

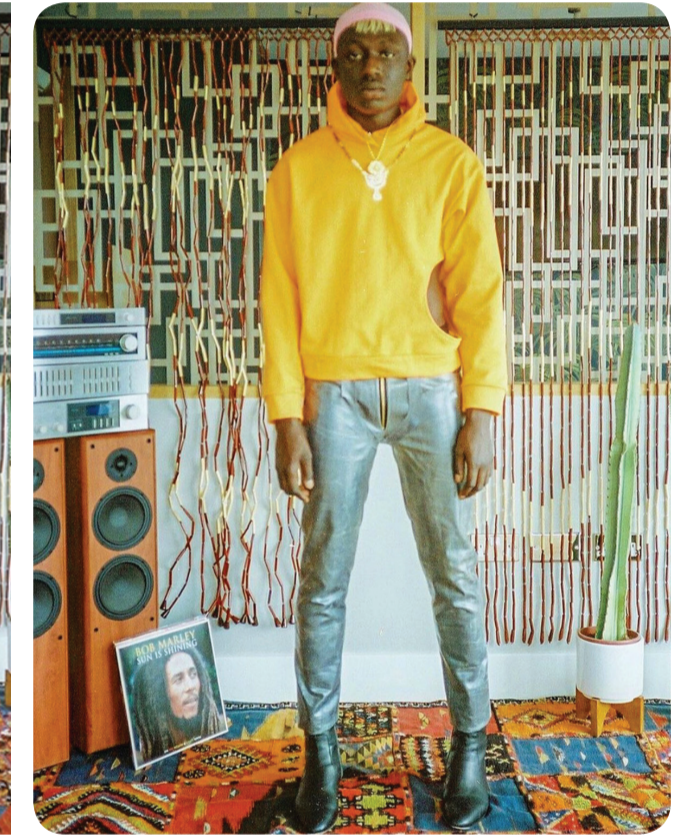
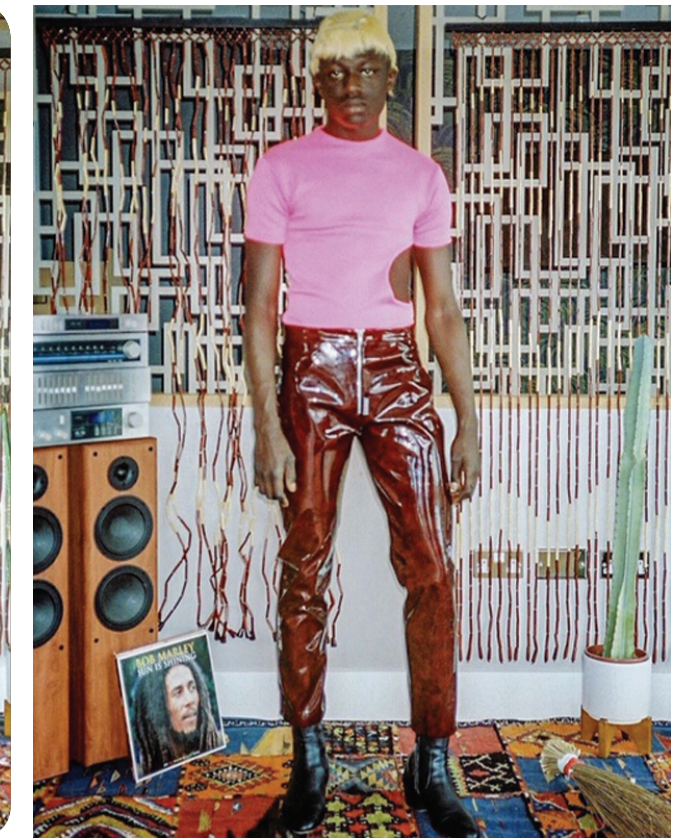
MASCULINITIES



2020

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MASCULINITIES

How do we understand what is meant by the notion of masculinities in the year 2020? In the following exhibition, students, staff and alumni from the Fashion Communication and Styling (FCS) programme at Middlesex University, respond to this complex question. The title *Masculinities* is intentionally plural: it is a term to which we can bring many readings and meanings. In examining a cross-section of visual representations, we can begin to untangle the multiplicity of definitions that contribute to such a changing and fluctuating concept. As an interdisciplinary programme that intentionally occupies and challenges contemporary fashion debate through art direction, styling, photography and film, FCS provides a rich territory in which selfhood and social constructs can be questioned and repositioned.

MASCULINITIES FCS EXHIBITION 2020

Essay by Rebecca Bell – Lecturer In Fashion Visual Cultures, Middlesex University

The 2020s have been referenced across a wealth of writing and film as a period deemed symbolic of The Future. Here, as in many other cultural arenas, the male protagonist has taken centre stage. Sci-fi thriller *The Terminator* was set in the 2020s (and created in the Orwellian year of 1984). The film was dominated by the caricatured masculinity of cyborg assassin Arnold Schwarzenegger, who negotiated a post-apocalyptic world of human versus machine. Giorgio Moroder's infamous edit of Fritz Lang's 1927 sci-fi masterpiece *Metropolis*, was also set in 2026, in which the character Maria declared, 'Great is the world and its Creator! And great is Man!'

How do we begin to untangle what 'Man' is in the 2020s, now we are here? In the context of *Metropolis*, it is a patriarchal term, subsuming all other gender definitions. It denotes a zone of male ubiquity in which phallicentric language structures the unconscious, creating a binary order and denigrating gender variations to the position of Other (Mulvey, [1975] 2009). Thankfully, feminist and queer studies in the 20th and 21st centuries have repositioned gender as a socially constructed notion (Bordo, 1999; Butler, 1990). We can now acknowledge that masculinity is a changing, fluctuating concept understood through the ways in which it is visually and materially represented – and through the individuals carrying out that representation. It is more accurate, then, to use the plural masculinities.

But, when it comes to masculinities, we (particularly in a UK or Euro-American context) seem to be experiencing a mixture of celebration, fascination and fear. A popular example is Grayson Perry's 2016 book *The Descent of Man*, which references Darwin's 1871 text of the same name. As a transvestite, Perry views the masculine and feminine as an exploratory territory, a place for fantasy. In his text, Perry critiques male privilege and warns against rigid masculine roles as destructive and restrictive for both the men who operate within them, and for those with whom they have relationships (Perry, 2016: 16–17).

As this century began, writer and photographer Ted Polhemus also warned of the imbalances of masculinity, and hoped that 'the twenty-first century sees fit to place the problem at the top of its agenda' (Polhemus, 2000: 44). At the point Polhemus was writing, the Lad Mag ruled in men's UK media. In the resulting atmosphere of indulgent toxic machismo, Alix Sharkey warned that 'men's magazines are desperately trying to mask the poverty of contemporary masculinity' (Sharkey, 2000: 172). J. C. Flügel's writing on *The Great Male Renunciation in The Psychology of Clothes* (1930) has cast a long shadow upon how we think about the masculine in western fashion. According to Flügel, in the 18th century men renounced decorative, frivolous dress for functional, sober clothing, thus delineating and restricting masculine expression (Polhemus, 2000: 51). However, Polhemus is one of many critics who have counterpoised street style,

gay culture, black countercultural movements, goth, punk and glam rock, as evidence of sartorial masculine expressiveness.

Polhemus called for the imbalances of masculinity to be placed at the top of our agenda. Fashion image-making is a vital territory for exploring what this means. The public and private formation of masculine identity is a question of such complexity (Hearn, 1992), that we can only hope to gather a cross-section of interpretations from individual practitioners. Middlesex University's FCS programme provides a place for this interpretation across a range of media. The *Masculinities* exhibition presents responses from FCS students, staff and alumni. Alongside this, we interviewed three practitioners who approach the theme in differing ways. We asked what masculinity means to the work and processes of Professor Andrew Groves, Director of the Westminster Menswear Archive, whose current research explores heteronormative menswear; Amy Gwatkin, an artist working in film and photography whose interests lie in 'fantasy, wish fulfilment, secret lives and private passions'; and menswear designer Martine Rose, whose work repeatedly reframes the boundaries of masculinity and femininity in fashion.

There is a current rise in exhibitions that question interpretations of the masculine and expand its conception. In February this year, Barbican will present *Masculinities: Liberation through Photography*, focused on exploring 'ideas of toxic and fragile masculinity' (Barbican, 2019). Groves's recent exhibition of 180 garments from the University of Westminster's Menswear Archive, *Invisible Men* (2019), explored the masculine through the ways in which social and working roles are made visible (or left unquestioned) in men's workwear and designer clothing. Co-curator Groves explains that the exhibition was conceived in 'response to the fact that menswear is underrepresented in collections of costume and dress, and overlooked within fashion exhibitions, usually reduced to either the story of 'The Dandy' or 'Savile Row'. Instead, Groves suggests, *Invisible Men* was a 'chance to show the multiplicity of ways that we can think about menswear, addressing ideas of design, class, functionality and masculinities. Significantly, the exhibition presented designer garments alongside functional garments intended for specific industrial, technical or military use, to acknowledge both their shared history and design language, but also to avoid setting a hierarchy for the objects presented'. The resulting exhibition provoked a myriad of questions around how we perceive masculinity in the worn garment.

Groves continues, 'I hoped to question how menswear has managed to maintain its invisibility within the study of dress, and why that might be in part due to the intrinsic nature of its design, functionality and use. How the constant replication of archetypal garments such as overalls, flight jackets, or the tailored black jacket,

has both reinforced ideals of masculinities within menswear and at the same time has rendered them unexamined and invisible due to their ubiquitous nature'. Relating to this, Groves is increasingly interested in the concept of 'Allyness'. This is a term used in the British military, and 'on a simple level could be described as the negotiation between wearing the correct standard-issue uniform and the wearer's adaption and amendment of their kit to seemingly create better functionality. However, it could be more honestly defined as a form of one-up-manship, a secret dress code that has been going on since at least the 1960s, and yet apart from military personnel has remained hidden and unexplored'.

The latter context reveals the complex social language of garments. It is not just what is designed for us, but how we then adapt and act out certain fashion codes. The question of masculine visibility in recent western history has been particularly prevalent since the political and sexual rebellions of the 1960s, from which time 'men's bodies began to be drawn into the ever-widening vortex of late-twentieth-century consumerism' (Bordo, 1999: 18). Although, these male bodies discussed by Bordo have been on display in underwear advertising since the early 20th century (Jobling, 2005: 122).

Gwatkin's work explores the visible role of the body and she is also inspired by 'codes of clothing'. She explains, 'I see it mostly in the young people I work with in fashion and art, or encounter as a lecturer. Also on the street – how people dress and present...jewellery, hair and make-up. I see new modes of beauty which defy categorisation, and in so doing alert you to the fact that these categories are so arbitrary in the first place'.

Gwatkin has most recently worked on two films, *Bob/Bobbi* and *Sunday Fantasy*, co-directed with Zoe Williams. Both, states Gwatkin, 'refer to masculinity either in a plural or non-straightforward way. In *Sunday Fantasy*, it's particularly oblique, with an all-female cast performing feminine and masculine elements.' *Sunday Fantasy* was co-directed by Gwatkin and Williams for Williams's solo show of the same name at Mimosa House gallery in 2019. It is a sumptuous exploration of fetish and fantasy, with female narratives overlaying scenes of bedroom exploration, orgies and the conflicted consumption of cream cakes. The repeated tropes of slithering eels and elegant glass perfume bottles underline questions of gendered sensuality. *Bob/Bobbi* has a more pared-back aesthetic. Gwatkin explains, 'it is an ongoing film and photographic project charting my relationship with Bob as he explores another side of himself through transvestism. We have staged a series of interviews and photo shoots at Airbnbs, sex clubs and in Epping Forest. It continues the work from *Risk Assessment*, exploring the role of the camera in facilitating, documenting and shaping fantasies'.

Both of Gwatkin's films present a powerful dialogue with gender for the 2020s, simultaneously conflating and

deconstructing assumed boundaries between masculine and feminine identities. Of particular interest to Gwatkin are generational differences in attitude: 'Bob belongs to a generation who speak/think/articulate ideas of gender and sexuality very differently. I wanted to address this issue in our interviews. I wanted to bring my own presence into it more. I think masculinities are very tied up with ideas of power, privilege and control. I have a particular interest in how these ideas are expressed when it comes to sex, performances of gender and especially in paid-for or transactional situations'.

Intergenerational interests were played out in the aesthetic of Rose's recent SS20 collection, which drew inspiration from 1980s British subcultures as a 'critique of contemporary British politics' (*Dazed*, 2019). Long jackets with over-sized shoulders, baggy jeans and shiny leather shoes contrasted with pencil skirts and neat feminine wigs. The codes of tracksuits, denim jackets, New Romantics and skinheads were layered together – looks that resonate with Groves's point concerning the ways in which menswear speaks to class and functionality, as well as Gwatkin's interest in ideas of power and boundaries. Rose's work consistently provokes new questions concerning both contemporary and historical articulations of the masculine, and their interfaces with femininity.

'I am always dealing with themes of masculinity,' Rose explains. 'I have always been drawn to menswear because I really enjoy the friction or the tension of exploring those themes and pushing them as far as you can go. I don't know if I consciously have those questions in my head when I am doing it, but I know that I am revealing those questions and answers in my work.' In her SS20 collection, the overlaying of subcultures and alter-egos ultimately expresses a message of coexistence (Morency, 2019). Using the rooftop of a corporate office building for the show, the work also intentionally confronted the troubled Brexit climate of departing businesses and ineffectual leadership.

Rose is optimistic about new explorations of the masculine as we begin the 2020s: 'I think there are loads of people, really exciting people, particularly in music, who are pushing the boundaries of masculinity, of what it means to be a man in 2020. Mykki Blanco, Yves Tumor, Boychild, LA Timpø'. Gender exploration, radical performance, activism and persistent reconceptualisations of identity are threaded through these artists' work. They ask what it means to be gendered beings, to be mortal, to be isolated or to belong. These themes are also present in the pieces shown at the 2020 FCS exhibition. In asking what we mean by masculinities, we ultimately return to what it means to consume, to have desires, to find ourselves socially and politically-positioned and the rights of being human as we negotiate this complex new decade.'

Very many thanks to Martine Rose, Amy Gwatkin and Professor Andrew Groves for their insights.



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