

From Tartan to Turmoil: Sensory Engagement and Historical Narratives in Alexander McQueen's "Highland Rape"

Do tartan ao tumulto: engajamento sensorial e narrativas históricas em "Highland Rape" de Alexander McQueen

Andjela Bisevac¹

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1294-5189>

[abstract] This paper examines Alexander McQueen's "Highland Rape" (Autumn/Winter 1995) as a collection that transcends aesthetics to explore trauma, resilience, and historical memory. Known for its provocative title and graphic imagery, the collection challenges conventional beauty and redefines fashion's role in society by confronting audiences with layered narratives of personal and collective suffering. Through torn fabrics, exposed skin, and stark contrasts, McQueen delivers a potent commentary on the violent history of the Scottish Highlands, intertwined with his personal experiences. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault - particularly Barthes's semiotic theory and Foucault's notions of power and bodily discipline - this study examines how McQueen transforms the runway into a symbolic stage. His garments function as signs - mutable, provocative, and saturated with meaning - while the performative nature of the show provokes both visceral and intellectual engagement. Contributions from Caroline Evans and Judith Watt further situate McQueen's work within a tradition of fashion as a critical narrative. Ultimately, the paper argues that "Highland Rape" exemplifies fashion's potential to provoke dialogue on identity, memory, and socio-political critique. Positioned within the broader discourse of fashion as both an expressive art form and a design practice, the collection continues to resonate as a transformative force in contemporary fashion history.

[keywords] Alexander McQueen. Highland Rape. Historical Memory. Fashion and Power. Embodied Trauma.

¹ Ph.D. in Literature, Kanagawa University, Yokohama, Japan. Dissertation titled: "Beyond the Conventional: An Examination of Alexander McQueen's Fashion Narrative and Designer-Audience Dynamics." M.A. in Literature, Kanagawa University, Yokohama, Japan. Thesis titled: "Fashion as Universal Language in the West and Japan - Comparative Study of Fashion Culture from an Orientalist Perspective." Email: andjelabisevac000@gmail.com

[**resumo**] Este artigo examina “Highland Rape” (Outono/Inverno 1995), de Alexander McQueen, como uma coleção que transcende a estética para explorar temas como trauma, resiliência e memória histórica. Conhecida por seu título provocador e imagens gráficas, a coleção desafia os padrões convencionais de beleza e redefine o papel da moda na sociedade ao confrontar o público com narrativas complexas de sofrimento pessoal e coletivo. Por meio de tecidos rasgados, pele exposta e contrastes visuais intensos, McQueen constrói um comentário contundente sobre a história violenta das Terras Altas da Escócia, entrelaçada com suas próprias experiências pessoais. Fundamentado em quadros teóricos de Roland Barthes e Michel Foucault - especialmente as teorias semióticas de Barthes e os conceitos de poder e disciplina corporal de Foucault - este estudo analisa como McQueen transformou a passarela em um palco simbólico. Suas criações funcionam como signos - mutáveis, provocativos e saturados de significado - enquanto a dimensão performativa dos desfiles estimula engajamento tanto emocional quanto intelectual. As contribuições de estudiosos como Caroline Evans e Judith Watt também ajudam a situar o trabalho de McQueen dentro de uma tradição de narrativa crítica na moda. Em última análise, o artigo argumenta que “Highland Rape” exemplifica o potencial da moda para provocar diálogos sobre identidade, memória e crítica sociopolítica. Posicionada dentro do discurso mais amplo da moda como forma de arte expressiva e prática de design, a coleção continua a ressoar como uma força transformadora na história contemporânea da moda.

[**palavras-chave**] **Alexander McQueen. Highland Rape. Memória Histórica. Moda e Poder. Trauma Incorporado.**

Received in: 28-10-2024.

Approved in: 02-04-2025.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26563/dobras.v18i44.1906>

Introduction

Fashion, as an artistic and design-driven medium, transcends mere utility, engaging deeply with sensory, emotional, and historical experiences. Alexander McQueen’s “Highland Rape” (Autumn/Winter 1995) epitomizes this dynamic—where the runway becomes a symbolic stage for confronting complex themes of trauma, resilience, beauty, and brutality. With torn fabrics, exposed skin, and confrontational silhouettes, McQueen challenged aesthetic conventions and positioned fashion as a form of storytelling, inviting audiences to engage on both visceral and intellectual levels.

“Highland Rape” infamous for its provocative title and graphic presentation, was met with both acclaim and controversy, particularly regarding its portrayal of violence against women. Yet beneath the shock lay a layered narrative - one that interwove personal trauma with historical violence, transforming the runway into a critical site of meaning-making. McQueen drew upon the violent history of the Scottish Highlands and his own lived experiences, creating a collection that spoke simultaneously to identity, resistance, and empowerment.

This paper approaches “Highland Rape” not as an isolated spectacle but as part of McQueen’s broader discourse on the body, gender, and cultural memory - a discourse echoed in later collections such as “Joan” (1998), “VOSS” (2001), and “The Widows of Culloden” (2006), where he continued to explore the interplay between fragility, violence, and power. The analysis also recognizes the dual nature of McQueen’s work, where the garments and their performative presentation operate in tandem, blurring the boundary between fashion design and theatrical production.

Through its symbolic imagery and the interplay between personal and collective trauma, “Highland Rape” challenges audiences to engage with fashion not only as a communicative system but as a medium of embodied critique and resistance. Ultimately, the collection’s impact lies not only in its controversy but in its ability to provoke thoughtful dialogue on fashion’s potential to express complex narratives of trauma, recovery, and transformation. McQueen’s work continues to inspire and challenge, shaping the evolution of fashion as a deeply expressive, performative, and critical design practice.

From Shock to Substance: Audience Reactions and Misinterpretations

The dialogue surrounding “Highland Rape” epitomizes the complexities and potential misreadings that can arise in the reception of fashion as both artistic and design discourse. The show’s title sparked immediate controversy, with critics such as Church focusing on its shock value and questioning the intent behind what appeared to be the portrayal of women as victims. As Church remarked, “The very title of the show Highland Rape has been done to shock people. It’s been done to attract publicity... women want to look at fashion, but they don’t want to see it in some way as portraying them as a victim” (McQueen, 2018).

In stark contrast, McQueen’s personal statement on the collection revealed a much deeper, more intimate motivation:

I’m not misogynist, but the idea was saying to the public, that a man takes from a woman. The woman’s not giving it. And that’s what rape is. My oldest sister was badly beaten up by her husband. When you’re eight years old and you’re seeing your sister strangled by her husband who’s now dead, thank God, you know, all you wanna do is make women look stronger (McQueen, 2018).

This direct reference to childhood trauma - witnessing domestic violence against his sister - positions the collection not as a glorification of victimhood but as a subversive act of

reclamation. By embedding his designs with traces of personal and collective pain, McQueen sought to shift the narrative from passive suffering to embodied defiance.

Critics and scholars have since reconsidered “Highland Rape” examining not only the garments but the performative presentation that contributed to the collection’s layered semiotics. Shahidha Bari, for instance, notes a green leather shift dress, “cut simply, with a pewter-studded collar, sharply rebarbative, and a tear across the right breast” highlighting how physical alterations to fabric function as deliberate signs of disruption (Bari, 2020, p. 63). These gestures - tears, frays, asymmetries - underscore themes of vulnerability, power, and resistance.

The show’s visual language was designed to shock, yes - but also to provoke reflection. The garments were not simply worn, but performed: bodies staggered, exposed, and visibly scarred, turning the runway into a space of confrontation. This interplay of aesthetic design and choreographed movement blurred the line between fashion and performance art. The tension between spectacle and substance became a central feature of the show, reflecting McQueen’s strategy of using provocation to unlock more complex socio-political commentary.

McQueen’s work demands an interpretive audience. The visceral, sometimes violent imagery confronts viewers with discomfort but simultaneously empowers them to decode meaning - echoing Roland Barthes’s notion that meaning is not fixed by the creator, but constructed through reception (Barthes, 1977). In this sense, “Highland Rape” operates as an open text. While initial reactions emphasized provocation, a deeper engagement reveals McQueen’s fashion as a form of symbolic resistance— one that challenges traditional power dynamics and invites emotional and intellectual participation in its narrative.

Fashion as Narrative: The Sutured Wound and Historical Trauma

“People find my things sometimes aggressive. But I don’t see it as aggressive. I see it as romantic, dealing with a dark side of personality” (McQueen, quoted by Bolton, 2011, p. 70). In “Highland Rape” the invitation featuring a sutured wound revealed a complex symbolic framework, intertwining vulnerability, resilience, and historical reference (Spooner and Wilcox, 2015, p. 147). This visual motif exemplifies McQueen’s broader approach to fashion design, in which garments do not merely adorn the body but engage with it - discipline it, expose it, and narrate its wounds.

The sutured wound operates as a layered metaphor in McQueen’s work. It suggests that clothing is not simply an external layer, but an extension of the body - akin to a second skin that simultaneously reveals and conceals. Much like the human epidermis, fabric here has the capacity to both protect and express. The stitches, evocative of surgical recovery, represent the possibility of transformation through trauma - a design intervention that reimagines the relationship between body and garment as one of mutual inscription (Entwistle, 2015).

More than a decorative motif, the sutured wound served as a semiotic device that immediately provoked both intellectual and emotional engagement. Its presentation - on the invitation itself - ensured that the audience encountered this symbol before the garments ever appeared, framing the collection as an affective narrative rather than a conventional

fashion show. The invitation thus operated as both a design artifact and a narrative threshold, signaling the show's focus on trauma, recovery, and resilience (Wilson, 2015, p. 32).

The sutured wound in "Highland Rape" does not merely represent personal trauma but also draws deeply from Scotland's turbulent history. The Jacobite risings and subsequent Highland Clearances left lasting scars on Scottish identity, much like the visible yet healed wound in McQueen's designs. These uprisings played a crucial role in the complex political and religious landscape of the time, and the brutal defeat at the Battle of Culloden in 1746 effectively ended the Jacobite cause, leading to the severe repression of Highland culture and clan structures.

Following this, the Highland Clearances (mid-18th to mid-19th century) saw the forced displacement of Highlanders—initially as political retribution, and later for agricultural restructuring. This systematic destruction of clan society devastated the Gaelic language and tradition, compelling widespread emigration and contributing to the formation of a Scottish diaspora (Devine, 2012; Prebble, 1969, p. 104).

Seen through this lens, the sutured wound evolves into a potent metaphor for the deep historical scars inflicted upon Scotland and its people. It represents the trauma of displacement and loss, where land, identity, and community were violently torn apart, only to be sutured back together through a painful and incomplete process of historical recovery. The visual metaphor of the wound, though externally healed, emphasizes that scars endure, leaving an indelible trace on Scottish cultural memory. The brutality of the Jacobite defeats and the forced emigrations during the Highland

Clearances are encapsulated in this symbol - healed on the surface, but forever altering the emotional and historical topography of Scottish identity.

By embedding Scotland's collective trauma into his designs, McQueen invites the audience to reflect on how historical displacement and resilience are woven into the fabric of cultural identity - much like the physical scars carried by individuals. The clothing in "Highland Rape" does not merely illustrate suffering; it performs it. This interplay between wound and repair, history and healing, transforms fashion from passive adornment into a form of critical design, charged with political and emotional depth.

Moreover, McQueen's use of the sutured wound as the collection's invitation underscores his commitment to fashion as narrative - a design practice that merges symbolism, sensory experience, and socio-political commentary. The wound was not a mere motif, but a visual thesis: a statement of intent that framed the audience's engagement with the collection as both intellectual and visceral. The invitation itself, encountered before the garments, acted as a narrative threshold, situating the viewer within a world where the body is a site of struggle, memory, and transformation.

In this way, McQueen's designs echo Michel Foucault's conception of the body as a surface upon which power inscribes itself (Foucault, 1977, pp. 136–138). The physical body in "Highland Rape" is not idealized or abstracted - it is marked, wounded, and exposed. These inscriptions mirror the disciplinary mechanisms Foucault describes, wherein the body becomes the medium through which historical and institutional forces exert control. Yet in McQueen's hands, these markings are reclaimed: the wound becomes a space of agency, where the trauma inscribed by history is made visible and, perhaps, re-authored.

Ultimately, McQueen's incorporation of the sutured wound illustrates how fashion can operate as a deeply layered narrative tool - one capable of expressing complex ideas about identity, history, and embodied trauma. By fusing personal memory with cultural loss, and historical reference with visceral design, McQueen transforms both body and clothing into sites of storytelling and healing. His work challenges aesthetic conventions and invites viewers to confront emotional and societal wounds, offering a space where vulnerability and strength converge. In doing so, "Highland Rape" exemplifies how fashion, as a critical design practice, can confront history not with detachment, but with emotional resonance and political urgency.

The Power of Interpretation: Clothing as Armor and Agency

"I like men to keep their distance from women", McQueen said. "I like men to be stunned by an entrance" (Wilson, 2015, p. 153). The "Highland Rape" collection, a pivotal moment in McQueen's career, was staged on a runway strewn with heather inside the British Fashion Council's tent near the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, London (Gleason, 2012, p. 31). The setting evoked a rugged, mythic version of Scotland - one that McQueen simultaneously invoked and subverted. The garments, crafted in red, black, and yellow McQueen clan tartan, infused both the designs and the designer with a strong sense of lineage (Bethune and Wilcox, 2015, p. 306). Traditional references, such as the tartan and wild bird plumes, paid homage to Scottish gamekeeping and clan identity, anchoring the collection in both personal and national heritage (Harrison, 1995, pp. 11-23).

Yet "Highland Rape" was far from a romantic portrayal of Scotland. McQueen deliberately rejected nostalgia, offering instead a collection that was startling, confrontational, and politically charged (*1995 News Report on Alexander McQueen's Highland Rape Collection*, 1995). Critics noted the violence of the aesthetic: garments aggressively torn, slashed, and cut to reveal breasts and skin (Gleason, 2012, p. 32). As Sally Brampton wrote in *The Guardian*, "It is McQueen's brand of misogynistic absurdity that gives fashion a bad name" (Brampton, 1995).

These deconstructed designs served as a visual metaphor for Scotland's turbulent history - an embodiment of collective trauma rendered in cloth. In resisting sanitized representations, McQueen's designs aligned with a broader cultural resistance to simplified historical narratives. Instead, he encouraged his audience to confront the brutal legacies of both national and personal histories with unflinching clarity (Bethune and Wilcox, 2015, p. 306).

Even traditionally delicate fabrics - chiffon, laminated lace - were weaponized by McQueen's construction. Rather than suggesting fragility, they were reshaped into emblems of resistance. The models, their faces shadowed by dark makeup and their eyes obscured by black mirrored contact lenses, appeared spectral, powerful, and beyond reach. The effect was not to objectify the body but to armor it. "I didn't care about what people thought of me", McQueen said. "I didn't care about what I thought of myself. So I would go to the far reaches of my dark side and pull these horrors out of my soul and put them on the catwalk" (McQueen, 2018).

The show's title was equally deliberate. A safer name like "Highland Fling" would have evoked kitsch, not critique. "Highland Rape" was chosen to provoke, to demand attention—and interpretation (Watt, 2012, pp. 83–84). As Bobby Hillson observed, the show was "overwhelming" and "powerful", telling a story in McQueen's singular visual language (Watt, 2012, pp. 83–84). The provocation was not gratuitous; it was strategic. It invited confrontation and emotional response, transforming fashion from spectacle into narrative. Among the collection's many layered gestures was its androgyny - evident, for instance, in the traditional military "stocks" worn at the neck, edged with Stuart-style frills. These subtle details signaled McQueen's ongoing interrogation of power, gender, and historical performance (Tiramani and North, 2011).

Among the collection's most striking elements were a sleeveless steel bodice resembling decorative armor, lace garments that left the breasts exposed, and silver fob chains extending from crotch to mid-thigh - a detail some critics misread as symbolic of tampon strings (Watt, 2012, pp. 83–84). The juxtaposition of these elements - armor-like bodices and exposed skin - illustrated McQueen's desire to blend vulnerability with strength, echoing his overarching theme of clothing as both protection and revelation. The collection also featured cutaway bodices inspired by the 18th century, an empire-line tartan bodice paired with a floor-length gauze skirt (a design evolution from his earlier "Banshee" collection), and sleeves cut on the bias in the style of 1810 (North, 2018, p. 86; Gleason, 2012, pp. 22–25; Stowell and Cox, 2017).

Extending this interplay of exposure and concealment, McQueen introduced his now-iconic "bumsters" - a radically low-slung silhouette that redefined the lower back and pelvic line. The design destabilized traditional notions of desirability by redirecting erotic emphasis from the overtly sexualized to the subtly anatomical. Historically, the ogee curve - an undulating S-shape - has been associated with beauty and eroticism. William Hogarth, in *The Analysis of Beauty*, identified this serpentine "Line of Beauty" as an aesthetic ideal found in art, design, and nature (Hogarth, 1997, p. 33). McQueen's use of the "bumster" reinterpreted this line in a contemporary fashion context, shifting its connotations from the male body to a more fluid, even female-centric, reading of allure.

Fashion historian Judith Watt deepens this interpretation, noting that McQueen's "bumsters" drew on visual references from gay pornography - particularly the extended torsos and pelvic emphasis of young men and body-builders - combined with elements of Renaissance male attire, in which breeches were provocatively low-cut (Watt, quoted by Wilson, 2015, p. 106). In McQueen's design, these influences converge, producing a silhouette that fuses historical allusion and subcultural citation to challenge and redefine what is considered erotically powerful or desirable on the female body (Breward and Wilcox, 2015, p. 45).

Technically, the "bumsters" demanded innovation. Achieving the precise visual effect required the trousers' waistband to sit five centimeters below the conventional hip line, a tailoring challenge solved by McQueen through the use of rubberized lining to maintain a snug and deliberate fit. This attention to technical construction underscored his dual commitment to design theory and sartorial functionality, where concept and craft are never separated, but mutually reinforcing (Breward and Wilcox, 2015, p. 45).

"(With bumsters) I wanted to elongate the body, not just show the bum. To me, that part of the body - not so much the buttocks, but the bottom of the spine - that's the most

erotic part of anyone's body, man or woman" (McQueen, quoted by Bolton, 2011, p. 53). McQueen's statement reveals a deliberate intent behind the "bumster" design that transcended provocation. His goal was not merely to shock but to reframe the body's proportions and aesthetic center. By elongating the silhouette and shifting attention away from traditionally eroticized zones, McQueen invited viewers to engage with the human form in a new, more nuanced way.

The lower spine, where the body transitions from torso to pelvis, becomes in McQueen's hands a site of subtle sensuality. It is a region often overlooked in conventional fashion and media, yet it carries an intimate rhythm - curving gently, moving fluidly with each step. As John Berger notes in "Ways of Seeing", the cultural eroticization of the female body has historically centered on selective visual codes, privileging certain zones while rendering others invisible (Berger, 1990, p. 47). McQueen challenges this tradition, shifting attention toward what the dominant gaze tends to omit. By spotlighting this zone, McQueen choreographed a shift in how beauty and desire might be mapped onto the body. His intervention draws attention to what might otherwise remain invisible, thereby complicating dominant codes of allure.

This reorientation of bodily emphasis also engages with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. As Butler argues, "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 2006, p. 179). Butler further elaborates on the concept of gender performativity, suggesting that "the gendered body is performative... this suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler, 2006, p. 179). The body, in this framework, is not a passive canvas but an active agent in the construction of identity. McQueen's "bumsters" enact this performativity by queering the relationship between cut, body, and desire - presenting gender not as a fixed attribute, but as a series of expressions open to reinterpretation. His designs refuse binary categorization; instead, they allow the body to become a space of fluid, individual authorship.

In fashion history, only a few designers have managed to introduce silhouettes so emblematic that they redefine the era's visual language—Coco Chanel's liberation from corsetry, Christian Dior's post-war "New Look" (Picardie, 2011, pp. 71–86; Dior, 2018, pp. 45–58). McQueen's "bumsters" join this lineage, encapsulating a broader cultural yearning for freedom: from constriction, from gender norms, and from prescribed forms of desire. In doing so, he not only reshaped silhouettes but also rewrote the visual vocabulary of seduction, defiance, and the gendered gaze.

By breaking with traditional boundaries in form and gendered expression, McQueen's "bumsters" encapsulated the rebellious ethos of "Highland Rape". Unsurprisingly, the collection's provocative title and bold designs did not go unnoticed by the public. The London Evening Standard reported that the show's title alone was enough to dismay the "Politically Correct police" (Watt, 2012, pp. 83–84). Yet despite the controversy, the collection retained an undeniable romantic allure. As many commentators noted, London Fashion Week thrives on theatricality, and McQueen's stark departure from convention reinvigorated the industry's appetite for risk, intensity, and creative freedom. In this sense, "Highland Rape" served as a reminder of fashion's potential to rupture polite sensibilities and defy moralizing gatekeepers.

Scotland for me is a harsh, cold, and bitter place. It was even worse when my great, great grandfather used to live there...The reason I'm patriotic about Scotland is because I think it's been dealt a really hard hand. It's marketed the world over as...haggis...bagpipes. But no one ever puts anything back to it (McQueen, quoted by Bolton, 2011, p. 102).

This awareness of Scotland's misrepresentation - and his ancestral ties to its history-infused "Highland Rape" with emotional weight. The collection was not simply a critique of fashion norms but a lament for a romanticized homeland that, in his view, had been commodified and erased.

The political climate of 1995 further amplified this resonance. That year, the Scottish Constitutional Convention published "Scotland's Parliament, Scotland's Right," a landmark report advocating for national devolution and the creation of a parliament in Holyrood (Murkens, Jones, and Keating, 2002, p. 12). Simultaneously, Hollywood cast its own spotlight on Scottish identity with two major releases: *Rob Roy* and *Braveheart*. Both films, particularly the latter, stirred public sentiment around independence and cultural pride. *Braveheart* - starring and directed by Mel Gibson, himself descended from the Scottish diaspora - romanticized rebellion and resistance, echoing themes of national struggle long woven into Scotland's historical fabric (Glasgow Times Reporter, 2020; Watt, 2012, pp. 78-80).

It was into this politically charged atmosphere that McQueen's "Highland Rape" emerged - confrontational, layered, and unflinchingly personal. The collection resonated as more than a fashion statement; it became a cultural intervention. By channeling his own lineage and refusing sanitized narratives, McQueen transformed the catwalk into a platform for national critique and emotional truth. His vision stood at the intersection of memory, myth, and rebellion - fusing biography with political rupture, and clothing with critique.

Evolving Narratives: From Victim to Survivor

The models McQueen sent down the runway in "Highland Rape" wore more than garments—they bore visible signs of bruising and blood, evoking scenes of violence and emotional rupture. These haunting visuals mirrored not only historical trauma but also deeply personal wounds, particularly those related to McQueen's sister, whose experience with domestic abuse had left a lasting mark on him (Bancroft, 2012). "I gave adults a lot of time in my life when I was young and some of them hurt me. And that way I learned even more. Let's say I turned the negative into a positive", McQueen once reflected (McQueen, quoted by Wilson, 2015, p. 34). In this sense, his work became a space of psychic exorcism, where pain was not hidden but transformed into form.

Central to this transformation was the role of skin - not as a neutral backdrop, but as a narrative surface. McQueen treated the body itself as a text: a site of inscription, vulnerability, and resistance. His garments did not merely cover; they communicated. By manipulating exposure - tearing, cutting, or encasing the skin - he blurred the line between adornment and assault, protection and provocation (Honigman, 2021, p. 60). "It's almost like putting armor on a woman. It's a very psychological way of dressing", he explained (McQueen, quoted

by Bolton, 2011, p. 60). The interplay between concealment and revelation suggested that power could be recovered precisely where vulnerability was made visible.

As the show unfolded, this narrative became increasingly pronounced. What began as garments that exposed fragility - loose, distressed, and suggestive of violation - gradually gave way to silhouettes that implied defense and defiance. The models, at first staggered and spectral, appeared to gain composure and strength as the sequence progressed. The clothing itself seemed to evolve - no longer rendering them victims, but survivors. This narrative arc was deliberate. McQueen choreographed an emotional progression in which the exposed body was not merely seen, but redefined - as a site of pain, yes, but also of power.

Caroline Evans draws compelling parallels between the Marquis de Sade and McQueen, observing how McQueen's sharp tailoring and thematic choices echoed the formidable women in de Sade's writing - figures of intense dominance and theatrical mastery. These women were not defined by passivity or fragility; they defied traditional gender roles and embodied exaggerated power. In Evans's reading, they became "superwomen" — and so, too, did McQueen's models (Evans, 2001, p. 207).

Like de Sade's narratives, McQueen's work reveled in the shifting dynamic between victim and aggressor (Evans, 2001, p. 207).

I think there has to be underlying sexuality. There has to be perverseness to the clothes. There is a hidden agenda in the fragility of romance. It's like the Story of O. I'm not big on women looking naïve. There has to be a sinister aspect, whether it's melancholy or sadomasochist. I think everyone has deep sexuality, and sometimes it's good to use a little of it - and sometimes a lot of it - like a masquerade (McQueen, quoted by Bolton, 2011, p. 80).

In this view, the runway becomes not just a stage but a battleground where power, pain, and desire play out. McQueen's models often embodied the arc from vulnerability to control - prey becoming predator, subject becoming agent (Bolton, 2011, pp. 96–97).

This transformation on the catwalk mirrors both McQueen's personal journey and his philosophical fascination with power. Foucault's concept of power/knowledge is particularly resonant here. Power is not static or oppressive in a singular direction; rather, it circulates, producing knowledge and identities in its wake. McQueen's collections enact this circulation. The shift from broken to empowered bodies on the runway visually dramatizes the Foucauldian claim that power is relational, performative, and productive - not just repressive. "The repressive hypothesis", Foucault writes, links power, knowledge, and sexuality, revealing how social systems organize desire and discipline through normative frameworks (Foucault, 1978, p. 5).

Further aligning with Foucault's theory of biopower - the governance of populations through subtle regulation - McQueen's designs expose the tension between subjugation and defiance. The human body in his shows becomes a contested site: simultaneously regulated and resisting. His models transition from passive figures to commanding presences, challenging norms around femininity, victimhood, and agency. In this sense, McQueen's fashion enacts a subtle but profound resistance to biopolitical containment.

While Foucault articulates how power operates through institutional structures, Barthes offers a different but complementary shift, moving from the creator to the receiver. In his essay “The Death of the Author”, Barthes argues that meaning resides not in the author’s intention, but in the reader’s interpretation. McQueen’s work exemplifies this theory in practice. The transformation from victim to survivor is not fully prescribed - it unfolds as an open text, inviting viewers to find their own meaning, their own reflection of strength.

In “Highland Rape” this interpretive openness is especially potent. The visual progression from violence to resilience, from exposure to armor, becomes a canvas for audience engagement. McQueen decentralizes authorship, allowing viewers to become co-authors of the narrative. This act of decentralization turns fashion into a dialogic medium - one where symbolic resistance is not only performed but perceived, and where the power of meaning shifts from the runway to the minds of those who witness it.

Dynamics of Audience Engagement

McQueen’s collections present a profound exploration of the shifting dynamics between designer and audience - an approach that resonates deeply with Roland Barthes’s theory in “The Death of the Author”, which posits that meaning is not dictated by the creator but constructed through the audience’s reception (Barthes, 1977, p. 148). Within this framework, McQueen’s designs move beyond visual spectacle to become narrative canvases: open texts that challenge conventional notions of authorship and meaning in fashion.

Barthes’s assertion that “the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost,” encapsulates the spirit of McQueen’s collections, particularly “Highland Rape” (Barthes, quoted by Seymour, 2018, p. 56). Each garment not only bears traces of McQueen’s personal and cultural history but also invites a multiplicity of readings, ranging from critiques of colonial and gendered violence to meditations on pain, resilience, and beauty (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001). This interpretive plurality reinforces Barthes’s idea that meaning arises through the act of engagement, not from authorial intent alone.

McQueen’s work - like Barthes’s conception of writing - is layered with sensory, emotional, and symbolic codes. The bruised bodies, torn fabrics, and confrontational imagery provoke not just intellectual reflection but also visceral, affective responses. The audience is not passive but implicated - drawn into a process of decoding and sense-making. In doing so, McQueen activates fashion as a performative site of cultural commentary, where each viewer’s perspective becomes part of the meaning-making process.

Caroline Elenowitz-Hess in her paper “Reckoning with Highland Rape: Sexuality, Violence, and Power on the Runway”, offers a sharply critical lens on this interpretive space:

Examining Highland Rape through its authorial intent and a close reading of the garments themselves while considering the power dynamics between model and designer reveals a performance that reinforces the glamorization of rape and the manipulation of women’s bodies (Elenowitz-Hess, 2020, p. 2).

Elenowitz-Hess further asserts that “this power dynamic between McQueen and the models is significant because consent and bodily autonomy are at the heart of sexual violence” (Elenowitz-Hess, 2020, p. 14).

While her reading is fundamentally critical, focusing on the potential glamorization of violence, it nonetheless demonstrates the kind of dialogue McQueen sought to provoke. Rather than closing interpretation, his work opens it. Elenowitz-Hess’s intervention underscores the friction and complexity that McQueen’s collections invite. Even critique becomes participation - fuel for an ongoing conversation around fashion, gender, and visual power.

These divergent readings, shaped by each viewer’s cultural, social, and gendered experiences, show how McQueen’s runway evolved into something more than a stage - it became a discursive space. In this way, “Highland Rape” does not deliver a singular message; instead, it performs what Barthes envisioned: the decentralization of meaning, where the audience becomes co-author of the narrative. Thus, McQueen’s decision to relinquish interpretive control is not just an artistic gesture but a radical act of empowerment. By allowing his audience to shape meaning - to confront, critique, or celebrate his vision - he destabilizes traditional fashion hierarchies. The runway becomes not a site of absolute authority, but a zone of negotiation between power and perception, authorship and agency.

Conclusion: The Lasting Impact of “Highland Rape”

“Highland Rape” stands as a seminal moment in Alexander McQueen’s career - not merely for its provocation, but for its audacious transformation of fashion into a medium of historical critique, emotional confrontation, and personal reckoning. The collection’s visceral imagery - ripped tartans, bruised skin, ghostly models - was not a gratuitous spectacle, but a deliberate staging of trauma as narrative. In blending his own familial experiences with Scotland’s cultural wounds, McQueen crafted a collection that collapsed the boundaries between personal and collective memory, beauty and brutality, spectacle and subversion.

Far from operating in isolation, “Highland Rape” exemplifies the continuity in McQueen’s body of work: a sustained interrogation of power, vulnerability, and identity across form, material, and performance. It shares thematic lineage with collections like “Joan”, “VOSS”, and “The Widows of Culloden”, where clothing functions as both expression and defense, where garments are not worn, but performed. In this sense, McQueen elevates fashion into a critical design practice: one capable of narrating histories, resisting norms, and invoking transformation.

This collection also marked a turning point in how fashion could operate as political discourse. By staging bodies that shift from victimhood to agency, McQueen foregrounded the fashion show as a symbolic battlefield - one where gendered violence, historical injustice, and psychological resilience were made visible. His work enacted what theorists like Foucault and Barthes have only conceptualized: the body as a site of power inscriptions, and meaning as an open, interpretive act. “Highland Rape” thus activated the audience not merely as observers, but as co-authors of the narrative.

Ultimately, the legacy of “Highland Rape” lies in its refusal to be resolved. It provokes without simplifying. It wounds, yet heals. And in doing so, it redefined the possibilities of

fashion, not as adornment, but as a medium for critique, remembrance, and resistance. More than a collection, “Highland Rape” endures as a political, emotional, and cultural artifact - one that continues to inspire scholarship, unsettle complacency, and affirm fashion’s place in the arena of cultural discourse.

References

1995 NEWS REPORT ON ALEXANDER MCQUEEN’S HIGHLAND RAPE COLLECTION.

Bumsters. YouTube, uploaded by Kinoslibrary, 2015. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8Sdwys0nTo>. Last visited: 19 oct. 2024.

BANCROFT, Alison. **Fashion and Psychoanalysis: Styling the Self.** London: I.B. Tauris, 2012.

BARI, Shahidha. **Dressed: A Philosophy of Clothes.** New York: Basic Books, 2020.

BARTHES, Roland. **The Death of the Author.** In: BARTHES, Roland. *Image-Music-Text.* Translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977. p. 142–148.

BERGER, John. **Ways of Seeing.** London: Penguin, 1990.

BERTHUNE, Kate. **Encyclopedia of Collections.** In: WILCOX, Claire (ed.). *Alexander McQueen.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2015, pp. 303-326.

BOLTON, Andrew. **Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty.** New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011.

BUTLER, Judith. **Gender Trouble.** New York: Routledge, 2006.

DE SADE, Marquis. **Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings.** Translated by Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse. New York: Grove Press, 1965.

DEVINE, T. M. **The Scottish Nation: A Modern History.** London: Penguin Books, 2012.

DIOR, Christian. **Dior by Dior: The Autobiography of Christian Dior.** London: V&A Publishing, 2018.

ELENOWITZ-HESS, Caroline. **Reckoning with Highland Rape: Sexuality, Violence, and Power on the Runway.** *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, v. 24, n. 5, p. 649–672, 2020. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2020.1846325>. Last visited: 14 sep. 2024.

ENTWISTLE, Joanne. **The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory**. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

ENTWISTLE, Joanne; WILSON, Elizabeth (ed.). **Body Dressing**. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001.

EVANS, Caroline. **Desire and Dread: Alexander McQueen and the Contemporary Femme Fatale**. In: ENTWISTLE, Joanne; WILSON, Elizabeth (ed.). **Body Dressing**. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001. p. 201–213.

FOUCAULT, Michel. **The History of Sexuality: Volume 1 – An Introduction**. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

FOUCAULT, Michel. **Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison**. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

GLASGOW TIMES REPORTER. **Mel Gibson Reveals Real Inspiration Behind Braveheart**. Glasgow Times, 2020. Available at: <https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/18462612-mel-gibson-reveals-real-inspiration-behind-braveheart/>. Last visited: 01 oct. 2024.

GLEASON, Katherine. **Alexander McQueen: Evolution**. Beverly, MA: Race Point Publishing, 2012.

HARRISON, E. P. **Scottish Estate Tweeds**. Elgin: Johnstons of Elgin, 1995. HOGARTH, William. **The Analysis of Beauty**. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

HONIGMAN, Ana Finel. **What Alexander McQueen Can Teach You About Fashion (Icons with Attitude)**. London: Frances Lincoln, 2021.

MCQUEEN. **Documentary directed by Ian Bonhôte and Peter Ettedgui**. United Kingdom: Embankment Films, 2018.

MURKENS, Jo Eric; JONES, Peter; KEATING, Michael. **Scottish Independence: Legal and Constitutional Issues: A Practical Guide**. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002.

NORTH, Susan. **18th Century Fashion in Detail**. London: Thames & Hudson, 2018.

PICARDIE, Justine. **Coco Chanel: The Legend and the Life**. New York: It Books, 2011.

PREBBLE, John. **The Highland Clearances**. London: Penguin Books, 1969.

SEYMOUR, Laura. **An Analysis of Roland Barthes's The Death of the Author**. London: The Macat Library, 2018.

SPOONER, Catherine. **A Gothic Mind**. In: WILCOX, Claire (ed.). **Alexander McQueen**. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2015. p. 141–158.

STOWELL, Lauren; COX, Abby. **The American Duchess Guide to 18th Century Dressmaking: How to Hand Sew Georgian Gowns and Wear Them With Style.** Salem, MA: Page Street Publishing, 2017.

TIRAMANI, Jenny; NORTH, Susan. **Seventeenth-Century Women's Dress Patterns: Book 1.** London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2011.

WATT, Judith. **Alexander McQueen: The Life and the Legacy.** New York: Harper Design, 2012.

WILCOX, Claire (ed.). **Alexander McQueen.** New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2015.

WILSON, Andrew. **Alexander McQueen: Blood Beneath the Skin.** London: Simon & Schuster UK, 2015.

Proofreading Acknowledgment

Name: Christian Ratcliff, Associate Professor, Department of Cross-Cultural Studies, Kanagawa University.

Email: jindaiclassesratcliff@gmail.com