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POSTHUMANISM IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY: ON HUMAN ANIMALS AND CYBORGS

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Introduction

The vindication of popular culture within academic research has enabled the theoretical exploration of diverse cultural and artistic manifestations, including fashion, which, unlike what happened in the past, is no longer regarded as a trivial subject matter. Thus, since the second half of the twentieth century, disciplines as varied as cultural studies, anthropology, sociology psychology or gender studies have considered fashion as worthy of academic pursuit. Particularly important for the purpose of the present study are those perspectives which, grounded on a sociological approach to fashion and dress, examine the tripartite interconnectedness between dress, body and identity (Entwistle 2000). In line with Joanne Entwistle's sociology of the dressed body (2000), dress is here considered as an embodied practice, one that is capable of imbuing the body with different layers of social and cultural meaning. However, this study does not simply focus on dress as an individual practice; it also addresses the critical and creative discourses presented by fashion designers in their runway shows, which are widely spread through social media in a cyber-mediated reality. In fact, as this study contends, inasmuch as it represents a system defined by incessant renewal, fashion is now echoing current ontological debates that call into question the barrier between the human and the nonhuman, and contemporary fashion designers are engaging creatively in the (re)creation of bodies that subvert dominant figurations of the human body. Among the designers that have challenged said barrier, the four-time winner of the British Designer of the Year Award Alexander McQueen (1969–2010) stands out for arousing raging controversies, which led the press to recognize him as the *enfant terrible* of the fashion industry.

Despite the contributions of scholars analyzing the fashion shows of Alexander McQueen, none insofar has conjointly applied both the parameters of animality and technology delimited by ecofeminism and posthumanism, and fashion's theory

examination of dress as a social and bodily practice to scrutinize the configurations of identities. To do so, the present study exhaustively examines the fashion shows that the British fashion designer produced under his own label and the often-obviated shows that he created as chief designer for the French house Givenchy from 1996 to 2001. In addition, the present dissertation also considers scenography elements such as music, venue design, lighting, and film projections as essential parts of McQueen's fashion shows, arguing that, altogether, they create a hybrid piece of performance art. Other elements here examined include the invitations for the shows, which encapsulated the show's tone in a piece of pictorial art, and McQueen's declared sources of inspiration, which ranged from cinema, photography, music and theatre to history, philosophy, social and environmental issues. Hence, similarly to other fellow conceptual designers, McQueen's role was that of a cultural (re)interpreter of his time.

With the intention to contribute to recent studies that have addressed fashion from a posthumanist perspective (Smelik 2022, Vänskä 2018), the present dissertation seeks to analyze the posthuman turn registered in Alexander McQueen's fashion shows, where dominant figurations of the human body were often challenged through creations that hybridized, in an explicit and controversial manner, the human body with parts of nonhuman animals as well as with technological artefacts. In so doing, McQueen produced scenarios where the human and nonhuman fused creatively, thus destabilizing some dualistic notions deeply embedded in Western thought, such as those of human animal/nonhuman animal, nature/culture, or biology/technology. Drawing on an interdisciplinary and transversal methodology that combines the sociological approach to dress and the discourse of posthumanism, this study intends to shed light on two different tropes crucial throughout McQueen's career, and which destabilize the above-mentioned binary opposites: first, the feral woman archetype, which challenges the barrier between

human animals and nonhuman animals; and second, the (re)creation of the cyborg, which defies the divide between human and machine. Along the presentation of these two tropes, and more significantly with the representation of the cyborg –conceived as part of a post-gendered world (Haraway 1991, 150)–, androgyny appears as a continuum in the designer’s fashion shows. Thus, this study also adopts a gender perspective in its approach to McQueen’s creations, one that is already inherent to some of the posthumanist works presented along the methodological apparatus. In this vein, Judith Butler’s work on the performativity of gender (1993; 1995) is another pivotal reference not only for this study, but also for the configuration of fashion theory which unveils how dress, as a visual metaphor for identity, either deconstructs or enhances our socially constructed gender identity.

The study is divided into two main sections, with the first one aiming at laying bare the methodological apparatus on which the study is grounded –namely, posthumanism and fashion theory– and the second one being devoted to analyzing a selection of McQueen’s fashion shows. Thus, Chapter 1 is dedicated to posthumanism, which is subsequently divided into three subsections. First, I explore the critical response that posthumanism takes vis-à-vis humanism, calling into question the universal notion of the Human. As an essential part of posthumanism, the synergies between living and inert matter are explored in the first subsection. Second, I examine the new materialist perspective proposed by some posthumanist thinkers, who consider the body as a site of becoming and transformation. The last subsection of the first chapter is devoted to exploring how posthumanism endorses and values genres, such as science-fiction or utopian and dystopian fiction, for challenging the notions of universality, neutrality and objectivity ascribed to Humanities. These speculative counternarratives are crafted in diverse cultural and artistic manifestations such as fashion, which has been (re)creating

new figurations of the human in relation to its others. For this reason, fashion is examined in depth in Chapter 2. First, I explore the origins of fashion theory, focusing on Joanne Entwistle's work on the dressed body (2000) as it provides a productive exploration of the triad dress/body/identity. Then, I address recent contributions within fashion theory that point to a posthuman turn in fashion. In the third chapter of the present study, I use the theoretical framework presented in the previous sections to provide a close analysis of the fashion shows of Alexander McQueen, ranging from his graduate collection presented in 1993, to his last collection produced while he was alive, called *Plato's Atlantis* and presented in 2010, together with some of his collections designed for the house of Givenchy between 1996 and 2001. By analyzing two tropes in his collections, the feral woman and the cyborg, I argue that his fashion shows have contributed to a posthuman and post-anthropocentric turn in fashion that ultimately decenters the dominance of Man/Anthropos on planet Earth.

1. Posthumanism and the Critique of Humanities

In recent decades, the crisis of Humanism has permeated different artistic and academic fields, so that literature, politics, cinema, anthropology, feminism and technology are registering the fall of the reign of man (Badmington 2000, 9), and some scholars have ventured to state that “humanism has reached its end” (Herbrechter 2013, 21). Although it is not easy to identify or even date the origins of posthumanism, this school of thought draws from various intellectual traditions in order to develop a post-anthropocentric epistemology that ultimately calls into question the centeredness of Man on planet Earth (Braidotti 2022, 142). Among these intellectual traditions, postmodernism, post-structuralism, deconstruction and even nihilism –with Friedrich Nietzsche being often considered a “proto-posthumanist thinker” (Herbrechter 2013, 3)– have been deeply influential in the articulation of posthumanism which, in broad terms, condemns the exclusionary Humanist subject, which was crafted in the ages of the Enlightenment and modernity, and which is embodied by a Man who is “assumed to be masculine, white, urbanized, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit and a full citizen of a recognizable polity” (Braidotti 2013, 65).

As one of these influential schools of thought for posthumanism, postmodernism is credited with criticizing the grandiose narratives of Humanism. In doing so, postmodern thinkers “have been stressing alternative values like particularity, difference, multiplicity, and plurality, as much as singularity of cultures (in the plural) as nonhuman forms” (Herbrechter 2013, 19). Among these postmodern thinkers, the French philosopher and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard contributed significantly to the development of posthumanism with the publication of *The Inhuman* (1991), where he deconstructed “the idea of an essential humanity on which humanity is traditionally

based” (Herbrechter 2013, 15). Furthermore, in his essay “A Postmodern Fable” (1997, chap. 6), he presents an eschatological narrative where humans would have to evolve by technological means after the collapse of the solar system, questioning what would remain of humanity if the human species began living in an extra-planetary reality. With this fable, Lyotard foresaw some of the basic tenets of transhumanism, arguing that “there is no point in denying the ongoing technologization of the human species” but, at the same time, contending that “a purely technology-centred idea of posthumanization is not enough to escape the humanist paradigm” (Herbrechter 2013, 14).

Prior to the publication of Lyotard’s *The Inhuman*, and influenced by the social turmoil that the Second World War left on the European continent, some thinkers who developed their philosophies throughout the second half of the twentieth century also forwarded a radical critique of Humanism, which was later materialized in social emancipatory movements such as feminism, de-colonization, and anti-racism and pacifist movements (Braidotti 2013, 16), which vindicated those who had been otherized and dehumanized by the Humanist ideal of Man because of their sexual and/or racial differences. As part of these emancipatory movements, post-structuralist feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray or Julia Kristeva rejected any preconceived identity attributed to women and, in broader terms, the “unitary identification indexed on the Eurocentric and normative idea of ‘Man’” (Braidotti 2013, 27), which has tended to reduce to “the sub-human status” (28) every individual who does not adjust to the restrictive category of Man: women, racialized, queer, and disabled people. Thus, Luce Irigaray pointed out that the allegedly abstract ideal of Man as a symbol of classical Humanity is undoubtedly male, white, European, handsome and able-bodied (Braidotti 2013, 24), and therefore, restricts more than represents the wide subject possibilities of humankind.

As one of the founders of post-colonial studies, Edward Said writes about antihumanism as another school of thought reacting against the aseptic nature of traditional Humanities:

Antihumanism took hold on the US intellectual scene partly because of the widespread revulsion with the Vietnam War. Part of the revulsion was the emergence of a resistance movement to racism, imperialism generally and the dry-as-dust academic Humanities that had for years represented an apolitical, unworldly and oblivious (sometimes even manipulative) attitude to the present, all the while adamantly extolling the virtues of the past. (2004, 13)

Antihumanism, which emerged out of the contributions of some post-structuralist thinkers, criticized “the humanistic arrogance of continuing to place Man at the centre of history” (Braidotti 2013, 23). As one of the key representatives of post-structuralist thought, the French philosopher Michel Foucault also contributed significantly to a critique of the Humanities with his *The Order of Things* (1970), where he argues that the idea of the Human, which by extension implies an ideal of Man, is just a historical construct far from being the canon of perfect proportions. Therefore, his critique addresses “abstract masculinity and triumphant whiteness” which resulted from a Humanist universalism that is highly objectionably not only epistemologically, but also ethically and politically (Braidotti 2013, 24).

Antihumanism, however, works by negation, and although posthumanism owes much of its philosophical development to it, posthumanism “look[s] more affirmatively towards new alternatives” (Braidotti 2013, 37). For the feminist and posthumanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti, the starting point of posthumanism, like in antihumanism, is decentering the Enlightenment’s most transcendent, yet most exclusionary creation: that of Man (Braidotti 2013, 37). However, the notion of human is not necessarily negative

for posthumanists, but rather a “highly regulatory and hence instrumental to the practices of exclusion and discrimination” (Braidotti 2022, 26). Thus, “the posthumanist perspective rests on the assumption of the historical decline of Humanism but goes further in exploring alternatives, without sinking into the rhetoric of the crisis of Man” (2013, 37). For Braidotti, “[p]osthumanism is the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and antihumanism and traces a different discursive framework, looking more affirmatively towards new alternatives” (Braidotti 2013, 37). Similarly, Katherine Hayles offers a constructive perspective, since posthumanism does not stop in the critique towards Humanism that previous generations of thinkers have offered. Thus, she states that “posthumanism does not mean the end of the human or the rise of antihumanism. It can signal a shared partnership between humans and nonhuman forms that in the process of this engagement challenges the boundaries between the two” (qtd. in Toffoletti 2007, 12). Although posthumanism does not imply the obsolescence of the human (Halberstam & Livingston 1995, 10), it aims at reconstructing, developing, and crafting new subjectivities that are suitable to the complex identity rainbow of present-day societies, since “we have come to regard the human standard that was posited in the universal mode of ‘Man of reason’ as inadequate precisely because of its partiality” (Braidotti 2017, 23). The posthuman task therefore consists in “grabbing the opportunities offered by the decline of the unitary subject position upheld by Humanism, which has mutated in a number of complex directions” (Braidotti 2013, 54).

1.1. Synergies among *Zoe/Techno/Geo*

The (inter)connections favored by posthumanism do not simply work within the human species, thus fostering inter-relatedness among women, the queer, the racialized, and the

disabled, but it also bridges the gap between nature and culture, between technology and biology, between human animals and nonhuman animals. The sense of interconnectedness of this productive range of subject(ive) possibilities is also cherished by the “current scientific revolution, led by contemporary bio-genetic environmental, neural and other sciences” (Braidotti 2013, 54). As signalled by Braidotti, “a theory of subjectivity as both materialist and relational, ‘nature-cultural’ and self-organizing is crucial in order to elaborate critical tools suited to the complexity and contradictions of our times” (51-52). Thus, alternative, subversive, and creative figurations of the human and nonhuman are now fully fledged and considered under a posthuman paradigm, which is inscribed in a nature-culture continuum rather than in a nature/culture divide.

As well as the posthuman subject considers and embraces those who have not been considered as humans, posthumanism also subverts “an essentialist separation between humans and nature and extends the traditional subject-object position” (Lindgren & Öhman 2019, 1204). Thus, posthumanism embraces nonhuman others as part of an expanding subjectivity in what Braidotti has coded as *zoe*, which refers to “the wider scope of human and non-human life [...] that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains”. For Braidotti, *zoe*-centred egalitarianism is “the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism” (Braidotti 2013, 60). Adopting *zoe*-egalitarianism as a principle that considers nonhuman life and agency in all its forms implies abandoning the idea that nonhuman life is at the expense of man’s will. As pointed out by Nicklas Lindgren & Johan Öhman, the distinction between humans as subjects and nonhuman others as objects “reproduces the idea of nature as a non-ethical and non-agential sphere. Consequently, when nonhumans are deprived of their ethical and political agency, they

can easily be instrumentalized, made profitable, and commodified” (2019, 1204). Therefore, deconstructing the barrier between the human and the nonhuman is yet another tool for engaging in a critical post-anthropocentric turn which considers the environment by “[connecting] human to non-human life so as to develop a comprehensive eco-philosophy of becoming” (Braidotti 2013, 104).

Drawing from some basic transhumanist tenets, posthuman subjectivity is not only paired with nature and nonhuman animals, but it also makes alliances with technology. A kinship with technologically embodied subjects contributes to decentering Man/Anthropos from the center of the world (Braidotti 2013; Toffoletti 2007; Halberstam & Livingston 1995). Braidotti exemplifies this by stating that “[g]enetic engineering and biotechnologies have seen to it that a qualitative conceptual dislocation has taken place in the contemporary classification of embodied subjects” (Braidotti 2013, 97). This creates a notion of “leaky bodies” (96), which no longer relies upon any essentialist human nature. Thus, science, nature, and technology fuse critically and creatively to offer new identitary projections. Gender reassignment surgeries and hormone replacement therapy (HRT) are examples that illustrate how science and nature cooperate to conform the posthuman subject, which ultimately seeks to deconstruct and dismantle categorical and essentialist oppositions, such as those of man/woman, nature/culture, or biology/technology. Hence, posthumanism links the human and the nonhuman animal with the realm of technology: “Matter as a non-human elemental force (*zoe*) allows for the inclusion of earth (*geo*), and for technological artefacts and mediation (*techno*) as elements in the transversal networks that compose posthuman subjectivity [...] We are such stuff as *zoe/geo/techno*-bound matter is made of” (Braidotti 2022, 131). Accepting such premises inevitably leads to an examination of the possible connections with everything and everyone that has been excluded from the category of human and allows

for opening a wide range of new ways for becoming *post* human, that is, exploring and embodying new subjectivities that do not adjust to such an exclusionary category.

1.2. A Return to the Body

The bridging of the gap between the human and the nonhuman (organic or inorganic) is enabled by a return to matter as shared constituent, since “all living entities are variations on common matter” (Braidotti 2022, 120). The return to matter implies a reaction to the linguistic turn proposed by postmodernism and deconstruction, as well as surpassing their ontological and epistemic limitations (Braidotti 2022, 110; 2013, 51), since the posthuman subject is “materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded, firmly located somewhere” (Braidotti 2013, 51). The posthuman therefore takes a material turn that emphasizes matter –and by extension, the body– as the shared arena between the human and the nonhuman, and as a self-organizing and vital aspect present in humans, nonhumans, and technology: “The transversal character of new materialism allows for materiality to emerge as the common denominator across, the human, non-human and dehumanized entities of all species” (Braidotti 2022, 111). In a similar vein, new materialist feminism focuses on matter, and therefore on the body itself, which is no longer considered as a mere biological given, but “rather an ontological site of becoming” (112). Reinstating the importance of the body implies abandoning the Cartesian dualist system that has been deeply ingrained in Western thought for the past centuries, and which has historically opposed mind and body, prioritizing the first at the expense of the latter (Entwistle 2000, 13). Being aware of this, posthuman feminism “makes a priority to honour the disenfranchised, dehumanized, and excluded *bodies*, defying the dominant version of the human as Man/Anthropos” (Braidotti 2022, 141-42; emphasis added).

The material turn taken by posthumanism also decenters and displaces the alleged natural-ness of the human body, and such natural-ness is called into question in present-day times more than ever before, if we consider the technological advances that reshape and improve our bodies. In this sense, bodies are posthuman “in that they are heterogeneous genetic and bacterial assemblages modulated by social and technological infrastructures” (Braidotti 2022, 113). As Braidotti argues, the synergy between bodies and technology is of utmost importance within the context of present-day societies:

Under the pressure of the material conditions of advanced capitalism and its speedy deterritorialization of the posthuman convergence, the modernist vision of the relationship between bodies and technology, which was dualistic and confrontational, is coming apart. This oppositional relationship between bodies and machines has been reorganized by cognitive capitalism’s predatory incursions into living matter on the one hand and environmental devastation on the other. (143)

If the body is perceived as an assemblage of biological and technological infrastructures (113), the cyborg –conceived as a being with both biological and technological components– becomes the suitable example of the inter-connection between biology and technology. In this vein, posthuman feminist thinkers such as Donna Haraway or Anne Balsamo consider the cyborg as a figure capable of undermining the deep-seated dualisms between biology and technology:

Cyborgs are hybrid entities that are neither wholly technological nor completely organic, which means that the cyborg has the potential not only to disrupt persistent dualisms that set the natural body in opposition to the technologically recrafted body, but also to refashion our thinking about the theoretical

construction of the body as both a material entity and a discursive process.

(Balsamo 1996, 11)

By deconstructing the divide between biology and technology, Haraway's cyborg similarly proves that biological essentialism is no longer the foundation for the construction of identities. Posthumanism, in all, propagates "new forms of human-self understanding, namely as an embodied self based on an interpenetration of mental and physical processes, which may lead to a bodily identity in the first place, but which also constitutes an identity that is not fixed but dynamic" (Hebrechter 2013, 106).

1.3. The Posthuman Quest: (Re)creating Scenarios of Resistance

As noted in the foregoing sections, posthumanism calls into question the natural-ness of our bodies, and in so doing, reconciliates with the artificial and technological part of our bodies since technology enhances our given, biological condition. But posthuman, present-day bodies, in the context of twenty-first century advanced capitalism, are also technological in that they enjoy a wide representation and mediatization precisely by means of technologically mediated means (Braidotti 2022, 149). The work of J. Halberstam and Ira Livingston (1995) is therein significant since it blurs the separation of embodied subjects from their mediated representation, for "[t]he posthuman body is a technology, a screen, a projected image" (3). Thus, counter-cultural posthuman projections of human and nonhuman bodies are virtually and (re)presented in today's imaginaries through manifold disciplines, including cinema, performance and body art.

Among these cultural and artistic manifestations, some posthumanist thinkers have credited popular culture with providing manifold counter- and subcultural manifestations of the human body (Braidotti 2022; Halberstam 2012; Toffoletti 2007;

Halberstam & Livingston 1995). Posthumanism therefore values alternative representations and recreation of bodies since they “contribute to the project of liberating humans and non-humans of the earth by conjuring up alternative worlds” (Braidotti 2022, 217) where identity boundaries are challenged. In this manner, “[c]ontemporary cultural criticism is therefore well advised to take science fiction seriously” (Herbrechter 2013, 124), as this genre has traditionally defied boundaries: reality and fiction, human and nonhuman. In fact, posthumanism calls for a dissolution of all disciplinary boundaries which will force Humanities to evolve into *post* Humanities that consider a wide range of cultural and artistic manifestations (Herbrechter 2013, 155). Thus, posthumanism not only serves to theorize on the posthuman body, but also to account for this subversive vision of the Humanities as a field that has traditionally disregarded other cultural manifestations (Herbrechter 2013, 155). Among the diversity of cultural expressions, we should add the field of fashion, which is, together with many other artistic disciplines, challenging the traditional figurations of the human body, thus recreating, in highly visual terms, the various human subjectivities that have not conformed to the traditional and monolithic ideal of “Man”. Thus, fashion is here credited with constructing alternative forms of embodiment, which ultimately challenge the dominance of Man/Anthropos on planet Earth (Braidotti 2022, 149; Smelik 2022, 68).

2. Fashion Studies

Herbrechter maintains that post- and transhumanist tendencies can be perceived in contemporary art (2013, 183), and welcomes these artistic configurations for providing a site of resistance and transformation, where traditional figurations of the human body are challenged in favor of a wide range of alternative embodied subjectivities. In some of these artistic manifestations that register posthuman and transhumanist tendencies, the

human body is deconstructed, distorted, or enhanced via technological means. The German artist Hans Bellmer and his surrealist photography provide an illustrative example of such bodily distortions with his collection of surrealist photographs entitled *The Doll* (1949), in which he deconstructs the human figure to its limits. Such tendencies permeate the fashion industry as well, and in 1997 Rei Kawakubo, as head designer of the French fashion house Comme des Garçons, created a collection significantly named *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body*, where the human figure is completely deconstructed. What these examples reveal is that some artistic manifestations –fashion included– provide a site of subversion where alternative figurations of the human body are constructed, thus demonstrating that the body is no longer an immutable and fixed entity. As Herbrechter noted in this respect:

Art thus becomes the mirror, as well as an agent, of technocultural mutation, which accompanies the prothesization, mediatization, digitalization and virtualization of the posthuman(ist) human, as well as accelerating these processes. It thus contributes to the further dissolution of the humanist ideal body image of human integrity and perfection. (2013, 185)

Therefore, the alternative figurations of the human body found in the field of fashion are rapidly virtualized –and thus, promulgated–, given the mediatization of present-day fashion shows, which are now conceived as performative spectacles in their own right and widely disseminated through social media. In order to explore these subversive figurations of the human body within the field of fashion, in the following sections, I examine the evolution of fashion theory, paying particular attention to sociologist Joanne Entwistle’s approach to dress as an embodied practice (2000).

2.1. The Origins of Fashion Theory

Far from articulating a correlation between body and dress, the first academic approaches to the study of fashion and dress were influenced by semiotics, examining fashion as a sign-system (Barthes 1967). However, contemporary views of fashion studies haven't taken a materialist turn, focusing on fashion as a bodily practice (Pereira-Ares 2018; Wilson 2003; Entwistle & Wilson 2001; Entwistle 2000; Tsëelon 1997; Davis 1992). Thus, posthumanism and fashion studies converge in their return to the body, that is, in their emphasis on a materialist perspective. The appraisal of the body proposed by fashion studies entails overcoming the neglect that the body had previously suffered in Western thought. As Kate Soper (2001, 15) argues:

I think we have to relate this neglect ultimately to the Platonist emphasis in the Western philosophical tradition – that is, to its abstraction and prioritization of the mental, the rational and the spiritual over the corporeal, the material, and the sensual, and the related tendency to define what is distinctive to the human being in terms of the possession of mind or should rather than by reference to embodied existence.

Although fashion and dress are now appropriately examined within academia, in the not-so-distant past, scholars interested in exploring sartorial matters often had to justify the academic value of a subject matter largely associated with vanity, frivolity and triviality. The Centre for Cultural Studies at Birmingham (often abbreviated CCCS), a research center linked to the University of Birmingham and founded by Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart in 1964, contributed significantly to the academic inclusion of popular culture within academic studies. Being interdisciplinarity one of the main tenets of cultural studies, diverse cultural manifestations began to be theoretically examined, including the

field of fashion. As a pupil of the CCCS, British sociologist Dick Hebdige published in 1979 his seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, where he analyzed how post-war British subcultures such as the hippies, punks or mods fashioned subversive forms of collective identification by appropriating everyday pieces of clothing and reworking their meanings.

Nowadays, the term “fashion theory” refers to an interdisciplinary study that seeks to analyze fashion as a cultural construction of identity as well as the intersections between dress, body, and culture. Journals such as the *Journal of Fashion Studies* or *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* have played a key role in the development of the field within academia. The latter defines the objectives of “fashion theory” in the following terms:

The importance of studying the body as a site for the deployment of discourses is well-established in a number of disciplines. By contrast, the study of fashion has, until recently, suffered from a lack of critical analysis. Increasingly, however, scholars have recognized the cultural significance of self-fashioning, including not only clothing but also such body alterations as tattooing and piercing. *Fashion Theory* provides an interdisciplinary forum for the rigorous analysis of cultural phenomena ranging from footbinding to fashion advertising. (Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.)

As *Fashion Theory* suggests, the concerns of fashion theory have become increasingly diversified and yet, in its definition of the field, the *Fashion Theory* Journal emphasizes the intimate connection between body and dress. In this sense, in *The Fashioned Body* (2000), Joanne Entwistle argues that “the classical tradition within sociology failed to acknowledge the significance of dress, largely because it neglected the body and the things that bodies do” (Entwistle 2000, 9). Fortunately, other scholars have added to the

study of fashion as an embodied practice, such as Elizabeth Wilson, who criticizes the work of authors such as Roland Barthes who, according to her, “takes for granted that fashion is irrational. In fact, his theory of fashion is based entirely on the idea of irrationality, since for him the sign, like language, is a system of arbitrarily defined differences” (2003, 57).

2.2. Entwistle’s Dressed Body

In her work *The Fashioned Body* (2000), sociologist Joanne Entwistle has elaborated a “sociology of the body”, stressing the bidirectional relationship between “body” and “dress”, and arguing that body and dress are inseparable: one without the other seems “strangely alienating” (9), since “nakedness is wholly inappropriate in almost all social situations”, for “no culture leaves the body unadorned” (6). Entwistle’s contribution to the sociology of the body bridges the gap between the exploration of the body within philosophy and sociology, and the study of fashion and dress, which, prior to Entwistle’s contribution, tended to address body and dress separately (6–7). Thus, Entwistle argues that “[a] sociological perspective on dress requires moving away from the consideration of dress as object to looking instead at the way in which dress is as embodied activity and one that is embedded within social relations” (10). To conceptualize her notion and concept of the dressed body, Entwistle draws from several theoretical resources, namely structuralism, post-structuralism and phenomenology. Thus, her theory is indebted to scholars and thinkers such as Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu. As social constructivists, these thinkers have theorized and offered insightful examinations of the body, taking it as “a thing of culture and not merely a biological entity” (12).

Some structuralist thinkers, such as Mary Douglas, perceived the body as a natural object shaped by social forces. In *Natural Symbols* (1973), she distinguishes between the physical body and the social body since, according to her, culture mediates the physiological properties of the body and translates them into meaningful symbols (Entwistle 2000, 14). Entwistle acutely points out how Douglas' theorization on the body can be extrapolated to the dressed body, for "the image the dressed body makes can be symbolic of the situation in which it is found" (2000, 15). According to Douglas, culture shapes the body, and the body in turn reflects cultural symbols. Entwistle illustrates this by means of formal situations such as weddings or funerals, where dressed bodies function as symbols of these events: a body dressed in black becomes a symbol of mourning in some Western cultures (2000, 15).

Entwistle's sociological examination of the body owes much to Michel Foucault, who perceived the body as "the object that modern knowledge/power seizes upon and invests with power" (Entwistle 2000, 17). For the French philosopher, discourses are the regimes through which knowledge –and, consequently, power– is conveyed and transferred. These discourses are put into practice at the microlevel of the body, since "power invests in bodies" (Entwistle 2000, 17). Along similar lines, Bryan Turner (1985) offers an insightful interpretation of how power operates on bodies, arguing that bodies are controlled and operated on by power through the development of specific regimes, such as diet or exercise (qtd. in Entwistle 2000, 17). Foucault's notion of power is also productively deployed by Entwistle, who argues that discursive power is also materialized through dress practices: while nineteenth-century women were obliged to wear corsets, and failing to wear them signaled a deplorable moral (20), contemporary corporate strategies of management employ strict dress codes, specially upon women, who are often obliged to wear certain uniforms in order to project the company's image (23).

Although Foucault's insights are fruitful to unveil how dress practices are often embedded in discourses of power, his theory fails to account for the experiences of the individuals that adopt or challenge such discourses of power. Moreover, Foucault's contributions fail to recognize the agency of bodies, and by presuming effects, fail to provide an account of individual practices of dress. Thus, Entwistle's distances her theory of the dressed body from the linguistically framed insight of post-structuralism, considering that the body may have its own agency outside language or discourse, since "his [Foucault's] focus on discourse seems to produce a notion of the body which has no materiality outside the representation" (2000, 27).

Entwistle contends that "[b]odies are not simply representations; they have a concrete, material reality, a biology that is in part determined by nature. Bodies are the product of a dialectic between nature and culture" (Entwistle 2000, 27), just as Rosi Braidotti's posthuman subject, who is "firmly located somewhere" (2013, 51). For this reason, Entwistle examines the perspectives offered by the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For him, there is a dialectical unity between self and body. The mind is situated in the body, and the body is in turn located in space in time. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty defends that "we come to understand our relation in the world via the positioning of our bodies physically and historically in space" (Entwistle 2000, 29). Such an analysis enables an explanation of how the dressed body is socially and temporally constructed, and therefore, not a mere entity of discursive relations of power. According to Entwistle, Merleau-Ponty's work turns useful to examine dress as a "situated bodily practice" (Entwistle 2000, 29), since dressing the body is related to temporal and spatial constraints. To this end, Entwistle argues that

The self, while experiencing an undifferentiated internal time, is also forever 'caught' frozen, temporally fixed by fashion. One only has to think of the

discomfort which is commonly felt when looking at old photographs of oneself in clothes which are no longer fashionable to see how fashion imposes a sense of time onto the experience of the adorned self. (2000, 32)

However, Merleau-Ponty's elevated philosophical discourse complicates an insightful examination of the social world and of the dressed body as a thing of culture (Entwistle 2000, 30). Thus, Entwistle adopts the sociological perspectives of Goffman and Bourdieu, which are suitable for an examination of dress as a social practice involving the body. By bridging the gap between structuralism and post-structuralism, Goffman perceives space as both external and internal to individuals. External, since space "imposes particular rules and norms upon them [the individuals]", and internal, since space "is experienced and indeed transformed by them" (Entwistle 2000, 33). Entwistle exemplifies how spaces impose particular sets of sartorial rules on individuals, and how failing to conform to such rules results in social censure or disapproval: in most Western cultures, at a wedding, a woman who dares to wear white will be probably looked at with disapproval (2000, 33).

Regarding space, Goffman's sense of space is social and perceptual, and it aids in shedding light on dress as a situated bodily practice which "forms part of the micro-social order of most social spaces" (Entwistle 2000, 34). "When we dress" Entwistle continues, "we have to orientate ourselves to the implicit norms of these spaces: is there a code of dress we have to abide by? Who are we likely to meet? What activities are we likely to perform? How visible do we want to be?". To this theory, Entwistle adds that spaces are also gendered: "women may have to think more carefully about how they appear in public than men [...] and how women experience public spaces such as offices, boardrooms, quiet streets at night, is likely to be different to how men experience them" (Entwistle 2000, 34).

Bourdieu's sociological examination of bodies offers further insights through which to address the notion of the dressed body. His concept of *habitus* "links the individual to social structures: the way we come to live in our bodies is structured by our social position in the world, in particular for Bourdieu, our class position" (Entwistle 2000, 36). Bourdieu's perspective of the *habitus* is therefore useful for "understanding the dressed body as the outcome of situated bodily practices" (Entwistle 2000, 36). Moreover, Bourdieu's theory is particularly convenient to a conception of the dressed body, for "it does not see dress as the outcome of either oppressive social forces on the one hand, or agency on the other: instead it drives a steady course between determinism and voluntarism" (Entwistle 2000, 38). In sum, Entwistle's theory of the dressed body oscillates between the discursive relations of power, and the bodily practice of dress by which individuals "orientate themselves to the social world" (39).

2.3. Identity and the Dressed Body

As seen in the previous section, body and dress "exist in a dialectic relationship to one another" (Entwistle 2003, 94), and from this inseparable relationship, the projection of a cultural identity takes place, for dress prepares us for our social embodiment, and reveals our social identity (Tsëelon 2001, 108). If "[i]n contemporary culture, the body has become the site of identity" (Entwistle 2000, 138), Entwistle clarifies that dress is the medium through which identity is often channeled: "The clothes we wear can be expressive of our identity" (112), since "[c]loth, and the tailoring practices that shape it, give form to the body's presentation in culture" (94). Thus, dress, clothing, and different kinds of adornments, such as accessories, piercings, or tattoos, as well as other kinds of

body modifications, are the tools which set the contemporary body as a “[container] of our identities and places of personal expression” (138).

Given that in our contemporary world “[i]dentities are no longer as stable as they once were” (Entwistle 2000, 138), fashion “opens up, yet simultaneously undercuts the possibility of individual self-development and of social co-operation” (Wilson qtd. in Entwistle 2000, 139). Fred Davis (1992, 25) argues that dress functions “as a kind of visual metaphor for identity and [...] for registering the culturally anchored ambivalences that resonate within and among identities”. Davis also explores the ways in which fashion and dress have encoded the identity ambivalences of the West, and which “address core sociological attributes of the person, the so-called *master statuses* (i.e., age, gender, physical beauty, class, and race)” (26). Davis argues that “[a]mbivalent orientations toward gender identification even now, as they have in the past, play a profound role in Western dress and in the symbolic buffeting to which fashion forever subjects it” (54).

Among these *master statuses*, gender identity, understood as the personal conception within the gender spectrum, is largely addressed by the fashion literature (Geczy & Karaminas 2018; Wissinger 2016; Wilson 2003; Elizabeth & Wilson 2001; Entwistle 2000; Davis 1992), for “gender is probably the most crucial feature of dress, the aspect of identity most clearly and consistently articulated by clothes” (Elizabeth & Wilson 2001, 6). As pointed out by Wilson, fashion is “obsessed with gender, [and it] defines and redefines the gender boundary” (2003, 117). The obsession with linking a sartorial coding to gender begins since the moment babies are born (Entwistle 2001, 39), so dress, in a way, operates following the gender spectrum, either enhancing the barrier between the feminine and the masculine or deconstructing it. To this end, Entwistle unveils how these codes are socially established, and by extension, artificial:

Clothing, as an aspect of culture, is a crucial feature in the production of masculinity and femininity: it turns nature into culture, layering cultural meanings on the body. There is no natural link between an item of clothing and ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’; instead, there is an arbitrary set of associations which are culturally specific. (2000, 143)

Adding to this, Tsëelon argues that “identity is constituted through ‘corporeal style’ repeated and rehearsed in public acts” (2001, 107). Fashion and dress can therefore be interpreted with the Butlerian notion of (gender) performativity, since fashion is yet another layer of identity meaning that adds up to the gender spectrum along different parameters. Butler’s theory of performativity (1990; 1993) is grounded on the idea that “[g]ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1990, 33). Consequently, Butler reveals how gender is performed through styles, and by extension, through dress and fashion. The arbitrariness of gender is further highlighted by the figure of the drag or the act of cross-dressing, which dismantles any essential category behind the sexes by caricaturizing and/or exaggerating gender features. In line with this and drawing from Butler’s work, Entwistle adds that

Cross-dressing reveals the arbitrariness or masquerade of gender: if femininity can be put on at will by men, and masculinity worn in the style of ‘butch’, or by ‘drag kings’, then gender is stripped of its naturalness and shown to be a set of culturally regulated styles. Gender is thus dislocated from the body and shown to be performed through style: femininity and masculinity are not the product of female or male bodies and there is no natural connection between female bodies and femininity or male bodies and masculinity. (2000, 178)

In this manner, fashion and dress enable the figuration of post-gendered bodies that defy the deep-seated gender binary of man/woman. However, practices such as drag and cross-dressing not only serve to explore alternative gender figurations. Drag and cross-dressing also pave the way for a discourse of disidentification with the traditional or canonical notion of the “Human”, thus interrogating what has historically counted as human. In this vein, a posthuman turn can already be detected in some recent studies on fashion which examine how some fashion designers have been producing creations that challenge binary oppositions: man/woman; nature/culture; human/nonhuman.

2.4. The Posthuman Turn in Fashion Studies

In *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Jane Bennet explores the relationship between inanimate bodies and humans, advocating for a recognition of the agency of nonhuman, inanimate objects and materials, such as stem cells, fish oils, electricity, metal and trash. As she argues, such recognition and consideration might pave the way for a more responsible and ecologically concerned ethic. In a similar vein, fashion researcher Annamari Vänskä contends that “[i]nstead of treating clothes as mute tools with which individuals fashion themselves, we should treat clothes as active and vibrant agents that materialize and mediate understanding of the human” (2018, 18). As it has been explained in previous sections, fashion and dress shape, deconstruct, enhance, or define our cultural identity along the parameters of gender, ethnicity and age, among others. For that reason, some fashion scholars have identified fashion and dress as a “technology of identity” (Tsëelon 2001, 108), for it adds layers of cultural meaning to our embodied selves. Herbrechter explores the bidirectional relationship between humans and technology, arguing that

human beings have always been ‘technological’ through and through, whether as a result of tool use or of the ‘recursivity’ of symbolic language as ultimate, ‘ontologizing’ tool (language would thus have to be understood as the ineluctable human ‘prosthesis’), or as the contemporary physical amalgamation of technological object and human subject (cyborgization)—hence, there would be no humanity without technics (i.e., the ontological involvement between humans, techniques and technologies). (2013, 27)

Considering fashion and dress as one of the first technological prosthesis that the *Homo sapiens* utilized to differentiate themselves from other animals, Vänskä (2018, 24) contends that “[o]ne is not born, but becomes a human through the process of hominization, that is, through the constant negotiation and fashioning of the boundary that separates the human from the non-human animal”. Vänskä clearly exemplifies how the boundary between the human and the nonhuman animal is being progressively erased by means of some contemporary practices, such as fashioning our pets. If fashion plays a fundamental role in the process of hominization, the act of dressing our pets blurs the boundary between the human and the nonhuman, for they are, in present-day families, “a fully-fledged family member” (Vänskä 2018, 26).

Such example perfectly illustrates fashion as a social mechanism that blurs the divide between human and nonhuman at an experiential level. Similarly, other scholars concerned with the posthuman turn in fashion (Smelik 2022) have directed their attention to the high fashion industry, where different designers are registering such turn. A clear example can be found in the runway presented by the house Gucci in the collection for autumn/winter 2018, designed by Alessandro Michele, who confessed that the inspiration for the show was Donna Haraway’s seminal essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985), calling into question the boundaries established between human animals, nonhuman animals, and

machines (Smelik 2022, 57). This runway's venue was decorated as a hospital's operation room which, according to the house, spoke about the plasticity of identity: "The concept of the operating room reflects the work of a designer—the act of cutting, splicing and reconstructing materials and fabrics to create a new personality and identity with them" (@gucci, February 21, 2018). As if the models were being replicated by a scientist-designer, some of the models carried severed replicas of their own heads, pointing to the replicable nature of humans.

Thus, examining the creations of Alessandro Michele in the first place, Anneke Smelik deciphers a posthuman turn in fashion, crediting him and other conceptual contemporary fashion designers for decentering human subjectivity from the runway. Smelik (2022, 57-58) studies a number of techniques that reshape and re-conceptualize the human figure, either by distorting the human body (Rei Kawakubo in *Comme des Garçons Body Meets Dress* presented in 1997), by covering or diffracting the human face (as in *Syntopia* [Fall 2018] by Iris van Herpen), or by fusing the human body with nonhuman animals (as in McQueen's *The Widows of Culloden* [F/W 2006]). Smelik expands her corpus of analysis and mentions Martin Margiela, Hussein Chalayan, Issey Miyake, or Gareth Pugh as designers who contribute to a posthuman fashion, which "blurs the border between human and machine, humans and animals, and organic and artificial" (2022, 57). Moreover, she argues that "[p]osthuman fashion can be said to push the boundaries further in blurring not only gender categories, but also transversally mixing them up with categories of the non-human like the animal or the machine" (61). This leads her to provide a provisional definition of the posthuman subject in the field of fashion: "a hybrid figure who decenters human subjectivity, celebrating in-between-ness, by making alliances with all kinds of nonhumans" (58).

However, posthumanism not only serves to identify disruptive and alternative figurations of the human body which, hybridized with all kinds of nonhumans, decenter human subjectivity. A posthumanist perspective in fashion also paves the way for the consideration of all matter, whether living or inert, as part of the fashion cycle. The current fashion industry, clearly defined by over production and over consumption, leads to the exploitation of human labor and natural resources (Smelik 2022, 62). Nonetheless, as some fashion scholars argue (Smelik 2022; Niessen 2020; Vänskä 2018; Entwistle 2015), a sustainable turn needs to be adopted by the fashion industry. Fortunately, the ateliers of some fashion designers are already echoing such an imperial necessity. As an example, the Dutch designer Iris van Herpen pioneered innovative and sustainable techniques, such as the use of recycled fabrics or the implementation of 3D printing designs in her runway collections. Perhaps van Herpen was inspired by her period as an intern in the label of the British fashion designer Alexander McQueen who, although not so engaged in producing sustainable clothing, certainly raised awareness of ecological problems at a later stage of his career. McQueen elaborated a post-anthropocentric discourse that signaled that the function of dress is no longer to conceal our bestial nature (Soper 2001, 17), or to engage in a process of hominization (Vänskä 2018, 22), but to connect with nonhuman animals and technology. In sum, to explore the synergies between “*zoe/techno/geo*” (Braidotti 2022, 131) in the designer’s creations will be the ultimate goal of the study here presented, examining his alternative figurations of human and nonhuman bodies that ultimately decentered the dominance of Man/Anthropos on planet Earth.

3. Posthumanism in Alexander McQueen's Shows

3.1. Alexander McQueen's Fashion Shows

In *The Fashioned Body* (2000), Entwistle writes about fashion designers as cultural innovators and mediators, arguing that “[f]ashion’ is therefore the product of interactions between these cultural mediators and their sources of inspiration, as well as the result of internal dynamics of fashion itself” (222). By the end of the 80s and throughout the 90s, the fashion sector in Great Britain enjoyed a great expansion. Figures such as Alexander McQueen and John Galliano represented, in these two decades, the emergence of a new phenomenon: “the fashion designer as *auteur*, as an artist in his or her own right” (McRobbie 2003, 8-9). Thanks to their shows which took the appearance of theatrical performances more than runway shows per se, fashion finally gained status as a fine art. Thus, like John Galliano and Antonio Berardi, Lee Alexander McQueen soon started to gain prominence in the British fashion scene with his controversial fashion shows, becoming a cultural mediator of his time in his own right. With his fashion shows, McQueen managed to elaborate a discourse through which the malaises of society were depicted and criticized, something that led him to be labeled as the *enfant terrible* of the fashion industry. In fact, McQueen defined himself as a sort of sartorial chronicler: “I’m making points about my time, about the times we live in. My work is a social document about the world today” (qtd. in Bolton 2011, 12). Thus, he documented some of the most unpleasant aspects of past and contemporary societies: female sexual abuse, historical events of colonization and imperialism and, in a later stage of his work, environmental issues such as global warming and biodiversity reduction.

As a student of Central Saint Martins in London, McQueen set the tone for the rest of his sartorial production with his graduate collection. The collection was named *Jack the Ripper Stalks His Victims* (1992), by which he commented on the issue of female sexual abuse through a historical lens, drawing from one of London's most cited horrors: the murders committed by Jack the Ripper in the streets of the East End of London in the nineteenth century. This historical perspective, which was present in other collections, such as *Highland Rape* (S/S 1995), by which he commented on the English colonization of Scotland, was acquired by his experience working at the theatrical costumers' company Berman's & Nathan's. Theatrical dress-making influenced McQueen's production as a designer, not only his designs, but also the creation of theatrical performances in almost all of his shows, which had a narrative thread and a story to tell.

Among other sources of inspiration for the designer, nature was one of the most salient throughout his sartorial career. Through the excellent craftsmanship that he acquired while working as a tailor in Savile Row, McQueen was able to turn his models into hybrids between human and nonhuman animals. Antlers worn as headpieces, full-body costumes that simulated some avian species, horns sprouting from jackets' shoulders are some of the techniques through which the designer linked the human and the nonhuman animal realms. McQueen's passion for nature did not impede the hybridization with other nonhuman inorganic others, i.e., technology. At a later stage in his sartorial creations, McQueen acquired a more critical attitude toward environmental issues, and for that, the designer returned to technology as humankind's salvation in a post-apocalyptic world. Although the communion with technology was also a recurrent theme throughout his creations, McQueen confessed that nature had always had a privileged position in his oeuvre: "I've done loads of collections based on man and machine and man and nature, but ultimately my work is always in some way directed by

nature” (qtd. in Wilson 2015, 212). Whether the perspective was historical or futuristic, driven by technology or by nature, McQueen questioned what it means to be human at the turn of the millennium. As McQueen made alliances with all kinds of nonhumans, the second section of this work will analyze two turns in his production: the animal-woman association, which often resulted in the creation of a feral hybrid, and the (re)creation of the figure of the cyborg, which blurred the divide between man and woman, between nature and culture, and between human and technology.

3.2. The Women-Animal Association

The pairing between women and animals has been present throughout history in a manifold of cultural and artistic manifestations. Through their mythologies, ancient Greek and Roman cultures were among the first to combine and distort the boundary between women and nonhuman animals. Hybrid creatures such as the siren or the sphynx were portrayed in said mythologies as evil creatures that entailed a threat to men. Mythical women figures such as Medusa, who had serpents instead of hair, represent the epitomized evil woman. Notwithstanding, the animal-woman association extends further than mythology, being also related to women’s bodies and their possibility of giving birth and nurturing other human beings. Some ecofeminist critics have negatively considered such a connection as essentialist, for it contraposes women to culture and emphasizes their bodily dimension, especially when the mind has been privileged over the body. Later on, other ecofeminists—in particular, essentialist ecofeminists—vindicated women’s more intimate and “natural” connection with nonhuman animals and nature so as to denounce how they had been illtreated and despised as it happened with a series of Others (including nonhuman animals, the land, or the colonized to name just a few), as well as to vindicate

an allegedly female ethics of care: being closer to nature and nonhuman animals, they were likely to be more ethically concerned with them.

Such an evolution within the field of ecofeminism points to the contentiousness of the woman-animal association which, as it has been shown in this brief review, has been both praised and denounced within ecofeminist examinations. This trajectory of the field of ecofeminism has resulted in the reconsideration of some basic concepts, such as those of human self, nature, and nonhuman others. In this vein, Margarita Estévez-Saá and María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia (2018) contend that ecofeminism urges to reconceive such concepts, especially because they are pertinent to the blurring between the human and the nonhuman: “the idea of the human self and the concept of nature must be reconsidered, indeed reconceived, and the system of relationships established between the human and the non-human realms should be revised”. Therefore, they go on to suggest that “ecofeminists today are focused on offering alternative discourses that renounce the establishment of hierarchies and emphasize the continuity and connections that should prevail between humans and non-human nature” (129).

It is therefore little wonder that this recent ecofeminist endeavor nourishes the construction of the posthuman subjectivity: “What makes ecofeminism relevant to posthumanism is its radical decentring of *Anthropos* [...] Moreover, the traditional distinction between human life (*bios*) and non-human life (*zoe*) is erased and a multitude of *zoe*-related entities become relevant to and involved in defining posthuman subjects today” (Braidotti 2022, 83). Furthermore, ecofeminists’ contribution has helped in the posthuman quest for deconstructing the nature-culture divide, which fuels the perception of a woman-animal association as negative or essentialist:

Ecofeminists [...] are critical of the separation of nature from culture and the hierarchical binary distinctions that were built upon it. This is where ecofeminism

strikes a fundamental chord, by showing how artificial the nature-culture distinction is. They also reveal this divide to be Eurocentric, knowing that most cultures on earth do not rest on such binary oppositions. But ecofeminists go further by contesting the inferior status and the negative connotations attributed to the natural order itself. Some even endorse a tactical embrace of the closeness of women to nature and turn it into a magnifying lens with both a critical and creative focus [...] On the creative side, they show the advantages of this proximity because a re-naturalized approach affords new perspectives and margins of political action as well as new ethical frameworks. (Braidotti 2022, 74)

Thus, Braidotti explains how ecofeminism heralded a posthuman turn which allows for a new materialist perspective that enables transversal alliances between the human and the nonhuman (77). From an animal ecofeminist perspective, and drawing from this premise that embraces alliances between the human and the nonhuman, Diana Villanueva acknowledges “the enormous contribution of the work done by ecofeminists to the deconstruction of binaries such as the human/animal” (Villanueva 2013, 151). Although she admits that the identification between women and nonhuman animals sometimes still contributes to the oppression of both groups (2013, 151), Villanueva turns to images in advertisements and in the fashion industry to defend that “the expression of this association in visual form can sometimes serve as an instrument of liberation” (2013, 155), even though the woman-animal association has been met by accusations of essentialism.

Contrarily, Carol J. Adams (2015; 2010) argues that women and animals are often stand-ins for each other in advertising, and the figure of women and nonhuman animals become absent when they are commodified and used instrumentally. Through the act of butchering, for example, animals become the “absent referent” when transformed into

meat. Similarly, women are also the absent referent when commodified as sexual objects. Thus, Adams identifies the “cues of violability” through which women signal that they want to be “tamed” or “hunted” in advertisements. These cues show how “[w]omen learn to exhibit, rather than to inhabit their bodies” (2015, 106). Both groups are commodified, both groups are seen as consumable objects whose subject position is blurred in the act of meat eating, or in the act of being raped. However, Diana Villanueva perceives a shift in some campaigns where the women-animal identification underscores a message of empowerment for the two, coining the term “cues of empowerment” (2013, 159). To illustrate such cues, Villanueva turns to the fashion shows of Alexander McQueen, where the hybrid between the nonhuman and human animal results in female empowerment, since the models who strut the designer’s runway appear as anything but commodified objects or victims, as Villanueva contends:

This image of a human-animal hybrid was a trademark of McQueen’s throughout this second phase. It spoke of his concept of women as powerful and not necessarily fixed in the role of victims. His work therefore evolved from a narrative where female domination was predominant to one where the tables were turned repositioning the victim in the place of the aggressor. In this sense, it is especially significant that McQueen uses the animalization of women to convey their force and that, contrary to the images of empowerment studied when analyzing advertising strategies, his choice does not necessarily fall on predator wild animals but on prey animals such as some bird species, deer, and gazelles. (2013, 170)

McQueen’s reinterpretation and subversion of women as victims began in his graduate collection, *Jack the Ripper Stalks His Victims* (1992), where, instead of portraying the female models as victims of the Victorian serial killer, they were made to carry knives,

as if the legend of the murderer was inverted. However, the women-animal association is not present until his 8th collection, called *Dante* (A/W 1996). In the show, some of the models, who looked more vampire than human, strutted the runway sporting huge headpieces with antlers and horns of different animals. One of the collection's most remarkable looks was Philip Treacy's headpiece of a stag skull with its corresponding enormous antlers, worn by a female model. In *The Mythical Zoo* (2001), Boria Sax explores the cultural representation of animals, and studies how hart and hind are the perfect symbols to distinguish between the male and female of the species: "Together, hart and hind represent nothing but the primordial division between male and female" (141). Thus, the fact that a female model is the one sporting the stag's headpiece subverts the deep-seated division between man/woman, as it is the male deer who is identified by the antlers. As Andrew Wilson points out, "some of the women on display here [in McQueen's *Dante*] looked as though they had transformed themselves into an unclassified third sex or a mutant hybrid of animal and human" (2015, 153). With such an image, McQueen was able to create a frightening image of a feral woman who trespasses the gender boundaries. McQueen's intention, in his own words, was "to create a woman who looks so fabulous you wouldn't dare lay a hand on her" (qtd. in Evans 2003, 143). Thus, female empowerment was achieved through the woman-animal hybrid (Villanueva 2013, 166), even if the animal with which the woman is hybridized is not a predator, such as the hart. Another of the central pieces of the collection was a black mantilla headdress, which was supported by antlers, thus increasing the height of the model to eight feet approximately (Wilson 2015, 153). Thus, the human body was altered by hybridizing it with animal body parts. The result is clear: "these were women you wouldn't want to mess with" (Wilson 2015, 153).

It took less than a year for McQueen to revisit the woman-animal association through hybridization. In *It's a Jungle Out There* (A/W 1997), in which the designer paid tribute to Thompson's gazelle, the figure of a ferocious woman reappeared in the designer's runway. This time, the models featured a feral look which was achieved through animalistic make-up and hairstyles. Some of them wore black contact lenses in order to simulate the gazelle's eyes, which was the case of the black model Debra Shaw, who had the chance to wear one of the pieces that astonished the audience. Shaw was clothed in a pony skin jacket from whose shoulders sprouted huge antelope's horns. Again, McQueen revisited the feral woman archetype by hybridizing the female body with an inoffensive creature, the gazelle which, despite its menacing features –its dark eyes, its enormous horns– is the last in the food chain in Africa. As McQueen pointed out, this “poor little critter [...] as soon as it's born it's dead” (qtd. in Wilson 2015, 193). However, Shaw and her fellow models, being “half woman half gazelle” (Wilson 2015, 193), embraced a rebellious attitude not only through their garments, but also through their defiant poses (Villanueva 2013, 170). By making connections with the nonhuman animal realm, McQueen again managed to subvert female and animal victimization in his runway show.

McQueen's confessed fondness for ornithology was expressed in several of his fashion shows.¹ McQueen used again the feral women archetype by hybridizing women and birds. In *Irere* (S/S 2003) and *La Dame Bleue* (S/S 2008), McQueen presented colorful, feathery garments that simulated the plumages of tropical birds. *Irere* (S/S 2003) was named after the Amazonian word for “transformation” (Wilson 2015, 277), which pointed at the collection's metamorphic narrative. For this show, McQueen envisioned

¹ As a member of the Young Ornithologists Club of England, McQueen declared his fondness for the avian species: “Birds in flight fascinate me. I admire eagles and falcons. I'm inspired by a feather but also its color, its graphics, its weightlessness and its engineering. It's so elaborate. In fact I try and transpose the beauty of a bird to women” (qtd. in Villanueva 2013, 168).

the conversion of a woman who, after a shipwreck, finds transformation in water. To reinforce such narrative, the models' hair was styled as if they had just gotten out of water. The outcome was a metamorphosis from human to a hybrid between human and bird. Kate Bethune points out that after the shipwreck took place in the runway, "[d]arkness gave way to a riot of colour for the finale, as models emerged as birds of paradise in chiffon gowns" (2015, 314). The models, who were more birds than human creatures, demonstrated that the human species needs to return to, and appreciate, the nonhuman realm in order to acquire resilience.

The epitome of the bird-woman hybrid seemingly culminates in McQueen's penultimate collection, called *The Horn of Plenty* (A/W 2009). In this collection, the designer self-referenced some of the most salient designs presented throughout his career and parodied some of the most iconic designs in the history of fashion, including the designs of well-established fashion houses such as Chanel, Dior or Givenchy (Bethune 2015, 320), in an attempt to deride the high fashion industry. The show culminated with the presentation of the collection's last two looks. The last model of the catwalk wore a full-body costume of black feathers, representing a crow or other bird of prey and creating an image extremely close to Fernand Khnopff's *The Sleeping Medusa* (1896). The black look was in direct contrast with the previous one, a full-body white costume inspired by Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* (1995), and made with white feathers, resembling a swan. A visual and metaphoric contrast was achieved, as the two woman-bird hybrids evoked the fierce, yet unprotected aspect of both nature and women. The human body was therefore completely hybridized with the avian species, and little to no trace of the human body could be perceived in this collection's last two looks.

If some of the collection's looks shaped the human body in a more flattering manner, the make-up of every model in the show consistently deconstructed female

features. In this show, every model was rendered in the same way: every model's features were erased by the use of white make-up, which covered their faces, and their lips were over-painted with red lipstick. The result mimicked the flamboyant, clown-like make-up look of Leigh Bowery, an Australian performance artist known for challenging the standards of beauty in fashion. Even though the looks were worn by some of the most influential and well-paid models of the time, including Alla Kostromichova, Tao Okamoto, Raquel Zimmermann, Charlotte Di Calypso and Karlie Kloss, no mark of their identity could be traced in the show, their faces being completely unrecognizable by the use of such exaggerated, distorting make-up. The implied critique to the fashion industry was prioritized at the expense of creating beautiful, consumable looks that could be easily sold when worn by some of the world's top models.

By pairing woman and nonhuman animals, McQueen elaborated a post-anthropocentric critique of the fashion industry and also incorporated sustainability into his visual discourse. In this show, the models walked around a giant pile of trash which stood at the runway's center, composed by "tires, old computer keyboards, burned-out televisions, an uncoiling hose, car parts, antlers, broken chair" (Gleason 2012, 195). In this way, McQueen criticized "the excesses of fashion in a modern consumer age" (Bethune 2015, 320). This critique was further conveyed through the hats presented for the collection. Philip Treacy, an Irish hat designer who designed many of the headpieces presented in McQueen's collections, elaborated hyperbolic hats out of quotidian objects, including wheel trims, umbrellas, soda cans, black garbage bags, and tires. The message of the collection was even present in the show's invitation featuring a woman with a shopping bag on her head, parodying Johannes Vermeer's "Girl with the Pearl Earring" (1665). In this manner, McQueen's criticized "the disposability of fashion in the twenty-first century" (Bethune 2015, 320). McQueen himself commented on the unsustainable

fashion industry: “The turnover of fashion is just so quick and so throwaway, and I think that is a big part of the problem. There is no longevity” (qtd. in Wilson 2015, 321). The discourse presented with *The Horn of Plenty* served as a wake-up call to raise awareness on environmental issues, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, for the fashion industry is among the most polluting sectors in present-day societies.

3.3. Toward a Cyborg Narrative

As stated before, McQueen’s fondness for nature and the animal world did not restrain him from embracing technology as another means of becoming, of transforming, and of exploring alternative forms of embodied identities. Hence, nature and technology were not antagonized in McQueen’s fashion shows. His 13th show, simply called *No. 13* (S/S 1999), was inspired by the late Victorian design movement of Arts and Crafts, which propelled the use of traditional craftsmanship and manual work in art in response to the impersonal, aseptic art produced by industrialization (Gleason 2012, 59). The textile designer William Morris stands out as one of the salient advocates of said movement, since he reacted against the use of machines by emphasizing handcrafting and natural forms in art. In harmony with such traits, in *No. 13*, McQueen presented refined designs using leather, lace and raffia in neutral and natural tones (Bethune 2015, 310). However, the emphasis on the natural and the handcrafted was in direct contrast with the show’s soundtrack, this time composed by American hip hop artists like the Beastie Boys (Bethune 2015, 310).

The contrast between what was presented in the models’ looks and the music hinted at the opposition McQueen tried to achieve in *No. 13*. The show was opened by Aimee Mullins, an American paralympic athlete who at the age of one had the lower part of her legs removed since she was born without fibulas (Wilson 2015, 228). In

collaboration with the Dorset Orthopaedic Company, McQueen designed a pair of wooden prosthetic legs, hand-carved with floral motifs, following the Arts & Crafts aesthetics. In relation to this, Braidotti looks at disability studies to craft her posthuman subject, arguing that “contemporary disability studies are in some ways a celebration of anomaly, monstrosity and weirdness [...] These studies aim to refashion the human by undoing the binary normal/abnormal and able/disabled” (2022, 163). By having Aimee Mullins opening his thirteenth collection, McQueen was celebrating such anomalies, and technology was the means to refashion the human body. Again, “McQueen experimented with the manipulation of bodily forms” (Bethune 2015, 310), and technology was a tool to carry out such experiment. In all, McQueen was seemingly adding to the posthuman quest “to honour the disenfranchised, dehumanized and excluded bodies, defying the dominant version of the human as Man/Anthropos” (Braidotti 2022, 142). Before the show, Mullins had already worked with McQueen who, as guest editor of the fashion magazine *Dazed & Confused*, featured her in the September 1998 issue of the magazine, where “she appears as both a fragile doll and a strong, fierce, almost superhuman athlete” (Gleason 2012, 59). The magazine issue was called “Fashion-Able”, and it featured eight differently abled models, a number of whom strutted the 1999 McQueen’s show. In the magazine, McQueen declared that “[c]lothes were made specifically for each individual in acknowledgement of the fact that, politics aside, people with disabilities have practical difficulties finding fashionable clothes” (qtd. in Wilson 2015, 228). McQueen registered a qualitative shift in the naturalness of the human body, which is now enhanced by prosthetic technologies, and which, according to him, should be praised and embraced instead of rejected. In this vein, Braidotti contends that “[w]e now need to learn to think differently about ourselves and to experiment with new fundamental schemes of thought about what counts as the new basic unit of common reference for the human” (2013, 196).

By celebrating the productive interaction between man and machine, McQueen was deriding Morris' premise that the artist must be, above all, a craftsman that works by hand. In this line, Bethune argues: "Counter-point to William Morris' anti-industrial ethic, thereby provoking comment on the interaction between man and machine at the turn of the 21st century" (2015, 310).

In *Fashioning the Gothic Body*, Catherine Spooner examines the use of prosthetics by Alexander McQueen as one of the Gothic elements which is presented throughout his collections: "A new wave of designers in the 1990s deliberately courted the Gothic in their work, Alexander McQueen in particular basing collections on *The Birds*, *The Hunger* and *The Shining* and frequently returning to themes of automata, dissection and prosthetics" (2004, 192). In the book published after the tribute exhibition held at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 2011 and called *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* in London, Spooner also comments on the use of the gothic in Alexander McQueen's oeuvre. She argues that the Gothic, as a literary genre, is a highly profuse genre in sartorial terms, for the Gothic is constructed by means of a strictly defined sartorial code, which utilizes masks, disguises and veils to dress the bodies of many Gothic fictional characters (2015, 141). More relevantly for our study here is the perception of the Gothic as a genre "through which bodies and their boundaries and surfaces are foregrounded and explored, in frequently excessive or unsettling ways" (Spooner 2015, 141). Spooner signals *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* (A/W 2002) as one of the most notable Gothic collections of McQueen, which was designed as a tribute to film director Tim Burton, known for his peculiar, eccentric style. Spooner explains how Burton was aware of the use of Gothicity in McQueen's shows: "Burton grasped a core tenet of McQueen's work: a radically Gothic view of the body as a surface that can be made and remade". To flesh out her point, Spooner also comments on several literary works that have explored human

liminality: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) are some of the texts that "have been inspired by developments in nineteenth-century medicine and that used dissection and vivisection to explore the limits of the human" (2015, 147). The Gothic, either present in literary texts or in some of the great designers of the 90s, surely explores the liminality of the human, putting into question the integrity and the essence of the human. As Kelly Hurley explores, "[t]he Gothic seizes upon the opportunity at hand—the evacuation of human identity accomplished within the sciences—in order to experiment with 'the plasticity' of human and other bodies" (1996, 55-56). In all, McQueen's figuration of the human body adjusts to what Kelly Hurley calls the "abhuman" to refer to the metamorphic bodies presented in 19th century Gothic literature. For her, the abhuman is "not-quite-human", and it is characterized by "morphic variability" (1996, 3).

No. 13's finale is one of McQueen's most astonishing contributions to the fashion industry. The show concluded with Canadian model Shalom Harlow rotating on a turntable and wearing a voluminous white dress, which was spray-painted in yellow and black paint by two industrial robots. While the dress was being sprayed, Harlow revolved like a ballerina, trying to defend herself from the assault of these two robots. McQueen was deliberately making a reference to the shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), where a woman is stabbed to death. But McQueen's take on this interpretation is a positive one: after the robots' "assault", the model "was left standing, covered not in blood but just paint, a symbol perhaps of McQueen's new optimism" (Wilson 2015, 228-30). The inspiration for the show's finale was indebted to the German installation and performance artist Rebecca Horn, whose pieces *Painting Machine* (1988) and *High Moon* (1992) reflect on the death of the figure of the artist, as in these pieces the figure of the machine –and by extension, of technology– substitutes that of the artist, who in the

twenty-first century is no longer an indispensable figure. By mocking the Arts & Crafts Movement –which defended the pureness of craftsmanship–, McQueen was commenting on the ubiquity of technology at the turn of twentieth century. Even his own figure as a designer was put into question: machines are finishing the sartorial work, as Harlow’s dress was not finished until the machines stained her pristine white dress. By pairing McQueen’s *No. 13* with Horns’ installations, Gleason comments on the agency of robots, which displaces human subjectivity from art and, in a way, points to the obsolescence of human agency in the process of art-making: “Like the machines that artist Rebecca Horn uses in her installations, such as the paint-firing rifles that inspired McQueen, these robots seem to have emotions. Are they somewhat human? And if they are, then what are we?” (2015, 62). As a counterpoint to Morris’s anti-industrial ethic, McQueen commented on the interaction and relationship between man and machine at the turn of the twenty-first century (Bethune 2015, 310) which displaces human subjectivity in favor of inter-relations. Thus, the work of McQueen aligned with the posthuman quest of embracing technology as an essential part of the *zoe*-egalitarianism proposed by Braidotti:

Under the pressure of the material conditions of advanced capitalism and its speedy deterritorializations of the posthuman convergence, the modernist vision of the relationship between bodies and technology, which was dualistic and confrontational, is coming apart [...] Posthuman feminism adds technology into the materialist re-reading of the environment as a symbiotic system of cross-species collaborative egalitarianism. (2022, 143)

Albeit formally restricted by the brand, McQueen also developed his sense of fashion in the house of Givenchy. After John Galliano was moved to the French house Dior, McQueen was named head designer of Givenchy from 1996 to 2001. In 1999, McQueen challenged the elegant and delicate essence of the French house, whose founder once

designed Audrey Hepburn's "little black dress" in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). Such sartorial elegance was counterpointed in the Fall 1999 collection with an army of cyborgs presented by McQueen. The collection was opened with a laser show, which set the tone for the collection's futuristic atmosphere. Inspired by the American science-fiction film *Tron* (1982), McQueen dressed an army of cyborg-like models that strutted the runway wearing garments with glow-in-the-dark embroidery that simulated circuit boards (Borelli-Persson 1999). This "android couture" culminated in the collections' last look. The last model wore a transparent, vacuum-formed body cast that was fitted out with battery-powered flashing LEDs (Borelli-Persson 1999). The circuit of flashing lights that covered the model's body extended to her hairless head, creating a bald look that pointed toward the more-than-human nature of the model. The last model stood out from the rest of the army, for she was the only one who did not wear the same hairstyle that the rest of her fellow models wore. As in *The Horn of Plenty*, the rest of the models were presented in the runway as clones, this time not hybridized with animals, but presented as cyborgs or androids. Although their clothes varied, the models' distinguishing features were completely removed: all of them had the exact same hairstyle, and their eyebrows were erased with make-up, creating an alien-like look. With McQueen's contribution, the house of Givenchy abandoned the identification with a single person: Audrey Hepburn as the founder's muse. Instead, he presented an army of clones whose true identity was concealed.

Along these lines, Toffoletti argues that the presentation of the clone in popular culture reflects one of the deep-seated fears in after-biotechnological advances: the cloning of species. She claims that the cultural representation of clones "is often represented as a horror story or science fiction fantasy whereby the status of the human subject and identity is threatened". She adds that "[o]ne of the reasons why the clone is

horrifying is because it threatens the uniqueness of each individual". As another posthuman form, the clone therefore calls into question "our conventional understandings of subjectivity and reality" (2007, 149). On a similar note, Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985) examines the figure of the cyborg as one who is given the potential to dismantle the dualisms deeply rooted in Western thought. The cyborg, or the android presented in McQueen's Givenchy collection, not only questions what it means to be human at the turn of the twentieth century, but also challenges the barrier between culture/nature, human/artificial since, as Balsamo acutely points out, the cyborg body cannot be conceived either as a wholly cultural product or as a thing of nature: it is in between (1996, 33). What is more, the cyborg also challenges the gender barrier. Combining blazer jackets with exaggerated shoulder pads that emulated those in male clothing with more traditionally feminine garments such as skirts and dresses, McQueen's cyborg also challenged the gender dualism. As Haraway points out, "[t]he cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world" (1991, 150).

Such androgynous look permeated other collections by McQueen. This time under his own label, in his A/W 2004 collection, called *Pantheon ad Lucem*, the designer presented "androgynous creatures which looked like inhabitants from another planet with pale skin, elongated eyes and hair pulled into short, tight curls" (Bethune 2015, 315). This show's inspiration draws again from one of the designer's biggest inspirations: cinema. In fact, the soundtrack of Stanley Kubrick's *A Space Odyssey* (2001) was played at the beginning of the show, which anticipated the tone of the collection. The venue looked like a spacecraft: the floor was so immaculately white that almost irradiated light. Moreover, this outer-space atmosphere was achieved through the projection of astronauts landing on the moon in the background screen. If the first model to appear in the runway "becomes a just-birtherd alien" (Gleason 2012, 121) that steps into our world, the last one

waits at the center of the runway to be transported into another, as she appeared illuminated by a strong, white light, as if an UFO is about to abduct her. Albeit not explicitly admitted, it is in this show where McQueen's tone begins to be critically engaged with environmental issues. The projected images of the surface of the moon and an astronaut in the background of the show was perhaps hinting at the necessity of exploring other planets as our second home after the complete exhaustion of Earth's resources.

Thus, McQueen showed an increasing preoccupation with environmental issues in his last three collections. Instead of images of the moon, *NATURAL DISTINCTION*, *UNNATURAL SELECTION* (S/S 2009) projected images of the Earth in the background screen, and the catwalk was presided by two lines of stuffed animals on both sides of it, including an elephant, a giraffe, a tiger, a zebra and a polar bear, all of them endangered species. The collection drew inspiration from Charles Darwin's fourth chapter in *On The Origin of Species* (1859), named "Natural Selection". According to McQueen, the show also reflected upon the Industrial Revolution: "I was also interested in the Industrial Revolution because that was when the balance shifted, man became more powerful than nature and the damage really started. The collection is about looking at the world and seeing what we've done to it" (qtd. in Wilson 2015, 317). Therefore, the selection of these wild animals and the projection of our planet on the screen was not arbitrary. McQueen wanted the audience to reflect on the destruction of our own environment whose starting point is the Industrial Revolution. However, Darwin's theory of evolution was challenged when the models started to walk along the catwalk, representing the following stage in human evolution. As in *Pantheon ad Lucem*, the models were given an Alien-like aspect, but this time achieved through a hybridization between human and amphibian. The elevated neck of some dresses emulated the gills of many aquatic organisms, and the hair

of the models was glued to their faces, as if they had just got out of water. Some of the fabrics used in the collection seemed more like second skins than clothes, and the vivid colors used in the garments resembled the eye-catching scales of some amphibians. This woman-amphibian hybridization foreshadowed what was about to come in McQueen's last collection, *Plato's Atlantis*.

Both in *NATURAL DIS-TINCTION*, *UNNATURAL SELECTION* and in *Plato's Atlantis* (S/S 2010), McQueen presented an eschatological prediction according to which humans would have to return to water in order to survive after the melting of the ice caps. As pointed out by Gleason, "humans, with the aid of bioengineering, reverse the evolution and return to the sea from which all life came". The stage for this collection was designed like a laboratory, suggesting that every model was "a biological experiment in evolution" (2012, 205). A short film was projected over the background screen before the show commenced. In it, Brazilian model Raquel Zimmermann slowly mutated into an aquatic creature. Zimmerman first lied naked on the sand while snakes slithered over her. Then, the model appeared in a water tank filled with black eels. Throughout the scene, digital prints from the collection were projected onto her body, transforming her into a semi-reptilian being (Wilcox 2015, 86). When the film was over, the two robotic cameras that presided each side of the runway projected the images of the audience, thus forcing people to look at themselves on the giant screen. Then, the screen went white, and the first model appeared.

The prints of the garments, which were digitally printed and engineered (Wilcox 2015, 85), mimicked the skin of different aquatic animals. Even though the show began with camouflage impressions in green and brown tones which depicted moths, a transition to water was soon suggested by snake prints, which would eventually lead the way to designs in blues and purples incorporating images of ocean creatures, such as stingrays

and jellyfish (Bethune 2015, 321). This transition from land to sea was also noticeable in the models' hairstyle and make-up. As the evolution process advanced, the models were turning into a hybrid between human, amphibian and alien. This other-worldly hybridization made the models' features change because of biological adaptation: the first group of models had their hair plaited in mounds, but from look twenty-third onwards, the hair of the models presented two big protuberances that elongated the women's heads, displaying a macrocephalic aspect allegedly typical of intellectually superior aliens. Moreover, their facial features were distorted with prosthesis that enhanced their cheekbones and noses and which confirmed the extra-terrestrial, androgynous aspect of the models. This certainly calls to be read alongside Braidotti's comments on the beneficial aspect of blending with technology in 21st century:

The nature of the human-technological interaction has shifted towards a blurring of the boundaries between the genders, the races and the species [...] The technological other today –a mere assemblage of circuitry and feedback loops– functions in the realm of an egalitarian blurring of differences, if not downright indeterminacy. (2013, 109)

Therefore, the cyborg that McQueen creates is far removed from the cyborg presented in films such as *Metropolis* (1984), whose cyborg is clearly sexualized. Instead, the cyborgs/hybrids of *Plato's Atlantis* are neutralized as “figures of mixity, hybridity, and interconnectiveness” (Braidotti 2013, 97). Thus, the posthuman subject is bound together “by the compassionate acknowledgement of their interdependence with multiple others most of which, in the age of Anthropocene, are quite simply not anthropomorphic” (101). By returning to water and morphing his models into a new species, McQueen decentered the human via hybridization, while creating a nature-culture continuum that embraces the nonhuman, which can be organic –nonhuman animals, plants– or inorganic –technology

(Smelik 2022, 58). McQueen was envisioning a not-so-distant future, where bio-engineering would be the solution for humankind: “Bio-hacking means self-designing one’s embodiment [...] Today, both gene-editing and gender-editing have become part of our vocabulary and our social as well as technological practices. They affect humans and animals, plants and just about all living matter” (Braidotti 2022, 167). The hybrid of *Plato’s Atlantis* therefore embodies the perfect example of the posthuman subject who, by making alliances with the nonhuman realm, decenters human subjectivity and subverts binary thinking (Smelik 2022, 58).

By making alliances with all kinds of nonhumans throughout his collections, McQueen elaborated a post-anthropocentric discourse that called into question the centeredness of the human on planet Earth. His solution to ecological problems was related to hybridization between species, and made possible thanks to technology. Thus, *Plato’s Atlantis* embraced a perfect, balanced communion between the human, nature and machine since, as the designer claimed, “[w]e came from water and now, with the help of stem cell technology, we must go back to survive” (qtd. in Wilson 2015, 328). Water, as the central element in *Plato’s Atlantis*, brings to the fore the issue of water usage in the fashion industry, which is precisely one of its urging issues (Entwistle 2015, 29). As a take on sustainability, Smelik advances that a posthumanist critique is “highly welcomed and most necessary when considering the urgent issue of sustainability. It is by now well documented that the fashion industry excels in textile waste, pollution, and exploitation of human labor and natural resources, due to over-production and over-consumption” (Smelik 2022, 62). A posthuman take on the sustainability of the fashion industry leads to the consideration of both human and nonhuman factors in the chain production of fashion (Smelik 2022, 62).

McQueen's preoccupation with the environment pervades in today's fashion. One of his interns, the Dutch fashion designer Iris van Herpen, had the opportunity to work with the Alexander McQueen label in 2007. Perhaps influenced by McQueen, van Herpen's most notable inspiration is also nature. The posthuman turn in Iris van Herpen is also examined by Smelik, who argues that the designer combines the organic and the inorganic in order to present her own idea of beauty (2022, 59). More importantly, van Herpen's inspiration from nature translates into an ongoing preoccupation with the environment. In fact, for the S/S 2021 collection, named *Roots of Rebirth*, the atelier incorporated fabric made from recycled ocean plastic, a project made in collaboration with the environmental organization Parley for the Oceans. The post-anthropocentric turn is further demonstrated not only by McQueen, but also by his disciples, who celebrate the possibility of making fashion while being environmentally friendly and conscious, producing garments with more sustainable techniques, such as 3D printing.

Conclusions

In the foregoing pages I have attempted to shed light on the connection between posthumanism and fashion studies, since both disciplines propose a return to matter and, by extension, a return to the body. If some posthumanist thinkers assert that the body is an ontological site of becoming, the dressed body enhances such transformative and transmutable notion: when dressed, the body acquires social and cultural meanings, and this may result in a deconstruction or an enhancement of our socially constructed identity. Moreover, considering dress as a social actant uncovers the agency of nonhuman forces capable of dismantling and subverting the binaries of man/woman, nature/technology. Hence, the deep-seated barrier between the human and nonhuman is further questioned.

The imagery conveyed in Alexander McQueen's fashion shows proves to be an alternative to the above-mentioned binary opposites. First, it has been shown how the British designer elaborated images that paired human animals with nonhuman animals. Fashion shows such as *Dante* (A/W 1996), *It's a Jungle Out There* (A/W 1997), or *The Horn of Plenty* (A/W 2009) showed the designer's taste for pairing his models with some nonhuman animal species, either by creating headpieces with stag's antlers or antelope's horns, or by presenting full-body costumes that resembled some avian species. Albeit denounced by some ecofeminists, such a pairing resulted in an image of female empowerment in the case of McQueen's fashion shows. From a posthumanist perspective, McQueen's *femme fatale* or feral woman archetype is fruitful inasmuch as it makes alliances with nonhuman animals, decentering anthropomorphic configurations of the human body within the fashion industry. Interestingly, animals were also part of some runway shows, as in *NATURAL DIS-TINCTION, UN-NATURAL SELECTION* (S/S 2009), where two rows of stuffed animals of endangered species presided each side of the

catwalk. By putting these animals in his show, McQueen commented on the alarming biodiversity loss, which is a result of land use, pollution, and climate change.

The hybrid between woman and nonhuman animal was not, however, the only means through which McQueen blurred the divide between the human and the nonhuman: his creations also bridged the gap between humans and technology. In *Plato's Atlantis* (S/S 2010), the designer imagined a world where bioengineered humans returned to water after a universal flood, caused by the melting of the ice-caps. McQueen also signaled how technology is part of our contemporary bodies, as shown in *No 13*, where models wearing prostheses appeared in the catwalk, thus commenting on the plasticity of human bodies fueled by technological enhancements. As in the fashion shows that presented the women-animal association, the futuristic tone pervading shows such as *Pantheon ad Lucem* (A/W 2004) or *Plato's Atlantis* (S/S 2010) also decentered human subjectivity by presenting an army of clones. In them, the features of the models who strutted the runway were rendered equally through the use of make-up or the same hairstyle. Such a post-anthropocentric turn was surprising amidst the fashion scene of the 90s and the 00s, which saw the emergence of the supermodel phenomenon with top models such as Naomi Campbell, Claudia Schiffer, or Cindy Crawford.

Studying the figuration of the feral woman and the cyborg in Alexander McQueen's fashion shows allows us to reach three general conclusions. To begin with, this study has shown that fashion might act as a subversive space, challenging essentialist notions of identity along different parameters, including gender and sexuality among others. The second general conclusion proves that fashion, albeit partially responsible for much of the ongoing climate crisis, can be the point of departure to raise awareness about environmental issues. Among other designers, McQueen stood out for elaborating a post-anthropocentric and environmentally concerned vision in a later stage of his career.

Finally, our study reveals the role of fashion designers as cultural mediators, showing how creators such as McQueen, who was inspired by cinema, music, politics, history and the arts, translated some cultural movements into the language of clothes. Although McQueen's work has been the only one analyzed in depth throughout this study due to space constraints, the British fashion designer is not an isolated case within the fashion industry: designers like Iris van Herpen, John Galliano, Thierry Mugler or Alessandro Michele also take the runway as a space for cultural reflection. Examining the contributions of these and other designers is, therefore, crucial to explore –as this study has attempted to do through the analysis of McQueen's work– how the field of fashion is reflecting some of the current ontological debates on the barrier between the human and the nonhuman, thus cementing the notion that the human is no longer a fixed, immutable category.

The present dissertation has sought to offer a fresh approach to Alexander McQueen's work by examining his fashion creations through new lenses. Regarding methodology, the present study has combined the fields of posthumanism, fashion theory, gender studies, animal studies and ecofeminism to analyze a comprehensive corpus that considers both the designer's fashion shows –for his own label and for Givenchy– and their surrounding and complementing elements. However, due to formal constraints, the study has been limited to two tropes: the feral woman and the cyborg. Other themes presented in the prolific creation of Alexander McQueen would constitute a further line of research worth pursuing, and this could include, inter alia, the representation of the Middle East, South Asia and Africa in fashion shows such as *Eye* (S/S 2000) or *Eshu* (A/W 2000), or the deconstruction and presentation of masculinities in his fashion shows. Likewise, this study could also be expanded by broadening the corpus of analysis so as to include other designers who, like Alessandro Michele, Martin Margiela, Hussein

Chalayan, Gareth Pugh or Thierry Mugler, have also produced creations conspicuously rooted in a posthumanist aesthetics. Moreover, the applicability of my analysis, which combines posthumanism and Entwistle's theory on the dressed body could be extrapolated to other artistic manifestations that are similarly registering an aesthetic post-anthropocentric turn, including science-fiction cinema and literary works, and performance and installation art.

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