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VISUAL AND LINGUISTIC SEMIOTICS IN CONTEMPORARY FASHION DESIGN: A MULTIMEDIA ANALYSIS OF THE WORKS OF ALEXANDER MCQUEEN, HUSSEIN CHALAYAN, IRIS VAN HERPEN, AND REI KAWAKUBO

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ABSTRACT

The study introduces the concept that fashion design can be understood as a visual-linguistic semiotic system, which refers to the interpretation of visual semantics. It also asserts that the primary function of linguistic semiotics is to decipher images. The article references semioticians such as Saussure, Barthes, and Peirce. It also focuses on social and multimodal semiotics, discussing how titles, designers' statements, printed texts, and critical discourse produce multiple layers of meaning for clothing. Using a qualitative, interpretive, multimodal semiotic approach, the study presents four examples: Alexander McQueen's "Highland Rape," Hussein Chalayan's "Afterwords," Iris van Herpen's "Capriole," "Sensory Seas," and "Roots of Rebirth" collections, and Rei Kawakubo's "Body Meets Dress," "Dress Meets Body," and "Not Making Clothing." These cases demonstrate how language and visual design interact to reshape narratives of violence, exile, posthuman embodiment, and the deconstruction of clothing and the body.

KEYWORDS: Visual Semiotics; Linguistic Semiotics; Contemporary Fashion Design; Conceptual Fashion; Post-Human Body.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper conceptualizes fashion design as a discourse on linguistic and semiotic levels within a multilevel shape-material structure. Fashion design is more than just appearance or consumption. The visual representation of clothing is apparent in aspects such as silhouette, cut, color, and fabric. Nevertheless, this study delves into the mechanisms of structural language that dictate, regulate, and confine meaning in design. Language itself establishes the design context, which is an essential condition of anything design-related, and is referred to in academic and business terms. This can be seen in collections, conceptual labels, designers' work, printed material, press releases, catalog essays, and critical and curatorial work. With this in mind, the study is grounded in Ferdinand de Saussure's classical semiotics. From this perspective, a sign is a system of interconnected relations between the signifier and the signified within a society. As Roland Barthes argues, signs constitute second-order signifying systems and are the mechanism by which social "myths" arise through the interaction of images and words. Charles Sanders Peirce expanded on this idea, claiming that signs are components of an icon-index-symbol triad. This article extensively uses social semiotics and multimodal theory to argue that meaningfulness does not derive from any semiotic resource (image or language) alone, but rather from their combination. Based on this conceptual model, fashion is a multimodal semiotic text in which language interprets and/or reconstructs meaning. From this perspective, designers such as Alexander McQueen, Hussein Chalayan, Iris van Herpen, and Rei Kawakubo are complex semiotic laboratories in which visual and linguistic elements are inextricably tied.

In McQueen's "Highland Rape," for instance, torn fabric, aggressive cuts, and dark color palettes visually suggest violence, exposure, and trauma. However, the title, the stitched-wound image, and the designer's comments on Scottish identity and women's representation reinterpret this imagery. The collection is situated within a narrative of colonial and gendered violence and national memory, rather than being merely "distressed" styling. Chalayan's *Afterwords* transforms domestic furniture into garments that tell a visual story of movement, displacement, and uprooting. The title "Afterwords" and its accompanying text transform the show into a semantic field related to "after the war," "after official discourse," and the everyday lives of refugees. Similarly, Iris van Herpen's work shows that a purely visual interpretation is incomplete

without considering the linguistic elements created through collection titles such as *Sensory Seas*, *Biopiracy*, and *Roots of Rebirth* and catalog texts containing scientific and ecological references. These texts create a conceptual lexicon that leads viewers to interpret 3D-printed structures as metaphors for neural networks, fungi, ecosystems, and the posthuman body. Rei Kawakubo's collection titles, such as *Body Meets Dress*, *Dress Meets Body* and *Not Making Clothing*, are read in relation to the excessive padding that alters the feminine body form.

The Western fashion world has seen significant discussion about normative body image, as clothing has become less important and "objects for the body" have taken its place. Language reveals what we see and tells us how to perceive it. This brings us to the core research question: In what ways do semiotic linguistic systems in collection names, designer statements, printed texts, press materials, and critical discourse mirror the interpretive spaces in which the visual narratives of Alexander McQueen, Hussein Chalayan, Iris van Herpen, Rei Kawakubo, and others take on meaning? These systems reveal different aspects of identity, power, memory, and futuristic fantasy in contemporary fashion design. How exactly do these systems relate to the various visual elements on the runway, such as color, cut, fabric, and body composition? Every fashion show is a multimodal semiotic text that cannot be understood through a single lens. In this context, the current study emphasizes linguistic encoding but also acknowledges visual encoding and how these encoding processes interact with non-linguistic forms. Textural and color cues, as well as design variables such as texture, cut, material, shape, and fit, inform the show's location and environment. However, this analysis focused primarily on verbal material, such as titles, subtitles, slogans, printed texts, show notes, press releases, interviews, essays, and critical writings.

Using a storytelling and myth-building approach, these texts can be examined through the lens of cultural ideologies such as violence, national history, exile, the posthuman body, and the dissolution of traditional body concepts. In this post, I analyze the lexemes and syntax of fashion discourse using Saussurean methodological analysis. Barthesian frameworks of denotation, connotation, myth, and anchorage are employed to explore written fashion discourse.

The study also employs a Peircean approach, organizing terms and components into icons, indices, or symbols to describe them through broader social, political, and technological lenses. This theoretical

contribution to fashion studies shifts our approach from fashion as visual codes to fashion as semiotic activity, organized and expressed in language. It is based on classical and contemporary semiotics. It focuses on discursive, technical, and practical contexts within signs. It offers designers, researchers, and educators a framework for understanding the semiotics behind design choices such as color, materials, collection names, and printed messages on clothing. These choices change how the body, identity, and values are presented in the public realm.

Therefore, it treats contemporary fashion design as a semiotic and communicative problem that is separate from the descriptive aesthetics of modern fashion. The framework emphasizes the importance of linguistic semiotics in organizing, repeating, and negotiating the meanings clothing carries and represents.

2. VISUAL AND LINGUISTIC SEMIOTICS OF FASHION BETWEEN SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY AND CONTEMPORARY FASHION THEORY

Fashion's semiotic inquiry begins with Ferdinand de Saussure's classic theory of signs. According to de Saussure (2011), a linguistic sign is an arbitrary relationship between a signifier and a signified within an organized social system. This framework treats verbal language as a means of representing experience and extends the concept of "sign-building" to nearly all nonverbal systems, including fashion, images, and architecture.

These systems of signs have their own lexicons and grammars. In this way, clothing, cuts, and materials can be viewed as signifying entities (signifiers) that carry specific meanings derived from their associations with other facets of fashion and cultural systems. Verbal designations, such as collection labels, descriptive language, and editorial texts, constitute a second verbal order named, classified, and hierarchized according to visual meaning.

Charles Sanders Peirce supplemented this framework by differentiating between iconic signs (based on resemblance), indexical signs (based on causal or spatial contiguity), and symbolic signs (based on cultural convention). Together, these enable visual and material details, such as color, line, cut, and fabric, to be understood as elements in the iconic, indexical, and symbolic signal structure within an extended set of meanings (Peirce, 1998). In "The Fashion System," Roland Barthes builds on this account by showing how fashion magazines create a

linguistic structure based on headlines, labels, and descriptive formulas. This structure is paralleled by images and produces second-order, "mythical" meanings involving femininity, luxury, modernity, and class (Barthes, 1990). Scholars further the semiotic paradigm by defining fashion as a symbolically influenced cultural act and acknowledging the significance of discourses of dress and their associations. Alison Lurie's 2000 text, "The Language of Clothes," states that clothing predates speech and asserts its social and historical significance.

According to Malcolm Barnard, fashion is not merely a reflection of who you are; it is also a means of expressing your identity in terms of gender, class, sexuality, and cultural power. According to Barnard (2002, 2013), discourse, including advertising slogans, editorial articles, and critical writings, mediates the relationship between clothing and its social connotations.

In his essay "The Fashioned Body," Entwistle further elaborates on this concept, noting that clothing semiotics are created through clothing's ability to become the body (the body becomes the "scene" in society's "picture"). These moments feature codes of gender, class, and sexuality that are translated and redefined through fashion writing and brand-building within the discourse surrounding daily wear (Entwistle, 2015).

Fashion is the dialectical process of engaging with or dissociating from society, as postulated by Georg Simmel. In other words, fashion is not merely the act of dressing or styling one's body; it is an intellectual voyage that is "modern," "elegant," and "eccentric," to borrow Simmel's terms.

Bourdieu theorizes that style is a system of taste and cultural capital through which people can be judged based on their class and status. Bourdieu defines styles as chic, vulgar, or avant-garde to signify symbolic distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984).

For Jean Baudrillard, fashion is merely a system of "sign value." Clothing is not just a utility; it is a sign that should be valued and judged according to codes of identity, status, value, and lifestyle.

These codes are primarily circulated and regulated by the media, language, and branding discourse (Baudrillard, 1970/1998). In fashion studies, Yuniya Kawamura defines "clothing" as material items and "fashion" as symbolic, social products produced through institutions, designers, the media, consumers, and intermediaries (Kawamura, 2005/2023).

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) conceived the idea of visual semiotics, which describes how the features

of a "visual grammar"—color, framing, perspective, and object—convey meaning to the subjects included in a fashion show or image. These visual structures are deeply linked to written and verbal texts, such as titles, captions, and explanatory texts, due to their multimodal focus.

Fashion imagery is a multimodal text in which language, movement, sound, and images converge. Within these texts, these elements interact (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Ma, 2024). Recently, the field has shifted towards a socio-semiotic perspective that prioritizes the social, media, and digital spaces in which fashion operates (Paz Gago, 2025; Boero, 2023).

Understanding the production of this work requires recognizing that meaning is constructed in the text of one's garments, not simply given form. Meaning is created through the manner in which clothing is disseminated and experienced in different media and discursive contexts. Designers like Iris van Herpen propose a concept of "posthuman fashion," in which hybrid materials, such as 3D-printed pieces, facilitate the creation of breathing, reconfigured bodies that coexist with humans, technology, and nature. These analyses draw upon biological and ecological language to interpret the subject matter by using the names of collections and curatorial texts together (Smelik, 2020). In her analysis of Rei Kawakubo's deconstructionist process, the author explores how she disrupts aestheticization by using asymmetrical cuts and oversized designs.

This is reflected in her statement that she "is not making clothing," suggesting that her designs are not garments but rather "objects for the body" (Geczy, 2020). Additionally, linguistic semiotics have significant implications.

Through brand names, promotional copy, runway notes, and social discussions, we develop perceptions long before we are directly confronted with a fashion moment. Barthes called for a "fashion discourse that is simultaneous to, but not differentiated from, the visual" (Barthes, 1990). Lurie and Barnard argue that language used to present clothing has ideological implications regarding gender, taste, and social value (Lurie, 2000; Barnard, 2002, 2013).

Further investigations have explored how tags, comments, names of collections, and designer statements influence multimodal fashion discourse within social and online media formats (Castaldo Lundén, 2020; Ma, 2024).

In such spaces, linguistic signals — which are usually condensed, marked, or promotional — become the basis for interpreting and regulating

different versions of collections. Thus, the next stage of research focuses on the linguistic aspect, specifically semiotic style analysis. Visual systems are positioned as platforms on which language is produced and performed, and they are also essential. Titles, labels, phrases, statements, printed texts, and conversations are major centers where meanings are adopted and reimagined.

In other words, the following sections will investigate the designs of Alexander McQueen, Hussein Chalayan, Iris van Herpen, and Rei Kawakubo to identify their linguistic structures, which act to enhance, rather than rival, the linguistic field.

3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: A MULTIMODAL LANGUAGE-CENTRED SEMIOTIC APPROACH

This study takes a qualitative, interpretive, multimodal semiotic approach to framing contemporary fashion as a linguistic sign system supported by visual and material forms rather than as a set of autonomous images or material garments. The corpus consists of runway images and video documentation of productions, focusing primarily on linguistic resources such as collection titles, subtitles, printed invitations, designers' statements and interviews, show notes, catalog essays, press releases, and critical works concerning the selected designers. Fashion is conceptualized as a multimodal text in which images, movement, and materiality are central. However, language also shapes, stabilizes, directs, and elevates the meanings implied by visual design.

The analysis is structured into multiple related methodological steps. Specifically, a corpus of linguistic data is created for each case. This corpus consists of official collection titles, show invitations, designer statements, exhibition labels, catalog texts, and a selection of significant critical and curatorial essays.

The texts are analyzed at the verbal level using Saussurean terminology to describe the relationship between signifiers and signifieds. The analysis identifies recurring lexical choices ("rape," "afterwords," "sensory seas," and "not making clothing"), semantic fields, and syntagmatic combinations that establish particular conceptual frameworks (de Saussure, 2011).

Second, this linguistic mapping corresponds to a close visual reading of selected looks from each collection. This reading includes sketching the silhouettes, cuts, fabrics, colors, points of tearing or padding, body posture, and movement on the

runway, as well as the relationship between the garment and the body. However, these visual details are primarily addressed as the material field in which these linguistic signifiers operate. Third, a Barthesian analysis of denotation, connotation, myth, and anchorage is utilized.

The study differentiates between first-order meaning, which is what is literally seen and said, and second-order mythical signification, such as "raped Scotland," "refugee home," "posthuman nature," and "anti-ideal body." Collection titles, invitations, designer statements, and catalog texts are read as anchoring and relay devices that direct, limit, or complicate the interpretation of images (Barthes, 1977, 1990).

Fourth, a Peircean triadic analysis parses visual and verbal signs as icons (resemblance), indices (trace or symptom), and symbols (convention). This analysis explains how words and images together point to bodies, histories, and social imaginaries (Peirce, 1998).

A comparative analysis of the four cases reveals that modern fashion narratives centered on violence, exile, posthuman corporeality, and body deconstruction are shaped by this linguistic and visual sign language. The linguistic dimension is given analytical weight.

The sample was selected using purposive (theoretical) sampling rather than statistical sampling. Each case involves four designers and four core collections. Each collection addresses a specific semiotic problem relevant to the subject of the research.

Thus, these cases were selected against the backdrop of strong linguistic framing and highly codified visual design within each collection. Alexander McQueen's "Highland Rape" (Autumn/Winter 1995) was chosen as it symbolizes the representation of past and gendered violence in fashion. This is evident in the ripped garments, daring title, and discursive space for interviews and critical analyses.

These aspects are just a few of the many ways in which "Highland Rape" serves as a vehicle for theorizing the interaction between linguistic discourse and visual design in the construction of experiences of trauma and national memory. Hussein Chalayan's "Afterwords" (Autumn/Winter 2000) is a paradigmatic example of fashion as a metaphor for exile and the portable home.

The transformation of furniture into garments cannot be separated from the title "Afterwords" or the explanatory texts that explicitly invoke war, displacement, and "what comes after" official

narratives.

Included is Iris van Herpen's work from collections such as "Capriole," "Sensory Seas," and "Roots of Rebirth."

These collections distill posthuman fashion through form and dialogue, using hybrid materiality, 3D printing, and complex silhouettes. The scientifically inflected titles and catalog essays activate vocabularies of biology, ecology, and neuroscience, making this a fertile breeding ground for researching the semiotics of the body in the age of biotechnology and digital fabrication.

Lastly, Rei Kawakubo's *Comme des Garçons* work, specifically "Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body" (Spring/Summer 1997), along with later statements such as "Not Making Clothing," is chosen as radical, deconstructive fashion. In this work, the disrupted silhouette is paired with a self-referential linguistic discourse that openly refutes the category of "dress" and reimagines garments as "objects for the body."

These four cases are particularly appropriate for this study for three reasons. First, they are well-documented in museum catalogs, interviews, and critical essays, which are necessary preconditions for a language-centered, multimodal, semiotic approach. Second, they are central to the discourse of conceptual and high fashion. Designers and institutional mediators (curators, critics, and brands) explicitly consider garments to be vehicles for ideas, narratives, or philosophical questions insofar as they address form.

Third, the four cases reflect the research question through four thematic axes: violence and memory (McQueen), exile and home (Chalayan), posthuman corporeality (van Herpen), and the deconstruction of the body and dress (Kawakubo).

The intention is not to make statistical generalizations about all fashion; rather, the goal is to formulate a theoretically informed interpretive model of modern fashion as visually and linguistically mediated meaning production in the fields of identity, power, memory, and future imaginaries, with a focus on linguistic framing.

In this context, "Highland Rape" by Alexander McQueen epitomizes the tension between visual and linguistic semiotics in his work.

Popular photographs of runway models in shredded lace or chiffon dresses that reveal the chest or thigh, combined with the frequent use of clan tartan and fabrics that reportedly "survived" a physical assault, exemplify this tension. Slumped shoulders, torn and worn fabrics, and an unstructured cut transform the garment into a

witness of violence, connecting the body and fabric

to the present (Fig. 1) (Bisevac, 2025; Bolton, 2011).



Figure 1: Torn Lace Dress from Alexander McQueen's Highland Rape Collection (Autumn/Winter 1995), In Which the Ripped Fabric and Exposed Thigh Function as Semiotic Markers of a Violated Body and Historical Trauma, As Displayed in the Exhibition Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. From. [Https://Blog.Metmuseum.Org/Alexandermcqueen/Tag/Highland-Rape/](https://Blog.Metmuseum.Org/Alexandermcqueen/Tag/Highland-Rape/)

Visually, these tears and distortions are signs of wounding and trauma. There are harsh slits through the breast and openings around the pelvis. Ripped fabrics falling from the shoulder or waist create a violated second skin in the dress. Angela Bisevac focuses on a simple green leather dress with a painful blade across the chest as a "model example of dismantling fabric as an intentional mode of disruption and disorder" (Bisevac, 2025). These details are not merely distressed in their styling; they form a constellation of visual cues reminiscent of violence, control, exposure, and resistance. However, from a Saussurean perspective, these visual signifiers acquire their full value only within the context of a broader language and cultural code. Torn lace, Scottish tartan, blood-like stains, and the models' hesitant walks function as signifiers that symbolize a wounded body, a violated land or nation, collective memory, masculine violence, and the body's dual frailty and power (Bisevac, 2025; Bolton, 2011; de Saussure, 2011). Central to the title "Highland Rape" is the reconstitution of its signifying field. Ripping signifies violence within a socio-historical system and verbal frame that links the Scottish Highlands to

rape and colonial aggression. McQueen reimagines the fashion language of the 1990s by transplanting recognizable elements (lace, slits, and tartan) and recombining them in shocking ways. The title and invitation further embed these combinations in a narrative of national and gendered trauma. Roland Barthes interpreted Highland Rape as denotation, connotation, and myth because it denotes and connotes. On a denotative level, there is a woman, a dress, and torn fabric. The title and critical discourse mythologize "Raped Scotland," "history as wound," and "woman as a site of political struggle" in connotative terms (Barthes, 1990).

The collection's title, "Highland Rape," has become a consistent motif. As Barthes (1977) explains, language provides these images with a stabilizing force that gives meaning to their multiple interpretations. This implies that interpretation is not dependent on the eroticism of colonial and gendered violence. The invitation, rendered as a stitched wound, becomes an artistic and linguistic portal to the exhibition. It spins a semiotic web of pain and healing, telling a story of scars that continue to permeate the present day (Bisevac, 2025). McQueen's

signs align with Peirce's three categories of visual and linguistic signs: icons, indices, and symbols. Stains or cuts resembling wounds or blood permeate the visual appearance (Peirce, 1998). The hanging threads and charred, unfinished edges become indices—the traces of cutting or burning—symbolizing savagery. The Scottish tartan, a heritage of Scottish clans, and the open, stitched wound on the invitation are symbols that carry cultural significance for a community (Bisevac, 2025; Bolton, 2011).

The model's ripped clothes, combined with McQueen's statements of empowerment for women and references to his Scottish heritage — linguistic gestures that ground the work in a narrative — transform her fragile, wounded skin into a canvas bearing a rich, bloody history. As the story progresses, the body symbolizes strength and defiance on the runway (Johnson, 2016; Figueredo, 2024). Even the shift in erotic focus from breasts and buttocks to "the end of the spine" in the low-rise "bumster" trousers is framed in interviews as a discourse that echoes Foucauldian theories of the body as a surface inscribed with power (Foucault, 1977; Bolton, 2011). Thus, "Highland Rape" becomes a dense semiotic text in which images, movements, and language intersect to depict a body as a site of historical violence and fashion as a medium that interrogates—rather than beautifies—that history.

In Hussein Chalayan's *Afterwords* (Autumn/Winter 2000), the focus shifts from bodily

wounds to wounds of place and exile. This shift occurs through the tight confluence of visual transformation and linguistic framing. The show took place in a set resembling a typical living room, complete with four chairs, a round coffee table, a television, and a few decorative pieces. Runway images show models wearing drab gray dresses that are stripped and reinterpreted to resemble clothing. Then, one model steps onto the coffee table, lifts it, and transforms it into a wide wooden skirt (Fig. 2) (Lau, 2011; Stansfield, 2016). Domestic furniture becomes aesthetic clothing. The familiar home becomes a moving body, transferring the weight of the house at its waist. All the furniture and other conventional items signify stability, family, and place. Worn as clothing, however, they become icons of forced displacement and the burden of carrying one's home on one's body while fleeing under duress. From a Saussurean perspective, *Afterwords* is a radical reshuffling of the semiotic system, which is made explicit and interpretable through the verbal signifier "Afterwords." Chairs and tables, which often have their own terminology in the language of furniture, are transposed into the language of clothing. This changes the meanings produced by these objects (de Saussure, 2011). The signified presented here includes the portability of home, the fragility of stability, and the burden of carrying one's home—a burden borne by refugees (Lau, 2011; Stansfield, 2016).



*Figure 2: Runway Scene from Hussein Chalayan's *Afterwords* Collection (Autumn/Winter 2000), In Which Domestic Furniture Is Transformed into Clothing—Culminating in the Iconic "Coffee-Table Skirt"—To Stage a Powerful Semiotic Metaphor of the Portable Home, Forced Displacement, And the Experience of Exile.*

From. <Https://Ayerhsmagazine.Com/2021/08/22/Otherworldy-After-Words-Chalayan-Fall-2000/>

In Barthes's sense, the term "Afterwords"—namely, "after words," "after war," and "after official discourses"—serves as an anchor and a relay that shapes the myth of what remains after all language—of the state and army—has fallen silent (Barthes, 1990; Barnard, 2002). From a Peircean perspective, the table skirt is an icon (equivalent to the table and the skirt), an index (emergency/fleeing), and a symbol (the transfer of the family table onto the body of the refugee) (Peirce, 1998; Kawamura, 2005/2023). The repositioning of "Afterwords" in Hussein Chalayan: From Fashion and Back, featuring a living room installation, video projection, and illuminated text panels, likewise emphasizes that Chalayan's work is organized as an integrated visual-linguistic scene (Lau, 2011). In Iris van Herpen's work, visual semiotics are articulated through three-dimensional structures, fractal folds, and hybrid materials. However, the titles and explanatory texts of her

collections are indispensable for understanding them as speculative studies in posthuman corporeality. In Capriole (Autumn/Winter 2011), the "skeleton dress" is a white, 3D-printed exoskeleton that is worn over the model's body, giving it an inside-out appearance (Fig. 3) (Smelik, 2016, 2020). A Saussurean analysis suggests that these unconventional signifiers—such as 3D-printed volumes, fractal pleats, and nerve- or fungus-like networks—are added to a lexicon that includes words like "sensory," "seas," "biopiracy," "roots," "rebirth," and "wilderness" (de Saussure, 2011; Smelik, 2020, 2024). Barthesian myth analysis indicates that these verbal markers transform organic-technological structures into a scientific-ecological myth about the body as a sensory and biological network and about the fusion of humanity, technology, and nature in the future (Barthes, 1990).



Figure 3: The Iconic "Skeleton Dress" From Iris Van Herpen's Capriole Collection (Autumn/Winter 2011), A 3D-Printed Polyamide Exoskeleton That Turns the Body Inside Out and Visualizes a Posthuman Anatomy, functioning as a Dense Semiotic Structure in Which Technological Materiality and Organic Form Converge. From. <Https://Www.Irisvanherpen.Com/Collections/Capriole/Backstage-6>.

The titles and catalog essays anchor interpretation, steering it toward ecological and biotechnological imaginaries. In Peircean terms, folds and waves are icons of neural networks and

ocean waves. Their movement with the wearer's body indexes sensory interaction. The use of technological materials and scientific titles functions symbolically, calling to mind a posthuman age

(Peirce, 1998; Smelik, 2020, 2024). The Aeternus dress (2021), featuring thousands of clear, laser-cut discs framed by a title evoking "eternity" as part of the "Roots of Rebirth" narrative, demonstrates how verbal and visual layers produce an expanded temporal and ecological significance (Smelik, 2024). In Rei Kawakubo's work with Comme des Garçons, specifically "Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body" and the subsequent "Not Making Clothing" formula, the relationship between linguistic and visual

semiotics becomes self-reflexive (Fig. 4). In the Lumps and Bumps style, elastic gingham dresses are distorted with large amounts of padding over the hips, back, shoulders, and other areas to resemble tumors or swellings (Gerrie, 2021; Paić, 2022). Saussurean analysis reveals how these forms denote resistance to the normative feminine archetype inscribed in the fashion system (de Saussure, 2011; Entwistle, 2015; Gerrie, 2021).



Figure 4: Look From Rei Kawakubo's Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body Collection for Comme des Garçons Spring/Summer 1997), In Which Exaggerated Padding Wrapped in Red Jersey Distorts the Normative Feminine Silhouette, functioning as a Deconstructive Semiotic Gesture That Questions Ideals of Harmony, Proportion, And The ("Correct" Body Shape. From. [Https://Zararara.Wordpress.Com/2010/05/27/Comme-Des-Garcons-1997/](https://zararara.wordpress.com/2010/05/27/Comme-Des-Garcons-1997/).

However, the titles "Body Meets Dress" and "Dress Meets Body," as well as the phrase "Not Making Clothing," precisely assert a counter-discourse. At the level of Barthesian language, myths suggest that there is no one "right" body and that the identity of "dress" is subject to reappropriation (Barthes, 1990; Barnard, 2013; Bolton, 2017; de Perthuis, 2019). A Peircean interpretation views these forms as icons representing nonconformist bodies and as indices of weight and restriction. They also represent dissent against the long tradition of hyper-symmetry and thinness (Peirce, 1998; Geczy, 2020;

Paić, 2022). Together, these four cases, analyzed through the lens of Saussure, Barthes, and Peirce while paying close attention to titles, statements, and critical discourse over sustained periods, exemplify how the chosen methodology and purposive sampling enable the study to appreciate contemporary fashion as a language-centered visual-semiotic system. These cases demonstrate that narratives of violence and memory (McQueen), exile and the portable home (Chalayan), posthuman corporeality (van Herpen), and deconstructed bodies and garments (Kawakubo) are constructed through

ongoing interactions between visual form and language.

4. CONCLUSION

A theoretical analysis of works by Alexander McQueen, Hussein Chalayan, Iris van Herpen, and Rei Kawakubo reveals that contemporary fashion design is a multidimensional, visual-linguistic semiotic system. Fashion transcends the typical categories of "decoration" and "consumer trend" to become a multifaceted cultural discourse in which the body, identity, memory, and social imagination are continuously remade. The analysis shows that each collection acts as a "semiotic text" composed of visual elements (such as cut, material, color, and geometric structure) and linguistic elements (such as collection titles, explanatory statements, printed texts on fabrics, and the accompanying critical discourse). Separating these two levels would disrupt the overarching structure of meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Barnard, 2002, 2013).

Meanwhile, the analysis revealed that language functions largely to orient interpretation, stabilize certain meanings, open others, and serve as the entry point for understanding the works. Thus, linguistic semiotics becomes a key entry point for comprehending these works, while visual semiotics functions as a similar, though not exclusive, field of signification. The primary finding is that Alexander McQueen's work, especially "Highland Rape," reveals how fashion can represent violence and the tortured history of the collective body through conscious semiotic tactics. Tears, distressed and stained fabrics, the use of clan tartan, and the models' staggering walks—as if the garments were another skin bearing the scars of violence—transform the body on the runway into a site of inscribed power relations, trauma, and memory (Bisevac, 2025; Bolton, 2011; Foucault, 1977). However, these visual cues only hold power within a broader linguistic and cultural context. The shocking title "Highland Rape," the stitched-wound image on the invitation, McQueen's statements about his Scottish heritage and women's empowerment, and critical discourse converge to create a language of signs that redefines the "language of fashion. In this light, however, the tear is a political and gendered symbol, as opposed to merely a "distressed fashion trend" (de Saussure, 2011; Barthes, 1977, 1990; Peirce, 1998). (de Saussure, 2011; Barthes, 1977, 1990; Peirce, 1998).

The investigation revealed that McQueen not only reconstructed the dress's intricate architecture, but also rethought fashion's semiotic fabric from the inside with symbolic and literal signifiers. One of the

best examples of transforming home furnishings into garments is Hussein Chalayan's *Afterwords* collection. This transformation is also a key semiotic metaphor for exile and the portable home. The study shows how moving the focus from "furniture" to "clothing" by rearranging chairs and tables remaps the body's relationship with place within the entire piece. This transformation turns a symbol of stability and family into a symbol of displacement, portraying home as a physical burden (Lau, 2011; Stansfield, 2016). This shift destabilizes the fixed relationships between signifiers and the signified in everyday life (Saussurean). Barthes's theory allows for reading the collection as a "myth of exile"; the title "*Afterwords*" anchors the visual composition in a world of "after war" and "after official discourse" (Barthes, 1990; Barnard, 2002).

For Peircean purposes, the table skirt is seen as a symbol of a portable home and an index of emergency. It is also a symbol of the literal "displacement" of the center of "the family table" to the body of the refugee. In this sense, the body of the displaced subject is a semiotic site for reimagining home and belonging (Peirce, 1998; Kawamura, 2005/2023; Paic, 2022). The linguistic co-construction and visual transformation permit "exile" to develop into a coherent semiotic field. Through Iris van Herpen, the authors demonstrate the experimental potential of fashion design as a laboratory for envisioning the posthuman body by integrating digital-architectural materials and strategies with scientific-poetic terminology in collection design titles and texts. The 3D-printed shapes, fractal folds, and networks resembling nerves or fungi in collections such as "Capriole", "Sensory Seas", and "Roots of Rebirth" create signifiers related to signifieds concerning neural entanglement, ecological systems, and the relationship between the natural and the technological (Smelik, 2016, 2020, 2024). Using Barthes's concept of second-order signification, titles such as "Sensory Seas" and "Roots of Rebirth" become scientific-ecological myths of the body as part of a network of life, not simply descriptive labels. From a Peircean perspective, these designs emerge as hybrid signs with distinctive forms (e.g., waves, roots, and halos), indexical qualities (e.g., halo-like motions that signal bodily movement and sensitivity), and symbolic aspects (e.g., technical material products and scientifically inflected titles as indicators of a posthuman era). This indicates that fashion produces knowledge that is as integral as its aesthetic value (Peirce, 1998; Smelik, 2020).

Crucially, the linguistic element directs analysis

toward ecological and biotechnological imaginaries, once again underscoring the importance of linguistic semiotics. The study determined that fashion can dislodge body image and deconstruct the concept of "dress" in Rei Kawakubo's collections, including "Body Meets Dress," "Dress Meets Body," and "Not Making Clothing." A visual inspection of the "Lumps and Bumps" collection revealed how exaggerated pads reshape the female silhouette, producing bodies that are "unreadable" according to the beauty standards of preeminence. Following Saussure's insight that value depends on difference within a system, our bodies have value only insofar as they differ from the historical norm of the fashionable body (de Saussure, 2011; Gerrie, 2021; Entwistle, 2015). In mythological terms, the study revealed that Kawakubo creates a "counter-myth" to the ideal body, which is an impossible-to-measure and classify form. Statements such as "Not Making Clothing" mark this transition from garments to "objects for the body," renaming the semiotic category (Barthes, 1990; Bolton, 2017; de Perthuis, 2019). From a Peircean perspective, they can be seen as icons of diseased, pregnant, or otherwise non-normative bodies; indices of weight and burden, given their constricting effect on movement; and symbols of dissent against the long-standing tradition of glorifying symmetrical, slender bodies, which some critics (e.g., Peirce, 1998; Gegy, 2020; Paić, 2022) refer to as "deconstructive fashion." Language, in the form of titles, manifestos, and critical descriptions, is not only behind the images but also defines what counts as "dress" and "body" in the first place. This study demonstrates that combining classical semiotics with the sociology of fashion, visual semiotics, and multimodal theory contributes to conceptualizing fashion as an integrated visual-linguistic discourse (de Saussure, 2011; Barthes, 1990; Peirce, 1998; Barnard, 2002, 2013; Kawamura, 2005/2023).

Some of these concepts, such as "system" (langue), "utterance" (parole), "difference," and "value," provide an understanding of how designers construct a "language of fashion" internally. Barthes's distinction between first- and second-order signification, "anchorage," and "myth" allows us to interpret fashion as the production of persistent myths regarding bodily identity and historical representations. Peirce's set of three symbols is a group of clear tools for checking visual similarity and understanding symbols in the area of fashion design. More precisely, it identifies contributing factors and significance (Barthes, 1977, 1990; Peirce, 1998). These findings echo contemporary academic discourse on "fashion semiotics" and "socio-semiotics," which

posit that fashion functions as a visual-linguistic code within postmodern society. Fashion also sparks conversations about gender, class, migration, technology, and environmentalism (Paz Gago, 2025; Boero, 2023; Ma, 2024).

The findings also have concrete, practical implications. They invite designers to discuss the use of color, material, and cut, as well as the format of collection titles and text written on cloth. These discussions relate to discourses on the body, identity, and social values, forcing designers to consider more than just consumer preferences (Barnard, 2002; Entwistle, 2015). In the process, researchers must reexamine the nature of design and confront the question of how they can redefine their work. We suggest that a multimodal approach to analyzing images, movement, data, textual forms, and exhibition spaces could be useful for audiences in fashion and the visual arts. This broader perspective encompasses the politics of human behavior, the body, technology, and the future, offering a more comprehensive understanding of fashion's nature (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Smelik, 2020; Paić, 2022).

This paradigm is relevant to new topics, including metaverse fashion, digital fashion, and portrayals of the body on social media and AI platforms. However, the study has some limitations. Since it focuses on a select group of renowned designers from Europe and Japan, the research findings cannot be generalized to all fashion traditions and cultures. Using the same theoretical approach to haute couture may cause researchers to overlook other sartorial practices in popular fashion, everyday dress, and street cultures (Entwistle, 2015; Kawamura, 2005/2023). Such practices require parallel studies within a different analytical framework. Further research is necessary to include designers from non-Western cultures, digital modes of dressing, and semiotic analyses of fashion on social media, including hashtags, comments, and modes of digital reception (Castaldo Lundén, 2020; Ma, 2024).

This is to be completed. Based on this, the theoretical and practical implications of the study can be established. First, the study demonstrates that visual-linguistic semiotics is not abstract but rather a potent analytical tool that reveals the underlying semiotics of fashion, particularly in the work of McQueen, Chalayan, van Herpen, and Kawakubo. Conversely, it shows that fashion today is not merely about mirroring a prevailing identity; it is also a practice that involves imagining alternatives and challenging existing images of the body, home, humanity, and nature. According to these results,

fashion design is considered a semiotic practice that constructs cultural meaning through a specific negotiation between the subject, image, language, and bodily constitution. This practice transforms

notions of identity and social imagination in distinctly different ways within the frameworks of globalization, postmodernity, and posthumanism.

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