

Makeup, masquerade and McQueen

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There is perhaps no better illustration of makeup's abilities to work with garments to evoke powerful statements about identity – and feminine identity in particular - than in Alexander McQueen's catwalk shows. This paper will explore how makeup in these shows places femininity at issue and will argue that makeup plays a crucial role in engendering the powerful effect had by many of these shows.

The importance of the body to how fashion 'speaks' is by now well established in existing fashion studies literature, where the work of writers like Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson - influenced by wider cultural theory from the likes of Michel Foucault - has argued that fashion can be best understood and analysed when its relationship to the body is fully acknowledged. Related work by authors like Anneke Smelik has shown the body itself and what we are encouraged to do to and with it, to be as subject to fashionable change as the clothing it inhabits.

Yet, despite such work, the peripheral aspects of embodiment like makeup have received little focused attention in their own right within the literature on fashion. A small amount of academic work on makeup has been published. Kathy Peiss has made an important contribution to the subject. There are some journal articles, book chapters and good histories, but there has been little in-depth exploration of makeup's distinct culture, products and practices. Instead, makeup is most often conflated with other forms of grooming and cosmetics use which all have different, cultural meanings and connotations.

Consequently, such connotations do makeup little justice since it is, in its products and applications, a complex cultural form. These complexities are brought into stark relief by many of the makeup looks designed for McQueen's catwalk. To understand how, it is important for us to remind ourselves of a wider cultural and social context where collectively, women spend billions of pounds and thousands of hours trying to achieve attractive and appropriate makeup looks; appropriate over-archingly for their gender, but also for their age, for their ethnicity, and in line with classed ideas of feminine good taste. This word appropriate is important and I will return to it several times through this paper.

Millions of pages in women's magazines are dedicated to makeup consumption, giving instruction to women on how and what to use; advising and advertising. In this digital age equally important are the vlogs, blogs and apps that hand out similar advice or allow women to virtually try before they buy. Books like Bobbi Brown's *Teenage Beauty* acculturate young women into an appropriate code of makeup use; unquestioningly supporting its use of course, not only because Brown is a makeup artist but also because makeup is deeply and ideologically embedded within discourses of *gender* in most cultures, and *femininity* for the majority. Thus texts like this do not question the need for women to use makeup in some form, as many second wave feminist thinkers have done (see for example Jeffreys, 2005, Sandra Lee Bartky, 1990 and Naomi Wolf, 1991), but in an age of populist female empowerment they do tend to make encouraging affirmations about self-esteem and the importance of 'natural' beauty and allowing one's 'real' individual beauty to shine through.

Through such texts, the woman's body is subjected to the ideological codes of a social context that imprints its beliefs, desires and power systems onto their bodies. On such terms, women are encouraged to use makeup to create an idealised form of feminine beauty that is made to seem natural to them and on them; though it is anything but. Instead this is natural femininity codified so that certain forms of makeup are deemed appropriate and this appropriateness comes to stand in for nature; *ideology* renders this makeup almost invisible. Through makeup use women are most often encouraged to create what Michel Foucault and Sandra Lee Bartky after him might term a 'docile body'; one that adheres to the proscribed ideals of gender identity expected of it within any given social context.

It is against such backdrops that This paper examines how the makeup for Alexander McQueen's catwalk shows is dialectically positioned and by this I mean that *many* of the makeup looks embodied throughout his shows demonstrate anything *but* this idealised docile body. However, firstly in a paper that seeks to argue that makeup in McQueen's shows was significant and often revolutionary, it is important to begin by acknowledging that across his shows, this makeup ran the gamut from excess to lack and everything in between and that several looks seem – at least - to largely adhere to these cultural expectations of 'natural' beauty.

VOSS (2001) is considered by many to be one of McQueen's most controversial catwalk shows, not least because as part of a fashion industry so synonymous with beauty, it dared to question the very premise. The makeup for VOSS, created by Val Garland was soft, pretty, feminine and wearable. It was delicate and it contoured and amplified models features, giving a soft, youthful flush to the cheeks. However, when read against the show's wider mise-en-scene, this natural beauty seems to concurrently remind us of the labour, fragility and ephemerality of beauty. It is not the makeup in and of itself that does so, but rather the juxtaposition of this conventional beauty with hard surfaces on garments that threaten to pierce the skin and bandages as head coverings that obscure the models hair entirely. The effect is as much reminiscent of cosmetic procedures as the idea the internalized, emotional disturbances that apparently inspired the show. In every case and in every connotation, 'real' or 'natural' beauty seems to be synonymously represented and problematized. This trope was recreated in a spread for Tush Magazine in 2010 by Michelle Du Xuan; this image of course makes more overt references to cosmetic intervention, but importantly for me, juxtaposing the two images demonstrates the wide variety of what is variously termed, the nude or bare faced look which is regularly reformulated through makeup to the vagaries of fashion.

...Thus, it is not my aim to say, in some overinflated manner, that makeup always does the work to create such meanings on its own, but it is to argue that it plays a significant role...

Makeup is of course concerned with the surfaces of the body and historically it, like fashion itself, has regularly been charged with superficiality; McQueen's work did much encourage us to rethink such beliefs. Dismissing the surfaces of the body as lacking meaning echoes with a Cartesian Dualism that locates the real self with the inner life of the mind and spirit. Even in a media saturated age where appearances are becoming more and more important this legacy still haunts many popular ideas about self-hood, human identity and also vanity. However, as Faccio writes "body identity resides neither with nor 'at the heart of' the body, since other people's acknowledgements validate our identities" (p45). Consequently, surfaces matter since they make identity and are a crucial mechanism through which that identity interacts with the world around it. Writing about makeup, Biddle-Perry and Miller argue that in seeking its cultural meanings we must not fall into a trap of either dismissing it or simply seeing it as an exterior manifestation of something deeper within. Instead, they argue that makeup should be seen as possessing an "inherent superficiality", but one

tied to and illustrative of the fluidity of human identity. Thus, they argue, if we can look at, instead of through makeup's "visible contradictions" to find its meanings, we have much to learn.

The makeup for *Sarabande* (2007) can be argued to use the surfaces of the body to create meaning. Makeup artist Charlotte Tilbury designed a configuration of makeup that clearly acknowledged its painterly origins with references to the work of Goya that inspired the collection. Foundation was mixed with a white base, taken beyond the jaw line towards the collarbone, finishing in light and visible brushstrokes. The effect was to create wraith-like, ethereal women. More importantly, in its design and application, this makeup makes clear the surfaces it inhabits and the technologies that constructed it by leaving a clear and visible demarcation between the makeup and the skin beneath.

A diverse group of thinkers from the anthropologist Mary Douglas, to philosophers Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin and feminist thinkers Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have all explored via different frameworks the ways in which societies ideologically situate and understand themselves and in turn, transform, through the boundaries, ideals and ideologies that they create and then enforce.

As Bakhtin forcefully argued the body itself can act as a metaphor for the social structures it inhabits and as Lynda Nead writes "the body's boundaries cannot be separated from the operation of other social and cultural boundaries" (p6). Indeed, as with *Sarabande*, it can make them visible if we look. The use of makeup is a cultural practice governed by sometimes overt, but more often implied rules and proscriptions about the appropriate ways that it should or should not be used. Consequently, what is worn, how much, where and by whom can be both illustrative of wider beliefs about human identity – particularly in relation to gender - and a place where such beliefs can be held up; or held up to visible challenge. We might argue that the makeup for *Sarabande* actively and artfully evokes one of the fundamental crimes of makeup use – the much feared foundation tidemark, which was 7th on the list of the top 10 makeup 'turn-offs' recounted in an article in the Daily Telegraph in 2010. The tidemark might be argued to be problematic and unappealing because it reminds us of the 'lie' that is feminine, gender identity, and as such we might read the makeup for *Sarabande* as both conventionally feminine and transgressive.

McQueen regularly declared his desire to present women who were strong and complex; who crossed boundaries and got 'out of place', saying "I want people to be afraid of the women I dress". Fear has been located as the driving force behind many of the cultural disciplinary, activities of feminine identity that this paper references. Using a psychoanalytic framework, Barbara Creed argued that "All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (BP&M p13) – for Creed it's prototype is the "female reproductive body" and in a re-evaluation of Sigmund Freud's ideas about castration, Creed argues that women are feared because of their reproductive power and their difference; within patriarchal culture they are other and are seen to possess the potential to both represent and enact castration. Thus all attempts to manage women's bodies are rooted, on such terms, in an attempt to negate such fears and powers.

Such ideas manifest seem to manifest themselves in *Horn of Plenty* (2009), where we are presented with makeup that can be argued to figuratively offer up a vision of a castrating woman. Lipstick is widely acknowledged to be one of the most powerfully emotive items of makeup that a woman can use but the lips created for *Horn of Plenty* are wider, fuller and shinier than fashion or beauty has ever demanded and seem reminiscent of Sigmund Freud's folkloric *vagina dentata* (or vagina with teeth) that possesses the ability to castrate. In a body of work that brings psychoanalysis to bear on fashion, Alison Bancroft argues that such possibilities are writ large throughout McQueen's oeuvre.

As she writes “McQueen wants woman in his designs to provoke fear, to be ‘so fabulous you wouldn’t dare lay a hand on her’. Why not? What is this untouchable fabulousness? It is, I suggest, the castration threat, the slipping of the veil that is couture to reveal the terrifying maw of castration” (p96). I would not disagree, but on the catwalk, I would argue that it is very often not the clothes alone but other aspects of the performance, including makeup, that acts to anchor this meaning.

The makeup for Horn of Plenty then, offers a model for how makeup in fashion can do more than simply adhere to the ideological demands of normative gender identity. It demonstrates that the idealized symbols of gendered identity can not only act as a mechanism via which women construct femininity but through which they can also be subverted. In Horn of Plenty, signifiers of femininity become what Mary Ann Doane terms “self-conscious masquerade”. Joan Riviere first posited the possibility of a gender masquerade in the 1920s, in her observation of one of the female patients she was treating with psychoanalysis. Masquerade as identified by Riviere was a kind of playing up or overplaying of gendered ideals as a way to offset the anxieties about gendered position that exist just beneath the surface of most social systems. For Riviere gender masquerade was a ‘reaction formation’ an attempt to symbolically undo anxiety about appropriate gender behaviours that is identifiable by its excessiveness. Taking up such ideas, writers like Mary Ann Doane, situate masquerade as an active mechanism where symbols of femininity are adopted knowingly and amplified as a form of resistance to the status quo. Horn of Plenty can be read on such terms.

While Vanity Fair posited in 2014 that women might or perhaps should “wear makeup to look like they are not wearing makeup”, to absolutely go without contravene ideals of femininity as actively as wearing it to excess and in all this talk of overplaying I want lastly, and very briefly, to consider its opposite since it is important to emphasise that ‘underplaying’ makeup can be as problematic and challenging to the normative codes of femininity. In 2014 the instigation of a charitable drive for Cancer Awareness ‘the make-up free selfie’ attracted the participation of many ordinary and famous women. The choice to take part in this drive, and coverage of it, keenly demonstrated the cultural significance of makeup for women since being without it possessed such currency. There are many examples across McQueen’s catwalk where femininity is challenged as much through underplaying as overplaying. I want to very briefly mention some of the makeup for The Girl Who Lived in a Tree, for example, which is almost imperceptible on a face framed by thick dark brows; this face which enacts makeup-less-ness can be as great a challenge to normative feminine identity as more excessive styles of makeup.

Thus, Paper examining how the excess and lack exhibited by makeup across McQueen’s shows is illustrative of the double bind in which women find themselves when they apply it or when they don’t and it exploits this to dramatize and challenge the ideological positions defined for women in Western culture in particular. Thus I am interested in how the makeup in McQueen’s shows works to resist dominant, restrictive ideas about femininity and to promote transgressive possibilities for feminine identities. It does so by encouraging us to look **at** not **through** makeup, and by this I mean that it reminds us that makeup is complex, and an active part of the embodiment of the catwalk and of the fashion system; and that it deserves our attention.