

# Mannequin to Human and Back Again: The Evolving Role of the Runway in Fashion

Ellie Ko

Hong Kong International School

## **Abstract:**

This paper will focus on the evolution of the fashion runway, as well as the positive and negative ways the fashion runway has impacted the industry as a whole. Specifically, through tracing the evolution of three fashion cornerstones—models, theatrics, and technology—this paper will explore how the runway has become the driving force of the fashion world.

## **Introduction**

Fashion is central to people's lives. Whether one is an avid follower or a person completely disinterested in fashion, fashion is at the core of society's daily life and function. Fashion defines what we wear to work, to events, to sleep, and to everything in-between. Furthermore, fashion reveals our own personalities, values, and shifting cultural and social attitudes in society.

The main component that has fueled the fashion industry is the fashion show. Only in fashion shows do innovative silhouettes, patterns, and trends first emerge; it is this collection of innovations that eventually translate into what we wear everyday. Exploring the development of fashion runway models, theatrics, and technology reveals the fashion world's overarching evolution from the past to the present and the future.

## **Models**

The idea of the fashion show started to develop with the replacement of the mannequin with a human model. In order to promote designs to clients, Charles Frederick Worth initiated this change with his wife, Marie Augustine Vernet, who is considered the first ever fashion model (Helmer). In the decades that followed, Lady Duff Gordon introduced the idea of the "showgirl", who poses in beautiful fashionable garments (Merrill 245). In addition, Gordon started "mannequin parades", during which models would hold rigid positions and walk around in circular motions through high-end dining venues. These changes in the way garments were modeled did impact the fashion industry. Before Charles Frederick Worth, designers would work on a one-on-one basis, personally visiting the homes of their clients. However, with the usage of human models,

naming them “showgirls”, and hosting “mannequin parades”, designers would now interact with clients on a group basis, showing their work to a wider audience of high class families.



Figure 1

Theatre also influenced the first fashion models. Celebrity clients often wore the designs of Charles Frederick Worth, Jeanne Paquin, and Paul Poiret in theatre plays, where designers could effectively showcase and sell their garments to a large audience. Although this may be attributed to costume designers today, theatre was one of the only public platforms for designers at that time, so it still had the function of a fashion runway. Therefore, theatre performers are also considered as one of the first fashion models to showcase designs. The platform of theatre propelled fashion forward because it first introduced the idea of a physical stage to showcase fashion. During this time, the fashion business was largely based on having clients, so the work of such fashion designers were exclusive, otherwise unknown to the public. But having a platform in theatre allowed the designer’s fashions to be on the spotlight, which made fashion accessible to a wider audience and

allowed it to eventually be deeply involved in society.

There is no doubt that models are expected to have such flawless and natural looks. That is not the only defining factor of the model’s role on the runway, however. The type of walk and charisma plays a bigger role in fashion shows. For example, Karlie Kloss is named the “panther” for exerting authority, Gisele Bundchen is called “the bounce” for her effortless walk, and Naomi Campbell’s famed “strut” has solidified her trademark attitude (O’Malley). This is vastly different from the models in “mannequin parades”, who were expected to all walk in a uniform structure.

As modeling customs grew more sophisticated, modeling charisma reached even higher extremes. In 2019, Maison Margiela artistic director John Galliano worked with Pat Bogulawski, a movement director, to bring out an iconic walk from model Leon Dame (Tashjian). With his aggressive and over exaggerated stride, Dame instantly went viral on the Internet, bringing attention to Maison Margiela. This example shows that designers are not afraid to step out of convention.



Figure 2

However, the increasingly innovative walks of modern models also differ from the walks of previous generations' models in that they serve to convey emotions and values. In this particular Maison Margiela show, John Galliano expressed that it is "about hope, and about democracy, and freedom" (qtd. Tashjian). This shows that models have significantly evolved from static replicas of mannequins to dynamic figures striding down the runway. Today, their passionate strides are essential to the runway. Without the existence of the runway itself, the ability to portray emotion through model walks would be limited. Therefore, the evolution of models on the fashion runway has enhanced the value of runway designs and has significantly advanced the fashion world.

### Theatrics

The frenzy for unconventional and absurd theatrics on the fashion runway gradually developed throughout fashion history. Starting from traditional plays in theaters showing Jeanne Paquin's work to Chanel's life size supermarket in Grand Palais, the theatrical aspects of a fashion show branched out and generated a constant stream of new ideas. This evolution of theatrical ideas includes Alexander McQueen, a contemporary fashion house pioneering state-of-the-art fashion shows. For example, in McQueen's 1997 show, each model walked on water while holding abstract metal restraints; in 2005, models stood on a giant chess board (Andrews).



Figure 3

Indeed, the theatrics of a fashion show does come at a cost. It costs a middle-rank designer a minimum of \$120,000 to produce a fashion show, while a front-end designer must spend a minimum of \$200,000 to produce a fashion show (Davis). Between casting and hiring professional dancers, IT technicians, stage designers, model scouts, musicians, and many more, costs to produce the most high-end, creative, and spectacular shows can even reach \$1 million (Davis).

So, why do fashion brands care so much about showcasing outrageous and spectacular theatrics? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the answers differ from the past to the present. In the past, the main purpose of a fashion show was to sell clothes for the upcoming season. The theatrical aspect enhanced the show and encouraged customers to purchase garments, and inspired journalists to cover the show in the press. In contemporary times, however, the intent of a fashion show differs from designer to designer. While Prabal Gurung wants to evoke cultural conversation, for example, Marc Jacobs wants to tell a fairytale story to the audience. With these specific objectives, designers tend to maximize theatrical value to sell garments, but also to build their

brands, make headlines, and stand out from other fashion designers.

### Technology

Today, technology is present in many aspects of a fashion show, from the lighting in the setup to background music. However, with the turn of the 21st century, brands and designers have increasingly utilized technology beyond lighting and music to enhance the theatricality, evocativeness, and memorability of fashion shows.

In the setup of the runway, designers have creatively employed technology to create an experience beyond the mere showing of clothes. For example, designer Issey Miyake used pulley systems to dress her models on the runway, putting on a spectacular show for the audience (Sanchez). Another example is when Burberry incorporated holographic models alongside real models (Roshitsh). With technology, a designer's creative freedom is unlimited.



Figure 4

Besides machinery, brands have used online platforms to gain publicity for their fashion shows. In 2010, Alexander McQueen live-streamed his “Plato Atlantis” show, the first designer to do so (Allwood). In the following year, New York Fashion Week live-streamed 30

shows held at Lincoln Center (Rosenbloom). Apps such as Runway by SAP, Vogue Runway, and NYFW All Access provide both live-streams and runway shots. In these and more ways, online technology has substantially broadened the global reach of fashion campaigns that, if executed in the early days of fashion, would be confined to buildings, even rooms.

Technology has also catalyzed new innovations for the runway. For instance, Tommy Hilfiger offered a “see now buy now” option in his Tommy x Zendaya show, where guests could shop a look immediately after the fashion show (Handley). In addition, fashion brands are collaborating with technology brands—for example, Alexander Wang partnered up with Uber to give guests rides to his fashion show (Hoff). Therefore, a fashion brand's usage of technology on both on and off the runway enhances relationships with shoppers and drives its brand forward.

All in all, the fashion runway must take advantage of the great developments in technology to simplify the purchasing process, gain publicity, and keep followers and audiences engaged. In a world where technology is so central to everyone's lives, designers have leveraged technology to expand the effect, accomplish successful fashion shows, and go beyond the present state of fashion.

### Positive and Negative Impacts

With the increase in creativity and innovation on the runway, designers are constantly seeking to break conformity. One way brands are seeking

innovation is through spreading out into different venues. In New York, high-end designers are no longer using the classic Lincoln Center. They are, for example, renting the Egyptian collection at the Metropolitan Museum, Bryant Park, rooms at the Natural History Museum, or any venue that suits their creative interest. With fashion shows spreading apart, fashion itself is becoming more decentralized. This could disengage people who are part of the fashion world, as fashion opens to a wider scope and more general audience.

Furthermore, the increase in creativity in both the garments and runway shows suggests that the relevance of the fashion industry is waning. In the 1900s, fashion played a role in almost everyone's lives, particularly during the mid 1900s, when women were allowed to wear trousers. This revolutionary change led all women to have an emotional stake in fashion, as they started to wear trousers. In addition, the rise in sneakers as a fashion trend involved the general people, transitioning from heels and oxford shoes to far more functional sneakers. All women bought trousers simply because they were more suitable for work, and everyone bought sneakers because of how comfortable and convenient they were.

However, fashion today no longer prioritizes functionality. The development of runway shows reveals how the fashion world is deeply submerged in creativity, to the extent where people praise uncomfortable, impractical designs made of plastic or cardboard. Although new silhouettes and patterns are emerging from

such innovations, it strikes no interest in the general public. The only people who are actually interested in utilizing and buying avant garde garments are magazine editors seeking to find photoshoot content and celebrities attending the Met Gala. The general population is therefore significantly less involved—and invested—in fashion than it used to be.

However, the creative aspect of fashion shows does have some bright spots as well. With less of a focus on functionality and revenue, designers are able to truly express their messages and creativity. It is acceptable for designers to showcase avant garde garments for their creative value. Designers can also spread awareness on global issues, where technology can be effectively used to raise awareness globally.



Figure 5

The development of the fashion runway also reveals a fascinating aspect of fashion today: the intertwining of the past, present, and future. In fashion shows, the past is referenced, but it also often indicates the future, which meets the past in the present. For models, there is a recent emergence in artificial intelligence and holographic models, which indicates that models are returning back to their non-human

form, just like mannequins in the 1800s. However, the technology of artificial intelligence and holograms demonstrates clear advancements in the future of fashion.

In addition, there are shows where human models remain static. For instance, in Gucci's Fall 2020 show, models stood still on a circular rotating platform covered with a glass wall, where spectators were seated around this platform ("Gucci Fall"). This could be referencing fashion's past of mannequin shows, but it can also be deemed unconventional in the context of today's fashion shows. In terms of theatrics, designers could be returning to certain press week style shows. In Spring 2019, Ralph Lauren debuted his collection in a luxurious "Ralph's Cafe" with guests sitting in a restaurant setting ("Spring 2019"). It is similar to the "mannequin parades" of the 1900s—but with a modern twist, which again shows how the past and future of fashion intertwine in the present.



Figure 6

## Conclusion

The development of the fashion runway reveals the industry's dependence on modeling, theatrics, and technology. The evolving nature of the runway also shows the decentralization of the fashion world, decreasing involvement of

society with fashion, expansion of designers' creativity, and the fusion of past, present, and future elements. The future of the industry is rather unclear, but seeing how much the fashion show has developed from its beginnings proves that it will always be transforming. The runway is essential for the fashion world, as it will forever remain a platform to express art and a catalyst for changing expressions.

## Works Cited

Allwood, Emma Hope. "The McQueen Show That Changed the Future of Fashion." *Dazed*, Dazed , 2 Aug. 2016, [www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/32285/1/the-mcqueen-show-that-changed-the-future-of-fashion-platos-atlantis-nick-knight](http://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/32285/1/the-mcqueen-show-that-changed-the-future-of-fashion-platos-atlantis-nick-knight).

Andrews, Jessica C. "The Most Dramatic Fashion-Show Stunts of All Time." *Vanity Fair*, Conde Nast , 23 Sept. 2014, [www.vanityfair.com/style/photos/2014/09/fashion-show-stunts](http://www.vanityfair.com/style/photos/2014/09/fashion-show-stunts).

Davis, Fred. "Stages of the Fashion Process ." *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, by Fred Davis, Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008, pp. 142-142.

"Gucci Fall Winter 2020 Women's Fashion Show." Youtube, Gucci, 19 Feb. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDCcii9lMQ>

Handley, Lucy. "How Tommy Hilfiger Reinvented Itself to Create 'See-Now-Buy-Now' Catwalk Shopping." *CNBC*, CNBC, 21 June

2017, [www.cnn.com/2017/06/19/tommy-hilfiger-reinvented-itself-to-create-see-now-buy-now-shopping.html](http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/19/tommy-hilfiger-reinvented-itself-to-create-see-now-buy-now-shopping.html).

Helmer, Vanessa. "How Did Fashion Modeling Begin?" *The Balance Careers*, The Balance Careers, 23 Jan. 2020, [www.thebalancecareers.com/a-quick-history-of-fashion-modeling-2379382](http://www.thebalancecareers.com/a-quick-history-of-fashion-modeling-2379382).

Hoff, Victoria Dawson. "Great Thing: Uber Is Partnering With Alexander Wang's Brooklyn Show." *ELLE*, ELLE, 11 Oct. 2017, [www.elle.com/fashion/news/a25561/uber-alexander-wang-brooklyn/](http://www.elle.com/fashion/news/a25561/uber-alexander-wang-brooklyn/).

Merrill, Jane. "Appendix A: Fashion and the Showgirl." *The Showgirl Costume: an Illustrated History*, by Jane Merrill, McFarland & Company, 2019, pp. 245-246.

O'Malley, Katie. "An Analysis Of The 10 Most Memorable Supermodel Runway Walks." *ELLE*, ELLE, 12 Feb. 2020, [www.elle.com/uk/fashion/celebrity-style/articles/a31869/an-analysis-of-the-most-iconic-supermodel-runway-walks/](http://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/celebrity-style/articles/a31869/an-analysis-of-the-most-iconic-supermodel-runway-walks/).

"Robinsons Mannequin Parade, 1920s - Film 46759." Youtube, Huntley Film Archives, 11 July. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpusmGx4gU>

Rosenbloom, Stephanie. "Way Off the Runway: Live Streaming of Fashion Week." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 7 Sept. 2011,

[www.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/fashion/live-streaming-of-runway-shows-new-york-fashion-week.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/fashion/live-streaming-of-runway-shows-new-york-fashion-week.html).

Roshitsh, Kaley. "The Fashion Runway's Tech Evolution." *WWD*, WWD, 6 Feb. 2019, [wwd.com/business-news/marketing-promotion/fashion-technology-1202996690/](http://wwd.com/business-news/marketing-promotion/fashion-technology-1202996690/).

Sanchez, Chelsey. "Issey Miyake's Floating Dresses Wow at Paris Fashion Week." *Harper's BAZAAR*, Harper's BAZAAR, 27 Sept. 2019, [www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/designers/a29268620/issey-miyake-floating-dresses-paris-fashion-week/](http://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/designers/a29268620/issey-miyake-floating-dresses-paris-fashion-week/).

"Spring 2019 at Ralph's Cafe." Youtube, Ralph Lauren, 7 Feb. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xv05xnx915c>

Tashjian, Rachel. "How Margiela Created That Viral Runway Walk." *GQ*, Conde Nast, 26 Sept. 2019, [www.gq.com/story/maison-margiela-walk](http://www.gq.com/story/maison-margiela-walk).