Schiaparelli and McQueen: Impossible Conversations

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As an art form, fashion is often tasked with the difficult task of communicating the unsaid or unspeakable, articulating ideas often too painful, or too abstract, to be spoken conventionally. Many fashion designers have used fashion as a means of communicating stories and social critique, turning their designs into statements that directly confront the designer's personal past or societal existence. Elsa Schiaparelli and Lee Alexander McQueen were two of these designers who fully utilized fashion's potential to communicate the uncomfortable, using their designs to force conversations that would have to confront the sexual violence facilitated and often encouraged by their respective societies. Schiaparelli's "Circus Collection" of 1938 and McQueen's "Highland Rape" of 1995 often share the same visual vocabulary, articulating critique in a manner that pushed the boundaries of respectability in their respective eras. "Highland Rape" (as well as many other designs throughout his career) is in direct dialogue with the visual language established by Elsa Schiaparelli, using the same imagery and themes to offer varying modes of femininity in the face of violence. Lee McQueen and Elsa Schiaparelli were storytellers in their craft, using fashion as a vessel for social critique and commentary. In their collections, the two designers pioneered juxtaposed imagery of sensuality and morbidity, forcing the topic of sexual violence and abuse out of the taboo onto the runway.

Understanding the personal histories and gender politics of each designer's respective life is crucial in understanding the message of their collections. Elsa Schiaparelli started her career in fashion in Paris in 1927, continuing to produce surrealist designs throughout the 1930s. As a single woman pioneering design and running her own business, Schiaparelli was especially subjected to the prejudices and inequalities of her society. In her article "Elsa Schiaparelli, The New Woman, and Surrealist Politics," Jennifer Sweeney-Risko highlights the importance of the postwar emergence of "The New Woman" in understanding the work of Schiaparelli. After

World War I, many women began to reject the enforced gender expectations of domesticity and motherhood, pushing for increased social and economic independence. However, with progress came backlash from a society accustomed to patriarchal dominance. The emergence of "The New Woman" as both independent and vulnerable to the violence of a male-dominated world is crucial in understanding the social commentary of Schiaparelli's work:

> Schiaparelli designed the Circus Collection in the midst of this conservative economic and political environment. Its Surrealist theme interjected a discussion of gender into the public sphere and provided commentary on the struggles of the New Woman to gain access. Its representation of gendered violence reveals the brutality and turbulence imposed upon women seeking equality… The Collection demonstrates the ways in which France's traditional feminine norms represented the New Woman as abject, distinctly vulnerable to conservative violence (Sweeney-Risko 314).

Schiaparelli's "Circus Collection" is set against the backdrop of this society reconciling the new autonomy of women. As a single woman, she understood the cultural backlash to this emerging trend of female autonomy: "Schiaparelli faced considerable backlash for her independent lifestyle: she lacked the necessary socioeconomic means to fully integrate into Parisian life. Her position as a single mother and a female business owner placed her in a precarious social situation" (Sweeney-Risko 310). Her collection seeks to articulate the dangers experienced by these women (and perhaps by Schiaparelli herself as a single woman in France), forcing her viewers to reconcile feminine glamour with the violence it faces in French society.

The "Skeleton Dress" (Figure 1) is one of the highlights of Schiaparelli's "Circus Collection;" it continues to be one of Schiaparelli's most iconic and influential designs. The dress is made of a skintight silk crepe with cotton wadding "bones" that accentuate the pelvis and

Figure 1. Elsa Schiaparelli, “Skeleton Dress.” *Circus Collection* 1938.

ribs, both “erotically charged parts of the female body normally hidden from view” (Sweeney-Risko 318). The dress is as erotic as it is morbid, eroticizing the form of a decaying corpse. Sweeney-Risko emphasizes how the morbid imagery of the dress speaks to Schiaparelli’s social critique, writing that “the juxtaposition between the gown’s somber color and bone structure and its fashionable cut forces viewers to examine the violent potentiality inherent to the New Women’s entrance into the public sphere. Its trendy cut signals to the New Woman’s social acceptability, yet its skeletal design implants contemporary backlash directly onto the female form” (Sweeney-Risko 319). Schiaparelli created a new visual language with her designers that spoke to the routine violence experienced by many women as they sought independence. The “Skeleton Dress” transposes visuals of death and decay onto sleek silhouettes, emphasizing fashion’s ability to be both a *wearable* art and an articulation of a deeper societal critique.

The “Tears Dress” (Figure 2) is another highlight from the “Circus Collection” that masterfully uses fashion as an art form to articulate similar commentary on violence against women. Echoing a painting entitled “Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in Their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra” by Schiaparelli’s frequent collaborator, Salvador Dalí, the dress is composed of fabric with two-dimensional images of tears and holes, creating the illusion of fabric torn away to reveal a purple hue. Sweeney-Risko describes the dress as “a confrontation between feminine poise and gendered violence” (319). The dress does so through this *illusion* of torn fabric that both represents and signifies sexual violence. While the dress connotes images of abuse and vulnerability, it ultimately creates an intact conservative silhouette that covers the female form: “the imagery of violence, the suggestion of attack, is counterpoised by the elegance of the dress, its existence as sophisticated fashion, the fact that is *not* rags, *not* torn… Violence and eroticism are simultaneously displayed and made to disappear; beauty is brought to bear on

Figure 2. Elsa Schiaparelli, “Tears Dress.” *Circus Collection* 1938.

rupture" (Evans and Thornton 50). Schiaparelli's abused female figure emerges elegant and poised despite the violence inflicted upon her; the tears do not render her outfit incomplete or revealing. In her analysis of the construction of femininity in the works of Schiaparelli, Surrealist scholar Marylaura Papalas stresses the importance of the gown's in-tact state: "this vulnerability, displayed on a highly elegant gown, actually demonstrates female resilience to it. The gown is not succumbing to violence, it is appropriating it and transforming it into power" (Papalas 511). Schiaparelli establishes a clear visual language that McQueen would later engage with and build upon, using the same imagery of tears to highlight sexual violence.

The dress's accompanying veil continues to elaborate on both the visual language and the social commentary of the dress. The veil contextualizes these representations of violence within the marital veil, connoting the domestic abuse suffered by many women in abusive marriages and "present[ing] a critique of the woman in the home as rife with violence" (Sweeney-Risko 320). Schiaparelli also builds upon the image of the tears, actually tearing the fabric (albeit in a clean and highly stylized manner) and giving the tears a three-dimensional form. However, the overall silhouette and integrity of the veil are not compromised because of these tears. Rather, Schiaparelli fills in the tears with the same purple hue, maintaining the veil's structure and function. Tears and decay prove to be two images that Schiaparelli utilizes to convey the violence and abuse suffered by many women. These images (and their accompanying messages) will prove to be highly influential and crucial in understanding the social critique offered by Lee McQueen nearly 60 years later in his "Highland Rape" collection.

Only three years after graduating from Central Saint Martins, Lee Alexander McQueen presented his Autumn/Winter 1995 collection entitled "Highland Rape," which would bring both fame and controversy to the McQueen brand. McQueen's signatures of intense sexuality, the

Figure 3. Elsa Schiaparelli, “Tears Dress” veil. *Circus Collection* 1938.

macabre, and dark historical references filled the collection, offering a commentary on sexuality and coercion. Models were fashioned as though recently attacked; torn lace, exposed breasts, and disheveled hair invoked images of sexual assault. McQueen stated that the collection was "a shout against English designers… doing flamboyant Scottish clothes… *Highland Rape* was about England's rape of Scotland" (Savage Beauty). Yet the collection also draws heavily on McQueen's own personal experience with violence and abuse, utilizing the same imagery as Schiaparelli in her initial critique of gendered violence.

McQueen experienced the ugliness of violence first-hand growing up. In his early life, McQueen suffered sexual and domestic abuse from many of his romantic partners and from his sister's husband. In his biography of McQueen entitled *Alexander Mcqueen: Blood Beneath the Skin*, Andrew Wilson examines how this trauma fueled his work:

> In his imagination, Lee began to fuse his experiences with [his sister's]. Both of them had suffered abuse at the hands of the same man, and he felt the need to purge the stew of feelings - anger, revenge, despair, corruption, guilt, and fragmentation, that he felt growing inside him. He saw his sister as the archetypal woman, vulnerable but strong, a survivor, and she became the blueprint for everything he did later. This was the woman he wanted to protect and empower through his clothes; the patina of armor that he created for her would shield her from danger (Wilson 31).

Not only does this contextualize McQueen's choice of subject matter for his show, but it helps articulate the themes encapsulated by the collection's imagery. In Figure 4, McQueen creates a version of femininity that speaks to his desire to "protect and empower." The model's torso is covered in spiked armor that invokes the uniquely feminine in its floral design. This look offers a mode of being both innately delicate and strong to cope with both the emotional and physical

Figure 4. Alexander McQueen, *Highland Rape* A/W 1995.

pain of abuse. The delicacy of the floral print is built into the armor piece, speaking to the inherent delicacy and vulnerability that are built into the strength it takes to survive violence and abuse. With this look, McQueen offers a vision of femininity in parallel with that of Schiaparelli's "Circus Collection," one that has *survived* abuse only to emerge composed and elegant.

But McQueen does not merely offer one perspective on gendered violence; instead, he builds upon Schiaparelli's imagery of the tear, taking it to its visual limits. Figure 5 offers an example of one of the many times McQueen implores rips and tears throughout the collection. The model is dressed in a green leather dress with a prominent slash cut into the fabric that exposes her breasts. Like Schiaparelli, McQueen uses the image of torn fabric to connote sexual violence, using the dressed form as a visual testimony to survived abuse. However, McQueen goes one step further than Schiaparelli in her "Circus Collection," choosing to actually tear and destroy the garments he presents, often revealing the model's naked body. Unlike Schiaparelli, McQueen offers an image of the female form disheveled and exposed instead of poised and elegant. McQueen's choice to permanently mutilate the garments by tearing them speaks to the image's ability to convey the broken and unhealed. The tear in the dress can also be read as an unhealed wound, speaking to the unhealed nature of McQueen's trauma. His choice of leather as a textile further enforces the parallel between the rip in the fabric and the wounding of the human body. The tear is also placed in the middle of the chest and exposes the model's breasts, calling attention to the inherently sexual undertone of this abuse. McQueen forces his audience to digest imagery of wounded skin; torn apart by sexual violence. This visual motif is one of many that lend to an understanding of the collection as a presentation of McQueen's own scars and personal history that he has attempted to heal and suture.

Figure 5. Alexander McQueen, *Highland Rape* A/W 1995.

Figure 6. Alexander McQueen, *Highland Rape* A/W 1995.

Figure 6 offers another example of how McQueen implores the imagery of tears to speak to sexual violence. The dress and model are presented with clear signs of abuse and sexual assault; her arm is bruised, and her lace dress is torn and clearly manipulated, revealing the model's crotch. The delicate lace and pastel color palette create a quintessentially fragile vision of femininity that is then destroyed and corrupted with tears and rips. Similarly to Schiaparelli's "Skeleton Dress," this look places visual emphasis on the model's pelvis and crotch, emphasizing sexuality and desire. However, for McQueen, this eroticization is forced upon the garment rather than built into its design as it is for the "Skeleton Dress." While Schiaparelli's figure is naturally erotic in her foundational "bones," McQueen's is forcefully eroticized through tears and exposition, brought about by destruction.

While not from his "Highland Rape" collection, McQueen's collaboration with jeweler Shaun Leane continued to implore the same juxtaposition of sensuality and morbidity, all while referencing Schiaparelli's "Skeleton Dress" design. However, McQueen does not just directly replicate Schiaparelli's visual language through the use of the same imagery. Instead, he transforms Schiaparelli's delicate and soft silk and cotton bones into a rigid, hard exoskeleton (Figure 7). In her analysis of the legacy of Schiaparelli's darker imagery, art historian Victoria Pass notes how McQueen's iteration of the skeleton differs from Schiaparelli's while maintaining a shared central idea of feminity:

> In this corset, the wearer can be read either as a human animal hybrid – a concept that McQueen explored in his last two collections before his death in 2010 (Spring 2010 and Fall 2010) – or as a huntress wearing the remains of her prey as a memento mori, a reminder of death. Both suggest the femme fatale, 'whose sexuality was dangerous, even deathly and for whom, therefore, male desire would always be tinged with dread' (Evans

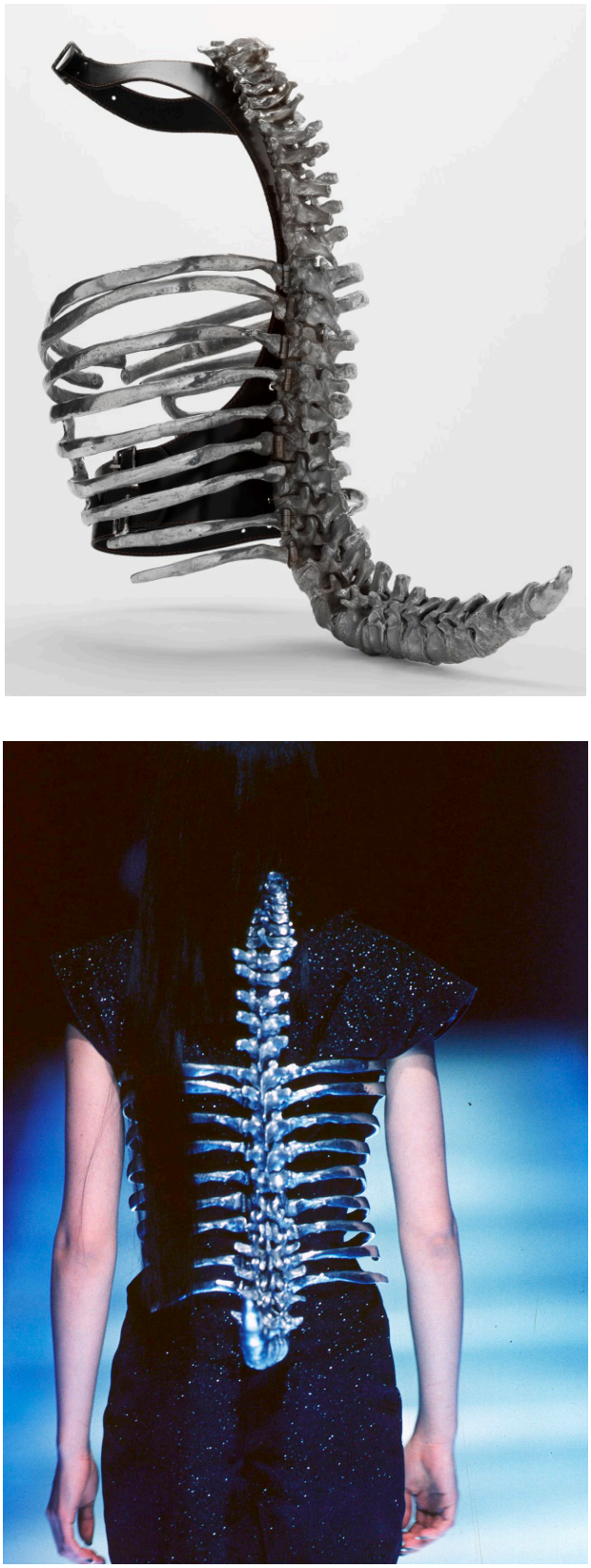

Figure 7. “Spine Corset.” Alexander McQueen and Shaun Leane. *Untitled* S/S 1998.

> 2003: 145). This is precisely the kind of woman McQueen was interested in evoking with these clothes, one who would provoke fear. These images are similar to those Schiaparelli conjured up with her wild gloves in the 1930s – adorned with claws, trimmed with hair-like monkey fur or made to look like animal paws – and with the Skeleton and Tear-Illusion Dresses (Pass 40).

The skeleton can now become a symbol of reclaimed sexuality for its wearer. The rigid spine that protrudes from the corset almost mimics a tail or scorpion stinger, creating an image of hostile defense. Ultimately, McQueen chooses the *corset* as the accessory to transform with skeleton imagery, reflecting the inescapable rigid restrictions and limits imposed by society, built into the very nature of the garment. McQueen's skeleton protects more than it exposes, offering a mode of femininity that embraces an almost primitive sexuality and violence to her advantage, using them to defend and protect her.

McQueen would continue to reference Schiaparelli and her skeletal motif with his own Circus-themed Fall 2001 Ready-to-Wear collection. Figure 8 reworks the imagery of a skull into a knitted sweater dress that recalls the style of Schiaparelli's iconic trompe l'oeil sweater. The sweater dress continues to also mimic the imagery of the tear dress, sustaining holes and patches as it gradually becomes undone toward the bottom. Again, McQueen uses the same visual language as Schiaparelli to create a vision of glamorized sexuality in juxtaposition with decay. Figure 9 mimics the sharp and conservative tailoring of Schiaparelli's "Skeleton Dress" while again transforming the morbidity of the design; the golden animal skeleton is draped upon her shoulders almost as if it is a trophy. The design and styling echo the reading offered by Pass of "the huntress wearing the remains of her prey as a memento mori" (Pass 40). McQueen

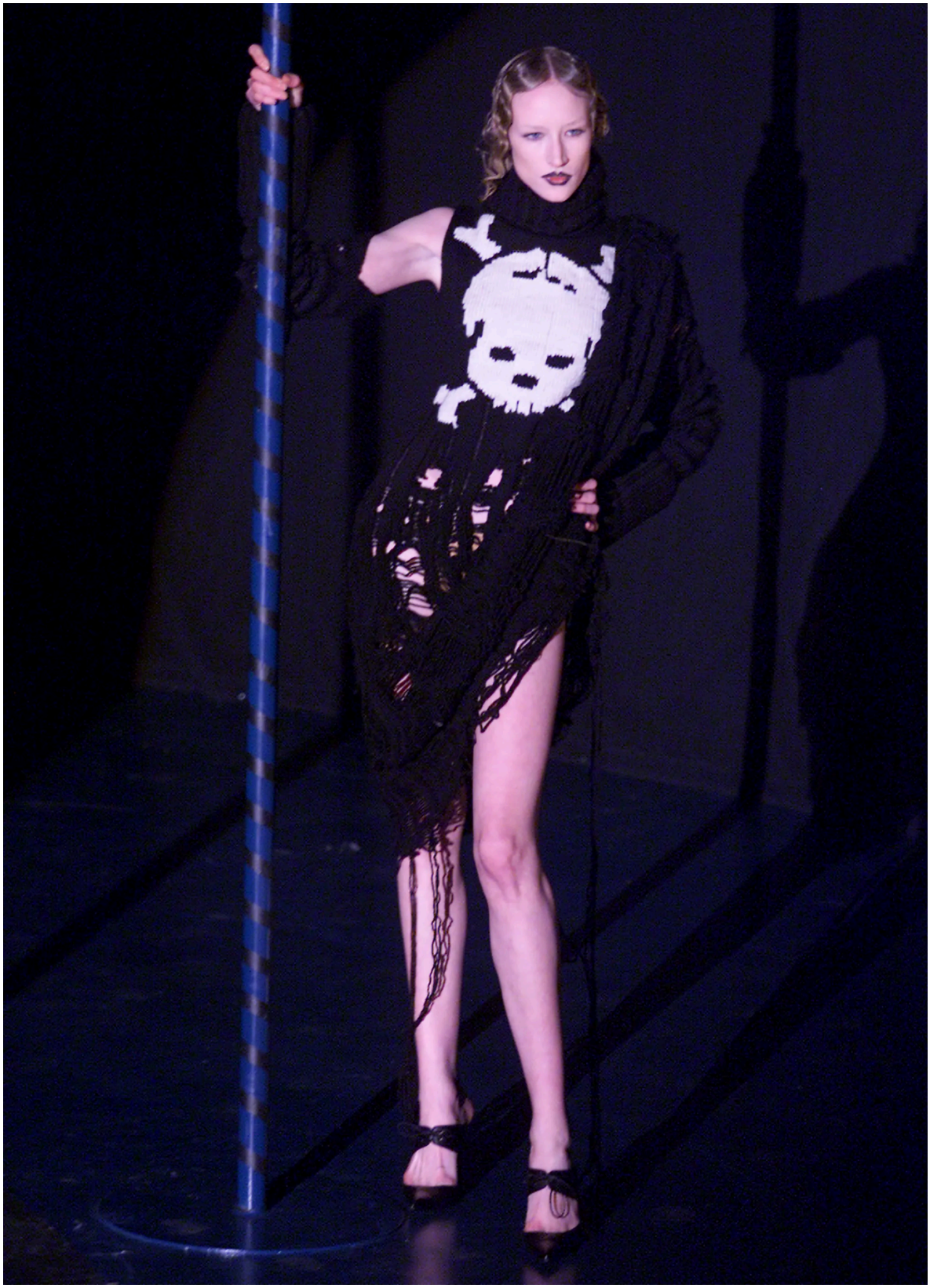

Figure 8. Alexander McQueen, Fall 2001 Ready-to-Wear.

Figures 9. Alexander McQueen, Fall 2001 Ready-to-Wear.

reinterprets the visual language of Schiaparelli to offer a mode of feminity that has weaponized its inherently lethal sexuality and proven the victor.

The rest of the collection saw a collage of the same classic circus imagery used by Schiaparelli. Clowns and plastic horses atop a merry-go-round (Figure 10) harken back to the same imagery utilized by Schiaparelli throughout her "Circus Collection," particularly the image of the merry-go-round horse as seen on a pink blazer (Figure 11). Both McQueen and Schiaparelli "juxtapose haute couture and the absurd," using surreal imagery to further define the capabilities of fashion presentation. The very invocation of the circus as an image speaks to the inherent *show* of fashion; each collection effectively acts as another monetized performance, aiming to please the audience. Both designers use their collections to comment on the inherent performative nature of the fashion world they inhabit, establishing their designs as part of a whimsical production aimed at pleasing childlike desire. The circus can also be understood as a metaphor for the ills of the fashion industry. The image of the merry-go-round speaks to the never-ending cycle of shows and the constant demand for designers to produce to meet the demands of the financial backers. The exposed breasts and underwear of the clowns in McQueen's collection even connote a comparison to prostitution, a selling of the intimate and personal. Each designer becomes a circus performer, faced with the pressure to meet the demand of their *paying* audience.

McQueen implores the same imagery of sexuality and violence as Schiaparelli, but he arguably takes it one step further by using this imagery to expose the models. "Highland Rape" received controversy and backlash from its debut; criticism of the collection has continued in the academic world since. Fashion historian Caroline Elenowitz-Hess criticized the collection by

Figure 10. Alexander McQueen, Fall 2001 Ready-to-Wear.

Figure 10. Elsa Schiaparelli. Evening Ensemble. *Circus Collection* 1938.

arguing that it effectively glamorized sexual assault in the evocation of imagery connected to sexual abuse. She writes,

> The use of model bodies as the medium to create this show raises further issues of gender, power, and vulnerability, which is particularly relevant when considering themes of sexual violence… In examining McQueen's show, the models function as crucial intermediaries whose role affects the meaning of the work itself. In this case, the instability and replaceability of the average model put them in a distinct power disadvantage in the fashion industry vis-a-vis a designer, which complicates the idea of seeing them as co-creators of the runway show (Elenowitz-Hess 13).

Elenowitz-Hess critiques McQueen's collection by arguing that it reproduces similar imbalances of power to those it is trying to critique. By having the garments actually mimic scenes of sexual assault and expose the models' naked bodies, the collection perpetuates a continual problem in the fashion world: models' lack of consent and autonomy. Instead of fighting against the cultural acceptance of abuse that facilitated McQueen's personal experience with domestic violence, the collection acts to reinforce these very same systems, directly taking bodily autonomy away from those involved with its staging.

Elenowitz-Hess, like many other critics and condemners of McQueen's work, also heavily critiqued the glamorization and sexuality of the collection's presentation. She writes,

> The combination of staggering, cowering models and those that were deliberately presenting as sexually available, e.g., by rubbing their bodies or biting their lips while looking out into the audience, displayed an elision of sexual violence and sexual pleasure. The slashes on the clothes highlighted the women's erogenous zones, with several pieces that specifically revealed the nipples or crotch—a choice that not only emphasized the

> sexual interests of the aggressor, but placed the audience in the role of erotic voyeurs. (Elenowitz-Hess 10)

Elenowitz-Hess notes that visible signs of sexual abuse are connected to seemingly legible displays of overt sexuality in the collection. Many critics feel as though McQueen's designs are too high fashion and sexualized to convey any actual perspective or message on sexual violence.

However, one could argue that this connection stems back to McQueen's original authorial intent; it functions as a direct response to a culture of abuse, attempting to hold a mirror to his face. In his own words, McQueen stated, "If people do say I portray women like that, it's cause I want to portray the way society still sees women" (Blanks). The overt sexualization and glamorization within the collection can then be understood as a commentary on how society treats abuse and survivors. Placing the audience "in the role of erotic voyeurs" forces that audience to question how their society associates sexual pleasure with signs of struggle and abuse. A model portraying a victim rubbing her exposed body parts could be read as an attempt to soothe and regain composure. However, the minds of the audience immediately recognize these acts as sexual and inviting in nature, speaking to the cultural norms surrounding sex and sexuality projected by viewers onto the collection. What does it say about a societal culture that immediately equates nakedness with sexuality? What does it mean for the audience to immediately associate this touching with erotic pleasure and displays of sexuality? Elenowitz-Hess argues that the show turns its audiences into "erotic voyeurs," and that is its very goal: to force its viewer to reconcile how their society normalizes and even glamorizes abuse and domestic violence.

But causing controversy and pushing the limits of respectability is just another way in which McQueen and Schiaparelli both use fashion to communicate. Elsa Schiaparelli's designs

also garnered heavy criticism and opposition from reviewers and critics. Many argued her designs were too overtly sexual or promiscuous, with her “Skeleton Dress” even being condemned as “an offense against good taste” (Leane). Schiaparelli biographer Meryle Secrest noted the distinct public disapproval that plagued Schiaparelli’s career: “Women turned away from her confident style and returned to femininity, corsets, crinolines and Dior's new look. Silent social disapproval wounded her, the shift in tastes disoriented her” (Secrest). Both McQueen and Schiaparelli were not universally praised or accepted for their designs; some loathed their overt sexuality, choosing to overlook the messages of their collections. As designers, they faced controversy and backlash for their comfortability in creating designs that openly discussed sexuality and violence, using fashion as a means to critique the societies that had failed them many times.

Elsa Schiaparelli and Lee McQueen were true artistic geniuses, using their designs and collections to communicate ideas beyond the mere aesthetic or functional. Schiaparelli’s “Circus Collection” proves to be a prime example of how fashion can be manipulated into sharp social critique. Her “Skeleton Dress” and “Tears Dress” juxtapose poised femininity with images of assault and morbid decay, calling attention to the vulnerability of the independent “New Woman” as she navigates a society designed to suppress and abuse her. McQueen built upon the legacy of Schiaparelli’s work in creating his designs, utilizing the same imagery of tears, skeletons, and femininity juxtaposed with evidence of graphic violence. While some of McQueen's designs work in tandem with Schiaparelli’s original collection to construct a mode of femininity that has persevered through trauma, emerging as a complete and poised figure. However, McQueen also chooses to depart from this mode, meditating on the permanence of trauma and violence that can not be healed or stitched back together. His morbid depictions of assault and death combined

with overt sexuality caused controversy and backlash, directly mirroring the response afforded to Schiaparelli and her surrealist designs. Despite the controversy they faced, the legacy of Schiaparelli and McQueen's work has lived on, continuing to serve as examples of the capabilities of couture to define and critique the social anxieties of their eras.

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