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Recalling forgotten principles: A cultural reading of fashion, death and sacredness

ABSTRACT

This work presents a thesis on how fashion might reorganize and redefine its cultural presence and relevance by shifting its focus from material progress, expansion and profit to a re-emphasis on the more sacred principles *that the author believes once defined its purpose. This discussion is particularly pertinent given the youth's increasing cynicism with fashion as a capitalist concept and their disenchantment with the fashion system for its transparent commercial, superficial and socially irresponsible ethos. This research is in effect, presented as a retrospective and focuses on a particular era which for the author, represents an important, and final cultural moment where arguably fashion was oriented and underpinned by sacred principles. The cultural context to be explored is the 1990s. Within this context, three cultural moments (and intermediaries) are identified, each presented as a short case to illustrate the orienting presence of sacred principles within fashion at this time. It is felt that by reflecting on and analysing these contexts, similar principles can be reworked and reconfigured to address fashion's current cultural malaise.*

Not summer's bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness, no matter which group may triumph externally now.

(Max Weber)

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, the introduction of various new 'means of consumption' (Ritzer 2010) such as social media apps, immersive brand experiences and online shopping has presented consumers with an abundance of choice and seemingly greater agency with regards to their consumer behaviour. Indeed, the *phantasmagoria* that fascinated Benjamin (1982), and the *spectacle* of Baudrillard (1981) and Debord (1967) have now evolved and intensified in their capacity to capture, beguile and seduce the consumer into subjective dreamworlds wherein they seek to experience some transcendent exaltation from the quotidian world. This has led to a concomitant progression in the current of individualism and desire for immediate gratification that now defines and organizes contemporary society. Increasing industrialization, urbanization, technological advances, etc. has created a social environment where both traditional communities and fashion subcultures have ruptured, with people's tribal sense of self becoming fragmented (Elliott 1994; Firat and Shultz 1997). An explanation for such, as Ritzer (2010) argues, are the processes of rationalization necessary to efficiently operationalize this type of capitalist system. That is, a system defined by and intent on growth, expansion and profit, tends to invoke in the consumer a sense of boredom, apathy, frustration and disappointment, collectively described by Weber ([1921] 1968) as the 'iron cage' of capitalism.

The confines and consequences of such have led society to become increasingly existentialist in its consumption of fashion, as people actively seek out experiences from which they can cobble together a coherent identity and extract meaning with which to negotiate their everyday lives (Elliott 1997). In such a society, consumers are increasingly desirous of experiences through which they can become jolted from their rudimentary patterns of everyday feeling and behaviour, to experience moments of intense vitality, essence and a higher sense of self. That is, people seek *enchantment*: '[T]hat ideal moment when alienation disappears and the fragmented world becomes whole again' (Oakes 2006: 237). The allure and power of enchantment, as Jaeger notes, is that it:

> [S]anctifies the immediate so as to create the momentary illusion of divinity in the individual, or of the eternal in the moment, or of indestructible existence, or of unfading beauty in what has long since passed, of happiness and its availability, or of the impotence of death.
>
> (2012: 35)

These felt moments of affective upheaval and embodied change alter people's perceptions and facilitate their escape from the rational confines of their ordinary present moment, whereupon they experience a renewed sense of self, community and purpose. Given the importance of 'enchantment' to socio-economics, capitalism perpetually attempts to re-enchant the marketplace, by orchestrating and presenting consumers with meaningful life experiences that offer to quell the inevitable disappointment and disenchantment that adheres from crass commercialization and material consumption where they can find sanctuary in the form of a quintessential, enchanted moment (Maslow 1943; Belk et al. 1989; Elliott 1997, 1998; Ritzer 2010; Firat and Dholakia 2003). Importantly, as Ritzer (2010) notes, the process of re-enchantment is reiterative and, thus, must be perpetually sustained in the late-capitalist era.

Paradoxically, the extent and intensity with which consumers are bombarded with such stimuli has resulted in their feeling increased boredom, frustration and apathy with the lived experiences of everyday mundane reality (Campbell 1987). This combined with brands' ardent pursuit of profit, lack of transparency and perceived inauthenticity has engendered a certain malaise that has taken stronger hold of fashion culture over the last number of years. The frustrations that emerge have led cultural opinion leaders to argue that fashion is experiencing crises of many forms: ecological impact (Iran and Schrader 2017), lack of inclusion (Von Busch 2018) and diversity (Prasad et al. 2011), outdated concepts (Kansara 2020), luxury's ongoing 'identity crisis' (Huggard et al. forthcoming 2022), the global pandemic (Fashion Revolution 2020), etc.

Agreeing with Li Edelkoort's argument that 'fashion has become old-fashioned' (Cordero 2016: n.pag.), this work presents a thesis on how fashion might reorganize and redefine its cultural presence and relevance by shifting its focus from material progress, expansion and profit to a re-emphasis on the more *sacred principles* that the author believes once defined its purpose. This discussion is particularly pertinent given the youth's increasing cynicism with fashion as a capitalist concept and their disenchantment with the fashion system for its transparent commercial, superficial and socially irresponsible ethos.

This research is in effect, presented as a retrospective and focuses on a particular era which for the author, represents an important, and final cultural moment where arguably fashion was oriented and underpinned by sacred principles. The cultural context to be explored is the 1990s. Within this context, three cultural moments (and intermediaries) are identified, each presented as a short case to illustrate the orienting presence of sacredness within fashion at this time. It is felt that by reflecting on and analysing these contexts, similar principles can be reworked and reconfigured to address the current cultural malaise. It is also salient to note that this era existed on the precipice of what would be a monumental cultural shift with technological advances such as the internet, social media and the notion of absolute consumer sovereignty set to transform cultural perceptions of fashion and consumption. The three cultural moments to be analysed are the presence of *hierophany* in the discovery of fashion model Kate Moss, *commitment* and *sacrifice* in the photography of Davide Sorrenti and the presence of *kratophany* in Alexander McQueen's shows, focusing specifically on *Dante*.

METHODOLOGY

In the last five years, approximately twenty years or more since their initial consecration (Bourdieu 1984) in fashion culture, Moss, McQueen and Sorrenti have all been the subject of new cultural discourses. Moss continues to endure as a fashion deity, gracing the covers of sacred fashion texts such as *British Vogue* (with the tagline: 'Forever Kate') as well as the anniversary issue of *Vogue* in Hong Kong, while McQueen and Sorrenti have had their work and identities analysed and celebrated posthumously through critically praised and widely publicized documentaries. Further, all three remain culturally relevant and pervasive 'voices' for a pure, authentic and expressive mode of fashion, with their cultural personas and status frequently alluded to through sacred language and a belief that they embody some divine essence.

To collect data, the author undertook an extensive narrative synthesis of the various media and cultural representations of these intermediaries particularly

pertaining to the specific areas of interest to this research (i.e. narratives that deify Moss's discovery, McQueen's orchestration of abject ceremony and Sorrenti's realist, grotesque photography). These were collated from a variety of sources such as editorials, documentaries, scholarly and pop cultural media texts. As an interpretivist researcher, the author believes that these various texts and conversations i.e. the stories told, that recall these cultural moments, are stories that ontologically found the world (Shankar et al. 2001). That is, their value and purpose at the time was to revive and restore a sense of magic, wonder and scaredness to the experience and practice of fashion.

Analysis of data followed the method of narrative analysis outlined by Lieblich et al. (1998), with the author choosing to oscillate between a *holistic-content* and *categorical-content* approach. The *holistic-content* approach focuses on an individual's entire life story and focuses on the meanings and themes conveyed within it. The process mirrors a thematic analysis in that each text is treated as a whole, without de-contextualizing these themes from the story (Lichrou et al. 2014). Thus, the themes that emerge from various commentaries connect to the overall theme of the story being told (i.e. the presence of and application of sacred principles). A categorical approach is taken when the phenomenon being studied is shared by a group of people (Lieblich et al. 1998). The phenomenon shared in this instance is the lived (albeit vicariously in many instances) experience of these cultural moments and engagement with the work of these cultural intermediaries. *Categorical-content* is thus similar to a 'content analysis' in that it extracts specific elements of the story into a defined category for analysis. This involved an interpretive process whereby the data were analysed carefully, empathetically and openly until certain patterns, impressions and ideas began to emerge.

FASHION: A DOMAIN OF SACRED CONSUMPTION

Religion, art and fashion are three foremost and intertwined cultural systems that have for centuries been ideologically and philosophically tied to the notion of the transcendent and purity through aesthetic experience (Bourdieu 1995). Aesthetics can be considered a 'portal' through which these systems manifest such ideology and to disavow any relation to the quotidian world. These cultural fields are thus highly aestheticized and rely heavily on aesthetics as a form of sensory communication. Thus, the primary value produced in such fields is *aesthetic*. Thrift (2010) describes aesthetics as 'an affective force' capable of resonating with people's deeper desire to transcend the banal is harboured (Weber [1921] 1968; Stern 1995; Lee 2010). Similarly, Bourdieu (1995) observes how aesthetic experiences are felt to be intrinsically pure, esoteric, abstract and difficult to cognitively rationalize. Noting the philosophical tradition of aesthetics with art and transcendence, Wagner (1999: 130) notes that aesthetics possess an 'escapist character' and are expressive of 'distinct worlds' to which enchanted individuals can vicariously and imaginatively lose themselves. The affective intensity constitutive of aesthetic consumption connects bodies and invokes experiences of (rationally) unobtainable realities and elevates the consecrated to a higher reality or realm of participation (Venkatesh and Meamber 2006).

Further, they are (traditionally, or perhaps more accurately, *romantically*) cultural institutions whose members' practice is motivated by *belief*, rather than logical thought, material gains or self-interest. Within such cultural institutions, the ideology of transcendence through aesthetics (i.e. salvation

through the practice and consumption of) is intended to, in theory or ideologically at least, supersede a desire for economic and material gain. The experience of purity and transcendence is sought after and felt through subscription to the institution's cultural narrative combined with the ritualistic practice (or, worship) of institution-specific principles, ceremony and doctrine, an idea defined by Bourdieu (1984) as *illusio*. Also referred to as 'collective misrecognition', 'self-deception' or 'self-mystification' (Bourdieu 1998; Dillon 2001; Schroeder 2002), Bourdieu (1984) notes that illusio manifests in cultural fields where value or the appeal of such is to a large extent intangible, aesthetic and malleable. Illusio is embodied by members of this cultural field and expressed through myriad heterogenous practices that express belief and devotion in the cultural value and identity of the field/system.

Important to note then is that the value created by these cultural institutions (i.e. whether defined as salvation, meaning, purpose, etc.) does not come from nowhere, but rather, is generated from *within*, as noted through the embodied expression of institution-specific rituals, narratives and principles, the result of which legitimates the meanings that evolve as sacred. Those involved in the cultural legitimation of these meanings (i.e. cultural intermediaries, arbiters of taste, etc.) are themselves revered, their personae legitimated and their presence deified within the institution. That is, the ritualistic and embodied expressions of such belief are designed to veil or disavow any contamination by profane principles such as commerce, materialism or rationality.

This focuses specifically on the field of fashion, considering it as a cultural institution that was founded on, yet has since the late 1990s, abandoned its sacred principles. Nonetheless, the author argues that fashion is ideologically a domain of sacred consumption. In the wake of the cultural demise of religion in late-capitalist culture, consumption has become the foremost spiritual practice (Kurenlahti and Salonen 2018) through which consumers pursue transcendence and salvation through deity worship and subscription to commodity narratives in highly aestheticized and branded 'cathedrals of consumption' (Belk et al. 1989). A critical point is that regarding distinctions between the sacred and profane, the dichotomy between the two is a *false* one (Arnould 2004). That is, the ritualistic ceremonies, sacralizing narratives and heterogenous expressions of devotion and *belief* facilitate the suspension of *disbelief* and allow for the abandonment of logic and rationale. A further key point, despite the constructed nature of sacredness, the author does not consider the consumer as a passive dupe or victim (Gabriel and Lang 2006). Instead, as Harrington (1983) argues, western society *needs* transcendence to fulfil the necessary desire to believe in something more significant, extraordinary and rewarding (Belk et al. 1989).

The enduring absence of such in fashion over the last two decades has reoriented its focus to materiality, which prioritizes logic and rationalism, thereby disenchanting individuals as they become exposed to the harsh dullness and profane realities of everyday life. The result of which precludes 'the right conditions' (Schouten et al. 2007: 358) necessary for 'the sacred' (i.e. experiences of purity) to manifest. To establish a context for this research and within which to illustrate the concept of sacredness and processes of sacralization, the author has chosen to focus on the final moments of sacredness in fashion, interpreted by the author as the mid-1990s, when 'the right conditions' (Schouten et al. 2007: 358) existed before being eroded by an orientation towards more secular and materialistic motives.

90S FASHION: A CULTURAL READING

It is difficult to discuss 90s fashion culture without addressing 'heroin chic'. Heroin chic is an interesting concept as to the author's mind, it represents the market's attempt to neatly package and commodify what was in effect, a sociocultural, political *and* spiritual challenge to mainstream commercial and capitalist ideologies. It was a time when fashion sought to destabilize conventional meanings and obliterate profane sentiment through the embodied expression and practice of sacred principles. Analysing this context in greater depth, the author interprets the cultural and spiritual ideologies embodied in heroin chic as being less about a marketing campaign or commercial aims, and more about coalescing with a greater cultural imperative through the production of commentaries that captured the sentiment of the frustrated and disenchanted youth. Heroin chic antagonized capitalist idealized representations of beauty and success through depicting images of youth culture revelling in sublime, libidinous and abject pleasures (Malins 2011).

As a cultural antithesis, it embodied expressions of dissolution, frustration and hopelessness for a capitalist system that had entered a recession by championing morals like individualism and self-interest. People began desiring more extreme experiences not only to give them a sense of control over their own bodies and lives but also to escape from the malaise generated by relentless dissemination of lacquered and pristine images of stereotypical beauty and glistening perfection. Its nihilistic and anti-establishment aesthetic destabilized the possibility of neat interpretations and problematized logo-centric arguments based on rationality and moral truths that had been so culturally prominent and available before (Harold 1999). The affective capacity of its imagery exposed the arbitrariness of cultural ideas while celebrating the non-rational and unruly logic of corporeal pleasure. For some, the abolition of stable cultural standards combined with simultaneous offerings of explicit, ambiguous and archaic alternatives was not only welcomed but also embraced.

Heroin chic's nihilistic and deviant aesthetic destabilized the possibility of neat interpretations and problematized logo-centric arguments based on rationality and moral truths that had been so culturally prominent and available before (Harold 1999). The affective intensity of the imagery exposed the arbitrariness of cultural ideas while celebrating the non-rational and unruly logic of corporeal pleasure. The abolition of stable cultural standards combined with simultaneous offerings of explicit, ambiguous and archaic alternatives was harnessed by fashion while arguably, originally stemming from other areas of popular culture – representations of youth culture in films like *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Requiem for a Dream* (2000). These cultural texts depicted heroin as a means by which the youth could express their anger and despair but also, their sense of vulnerability, uncertainty and tragedy, evocative in the music and real lives (and heroin-related deaths) of seminal 90s grunge musicians like Kurt Cobain and Layne Staley.

The punk sensibility that had existed for some decades previous became increasingly aestheticized and arguably developed a commodified air of inauthenticity. Contrastingly, amid the flood of accusations for glamorizing heroin use, British photographer Corinne Day maintained that she was merely capturing the sentiment of a frustrated youth and offering a visual representation of youths' desire for extremity and vitality i.e. aliveness. Similarly, photographer Francesca Sorrenti: 'Heroin chic isn't what we're projecting. It's what we are. Our business has become heroin chic. Someone taking pictures of

that magnitude has to have experienced hard drugs' (Helmore and Pryor 1997: 3). Distinctions between the identities of these intermediaries and their art became blurred as the lives and deaths of these pop cultural icons echoed and authenticated a feeling of disenchantment and displacement from the lives (and unfulfilled promises) of their elders and the institutions to which they belonged. The youth's challenge to stable meanings and disruption of moral and cultural codes triggered a moral panic amongst the corporate elites in society, so much so that then President Bill Clinton was forced to chastise the 'movement'. During this time, fashion began to appropriate, embody and express what the author interprets as sacred rituals and practices in response to its followers' expressions of hopelessness and ambivalence with the consumerist society that had enveloped around it. As this article argues, fashion has lost sight of these sacred principles upon which it was founded, becoming increasingly profane, boring and morally problematic in an ever-intensifying secular, rationalized and materialistic culture. The article will now address each in turn, illustrating 'the right conditions' (Schouten et al. 2007: 358) for the manifestation of sacred principles and connecting these principles with the cultural persona, narrative and work of each cultural intermediary, beginning with Kate Moss.

HIEROPHANY: THE DISCOVERY OF KATE MOSS

> As the story goes, in 1988, Sarah Doukas was in JKF-airport waiting to board her flight back to London. While waiting in the queue, she noticed a 14-year-old girl with her family waiting to board the flight. The young girl was not a traditional beauty by any means, but she looked 'different'. She had this natural, magnetic charisma. During the flight, Doukas asked her business partner and brother to walk down the aisle and approach the girl who was sat next to her family. He returned to his seat and informed Doukas that the girl's name was Kate Moss.
>
> (Lara [designer])

A key sacred principle, *Hierophany* refers to 'the act of manifestation of the sacred […] i.e., that something sacred shows itself to us' (Eliade 1958: 7). Hierophany constitutes many 'sacred' narratives to convey a sense of predestination, naturalness, effortlessness, etc. and ultimately, consecration (Bourdieu 1984). The purpose of hierophany is to reinforce the idea that the sacred is not created, rather, *it just is*. Further, this sacred quality is not obvious to everyone, as Belk et al. note: '[A] sacred stone will continue to appear as a normal stone amongst a sea of stones except to those who believe it is unique, supernatural or *ganz andere* (totally other)' (1989: 6). Importantly, the quality of hierophany must be filtered through the lens of an affect-laden story, or myth, if it is to be culturally legitimated and authenticated.

As Sherry and Schouten argue, myths are stories that act as 'a portal both to the unconscious and the transcendent' (2002: 230). They resonate with universal cultural narratives and the lived experiences of a (sub)culture. Their ambiguous nature (Brown et al. 2013) ensures that not everyone will appreciate or recognize its special quality, thus perpetuating the esoteric nature of that person or object that is consecrated through the narrative. Nonetheless, as an integral way of perceiving reality (Levy 1981), myths possess universality dating back to the origins of humanity. A key tenet of mythologies then is that, as Stern (1995) notes, they are continuously evolving and renewed as cultural conditions merit, as in the case of Kate Moss's discovery.

1. Defined by Dion and Arnould as 'clusters of images or symbols [that] may constitute an archetype of fiction deeply embedded in the consumer imagination' (2011: 503).

Vogue's proclamation of Moss as 'Fashion's New Spirit' on the March 1993 cover began this reiterative process from which Moss would continue to be revered, mythologized and deified. For example, a 1999 exhibition entitled *Heaven* at the Tate featured the work of Olga Tobreluts who transposed Moss's face onto iconic saintly portraits of the past and titled the work 'Sacred Figures: Kate Moss' (Tate 2021). Nick Knight's wax angel sculpture of Moss in 2012 featuring the model adopting a pose from early Christian iconography, she is presented not just as a fashion icon, but as a religious icon and deity. Marc Quinn's series of sculptures of Moss between 2000 and 2010 presents the model as an 'abstraction' and 'a cultural hallucination' in contorted yoga poses with the work titled after cultural and mythical icons – Sphinx and Siren (Marc Quinn 2021). Further, Moss featured on two covers for *W* magazine under the main title 'Fashion Bible' and the article 'Good Kate, bad Kate', in which she embodied angelic and demonic forms – wearing a crown of thorns, brandishing an upside-down crucifix, dressed in nun's attire, wearing large devil-like horns, etc. These are just some of the more prominent and explicit examples of Kate Moss reimagined as or transposed with religious iconography, save to mention the countless lyrical and poetic articulations of Moss being the embodiment of 'contemporary fantasy' (Nancy Waters, *AnOther*), 'a modern-day Aphrodite' (Marc Quinn 2021), 'an unrivaled deity of our times' (*i-D Magazine*), etc. As her cultural iconicity endures, it is important to note that without the creation and embracing of an initial hierophanic narrative, Moss's cultural persona[1] could not have been cultivated around such sacred principles, narratives and iconography.

In an analytic sense, the circumstances of Moss's discovery and subsequent consecration result from her embodiment of this *total otherness* which antagonized rational, conventional representations of beauty at the time. At the precipice of Moss's discovery, the dominant archetype was that of the Amazonian woman: a statuesque, healthy, successful woman embodied by models such as Cindy Crawford, Elle Macpherson and Claudia Schiffer. Images were rational in that they represented definitive, easily interpreted cultural meanings like morality, norms and tradition. Images sold a fantasy of the 'perfect body' that in turn would manifest the 'perfect life', both of which could be attained through capitalist virtues like hard work, determination and discipline – all very rationalistic and profane characteristics. Thus, fashion culture needed re-enchantment. The epiphanic moment (Kozinets and Handelman 2004) of Moss's discovery is akin to a type of *consecration* and the manifestation of hierophany. The perceived 'effortlessness' and/or 'naturalness' that derives from consecration, affirms the subject as 'something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world' (Beane and Doty 1975: 141). As noted by Montero (2013), 'effortlessness' and 'naturalness' possess important social value, the embodied experience of which is felt as an ethereal magnetism, where affected bodies are drawn to the person exhibiting such (what we might also cognitively label as 'charisma', or 'aura').

Such mystery and ambiguity are important characteristics of cultural myths and mythical subjects such as Moss. Narratives are woven around 'sacred' objects and/or subjects to denote their elevated status and otherness (Brown et al. 2013). Moss's stature at five feet ten inches was considered much shorter than the required height, while her facial features were not accepted by many tastemakers as 'conventionally beautiful' in contrast to the type of model typically photographed by Peter Lindbergh. The perceived naturalness and magnetism of her look however transcended market logic and rationale,

and instead derived from Doukas's (as a tastemaker) and arguably fashion culture's collective desire for more profound experiences from fashion photography and consumption. Cultural tastemakers such as Marc Jacobs, referring to Moss as 'perfectly imperfect' speak to this ambiguity further. In a collective unconscious bid to commune with the sacred, Moss thus became immune from rational explanation and instead, came to embody multitudinous, unfathomable cultural meanings. As Nisbet (1966) argues, when something is diluted of its mystery and sought to be understood through rationalism, it loses its sacred aura and is consequently experienced as ordinary and profane.

Such affect-laden narratives of Moss's discovery perpetuate a (fashion) cultural 'belief in the sacred' and, thus, disavow any relation to the quotidian world of commerce. Through her embodied 'difference', Kate Moss was a conduit through which to antagonize the prevailing cultural zeitgeist. The manifestation of hierophany served to consecrate Moss as a new deity and evangelist of the fashion revolution to come. As a consecrated deity, Moss embodies and fulfils fashion culture's 'need to believe in something significantly more powerful and extraordinary than the self – a need to transcend existence as a mere biological being coping with the everyday world' (Belk et al. 1989: 2). In the absence of sacredness, the experience of fashion is deemed bland, boring, vulgar and basic (i.e. commercial). That is, its inherent lack of 'depth' or 'soul' renders it profane and, therefore, void of cultural legitimacy and aesthetic value.

KRATOPHANY: ALEXANDER MCQUEEN'S *DANTE*

> In fashion […] the show […] should make you think, there is no point in doing it if it is not going to create some sort of emotion. I don't want to do a cocktail party. I'd rather people left my shows and vomited. I prefer extreme reactions.
>
> (Alexander McQueen)

During the 1990s, the fashion show was a theatrical and ritualistic ceremony of consecration and sacralization during which a belief in the sacred (i.e. the illusio) was reiteratively embodied and expressed (Bourdieu 1984). For Rook (1985), ritual is a highly expressive and symbolic form of embodied performance that is dramatically scripted. That is, ritual is rooted in and emblematic of one's deeper, inner self wherein the desire for renewal and to transcend the banal is harboured (Weber [1921] 1968; Stern 1995; Lee 2010). Thus, in performing rituals, 'believers' are attempting to invigorate and sustain a felt sense of connectedness to sacredness and experience a moment of existential catharsis, otherwise known as the sacred principle of *quintessence*: '[T]hat ideal moment when alienation disappears and the fragmented world becomes whole again' (Oakes 2006: 237). McQueen's artistry embraced the sacred principle of kratophany, acting as the artist noted, as 'a social document' that according to journalist Suzy Menkes was a 'reflection of our nasty world' (Bolton 2012: 12). The experiences of his work often resonated with audiences and penetrated widespread cultural anxieties and uncertainties of the time.

Belk et al. (1989) introduced the notion of kratophany to consumption studies as one of twelve sacred properties/principles, defining it as the ability of the sacred to both enchant awe and terrify. While the sacred possesses 'kratophanus power' (i.e. a property of the sacred), kratophany refers to consumers' strong, unconscious, embodied and often mixed reaction to

such overwhelming power. Such reactions are primarily affective. In other words, they occur beneath the threshold of cognitive awareness as bodies are grabbed, struck and impinged upon during the mobilization of affective intensities channelled through the practice of sacralization rituals. It is only after being affected that bodies can cognitively reflect and label the experience with a series of emotions. An important point to stress is this multi-valanced nature of kratophany. For instance, Belk et al. (1989) note that all sacred entities must have the capacity to be benevolent (e.g. Gods) and malevolent (e.g. corpses). As a result of this multi-valance and unpredictability, kratophany possesses a tension, a tension that can be explained by the *uncertainty i.e.* to highly value a possession but to also acknowledge the potential for the loss of that possession. Extant literature has explored kratophany and the kratophanus power of culturally valuable ideas and objects such as money (Belk and Wallendorf 1990), inherited family heirlooms (Curasi et al. 2004) and college football teams (Pimentel and Reynolds 2004).

Heavily influenced by romanticism, McQueen's work, like that of the Romantics, addressed the more existential aspects of life, often dealing with such aspects in their extremities e.g. life, death, ethereality, awe, wonder, terror and fear. In this sense, his artistry and commentaries harnessed and mobilized kratophanus power as the viewer was always uncertain as to what to expect, and indeed, what they were viewing. The experience was affective, theatrical and tense due to McQueen's ability to obliterate logical notions of theatre and dress, through the fluid mobilization of affective intensities, channelled through the various conduits of his show. As Osman Ahmed for *AnOther* noted, McQueen had a unique ability to weave 'heavy ideas into exquisitely cut garments presented in theatrical gestures' (Ahmed 2018). While arguably any example from McQueen's entire catalogue of work could be used to demonstrate the presence of this sacred property, this research has chosen to focus on his 'era defining' (Ahmed 2018) show *Dante*, a ceremony of sacralization which took place in Christ Church, Spitalfields on 1 March 1996.

Dante was named after the fourteenth-century Italian poet whose *Divine Comedy* depicts the protagonist's journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, exploring as it does, existential ideas such as the afterlife, Christianity, redemption, salvation and divinity. The show that propelled McQueen to international acclaim, *Dante* was a performance art piece merged with an unholy ceremony combined with a fashion spectacular where the atmosphere (i.e. the various amplifiers of affective flow beyond the clothing) was expertly orchestrated and manipulated by McQueen to *affect* his audience. The aesthetic experience of *Dante* evoked the spirit of kratophany: a skeleton perched in the front row, provocative, razor sharp tailoring inspired by religious paintings (e.g. slashed sleeves, 'bumster' trousers), religious iconography both inscribed on the walls of the church (e.g. stain class windows, church altar) as well as models adorned in crowns of thorns, masks with a figure of crucified Christ on, vampish black lace and lilac, constrictive corsetry, antler headdresses, satanic horns, rare wild bird feathers, spikes seemingly emerging from models' skin and the war photography of Don McCullin printed on fabrics, all to a chorus of disembodied Gregorian chanting mixed with the sounds of helicopter blades and rapid machinegun fire from the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*. *Dante* was also coincidentally the first but certainly not the last time Kate Moss appeared in an Alexander McQueen show.

Mikhail Bakhtin's ([1965] 1984) work on the 'grotesque' is also helpful to further conceptualize the kratophanus power of *Dante*, and in appreciating the

cultural impact of McQueen and the cultural resonance of his work during the 90s. Much like McQueen who once noted 'I find beauty in the grotesque' (Stansfield 2015: 19), Bakhtin understood fashion as an ambiguous and unstable terrain upon which sociocultural and bodily norms and deviations were continuously being contested. He theorized the grotesque as that which unsettles cultural discourse and ruptures these imaginary borders within which people are inculcated and made to act/exist. For the author, the grotesque thus also possesses kratophanus power. The fashionable body for instance according to this notion conforms to the 'classical body' of official culture – that is, a completed, finished product with easily interpreted with a quantifiable meaning.

Conversely, the grotesque and kratophanus as embodied and expressed by McQueen and his contemporaries disobeyed rationale and instead, occupied a constant state of becoming (i.e. change, contortion) (Granata 2013). His friend and mentor Isabella Blow proclaimed McQueen as 'the only designer [to make] his audiences react emotionally to a show, be it happy, sad, repelled, or disgusted' (Bolton 2012: 12). The aesthetic consumption experience of McQueen's art was therefore kratophanus in that it was very difficult to pin down and attribute quantifiable meaning to. Rather, it had to be engaged, absorbed and experienced through an embodied form of consumption – not with a visual, but rather, a 'tactile eye' (Featherstone 2010). Moreover, the fashion show and McQueen's shows typify what Bakhtin ([1965] 1984) describes as 'carnival ritual'. The purpose of which was to facilitate symbolic inversion: '[A]n act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms, by the linguistic, literary, or artistic, religious, or social and political' (Babcock 1978: 14).

In his preface for the *Savage Beauty* catalogue, museum curator Andrew Bolton noted how McQueen's shows 'took his audience to the limits of reason, eliciting an uneasy pleasure that merged wonder and terror, incredulity and revulsion' (Bolton 2012: 12). In many respects, McQueen's shows represent a temporary period of authorized transgression during which devotees and followers, through ritualistic acts of consumption and production, can commune with the sacred (be it through abject or blissful experience) and transcend the conventions of the established symbolic order (Burton 2013).

COMMITMENT AND *SACRIFICE*: THE LIFE AND PHOTOGRAPHY OF DAVIDE SORRENTI

> Davide lived emotion in his life because he lived pain. […] I think to myself, Wow, Davide, no wonder you pushed boundaries. I can't equate my pain with his, but that's where the sensitivity came from. He was there for the underdog. And he was a juvenile delinquent, pushing the boundaries. […] Davide was otherworldly. How did someone create such a movement?
>
> (Francesca Sorrenti [Davide's Mother], *Vogue*, Holgate 2019: n.pag.)

Davide Sorrenti was an Italian fashion photographer whose work is celebrated for its 'rawness', 'authenticity' and 'realism'. In most discussions of his work, his photography has become conflated with and wrapped up in the 'heroin chic' movement, he himself becoming a posthumous poster boy for such. However, while the 'movement' to which the above quote refers can be interpreted as

2. A considerable number of artists such as Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison and Amy Winehouse who died aged 27, mainly due to misadventure of various kinds, largely attributed to the cultural narrative that associates excess and artistic genius.

'heroin chic', the author considers this a sociocultural and political movement, the aim of which was to transgress standard practices and norms where the conventional aesthetic of fashion photography was concerned, and a disavowing of the representations of not just beauty, but people, being proliferated in culture at the time. For instance, Sorrenti's work rallied against and is a world away from the infamous *White Shirt Series* that promoted the statuesque, unattainable, supermodel aesthetic shot by Peter Lindbergh on Malibu beach in 1988. Like McQueen, Sorrenti's work was not a phantasmagoria, but a social document that reflected the 'obscene truth' (Holgate 2019) of the authentic lived experiences of people in what became considered the 90s counterculture.

This research interprets the presence of two sacred principles: *Commitment* and *Sacrifice* in the life and work of Davide Sorrenti. *Commitment* refers to an individual's 'focused emotion or emotional attachment' to that which is considered sacred (Mol 1976: 216). The rituals, practices and embodied expressions constitutive of Sorrenti's work are interpreted here as a commitment to this aesthetic movement and/or counterculture. The intensity of this connection creates a shared solidarity among artists/people within the community/culture is the integrative basis for any movement or culture (Belk et al. 1989). Sorrenti's embodiment of this sacred principle is clear from viewing his photography, a social document or as *The Face* described it: '[L]ensing the fast paced, razor-sharp life of a kid living in New York' (Sidhu 2019: n.pag.).

His photography depicted friends, family and strangers on the streets of New York, in private moments, often blurred, always unfiltered (i.e. largely Polaroids), with his subjects often looking jaded, waif-like, unkempt in run down and often dirty looking settings, as though threading the fine line between life and death, as noted Di Alessia Glaviano in *Vogue*:

> Davide was photographing the proximity of life to death, of euphoria to disorientation, of beauty to the abyss. And, by doing so, he was bringing to the surface the other side of the terrible and brazen Eighties, with all their indecent ostentation.
>
> (Holgate 2019: n.pag.)

Within a somewhat related or parallel context, the same commitment is observed by Goulding et al. (2008), in their study of how 90s rave culture can transcend mundane subjectivities and animate an 'orgy of excess' (2008: 767) through embodied performances of illegality within a contained space. The conscious orchestration of an extreme consumption space (i.e. loud repetitive music, euphoric dancing and heavy drug taking) antagonizes the world outside. Disenchantment is concealed while a new reality is animated and celebrated, resulting in shared yet fleeting experiences of vitality amongst clubbers.

Sorrenti's tragic death aged 20 (due to a rare blood condition known as thalassaemia) became packaged as a heroin induced, 'live fast die young' narrative, much like that of other young artists, most notably the '27 Club'.[2] In many respects, the sacred principle of *Sacrifice* was perhaps unknowingly practised and projected onto Sorrenti, referring as it does to a means of purification as one prepares to commune with the sacred (Belk et al. 1989). As observed by Mol (1976), sacrifice can manifest in many forms and such practice is context specific but can include fasting, self-mutilation, sexual abstinence, etc. or in this instance, the consumption and experience of illicit drugs. Sorrenti's life and work (and the same can be said for other artists) reveals a

fear of death and dying that fascinates and grips the everyday public whose lives prevent them from transgressing such norms and boundaries. The life and work of these rare artists then are presented to an extent as fodder, to be consumed and lived vicariously. Typical of this, Sorrenti's death became co-opted by a dominant cultural and political system as 'caused by heroin', leading then President Bill Clinton to politicize and decry 'heroin chic' as a fashion trend that glorified heroin use.

Having referred to Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque ([1965] 1984) in the previous section, this theory, as well as Kristeva's abjection theory (1982) is considered useful in helping understand the affective capacity of Sorrenti's photography and his embodiment and expression of sacred principles. For instance, Kristeva's work on abjection is rooted in Lacan's theory of the symbolic order, which describes how the child is indoctrinated into cultural institutions governed by a patriarchal system. She describes the abject as 'the place where meaning collapses' (1982: 2). The abject is thus, *affective*: a pervasive, pre-discursive and embodied flow of vitality between bodies that can shape the dispositions of those affected. As well as considering the polaroid image as a unique, auratic and sacred object, one that animates and preserves these sacred narratives and principles, his photography can also be thought of as an 'amplifier' or 'conduit' for the flow of affective energies and intensities in that it captures embodied expressions in a 'pure' format and method. As noted previously, this 'purity' possesses aesthetic value and is akin to sacredness.

The ubiquitous and contagious flow of intensity during the consumption experience of Sorrenti's photography allows such energies to 'leap between and take hold of bodies without an individual's volition' (Hill et al. 2014: 388). Only afterwards can an attempt at signification be made as these intensities become captured, closed off and qualified as emotions. As demonstrated by Sorrenti's work, moral panic is often a reaction to the affective intensity of the abject, which according to the dominant symbolic order threatens life and must be excluded, shunned to the other side of an imaginary border between the self and that which threatens it (Creed 2002).

DISCUSSION

Within culture, there exist cultural systems which through myriad heterogenous cultural practices and social processes create and express meaning. The meaning created through such processes can solidify perspectives, shape views of cultural reality and define for people, not just a way of life, but a framework with which to make sense of and negotiate everyday lived experiences. More than this, meaning offers human beings a means by which to preserve the fragility of life and all its cherished constituents (memories, loved ones, relationships, self-identity, experience, purpose, etc.). Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1975) argues that such cultural meaning systems have evolved as a psychological defence strategy designed to manage humans' most basic and greatest fear, death. That is, humans manage this existential threat by investing in cultural meaning/belief systems whose primary purpose is to infuse life with an enduring sense of meaning, order and permanence, thus keeping the inevitability of death (and potential for debilitating death anxiety) from the fore of consciousness. The value processes through which one can experience such meaning, order and permanence are prescribed by the ideologies of the requisite system (i.e. the values, beliefs that establish a form of governance within that cultural system). One's embodied and ritualistic

practice of faith or belief in a system's ideologies, that is, living up to the value standards prescribed, can invoke in humans a feeling of death transcendence or symbolic immortality (the symbolic extension of self after one's death i.e. through family lineage or achieving fame and notoriety) (McCabe and Arndt 2016).

Fashion (or perhaps more accurately consumerism) has become the ideological successor to religion, as the foremost cultural belief system that prescribes pathways towards transcendence and symbolic immortality. Increasingly beholden to a capitalist economic system and cultural world-view, the structuring influence of rationalism and neo-liberal values has prescribed fashion as an economic model for growth, a cultural tool for individual self-expression and a vehicle to reassure oneself and others of one's existence (while continuously distracting from and mitigating one's enduring fear of non-existence). It has been the argument of this article that in abandoning the sacred principles by which it once abided, in favour of neo-liberal/capitalist ideologies, fashion has emancipated itself from its ideological essence and is now accruing the overdue moral, humanistic and ecological consequences.

The quote used to open this article neatly summarizes this current predicament and fashion's increasing secularization and subsequent entrapment within 'the iron cage' of capitalism (Weber and Kalberg 2013). In this late-capitalist era of hyper-competition, profit margins and uber-efficiency of mass production, fashion has become stale, boring and ordinary under the weight of such prescriptive ideology that foregrounds a materialistic, rationalist cultural world-view. Its capacity as a cultural institution to express ideas and transgress culturally regressive 'norms' is now impotent. The results of such are manifesting in all sorts of ways, be it progressive ecological deterioration, inhumane treatment of workers or the increasing mental health anxieties of the youth as they compete for status and assurance. In short, fashion has lost the belief it once had, in a cultural system with the potential to reflect cultural frustrations and injustices, enhance social realities, bind communities and generations and express new ideas of progressive ways of thinking, doing and being.

The existential catharsis produced by absorbing sacred principles into cultural practices has been shown to create meaning through experience that is 'wonderful and illogical', comparable to the 'pure joy a child feels when he unexpectedly comes into the possession of something magically desirable' (Cornfeld and Edwards 1983: 2). As in the 90s and previous countercultures, individuals can interpret and modify these cultural narratives in animating stories of their own experiences and identities, thereby salvaging a sense of structure, stability and *purpose* for their lives and the lives of their community (Levy 1981; Stern 1995; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Belk and Costa 1998). On this note, vehement opposition to commerciality and the ordinariness it imposes is already not uncommon in discussions of enchantment and aesthetic experiences within consumer research (Arnould and Price 1993; Arsel and Thompson 2011; Celsi et al. 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Larsen and Patterson 2014; Goulding et al. 2008; Sandicki and Ger 2010; Canniford and Shankar 2012).

Fashion can thus act as a conduit for catharsis, during which people's deeper, repressed yearnings and fears can become momentarily fulfilled or abolished, rather than ignored in a fleeting, impulsive moment of distraction and throwaway consumption. In momentarily obliterating traces of the profane through sacralizing experience, consumers can become rescued from the ordinary, the mundane and the bland and exist in a 'new' moment

of heightened awareness with community and commonality rather than self-interest and competition as core ideologies.

The instances articulated here seek to evidence this idea. Fashion as a cultural belief system, which when predicated on mythic archetypes and spiritual principles, can disavow any relation to the quotidian world of commerce and induce opportunities for social purpose, collectively shared meanings and transcendence. Within this philosophy, cultural intermediaries act as storytellers, propagators and evangelists for fashion myths that re-enchant fashion audiences and the ideologies/principles of sacredness underpinning the system. In the past, this expert orchestration and manipulation of myth and ritual allowed fashion to blatantly obfuscate any attachment to the profane and in doing so, bewitch consumers with what are felt to be intrinsically pure experiences and cultural expressions. The time has now come for new narratives and expressions of culture, told by new cultural intermediaries from diverse cultures and subcultures such that new generations might use fashion as a cultural resource with which to negotiate their identities and make sense of their lived experiences, conscious of, rather than ignorant of the more existential inevitability to which we are all bound. By familiarizing itself with the sacred principles outlined by Emile Durkheim (1976), as well as the three instances presented by this work, fashion and its intermediaries can become more appreciative of the structuring influence that these principles have had and how they were fruitfully embraced during some of fashion's most pivotal cultural moments, three of which have been outlined here.

CONCLUSION

To be clear, this article is not arguing for a (re)institutionalization of fashion as a cultural system designed for a select few. Nor is it a declaration of fashion as 'doomed' beyond repair. Rather, it is calling for a re-evaluation of fashion as a cultural belief system and an appreciation for the potential artistry and communities that might develop were these sacred principles re-introduced. While contemporary consumption is performed in part to achieve/experience death transcendence, the intermediaries and instances referenced in this article literally and symbolically confronted the experience of death, while harnessing and embodying mythic ideas and expressions in their work and lives.

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