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Physical Assault: World War I

Fashion has a significant relationship with its social, political, and economic context, and is able to trigger, reflect, and respond to wider changes. When such changes involve violence, horror, or trauma, this process has particular ramifications due to fashion's deep intertwinement with the body, both physically and conceptually. From depictions in luxury fashion magazines of headless women after World War I, to ghostly interpretations of death as the Internet took hold in the 2000s, fashion and violence have shared a unique connection. Violence can be found, implicitly and explicitly, across fashion's multiple layers: object, body, and image. The forms that violence manifests itself within include notions of physical assault, fragmentation, psychological violence, sexual violence, the abject, and deathliness, which will be explored in chronological order across the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first. The eruption of violence onto the surface of fashion—which itself serves as an external surface to the body—exposes important revelations about the individual and society from which it is spawned.

During the early 1910s, Western fashion was fluid, elegant, and ladylike. Already having loosened from the stiffer silhouettes of the previous decade, cultural influences—such as the Ballets Russes, which performed in Paris, the city that served as fashion leader—began to take hold, injecting playfulness and expression, while gradually allowing garments to become simpler and easier to move in. Fashion, as expected, was shifting, but the catastrophic occurrence of World War I had a huge impact.

The conflict was the largest and most devastating that had been experienced to date. A lethal combination of nineteenth--century battle tactics with modern, mechanized machinery such as tanks caused death and destruction on unprecedented scales. Over 16 million civilians and military personnel were killed, and more than a further 20 million were wounded. Its presence was inescapable: the beginnings of the mass media painted a gruesome picture of the action, through newspaper articles and photographs, and newsreels, which were accessible in each country. Furthermore, the emotional impact ran deeply, and many families in all involved countries faced a loss.

This devastating violence and its widespread impact upon society affected fashion in several ways. On a practical level, the sartorial changes already in motion before the war were forced to rapidly accelerate. Many women worked for the very first time, in active roles usually reserved for men. This necessitated an overhaul in approach to dress. Practicality and ease of movement—which were already starting to be considered before the war—became key priorities, to enable women to carry out their duties and participate fully.

As Nina Edwards has written, utilitarianism also appeared within civilian fashion, which began to strongly follow trends in military attire. In part, this was instigated by practical restrictions such as the shortage of dyes and repurposing of utilitarian material, which lent a combat-ready flair to regular clothing. However, it also had widespread cultural appeal as an aesthetic, and clear links to public sentiment: while not every person directly fought, they could show sensitivity and support through dress. This was demonstrated in numerous ways, from sharp, uniform-inspired cuts, for example within coats and capes, to militaristic details such as gold braiding and buttons. In addition to patriotism, adopting such styles could act as a form of comfort against the deep-seated and troubling angst that understandably was caused by the destruction. These qualities signified strength and lent a sense of countering the uncontrollable chaos of the war that was currently unfolding.

The war also impacted fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, which directly lamented its physical and emotional cost. Even the advertisements upon their pages were affected. Beforehand, beauty advertisers drew on idyllic, natural imagery to promote the "undetectable" qualities of their products. With the onset of the war, the inspiration for these became more scientific. Images began to appear showing dangerous and invasive implements being held closely to women's faces. These suggestive and potentially violent actions were presented as beauty procedures and used to publicize innocuous skincare creams. Such advertisements drew upon recent successes in science and medicine, which had advanced rapidly as a result of the war. These idealized projections of cleanliness, radical transformation, and healing addressed—and tantalizingly offered to eliminate—women's traumas.

As the war raged, the changing conditions for women and their dress were also coupled with progressive developments in haute couture. In 1916, Coco Chanel produced her first couture collection, from surplus fabric. American *Vogue* praised Chanel's transformation of a humble, undesired material into one that would become a classic. Using knit jersey in women's fashion for the first time picked up on the war-accelerated trends and offered a revolutionarily comfortable, moveable, and breathable fit, which would remain internationally influential throughout the twentieth century.

Fragmentation: 1919–1939

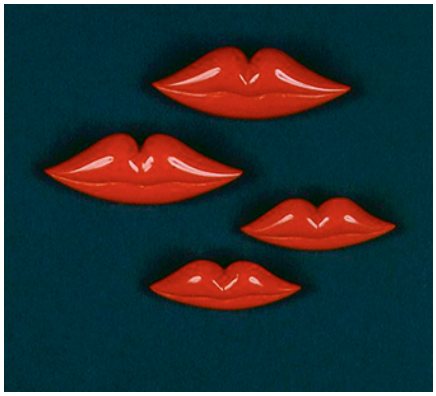
Nevertheless, the devastation of the war laid profound roots that would last considerably after the conflict ceased. Some of the implications of this, and their effect on dress, can be explored through the theme of fragmentation. On a physical level, soldiers—many of whom returned with disabilities and amputations—embodied the war's cruel chaos, and their public presence was a continual reminder of its afflictions.

Everyday life, which had been destabilized massively by the war, was not reassured or reinstated by its end. Rather, the onset of postwar modernity led to increased anxiety, and existence came to be perceived as fragmented. The rise of technology, including transport, and the growth of the modern mass media hastened the pace of modern life. The senses were overburdened with flickering newsreel images and the flipped pages of magazines and newspapers, whose titles and circulation figures increased rapidly. Georg Simmel wrote of the anxiety that could be caused by the simple process of walking on a street in the modern city, which involved, as it still does, being confronted by a continuous stream of images: signs, glimpses of buildings, and blurred faces.

This had specific consequences for women. Helped by wartime activity, public independence became more acceptable for women, and for the first time they were able to work and move freely in urban settings and modern life without tarnishing their reputation. However, while independence could mean freedom and fun, it also subjected them directly to the shifting shards of modernity and new social demands.

Fashion enhanced sensations of exposure, with rapidly rising hemlines that revealed more skin than ever before, and with simpler silhouettes that revealed more of the natural body shape. Even newly bobbed hairstyles permanently exposed the neck. The demands and changes of modern life generated new tensions and fears, as women were now able to act and appear in manners that had until only recently been associated with disreputable members of society.

Over the course of the interwar period, these anxieties were reflected through the explicit appearance of fragmentation within fashion imagery, such as photography and illustration. In 1928, for example, Cecil Beaton drew a luxuriously and fashionably dressed woman for French *Vogue*. However, in her hands was not a bag, or any other expected accessory, but a severed head. This concept became ubiquitous, and the magazine was still drawing on it by 1938, when its American version published a drawing by Edouard Benito. In this case, women modeled couture dresses, with scattered heads at their feet.



Elsa Schiaparelli, *Lip Buttons*, plastic, ca. 1936–1937.Royal Pavillion and Museums, Brighton and Hove.

The theme of fragmentation also appeared extensively within physical objects of dress during the interwar period. Couturière Elsa Schiaparelli, for example, frequently included fragmented body parts such as heads and lips within her ensembles. Dilys Blum has pointed out the way in which Schiaparelli's collection for fall 1934 heavily featured hand shapes in applications such as belts and buttons. Jeweler Jean Schlumberger also produced similar hair clips. These efforts were picked up on by the mainstream media, and on 15 September 1937, *Harper's Bazaar* featured a suit by Schiaparelli which had lip-shaped pockets. These forays into the representation of fragmentation within dress conversed with concurrent explorations made by the Paris-based surrealist group of artists and writers. In 1937, Dali also experimented with lips when he produced a sofa modeled after the lips of actress Mae West, which Schiaparelli went on to use within her Parisian boutique.

These increasing appearances of fragmentation in fashion over the 1930s reveal the continued and unresolved aftermath trauma of World War I. This strain was deepened by the onset of a frenzied modernity and other crisis scenarios, such as the financial crash, the Spanish Civil War, and the political restlessness that would culminate in the advent of the World War II.

Psychological Violence: The 1940s and 1950s

World War II surpassed the previously unprecedented scale of World War I. All aspects of society were directly affected, and home was no longer safe: many countries faced civilian bombings and occupation. As in World War I, women played active and necessary roles, though this time, they were even permitted to join army divisions in several countries.

During World War I, beauty, through skincare products, was advertised as psychologically comforting. During the World War II, beauty was employed as an active tool. Physically, skincare creams could form a barrier against dangerous conditions, such as those within munitions factories. However, skincare, along with makeup, could also boost morale, both of the women wearing it and cumulatively across nations. According to Madeleine Marsh, British government officials and managers considered cosmetic products as critically important for this purpose.

Individual approaches differed, and while a polished swipe of red lipstick signaled bravery and defiance in Britain and America, patriotism in Germany was displayed through a restrained look. However, femininity featured heavily in propaganda across nations, either calling on women to dutifully maintain their feminine appearance, or by appealing to men to protect them.

The violence of the conflict also directly affected dress in several ways, with decreased amounts of available material, and the repurposing of garment factories to military supplies. Utilitarian styles, including berets, short jackets, and narrower skirts, bridged the gap between functionality and fashionability, and trousers became more popular among women, with their air of ease and practicality. Several pieces made direct reference to the war, such as a blouse produced by London designer Anita Bodley in 1943, which featured propaganda posters upon a brick wall as its print.

Anita Bodley, silk blouse, 1943. From Rationing to Ravishing exhibition, September 2014–March 2015.Photo by author, by permission of the Museum of Vancouver.

The onset of a second world war, so shortly after the first, exacerbated a social sense of denouement that had never been resolved. The coping methods of World War I were again relevant, and many of these were carried out through dress: from maintaining a well put together appearance through limited means, to the military production of dress objects, such as compacts, to be exchanged between soldiers and their loved ones.

These revivals accord with the psychoanalytic theory of hysteria, which was theorized by Sigmund Freud from the late nineteenth century and during the interwar years. According to Freud, hysteria—a violence of the mind—occurs when residing trauma reemerges, and what has been repressed returns to the surface. The outbreak of another, and even more horrific, world war, brought with it the psychological violence of hysteria. World War II unleashed the precise anxieties that society had striven to move away from, on an even wider scale.

This intertwining of psychological trauma and fashion development continued during the postwar period. One key style of this time stemmed from couturier Christian Dior's "New Look," first shown in 1947, and named after its abrupt contrast with wartime styles. Abundant use of material replaced the previous frugal usage, and fuller, longer skirts were embraced after higher hemlines. Furthermore, the traditionally feminine figure reemerged after the androgynous silhouette of the 1920s, and wartime boxy styles.

However, in order to achieve this look, which became the prime style of the 1950s, the body was sculpted by heavy, stiff fabrics and tightly cinched waistlines. This emphasized fashion's ability to construct a second surface of the body. The doubling that it entailed—between the natural form, and the figure molded and created through clothing—recalls another of Freud's theories, and therefore a further source of psychological violence: the Uncanny. According to Freud's paper on the matter, published in 1919, the Uncanny occurs when the familiar is made strange, which incites a feeling of unease. This especially occurs in instances of repetition, and contrasts between the living and unliving. All of these aspects are present in the 1950s silhouette, in which the natural, familiar body was reproduced by a second, artificially created one.

This idea of unfamiliarity and deliberate construction ties into the position of women during the decade. They were expected to fill several roles with grace and ease: acceptance of the working woman was becoming more widespread, and larger numbers of women balanced successful careers with being wives and mothers. As dress historian Rebecca Arnold has written, maintaining all of these roles demanded careful self-presentation, and the fashion industry produced precise garments for each one. This suggested that women could use dress in order to fulfill, or play, the various roles that society demanded of them. While this corresponded with, and contributed to, a rapid increase in consumerism, choice, and accessibility, it also brought about anxiety in the form of constant monitoring, self-invigilation, and awareness.

This also highlighted a tension in goals and roles. As the postwar period morphed into the early Cold War, gender roles became a central part of political identity and could be used to project strength and stability. Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, described the crucial role in America played by a femininity that was firmly traditional yet receptive to modern advancements.

Women were forced to contend with this conflict, between the new modern lifestyle and the heavily promoted traditional expectations, and dress was a means through which to do so. The popular New Look was reminiscent of late nineteenth-century styles. Because feminine roles during the 1890s were clearer cut than in the 1950s, associating current dress with the late nineteenth century acted as a comforting, guiding visual reference. The revival of this traditional silhouette marked a further return of the repressed trauma of patriarchal repression, another indication of the psychological violence of hysteria. It revealed, and could help to offset, the confusion and contradiction of the 1950s' shifting international spectrum and values.

Violence and Sexuality: The 1960s and 1970s

As the first postwar generation reached adulthood, these stricter values and dress styles began to fade in favor of the unconventional. The vigor of youth became prized, and fashion perpetuated this. Graphic makeup emphasized wide doe eyes; dress promoted a childlike figure through de-emphasization of the waist and straight cuts falling away from the body; and loud colors and patterns added to a sense of youthful wonder. Yves Saint Laurent featured these elements in his bright, color-blocked 1965 "Mondrian" day dress, which drew connections between contemporary art and fashion trends.

While this sense of carefree play seemed to underplay eroticism of the female body, other aspects of dress enhanced it. The thigh-skimming length of Saint Laurent's "Mondrian" piece represented a new taste for the minidress and miniskirt. In 1967, he enhanced the sexual properties of a minidress within his "African Look" collection, which exposed the wearer's torso behind a provocatively scanty layer of beads. Many other designers, from high street to haute couture, also experimented with transparent materials, and nonchalantly exposed breasts even appeared in fashion photography.

These elements contributed toward a new, carefree sexuality. Fashion historian Daniel Delis Hill has discussed the period as a watershed in advertising, in which the industry first began to employ sexual imagery as a major selling device. This was matched by increased sexual freedom, due to the availability of the contraceptive pill and greater sex education. However, while some liberation of a largely sexual nature took place, as political scientist Richard Dunphy has expressed, it was not universal, as conservative values remained for a majority of society. This added to the sense of conflict and tension.

The expression of new political views through dress deepened as the decade progressed into the 1970s. The primacy of youth remained central, with a strong emphasis on subcultures. One subculture in particular that came to define the decade, and would influence contemporaneous and future fashion, is punk. The movement expressed frustrations toward consumerism and modern mass life, often through heavily sexualized means.

While the preceding years had prized both youth and sexuality, the 1970s made very explicit any previously implicit violence. Marginalized sexual practices were drawn upon in punk fashion, through the appropriation of previously underground artifacts. Skintight black leather, layers of belts, and metal chains and hardware conflated fashion with fetish wear, and conjured notions of power play, control, and violation.

Elements of visual violence were also apparent. Unraveling string jumpers suggested destruction, the usage of safety pins as jewelry punctured the skin, and the popular mohawk style formed hair into spikes. This was deliberately aggressive, and both male and female wearers sought and celebrated the outrage that it provoked. Indeed, punk was one of the most inclusive subcultures for women and gave them an outlet for assertiveness and individuality. Heavy, threatening makeup and miniskirts shorter than ever before, in bondage-inspired materials, harbored signs of traditional sexual attraction and tinged them with perversion. Furthermore, certain aspects, such as deliberate rips in fishnet stockings, strongly connoted a sense of violation. Through knowingly donning such associations, women could rebuke the traditional male gaze and counter it with strength and violence.

Studded T-shirt with leather collar, bondage trousers with zips, Kensington Market. Mohair jumper, Camden Market. Ensemble worn by punk singer Marian Williams, ca. 1982.Museum of London.

These practices found their way into mainstream and high fashion. Designer Dame Vivienne Westwood remains renowned for this style. She began her career with a London boutique, which she owned with her then partner Malcolm McLaren (manager of punk band, the Sex Pistols), and in 1974 was named Sex (there were later name changes). Selling punk wares, and decorated with pornographic material, it exemplifies the period's commercialization of the subversive. The 1960s quest to rebuke older generations culminated in playing with the taboos of society, the biggest of which was sex, and increasing its power by stressing violence.

The Abject: The 1980s and 1990s

Dress continued to be an important means through which women could navigate traditionally masculine environments. By the 1980s, women's role and ambition in the workplace was established. The pressure to both work and play hard was high, and psychologist Carol Tomlinson-Keasey has described the tolls suffered by women attempting to perform as "superwomen." In order to take on this tall task, and to fit in, women adopted masculine attire such as suits. Nevertheless, femininity was not lost: exaggerated shoulders, narrow jacket waists, and tight skirts emphasized the female form. Fashion created a rigid shell around the body, simultaneously revealing its contours and armoring it. At nighttime, this shell was pierced by flashes of naked flesh: low necklines and skintight dresses expressed overt glamour. This meant that for (working) women during the 1980s, their appearance oscillated between a professional, exterior self, and glimpses of internal sexuality. Physically, and metaphorically, the body was turned inside out.

Several designers expressed this concept, including Jean Paul Gaultier, Karl Lagerfeld, and Gianni Versace, who played with boundaries of the body, sexuality, and taste. In 1982, Rei Kawakubo, the designer behind Comme des Garçons, graphically represented it through sweaters made from lace. The choice of material alone played with notions of hiding and revelation, and of exposing and concealing certain aspects of the body

and psyche. She emphasized this even further with irregular holes in the material, as if eaten by moths. Not only did this expose the body—with implications that this was done unwillingly—but it also introduced notions of decay and disgust.

These tropes recall psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's theorization on the abject, which she published contemporaneously, in 1980. According to Kristeva, abjection is a reaction that occurs in a strongly visceral manner, often toward something that society usually disregards or conceals. This theory was fulfilled by contemporary designers' notions of an inverted body, uncovered flesh, and even decay.

The recession of the early 1990s halted the overt consumerism that fuelled many of the trends beforehand. However, certain designers continued to expose and suggest potential violence to the body. Gianni Versace took this to new heights, for example in his plunging 1994 dress, worn by movie star Elizabeth Hurley, with naked flesh revealed by large slashes, constrained only by oversized gold safety pins.

Elizabeth Hurley wearing Versace with Hugh Grant, 1994.Photo by Dave Benett/Getty Images.

In addition to exposing the corporality of the body, fashion also placed it into harrowing situations. As the decade wore on, fashion photography, editorial, advertising, and catwalk shows alike portrayed models facing the physical consequences of drug abuse. Their emaciated figures and shadowed, haunted faces appeared as though teetering between life and death, in an aesthetic that came to be known as “heroin chic.” According to Kristeva, viewers of the abject lose the boundaries between themselves and the object, the self and the other. This process was heightened within heroin chic, due to several reasons. Firstly, its grittily realist style brought staged fantasy closer to reality. Secondly, access to heroin was facilitated by new trade routes to the West. Finally, some models and photographers of the style tragically followed the same fate in reality that they helped to depict on a figurative level.

These dalliances with death intensified the exposure of the body. By showing it in moments of fatal danger, its acceptable outer shell was pierced, and mortality revealed. This exposed a side of fashion as being a disguise for the living, but simultaneously decaying, mortal body.

Deathliness: 2000–2014

Modern beauty had become bound up with its opposite, horror. Imagery of the 1990s began to explore the abject, and found an ideal expression of this on the boundary of life and death. This remained a substantial theme within high fashion of the 2000s; however, the previous graphic, sensational approaches gave way to ethereality.

Designer Alexander McQueen had extensively employed graphic horror during the first decade of his career, in the 1990s. By the early 2000s, he had begun to explore a different face of deathliness. His “Oyster” dress of spring/summer 2003, for example, was composed of a multitude of layers of sheer, pale fabric. Ravaged strands, left to unravel elegantly from the shoulder and off the hip, emphasized its frailty. Within another dress from the same collection, he used explicitly torn translucent beige silk, and trailed it behind the figure. This sense of vulnerability was powerfully emphasized in 2006, when McQueen punctured an elaborate lace headdress with antlers. The ephemerality suggested by sheer, vulnerable textures was further heightened by a silk dress embroidered with real and silk flowers in 2006–2007. This juxtaposed the artificial, or unliving, with something that was living, but only transiently. This emblematic approach to death took center stage of McQueen’s fall/winter collection of 2010–2011, his last before committing suicide. It drew on religious imagery and icons, including doves and angels. This connoted eternity and the afterlife, once more employing light, floating fabrics to do so. Such primacy of the symbolic and the ephemeral conjures the immaterial nature of deathliness.

This corresponds with a change in the human experience, as the technological age itself has placed a new emphasis on the intangible. The importance of digital identity has increased catastrophically, and competes with traditional physical existence and relationships. This in turn creates anxieties. In 2012, philosopher of communication Philip Weiss described the vast technological revolutions taking place and explained that while they offer expediency, they also induce widespread despondency. Isolation, the dissemination of the private sphere, and the restlessness of communication contribute to an awareness of self, and therefore of its extinction. However, since the digital self can be established separately to the body, it evades its organic mortality, as the digitalization of the self as data allows for its eternal and unblemished persistence. Perturbation toward death remains but has taken on a new form, which found an ideal outlet in couture creations.

Other design houses, such as Valentino and Jean Paul Gaultier, continued to express these ideas, as exemplified by their respective 2014 couture collections. The Valentino stage was decorated with butterflies. Their *mille-feuille* wings and fragility were echoed by the sheer materials and flimsy lace that wispily clothed the models. Similarly, Gaultier invoked the ethereal with gauzy clouds of cloth, and built on the theme by simultaneously using oversized mesh to invoke a caged sensation.

This oscillation of freedom and entrapment, of life and death, corresponds to the pressures exerted on the individual during the early twenty-first century. Technology has connected the world, but it has simultaneously dissolved the division between the individual and public. This has led to insecurity, apprehension, and despondence about modern society’s disintegration of previous beliefs caused by the decline of collectivism. While fashion may provide an apparently safe overlay and reflect progress, it also serves as a plane onto which inner turmoil and violence can erupt. Throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first century, fashion has both rejected and flaunted taboos as it unleashes the forbidden modern anxiety and expresses underlying truths about the jagged existence of contemporaneity.

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