, uncanny. Their outfits are sensational and made them desirable but their faces, painted as porcelain dolls with ruined make-up, created a weird atmosphere. What makes these looks uncanny is the contradiction between the woman, as she is fantasized and idealized by men, and the way Galliano presented her.



John Galliano's Spring 2006 collection was inspired by the French Revolution. A blood- and gore-spattered drama was unfolded during the catwalk as the models were covered with blood-red satins or with white muslins splattered with red spots. Among those looks, there are two that graphically represent the female figure as a bleeding wound. The first look is a red, semi-transparent veil that covers the head, shoulders and breasts of the model, with a white pair of trousers, embellished with red stones in the hem, resembling blood stains. The garments imply a heavy injury in the head, bleeding and covering the model with "blood." The second look is an extravagant gown, with lots of layers of satin and muslin in blood red color, creating an image of a woman showered in blood. What is particularly interesting is the detail of the accessory: a necklace choker with three series of pearls that are partially red and with series of red stones hanging on the side. The necklace, designed to seem like dripping blood, is a direct reference to guillotine and the decapitations of the French aristocracy.

The distortion of romanticized ideas has been the signature of Galliano. His garments are sexually charged but they also have a twisted side, with strong violent meaning. His dark fantasies with the decayed, sensual heroines had a theatrical side, but they could be interpreted as something more than the object of male desire. Their image, being bathed in blood (blood stains, red embellishments, dripping red pearls), establishes the connection between the idea of the bleeding wound, the female sexuality and the traumatized femininity. His desire to dress them in a way that men would like to have sex with them ["When a man looks at a woman wearing one of my dresses, I would like him basically to be saying to himself – I have to fuck her" (Bancroft 2012, p. 59)] could be the fulfillment of the woman's desire to be desirable. Woman's desire does not seem focused on men, but it could be associated with her feeling of being attractive, to be the stimulus of lust. In other words, Galliano's woman may be dressed in such a way that men want to sleep with her, but her satisfaction comes from the fact that she is in control of her sexuality, being a sexual *subject* and not an object in the first place. For Evans, healing the trauma through the pleasurable display could explain the importance for the body to be desired (Evans 2003, p. 159).

The oversexualized image of Galliano's living dolls is an expression of the continuous repression of female sexuality. Galliano's aim was to convert femininity from women's vulnerability, as it was considered such during the previous centuries due to hysteria and the religious associations between female sexuality and the evil forces, to a representative of seduction that could benefit them. According to Galliano's associates, "John understood women and what women wanted to wear" (Thomas 2015, p. 172). Taking this idea into account, Galliano's intention to reinforce the lustful side of female body could be interpreted as an attempt to balance the wounds of the body and the woman's desire to be beautiful. Men's reaction to this image (their desire to have sex with these women) is not an end in itself -in the same body could co-exist lust and fear, pleasure and disgust.

#### 4. A Dialogue between the Deadly Woman and the Doll

The female body has been an object of social control as femininity is considered a cultural construction, according to Marianne Thesander (Thesander 1997, p. 8). McQueen and Galliano used the body as a mean of expression, where aesthetics and traditional morality were altered and challenged. The designers, by escaping from the conventional idealization of the female body, presented a distorted and, at the same time, darkly romanticized image of women, far from the fertility and motherhood models (ideals). The identification of women with their bodies plays a major role in the relation between fashion and femininity: clothes, such as the corset, used to be a way of restriction in the past but became a liberating act in the present, since their symbolism changed over time and content (Thesander 1997, p. 13). McQueen used the concept of deathliness as a form of resistance against misogyny and the objectification of women: his women were not human but human-like creatures, who experienced death and fear, and therefore they became dreadful to protect themselves. Galliano, with the concept of sexualization, presented women in the most erotic way possible by dressing them with sensual costumes, embedded with sexual connotations and fetishistic symbols. While sex used to be associated with the passive position of women, the designer emphasized the seduction and the pleasure that women could derive from sex.

The concept of wound and particularly the wound as inspiration for fashion garments is a theme found in the work of both McQueen and Galliano. Fashion pieces, that cover (or reveal) part of the female body and remind us of somatic traumas, are a characteristic example of the combination of fear, desire and disgust in the context of fashion. These garments are *symbolic*, aiming to deliver a message to the audience, to shock or to provoke negative emotions. In the work of McQueen and Galliano, fear, desire and disgust are not two separate ideas, but the two sides of the same coin. Fearful figures have also a latent desirable side while the desirable figures have a latent dreadful side. In other words, this dipole/duality seem to complete rather than collide with each other. The connection between fear and desire is also an exploration of the way that these feelings are interacting with each other and the female body. It could be said that, where there is a representation of fear, there is also a hint of desire and vice versa.

Alexander McQueen, in his own words, commented on his creative perspective and Galliano's identity "John's a hopeless romantic and I've become a hopeless realist..." Galliano's romantic heroines and McQueen's warriors were quite different, but their symbolic function had the same meaning: the empowerment of femininity. For Dana Thomas, biographer of the designers and journalist, "if Galliano was a romantic, McQueen was a pornographer" (Thomas 2015, p. 5). Of course, the characterization of McQueen was more associated with his brutal representation of sexuality and the provocative images that made his audience uncomfortable. Still, the way that he deals with female sexuality and his intention to make women so powerful that

men would be afraid of them [“I want people to be afraid of the women I dress” (Bolton 2012, p. 64)] could also imply an aggressive version of pleasure. The dreadful woman is desirable, even if her image is fearful for men. Fear does not negate desire: especially in sado-masochism, a source of inspiration for both designers, fear of punishment or/and pain intensifies desire (Deleuze 1991, p. 88). Galliano’s romantic perspective follows a similar pattern. The sensual images of femininity seemed to conceal a latent dreadful aspect. Colin McDowell commented on the projection of a “libidinous female image,” which could also imply a hidden fear of femininity: “...John, we are told, loves women, but it is not easy to avoid the thought that, within that love lurks a fear...the suspicion that it is a love so intense it also encompasses a degree of hatred” (McDowell 1997, p. 117). In this case, the female figures, behind their frilled skirts and tight-laced corsets, were shaped by the contradiction between their sensuality and their distorted image, which created the feeling of uncanniness.

In *The Fashioned Body*, Joan Entwistle suggests that “the body is a highly restricted medium of expression since it is heavily mediated by culture and expresses the social pressure brought to bear on it” (Entwistle 2015, p. 37). Indeed, in the work of both the designers, among the more personal associations, there are comments on morality, femininity, independence and other concepts that are constructed by society. Alison Bancroft underpins the body-as-a-gap that marks the focus of the desire in couture, however I argue that the designers added different layers of meaning on the female body, beyond its erotic function (Bancroft 2012, pp. 66, 89). Without denying that the female body is inevitably a sexual body, as both Bancroft and Entwistle state, in my case studies it is also “invested with power” (Entwistle 2015, p. 40). In McQueen and Galliano, whose aim seems to be female resistance, the body is dressed with powerful, meaningful clothes that serve the purposes of the women: to be feared and to be desired. The female body is actually enclosed by power, and this power (the power of dress) is what makes women capable of overthrowing male dominance.

## **5. Disgust and the Fashioned Body**

Dark sensuality, brutality and the unconventional ideals of beauty that they represented Horror and romance, death and life, lightness and darkness were the principal dichotomies that created a balance between the beautiful and the grotesque character of McQueen’s and Galliano’s designs. In their works, the boundaries between the “horrifyingly” beautiful and the “horrifyingly” ugly became blurry. The designers’ work was characterized by this duality and made it difficult for people to understand whether their purpose was to victimize their subject, or to empower it. For McQueen, the beauty and the originality of his clothes was veiled by the violence of his show. His provocative approach had as a result the disgust of the audience, and Thomas refers that

“people were furious and shocked...they thought he was terrible” (Thomas 2015, p. 152). McQueen’s fashion could not be revolutionary without being politically incorrect. Galliano, on the other hand, through the use of historical references, succeeded in presenting stereotypes of female sexuality as a way to empower women. For Kim Johnson, “provocative dress is considered as stimuli” and is more likely for the wearer to use sex for personal gain (Johnson and Rudd 2014, 2p. ). Also Rebecca Arnold, commenting on the corsetry and the eroticized body, mentions that “this offered women the opportunity to take pleasure in the sensuality of fashion and its display of the body” (Arnold 2001, p. 63).

Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* illustrates the interconnections between pleasure, fear and repulsion and the role of the body (especially the female one) in the definition of purity, sin, abjection and death (Kristeva 1982, p. 28). Nevertheless, she does not consider death as the source of disgust, since we are not afraid of death in particular, rather the idea of the corpse, a decayed body that crosses the boundaries between the living and non-living stage. Heinämaa, exploring the connection between Kristeva’s theory of abjection and Jean Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*, notices that both Kristeva and Sartre consider disgust as the anxiety about human mortality or vulnerability, “It is a more complex aversion that concerns disproportional intertwinements of life and death” (Heinämaa 2020, p. 9). In terms of fashion, Bancroft states that “it emphasizes the gap, it turns the body itself into a cut, and besides accentuating the partiality of the *corps morcelé* (mean. fragmented body) in contrast to bodily unity, it also creates the erotic function of body-as-gap” (Bancroft 2012, p. 66).

In the case of McQueen’s cut dress, the body *is* the cut, the wound, the pudendum. But why this image provokes negative reactions? First of all, the relation between female sexuality and filth (natural and moral) has its roots in the Christian religion. Evans comments that McQueen had an almost perverse way to bring together “sexuality, death and transgression in an image in which disgust...bears the imprint of desire” (Heinämaa 2020, pp. 6-7). The female genitals, along with their secretions, are considered as dirty and capable of contamination, similar to an open wound with blood and pus. Nussbaum argues that the misogynistic disgust is related to woman’s secretions, which are too physical and are related to decay (Nussbaum 2004, p. 113). De Beauvoir writes that when the flesh drips-similar to an old wall or a corpse-it does not seem like secreting fluid but looks like being liquified, a process of decomposition that causes horror (De Beauvoir 2008, p. 532). Heinämaa, quoting Sartre, also refers to repulsion generated from “substances between two states,” emphasizing in slimy (*viscuous*) textures that “are between solid and liquid, sticky and sleazy (Heinämaa 2020, p. 7). In McQueen’s garments, the boundaries between eroticism and disgust become blurry. The associations of the opening/wound are those that evoke disgust and not its image as such; it is the violation of bodily

boundaries that renders the dress as uncanny. The splitting, the idea of an opening on the body that can be violated or contaminated is interpreted by Bancroft, “McQueen turns the body into *coupure*, the gap, that marks the aim of desire” (Bancroft 2012, p. 89).

The image of the wound/gap on the dress and, as a result, the fashioned body is sexual, threatening and disgusting, since it incorporates the characteristics of the garment. The decay of the dress denotes the decay of the body, but in the case of the worm-filled corset, the body is presented as rotten, while the garment functions as a window to the internals. The trapped worms behind the transparent top touching the bare skin of the model is abject, since this image “undermines or endangers the division between life and the non-living” (Heinämaa 2020, p. 5). The absence of proper boundaries between the flesh and the organisms is the source of disgust. Heinämaa in her analysis of Kolnai’s views on disgust, states that the focus on disgust is “the extravagant life that feeds on the body and multiplies without boundaries or directions” (Heinämaa 2020, p. 8). According to Kolnai, the superfluous fertility and the excessive growth of the maggots are the source of disgust and not the corpse itself. As a result, the worm-filled bodice is disgusting for two reasons: first, the idea that the worms, a lower form of life associated with decomposition, touch the skin thus potentially contaminating it and second, the abject image of a body (even symbolically) is rotting in front of our eyes. The Anemone dress is the representation of fashion’s *allure macabre*. Kolnai states that disgusting things have the ability to evoke repulsion and, at the same time, to draw our attention (Kolnai 2004, p. 102). In the context of the “poetically disgusting” garment, the idea of an open wound is linked to the danger of contamination; at the same time, this black and red area that reminds us of fear, pain and death, is the center of our attention. This image has an almost theatrical character: the model is “bleeding” a flower (the anemone). The aversive side of the dress is related not to the wound itself but to the association between the abdominal area of the body and the internal organs. The “wound” of the dress reminds us that there are no boundaries between the external and the internal. Evans argues that “women’s bodies, their internal and external parts, that have come to represent the space of danger, desire and unconscious fears about both sexuality and mortality” (Evans 2003, p. 224).

The concept of the bleeding wound is also found in the creations of Galliano, since both designers merge the forces of horror, pleasure and repulsion. Fear and desire leave a disgusting mark on the female body. Evans states in the analysis of the bodily trauma in fashion that the physical wounds or the psychological pain is eroticized “Terror bleeds into Eros” (Evans 2003, p. 106). For Galliano, the designs were like “slicing yourself open and letting the whole world see, warts and all, what you’re about, what you’re thinking, what your attitude to women is” (Thomas 2015, p. 93). There is a particular interest in exploring what is underneath the surface, meaning under the dress (and the skin), inside the body. The body’s interior is a symbol of our

own mortality; first it is feminized and then sexualized in the representation (Evans 2003, p. 220). Galliano's looks are more subtle in the way that portray the wounded femininity. The red piece that covers the model from head to waist creates a graphic image that resembles decapitation or a heavy traumatized head that bleeds. In this case, the disgust has not only to do with the wound itself, but the violence that caused it. The Antoinettes of Galliano are the representation of the violated femininity; the brutalities of the French revolution are embedded on the blood dripping pearl necklaces of the models.

## **6. Aesthetic Violation of the Female Body: A Feministic Act**

Evans mentions that "as the inside of the body can be presented as a crypt, so too may the spaces around it, in and between its parts be creatively revealed" (Evans 2003, p. 230). The visceral disgust that the garments of McQueen and Galliano are related more to defilement rather than deathliness. The horror of an "opened" body is associated both to femininity and female sexuality; in Elizabeth Wilson's words "dread as well as desire; the shell of chic, the aura of glamour, always hide[s] a wound" (Wilson 2003, p. 246). The wound as part of the dress becomes also part of the female body. The body coexists with the dress, both changing form and meaning through the process of wearing. The bodies of McQueen and Galliano are imperfect, a disarming attempt to present all the potentials and alternative realities of the feminine soma. The distorted, violated imagery of femininity is not an attempt of the designers to degrade it, but a rather paradoxical way to prove its dominance.

Shusterman refers to the body as a mean to overcome the repressive ideologies (Shusterman 2000, p. 281). The grotesque, wounded female bodies are an answer to the traditional male gaze. The perfect, sexualized figures are replaced by horrific heroines that bleed to death. The wound as a somatic characteristic, functions as an affirmation of decay. Despite of this repulsive image, the fashioned body remains an aesthetically pleasing body. Imperfect, disgusting, repulsive without the need to idealize or beautify the wound, the bodies of Galliano and McQueen are unapologetically feminine. For Arnold, "the powerful feminine of their designs seems rather to flaunt her mortality, and revels in the fears it provokes" (Arnold 2001, p. 59). Indeed, the way femininity is portrayed in the designs is empowering since the emotion of disgust functions as an armor; the fashioned body is armored with the grisly feeling of repulsion. De Beauvoir explains the relationship between femininity and disgust, stating that the young girl enjoys anything repulsive: insects, dirty pards, blood from wounds and abrasions. Especially during puberty, the girl is repulsed by her very fleshy body, her menstrual blood, the sexual practices of the adults, the male that she intends to (De Beauvoir 2008, pp. 491-492). The philosopher highlights that these disgust-related practices are an exordium of the sexual experience and,

simultaneously, a protest against it-through these practices the girl punishes herself with the excuse that her future lover will not do anything more horrifying to her than what she does to herself. For De Beauvoir the relationship between disgust and femininity do not only start in a very early age, but it also defines the sexual nature of the woman. Based on these observations, the designers' works seem to have a deeply feminist interpretation, since femininity is identified with the sexual and horrific nature of repulsion.

The garments of McQueen and Galliano are a representation of the repulsive fashion: the disgusting dress and, by association, the disgusting, wounded body does not negate the value of the female body or the designs. There are different philosophical perceptions of disgusting femininity -the repulsion is usually associated with female vulnerability and the abject imagery of the female soma. Nevertheless, I argue that the distorted female body and dress can still be an aesthetically feminist act without being conventionally beautiful or losing its sexual and feminine character. Shusterman, in his somaesthetic analysis of *The Second Sex*, mentions, quoting de Beauvoir, that young girl's sexuality "is experienced as something strange, disgusting, inhumanly and animal." He highlights that the female sexual organs are "unknown" to the woman, almost an autonomous part of herself, characterized as "mucous, humid...sullied with body fluids" (Shusterman 2003, p. 124). He also argues that women by familiarizing with their bodies and recognized them (and, by association, their desire) as their own will be more understandable and will become less disgusting, threatening and disempowering (Shusterman 2003, p. 125). Nussbaum also states that women are associated with certain disgust properties such as stickiness, sliminess and decay. She argues that misogynistic disgust is a product of fear and shame as menstrual blood, contamination through sex (women are considered as receivers of semen, a disgusting and distressing idea for males) and giving birth are all sources of repulsion related to female body. In general, femininity is perceived as entirely animalistic and sexual, and "it is in effect the man's animality, from which he unevenly tries to distance himself," since it is a constant reminder of his mortality (Nussbaum 2004, pp. 111-112). Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness* refers also to the slimy nature of femininity. Particularly, he analyzes the relationship between male and female stating that the later "give us at first the impression that is a being which can be possessed [...], but] at the very moment when I believe that I possess it, behold by a curious reversal, it possesses me" (Ablett 2020, p. 61). This existential approach of the power relations between male and female defines femininity as something untamable. Sara Ablett mentions Sartre's theory that "slime and feminine show as what we are" (Ablett 2020, p. 62). The controlling nature of disgust and femininity is the center of the female dominance. In the paradigms of McQueen and Galliano, their ideal Feminine embodies the very idea of Sartre: a female so powerful in her wounded, fragile body that is able to "consume" everything through her repulsive

nature. The wound is not a weakness but a proof of resistance, power and survival- blood and deathliness function as reminders of the female resilience.

## 6. Conclusion

McQueen and Galliano are known for the controversial portrayal of femininity in their works. For them, the fashioned body is a horrific creative locus but, at the same time, a liberal act against the moral and sexual conservatism. Sexuality, sensuality and power are merged in the context of disgust. The designers present their own versions of womanhood, which are repulsive, dreadful, horrific and grotesque. The distortion of the Feminine Ideals aims to empower women and redefine the way femininity is perceived. The wound on the creations becomes an armor that protects females by keeping males at distance. The representation of femininity as an open wound (through the dress) has a lot of interpretations; it is a *memento mori* of mortality and animality, a potentially contaminating opening that threatens manhood, a sexual connotation, a reminder of the abjection and the lack of boundaries between life and decay. The wounded fashion bodies are an exploration of the emotion of disgust in relation to fear and desire. Repulsion contains both dread and pleasure (*macabre allure*); the image of a decaying body is horrific and erotic at the same time. As disgust is placed between mortality and sexuality, the fear of death and its relation to femininity is central. The dangers of animality and vulnerability are projected on the traumatized body, who becomes the corpus of disgust. In the end, the aversive fashioned body is a feminist statement. The wounded woman, through her sticky, slimy, abject and consuming nature, becomes powerful by changing the definition of femininity herself.

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1 Nussbaum mentions in her chapter *Disgust and our Animal Bodies* that “human disgust reactions are typically mediated very powerfully by the awareness of death and decay. In developing a disgust toward bodily wastes, a young human is reacting against ‘the fate as well of all that is physical: decay and death.’”

2 Honigman, referring to *memento mori*, states that “a material obtained through creature’s death, leather, is a constant *memento mori* and our everyday connection to mortality.” It is interesting to notice the way that leather (the skin of an animal) is associated with death; it is the disgusting nature of the leather (flesh) that “protect” us from our mortality (for Terror Management Theory see also Kyprianidou, “On Moral Disgust in Art: Imaginative Resistance and Empathic Engagement,” forthcoming).

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