

STOCKHOLM UNIVERSITY

Centre for Fashion Studies

MA II Dissertation

The Perception of Fashion:

Alexander McQueen

A case study of the subjective perceptual experience of
five Alexander McQueen fashion shows

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the subjective perceptual experience of five video documented Alexander McQueen's fashion shows, where the subjective pleasurable experience is in focus. By examining McQueen's fashion shows the study attempt to develop a psychophysical perspective on the phenomenon of fashion, which takes its starting point in the individual's lived experience. As a whole the study can be seen as a discussion about the relationship between sensory input and the perceptual experience, which draw attention to the processes where fashion essentially is constructed.

Keywords: Alexander McQueen, fashion, fashion show, sensation, perception, embodiment, affect, pleasure, sense, sensory pleasure, multisensory experience, synesthetic experience

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Introduction

This dissertation is an examination of the perception of fashion. More specifically it is a study of the subjective perceptual experience of five Alexander McQueen's fashion shows, where the notion of pleasure plays a significant role. This perceptual experience is registered by all the five sense organs of the human body: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. We relate to the world around us through all of our senses.

Perception is always a matter of an individually lived experience. Yet as a social phenomenon perception is also always shared by others, "individual ways of sensing are always elaborated within the context of communal sensory orders."¹ Ever since the international breakthrough of electronic media of communications, private sensory experiences as well as shared sensory experiences have changed the way they work on a fundamental way. The new media has created a new kind of sensory space, which has lead to new ways of "thinking about and interacting with the environment."² This change especially becomes noticeable by the increased flow of information and knowledge exchange that Internet has resulted in.

What sometimes is called "the philosophy of perception," is an on-going philosophical discussion, particularly concentrated to the ways the senses and the perceptive experience interact, and how different perceptual phenomena relate to various beliefs about, or knowledge of the world. This study attempts to relate to this discussion by bringing into light the perceptual experience of fashion.

The concept of perception has customarily been seen by Western scholars, especially within the field of Art History and Visual Studies, as something that first and foremost revolve around the notion of vision, induced by the sight organ i.e. the eyes. This, in my opinion, is nonsense, simply because the concept of perception does not refer to any sense in particular, but to several interacting senses. This tendency to overemphasize the role of vision on behalf of other senses when addressing the issue of perception, is furthermore part of a long Western philosophical tradition where the senses typically have been ordered in hierarchies based on their relation to the either the body or the mind. In this body-mind dichotomy, sensing and thinking have traditionally been seen as two separated activities, where sense and emotion mainly have been associated with nature and thus considered as the

¹ David Howes, introduction to *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), 4-5.

² Ibid., 8.

very antithesis to meaning and culture.³ In this line of thought, thinking and reasoning was seen as higher, noble and rational mental activities, whereas sensing and feeling primary was perceived as lower, bodily matters. Vision's relatively high status in this sensory hierarchy order, was due to vision being seen as "the most noble, rational and masculine of the senses."⁴ These ideas may belong to the past, in fact many scholars of today argue that "meaning and sense are one."⁵ Yet this kind of body-mind dichotomy still exists in many peoples' consciousness, which points to one of my aims for this investigation. I wish to increase the understanding of the concept of perception, and particularly draw attention to the fact that perception is not evoked by sight solely, since the perceptual experience is formed in collaboration with other senses as well.

The perspective I wish to put forward is that fashion is a highly perceptual phenomenon, which both can be consumed on a tangible and an intangible level, depending on which part of the phenomenon that gives the individual most pleasure. Yet regardless of in which form fashion is consumed, it always involves a subjective perceptual experience. This investigation thus aims to bring the concept of perception and the concept of fashion together, and by doing so hopefully contribute with valuable information about the subjective perceptual experience of Alexander McQueen's fashion shows, where the subjective pleasurable experience is in focus. I further want to contribute to a more thorough understanding of the phenomena of fashion, especially a deepened knowledge about how fashion operates on a perceptual level.

Alexander McQueen was a British fashion designer who played a significant role for me on a personal level. When he committed suicide in February 2010, I was devastated and mourned his death for a long time. I always thought of him as a close friend of mine that shared my philosophy of life. I have always felt great pleasure in looking at McQueen's fashion designs and fashion shows, and especially admired McQueen for his passionate and uncompromising approach to fashion. At the beginning of this research project I read Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, in which Barthes addressed his mourning over his deceased mother. Inspired by Barthes analysis of his relationship to his mother, I decided to investigate my own relationship to McQueen in a similar manner. Motivated by Barthes approach to not reduce himself as a subject and to use his personal thoughts, feelings and experiences as the starting point for his study, I decided to start my

³ Ibid., 6.

⁴ Constance Classen, "The Witch's Senses: Sensory Ideologies and Transgressive Femininities from the Renaissance to Modernity," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), 75.

⁵ Howes, 2006, 9.

inquiry with something that “I was sure existed *for me*,”⁶ namely the pleasurable feeling that McQueen’s fashion and fashion shows in general evoke. In addition, this study only concerns my subjective experience of McQueen’s fashion shows, henceforth I will not take into consideration anything but my personal thoughts, feelings and reactions in the matter.

The empirical material consists of five video documented McQueen fashion shows, produced between the years of 2000 – 2010. The selected fashion shows are: *Voss* (spring/summer 2001), *It’s Only A Game* (spring/summer 2005), *The Widows of Culloden* (fall/winter 2006), *The Girl Who Lived in the Tree* (fall/winter 2008) and *The Horn of Plenty* (fall/winter 2009). The reason I have chosen these particular five fashion shows is because they all give me great physical and psychological pleasure, which I believe will contribute with interesting and important information about the phenomena of perception, fashion and pleasure. In order to investigate the fashion shows I use both Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach and Sara Ahmed’s affect theory to interpret the material. I use a qualitative research method, where I characterize the properties or the salient features that can be distinguished in the studied material. I apply a human-hermeneutic perspective in the analysis, where I presume that one can never be completely objective as a scholar, aware that it is likely that my personal characteristics will affect the study’s direction and content in some sense. Therefore I have deliberately chosen to include my subjective thought and feelings in my work, because I think that will make the analysis richer and more interesting. Since the chosen empirical material is relatively extensive, I begin the study with a description of the material, and then turn to analysing the content, based on some general themes that I consider to be representative of the material as a whole.

The questions that will be underlying my analysis concern my subjective pleasurable experience of McQueen’s fashion shows, where I ask myself how my pleasure is constructed and why some of the fashion shows are perceived as more pleasurable than others. I further ask myself what it is in, or with McQueen’s fashion shows that make me feel the way I do. My subjective pleasurable experience of McQueen’s fashion shows are in this context perceived as intimately connected to questions concerning various concepts as fashion, perception, affect, embodiment, *punctum* and bliss, which all will be taken into account. I moreover strive to introduce a general discussion about senses, where the dominant position that sight holds in Western societies is questioned.

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 8.

Theoretical framework

The basic analytical tools I will use are the concepts of fashion, perception, embodiment and affect. I use the term *fashion* to signify a form of fiction, i.e. a non-real idea, illusion or dream that “has to do with *becoming*, and not with being”.⁷ Hence the concept of fashion is primary understood as an ephemeral phenomenon “which has no content substance by/in itself”.⁸

Perception is a word that originates from the Latin term *perceptiōn*, (stem of *perceptiō*) which means comprehension, and could be understood as a form of sensory awareness. The concept of perception is intimately connected to the concept of sensation. Sensation refers to “the stimulus detection process by which our sense organs respond to and translate environmental stimuli into nerve impulses that are sent to the brain,” whereas perception “involves making ‘sense’ of what our senses tell us. It is the active process of organizing this stimulus input and giving it meaning.”⁹ In other words, perception involves processes where a subject attains awareness of its surroundings by organizing and interpreting sensory information registered by the five sense organs: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch.

The concept of *embodiment* refers to a perspective where body and mind are not perceived as separated from each other, but working together as one unit, whereas the embodied experience constitute a way of living something with all the human senses. In this context I use the term embodiment to describe a completely absorption or synchronization with something or someone, which constitute an intense sensory experience that is felt with all the senses throughout the body.

The definition of the concept of *affect* I henceforth will be using refer to a “feeling or emotion, and the expression of feeling or emotion in the face and body”.¹⁰ In psychology the term affect is often used to describe a physiological sensation, whereas emotion in comparison is used to describe a psychological state. There have been disagreements on how to distinguish the concept of affect from the concept of emotion. However, I will not engage in that discussion, instead I will use the terms affect and emotion to complement each other. Affect is first and foremost used here as a concept I use as a link to the concept of

⁷ Louise Wallenberg, foreword to *Fashion in Fiction: Text and Clothing in Literature, Film, and Television*, ed. Peter McNeil, Vicki Karaminas and Catherine Cole (Oxford: Berg 2009), xv-xvii.

⁸ Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashion-ology – An Introduction to Fashion Studies* (New York: Berg, 2006), 2.

⁹ Michael Passer et al., *Psychology: The Science of Mind and Behaviour* (Berkshire: McGraw-Hill Education, 2009), 167.

¹⁰ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 431.

embodiment, and thus also to a discussion of sensory perception, since the so-called “affected turn” also have been described as “the return to the body”.¹¹

The theoretical material that will guide me throughout this process consists first and foremost of Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* and *The Pleasure of the Text*, Sara Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, yet other theorists will be taken into account as well.

Each of these literary sources are chosen because they contribute with important findings concerning perception, pleasure, fashion, senses, affect and embodiment, which makes it easier for a discussion about the perception of fashion to take place. A presentation of the main features in their respective theories follows below.

In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* Roland Barthes analyses the effects photography has on the spectators by introducing the notions of “studium” and “punctum”. Through the photograph’s studium the spectators interest is aroused based on the cultural recognition of the photographer’s intention, whereas through its punctum the spectator breaks away from the polite interest aroused by the studium: “punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”¹² Barthes explains the difference between the concept of studium and the concept of punctum in the quote below:

Many photographs are, alas, inert under my gaze. But even among these which have some existence in my eyes, most provoke only a general and, so to speak, *polite* interest: they have no *punctum* in them: they please or displease me without pricking me: they are invested with no more than *studium*. The *studium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste: *I like/ I don't like*. The *studium* is of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*; it mobilizes a half desire, a demi-volution; it is the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds ‘all right’.”¹³

The studium stands for a kind of general or average interest in photographs as cultural artefacts, whereas punctum stands for a more intense personal experience that breaks or punctuates the studium, which constitutes of certain details in photographs that succeed to point or prick the spectator, leaving him or her affected. According to Barthes, the punctum of

¹¹ Anu Koivunen, “An affective turn? Reimagining the subject of feminist theory,” in *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing differences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 11.

¹² Barthes, 2000, 26-7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

a photograph “takes the spectator outside its frame”¹⁴ through a process of circulating animation, where the spectator and the photograph are caught in a mutual act of animating each other; the spectator animating the photograph and the photograph animating the spectator.¹⁵ In short, the punctum of a photograph is a personal and emotional matter, which affects the spectator powerfully, whereas the studium is an impersonal and general matter that only evokes a slight interest in the spectator.¹⁶

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes emphasizes that there are many different kinds of texts, which may affect the readers very differently. Yet for Barthes, “the text of pleasure” and “the text of bliss” constitute two of the most important types of texts. He describes the difference between a text of pleasure and a text of bliss with following words:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.¹⁷

In Barthes quote above, the text of pleasure is described as a “text that contents, fills, grants euphoria” which is “linked to a comfortable practice of reading,” whereas the text of bliss is defined as a “text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts” the reader. Barthes further notes that the text of pleasure “comes from culture and does not break with it,” while the text of bliss “unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions.” Hence Barthes’s two types of texts do not belong in the same category; in the text of pleasure, it is the continuity and stability of culture that evoke pleasure and enjoyment, while in the text of bliss, it is rather the disruption or destruction of culture that induce a state of bliss and ecstasy. Thus, the text of pleasure is first and foremost concentrated around the notion of contentment, whereas the text of bliss revolves around the concept of rapture.¹⁸ The text of pleasure is connected to a calm, relaxed and comfortable reading experience, while the text of bliss in comparison is linked to an intense, uncomfortable, affected reading experience. In other

¹⁴ Ibid., 59.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 14.

¹⁸ Ibid., 19.

words, when reading the text of pleasure the reader “enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure)” whereas in the text of bliss the reader “seeks its loss (that is his bliss).”¹⁹

Barthes further writes that the feeling of bliss in reading a text, “proceeds from certain breaks (or certain collisions)”²⁰ where two contrasting element come in contact with each other, because in that process the language becomes redistributed. He develop this thought more fully in the quote below:

Now, *such redistribution is always achieved by cutting*. Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and *another edge*, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. These two edges, *the compromise they bring about*, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so.”²¹

Thus the feeling of bliss in reading a text originates from certain breaks or collisions, where two edges are created. These two edges are essential, because it is in “the seam between them, the fault, the flaw” that bliss ultimately arises. Hence for bliss to emerge, two edges must be present, since it is the intermittence between them and the tension that the two bring about, which induces that particular feeling.²²

Barthes moreover argues that the bliss in reading a text derive from “the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read,”²³ because “we do not read everything with the same intensity of reading.”²⁴ Barthes states: “Thus what I enjoy in a narrative is not directly its content or even its structure, but rather the abrasions I impose upon the fine surface: I read on, I skip, I look up, I dip in again.”²⁵ Hence it is the rhythm between what is read and what is not read, that brings a certain tensivity to the text, which gives rise to the feeling of bliss. Barthes lastly describes the text that yields him the greatest satisfaction with the following words:

To be with the one I love and to think of something else: this is how I have my best ideas, how I best invent what is necessary to my work. Likewise for the text: it

¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

²⁰ Ibid., 6.

²¹ Ibid., 6-7.

²² Ibid., 10.

²³ Ibid., 11.

²⁴ Ibid. 10.

²⁵ Ibid., 11-12.

produces, in me, the best pleasure if it manages to make itself heard indirectly; if reading it, I am led to look up often, to listen to something else.²⁶

Thus in Barthes opinion, a text is most satisfying “if it manages to make itself heard indirectly” for the reason that such text make it possible “to listen to something else” at the same time. The reading then takes the form of a drift,²⁷ where the body pursues its own ideas.²⁸

Sara Ahmed explores how emotions take shape in contact with objects and other people in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, arguing that emotions cannot be separated from bodily sensations (affects) because they are always intertwined with each other. Ahmed emphasizes that evolutionary thinking have been key for how emotions have been understood throughout history. In this figure of thought, “emotions get narrated as a sign of ‘our’ prehistory, and as a sign of how the primitive persists in the present”.²⁹ Ahmed furthermore writes that emotions typically are ordered in hierarchies, where “some emotions are ‘elevated’ as signs of cultivation, whilst others remain ‘lower’ as signs of weakness. The story of evolution is narrated not only as the story of the triumph of reason, but of the ability to control emotions, and to experience the ‘appropriate’ emotions at different times and places.”³⁰ Based on these assumptions it is not difficult to see how emotions are intimately connected to activities that aims to preserve social hierarchies, where certain “emotions become attributes of bodies as a way of transforming what is ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ into bodily traits”.³¹ In Ahmed’s perspective:

Emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others. Indeed, attending to emotions might show us how all actions are reactions, in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others.³²

Ahmed does not “think about emotionality as a characteristic of bodies, whether individual or collective,” rather she “reflect on the processes whereby ‘being emotional’ comes to be seen as a characteristics of some bodies and not others.”³³ Therefore she argues “we need to

²⁶ Ibid., 24.

²⁷ Ibid., 18.

²⁸ Ibid., 17.

²⁹ Ibid., 3.

³⁰ Ibid., 3-4.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 4.

³³ Ibid.

consider how emotions operate to ‘make’ and ‘shape’ bodies as forms of action, which also involve orientations towards others.”³⁴

There have been many discussions about how the concept of emotion should be separated from the concept of bodily sensation i.e. affect. Ahmed however suggests that the distinction between sensation and emotion can only be analytic. Thus Ahmed prefers to use the concept of “impression” instead. She describes the concept of impression with the following words:

To form an impression might involve acts of perception and cognition as well as an emotion. But forming an impression also depends on how objects impress upon us. An impression can be an effect on the subject’s feelings (‘she made an impression’). It can be a belief (‘to be under an impression’). It can be an imitation or an image (‘to create an impression’). Or it can be a mark on the surface (‘to leave an impression’). *We need to remember the ‘press’ in an impression.* It allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace. So not only do I have an impression of others, but they also leave me with an impression; they impress me, and impress upon me. I will use the idea of ‘impression’ as it allows me to avoid making analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion and thought as if they could be ‘experienced’ as distinct realms of human ‘experience’.³⁵

In other words, an impression is formed by perception, cognition and emotion all together. Thus, Ahmed does not see any point in making analytical distinctions between them. Impressions may very well be “felt on the surface of the skin,” i.e. a bodily knowledge of some sort, yet “the ‘immediacy’ of the reaction is not itself a sign of a lack of mediation,”³⁶ Ahmed points out. The bodily knowledge makes sense in relation between someone and something else that come into contact. This is why Ahmed argues that emotions always are relational: “they involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’”³⁷ shaped by contact with objects and other people. But she also highlights that such contact always is mediated “by past histories of contact, unavailable in the present,”³⁸ since what we feel is tied to what we already know.

According to Ahmed emotions are not psychological states, but social and cultural practices.³⁹ Hence, she offers a theory about the sociality of emotion, which both dismisses

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 6.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 8.

³⁸ Ibid., 7.

³⁹ Ibid., 9.

psychological ‘inside out’ and sociological ‘outside in’ models, for the reason that both these models “assume the objectivity of the very distinction between inside and outside, the individual and the social, and the ‘me’ and the ‘we’.”⁴⁰ In Ahmed’s model, emotions do not operate from either an inside or an outside, but “create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place”.⁴¹ Hence it is through emotions that boundaries ultimately are raised, which always involves a relation between someone and something else that come into contact.

Finally, Ahmed stresses that emotions circulate between people. Yet she thinks it is important to have in mind that what passes between individuals may not necessarily be the same emotion, thus it would be more accurate to say, “that it is the objects of emotion that circulate, rather than emotion as such.”⁴² Ahmed emphasizes that emotions circulate, but then it is a matter of moving through the objects of emotion that passes between individuals, since these “objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension.”⁴³

In Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, phenomenology is perceived as a discourse of the world, where the embodied experience constitutes the foundation for all communication in the world.⁴⁴ Phenomenology is a philosophy which returns to the things themselves, for the reason that “the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins – as an inalienable presence”.⁴⁵ Thus, phenomenology is about describing, rather than explaining or analysing,⁴⁶ which means that perception has to be separated from “syntheses represented by judgements, acts or predications”.⁴⁷ He describes the subject matter with following words:

The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible. “There is a world”, or rather: “There is the world”; I can never completely account for this ever-reiterated assertion in my life.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 10.

⁴² Ibid., 11.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2009), preface xxiii.

⁴⁵ Ibid., preface vii.

⁴⁶ Ibid., preface ix.

⁴⁷ Ibid., preface xi.

⁴⁸ Ibid., preface xviii - xix.

Merleau-Ponty criticizes scientific analysis which emphasize that our experience of the world is to be found in the subject's consciousness, because such a perspective tend to trace back that experience to the "inner man", which always has been identical with the inner self. Thus, the reflection of the world is "carried off by itself and installs itself in an impregnable subjectivity, as yet untouched by being and time".⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty stresses that such perspective is inadequate, first and foremost for the reason that "the world is there before any possible analysis of mine,"⁵⁰ and second that "there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself."⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty argues that much science is built upon the belief that the world is directly experienced through the human mind, which according to him is a misunderstanding, since science always constitutes a second-order expression. Hence the only direct experience of the world can be found in the lived or "embodied" experience, through which we perceive the world. In this embodied experience, the mind is not separated from the body, nor superior the body, but incorporated as a part of the whole bodily experience. He explains the subject matter with following words:

Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions.⁵²

Merleau-Ponty uses the notion of intentionality to point to "that inner perception is impossible without outer perception,"⁵³ where the consciousness itself is a project of the world, and that the world consists of a collection of connected phenomena.⁵⁴ It is thus a matter of a critique of philosophical idealism's use of consciousness as the uttermost evidence of existence in the world. Instead he stresses that the world exist before the mind becomes conscious about it. Thus, the embodied experience precedes consciousness, because we perceive the world around us with all the senses and not only with the mind. Idealism, in contrast, stresses that the subject's consciousness is what appears first, and that without a consciousness there would be no world.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Ibid., preface x- xi.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., preface xi - xii.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., preface xix.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., preface x.

Merleau-Ponty furthermore emphasizes that the subject, through the use of the transcendental subjectivity, referred to as intersubjectivity, exists in the world. This means the subject exists in the world without necessarily being conscious about that fact. In other words, the subject's existence in the world is not defined by the thought he or she has about existing in the world. Instead, the subject's existence depends on the condition of intersubjectivity, which recognizes the subject's thought in itself as an inalienable fact, in revealing the subject as "being-in-the-world".⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty explains his view on phenomenology, and the interrelationship between subjectivity and intersubjectivity below:

The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears. It is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which find their unity when I either take up my past experiences in those of the present, or other people's in my own. [...] The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being.⁵⁷

Previous research

I am aware that quite a number of studies have already been implemented on the subject of perception within the Humanities and Social Sciences. Nevertheless, I think some aspects of the concept of perception could benefit from further attention; as the pleasure part of the perceptual experience. However, due to space reasons, I will not be able to discuss the large amount of existing academic works on perception here.

Numerous academic writings on Alexander McQueen have been produced recently, yet most of them either focus on the role of McQueen as a fashion designer, or on the thematic features and visual characteristics of his fashion shows. None of them seem to address the subjective experience of McQueen's fashion shows, that is the focus of this study. Below follows some of the previous academic writings on McQueen.

Angela McRobbie touch upon McQueen in *British fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry?* (1998) as well as *In the Culture Society: Art, Fashion and Popular Music* (1999). Caroline Evans's chapter "Yesterday's Emblems and Tomorrow's Commodities: The return of the repressed in fashion imagery today" and Natalie Khan's chapter "Catwalk Politics" in

⁵⁶ Ibid., preface xiv.

⁵⁷ Ibid., preface xxii-xxiii.

Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson's anthology *Fashion Cultures: Theories, explorations and analysis* (2000), both examine McQueen.

Furthermore Ginger Gregg Duggan's article "The Greatest Show on Earth: A Look at Contemporary Fashion Shows and Their Relationship to Performance Art" (2001) investigates McQueen's fashion shows. Rebecca Arnold's *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the 20th Century* (2001) studies McQueen from several angles.

Moreover Bradley Quinn write about McQueen in *Techno Fashion* (2002) as well as in *Fashion Of Architecture* (2003). Caroline Evans furthermore studies McQueen in *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness* (2003). Ingrid Loschek discusses McQueen in *When Clothes Become Fashion: Design and Innovation Systems* (2009). Finally, Andrew Bolton examines McQueen in *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (2011), which is a collaboration piece with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Disposition

The study is organized in five chapters, where each chapter, in the context of five McQueen fashion shows, look into the perception of fashion from a specific angle.

In chapter one, "Case study: Alexander McQueen's five fashion shows," I describe the main characteristics of each of McQueen's five fashion shows.

In chapter two, "The cultural history of the senses," I sketch a historical overview of the senses in Western philosophy and literature, noting how different senses have been looked upon during different times in history, which makes it easier for a discussion about McQueen's fashion shows to take place in the following chapters.

In chapter three, "Pleasure," I discuss the characteristics of McQueen's fashion shows in relation to Barthes's concepts of "punctum," "studium," "bliss" and "pleasure." By distinguishing two types of pleasurable experiences; one settle and one intense, I bring forth a discussion about how these two pleasurable experiences are constructed.

Chapter four, "Affect," is concentrated around the concepts of "affect" where Ahmed's thoughts on emotions and affects as something relational, as well as other affect theories are taken into account. I furthermore discuss why McQueen's fashion shows evoke an affective experience and how that experience feels like.

In chapter five, "Embodiment," I examine the concept of "embodiment" especially in relation to Merleau-Ponty's concept of "lived experience" and Entwistle's concept of "situated bodily practice," where my feelings and thoughts about McQueen's fashion shows are understood as a embodied awareness that are felt over the whole body.

Chapter six, “Perception,” includes a general discussion of the philosophy of perception, the notion of a “sensory turn” and “the perception of fashion,” which all are issues that could be related to McQueen’s fashion shows.

Lastly the study ends with a final discussion where I link together the different concepts that have been examined throughout the study, and discusses why such a theoretical framework is useful when studying McQueen’s fashion shows, followed by a conclusion where I briefly present the results of the study.

Analysis

1. Case study: Alexander McQueen’s five fashion shows

In this chapter I focus on describing the five McQueen fashion shows I have chosen to work with in this dissertation, which is: *Voss*, *It’s Only A Game*, *The Widows of Culloden*, *The Girl Who Lived in the Tree* and *The Horn of Plenty*. Starting with brief written descriptions of each fashion show, all found on McQueen’s homepage, except the one concerning *Voss* that was found in a internet blog, followed by my interpretations of that particular fashion show.

Voss (see footnote for video and appendix nr. 1 for images)⁵⁸

For the Spring/Summer 2001 Asylum collection the audience sat around a mirrored cube forced to stare at themselves for a whole hour. When finally lit from inside, the cube revealed itself to be a mental-hospital holding cell. Demented girls, wearing hospital headbands and everything from extraordinary mussel-shell skirts to impossibly chic pearl-colored cocktail dresses, slithered and strutted while uselessly attempting to fly over the cuckoo’s nest. There were gothic, theatrical pieces, like a dress with a miniature castle and rat posing as a shoulder pad; a top made out of a jigsaw puzzle; and a huge feathered creation with stuffed eagles suspended over the model’s head, poised to attack à la Hitchcock. But amidst all the insanity, there was a cornucopia of startlingly elegant — and wearable — pantsuits, flouncy party dresses, and even a spectator pump or two.

How to top off such a climactic presentation? After everyone thought it was all over, another cube within the psychiatric ward-cum-runway opened up to reveal a nude Michelle Olley, her face covered by a mask, breathing through a tube, surrounded by fluttering moths. It was a truly shocking and enthralling tableau:

⁵⁸ Alexander McQueen, spring/summer 2001, *Voss* (0.00:01.20), YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPK4IBrxIbY>.

Francis Bacon via Leigh Bowery and Lucien Freud. In a word, sublime.⁵⁹

The spring/summer fashion show 2001, *Voss*, sometimes also called the “Asylum collection”, was worn on models walking inside a large mirror glass-walled cube, placed in the centre of the room where the fashion show took place. Before the show started the glass cube was darkened, while everything else in the room was harshly lighted, with the effect that the audience could see their own reflections in the mirror glass. The audience was seated around the mirror cube, and “had to choose between looking away, watching themselves or watching others watching themselves”⁶⁰ in the mirrors for an hour before the cube finally was lit from the inside and the first model made her appearance inside the cube. Unfortunately the original audio was not available on the video documentation of the fashion show, thus the aspect of sound was not taken into account.

When the show started, the lighting in the room went down and came on inside the cube instead. Since the cube was made of reflective surveillance glass it could be mirrored both from the inside as well as from outside. “This time the models inside the box could not see the audience but they could clearly see their own reflections. Thus the audience could watch the models watching themselves.”⁶¹ While lighted, the glass cube revealed a staged solitary isolation cell of a mental hospital, with pale looking models slowly slithering and stumbling inside. While strutting around in the cube, the models occasionally stopped and pressed both of their hands against the mirrored glass walls, looking straight out in the air with absent gazes.

The *Voss* collection contained both McQueen’s characteristic hard-edged, razor-sharp, flawless tailored pantsuits, skirtsuits and dresses as well as more ethereal pieces made of ostrich feathers, glass pieces, mussel-shells and antique kimonos, all in a colour palette of beige, grey, black, red, light green and white. The collection overall comes across as dreamlike, eerie and mysterious with lots of dark undertones paraphrasing the notion of narcissism, but above all the concept of insanity. The tight fitting white scalp caps that all the models wore, especially contributed to that feeling, consisting of bandages wrapped around their heads and necks, which made the models heads appear as bald and glowing in the bright light that was illuminated from above.

⁵⁹Alexander McQueen: Asylum spring/summer 2001, Blotting paper’s mood board, <http://bpsmoodboard.wordpress.com/2010/06/01/mcqueen-asylum/>.

⁶⁰Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 94.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

At the end of the show, the sides of another box came down, revealing the naked full-figured fetish writer Michelle Olley slouching on a sofa adorned with large cow horns, with a breathing tube sticking out of the mouth of her masked face, surrounded by flying moths. The set was inspired by a photograph from 1983 called “Sanitorium” by Joel Peter Witkin, depicting “a twenty-stone middle-aged woman, connected via a breathing tube to a stuffed monkey.”⁶² The notion of decay was intensified in the final scene, showing a disturbing naked body in a milieu where it did not belong, together with another disturbing element; clothes-eating moths. In this way the show brought together elements that traditionally have been subject of Western disgust: fatness, fetishism and pest insects.

It's Only A Game (see footnote for video and appendix nr. 2 for images)⁶³

Using a futuristic chess game as mise en scene, McQueen this time offers an intricately worked and determinedly youthful collection featuring pieces that whisper of fashion fantasy although always with a typically tough edge. And so a floral print, primrose yellow baby doll dress is finished with signature leather harnessing, for example, amply demonstrating the play between power and vulnerability that the designer has by now made his own. The starting point is filmic again. This time clothes are inspired by Picnic At Hanging Rock – quintessential McQueen territory given its ultra-feminine and innocent spirit undermined by a significantly dark undercurrent. Everything from Edwardian children’s wear to embroidered fairground horses makes an appearance. The chessboard motif allows the designer to explore different types of women – Americans face Japanese on the board, redheads are placed opposite Latin Americans and so forth.⁶⁴

McQueen’s spring/summer fashion show 2005, *It's Only A Game*, took place on a monotonous white squared runway, with a white background and white floor. Large lamps hang from the ceiling, positioned to project a checkered pattern onto the runway, imitating a chess game in the end of the show. As inspiration for this collection stands the Australian 1970s’ film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*⁶⁵ set in a girls’ college in the Australian bush in the early

⁶² Ibid., 98.

⁶³ Alexander McQueen, spring/summer 2005, *It's Only A Game*, YouTube, http://www.alexandermcqueen.com/int/en/corporate/archive2005_ss_womens.aspx.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Directed by Peter Weir in 1975, screenplay by Cliff Green, adapted from the novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* by Joan Lindsay from 1967.

twentieth century. The background music constituted of the song “Relax” by *Frankie goes to Hollywood*.⁶⁶

When the show began and the first model appeared on the catwalk, the model first walked to the end of the catwalk to strike a pose, and then walked back along the edges of the squared stage until finally positioning herself in the middle of the catwalk looking straight ahead. This procedure was then repeated by all of the thirty-six models, but none of them walked off the stage. Instead they placed themselves, one by one, in one of the six lines that had been formed, consisting of six models in each line. Every line of models were coloured coordinated and up built around one specifically colour tone. The first line of models that appeared on the runway wore black, white and grey colours, the second line wore beige and peach, the third line wore light grey and light green, the fourth line wore yellow, the fifth line wore light purple and the sixth line wore only pink.

All the models walked with a flirtatious, light and fast strut that made their hair and clothing move to the music. The hair were styled in big tousled hairdos, resembling hairstyles that were popular in the early twentieth century, accompanied with high-heeled pumps or boots in matching colours.

As soon as the last of the thirty-six models had taken place, all of them standing on the catwalk at the same time, the lighting went down and a black and white checkered pattern appeared on the stage floor, where every model was standing in one square each. Then all six lines of models turned themselves toward the middle, creating two opposite sides fronting each other. A speaker voice then emerged and started to play out the models against each other on the chessboard, by giving them instructions how to move in order to eliminate each other. When only a few models were left standing on the chessboard, all the other models that previously had been eliminated came on the stage and did a final walk, then the last standing models also left the stage and the lighting went down.

The Widows of Culloden (see footnote for video and appendix nr. 3 for images)⁶⁷

With this collection McQueen revisits the subject matter of The Highland Rape – the show with which he made his name – but applies to similar territory a sophistication and expertise that reflect his experience as both couturier and designer. The inspiration here is highly personal – the designer’s own heritage – which goes at least

⁶⁶ Performed by Peter Gill, William Johnson and Mark O’Toole in 1983, produced by ZTT Records Ltd.

⁶⁷ Alexander McQueen, fall/winter 2006, *The Widows of Culloden*, YouTube, http://www.alexandermcqueen.com/int/en/corporate/archive2006_aw_womens.aspx.

some way towards explaining the exquisite hand-craftmanship that goes into each piece as well, of course, as bird head-dresses and McQueen tartan. The collection is luxurious and romantic but melancholic and even austere at the same time. The silhouette – all nipped waists, bustles and exaggerated hip lines – is designed to exaggerate a woman's form and each piece is unique, a one-off couture with emotional content intended to be handed down from generation to generation like the most precious of heirlooms.⁶⁸

The fall/winter fashion show 2006 called *The Widows of Culloden* revisited the theme of England's exploitation of Scotland that McQueen already addressed in his autumn/winter collection 1995 named *Highland Rape*. But unlike the brutal and rough imagery of the 1995 collection, the collection from 2006 was executed in a more romantic and melancholic manner, where McQueen's own Scottish heritage stood as inspiration. The collection gave a luxurious impression, with a general silhouette that constituted of corseted narrow waists, bustles and exaggerated hips, which accentuated the feminine figure.

The fashion show took place inside Louvre in Paris, on a square catwalk with a glass pyramid positioned in the middle. Unfortunately the original audio was not stated in the video documentation of the fashion show, yet I could identify three movie soundtracks in it; the soundtracks of *Orlando* by David Motion, *The Piano* by Michael Nyman and *Schindler's List* by John Williams.

The first part of the show was dominated by a military theme in a colour scale of beige, olive green, grey and crème white. Featuring tailored tweed suits, military jackets, trench coats, double-chested wool coats, pencil skirts and ruffle blouses, accessorized with tight-fitting leather belts, ankle socks and high-heeled leather pumps. Many of the models wore hat pieces made of large outstretched raptor wings.

Towards the end of the first part of the show, dresses and skirts in golden brocade, crème coloured cocktail dresses embroidered with rhinestones, beads and feathers and last an evening gown completely covered in brown feathers made its appearance on the catwalk.

The second part of the show was instead organized around the red and black coloured Scottish tartan that appeared on everything from pleated kilts, tailored vests, suits, pants and dresses. The tartan was frequently worn together with white blouses and petticoats, bulky brown leather belts, berets and woollen knee socks, all in a colour scale of red, black, brown and crème white. Some of the models wore knee-high heeled boots that resembled "Highland

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Ghillies,” a traditional Scottish shoe with criss-crossed laces. Most of the models wore one long and pointy feather placed in their hair.

Towards the end of the show, a number of black dresses made of silk or velvet with silver ornaments and some crème coloured evening gowns appeared on the catwalk. One of the evening gowns was made of many layers of ruffles with a fitted bodice and trail, worn together with a pair of jewelled deer antlers draped by a transparent shawl.

When the last model had left the runway, the lighting went down and an illusive and transparent 3D hologram, featuring fashion model Kate Moss, began to take form inside the glass pyramid in the middle of the catwalk.⁶⁹ Dressed in a white veil and ruffle gown designed by McQueen, Moss floated and twirled in the air, slowly rotating her body to the music. This made her dress, veil and hair move as if a wind was blowing at her, the hologram finally ended with a flash of light. All the models walked down the runway one last time before the show ended.

The Girl Who Lived in the Tree (see footnote for video and appendix nr. 4 for images)⁷⁰

Based on the British Empire, the Queens of England, the Duke of Wellington, toy soldiers and punk princesses, this fashion fairy tale is dominated by an ancient tulle-wrapped tree referencing the work of the artist, Christo. For the first half of the show our heroine is dressed in beautiful rags: nipped waisted jackets, Victorian-line dresses with S-bend corseted tops, textured, hand-knitted mohair and washed tweeds all in dark or neutral colours lend a make-do-and-mend feel to the proceedings. It isn't long, though, before our princess meets her Prince Charming, at which point she descends from her treetop habitat and finds all the riches of the world at her disposal. Her clothing duly explodes into colour and references everything from the wardrobe of the young Princess Elizabeth – crimson velvet New Look dresses, ermine wraps and a bastardised Union Jack print – to the places of the Maharajas – a draped, predominantly empire-line silhouette finished with paper-flat embroidered slippers, each pair bespoke and created to complement its own outfit.⁷¹

In the fall/winter 2008 collection, *The Girl Who Lived in the Tree*, McQueen staged a fashion show inspired by the work of the Bulgarian artist “Christo,” especially known for wrapping in

⁶⁹ Directed by Niall Donnelly and Brendan Morrissey, accompanied with the soundtrack for Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, written by John Williams, performed by Iain Sutherland, New World Philharmonic Orchestra & Tasmin Little, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIcsYBZSQ48&feature=related>.

⁷⁰ Alexander McQueen, fall/winter 2008, *The Girl Who Lived in the Tree*, YouTube, http://www.alexandermcqueen.com/int/en/corporate/archive2008_aw_womens.aspx.

⁷¹ Ibid.

large buildings or other parts of the environment with textile fabrics. The whole setting for the show was covered in light textiles, the floor were draped and in the centre of the space stood a large constructed tree. The runway had a circular form, with the tree placed in the middle. All the models walked one by one, gentle and slowly around the tree, stopping in the middle of the runway to strike a pose, and then kept walking to the end of the catwalk. The audio was not specified in the video documentation of the fashion show, yet it featured string versions of grunge band Nirvana's "Come As You Are" as well as "Smells Like Teen Spirit," and in the end of the show, during the models final walk, Smith's "This Charming Man" was playing.⁷²

The collection's theme revolved around the British Empire during the Victorian imperialist era, featuring exaggerated nineteenth century silhouettes with strongly corseted waists and full crinoline skirts, sleek black-tie suits, frail empire cut muslin dresses and luxurious Indian inspired garments combined with diamond jewellery.

The first part of the show were structured around a dark colour scale consisting of outfits mostly in black or grey, with some features of crème white. All the models' in the first part had big frizzy punk inspired hairdos, and wore high-heeled leather pumps. The models wore sharply tailored pantsuits, cravat shirts, patterned leather, checkered wool, sleeveless tulle crinoline dresses with lace applications and knitted wool dresses embroidered with silver.

Whereas the second part of the show rather was built around a colour scale of gold, white, red, black and purple. The models' hair were tightly combed parted in the middle, in a style similar to that worn by Queen Elizabeth the first. The models were heavily adorned in golden jewellery, decorated with raw cut diamonds, most of them wore earrings, necklaces as well as headpieces. The second part's models were dressed in Napoleon inspired waistcoats, sheer empire cut muslin dresses, slippers encrusted with crystals, dresses made of Indian saris and evening gowns completely covered with feathers. Almost every piece was decorated with gold embroidery and jewels.

The Horn Of Plenty (see footnote for video and appendix nr. 5 for images)⁷³

Subtitled 'Everything But The Kitchen Sink', the concept here is a play between a profound respect for and the subversion of the haute couture tradition. The set features a pile of debris – everything from rubbish bags and crashed car parts to broken fairground horses and castaway chairs – much of it recycled props from past

⁷² Alexander McQueen, fall/winter 2008, *The Girl Who lived in the Tree*, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcBKBiOoFq0&feature=related>.

⁷³ Alexander McQueen, fall/winter 2009, *The Horn Of Plenty*, YouTube, http://www.alexandermcqueen.com/int/en/corporate/archive2009_aw_womens.aspx.

McQueen shows. The clothes themselves draw on haute couture signatures – Dior’s iconic hounds tooth check, the elegance of Audrey Hepburn in Givenchy – and takes them apart at the seams. Aforementioned check breaks away into a magpie print inspired by M.C. Escher, or is scarred with vinyl reminiscent of the splatter paintings of Jackson Pollock. Gowns are crafted in what looks like bin-liners or broken records but are in fact highly expensive paper nylon and lacquered silk respectively. Hats echo the ordurous theme – washing machine hoses, umbrellas, lampshades and more are transformed into objects of beauty. McQueen’s models stand taller and prouder than ever in hugely elevated footwear. All in all, this is power-dressing at its most elaborate and extreme.⁷⁴

In the fall/winter collection 2009 named *The Horn Of plenty*, McQueen addressed the, at the time, on-going recession, and how the economic crisis came to effect the fashion industry. The fashion show was staged around a giant “pile of debris – everything from rubbish bags and crashed car parts to broken fairground horses and castaway chairs – much of it recycled props from past McQueen shows,”⁷⁵ with a floor made of cracked mirror glass.

The background music for the show was built around a pulsing electronically sounds, creating an aggressive and hostile atmosphere, containing of roaring, clattering and howling animal sounds, combined with military influenced rhythms.

The collection contained a mixture of pieces from McQueen’s own previous collections and outfits inspired by the classic designs by Christian Dior and Hubert de Givenchy, all in a colour scale of black, red and white. The collection was to a great extent “a play between a profound respect for and the subversion of the haute couture tradition,”⁷⁶ where McQueen had added a gothic, fetishistic and rebellious side to the iconic pieces. The show appeared as a kind of revisited fashion history, viewed from a doomsday perspective.

All the models walked with a strong and aggressive, yet elegant and sophisticated, strut, often with their hands placed on their hips. They moved slowly around the garbage hoop, stopping in the middle of the runway to strike a pose, dressed in high platform pumps or boots and with extraordinary headpieces consisting of: hair curlers, deposit cans, washing machine hoses, umbrellas, lampshades and hubcaps wrapped in plastic tape or cellophane. The models were pale looking with distinctive red or black coloured lips, in a style that reminded of clown makeup.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

In the first section of the show, the models wore black and white coloured hounds tooth checkered from top to toe: hounds tooth checkered skirt suits, coats, cocktail dresses, vests, pants, shoes, scarfs and sunglasses. Eventually replaced by a monochromic black theme consisting of: coatdresses with narrow waists and full skirts, longhaired fur coats, tightfitting leather dresses with bondage inspiration, quilted suits, trench coats and tightfitting knitted wool dresses. Followed by a red and black coloured segment of outfits, for example striped knitted wool dresses, striped fur jackets, checkered pencil skirts, graphic leatherjackets and some striped sleeveless silk dresses with fitted bodices and tails.

Towards the end of the show, evening gowns of various kinds came into view; one black full length sequin dress, with a hoodie lined with red sequins, followed by a red and black silk puff dress, with birds in different sizes printed all over the dress. Then two hourglass shaped dresses appeared, both in red and black colours. One was completely covered with red and black feathers, the other was worn under a tightfitting metallic mail or burqa made of square metal pieces, covering the model's arms, shoulders, neck and head except for the eyes. The last two models of the show wore completely feather-covered gowns, one white and one black. The white outfit constituted of a tightfitting dress combined with a tightfitting scalp cap, accessorized with red lipstick and red platform pumps, with some sort of frame or cage constructed around the model's upper body. The black outfit was similar to the white in shape, consisting of a tightfitting dress with a scalp cap, but had in contrast, large wings attached to the shoulders.

2. The cultural history of the senses

This chapter address the role of the senses in Western philosophy and literature, noting how different senses have been looked upon during different times in history, where sensory hierarchies have been replacing each other over time. An implication must here be addressed. This chapter do not address McQueen's five fashion shows, but sketches a discussion of the senses, which makes it easier for a discussion about McQueen's fashion shows to take place in the next following chapters. Most of the sources I will refer to, belong in the anthology *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, edited by David Howes.

In Susan Stewart's contribution, "Remembering the Senses," she introduces a general theory about why the senses throughout history have been perceived as philosophical problematic. This issue is further discussed in the quote below:

The senses have often been considered as a philosophical problem appearing on a boundary between what we refer to, perhaps for lack of better terms, as internal and external phenomena. Here the relation between external objects – that is, material forms and living organisms – and the phenomena of our immediate awareness of the world – colour, shape, sound, smell, tactile feelings – is both distinguished and blurred.⁷⁷

The philosophical problem with the senses have been that they operate on the boundary between what have been thought of as internal and external phenomena, which make the boundaries between them seem blurred and unclear. In this way the senses has been considered problematic since they have “emphasized the status of sensory experiences in relation to varying historical models of the real”.⁷⁸ This means, challenging contemporary definitions of “the reality,” which ever since Aristotle’s days has been a topic of great philosophical concern. Stewart states: “In Aristotle’s doctrine the information provided by the external senses reached the internal senses by means of a common sense of touch.”⁷⁹ Aristotle is often said to be the thinker that introduced the notion of the five sensory organs in his work *De Anima*, which have come to influence how the discourses of the senses later have been constructed.⁸⁰ Hence by tracing the five senses back to Aristotle, Stewart notes that also the hierarchy of the senses originate from Ancient time:

For Aristotle touch (and thereby taste) was found in all animals and so became the lowliest sense. He contended that touch was the sense needed for being, whereas the other senses were necessary for wellbeing. He therefore posed a hierarchical order of the senses, from most to least valuable: vision-hearing-smell-taste-touch.⁸¹

Stewart further stresses that Aristotle’s work *Nicomachean Ethics* to a great extent is responsible for the development of “the opposition between the Heroic Virtue (tending toward God and therefore abstraction) and pleasure (tending toward the animal and therefore the sensual).”⁸² Thus the hierarchical order of the senses also reflects a philosophical discussion of ethics and morality. Stewart explains this subject matter with the following words:

⁷⁷ Susan Stewart, “Remembering the Senses,” in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), 59-60.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

[...] the senses have been ranked in relation to their degree of immediacy – taste and touch, in direct contact with the world, are lowest, followed by smell, which forms a kind of mean distance to sight and hearing, which operate across distance and yet can be remembered at will. Hearing and sight, because of their link with philosophical contemplation and abstraction, hold the leading place.”⁸³

Stewart argues that it is possible to construct a discourse of the senses by studying the “history of the senses as the history of an economy that ranks the senses and regulates the body’s relation to the social world in a transformed and transforming way.”⁸⁴ Stewart hence draws attention to how different sense discourses historically have been constructed, which simultaneously also suggests that it is possible to construct a new discourse of the senses if wanted or needed.

Christian Metz draws attention to this subject matter in *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* as well, noting that: “Psychophysiology makes a classic distinction between the ‘senses at a distance’ (sight and hearing) and the others all of which involve immediate proximity and which it calls the ‘senses of contact’ (Pradines): touch, taste, smell, cœnaesthetic sense, etc.”⁸⁵ Metz henceforth stresses: “It is no accident that the main socially acceptable arts are based on the senses at a distance, and that those which depend on the senses of contact are often regarded as ‘minor’ arts (e.g. the culinary arts, the art of perfumes, etc.). Nor is it an accident that the visual or auditory imaginaries have played a much important part in the histories of societies than the tactile or olfactory imaginaries.”⁸⁶

Constance Classen’s chapter “The Witch’s Senses: Sensory Ideologies and Transgressive Femininities from the Renaissance to Modernity,” addresses the Western hierarchy of the senses viewed from a gender perspective. Classen states: “In the European hierarchy of the senses, the sensibilities of women traditionally ranked low. While men had mastery of the ‘higher’ senses of sight and hearing, women were linked with the ‘lower’ senses of touch, taste and smell.”⁸⁷ According to Classen the highest sense was sight, because it was considered “the most noble, rational and masculine of the senses.”⁸⁸

David Howes also discuss this issue of sense hierarchies in the introduction to the book, where he writes:

⁸³ Ibid., 62.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982), 59.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 59-60.

⁸⁷ Classen, 2006, 70.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 75.

The senses are typically ordered in hierarchies. In one society or social context sight will head the list of the senses, in another it may be hearing or touch. Such sensory rankings are always allied with social rankings and employed to order society. The dominant group in society will be linked to esteemed senses and sensations while subordinate groups will be associated with less-valued or denigrated senses. In the West the dominant group – whether it be conceptualized in terms of gender, class or race – has conventionally been associated with the supposedly ‘higher’ senses of sight and hearing, while subordinate groups (women, workers, non-Westerners) have been associated with the so-called lower senses of smell, taste and touch. Within each sensory field, as well, sensations deemed relatively unpleasant or dangerous will be linked to ‘unpleasant,’ ‘dangerous’ social groups.⁸⁹

Hence, the ordering of the senses in hierarchies are, as Howes points out above, “always allied with social rankings and employed to order society.” In other words, the sensory rankings always correspond with the prevailing social structure, hence the senses meaning are not fixed or frozen, but are continuously constructed within the context of a particular society during a specific time.

Howes furthermore notes that it throughout Western history have been customary to associate the senses with nature in contrast to culture. “The human sensorium, however, never exists in a natural state. Humans are social beings, and just as human nature itself is a product of culture, so is the human sensorium,”⁹⁰ Howes writes. In other words, the human senses are not a product of nature, but of culture. According to Howes, the phenomenon of perception is thus first and foremost something one lives with the human senses, which essentially are socially and culturally constructed.⁹¹ On account of the social and cultural significance of perception, Howes argues for the need of a “sensual revolution” within the humanities and social sciences with the words:

In addition to overturning linguistic paradigms of culture, one of the aims of the sensual revolution is to recover perception from the laboratory. Science and psychology typically understand perception to be private, internal, ahistorical and apolitical. Ignoring the role of culture makes it possible to universalize from experiments conducted on a limited sample of (usually) Western subjects.⁹²

⁸⁹ Howes, 2006, 10.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁹¹ Ibid., 3-4.

⁹² Ibid., 4.

Howes emphasizes that such a sensory revolution must be carried out by writing and discussing the senses, and to acknowledge all the senses as equally important. He furthermore stresses that “perception is a shared social phenomenon – and as a social phenomenon it has a history and a politics that can only be comprehended within its cultural setting.”⁹³ In other words, since perceptions are socially constructed, they are also shared by others. Howes writes that the main problem with a mind/body dichotomy within a scientific context, is that such perspective tend to view sense and intellect in opposition to each other. He develops this thought further in the quote below:

Despite the increasing breadth and depth of the work being done on the senses in the humanities and social sciences, the cultural and historical study of the senses – or of ‘sensual culture’ as used here – is still suspect in the eyes of many scholars. Such scholars fear that an emphasis on sensation entails a loss of critical awareness and precipitates a slide into a morass of emotion and desire. [...] This is hardly a recent concern, but rather a contemporary expression of one of the crucial dichotomies of Western intellectual history: the divide between body and mind [...] The classic opposition between sense and intellect has led to the notion that the expansion of sensory awareness (except in the case of sight, the most ‘rational’ of the senses) entails a diminution of intellectual activity.⁹⁴

Howes notes that this imagined opposition between sense and intellect, as well as the divide between thinking and feeling, has existed for a long time in history. Hence he stresses the need of let go of that kind of reasoning and instead highlight the fact “that the mind is necessarily embodied and the senses mindful, then a focus on perceptual life is not a matter of losing our minds but of coming to our senses.”⁹⁵

Finally Steven Connor’s chapter “Michel Serres’ Five Senses” takes its starting point in Michel Serres book *Les cinq sens*, where Serres stresses the existence of a sixth sense; a “unifying or common sense, the sense of selfhood, whereby the self apprehends itself as itself.”⁹⁶ This sixth or common sense is especially located to the skin and touch that signify “a way of being amidst rather than standing before the world, that is necessary for knowledge.”⁹⁷ In Connor’s reading of Serres, “The skin encompasses, implies, pockets up all the other sense

⁹³ Ibid., 5.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁹⁶ Steven Connor, “Michel Serres’ Five Senses,” in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), 323.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 322.

organs: but, in doing so, it stands as a model for the way in which all the senses in their turn also invaginate all the others.”⁹⁸ The skin and the faculty of touch are thus placed centre stage in the discussion of the senses.

Connor emphasize that Serres’s sixth sense also could be understood as a “sense of bodily joy, or ecstasy”⁹⁹ for example to be found “in the pleasures of swimming, of running, in the human fascination with the trampoline, or in the playing of rugby. Here, the body becomes itself in playing with, or transforming itself.”¹⁰⁰

In sum, Stewart, Metz, Classen and Howes all discuss how the five human senses historically have been perceived in the West, whereas Connor also discusses the possibility of a sixth sense and how such a sense operates. All theorists emphasize that the meaning of the senses may change over time since they are not naturally given, but culturally and socially constructed within a specific cultural and historical setting.

3. Pleasure

This chapter is concentrated around the concept of “pleasure,” taking its starting point in Barthes’s thoughts on “the text of pleasure” and “the text of bliss” as well as his notions of the “punctum” and “studium” qualities of a photograph. But before engaging in that discussion, I will first address the specific role of McQueen’s fashion shows in this context.

As mentioned earlier, McQueen’s fashion shows give me pleasure on a personal level, but why this pleasure arises or how it is constructed is not fully as clear. To get closer to an answer, I compared the five fashion shows with each other, in order to distinguish certain characteristics that unite and separate them from each other. An implication must here be addressed. All five of the fashion shows give me pleasure in general, but to be able to discuss them more thorough, I had to characterize certain contrasting features that sometimes may be a bit exaggerated and therefore should not be taken too seriously. The five fashion shows are after all chosen, because they all affect me intensely and give me pleasure.

First, when comparing the five fashion shows I realized that I do not find *Voss* and *It’s Only A Game* fully as pleasurable as *The Widows of Culloden*, *The Girl Who Lived in the Tree* and *The Horn of Plenty*. Second, I find all of the five fashion shows’ fashion designs to be extraordinary, inspiring and pleasurable to look at. Thus I think the difference in pleasure should be searched for elsewhere than in the clothes and accessories solely. Possibly in the

⁹⁸ Ibid., 323.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 329.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

elements that has to do with the fashion shows narrative, location and performative qualities i.e. the atmosphere on the show, music, lighting and model choice, which all together affects the final impression. Third, McQueen's fashion shows are essentially very spectacular events that more than anything else appears as art performances, often concentrated around a specific theme, where all different parts come together. One of the reasons I find them so fascinating is that they give rise to an intense form of experience that can be felt over the whole body.

Pleasure, bliss, punctum and studium

Barthes's reflections over the text of pleasure and the text of bliss have a lot in common with his notion of punctum and studium. To start with, it seems as if the concept of pleasure and studium belong in one category, and bliss and punctum in another. Furthermore, Barthes appears to use these two categories to contrast two different types of approaches against each other: a social conformist approach versus an asocial revolutionary approach.¹⁰¹

As already noted, Barthes describes the text of pleasure as "the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading,"¹⁰² while the concept of studium as an "application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity".¹⁰³ In these quotes it becomes apparent that both the concept of pleasure and the concept of studium refer to activities that operates on a cultural level. These concepts do not break or disturb the order of things, and that follows some sort of continuity.

By comparison the text of bliss is described as "the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts [...] unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language,"¹⁰⁴ whereas punctum refer to an element that "will break (or punctuate) the studium. [...] it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. [...] A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."¹⁰⁵ Hence it is clear that the concept of bliss as well as the concept of punctum is organized around disruptions, cuts and breaks with order, rather than around continuity and harmony.

¹⁰¹ Barthes, 1975, 23.

¹⁰² Ibid., 14 (Italics in original).

¹⁰³ Barthes, 2000, 26 (Italics in original).

¹⁰⁴ Barthes, 1975, 14.

¹⁰⁵ Barthes, 2000, 26-7 (Italics in original).

The difference between Barthes's two types of texts/photographs could maybe be described as the state when one is taking part of the text/photograph, and when one becomes lost within the text/photograph. I interpret this difference as something that also could be described as the difference between being influenced by culture, and to break with culture.

Barthes's notions of punctum and studium can be used as tools to distinguish different types of experiences from each other. Barthes speaks of the studium of a photograph as the thing that evokes a polite and general interest for the picture, yet it is clear that such a photograph do not give rise to any extreme feelings of excitement and affect.

In the view of Barthes, I would say that both McQueen's *Voss* and *It's Only A Game* fashion shows evoke some sort of general interest and enjoyment, thus belonging in the category of studium, whereas *The Widows of Culloden*, *The Girl Who Lived in the Tree* and *The Horn of Plenty* fashion shows "prick" me, or "bruises" me with intense emotions of pleasure, hence belonging in the category of punctum.

I appreciate McQueen's *Voss* and *It's Only A Game* for many reasons, but there are some elements in the two fashion shows that I think lowers the whole experience, and thus also my pleasure. The fashion designs by McQueen are always of great interest and I truly adore his artistic work, yet it is clear that fashion shows are not all about fashion, here understood as clothing and accessories. Instead, other elements as the music, model choice, location, atmosphere and narrative all have a crucial impact on how the fashion show is perceived. The *Voss* show is staged around a large glass cube, with models walking around inside it. The show comes into view as interesting and stimulating in general, but in the finale when the naked Michelle Olley slouching on a sofa appear, I think it all fall apart. The end of the show is in my opinion too exaggerated; it gives the show a humorous or even burlesque touch to it. It appears to me as if McQueen in *Voss* mixes elements of horror, disgust and humour, thus using a narrative structure sometimes referred to as "grotesque".

In *It's Only A Game*, McQueen stages a fashion show set as a chess game, where the models take on roles as different groups or tribes who battle each other. The notion of playfulness and humour is present in the show, time to time it even feels a little bit gimmicky. The storytelling do not operate through subtle channels, instead the narrative is almost too obvious with the result that the show loses some of its magic and mystery.

In the end of the show when a speaker voice announces that the chess game has begun, and the models start to battle each other on the chessboard, I feel that the magic that the collection indeed has in itself, in a way is spoiled. I get the impression that the taken for granted reaction is to perceive the show as innovative and spectacular in relation to how fashion shows usually

are constructed. But I do not feel like that, instead I feel as something is missing. The show gives a stiff, irregular and technical impression, with little room for surprises or spontaneity. Hence what the show is missing is a sense of flow and sensuality, which makes the whole experience of watching it less delightful.

In short, *Voss* and *It's Only A Game* represent experiences belonging in the category of studium, "which never is my delight or my pain."¹⁰⁶ They only evoke a form of slight general interest, even though the fashion designs in the two fashion shows are truly amazing. This due to the fact that the fashion shows contains elements that make the total impression less pleasurable. One could also say that the two fashion shows did not correspond to my expectations of a McQueen fashion show, which I associate with another type of experience, an experience that give rise to powerful feelings of excitement and affect.

Sensory pleasure

What I ultimately strive to get from looking at McQueen's fashion shows, is an intense sensory pleasurable experience, where I both feel physical and psychological affected by what I perceive. *The Widows of Culloden*, *The Girl Who Lived in the Tree* and *The Horn of Plenty*, all give rise to this type of sensory pleasure. Sensory pleasure is of course something that must be said to be highly personal. In this context Barthes words comes into mind:

I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science, it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound.¹⁰⁷

In the quote above, Barthes explains how the concept of punctum operates, which always is on a subjective level. This is why someone's experience of punctum, at the same time can be a subject of studium for someone else. Thus, the things that affect one person may very well leave someone else completely indifferent. For this reason, the notion of sensory pleasure is only connected to the concept of punctum, since someones' sensory pleasure naturally involve a subjective experience of some sort. The thing that especially give me sensory pleasure in *The Widows of Culloden*, *The Girl Who Lived in the Tree* and *The Horn of Plenty* is a certain

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 28 (Italics in original).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 73.

feeling of flow and sensuality, performed with delicacy and effortless elegance that create an illusion of a perfect, yet fleeting moment.

As already mentioned, Barthes argues that the site of bliss in a text proceeds from certain breaks or collisions achieved by cutting, where two edges are created. This duplicity is important since it is in the seam, cut, fault and flaw between the two edges that bliss essentially is constructed.¹⁰⁸ In the case of McQueen, all five of his fashion shows contain features that break or collide with each other. This comes into view in McQueen's way of mixing soft and hard textures and materials in his fashion designs, which succeeds to capture vulnerability as well as toughness at the same time. His shows are also often constructed around two contrasting parts; one introductory part and one breaking part. There always seem to be a breaking point somewhere in the middle of the fashion shows, where the introductory theme gradually is replaced by something new, often in a completely different fashion. It is precisely in this tension, between the two contrasting components in the fashion shows, that my state of bliss ultimately arises.

McQueen's highly personal perception of beauty and fashion is furthermore something that breaks or collides with much contemporary fashion. On a symbolically level McQueen's work seems to exist in a space between different fashion approaches, which do not sit in a category with anything else. As an actor in the fashion system, McQueen can be seen as a "free radical" that creates tension within the fashion system. Following Barthes's theory, it is this tension that McQueen bring about that also gives rise to my bliss i.e. my sensory pleasure.

Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright discuss the emotional power of photographs by referring to Barthes in *Practices of Looking: An introduction to Visual Culture*, stating that: "Photographic meaning derives precisely from this paradoxical combination of affective and magical qualities and the photograph's cultural status as cold proof."¹⁰⁹ Sturken and Cartwright interpret Barthes concept of punctum as a way of "characterize the affective element of those certain photographs that pierce one's heart with feeling" and studium as a concept which "serve as banal traces of the real, documentary evidence of something that simply has happened".¹¹⁰

Based on Sturken and Cartwright's perspective, I would like to argue that Barthes's concept of punctum as well as his notion of bliss just as easily could be understood as descriptions of an intense affecting experience. With this in mind, my feelings about

¹⁰⁸ Barthes 1975, 6-7.

¹⁰⁹ Sturken and Cartwright, 2009, 18.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

McQueen's fashion shows are hence a matter of affection. Many of the fashion shows that passes me by in general, interests me. Yet very few fashion shows really leaves me affected, or to use Barthes words: "I glance through them, I don't recall them; no detail [...] I am interested in them (as I am interested in the world), I do not love them."¹¹¹ But when I look at McQueen's fashion shows, I get lost within them. Something within them pierce my heart with feeling so that they continue to exist in my consciousness long time after I have stopped watching. The fashion shows and designs of McQueen are not something I think calmly about; I *love* them, hence it is not just a question of liking or not liking, but something I feel very strongly about, that leaves me intensely affected.

Barthes describes a photograph that induces a powerful interest in him, with the following words: "a specific photograph reaches me; it animates me, and I animate it."¹¹² In a similar view, I would like to argue that the fashion shows that take hold of me contains an animating quality that succeeds to animate me, which makes me feel as if the fashion shows are "coming alive".

A sixth sense

As already mentioned, Connor refers to Serres's thoughts of the existence of a sixth sense; a "unifying or common sense, the sense of selfhood, whereby the self apprehends itself as itself."¹¹³ This sixth or common sense is especially located to the skin and touch that signify "a way of being amidst rather than standing before the world, that is necessary for knowledge".¹¹⁴ I find these thoughts about a sixth sense very interesting because it points to the notion of a "sense of selfhood," which draw attention to the notion of a self-reflective subjectivity. In the case of McQueen's fashion shows, it is my self-reflective sense of selfhood that I try to describe, which constitutes a way of being within McQueen's fashion shows rather than standing in front of them.

Serres's sixth sense could also be understood as a "sense of bodily joy, or ecstasy" for example to be found in the pleasures of certain physical activities, where "the body becomes itself in playing with, or transforming itself."¹¹⁵ This type of bodily joy or felt ecstasy could easily be connected to my discussion of McQueen's video documented fashion shows. In this case, much of my bodily joy lies in me letting my body pursue its own sensory pleasures by

¹¹¹ Barthes, 2000, 41.

¹¹² Ibid., 20.

¹¹³ Connor, 2006, 323.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 322.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 329.

“playing with, or transforming itself.” When I watch the fashion shows I experience an intense feeling of pleasure, a pleasure that I can feel all over my skin, as a form of sixth sense, that pick up all the other senses as well.

4. Affect

This chapter examines the concepts of “affect”, particularly in relation to Ahmed theory where emotions and affects are perceived as relational and mediated. I furthermore discuss my affective experience of McQueen’s fashion shows and describe how that experience feels like.

As a result of the Western Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body, reason and emotion has for a long time in history been constructed as each other’s opposites, subsequently have also reasoning and feeling been treated as two separated phenomena. In this line of thought, reasoning is perceived as rational and constructive, whereas feelings and emotion are viewed as irrational, deceitful and misleading. For this reason feelings and emotions have been viewed as untrustworthy sources for reasoning and judgements.¹¹⁶

Even if these intellectual traditions no longer hold the same dominant position in peoples’ minds as they did in the past, they still continue to influence how certain phenomena, activities and people are perceived today. Affect theory thus bring forth that by examining how this opposition between reason and emotion historically has been constructed. It is also possible to challenge it and articulate an alternative approach. Affect theory challenges the dualism of mind and body by deliberately highlighting issues that in the past have been considered unworthy the attention by scholars, like “intensities of feeling, emotional attachments and gut reactions.”¹¹⁷ Affect theory moreover examines the very physicality of affects and emotions, how they work on and through bodies. Hence much affect theory share common ground with phenomenology that places the lived bodily experience centre stage for its theory and thus rethinks the Cartesian subject.

Affects and emotions - relational and mediated

As already mentioned, in Ahmed’s perspective affects and emotions are not something that individuals or collectives simply have, but are shaped by the contact we have with objects and

¹¹⁶ Koivunen, 2010, 11.

¹¹⁷ Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen, introduction to *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing differences* (London and New York, 2010), 1.

other people.¹¹⁸ They are in other words relational, and as such “they involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’”.¹¹⁹ Hence affects and emotions are constructed in the relation when someone and something else come into contact. Ahmed furthermore emphasizes that such contact always is mediated by past histories of contact.¹²⁰ For this reason Ahmed both find psychological ‘inside out’ and sociological ‘outside in’ models on affects and emotions to be inadequate, since such models do not take into account the relational and mediated side of affects and emotions, which “actually work to generate the distinction between inside and outside, partly by rehearsing associations that are already in place.”¹²¹

Ahmed writes that the phenomena of affect and emotion may be separated conceptually, but that they cannot be separated from each other as lived experiences. Since affects and emotions are mediated, what we feel is tied to what we already know, which is based on passed bodily experiences that builds a sort of knowledge transmitted by the skin. Following Ahmed’s theory, the pleasure I feel when I watch McQueen’s fashion shows is intimately connected to my previously mediated lived experiences, and how these passed experiences have affected me in bodily and emotional ways. These previously mediated lived experiences that McQueen’s fashion shows could be connected to, are thus shaped by the contact I have with objects and other people. The objects and persons that I relate McQueen’s five fashion shows to, consist of certain people, films, images and music. I describe some of them below.

To start with, several of McQueen’s fashion shows recall much of Peter Greenaway’s film aesthetics in its coupling of delicacy and savageness. *The Horn of Plenty*’s dark, unpolished and brutal imagery, reminds me of Greenaway’s film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989) and particularly the film costumes that were designed by Jean Paul Gaultier¹²² (known as the “enfant terrible” of French fashion). Similarly to Gaultier, McQueen was often referred to as the “enfant terrible” of British fashion. Besides their parallel epithets, Gaultier and McQueen furthermore have in common their sadomasochistic references, their attention to details as well as their flair for spectacular drama. Many of the fashion designs of the show consisted of trench coat inspired pieces; another shared ground with Gaultier, which designs often are inspired by trench coats. The extraordinary head wear of the models that consist of lampshades, round balls, aluminium cans, umbrellas and much more, as well as the make up

¹¹⁸ Ahmed, 2004, 4.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹²¹ Ibid., 194.

¹²² The Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097108/combined>.

of the models with white skin and distinctive red or black coloured mouths was a clear reference to Australian performance artist Leigh Bowary.

In the case of *It's Only A Game*, the models' appearance as well as the fashion designs of the fashion show remind me of the beautiful yet eerie atmosphere of Sofia Coppola's film *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) with costume design by Nancy Steiner.¹²³ Coppola's film has sometimes been said to be a modern updated version of Peter Weir's film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975).¹²⁴ Interestingly, Weir's film is also the inspiration source behind McQueen's collection, thus becoming a common point of contact. Furthermore, the playfulness and the all-white minimalist setting of the runway recalls a theatre scene or an exhibition space, which makes the fashion show appear more as an art performance than a traditional fashion show.

In *The Girl Who Lived in the Tree*, McQueen stages a fashion show inspired by the work of the Bulgarian artist Christo, featuring a setting covered in light textiles with a large constructed tree placed in the middle. The background music consists of string versions of grunge band Nirvana's "Come As You Are" as well as "Smells Like Teen Spirit," which I associate with rebellious youth and a nevermind attitude to things in general. There are several historical themes in the fashion show: the Queens of England, the Battle of Waterloo and the British Empire presence in India, with explicit references to: Elizabeth 1, Queen Victoria, Elizabeth II, the Duke of Wellington, Napoleon and Joséphine de Beauharnais.¹²⁵

In *The Widows of Culloden*, McQueen returns to the theme of England's exploitation of Scotland, which he already addressed in his autumn/winter collection called *Highland Rape*, where a symbolic battle take place on the runway. The collection gives a luxurious, romantic but melancholic impression, where almost every piece in the show appears as a piece of art. The amazing 3-D hologram with its classic music soundtrack in the finale of the fashion show comes across as an art installation more than anything else.

Finally, because of *Voss*'s mental hospital theme, it first and foremost reminds me of Milos Forman's film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) that takes place in a similar milieu. The setting of a solitary confinement combined with models wearing extraordinary pieces of clothing gives a contradictory and bizarre impression. Several of the fashion designs are adorned with unconventional materials as ostrich feathers, glass pieces and mussel-shells.

¹²³ The Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0159097/combined>.

¹²⁴ Roy Rodenstein, "The Virgin Suicides – The Occasional Golden Moment," *The Tech*, (May 09, 2000), http://tech.mit.edu/V120/N26/Virgin_Suicides.26a.html.

¹²⁵ Alexander McQueen, fall/winter 2008, *The Girl Who lived in the Tree*, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcBKBiOoFq0&feature=related>.

One creation has two stuffed eagles, ready to attack, attached to the model's shoulders, which is an obvious reference to Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds* (1963). The tight fitting scalp caps that all the models wear as well as the mask that fetish writer Michelle Olley wear, again recalls Leigh Bowary, since his stage outfits often involved a mask or scalp cap of some sort.

In sum, following Ahmed's theory where affects and emotions are shaped by the contact we have with objects and other people, affects and emotions are essentially mediated, since what we feel is tied to what we already know. Thus, all the references in McQueen's five fashion shows constitute previously mediated experiences that influence my affective and emotional impression of them. I find Ahmed's assumptions to be correct; indeed do my previous experiences influence how I perceive something, because what I already know is then added to the new experience.

An affective turn

Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen write in the introduction to *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing differences* that the concept of affect has become a frequently used perspective within cultural theory and feminist research during the past decade. This has resulted in a new kind of theoretical platform. They explain the subject matter further in the quote below:

Affect has turned into a site for rethinking theoretical concerns ranging from dualisms of the mind and the body to critiques of identity politics and practices of critical reading. [...] New materialist critiques in particular have argued for the shortcomings of textual analysis and the legacy of the so-called textual turn for its tendency to downplay the sensory and the material in accounts of society and culture while conceptualizing cultural phenomena as discourses, texts or systems to be interpreted. For many, the so-called 'affective turn' is a reaction towards the limitations of post-structuralist theorizations, their structuralist legacies and commitment to linguistic models.¹²⁶

According to Liljeström and Paasonen, the so-called textual or "linguistic turn" within the field of Humanities and Social Sciences has to a great extent been challenged by the so-called "affective turn," which as in the quote above is described as a reaction towards the limitations of post-structuralist theorizations and the commitment to linguistic models. This affective turn has resulted in a positive attitude towards feelings, emotional attachments and bodily

¹²⁶ Liljeström and Paasonen, 2010, 1.

reactions in general.¹²⁷ Liljeström and Paasonen argue that the linguistic perspective is problematic for the reason that it does not take into account that interpretation always is inseparable from affect and vice versa.¹²⁸

Anu Koivunen also addresses the subject of an “affective turn” in her essay “An affective turn?: Reimagining the subject of feminist theory,” described as a “broad range of criticism of the linguistic turn and its effects on feminist research” taking place within the Humanities and Social Sciences in the 1990s.¹²⁹ Koivunen writes that the affective turn also could be understood as “the return of the body”.¹³⁰

Fashion shows that affects

The five fashion shows of McQueen have had a particularly haunting presence in my mind ever since I first came across them. The fashion shows still fascinate me and have not lost their power to move me, even though time has gone by. They affect me, i.e. move or touch me in highly bodily ways.

My affective involvement with McQueen’s fashion shows is something I mainly find to be positive, yet some negative aspects could be mentioned. On one hand the fashion shows give me pleasure, on the other hand they are also disturbing in that they succeed to mesmerize me, so that time goes by without me noticing it. In other words, distracting me from noticing other things at the same time. Hence both the positive and negative sides of the fashion shows are due to the fact that they affect me intensely.

Following Barthes’s thoughts on photography, where he states: “If I like a photograph, if it disturbs me, I linger over it. What am I doing, during the whole time I remain with it? I look at it, I scrutinize it, as if I wanted to know more about the thing or person it represents.”¹³¹ I find that it is precisely this arresting element in McQueen’s fashion shows that I like but also disturbs me, which drives me to watch them again and again to possibly discover something new that I have not noticed before. Yet I do not know exactly what it is I am looking for or what I want to know about them. The only thing I know is that I can not get enough of them. Thus, to feel attraction towards something as well as being disturbed by something is both a matter of affection.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Koivunen, 2010, 9.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹³¹ Barthes, 2000, 99.

The affective qualities of McQueen's fashion shows both operate on a psychological and a physical level. On one hand the fashion shows fuel my imagination, inspire and stimulate me in my own work and give me mental strength and energy, on the other hand they give rise to bodily sensations reflected by heightened levels of adrenaline that make me feel excited, alert and active.

Susanna Paasonen's chapter "Disturbing, fleshy texts: Close looking at pornography," also in *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing differences*, investigates what sometimes is considered to be disturbing in pornography, and how such experiences may affect individuals. Paasonen refers to film scholar Linda Williams in her text, who categorizes "pornography, melodrama and horror as body genres that aim to move their viewers in highly bodily ways".¹³² Following that thought, Paasonen writes that the quality of these film genres "is evaluated through its sensory and sensuous effects rather than more formal considerations of narrative, character construction or aesthetics."¹³³

Drawing on Paasonen's theorization, I would like to argue that all five of McQueen's fashion shows indeed operate in ways "that aim to move their viewers in highly bodily ways," but that do not mean that any less time was spent on the narrative, character portraits and aesthetics. Instead the fashion shows' affective power lies exactly in the careful attention to details, where narrative, character portraits and aesthetics all play equally important parts in the construction of the fashion shows. My affective experience depends ultimately on the way the fashion shows are weaved together. McQueen's fashion shows often mix up different sensory inputs that create an intimate feeling between all the different parts of the fashion shows. Even though only the visual and audio based characteristics could be taken into consideration in this study, the fashion shows still make a strong impression. I think one of the reasons I find them so extraordinary and pleasurable is because they hold a dimension of "synesthetic experience mingling of sensation,"¹³⁴ where a certain sensory experience evokes a separate additional sensory experience, as the translation of texture to tone or of tone to colour, smell or taste.¹³⁵ I will discuss the synesthetic experience more thorough in chapter six.

¹³² Susanna Paasonen, "Disturbing, fleshy texts: Close looking at pornography," in *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing differences*, ed. Liljeström and Paasonen (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 58.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Howes, 2006, 9.

¹³⁵ Richard E. Cytowic, *The Man Who Tasted Shapes* (London: The MIT Press, 2000), 54.

McQueen's fashion shows have, as digital files, appeals and qualities that still images do not have. Paasonen writes that the digital image has a more social, dynamic and viral life than the still image in the past had.¹³⁶ Paasonen states that the digital file essentially is:

Incontrollable in its circulation, the image can be endlessly reproduced, reappropriated and displayed in ways unintended by its creator. This brings about a specific kind of fluidity and liveness that the image could not have as a printed, physical – and in a sense fixed – material object.¹³⁷

Paasonen thus brings into view the fluidity of the digital image that unlike the still image “can be endlessly reproduced, reappropriated and displayed in ways unintended by its creator”. As digital video documentations, McQueen's fashion shows are more or less available for everyone at anytime. In my opinion, these incontrollable and circulating features of digital files give more room for personal interaction and affection. I perceive the digital video documentations of McQueen's fashion shows as much more vital, intimate and stimulating than the still images from the same shows, because in the digital format the fashion shows really “come alive”.

5. Embodiment

This chapter will investigate the concept of “embodiment” especially in relation to Merleau-Ponty's concept of “lived experience” and Entwistle's concept of “situated bodily practice,” where both my physical sensations (affects) and psychological states (emotions) about McQueen's fashion shows are taken into account. This chapter will mostly discuss McQueen's fashion shows in general terms and will therefore not go into details of each fashion show.

In Merleau-Ponty's view, phenomenology offers a resolution of traditional dichotomies between subject and object, culture and nature and mind and matter, because phenomenology goes back to the primary source, namely to the life-world experience, i.e. the embodied experience. Only through the embodied experience can the life-world be perceived directly, for the reason that any kind of intellectual activity essentially constitutes a second-order experience. According to Merleau-Ponty, the life-world is so to speak already there before any synthesis or judgements about it begins to take place. In this embodied experience, the

¹³⁶ Paasonen, 2010, 68.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

mind is not separated from the body, nor superior the body, but incorporated as a part of the whole bodily experience. Thus Merleau-Ponty argues that the life-world must be described rather than analysed, and that such a description preferably should start with the perception of the world, because the perception “is the background from which all acts stands out and is presupposed by them.”¹³⁸

In the light of Merleau-Ponty, every perception of the life-world evolves out of the embodied experience. From his point of view, it would perhaps be inaccurate to argue that some experiences are more embodied than other ones, since every experience in essence is embodied. Yet, I would like to argue that it is possible to distinguish certain experiences from other ones, based on their different levels of bodily and emotional intensity. In this context I use the term embodiment to describe a completely absorption or synchronization with something or someone, which constitute an intense sensory experience that is felt with all the senses throughout the body. In addition I focus on the pleasurable side of this embodied experience, hence by studying McQueen’s fashion shows I try to illustrate how such a sensory pleasurable experience could be described.

I find Merleau-Ponty’s embodiment theory on how individuals perceive the world around them through the life-world experience, to be useful when studying McQueen’s fashion shows. My experience of the fashion shows is something that I perceive through all my senses, hence it is not only a matter of a mental consciousness, but of an embodied consciousness experienced with the whole body. In the light of Merleau-Ponty, my experiences of the fashion shows are so to speak already in my consciousness before any reflections about that begins to appear. In other words, my perceptive awareness of the fashion shows arises out of my collected bodily experiences, and not from any separated mental activity taking place inside my head.

Ahmed as well as Howes challenge Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodiment. Ahmed does it by stressing that all emotions and affects ultimately are relational and performative, and as such shaped by the contact we have with others. Whereas Howes do it by emphasizing that the concept of embodiment could be extended to also include the concept of “emplacement.” He states: “While the paradigm of ‘embodiment’ implies an integration of mind and body, the emergent paradigm of emplacement suggests the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment”.¹³⁹ Hence what Ahmed wants to add to Merleau-Ponty’s embodiment theory, is the relational and performative aspect of the lived experience, while Howes want to add

¹³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, 2009, xi - xii.

¹³⁹ Howes, 2006, 7.

environmental issues to the concept. Howes notes that the idea of embodiment that often is described as a body-mind relation, could be improved by including the concept of “emplacement,” that involves a body-mind-environment relation. Nevertheless both Ahmed and Howes emphasize the usefulness of Merleau-Ponty’s theory in general.

Situated bodily practice

In *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* Joanne Entwistle introduces the concept of “‘situated bodily practice’ as a framework for bridging the gap between fashion and dress.”¹⁴⁰ By positioning the body in the centre for studies of fashion and dress, Entwistle argues that new knowledge, that previous scholars have been neglecting, can be gained. She states: “Dress is the way in which individuals learn to live in their bodies and feel at home in them. [...] In this respect, dress is both an intimate experience of the body and a public presentation of it. Operating on the boundary between self and other is the interface between the individual and the social world, the meeting place of the private and the public.”¹⁴¹ According to Entwistle, dress in peoples’ everyday life, “is an intimate aspect of the experience and presentation of the self and is so closely linked to the identity that these three – dress, the body and the self – are not perceived separately but simultaneously, as a totality.”¹⁴² It is this embodied dimension of dress that Entwistle argues that much studies of dress have missed to notice; “how dress operates on a phenomenal, moving body and how it is a practice that involves individual actions of attending *to* the body *with* the body.”¹⁴³

Drawing on Entwistle’s theorization, the activity of watching McQueen’s video documented fashion could be understood as a situated bodily practice. This situated bodily practice involves me attending to my body with my body. McQueen’s fashion shows operate on my body by inducing certain pleasurable bodily reactions in me, thus when I place myself in front of a computer in order to watch the fashion shows (that I know will give me pleasure) I so to speak attend to my body with my body.

Entwistle moreover states: “As a result of Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on perception and experience, subjects are reinstated as temporal and spatial beings. Rather than being ‘an object in the world’ the body forms our ‘point of view on the world’”.¹⁴⁴ Entwistle emphasizes that Merleau-Ponty’s theory point to the important yet simple fact that the mind is

¹⁴⁰ Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 4.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 28-9.

positioned in the body, and that any perceptive awareness of the world hence arise from our bodily experience in the world.¹⁴⁵ Thus both Entwistle's notion of the situated bodily practice and Merleau-Ponty's concept of the embodied experience have in common that they place the bodily experience in the centre of their discussions.

The embodied experience of McQueen's fashion shows

When I watch McQueen's video documented fashion shows, I feel completely absorbed and synchronized with them, as if they become an extension of myself. Following Entwistle's concept of the situated bodily practice; McQueen's fashion shows, my body and my sense of self, "are not perceived separately but simultaneously, as a totality."¹⁴⁶ My body and the computer I watch the fashion shows on, become one inseparable unit, where no distance between the fashion shows and myself seem to exist. When I watch the fashion shows, I am for a time lost. When I watch them in real-time, I do not think or feel anything specific, I am just transfixed by them. It is first afterwards that I begin to think and feel particular things.

Based on Merleau-Ponty's thoughts, one could say that the McQueen's fashion shows constitute my "life-world" during the time I watch them, and as such they are so to speak already there before any synthesis or judgements of mine about them begins to take place. In other words, first I perceive the fashion shows with my senses, then these sensory impressions are registered and organized in my nervous system, and last I begin to feel and think certain things.

What I first and foremost feel when I watch McQueen's fashion shows is excitement and pleasure. These feelings of excitement and pleasure are both felt on a bodily and an emotional level, thus constituting an embodied experience. This is one of the reasons I find the concept of embodiment so useful, that it does not separate physiological sensations (affects) from physiological states (emotions), but consider them as intertwined, hence bringing affect and emotion together.

My pleasure and excitement is something that is particularly linked to my imagination. When I watch the fashion shows, I adorn myself in McQueen's fashion designs in my imagination. In my imagination I shift place with the models in the fashion shows, so that I am the one who experience the fashion designs directly against my skin, and feels the weight of the clothes onto my body. Sometimes I can even imagine the smell of the garment and accessories. I find this imaginative activity pleasurable because it gives me the opportunity to

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 28.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 10.

speculate about how such experiences might feel like. In other words, at the same time I am watching the fashion shows, I am constructing parallel scenarios in my imagination, which gives me pleasure.

This fictive dimension that lies inherent in fashion, also affects the embodied experience by being even more intense, which is why I perceive fashion as the primary tool for reaching intense bodily and emotional experiences of pleasure and exaltation. In reality, I can only experience McQueen's video documented fashion shows through my sight and hearing senses, yet in my imagination I can construct an experience that involves sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch all together, which creates an intense feeling of pleasure and excitement.

Following Merleau-Ponty's perspective, I perceive the world around me through my life-world experience. This life-world is consequently something I perceive with all my senses. Now, as already discussed, McQueen's fashion shows constitute my life-world during the time when I watch them, hence my live-world experience is not a matter of a psychological state nor a physiological sensation, but of an embodied experience i.e. a multi-sensory experience.

Embodied desire

Russell W. Belk, Güliz Ger and Søren Askegaard emphasize in their joint work "The Fire of Desire: A Multisited inquiry into Consumer Passion" in the *Journal of Consumer Research* the social nature of desire, and perceive desire as a very intense and passionate emotion. They stress that "intense desire is a palpable feeling that permeates our existence – including our body – and rivets our consciousness on the desired object".¹⁴⁷ Hence, they are particularly interested in the lived experience of desire, where their main focus is on what it feels like to desire something, and how individuals think about their desires. Belk et al. further argue that desire seldom is a calm or neutral matter, because the things people desire often evokes strong feelings. According to them, desire can both feel "life affirming, energizing, and invigorating, as well as potentially addictive and destructive," but either way, desire is something that one can feel all over ones body.¹⁴⁸ Belk et al. moreover state that the passionate feature of desire makes the individual absorbed by his or her own experience.

Following Belk et al.s' thoughts, I would indeed say that I am absorbed by my own feelings of desire for McQueen's fashion shows. When I watch them, I get lost in them,

¹⁴⁷ Russel W. Belk, Güliz Ger, and Søren Askegaard, "The Fire of Desire: A Multisited Inquiry into Consumer Passion," *Journal of Consumer Research* Vol. 30, December (2003): 333.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 333-4.

something within them transfixes me, so that they continue to exist in my consciousness long after I have stopped watching. McQueen's fashion shows are not a calm or neutral matter, but something I feel very strongly about and that leaves me intensely affected. Yet exactly what it is that I desire with or in them I do not know for certain. The only thing I do know is that something in the fashion shows evokes a strong feeling of desire that I can both feel as a physiological sensation (affect) and a psychological state (emotion) in my body. Hence my bodily and emotional reactions blend together in an embodied feeling of desire. In this way, my embodied feeling of desire towards McQueen's fashion shows corresponds well with the notion of desire that Belk et al. have put forward.

The theory of desire developed by Belk et al. and Merleau-Ponty's embodiment theory contain many similar ideas. For example, Belk et al. do not stress any distinction between knowledge deriving from the mind or the body, instead they emphasize the lived experience, as in a combination of both, as the preferred source of information. Another connection that comes into view is Belk et al.'s theory about how individuals who desire something intensely, becomes totally absorbed by their own desire, which in Merleau-Ponty's view, could be understood as a form of embodied experience.

Finally, I would like to argue that embodied desire is an intense and passionate emotion, which sometimes is so powerful that there no longer seems to exist any contrast between the self and the desired object. This is because desire concerns the illusion, the dream that transfixes us, which makes our lives worth living. Thus to desire something is to live through that desire, or as Belk et al., puts it, "To desire is to feel vitally alive and hold back the void of death".¹⁴⁹

6. Perception

This chapter include a general discussion of the philosophy of perception, the notion of a "sensory turn" and "the perception of fashion," which are all issues that could be related to McQueen's five fashion shows.

Many scholars within the fields of Visual Studies and Art History tend to overemphasize the role of vision as the primacy for perception, where the sight organ is favoured on behalf of the other sense organs. This idea is not new, but has long historical roots that go back to Ancient philosophy, as discussed previously. To perceive vision as the key sense organ is moreover markedly Western. In cultures outside the West, other sense organs hold the most

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 347.

prominent position. At some places, touch, taste or hearing may be seen as the most important sense, and at other places it is rather the combination of all the senses that are seen as most significant.

However, critical approaches to this Eurocentric favouring of vision as the prerequisite for perception do exist. Such perspectives for example studies how different sense discourses have been constructed throughout history and why some of them continue to influence peoples' attitudes against certain senses today. Such angle furthermore emphasizes the need of a more thorough understanding of the senses, where all sense organs are seen as equally important.

The pictorial turn and the linguistic turn

Visual studies scholar W. J. T. Mitchell introduces the notion of a “pictorial turn” in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* from 1994, where Mitchell “suggest that we live in a culture dominated by pictures, visual simulations, stereotypes, illusions, copies, reproductions, imitations, and fantasies.”¹⁵⁰ Hence, the late twentieth century must first and foremost be understood as a form of visual culture, where everything in effect could be interpreted as image. The pictorial turn is furthermore described as “a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality.”¹⁵¹ In Mitchell’s perspective: “Vision is as important as language in mediating social relations, and it is not reducible to language, to the ‘sign,’ or to discourse. Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language.”¹⁵² The pictorial turn was to a great extent a response or critical reaction to the so-called “linguistic turn,” that sometimes is said to have been initiated by Richard Rorty in *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Methods* from 1967, Howes describe this linguistic turn with the following words:

What have been called ‘the linguistic turn’ – which gained prominence in the 1960s – has dominated much of late twentieth century thought in the humanities and social sciences. According to this approach, all human thought and endeavour can be

¹⁵⁰ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London, 1994), 2.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵² W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 47.

understood as structured by, and analogous to language, so one may best look to linguistics for models of philosophical and social interpretation.¹⁵³

The linguistic turn was part of a general idea where all thoughts and actions essentially was understood as structured by language and thus possible to interpret as text.

The sensory turn

While both linguistic perspectives and visual approaches offer useful insights to interpret materials of various kinds, neither of them offers a complete explanatory model that McQueen's fashion shows could be interpreted with. Linguistic angles sometimes appear to strive to formulate some sort of objectivity or universalism, while visual or pictorial perspectives seem more focused on addressing more relativistic or subjective matters. Even though visual approaches often address the subjective experience, which I find valuable in this context, they are insufficient in that they merely focus on what concerns the sight organ.

Ultimately I strive to find a theoretical position that involves all the sense organs. Affect theory as well as phenomenological and multisensory perspectives are representative for such an alternative outlook, which could be seen as part of a more general "sensory turn." This sensory turn constitutes a new set of explanatory models taking its starting point in the individual's lived experience as a way of getting in touch with the senses.

From a sensory standpoint, Howes notes that a sensory awareness have been more or less absent in much contemporary theory, writing that it "has taken an ideological revolution to turn the tables and recover a full-bodied understanding of culture and experience. It has taken a sensual revolution."¹⁵⁴ According to Howes, this sensual revolution that has taken place within the Humanities and Social Sciences quite recently, has led to an extended view on the senses where perception no longer is interpreted as a matter of linguistic, biology or psychology, but of social and cultural formation.¹⁵⁵ Howes furthermore states, "the revolt against the domination of language will have to come from the senses,"¹⁵⁶ which I agree with, except that it likewise then must include a revolt against the domination of images. In addition to overturning linguistic and pictorial paradigms of culture, the sensory turn places the body

¹⁵³ Howes, 2006, 1.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 4.

and the senses centre stage, highlighting that perception first and foremost is a shared social and cultural phenomenon.¹⁵⁷

Sensation and perception

The phenomena of sensation and perception often blend together so completely that they are difficult to separate from each other. However, in psychology there is a distinction:

Sensation is the stimulus detection process by which our sense organs respond to and translate environmental stimuli into nerve impulses that are sent to the brain. Perception involves making ‘sense’ of what our senses tell us. It is the active process of organizing this stimulus input and giving it meaning.¹⁵⁸

In other words, the phenomenon of sensation is “the process by which our sense organs receive and transmit information” whereas the phenomenon of perception “involves the brain’s processing and interpretation of the information.”¹⁵⁹ Thus, sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch may provide us with the raw material from which our experiences are formed, but sensations “do not select what we will be aware of or how we will experience it”.¹⁶⁰ Instead it is our perception that creates our experiences, in which we organize and give meaning to things. This means that different people may experience the same sensory information in radically different ways, since perception always involve an act of interpretation.¹⁶¹

Our perceptions are furthermore often influenced by the context in which they appear. One could then talk about the perception having a “perceptual set – a readiness to perceive stimuli in a particular way.”¹⁶² In this way, sometimes believing something is the same as seeing something. This idea, that the context may influence the perception of something, could easily be connected to Barthes’s thoughts on the mechanisms behind the pleasure of the text, which I discussed earlier. For Barthes, the greatest pleasures arise when someone or something “manages to make itself heard indirectly,” that makes room for thinking or listening to something else at the same time.¹⁶³

When applying these ideas on McQueen’s five fashion shows, this means that the context in which they are watched may influence my perception of them. I usually watch the fashion

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵⁸ Passer et al., 2009, 167.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 173.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 200.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 200.

¹⁶² Ibid., 206.

¹⁶³ Barthes, 1975, 24-5.

shows in my leisure time, when I am at home, relaxing in front of my computer. Since the fashion shows consist of digital video documentations, I can both pause them and replay selected parts whenever I want. Then I am given the possibility to choose if I want to watch the fashion shows briefly or more intensely. Thus, in this way the fashion shows manage to make themselves heard both directly and indirectly, making room for thinking or listening to something else at the same time, as Barthes points out. Hence I both find pleasure in watching the fashion shows directly and indirectly, which offers an intensive experience as well as one more settle experience, where the fashion shows either stands in the centre or in the background for something else. I definitely think that the context where I watch McQueen's fashion shows influences my total experience of them. In other words, perceptions are highly influenced by the context in which a stimulus occurs.

Synesthesia and the synesthetic experience

Synaesthesia is a sensory perceptual phenomenon that constitutes an involuntary mixture of information coming from different senses, which operate on a psychophysical level, neurologist Richard E. Cytowic claim in *Synesthesia: A Union of the Senses*. Cytowic describe the phenomenon of synesthesia in the quote below:

The word *anesthesia*, meaning “no sensation,” shares the same root with *synesthesia*, meaning “joined sensation”. It comes from the Greek *syn*, union + *aesthesia*, sensation. It denotes the rare capacity to hear colors, taste shapes, or experience other equally strange sensory fusions [...] For example, my voice would be not just something that is heard, but also felt, seen or tasted.¹⁶⁴

Synesthesia is a form of mingling of the senses, where parallel sensations take place between different senses. It refers to the rare ability of certain individuals, called synesthetes, to for example hear colours, taste shapes, feel sounds and see smells.¹⁶⁵ As a psychophysical phenomenon, synesthesia raises some philosophical questions about perception and the consciousness of mind. First, the concept of synesthesia dispute the notion that there is a fixed set of qualities corresponding to each sense, by bringing into view that senses sometimes are mixed up. Secondly, synesthesia poses a challenge to any theory of the mind that rigidly separates sensations from perceptions, since the phenomenon is a perceptual condition in which stimulation in one sensory organ sometimes provokes a simultaneous sensation in

¹⁶⁴ Richard W. Cytowic, *Synesthesia: A Union of the Senses* (Cambridge, MA, USA: The MIT Press, 2002), 2.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

another sense organ at the same time. Synesthesia thus points to the important fact that perceptions sometimes involve several joined senses. Vision for example, is often thought of as something that merely involves the sight organ, yet “it is our brains that construct much of what we take to be objective visual data.”¹⁶⁶ Consequently what we see may not depend so much on our sight, but more on our nervous systems ability to interpret different sensory inputs, which synesthesia shows, sometimes are mixed up. Thus synesthesia seems to transgress the boundaries of what have been thought of as possible and impossible to perceive.

The synesthetic experience on the other hand comes into view in the mixing of different senses, particularly common in various forms of art, as in literature, music, film etc. Different forms of synesthetic expressions reflects the intermingling of different sensory sensations, where a certain experience evokes a separate additional experience, as the translation of texture to tone or of tone to colour, smell or taste.¹⁶⁷ This form of union of the senses in art expressions is really something that comes into mind when I watch McQueen’s fashion shows. I find them to be spectacular performances, where different elements melt together into a vividly sensorial and experimental experience. Hence I perceive the fashion shows as psychophysical sensory fusions.

I have never visited any McQueen fashion show. However, by watching his digital video documented fashion shows I find it possible to imagine how it would be like to actually watch the fashion shows live, much due to the rich and powerful visual and auditory material of the fashion shows. This is possible even if the video documentations never truly can simulate the immediate real-time experience of the fashion shows (the sensory element of smell, taste and touch is for example not possible for me to experience). They still give a vibrant and intense impression, where my imagination helps me to fill in the gaps that are missing, to construct a complete five-sense experience. In my imagination I can thus indulge in the ultimate full sensory experience of the fashion shows, which includes the possibility of touching the clothes, accessories and setting properties, smelling the clothes, electronic equipment, lamps, cameras as well as the location of the shows and the people in it, and finally also the element of tasting which involve the drinks and food of the fashion shows.

Additionally, since McQueen’s fashion shows are available in the ever-present electronic media, my synesthetic experience may take on a form that was not possible earlier in history. The new interactive media, with its explosion of information and knowledge, offer experiences with unlimited synesthetical qualities. This means that sight, hearing, smell, taste

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁶⁷ Cytowic, 2000, 54.

and touch, more easily are mixed up in the new type of interactive media, than was the case with distinctly separated media artefacts in the past; as television sets, magazines and radios.

The perception of fashion

As already mentioned, I find McQueen's five fashion shows empowering and life enhancing. I have proposed that my pleasure could be traced to the overall characteristics of the fashion shows; clothing and accessories, background music, model choice, location, atmosphere and narrative, which all have crucial impacts on how the fashion shows are perceived. Yet, I want to address another take on the subject matter, namely that my pleasure instead arises out of the qualities that lie inherent in the concept of fashion.

“In order to understand what fashion means in a more specific sense, it is essential that we understand the difference between fashion and clothing and also integrate two senses of fashion, that is fashion as a concept and clothing-fashion as a practice or phenomenon,”¹⁶⁸ emphasizes Yuniya Kawamura in the book *Fashion-ology – An Introduction to Fashion Studies*. Kawamura explains the difference between the concept of fashion and the concept of clothing as follows:

Fashion is a concept that separates itself from other words which are often used as synonyms of fashion, such as clothing, garments and apparel. Those words refer to tangible objects while fashion is an intangible object. Trying to define a particular item of clothing as fashion is futile because fashion is not a material product but a symbolic product which has no content substance by/in itself.¹⁶⁹

Kawamura argues that fashion provides some sort of extra added value to clothing, but emphasizes that such added value only exist in people's imaginations and beliefs, because fashion is not visual clothing, but the invisible elements included in clothing.¹⁷⁰ In other words, fashion is an abstract socially constructed phenomenon, which material clothing in comparison is not.

The concept of fashion has nevertheless for a long time in history been associated with visual artefacts of various kinds, as clothes or images. But such perspective is problematic for many reasons. First, fashion should not be mistaken for either image or clothing, since fashion essentially is an abstract concept, “which has no content substance by/in itself,” as Kawamura

¹⁶⁸ Kawamura, 2006, 2.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 4.

points out. Second, as long as fashion continues to be associated with visual artefacts, the concept of fashion will not gain the recognition it deserves. Hence I think it is important to put forward another perception of fashion that emphasizes the fictive, illusive and ephemeral dimension of fashion.

The point I want to make is that fashion should not be mixed up with visual artefacts as images or clothing, since the concept of fashion does not relate to sight more than to any other sensory organ like hearing, taste, smell and touch. Therefore I think it is time to leave such misunderstandings in the past, and instead focus on the potential that lies in fashion's fluid character.

Fashion could indeed be visual, but fashion does not need any material support to exist. As already mentioned, visual experiences do not necessarily arise from what is visible for the human eyes, instead I have argued that visual experiences just as easily could arise when we close our eyes and listen to something else that stimulates our imagination. A visual experience may in fact arise without any visual support at all, "we should remind ourselves that we do not see with the eyes, hear with the ears or taste with the taste buds; we see, hear and taste with our brain. [...] Sight, hearing or taste is simply the brain's adaptation to the input it receives."¹⁷¹ This is of course true, indeed we see, hear and taste with our brains, yet it must be remembered that the brain always is situated in the body. Thus sight, hearing and taste is not solely about the brains processing of information, but also about how information is registered by the body, which together constitute the embodied experience.

Hence my perceptive experience of McQueen's five fashion shows is to a great extent a product of my own making. Thus what I perceive as pleasurable is largely a construction of my own subjective mind and body. Fashion is in the end not about image, or text for that matter, but about perception, or as it says tattooed on McQueen's right upper arm: "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind"¹⁷².

Discussion

In this dissertation I have examined my subjective perceptual experience of five video documented Alexander McQueen's fashion shows. The fashion shows I have investigated are: *Voss* (spring/summer 2001), *It's Only A Game* (spring/summer 2005), *The Widows of Culloden* (fall/winter 2006), *The Girl Who Lived in the Tree* (fall/winter 2008) and *The Horn*

¹⁷¹ Passer, 2009, 197.

¹⁷² Andrew Bolton, preface to *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (New Haven: Yale University Press/ New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 12.

of Plenty (fall/winter 2009). All of these five fashion shows give me intense pleasure both on a bodily and an emotional level. My intention was to investigate why my pleasure arises and how it is constructed. Through close examination of the five video documented fashion shows, I found that they provided a rich source of information that easily could illustrate my subjective pleasurable experience of McQueen's fashion shows.

The theorizations of affect interpreted by Sara Ahmed, embodiment in the view of Merleau-Ponty and Barthes's concepts of punctum and bliss, as well as many other scholars' thoughts on senses, pleasure, perception and fashion, all contribute with interesting and important information about the perception of fashion.

Much Western philosophical thinking is still constrained by the Cartesian body-mind dualism where reason and emotion are seen as each other's opposites. In this line of thought, reasoning is perceived as rational and constructive, whereas feeling and emotion are viewed as irrational, deceitful and misleading. For this reasons, feelings and emotions have been viewed as untrustworthy sources for reasoning and judgements, and perceived as scientifically problematic to study in general.

Ahmed, Merleau-Ponty and Barthes challenge this philosophical tradition by deliberately addressing issues that are related to the body, feelings and emotions, as well as by expressing their subjective thoughts and feelings in their research. Thus, they emphasize a need for a more personal approach to research, a form of self-reflective subjectivity, which does not reduce the researcher's own personal thoughts and feelings. Hence they dispute the assumption that interpretations of emotions or bodily reactions should be considered to be less scientific and untrustworthy as sources of information.

The so-called philosophy of perception is concentrated to the interrelationship between sensory inputs and the perceptual experience. Sensory inputs, or sensations as they also are called, constitute the process by which our sense organs, sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, receive and transmit information, whereas perceptions involves the brain's processing and interpretation of that information. In my opinion, descriptions of perception often tend to overestimate the primacy of the visual on behalf of other senses. This way of positioning sight, as the most important of the senses, is part of a long Western tradition with connections to the Cartesian body-mind dichotomy. In many societies outside the West, other senses hold the most prominent position. The human senses are often thought of as naturally given, but they are to a great extent culturally and socially constructed, which consequently implies that that it is possible to challenge established thoughts of the senses and maybe also turn them on its head.

This study analyses the perceptual experience of McQueen's fashion shows, where the notion of pleasure plays a central role. The perspective I wish to put forward is that fashion is a highly perceptual phenomenon, which is subjectively constructed. Fashion is a fictive, illusive and ephemeral phenomenon that has no content substance by/in itself. The fictive dimension of fashion makes it possible for individuals to perceptually experience things without any visible or material support. Fashion is hence not only a matter of registering different sensory input from our senses, but also about constructing a perception of fashion, that to a great extent is a product of our own making.

By using Barthes's concepts of punctum and bliss, Ahmed's thoughts on affect and emotion as well as Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment. I have outlined a perspective on McQueen's five fashion shows that could be characterized as emotional and personal, where I deliberately have tried to move away from the classical philosophical dichotomy of mind and body, where reason and emotion are treated as opposites. I have wanted to highlight the importance of philosophical discussions that both involve a subject's thoughts and feelings, for the reason that such perspective challenges the notion of a Cartesian subject. Thus one of the most striking findings of this study is undoubtedly the agency potential that lies inherent in the concepts of perception, fashion, punctum, bliss, affect and embodiment which all have the potential to theorize the subjective in new ways.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have examined my subjective experience of five video documented Alexander McQueen's fashion shows. All five of the chosen fashion shows yield me great pleasure both on a physical and a psychological level. Why this is the case, is something that I have tried to investigate in this study.

The things we find pleasurable depend both on the process by which our sense organs, sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, receive and transmit information and how such information is processed and interpreted in our nervous system, in other words the interaction between sensory input and the perceptual experience. Thus, sensory input may provide us with the raw materials from which our experiences are formed, but it is first when we interpret and organise the sensory input that they are given meaning. Hence, what we find pleasurable is not only shaped by our senses, but also by our perceptions. The same could be said about the concept of fashion, since what we perceive as fashion to a great extent is a matter of our own making. This investigation of McQueen's fashion shows illustrate the fluidity of fashion as a concept; by showing that fashion first and foremost is something that is constructed by our own subjective perceptual experiences.

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Appendix nr. 1



Appendix nr. 2



Appendix nr. 3



Appendix nr. 4



Appendix nr. 5



