

# Head Games: Exploring the Symbolic Uses of Heads in Fashion Shows

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## ABSTRACT

The study explores the symbolic uses of heads in fashion shows, multifarious influence and the cultural/historical symbolism that it holds against a multiplicity of representations, sites, and registers: religion, art, fashion. In following the evolution of uses of heads from its birth as a dread form of punishment and tool of terror to implications and representations by media and consumer culture in today's society, the research applies an in-depth analytical approach. The transformation of this motif and the influence on societal norms and values turned toward this motif in the respective historical periods and cultural contexts have been methodically analyzed. Illustrating that while decapitation has forever provoked a reaction from revulsion to fascination, these days it is rebooted as a provocative symbol in fashion and art, often straying between cultural tribute and tastelessness. An example of this research is the study that seeks to describe cases whereby fashion brands like Gucci and Balenciaga were using images of beheading in a bid to illustrate the thin line between creative freedom and cultural appropriation. A sensitive approach needs to be paid to the use of such potent symbols, which includes the possibility of respect or offense, depending on the context of use. This makes the study relevant in its contribution of understanding how re-interpretations of historical symbols are done in contemporary culture and, respectively, the influence they have on issues of identity and ethics in the strategy of global marketing. This study extended the academic debate about the cultural symbolism by providing useful insight to practice by brands on how to manage the perils cultural representation may pose in a global market.

**Keywords:** Fashion Shows, Violent Imagery, Visual Ethics, beheading.

## 1 Introduction

In an era where mental health and inclusion are at the forefront of societal dialogues in the “North of the World”, the role of luxury fashion brands in influencing these issues remains ambiguous. While some brands have taken steps to engage with some of these topics actively, others have chosen a path that seemingly contradicts the broader movement towards awareness and sensitivity. The examples presented show complex messages, where the use of heads and faces become a particular element used in the presentation of various collections, serving as powerful tools of the creative expression, but also carrying a symbolic meaning that slowly permeates along different groups of society all over the world.

By “playing” with concepts and metaphors, high fashion tries to re-signify imagery that emerges outside the dominant sectors. Analysing the visual and textual content of fashion shows and editorial shoots, we aim to further identify patterns and themes related in this case to the use of faces and heads that could trigger or recall violence if compared with diverse historical or cultural contexts. The cases chosen for this first approach are a) Gucci. Autumn/winter 2018 by Alessandro Michele, b) Schiaparelli. Spring/summer 2023 by Daniel Roseberry, c) Balenciaga. Spring/Summer 2023 collection by Demna Gvasalia; also giving a brief mention of d) Maison Margiela. various collections by Martin Margiela.



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## 2 Problem Statement

In recent years, mental health, wellbeing, and social issues have gained momentum, especially in the way of awareness against racism and violence. However, many luxury fashion brands stay far from attending to those issues, since many of their visual communication can often include elements to shock and attract consumers, which is then perpetuated on social media and in magazines. Even if shock value is a known strategy of some brands to call attention to their products [1], there are some images that, even when fake, speak to a deeper part of the human subconscious, having some effects in a longer term. While these elements might be intended as artistic expression, they also could engender significant problems, including the possibility of making viewers re-live trauma, feel stress or (on the other hand) desensitization to violence that, since even if referential, images can have long-term psychological effects on what society considers acceptable, normal or desirable [2] and therefore, violence-taboo related references could contribute heighten levels of aggression and reduced prosocial behaviour, especially among young adults and children.

Our existential awareness is rooted in the mind and perception of the outside world through the senses, primarily located in the head; the head and face play a vital role in communication and expression of immediate reactions. The trends with a rather unique display of and around the head or the face of the models -such as the use of severed head replicas and materials that obscure or distort facial features- make it a subject of analysis in this work. The deep semiotic significance of heads and faces being uniformed, covered, cut or hidden have generally equalled statements in various cultures historically, always linked to struggle, punishment, wars or violence, and the glorification of related images in runways should be subject of analysis for the design community and mental health professionals in order to revisit questions of ethical, social, and cultural concerns in a society that interacts with fashion in multiple ways and levels.

## 3 Objectives and methodology

This research aims to observe the use of references to violence, specifically related to decapitating and defacing in fashion shows and explore how could consumers from different cultural backgrounds could perceive them, in order to raise questions about cultural sensitivity and empathy. In these first stages of the study, we try to analyse the discourse surrounding these practices to discern if it corresponds with the conceptual justification and mention the ethical implications within the broader context of fashion's cultural influence.

**-Runway images analysis:** where we will look at specific runway presentations from the brands like to identify and interpret the violent images and the similarity to other contexts and the stories their creatives tell in order to “justify” them when controversy has place, questioning if such conceptual bases are reflected on the images.

**-Industry discourse analysis:** looking at public reactions and media narratives through interviews to understand why violent imagery is used and how it is received by society.

## 4 Violent images in Fashion Industry

To understand the gravity and implications of using violent imagery in fashion, it is imperative to trace the historical trajectory of violence and its representation, particularly on the area of the head and face in various mediums. Historically, violence has been both condemned and glorified, with different eras and societies showcasing a complex relationship with violent acts. Wars and fights are prominent in the literature of antiquity, “*but in neither Greek nor even Roman culture was war glorified or regarded as the natural state of affairs, though winners naturally ‘glorified’ one aspect (of war) their own victories*”[3].

From a community perspective, *having normative beliefs and attitudes in support of aggression has been associated with*

*eventual aggressive behaviour*, fostering stereotypes and environments of fear and mistrust [4]. The social repercussions of violence affect individuals and communities deeply and fundamentally, since it can perpetuate harmful narratives, influencing public perceptions and behaviours negatively. The use of violent images in media and art has been already linked to a range of societal repercussions, including potential desensitization to violence. *Individuals exposed to violent imagery may exhibit reduced emotional responses to real-life violence, a phenomenon that has been documented in various studies* [2]. In the context of fashion, these kinds of images could be seen as a reflection of societal issues, but it also raises ethical questions about the responsibility of designers in perpetuating such when looking for publicity and economical profit.

#### **4.1 Symbolic Meaning of Face/Head/Beheading**

A pivotal aspect of existential consciousness emanates from our cognitive faculties, historically believed to be situated within our craniums. "Our heads" encompass not solely internal cogitation and cognitive processes but also extend to consciousness itself. The skull houses the epicentre of the nervous system, while faces constitute the most communicative facet of our bodies, representing a leading feature for promptly declaring our individuality. It functions as a locus of interaction with the environment surrounding us, harnessing our senses and therefore, our extrinsic perceptual input. Our face also serves as the hold of the primary interfaces through which we satisfy primal necessities such as respiration, sustenance, and hydration. Moreover, it conduits for self-expression: through it, we express our emotions, manifest our reactions to external stimuli and communicate with others; maybe that's why the symbolic power of the outrage suffered by the decapitation invades the psyche of the living more forcefully [5]. It is known that the mere presence of any cadaver, as Kristeva [6] points out, 'violently disrupts [...] the identity of the one who faces it as it reminds us of our own fragility. According to Vázquez [5], death is perhaps the most compelling phenomenon to remind human beings of their finite condition, a reminder that our bodies will become a *repugnant waste that would induce the fading away and expulsion of the 'self'* of the observer. While Some might feel terror and disgust, the influence on the physique of whoever testifies those images can be deep for a long term, even if the culture or sensitivity differs from one context to another. The face and head are central to human identity and expression, carrying deep symbolic meanings across cultures. Historically, beheading has been a form of capital punishment, symbolizing power, control, for a sort of dehumanization of the victim. Ancient cultures historically associated the act of beheading with sacrificial rituals. Because the severed head from the body expresses the extreme otherness of man as a living creature, it is a sign of dehumanisation that highlights that what is at stake is not the end of life, but the human condition itself as a singular and vulnerable body. *The destruction of the symbolic bodily unity, as a tangible sign of the human, is an offence to the ontological dignity of the subject* [7], This could symbolically be related to the tendency of fashion industry of dehumanization or objectivization on the runways with a variety of methods, as well as the tendency to show fragility, in many cases where models should be pale, slim, androgynous, and inexpressive; and in some examples lately, walking carrying babies, holding children and real or fictional creatures as accessories for the main fashion pieces. This not only engenders a culture of body dissatisfaction but also raises pressing ethical questions concerning the dignity and respect due to individuals. In the trajectory of state formation, particularly observed in Europe since the Middle Ages, this punitive measure was employed against citizens who posed threats to established power structures. It was applied to war enemies, internal revolutionaries, traitors, known criminals, and those found guilty of heresy. The prevalent Mesoamerican creation myth alludes to decapitation, *imbuing it with a castrating connotation* [8]. This symbolism has endured, manifesting in the colloquial phrase referencing man's "two heads," equating phallic severance with the loss of authority, honour, and bravery. A practice considered barbaric by many societies, for representing a violation of the body's integrity, and seen as a very immoral act and one of the last taboos. Regrettably, in some cultures

some of these practices persist today, for example as a grim emblem of cartel conflicts in Mexico's most violent regions, serving as a public spectacle to intimidate and coerce submission.

In art and literature, it has been used to evoke fear and to portray the brutality of those in power. Despite its profoundly shocking nature, beheading has also served as a recurring motif [9]. within various artistic forms, notably appearing in artworks narrating myths and religious texts. In fashion, the use of head and face imagery can evoke powerful reactions, tapping into deep-seated cultural and historical symbols. Do these creative teams fully understand the weight of the images they use? Did they encounter the stark realities represented by their schemes, such as seeing victims of violence or the heads of dead animals or victims?

#### **4.2 Creativity and Proffit. The influence of aspirational brands**

In the fashion industry, a space of creativity and expression designers sometimes flirt with taboo topics to challenge norms and provoke thought. However, this approach can backfire, resulting in accusations of insensitivity or cultural appropriation. Runway shows have transcended their original purpose of simply showcasing garments and morphed into grand stages where designers unfurl their narratives, mirroring contemporary aesthetics and steering consumer inclinations. The onset of the 21st century marked a pronounced fusion of fashion with entertainment, giving runway shows a theatrical demeanour. In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the use of designers leveraging shock value to make a statement; brands such as Gucci and Balenciaga have adeptly utilized shock value as a potent tool to seize attention and foster discourse, amplifying their presence in cultural dialogues and has also positioned them as pioneers in defining modern artistic lexicons in the fashion industry.

Luxury fashion brands have been instrumental in sculpting beauty standards [10], weaving a complex narrative that harbours both admiration and critique. These brands have been the harbinger of fashion evolution, offering a canvas for self-expression. However, the exclusivity attached to these brands has fostered a culture of elitism, where beauty and prestige are perceived as privileges of a select few, potentially engendering feelings of inadequacy in the broader population. The promotion of narrow beauty ideals has also ventured into the territory of harmful representation by nurturing unrealistic expectations, and facilitating cultural appropriation, thereby diminishing the rich tapestry of diverse cultural symbols to mere fashion statements for younger generations that with globalization could be less aware of their own cultural heritage.

The digital age has accelerated the dissemination of luxury fashion ideals, inadvertently steering towards a homogenization of beauty standards [11]. This phenomenon has cast a shadow over the diversity of individual beauty, nurturing a constrained perception of beauty that marginalizes those who diverge from established norms, even if some of the concepts shown in the same fashion shows copy or take inspiration on the same populations that usually stay out of the normative standards of the dominant class.

#### **4.3 “Luxury Fashion” Brands and Design Ethics**

There has been a discernible uptick in the incorporation of violent imagery in the fashion industry, notably also in runway shows and advertising campaigns in the last decades. This trend seems to be grounded in a deliberate strategy to shock and provoke audiences. Some creatives used strategies to rationalize and mitigate the backlash against violent representations in controversial advertising; encompassing tactics such as subverting interpretations and abdicating responsibility, all aimed at diminishing the perceived severity of taboo transgressions and safeguarding organizational interests.

The deployment of these strategies *profoundly affects the prevailing social order, introducing a form of "pollution" into society* [12], engendering of uncertainties surrounding existing codes and norms and altering prevailing perceptions.

The latter part of the 20th century witnessed fashion brands gradually embracing violent imagery, a trend that has intensified in recent years. Designers began to challenge traditional norms, using the runway as a canvas to depict provocative and sometimes controversial themes. Iconic instances include Alexander McQueen's "Highland Rape" collection in 1995, which spurred debates on the ethical confines of fashion, and John Galliano's "Homeless Chic" collection in 2000, which was criticized for glamorizing poverty.

## **5 Case studies:**

Over the last 30 years, designers have increasingly leveraged shock value as a tool to garner attention and provoke society, sometimes pushing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable to be shown to all age audiences in all kinds of media. The observed case studies show a fine line between artistic expression and potentially offensive material, showing opportunities for a better understanding of the symbolic weight carried by such imagery, especially for development countries or in the middle of crisis.

### **5.1 Gucci - Alessandro Michele (Autumn/Winter 2018)**

After announcing on twitter, the date of the event with what seems to be an explosive control device, the show takes place in what seems to be an operating room, where the spectators seem to take part of the about to be intervention. Some models carry fantasy creatures on their hands, but the central pieces are those who bring in one hand an exact replica of their heads. Both pale and inexpressive walk around the room as ghosts, making us wonder what the result of this "surgical procedure" in which will be the before and the after look exactly the same. It calls attention to how some western countries condemn the use of the burka and similar garments along the Middle East for considering that it takes away the identity of women, but in the context of "high fashion". Figure 1

#### **Statement:**

A procession of transhumanism, walking in trancelike step through a suite of operating theatres: Bolted together from the clothing of many cultures, they were Alessandro Michele's metaphor for how people today construct their identities—a population undergoing self-regeneration through the powers of tech, Hollywood, Instagram, and Gucci. "*We are the Dr. Frankenstein of our lives,*" said Michele. "*There's a clinical clarity about what I am doing. I was thinking of a space that represents the creative act. I wanted to represent the lab I have in my head. It's physical work, like a surgeon's.*"

"*We exist to reproduce ourselves, but we have moved on. We are in a post-human era, for sure; it is under way.*". Also, in this collection "*There were Russian babushka headscarves and modest, covered-up folk-costume dresses next to spangled, '20s showgirl chain mail and jewellery; a pagoda hat and Chinese pyjamas; English tweed, Scottish plaid, and a Fair Isle sweater*" completes the Vogue Runway article [13].



**Figure 1:** Runway Gucci looks photograph as shown in *Vogue*, a recognized fashion magazine.

**Colour images[1]:** M. Tondo, "Gucci Fall 2018 Ready-to-Wear Look 1, 13," photograph, *VOGUE Runway*, [Online]. Available: <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2018-ready-to-wear/gucci/slideshow/collection>.

**Black and white images [2]:** "Decapitations, the vehicle of terror of the cartels in Mexico," *La Síntesis Mx*, Oct. 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://lasintesis.mx/decapitacion-es-el-vehiculo-del-terror-de-los-carteles-en-mexico/>

**Black and white images [3]:** A. Ismael, "The niqab in Egypt is a history of crises," *El Watan News*, 18 April 2017. [Online]. Available: <https://honna.elwatannews.com/news/details/1908192/النقاب-في-مصر-تاريخ-من-الازمات>.

## 5.2 Balenciaga - Demna Gvasalia (Spring/Summer 2023)

The proposed aesthetic of the runway goes further from sports and more into imagery that is related with sadomasochistic sexual practices. The show takes place in Wall Street, surrounded by screens and technology in the service of monetary exchange. Where all are known for wearing a suit, a sports collection is proposed, tracksuits are permitted as long as fashion and luxury takes them there.

The masks take away any possibility of expression or identity of the models, that according to a sport's garment should be free and comfortable. The masks remind a combination between plastic bags and erotic masks related to the BDSM practices, subject for which the brand got a backlash in another launch for including- in some photographs- toddlers and small children in a campaign that featured also BDSM gear worn by teddy bears. Figure 2

### Media Statement:

As an invitation to the show, guests were given bundles of counterfeit money, fastened with a strap with the Balenciaga logo. America is obsessed with money and Demna used this fact to attract the attention of the public. Demna admitted that he wanted to cause a little horror with his show, because the world we live in is quite cruel. *"This show is supposed to evoke emotions. We've been sitting at home for two years trying to come up with digital stuff, video games and movies. We live in a terrifying world, and fashion is a reflection of it, and if it makes you afraid or horrified, I succeeded..."*



**Figure 2:** Looks of Balenciaga and Adidas collaboration as displayed in a fashion website, with no further data about the photographer or the models; compared to an exhibition of BDSM masks.

**Colour image [3]** : World Fashion Channel (WF), "Money, street, and fetishism: a new collaboration between Balenciaga and Adidas Resort 2023," May 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://wfc.tv/en/articles/about-fashion/balenciaga-and-adidas-resort-2023/>.

**Black and white image[4]:** C. Charisius, "30 years erotic department store. Boutique Bizarre," picture alliance via Getty Images. [Online]. Available: <https://shorturl.at/dCOQ3>

### 5.3 Schiaparelli - Daniel Roseberry (Spring/Summer 2023)

Daniel Roseberry's Spring/Summer 2023 collection for Schiaparelli was a vivid exploration of surrealism, with designs that challenged conventional notions of fashion. This show takes place in what seems to be a traditional scenario for a runway, bringing however the savage into the refined. The models, beside some beautifully crafted head pieces that make them look like sculptures, and also dresses with replicas of animal heads, reminding us of the tradition of hunters that used to showcase their hunting trophies display, but also of those who have won a battle to the animal world, like the lion skin that's worn by Hercules, only that in this case analysis has been made according to the meaning of Dante's inferno, that in the end should also express a battle, in which the presented object has to be or has been defeated. Figure 3

#### Media Statement:

*"I wanted to step away from techniques I was comfortable with and understood, to choose instead that dark wood where everything is scary but new ... Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso: One cannot exist without the others ... It is a reminder that there is no such thing as heaven without hell; there is no joy without sorrow; there is no ecstasy of creation without the torture of doubt.*

*As he attempts to climb the holy mountain, Dante encounters three beasts – a leopard, a lion and a she-wolf. He is forced back down into the dark woods by the she-wolf, where he is visited by the Roman poet Virgil, who acts as his spiritual guide into the inferno (hell).*

It calls attention to how some western countries condemn the use of the burka and similar garments along the Middle East for considering that it takes away the identity of women, but in the context of "high fashion"



**Figure 3:** Moments of the Schiaparelli runway as collected and reproduced by influencers and “X” users, later took for a further analysis for a news website that would later be quoted by independent fashion bloggers, compared with a real lion head used for taxidermy purposes.

**Coloured images[5]:** S. Wood, "Schiaparelli couture show featured animal heads inspired by Dante's Inferno - here's what they mean," *The Conversation*, Laura Hood, Ed., Jan. 2023. [Online]. Available: <https://theconversation.com/schiaparelli-couture-show-featured-animal-heads-inspired-by-dantes-inferno-heres-what-they-mean-198819>

**Black and white images[6]:** Sophele, "Taxidermy Lion - Stock Photo," iStockphoto, Accessed: Feb. 21, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://www.istockphoto.com/it/foto/tassidermia-di-leone-gm174569184-25823069>

## 6 Conclusion

Even if these are just a few examples that have recently caught media and people's attention, getting replicated by performers and influencers in social events around the world, our examination will observe a very nuanced link between the ingeniousness, the element of shock, and moral considerations when bringing these issues for analysis. Admired for their revolutionary art, clothing designers, on one hand, at the same time, ignite a debate for being able to desensitize attitudes toward violence even before being noticed by the majority of consumers in the responsibility that lies over the design discipline in its new contributions to societal narratives. It should be worrying for design ethics that key elements of narratives of violence be included and not only "the value of the work of art," for design assumes a projection with utilitarian, economic, and social purposes. The boundaries here should not be thought of along the same lines of purely artistic freedom. As fashion pervades into more users and cultural contexts, it has to increase awareness of the impact its products could generate on society, weighing with great attention to the artistic quality and the communication objectives with possible deleterious effects linked to corporate choices. Moreover, design ethics would need to continue to grow along a line of ethics in all production sectors even in the luxury industry, as it does for other sectors in the field. The images created by creators should be a responsibility, and they should do this from the approach of respect and being informed about the different cultures and life conditions.

It is highly important to reach some form of maturity with the philosophical, moral, emotional, and psychological consequences of these choices [14]. This is important for designers, particularly should they be involved in nurturing a culture of enhanced ethics, sensitivity, and empathy. It is very crucial that the following principles be enforced to guide the fashion industry: inclusivity and diversity, which makes designs be in a position to resonate with all kinds of audiences; cultural sensitivity, which encourages informed respect for the incorporation of diverse cultural elements to avoid appropriation; and responsible innovation, which includes foresight innovation aiming at sustainability, transparency, and taking care of the design process of environmental practices and human rights perspectives. Adhering to these principles



could allow luxury brands to use creativity as a tool for positive change in society and culture, thus fostering positive feelings of self-appreciation and acceptance amongst the consumers. The global world requires an understanding a newer, deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary context of more cultures to avoid not only misrepresentation and appropriation but also foster a more inclusive and respectful narrative.

## 7 Publisher's Note

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