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GOD SAVE McQUEEN?

**An investigation into the work of the fashion designer Alexander
McQueen**

by

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INTRODUCTION

My reason for choosing this area of research stems from the fact that as a student of fashion design I have always admired the work of Alexander McQueen. Following his work closely for approximately three years I have watched, with avid interest, his work grow stronger, his personal style develop and his ever-growing success in the field of fashion. More importantly, I have observed the acceptance of his work by his peers and his contemporaries. 1996 saw McQueen receiving the Designer of the Year award and also the post of Chief Designer at the House of Givenchy. This is indeed quite an achievement at the age of twenty-seven and a Masters graduate of only five years. In this deeply commercial and market-orientated society that we find ourselves living in, it is nothing but refreshing to see such a unique and personal interpretation of clothing design receiving not only recognition, but admiration; it does not happen very often.

In fashion terms, the 1990s has been, as yet, a decade of chaos, turbulence and identity-searching. It has seen a rebellion against the power-dressing of the late 1980s with 'Deconstructionism', and frenzied, schizophrenic recycling of fashions just gone by. For a short period, one saw not progressive but erratic fashions; fashion journalists and editors were concerned as to the future of fashion. The outcome of this erratic period is that personal style worn with conviction was the brief; there is no longer one set look, but a multitude of choices in which one can mix and match as one's needs dictate. In the late 1990s, British fashion has been receiving renewed interest, and many hold the opinion that Alexander McQueen is a prominent catalyst in setting the pace for fashion. He has been hailed the latest *enfant terrible* in fashion. It would be true to say that many know Alexander McQueen, not so much for the garments he designs, but the way he chooses to

present them. Aspersions have been cast on him and his work, his methods and sources that shock and in his representation of women.

“Clothing plays an important part in our lives. For it is often through its meaning that we substantiate our sense of self and our place in society. Clothing becomes, then, an indicator of our personal worth, values and beliefs as well as those of the culture in which we live.”

(CUNNINGHAM and VOSO LAB, 1991, p.26)

Although clothing as a communicator is almost always seen from a consumer's viewpoint, it also works on the same principles from a designer's point of view; collections are essentially an indication of the designer's beliefs and convictions within the society in which they live. Alexander McQueen designs with his values and beliefs in an almost literal manner. His collection titles, his representations of women and his collections are representative of issues he wishes to raise. McQueen's work is seen to be subversive, thought-provoking and in-your-face; he seeks to change attitudes, not caring if he shocks people in the process. A lot of his work's emphasis is on realism, something not seen very often in fashion. He addresses political, moral and ethical values in his collections, as Katherine Hamnett with her slogan T-shirts in the 1980s, and Vivienne Westwood with her anarchic views through punk clothing in the 1970s.

We live in an age of vast technological advances, a world where we can communicate instantly to people on the other side of the world. Mass media and global transportation means that we are visually aware of other cultures and news in all parts of the world. As designers, one has access to an unlimited wealth of information to create collections around, and we are taught to design from the world

around us and from first-hand personal experiences. This is most likely due to the fact that fashion has always been seen to reflect the era from which it hails, and is a pictorial indication of society's beliefs, practices and cultures.

Today's society has seen an increase in violence, both in reality and through the medium of television. We are totally intoxicated by the amount of violence visually consumed and as a culture are desensitised to suffering, preferring to shield ourselves from its harsh realities. Alexander McQueen's work displaying aspects of violence and prejudices cause alarm and outrage, yet he has become one of the most formidable designers in the late 1990s. Why is this?

Chapter 1 will look at violence and shock effects, discussing the infiltration of violent imagery and sources becoming more apparent in advertising and fashion magazines aimed at the youth culture of today, and also investigate Alexander McQueen's use of shock effects and nihilistic sources for collections and question why his work is so desirable given his love of the macabre.

Chapter 2 deals with the claims that Alexander McQueen is a misogynist, due to the manner in which he chooses to present the women in his collections. Through analysis and investigating the styling in both his fashion shows and photoshoots, discussing what women in the 1990s want and what McQueen consequently offers them, and also the theories of psychologist and author Edmund Bergler, I will investigate these claims.

Chapter 3 will look at McQueen's tailoring and how, after graduating from a Masters degree in fashion five years ago, at the age of twenty-two, he has now been named the successor of John Galliano at the couture House of Givenchy. I will investigate his treatment of fabrics, the development of new ones and how he can treat them with both reverence and irreverence, in order to create innovative and directional collections.

Due to the contemporary nature of the subject my research into Alexander McQueen was carried out mainly through periodicals, by visiting the exhibition 'Jam-Music, Style and Media' at the Barbican Gallery, London, also by physical investigation of McQueen's work on sale at Liberty's, London, and also John Galliano's work for Givenchy at Harvey Nichols, London.

CHAPTER 1

SHOCK AND VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY FASHION

“Today blood is sexy, the beast is a star and carnage doesn’t sell just movies anymore.”
(HUTTON, 1994, p.532)

The world is a much smaller place in the twentieth century through the development of technology and telecommunications. We see on television events as they are happening. The remote control can be seen to be an extension of our right arm as it were; we ‘relax’ from the working day by viewing wars and conflicts going on in various parts of the world, hearing horrendous stories of acts of violence towards fellow human beings to the point of saturation.

“Skeletons and half-rotten skulls, children without legs, babies killed by sniper fire. A twelve year old rape victim talking about it on camera. We have seen all that on everyday television.... We have consumed this terrible ‘pornography of the dying’.”
(ROBINS, 1996, p.115)

Through violence disseminating into most aspects of our lives we have become ambivalent to it, our senses fully intoxicated.

Alexander McQueen’s work is known to shock and has become a trademark of sorts. This chapter is concerned with investigating his use of shock. McQueen strives to confront with his work; his sources and subsequent collections are firmly rooted in highlighting contemporary culture’s human failings and prejudices. In order to properly address the issues of Alexander McQueen’s love of shock it is necessary to investigate the effects of shock on individuals. Advertising, both product and fashion advertising and also contemporary film makers today have long realised the need for shock tactics in order to make impact, and thus, make sales. The world we live in

today contains very well-informed individuals who are adept at utilising technology and, who, through telecommunication and the media are fully aware of world-wide news.

THE EFFECTS OF SHOCK ON THE POST-MODERN SOCIETY

“Vision is becoming separated from experience, and the world is fast assuming a derealised quality.”
(ROBINS, 1996, p.13)

Sigmund Freud long since argued reasons for the motivations of humans to avoid unpleasant situations in favour of pleasurable ones. His belief was that humans are naturally evasive towards suffering painful realities, preferring that they are somewhat protected from it, through the process of screening confrontations in some way. He stated that “all suffering is nothing else than sensation; it only exists in so far as we feel it” (ROBINS, 1996, p.112), believing that humans must be able to control the shocking realities, keeping it at a distance in order to be able to view it.

In addition Zgymunt Baumans suggests that the human sense of survival manifests itself through living our lives through the deaths of others; through watching their death there is automatic confirmation that we are alive, a theory that is reiterated by Elias Canetti (ROBINS, 1996, p.115).

What does this mean to the modern world? Basically human beings need the stimuli of shock and pain in order to reaffirm their existence, but, they need to be able to control its effects in order to want to be subjected to it. By distancing themselves from it the above is achieved.

These theories may help to explain the fascination with reality TV, news broadcasts featuring horrifying visual footage of wars and conflicts and also the production of films such as 'Reservoir Dogs', 'Pulp Fiction' and 'Natural Born Killers'.

TELEVISION AND MEDIA INFLUENCES ON FASHION ADVERTISING

Fashion in the 1990s has seen a gradual incorporation of violence and the state of the post-modern culture we live in. It is an accepted fact that fashion is a reflection of society's values, beliefs and moral stances. At this time we see, to a certain extent, in both British and American magazines, the incorporation of disturbingly realistic themes or stories in which to advertise clothing. Although this may be disconcerting to some readers, it is not as surprising as it first appears. In the words of Nancy Hall-Duncan, fashion is a mirror reflecting the soul of the era (HALL-DUNCAN, 1979, p.46). Just as Vogue publications in the 1920s was a reflection of women's emancipation, a 1990s publication such as The Face or I-D, for example, contains the essence, the core of what is happening in today's culture. Roland Barthes states that

"Magazines do not explicitly advertise or sell the clothes they feature in their fashion pages. The fashion magazine purports to represent a commodity - fashion - but in fact seeks to sell itself - a look, an image, a world."
(BARTHES, 1983, p.287)

Fashion stories produced for these magazines do not happen by accident, but instead are carefully choreographed; almost photo-journalistic devices are used for capturing and identifying with today's youth. Clothing used will gel with the story, most of the time being almost camouflaged in the overall image the reader takes in.

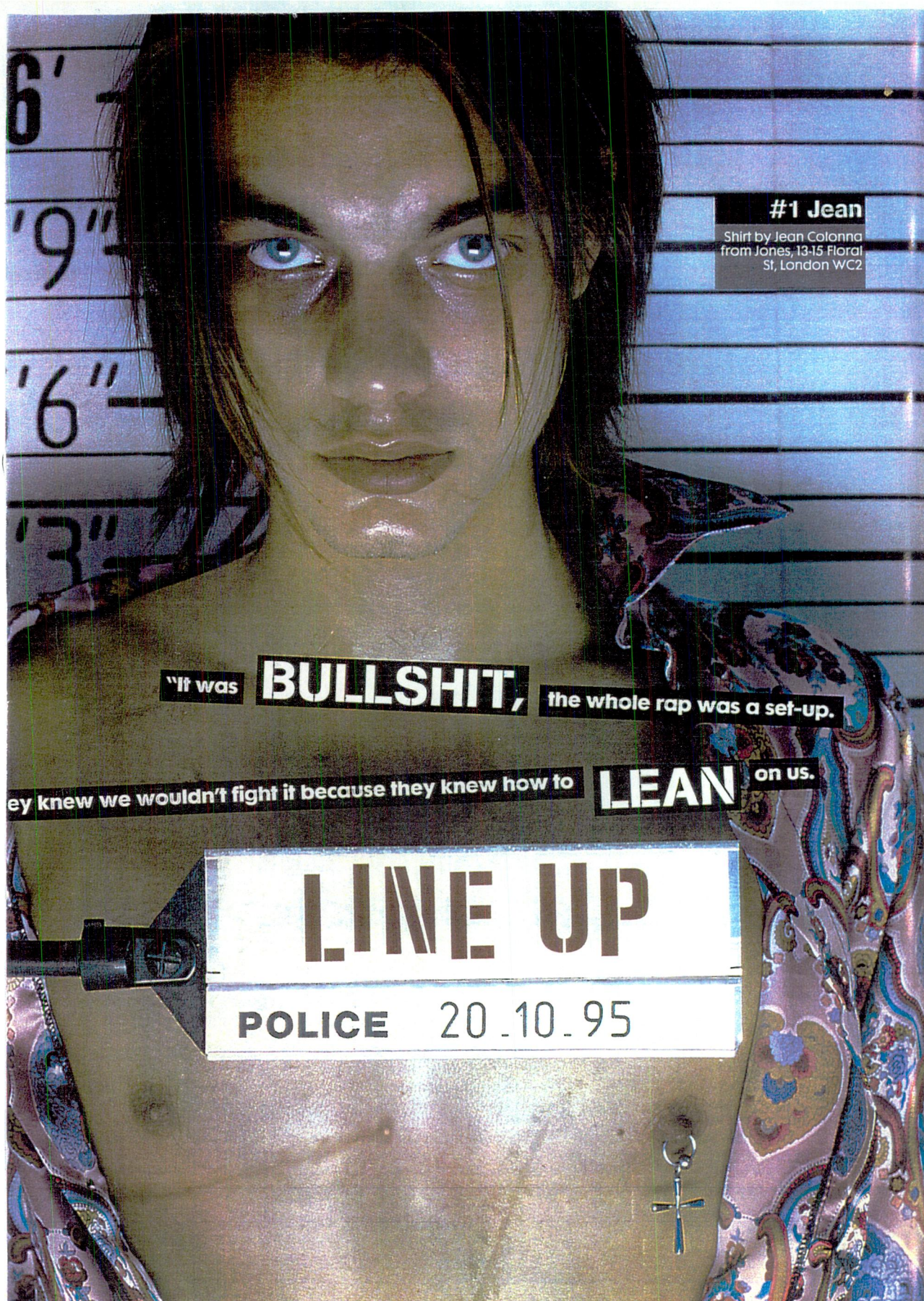


Figure 1

Violence in fashion photography; a tribute to the film 'The Usual Suspects' by Jean Baptiste Mondino, The Face, January 1996



Figure 2 'The Usual Suspects' fashion line-up, *The Face*, January 1996

Take, for example, 'The Usual Suspects' story published in The Face, (January 1996, pp.118-125) purporting to be a fashion story; clothing seemed to be used for the magazine's convenience more than anything else (Fig 1). Using the format of a police line-up, borrowed from the film of the same name, the models posed exhibiting a garish bruising, ripped clothing and tousled hair (Fig 2). Here the magazine chose to identify directly with today's youth culture, with a particular genre of film similar to 'Pulp Fiction', 'Natural Born Killers' and 'Reservoir Dogs' (Fig 3).



Figure 3 Mr Orange in 'Reservoir Dogs'

One could say that the use of this particular type of film as inspiration for a fashion story is disturbing and unnecessary in so much as it does nothing to enhance the desirability of the clothing. The youth culture it empathises with are more than likely absorbing the imagery without consciously analysing the reasons for the story being produced, or paying full attention to the clothing. The clothing in fact had to be

destroyed with rips and blood stains to achieve the atmosphere desired by the magazine.

SHOCK AS SALES STRATEGY

It is not only fashion magazines that use images that leave viewers aghast, the wider advertising world uses shock tactics on a regular basis. Shock exists on many different levels and is effective in so much as it produces a response, it stimulates emotions and anxiety, which in turn evokes discussion and publicity through word of mouth.

Sigmund Freud believes that 'all suffering is nothing else than sensation, it only exists in so far as we feel it' (ROBINS, 1996, p.112) and some suggest that as a nation we need to observe pain and suffering in order to be reassured of our mortality, and thus realise that we are very much alive. Subconsciously, the brain seeks to numb the stimuli in order to protect oneself against the vision; in our culture, death is an issue that is repressed and denied. Advertising today is aware of psychological effects and uses it adeptly.

"Avant-gardist strategies have been so completely assimilated into the dominant culture that they have ceased to shock the spectator. Consequently, the shock has to adhere in the consequent image - change, and in the use of excessively unusual images."
(CRANE, 1992, p.10)

The obvious example to take when addressing shock as a sales strategy is Bennetton. The Benetton Company are arguably better known for their advertising campaigns than their clothes. Using a method of photo-journalism they occupy billboard and magazine space, not by showing their clothes, but by showing contemporary images of the social and political problems the world is facing. Their intention lies in cultivating youth - orientated, politically active and rebellious images to target potential customers who can identify with them.



Figure 4

Figure 4 is a contemporary interpretation of the sculpture by Michaelangelo (1475-1564) showing the AIDS victim, David Kirby, dying in the arms of his father. Benetton manages to both provoke discussion in highlighting the AIDS issue and

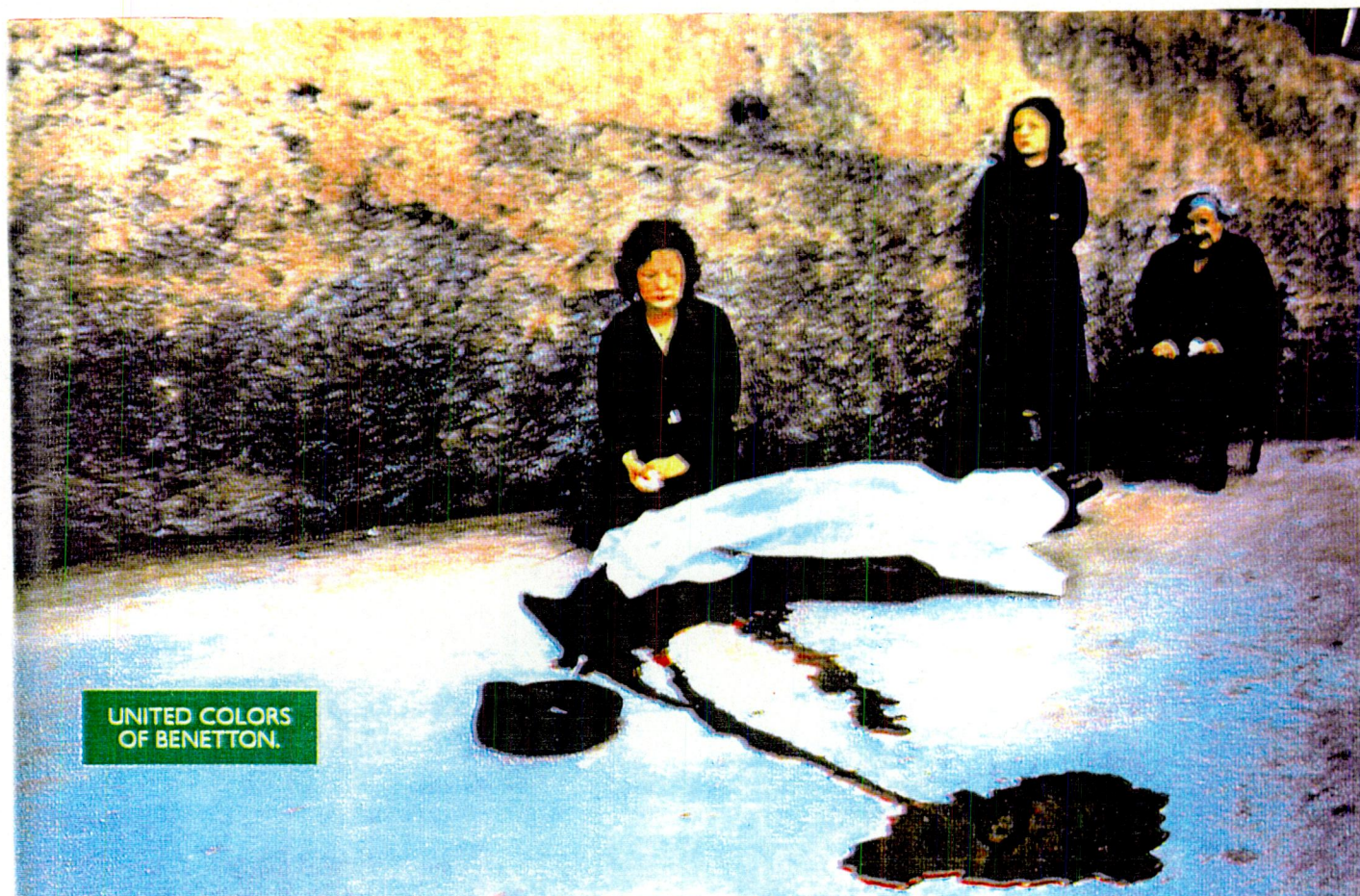


Figure 5 Benetton newsreel advertisement

produces unanimous feelings of concern with multi-million corporations taking advantage of the underdog.

“We’ve been saying all along that our intention is not to sell sweaters. We’re not stupid. We’re doing corporate communication. We’re sponsoring these images in order to change people’s minds and create compassion around social issues. We think of it as art with a social message.”

LUCIANO BENNETTON

(Fressola, 1992, p.18)

Bennetton show extreme courage in the risks they are taking by approaching their advertising in this manner. By using this genre of photo-journalistic advertising they have created and provoked endless discussions and disputes. Where other advertising simply fabricates the truth to suit their intentions, the Bennetton Company constantly confront and force awareness on society. However, others might argue that many see Bennetton’s advertising campaign as exploitation of human suffering for the company’s financial gain. Countless advertisements have been forced to be withdrawn from billboards and magazine publications due to the sheer public outrage they have caused (Fig 5).

Shock as a sales strategy is effective in that one does not necessarily need a large budget in which to utilise it, although the risk is there for losing potential customers. It most certainly enhances awareness of the company, and it is through this that it produces sales.



'Dante' – Autumn 1996



'The Hunger' – Spring 1996



'Highland Rape' – Autumn 1995



'The Birds' – Spring 1995



'Banshee' – Autumn 1994



'Nihilism' – Spring 1994

Figure 6 Pictorial outline showing examples from McQueen's collections and his love for the macabre as source for his collections

THE SHOCK OF McQUEEN

"I'm not an aggressive person, but I do want to change attitudes. If I shock people, that's their problem."

ALEXANDER McQUEEN

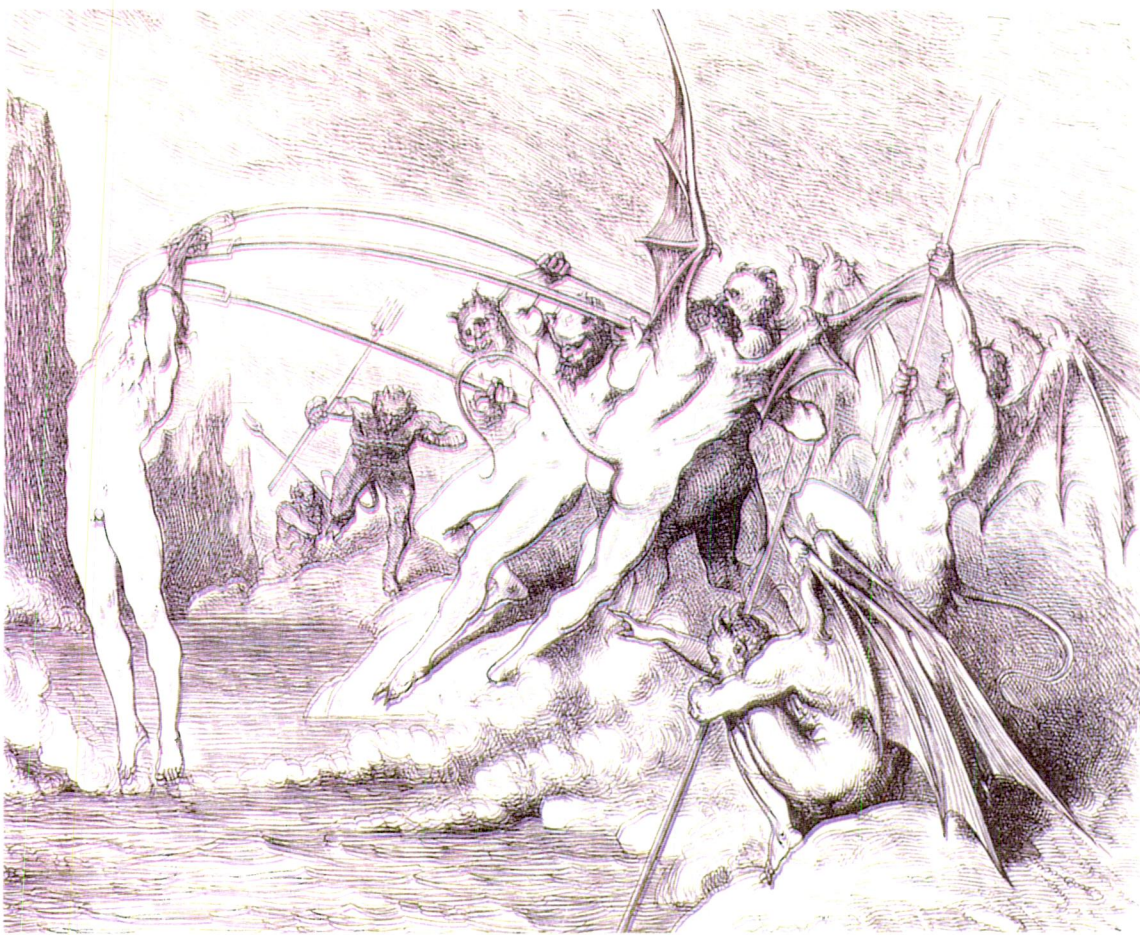
(REED, 1996, p.50)

"Fashion has throughout history been exposed to a constant didactic of disapproval. Indeed the emergence of fashion as a topic for comment in the first place seems to have arisen from the desire to censure it."

(RADFORD, 1993, p.115)

There is no other fashion designer in the late 1990s who has evoked as much discussion and dialogue as Alexander McQueen. His collections, for their clothing, their styling and their drama, epitomise the elements that are required in order to obtain publicity and attention. McQueen is successful in instigating emotions of shock and intrigue in his audience, using inflammatory language and images in his shows, his clothing and his styling (Fig 6). We have looked at the effect shock and violent imagery has on individuals. Shock, utilised to the extent McQueen uses it, has never been seen before. His preoccupation with realism in fashion, with clothing having a social conscience has become one of his trademarks. The main areas of his enterprise that rely on the use of shock in order to cause maximum effects are:-

- (i) collection titles and themes
- (ii) catwalk shows
- (iii) styling of the models
- (iv) his clothes



(i)



(ii)

Figure 7

- (i) Dante 'The Divine Comedy' Hell Canto XXI; McQueen's inspiration for A/W 1996 collection
- (ii) McQueen's subsequent collection

The way in which he uses these areas lie behind what makes them shocking. The fashion world is generally perceived to be one of a purely vanity-orientated and frivolous nature. Exasperation and dismay are commonly used words to describe the collections that are presented as the designers' new (and improved) visions of what society should be wearing. The impracticalities of many designs (is) almost expected from the designers. Indeed, due to the sheer competitiveness of the fashion industry, avant-garde and dysfunctional garments are required in order to gain publicity. The sight of semi-nude models parading the catwalk no longer shock, although it is an accepted fact that sex sells. McQueen, it seems, gives the audience what they expect, and then some.

McQUEEN'S PREOCCUPATION WITH REALISM AS SOURCE FOR COLLECTIONS

The inspiration, and indeed the catalyst for McQueen's work, begins with his chosen theme. As mentioned previously his preoccupation with social and moral issues naturally guide him to certain areas of research

"It's the ugly things I notice more, because other people tend to ignore the ugly things. I despise the man in front of me who completely ignores the homeless person. I'd prefer to make people look and think about those sort of things and that's what I try to do with my shows."

ALEXANDER McQUEEN

(HEATH, 1996, p.84)

In the past he has looked at the works of Dante (Fig 7) and Alfred Hitchcock's 'The Birds'. He looked at Scottish war-history and named the ensuing collection for the



Figure 8 Excerpts from McQueen's 'The Highland Rape' collection



This page: photo print
jacket, £750, to
order from Jones, as
before. Left: lilac
and lace jet-headed
corset, to order from
Alexander McQueen
(0171-729 0537)

Figure 9 McQueen's preoccupation with realism: photo-print jacket of Ethiopian child

Autumn/Winter 1995 fashion show 'The Highland Rape' (Fig 8). McQueen in this instance was concerned with stripping the romanticised and idealised history of the violent destruction of the Scottish clans to a more objective truth. The collection was characterised with revealing slashes at the breasts and buttocks as well as using the Scottish tartans. The title 'The Highland Rape' is one that has immediate impact and conjures up images of violence and aggression. McQueen states

"It was supposed to be aggressive, to counter all that tartan romance."

(HUME, 1996, p.82)

Rape is viewed by some to be one of the most violent crimes committed against another person. It violates a person's privacy and sense of self-worth. Camille Paglia, feminist writer, states that

"Rape is an act of desperation, a confusion of envy and exclusion. The rapist is sickened by the conflict between his humiliating neediness and his masculine rage for autonomy. He feels suffocated by women and yet entranced and allured by her."

(PAGLIA, 1995, p.32)

Making political, moral or ethical statements through one's collections is quite a precarious move for many reasons. Risk is a dangerous preoccupation in any business. Fashion is generally perceived as a frivolous, purely vain practice; politics and ethics are not. This has been one of the factors that has caused McQueen's work to be so disturbing. In McQueen's recent collection he includes a jacket with a photo-print of an Ethiopian child (Fig 9). This image is one instantly recognisable, similar to those used by the media for television news broadcasts, and one that everyone can identify with. The juxtaposition of the frivolous world of fashion and

the child in a Third World country starving, and probably dying of malnutrition, makes the garment shocking. What does McQueen hope to achieve by this? He obviously wants to make a stance against the injustices of the Third World but is it morally right to do so in this way? One wonders what kind of person could wear this blatantly potent garment when its cost could probably save the child's life. Maybe his thinking is such that if this garment is worn in public it will indeed change attitudes, but the possibility is that it will provoke outrage due to seemingly taking advantage of the underprivileged.

Many may believe that Alexander McQueen goes too far, and may feel that the utopian world he strives for cannot happen through his collections. Would that be a fair comment? Can and should fashion take on the arbitrary role of negotiator in social justice and humanity? What makes one think McQueen's desire to change attitudes through his clothes can work, is the sheer fact that his acceptance and success have grown phenomenally over the very short three years of his career. McQueen may not be a politician but with his collections and fashion shows he does have the power to express what he likes, and, like it or not, his viewpoints infiltrate the minds and subconscious of the captive audience.

McQUEEN'S THEATRICALS

"His MA show at Central Saint Martins in 1992 included (real) bloodstains, rib-crushing latex corsets and see-through breast plates lined with insects and human hair. His shows since have at avant-garde London venues, been noted for their screeching music, frantic-looking models and collection titles such as 'The Highland Rape'."

(REED, 1996, p.50)



Figure 11 McQueen's S/S 1997 collection in The Royal Horticultural Society's Halls, London: models walking on water

Alexander McQueen's catwalk shows provide us with an insight into his world. He insists, like Galliano, that the clothes are displayed in surroundings that serve to enhance and strengthen his story.



Figure 10 McQueen's show set in a synagogue

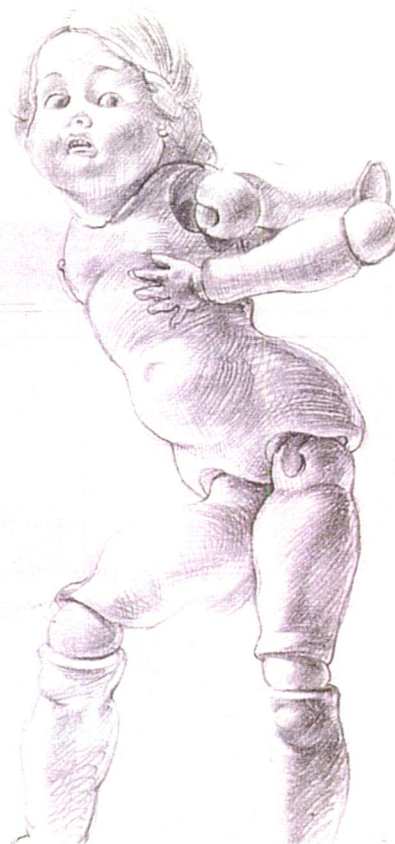
This section will deal with McQueen's love of embellishment, both in the catwalk environments, the styling of the models and the way this is used to shock.

"I love drama and images and he is the only designer who makes his audiences react emotionally to a show, be it happy, sad, repelled or disgusted."

ISABELLA BLOW

(RUMBOLD, 1996, p.31)

After looking at the clothes in the exhibition 'Jam-style, Music and Media' one was drawn into a darkened room, where a screen played on a loop McQueen's winter 1996 fashion show. Set in the eerie stillness of a church (still used for worship) the audience sat on the rows of pews while the models paraded reverently down the



(i)



(ii)

Figure 12

Hans Bellmer's series of work on disfigured dolls

(i) Pencil sketch 19.5 x 13 cm

(ii) 'The Doll' CNAC Collection, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris: photograph



Figure 13 S/S 1997, model wearing metal braces attached to arms and legs



Figure 14 S/S 1997, model wearing antennae metal rods on her head

aisles. Although music played in the background, I felt my eyes and mind focus only on the moving screen, becoming entranced and at one with the visuals.

As Isabella Blow said, I, like many others, was very emotionally moved at the show. In a somewhat voyeuristic stance I could observe the audience's reaction as his collection was debut. It seemed enlightening that they, on the whole, did not converse with one another, but instead just watched with intense concentration, almost as though they were afraid of missing something. McQueen's name pulsed and groaned under the screen, the simple black and white graphics and the sound of manipulated cameras clicking completed the experience.

McQueen's catwalk shows have several times been set in churches, both in London and in a New York synagogue (Fig 10). Recently (in the Royal Horticultural Society's Halls, London) McQueen showed his Spring/Summer 1997 collection (Fig 11).

“...which the designer transformed into a temple with white panels atop a set of fourteen steps and a 150-yard pool of water two inches deep through which the models splashed as if they were walking on top of it.”
(FALLON, 1996, p.128)

This collection, inspired by German artist Hans Bellmer's 1949 series of disfigured dolls (Fig 12), sees some models forced to move down the slippery catwalk wearing metal braces, attached to both the legs and the arms of the models (Fig 13). This restriction in natural movement, a bondage of sorts, features quite regularly in his

shows. Braces were also used in and around the face, with antennae-type metal rods dangerously protruding outwards (Fig 14).

His styling methods serve to reinforce his skill and aptitude in the exploration of shock, and also in his ability to gain attention. In Fashion Weekly, a synopsis of 'The Birds' collection was given, and writer Sarah Woodhead stated

"His models, wearing white contact lenses to conceal their pupils, looked like androids. Hobble skirts in clear and red plastic were more like cripple skirts after McQueen had sellotaped the models' legs together."
(WOODHEAD, 1994, p.12)

Could it be that McQueen's shocking is sometimes coincidental? We are aware that his creations are not superficially made, there are reasons behind them. As previously stated he wants to change attitudes through his collections. Referring to his MA collection at Central Saint Martins in 1992, McQueen stated that

"I could start winding you up and pretending that putting real locusts all over a latex dress in my first collection was a wind-up for the press. But to me it did mean a lot at the time."
(HEATH, 1996, p.84)

How does one read this sort of contrived image? One could possibly reach the conclusion that these styling accessories aim to represent power in the female, making her aloof and unapproachable in a physical way. What McQueen's meanings for these accessories are, however, is discussed in Chapter 2.

To conclude, it seems that McQueen's work is shocking due to the fact that he uses mediums and messages in a displaced manner; fashion is usually not where we see morals or lessons in humanity. McQueen is able to gain publicity due to the sheer emotionally charged images he produces - fashion magazine editors and newspapers editors alike love the most elaborate creations to adorn their pages. By analysing the advertising markets it seems that McQueen has an adept understanding of both psychology and marketing. It is possible that McQueen is trying to recapture the audience's lack of ability to take in what they are seeing by placing violent and disturbing imagery in the 'frivolous and whimsical' setting of the fashion world.

CHAPTER 2

McQUEEN'S VISION OF WOMEN

The clothes of the past

“...turned women into creatures with no other purpose than to be looked at; creatures incapable of moving with anything like alacrity, let alone working with physical vigour.”

(McDOWELL, 1994, p.193)

“What is this notion of femininity? This caricature of womanliness? Why, when women have just attained that state of grace when freedom is in fashion in every sense, have we come full circle to an era of constraint and artifice? It implies a tyranny that we are all well rid of.”

SALLY BRAMPTON (Editor, 'Elle Magazine')

(HOWELL, 1975, p.76)

The twentieth century has seen vast changes in all aspects of living, some beneficial, some detrimental. Although it has seen the introduction of world wars it has also seen the evolution of global communication and travel, computer technology, advances in medicine and also in industry. The greatest development, however, from a clothing perspective, could be said to be seen in the emancipation of women. This includes the way they are perceived, their rise in status, their right to vote, to work, and, most importantly for this study, their new formed ability to approach a more sensible and comfortable attitude towards clothing.

Women in the 1990s enjoy a vast and variable choice in styles of clothing. The twentieth century has attempted to create the ideal clothes to suit women's needs for the lives they lead.

But that is not to say that this attempt has been entirely successful in its evaluation and execution of the needs and desires of women. However much women may

appreciate the efforts to obtain comfort in clothing, many still want to look like the sirens of the past, to wear clothing that immediately distinguishes them from the male population.

Alexander McQueen has been labelled a misogynist, an argument he vehemently disputes and feels somewhat tired of. In order to assess and evaluate this claim it is necessary to look at both the reasons why he has been named such and to investigate what has inspired him, his beliefs and attitudes, and by investigating what femininity means in the 1990s. What does Alexander McQueen offer to women? With over an estimated one million pounds of sales in 1996 surely he offers something valid to women of today? What is his focus; who or what is his muse? These questions will be addressed by looking at McQueen's clothes and styling and the beliefs and attitudes behind them.

NOTIONS OF FEMININITY

"Among reformers, feminine fashion itself was rather seen as feminine folly in material form, female weakness made manifest."
(HOLLANDER, 1994, p.123)

Throughout history, women have been defined as the subservient sex, incapable of any role other than as mother and housekeeper. For centuries women have been perceived as objects of adornment and decoration through which they outwardly indicate their social position, stance and wealth. Fashion and clothing are the ways they do this. The conclusion was that femininity equalled weakness, a statement which, in reality, has never quite disappeared from many ways of thinking.

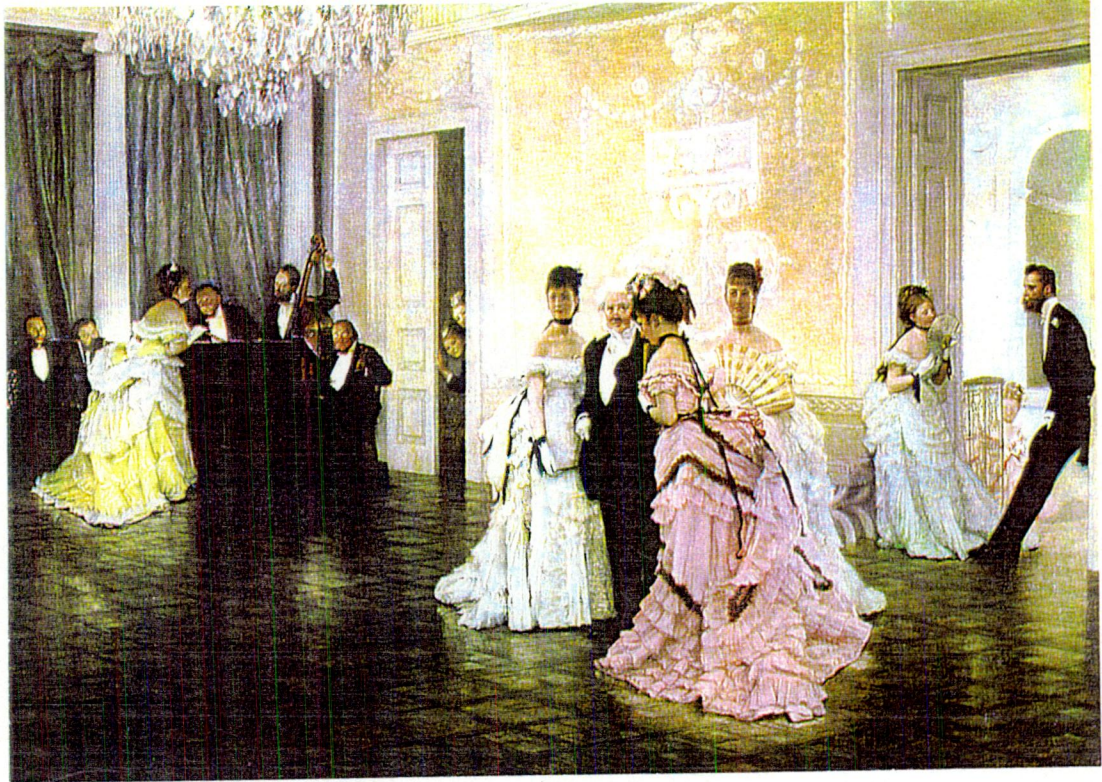


Figure 15 'Too Early', James Tissot, 1873. Women as objects of adornment

To dress femininely immediately gives the illusion of weakness and subservience (Fig 15); to be taken seriously, one had to appear masculine and even underplay femininity.

"By taking up men's clothes, and having them well-fitted to her feminine body, she showed herself to be interested, not in female concerns like child bearing and domesticity, nor in the standard feminine uses of alluring submissiveness, but in a female erotic life that depends on an active imagination, on adventurous and multiform fantasy, the modern sort of sexuality customarily reserved for men."

(HOLLANDER, 1994, p.41)

Although the twentieth century enabled women to redefine their roles in life, and also their appearance, this century has seen at all times, in some form or another, women



Figure 16 Restrictive corsetry of the late 1800s



Figure 17 Erte's illustrations showing Flapper clothing by Paul Poiret

striving to break free from the accusation that they are the weaker sex, in their home lives, their career abilities and their outward appearance.

As women achieved success in these areas, proving themselves to be equally capable as the male in terms of careers, so their confidence grew. Women have become more empowered in making decisions about how their lives are led. Reactions cause counter-reactions; women of the 1990s no longer feel it is necessary to look masculine in order to succeed (as in the 1980s), nor do they wish to. The emergence of the concept that as humans we are individuals, with an entirely unique set of experiences that mould the people we become, has led to multiple choice in ways of dressing, in a way that suits the individual's particular wants and needs.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON RESTRICTIVE CLOTHING OF THE PAST

There is a tendency to generalise when looking at fashion history, both in the past and in the present. Many fashion design history publications fail to address issues of alternative perceptions on articles of clothing or ways of dressing. Although the emergence of hostility and outrage almost invariably follows radical changes in clothing, one tends to feel that fashion history suggests that each development in fashion history has progressively come nearer to perfection. One comes away almost feeling that, for example, when the advent of a more casual approach to clothing arrived, the once restrictive corsetry and clothing were automatically discarded, no longer desired (Fig 16). To say that leisurewear killed the desire to wear somewhat

constrictive clothing would be an enormous error of evaluation. Anne Hollander states that it is

“...tempting to believe people always feel psychically the same and that they look different only because the cuts of the garments change; but people feel more at ease dressed than undressed.”
(HOLLANDER, 1978, p.98)

Throughout history women have been comfortable with what they wore simply because an alternative was not offered; however, take, for example, the fact that when the Flapper clothing of the 1920s came about some women were uncomfortable (Fig 17). To them, it induced a feeling of near-nudity.

“It has been proposed that the popularity of tight-lacing among women in the nineteenth century is attributable to its anti-maternal significance in an age that prescribed maternity. Controversially, the corset might then be understood as a liberation garment, signifying a self-determined sexuality, distinct from the demands of procreation.”
(EVANS and THORNTON, 1989, p.2)

To summarise, it is necessary to keep an open mind on what can and cannot be perceived as ‘comfortable’. After all, comfort is a state of mind, and somewhat exempt from a straightforward process of analysis.

THEORIES OF EDMUND BERGLER

“Fashion is a male problem, deriving from the need for reassurance as to masculinity and from men’s unconscious, masochistic fear of women’s bodies. Women’s fashions are so foolish, uncomfortable and restrictive because ‘women are dressed by their bitterest enemy, the male homosexual’, with the result that ‘unsuspecting women are the victims of a fashion hoax’.”

(RADFORD, 1993, p.116)

At this stage it is possibly useful to discuss the theories of the psychologist and author, Edmund Bergler, with regards to the homosexual male fashion designer and misogyny. Although Bergler’s theories were written in 1953, and taking into consideration that some of his beliefs are quite radical and somewhat homophobic, it is useful to examine them in the light of claims that Alexander McQueen is a misogynist. It is true to say that a lot of males in the fashion industry are homosexual but that does not automatically mean they hold misogynist feelings.

Bergler’s theories are developed using reviews of case studies of his patients. An example taken from one, a homosexual professional fashion designer cites

“My patient co-operated by putting me on the alert with a sudden outburst. He shouted, ‘I HATE WOMEN, I HATE WOMEN, I HATE THEM!’ What struck me was my own association: If he hates women, his fashion creations must reflect this pseudo-hatred too. Women who trust this type of guidance are delivering themselves into the hands of their worst enemies’.”

(RADFORD, 1993, p.117)

Bergler even went so far as to suggest that homosexual male designers were possibly jealous of the fact that the women they ultimately designed for were sharing the male population, therefore they would design not to make women look good, but, in fact, quite the opposite, to make them look unappealing.

What Bergler did not account for, however, is the possibility that male designers, designing for women, are automatically at somewhat of a disadvantage, simply because of the ignorance and lack of primary insight into the workings of the female body, how it moves and thus affects their designs and creations.

In the 1990s homosexuality is now mostly accepted, and one cannot distinguish whether Bergler was simply against homosexuality or whether he actually held a valid point when speaking of homosexual fashion designers collectively, and not, as in the example given previously, when he spoke of an individual. It is interesting however that Alexander McQueen is homosexual and a designer of womenswear, and that he has been labelled a misogynist. As stated earlier, other homosexual fashion designers exist yet have not been called misogynists, therefore it is a claim which must be investigated.

McQUEEN AND MISOGYNY

“I design clothes because I don’t want women to look at all innocent and naive, because I know what can happen to them. I want women to look stronger.”

ALEXANDER McQUEEN

(HUME, 1996, p.82)

“Male artists’ female creations are not always erotic creatures, but the whole process is itself erotic, and actual women have repeatedly responded to that. To be a man’s creation is to participate intimately in his sexuality, whatever kind of creature you turn out to be; it’s a thrilling and dangerous prospect.”
(HOLLANDER, 1994, p.120)

To be accused of being a misogynist, when one ultimately has built their life around women and clothing, is almost to say that the work you do goes against what women want. If we are to acknowledge the fact that male designers are somewhat ignorant of what it means to be a woman, and therefore they occasionally make *faux pas*, how do we explain the fact that the ratio of top male designers outnumber the top female ones? Also, if we accept Bergler’s theory that all homosexual fashion designers are misogynists then how does that explain the fact that Alexander McQueen alone has been targeted with this accusation? What, if anything, warrants this slanderous claim? What do women think of his clothes? We know that, as previously mentioned, there was an estimated one million pounds worth of sales in 1996 alone, and as his popularity as a designer continues to grow in 1997 with his recent post as Chief Designer at the House of Givenchy and the recent accolade of being voted Designer of the Year, are we to presume that his clothes are mostly purchased by self-deprecating and humble women or by sympathetic misogynistic males?

McQueen states that he designs clothes in order to make women look stronger, as opposed to appearing innocent and naive. This is a very strong anti-misogynistic statement; in order to evaluate his claims we must look at examples of his work in order to debate the claims.

There are several factors that could be attributed to the emergence of the claims that Alexander McQueen is a misogynist. For instance, his collections all base themselves strongly around certain issues of womanhood, or times in history, whether factual or fictional, where women have been mistreated. Three prime examples are:-

- (i) 'The Highland Rape' collection of Autumn/Winter 1995
- (ii) 'Dante' collection of Autumn/Winter 1996
- (iii) A collection based on the work of the German artist Hans Bellmer's 1949 series of disfigured dolls for the Spring/Summer 1997 collection.

These collection titles were dealt with in greater depth in Chapter 1 but one can conclude that at all times McQueen is dealing with some form of maltreating of women.

Another factor could be in the way McQueen portrays women, both on the catwalk and in his choice of styling fashion photographs.

The first example chosen is taken from the article 'McQueen of England', featured in The Face magazine, November 1996. This article with text and several images, are styled by both Alexander McQueen and Nick Knight, a well-established photographer (Figs 18-20). Women are portrayed in a variety of stances and situations.



Figure 18 McQueen's questionable depiction of the 'English Rose'



Figure 19 McQueen's questionable depiction of woman as mannequin

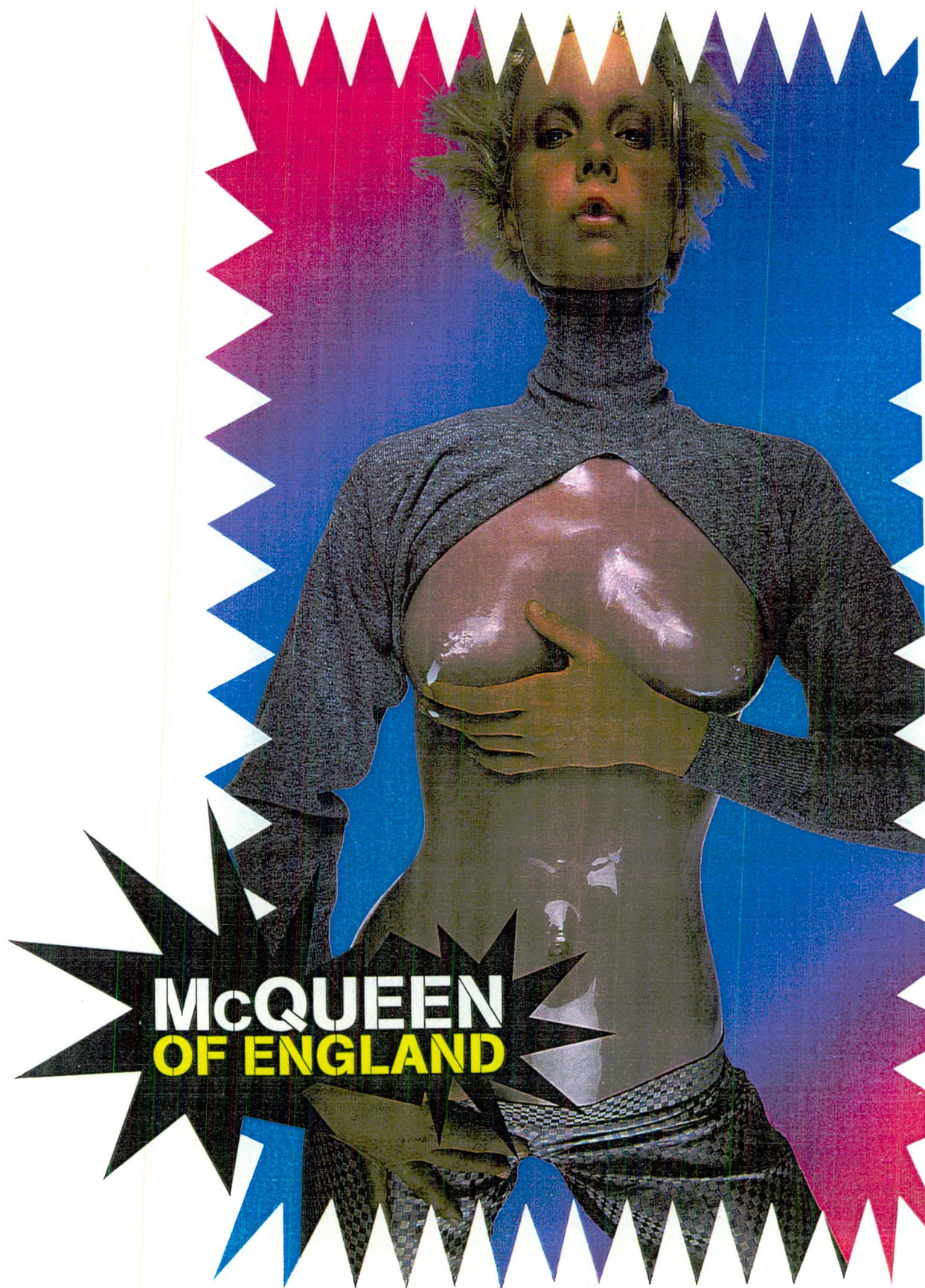


Figure 20 McQueen's pastiche of womanhood

Figure 18 depicts the woman as the typical English rose, only in this instance the rose contains thorns. A play on words, highlighting the age-old clichéd expression but dispelling the romanticised, evocative illusions of English women?

Figure 19 shows a woman in a mannequin-like stance, zombified in posture and facial expression; our eyes look up, she dominates. Ultimately because we look up, our eyes take in all the information in the clothing, her face is the last to be viewed. Here is the female represented as a clothes dummy, an object in which to decorate and embellish?

Figure 20 shows a woman, portrayed as a nostalgic overgrown baby doll, complete with a fibreglass false torso with milk (or what purports to be milk) protruding from the right breast. The model's stance is provocative, with one hand to the lactating breast and the other suggestively resting on her extremely low-cut bumster trousers. The polo-neck top she is wearing has been designed to fully expose the breasts and when one studies her face more closely one sees that she is complete with the same type of orifice used in dolls for soothers to be inserted. This image is shocking and disturbing definitely, and one wonders whether it is due to the staged and false look of the fashion photographs. McQueen challenges the viewer extensively. Is this McQueen's vision of his ideal clothing for a pregnant woman or a new mother? The fact that the clothes have been made to display the vital parts of the female in pregnancy suggests this. The top finishes at such a point where it would not interfere with feeding a new-born child, and the bumster trousers would not, being cut so low below the pubic bone, constrict the ever-growing stomach of a pregnant mother. Is this Alexander McQueen's idea of a joke on women? A double-take seems to exist

between sexuality and motherhood; a pastiche on baby dolls, blow-up dolls and women.

One cannot but question his motives and reasons for choosing to display his models, and therefore, women in this way. In this article alone, McQueen perceives women as drone-like clothes dummies in which decoration and embellishment is added; he dispels and rejects the image of the 'English Rose', as one that has an element of physical danger attached; and, finally, as part sex object, part reproductive organ. What is interesting is that when one analyses the images, the shocking discovery that these perceptions of women previously existed, and, in fact, go hand in hand with what it is to be a woman, both in the past and present. Is this coincidental or not? It is very probable that Alexander McQueen is purposefully addressing the issues that women address every day of their lives. Women have been objects useful for outwardly portraying wealth and social status; as sexual beings useful for childbearing and sex, and have also been given the label of being the weaker and subservient sex, hence the 'English Rose' equation. However, if this analysis in fact has any truth in it one wonders what McQueen wants to achieve by highlighting these issues. Does he agree with them? Using the images to show women in this light, is he trying to controversially highlight women's blighted existence at the hands of men, in order to create talking points that in fact will make women stronger, an equal sex in their own right? We are well aware that the fashion photograph is designed to seduce people into buying the product; that the whole image (ie the background, the pose of the model etc) has been carefully staged to work with the eventual message. However, in Figures 18-20 there is no focus on the background, nothing to detract from the

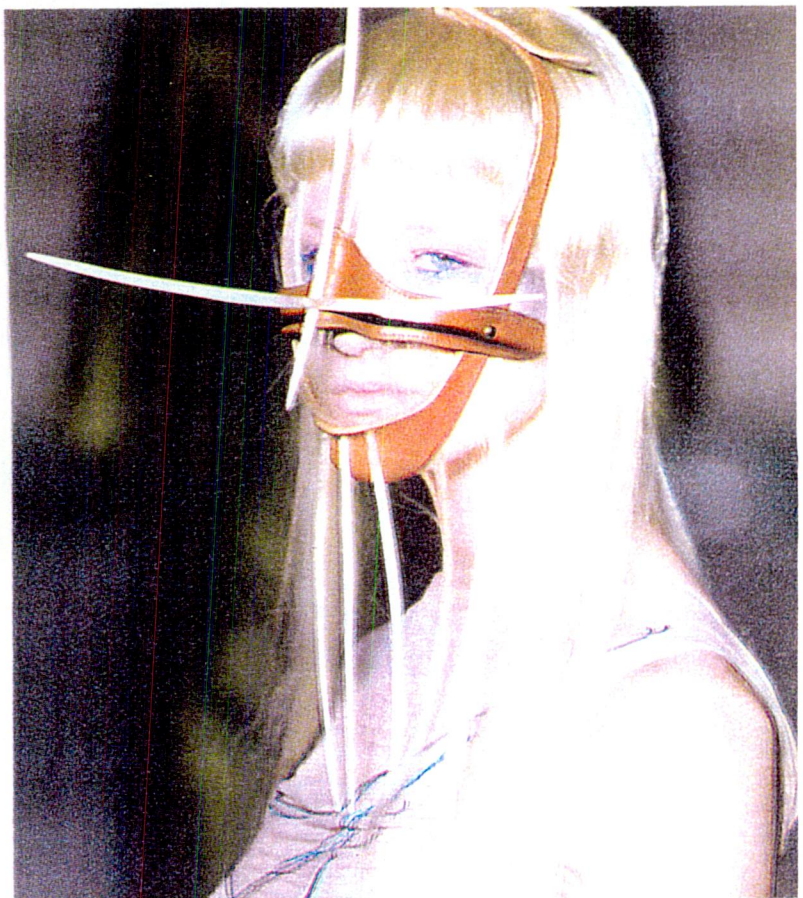
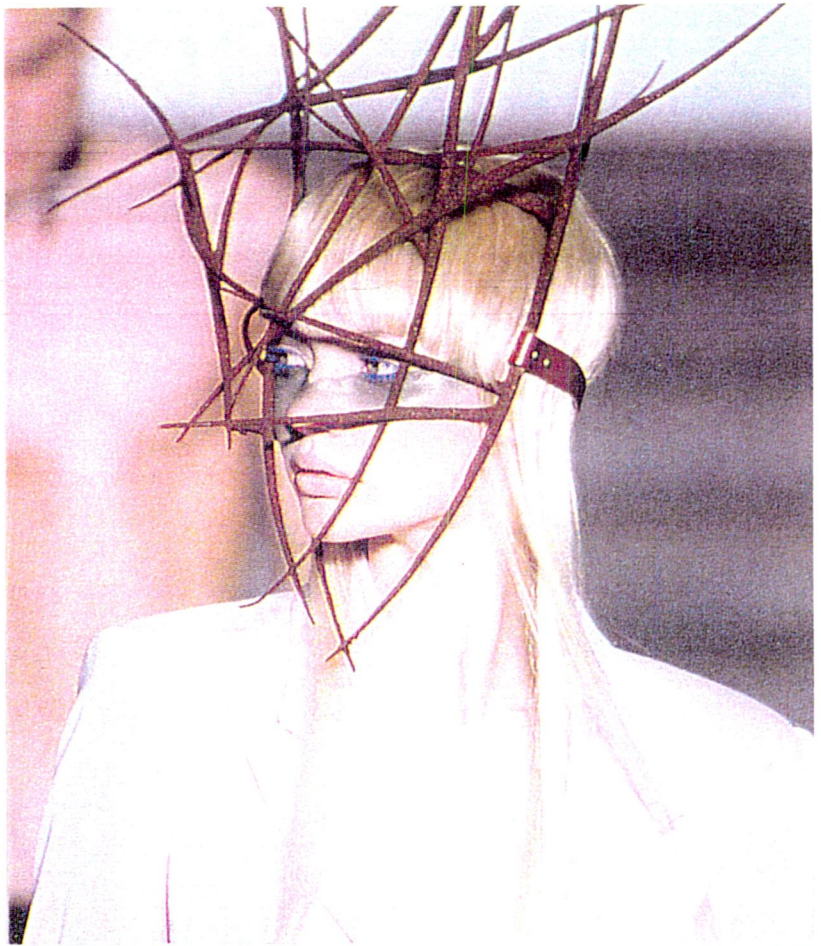


Figure 21 McQueen's muzzles, masks and antennae



Figure 22 Cage-like construction filled with live butterflies

image and the model, therefore making the image of the model ever more important and potent.

Further information comes from Alexander McQueen's catwalk shows and the manner in which he styles his models. He has a strong tendency to restrain the models from being able to walk down the catwalk. In 1994 Fashion Weekly reported that hobble skirt designed by McQueen

“...were more like cripple skirts after McQueen had sellotaped their legs together.”
(WOODHEAD, 1994, p.12)

Once again in his Spring/Summer 1997 collection, McQueen made the models wear specially constructed metal braces that forced their legs and arms open, forcing them to walk down the catwalk, not with the grace that we have come to expect from them, but in a humiliating and awkward manner. The antennae-like metal rods around the face and also the constructed muzzles (Fig 21) prevented any close contact with other models, quite reminiscent of Figure 18 (the 'English Rose'). He also placed some models in a cage-like construction filled with live butterflies (Fig 22).

It is almost impossible to correctly assess the issue of McQueen as misogynist. When one looks at Alexander McQueen's background one does not uncover childhood experiences which may explain the claims of misogyny.

“His credentials as a rebel are pathetic. McQueen hasn’t even got a troubled childhood to his name. The youngest of six children, he comes from a rock-solid background in London’s East End. His school teacher, Eileen O’Brien, remembers him as a nice, quiet, polite boy.”
(RUMBOLD, 1996, p.31)

With the influences of three sisters and a mother with whom he enjoys a close relationship, one could not say that he has most probably encountered women’s anxieties and experiences at close hand. One of those sister/s reportedly was a victim of domestic violence (HUME, 1996, p.82); could this be one of the reasons behind McQueen’s convictions to make women stronger?

Given his penchant for choosing somewhat nihilistic sources, one cannot expect serene and tranquil collections. Also, a lot of the material more than likely used as evidence to back up the theories of misogyny in his work, is taken from fashion shows or studio scenarios, known for the necessary steps of embellishment and exaggeration in order to gain notoriety. Although this styling is extreme, it can only be taken at face value; its presence is simply to gain attention and it most certainly succeeds in doing so.

WOMEN WHO BUY INTO McQUEEN’S VISION OF WOMEN

The question arises, who buys McQueen? What sort of woman would want to buy into his particular vision? This was not an easy task to research; being such a contemporary designer only just in the stages of infancy in establishing himself, I was unable to find out any particular customer profile. After interviewing the salesperson of McQueen’s clothes at Liberty’s, London, I learnt that a New York writer in her

sixties had come to London with the intent of buying McQueen, since at this time his clothing was not available in America.

Isabella Blow, Alexander McQueen's stylist and now muse, mentor and close friend, bought his entire degree collection. She was reportedly entranced by the lyricism of what she saw.

"She promptly set about buying a jacket here, a skirt there, until, within a year, she owned the collection in its entirety."
(RUMBOLD, 1996, p.30)

When McQueen is asked who buys his clothes, he states

"I haven't got a clue. I know the Japanese are buying it, but I don't know what types of Japanese."
(HEATH, 1996, p.84)

The only conclusion one can come to is that his customer tends to be somewhat linked with the arts industry, someone who is prepared to take risks in their visual persona and who also appreciates individuality in clothing. McQueen does not propose to produce collections that are for the mass-market; he is aware that his work is only for a handful of the market. Although McQueen's styling and representation may be off-putting to some, his strength lies in his design capabilities and tailoring skills; that is where he makes his sales impact.

CHAPTER 3

McQUEEN'S CUTTING EDGE

“Though adept at upsetting the delicate sensibilities of some with his propensity for bare buttocks, breasts revealed through sliced-away jackets, war photographs printed on denim and religious icons used as decoration, discerning observers... know that such mischief is underpinned by the fact that McQueen may well think like the devil, but cuts like an angel.”
(RUMBOLD, 1996, p.28)

“Although his gimmicks have become more outrageous, his saving grace has been that his designs are based on a detailed knowledge of classical tailoring.”
(REED, 1996, p.50)

It is not only Alexander McQueen's presentations of women that have caused waves of shock to rock through the fashion world, his clothes also have the capacity to both shock and leave audiences in awe. McQueen can cut, a fact that no-one can dispute. Due to his background in Saville Row tailoring, working for two years in establishments such as Gieves and Hawkes and Anderson and Sheppard, purveyors of suits to the Prince of Wales, he has also worked in the theatrical costumiers, Bermans and Nathans (where he worked on costumes for 'Les Miserables'), with the Japanese designer Koji Tatsuno and then for a brief spell with Romeo Gigli, he has been exposed to varied principles and disciplines of garment-making. McQueen's skill and execution enables him to realise ideas eloquently and can be attributed to his experience in these disciplines.

As with McQueen's use of styling and representation of women, his approach to garment design is radical and experimental, pushing the boundaries of innovation, resulting in fresh and contemporary interpretations of clothing. His collections are representative of both the wealth of ideas McQueen has, and the almost analytical and methodical way he designs (Fig 23).

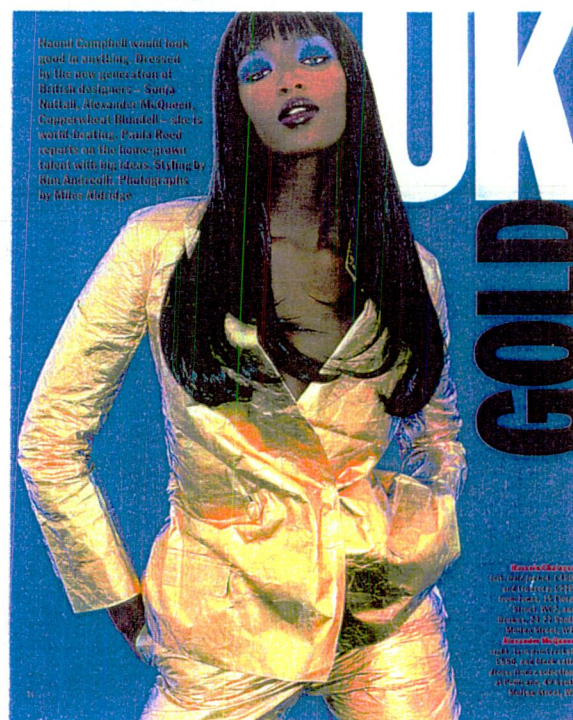


Figure 23 McQueen's innovative and extreme corsetry



(i)

(ii)



(iii)



Figure 24

The 'Neocouturists'

- (i) Owen Gaster
- (ii) Hussein Chalayan
- (iii) Pierce Fionda

The previous two chapters dealt with McQueen's ability to shock, his methods of styling and his representation of women through his collections; this chapter will investigate McQueen's handling of cloth, his radical experimentation with cut and also with his reverent and irreverent use of fabric.

In 1994 he was labelled a 'Neocouturist', along with several other contemporary British designers such as Owen Gaster, Hussein Chalayan and Pierce Fionda (Fig 24). The 'Neocouturists' offered a variety of fresh and directional work that at the time gave hope to a fashion industry that was recycling nostalgic collections at a speed that frightened the fashion editors greatly. They represented the fact that British fashion design education encourages individuality and freedom of expression. Damien Foxe states that

"British fashion is exciting, creative, rebellious, avant-garde, innovative, provocative and at times electrifying."
(FOX, 1996-1997, p.116)

The label 'Neocouturist' seems quite ironic three years later, given the fact that McQueen is now chief designer at the House of Givenchy, where he has signed a two year contract, and will produce two ready-to-wear and two couture collections a year. McQueen's reasoning as to why a British designer now heads a French couture house is

"British fashion is known for projecting forward, and that is what they are looking for. The British fashion industry is the best in the world for turning out designers. It has always been from the year dot. Charles Worth was English, and he was the first person to do couture in Paris."

ALEXANDER McQUEEN

FALLON, 1996, p.126)

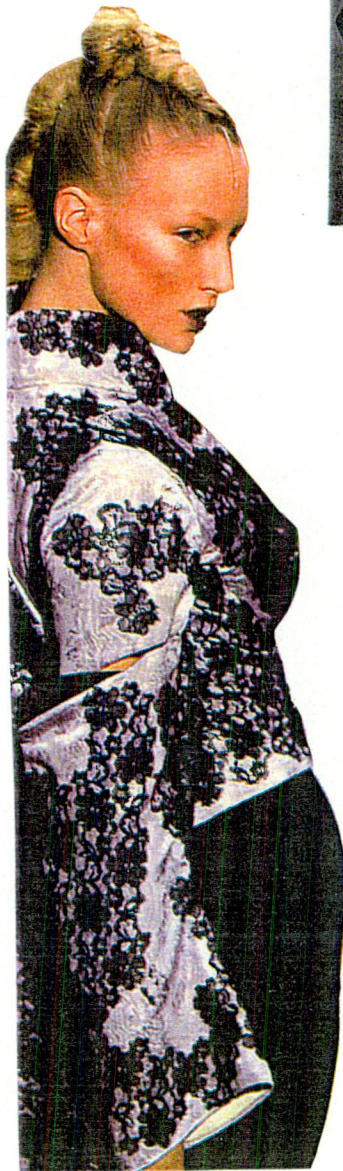


Figure 25 McQueen's technical wizardry



Figure 26 The Bumster trousers, front and rear views

This prestigious position of Givenchy reiterates the fact that McQueen is highly regarded in both the established couture houses and with contemporary fashion enthusiasts.

McQUEEN'S EXPERIMENTAL CUTS

Many of McQueen's designs are highly experimental and unprecedented, described by the media as 'avant-garde' and 'provocative'. Regardless of personal taste one must salute the designer who successfully manages to squeeze a man into a fifteen-inch corset, or cuts a pair of trousers to fit one inch above the pubic bone. Some of his creations are shocking, certainly, but can only be hailed as epitomising technical wizardry (Fig 25).

Take, for example, his bumsters, an item which has become somewhat of a signature piece in his collections (Fig 26). When first shown they caused extensive publicity and criticism, both positive and negative. To some they were hailed as creating the new erogenous zone and, in turn, had a strong influence on other designers' work. Evening dresses cut so low as to show the buttocks were seen on catwalks shortly after. To others they were seen as disgusting, unwearable and reminiscent of workmen's ill-fitting jeans. To Alexander McQueen they were an experiment with the body.

"They were never really about the bum. They were a technical experiment in how to elongate the torso."

ALEXANDER McQUEEN

HUME, 1996, p.52)

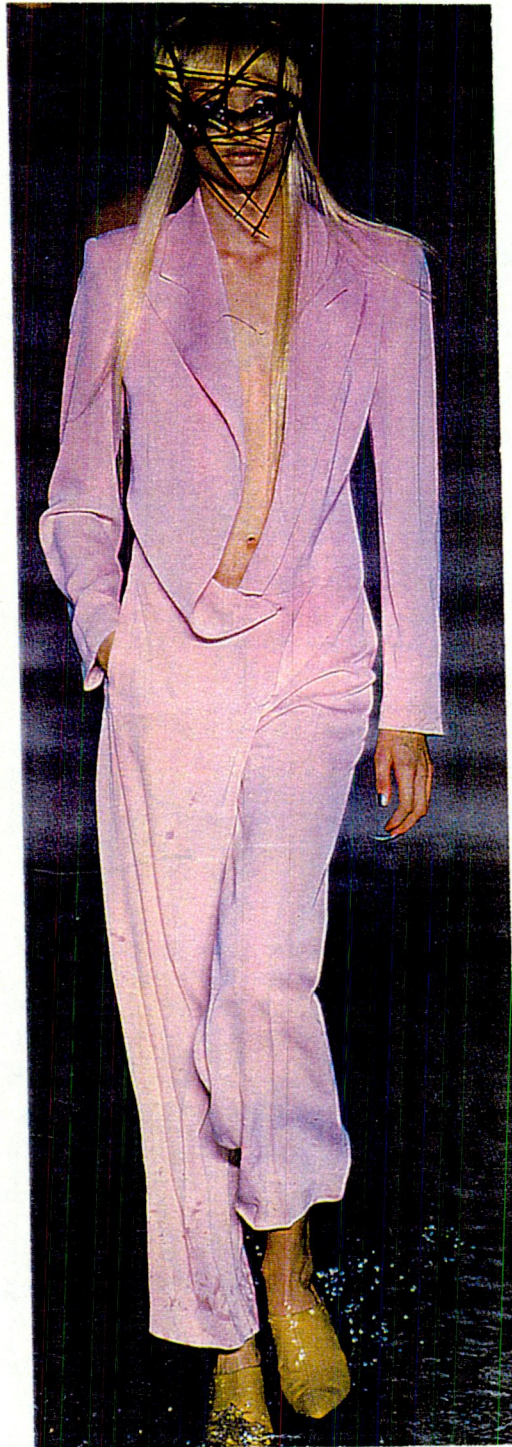


Figure 27 Drape-front jump-suit



Figure 28 McQueen's signature bumsters, slashed to reveal the bum, teamed with cut out lace top

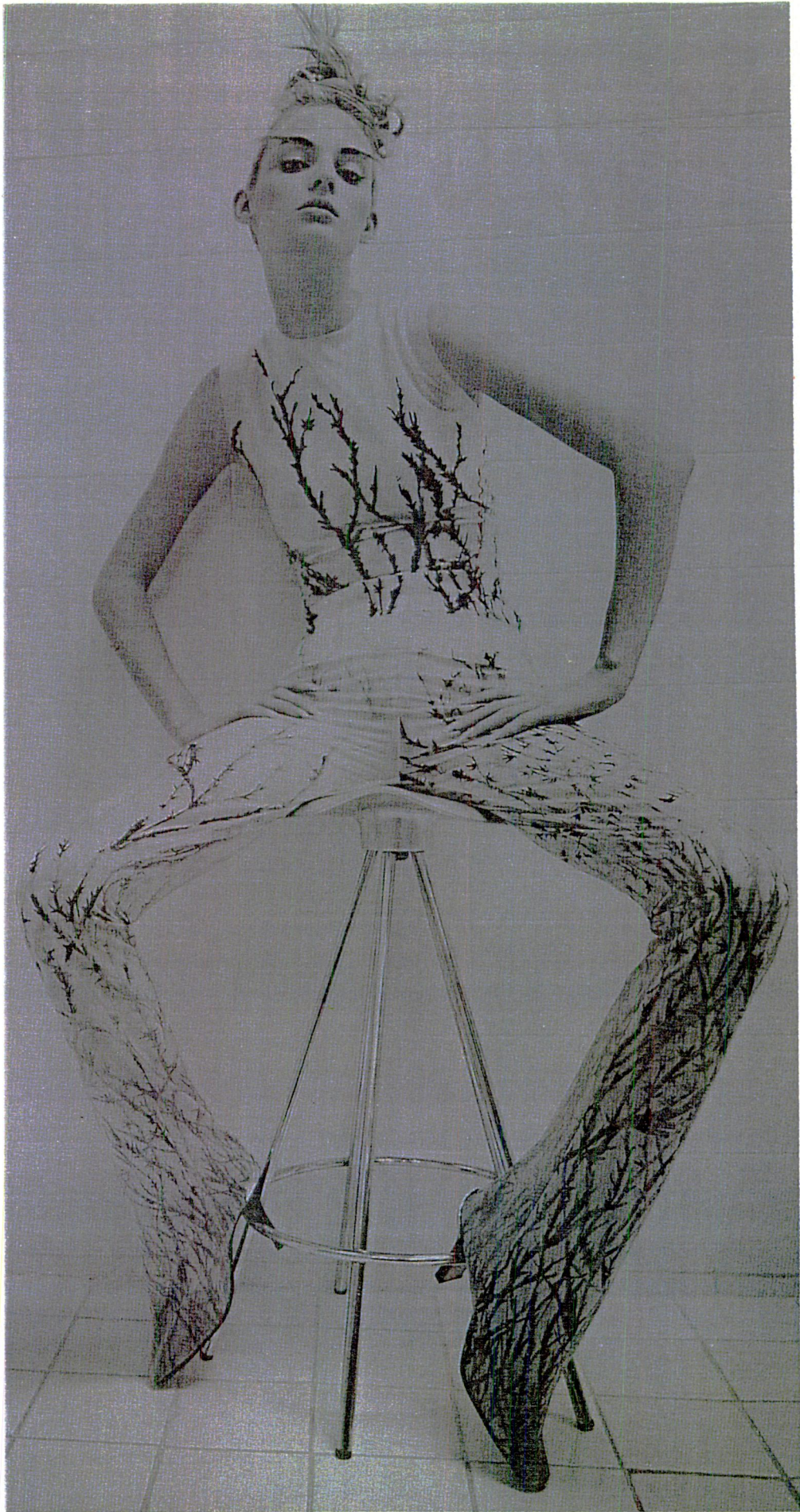


Figure 29 McQueen's all-in-one trousers and shoes

The bumsters were cut below the pubic bone where there is no support, where the body gets narrow; making them stay on the body showed an extreme amount of skill.

Figure 27 shows an exquisitely cut jump-suit, with one side of the garment draped to create a sensuous fold. This garment follows classical principles but with an added twist. It is a development of a McQueen jacket I saw in Liberty's of London, during November 1996. The jacket was draped on one side as in Figure 27, except the drape was more exaggerated and occurred only when the jacket was buttoned. Extremely simple, yet highly innovative and desirable, it highlighted McQueen's depth of thought and understanding in how to work within the boundaries of the cloth, manipulating it gently and not forcing results. This is a skill that he has not only learnt but, in fact, conquered. It is through the understanding of the cloth and how the body relates to it that McQueen creates not only the radical and controversial, but also the sensual and elegant. McQueen offers his customers garments finished to extremely high standards; even his T-shirts have bust darts to ensure a good fit. A lot of McQueen's work revolves around well-cut garments that hold an added twist. Figure 28 shows a pair of his signature bumsters with open seams at the back of each upper leg, revealing the bottom when the model bends over, and, Figure 29 shows a pair of all-in-one trousers and shoes. Technical experiments that are executed beautifully. To quote McQueen

"If people want a boring coat, they can go to DKNY."
(REED, 1996, p.51)

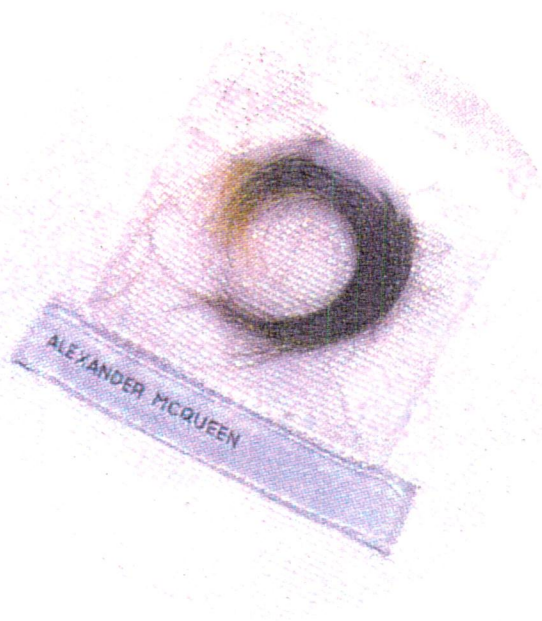


Figure 30

McQueen's label,
clear plastic with human hair
trapped inside

Figure 31

Example of McQueen's
irreverent use of fabrics,
ripped and shredded for
'The Highland Rape'
collection





(i)



(iii)



(ii)

Figure 32

The 'Deconstructionists'

(i) Martin Margiela

(ii) Martine Sitbon

(iii) Anne Demeulemeester

McQUEEN'S FABRICS

McQueen's choice of and assimilation of fabrics are also a talking point in fashion circles, and have been, ever since his MA show in 1992, which included real bloodstains on fabrics, latex corsets and see-through breastplates lined with insects and human hair. His label is clear plastic with human hair trapped inside (Fig 30).

Fabrics in previous collections have been torn, shredded and ripped for his 'The Highland Rape' collection (Fig 31). Delicate laces have been cut around the pattern in the lace to create an uneven seam; the final result transforms the relatively inexpensive lace; with one simple action the qualities of the lace are exaggerated and highlighted, giving it a very contemporary feel (Fig 28). Expensive and impeccably finished corsets have been teamed with skirts made out of scraps of frayed denim. His inspiration for the above could well be attributed to the 'Deconstructionists' of the early 1990s. This group consisted of fashion designers such as Martin Margiela, Martine Sitbon and Anne Demeulemeester (Fig 32). They literally deconstructed constructions; seams were no longer on the inside but were outside and garments looked intentionally unfinished.

McQueen uses print techniques, elaborate and intricate embroidery and wonderful trims to enhance the garments. Isabella Blow talks of how McQueen has developed ground-breaking new fabrics (Fig 33) such as wool dipped in latex, laminated lace and bonded fabrics (RUMBOLD, 1996, p.30).

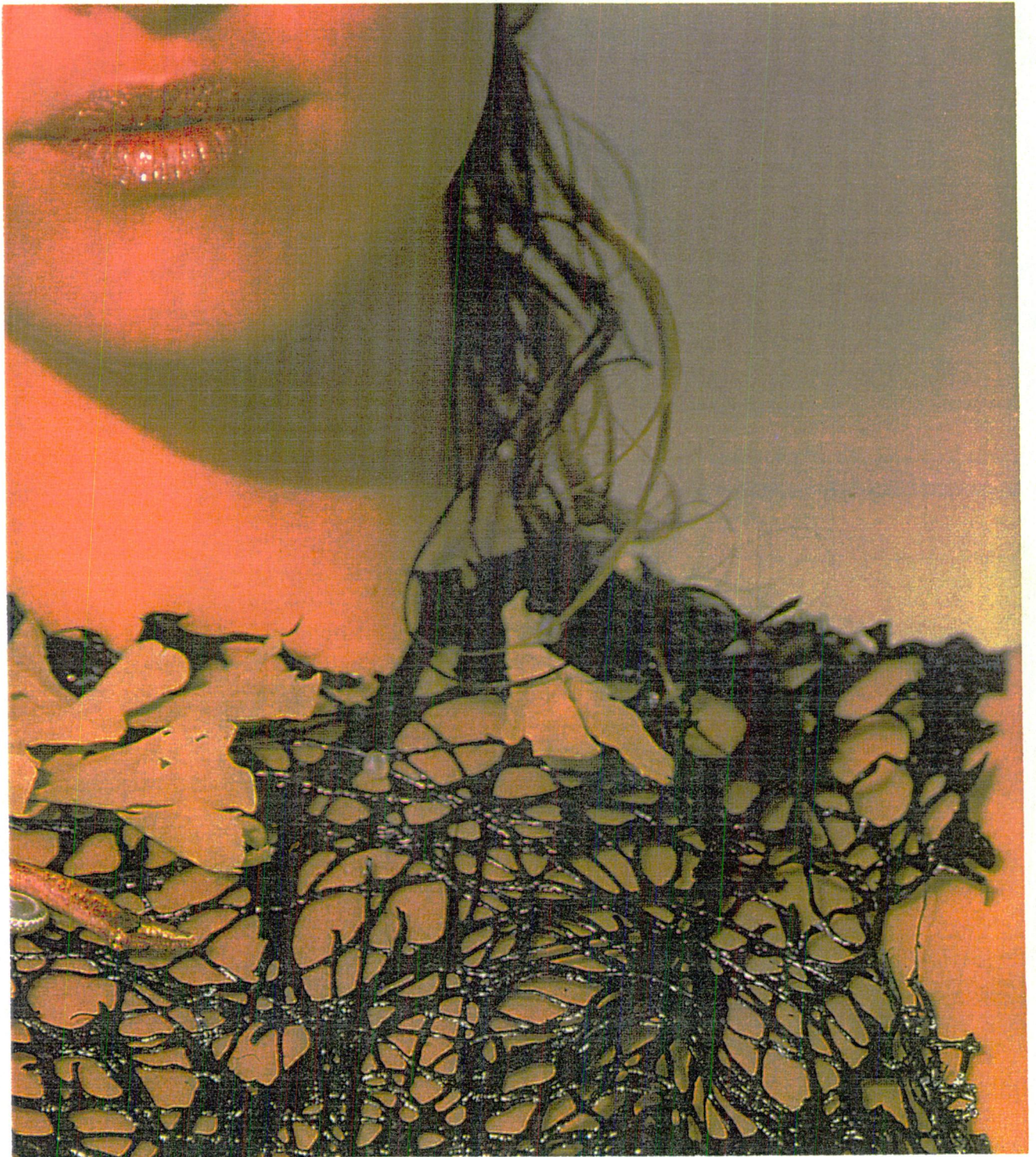


Figure 33 An example of McQueen's fabric development: glass fibre top

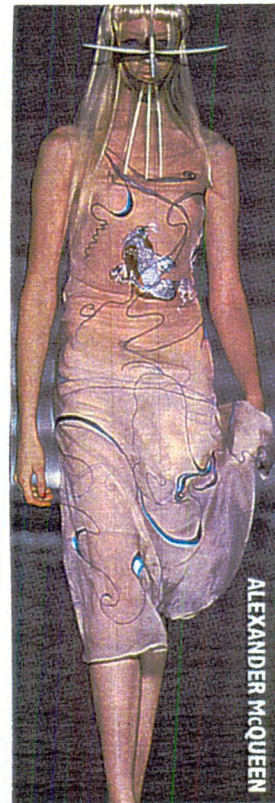
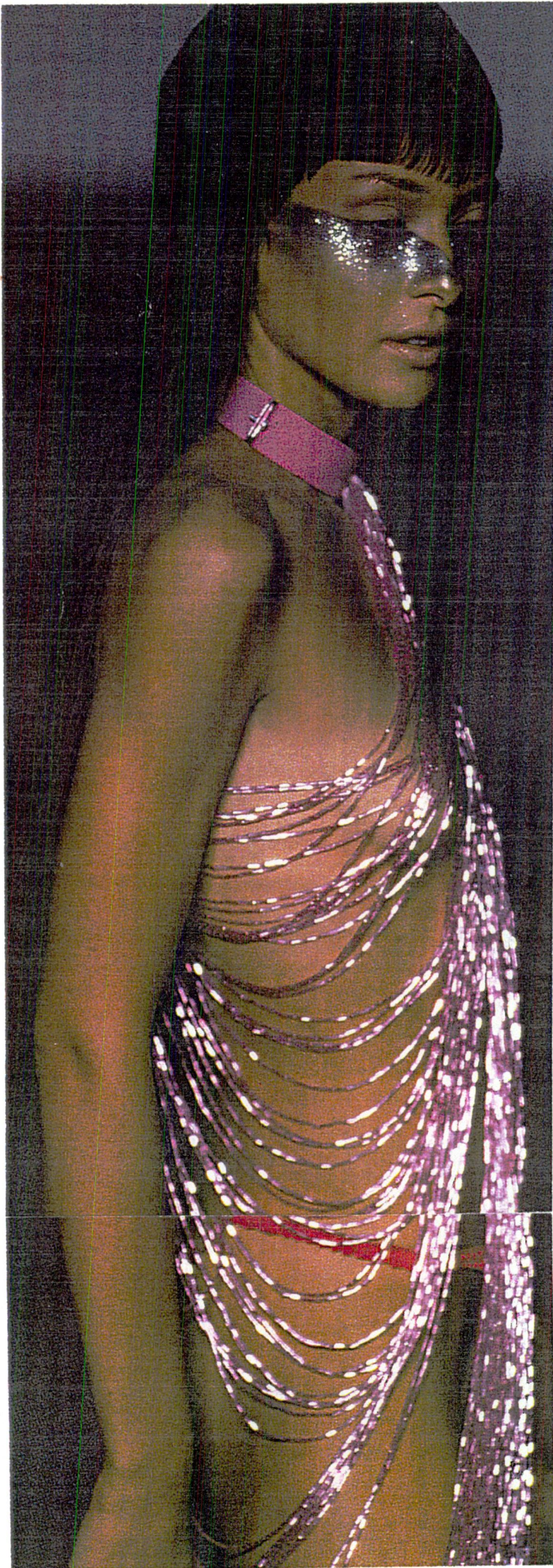


Figure 34

McQueen's intricate embroidery, bead and print work

McQueen's collection for Spring/Summer 1997 (based on Hans Bellmer's 1949 series of disfigured dolls - refer to Chapter 2) saw a conscious move away from the distressed fabrics of past collections. He used intricate sequins, embroidery and beautifully finished garments as the final details of his contract for the Givenchy post were being negotiated; he showed he was capable of expressing his ideas for a more exclusive clientele (Fig 34).

McQUEEN OF GIVENCHY

"There won't be any bumsters on the Givenchy runways. John relied on dressed and bias cuts, and mine is going to be about tailoring. Givenchy made his name with clean tailoring. I want to bring back that sophisticated wearability."

ALEXANDER McQUEEN

(FALLON, 1996, p.126)

McQueen's recent appointment with Givenchy further solidifies the fact that he is one of the most formidable designers and executors in the late 1990s. Following in the footsteps of his predecessor John Galliano (now heading the House of Dior), McQueen faces the task of giving Givenchy a contemporary new image. Galliano and McQueen together have contributed to the recent turnaround in the interest of couture.

So what made Givenchy want Alexander McQueen to take on the role of bringing couture back from the dead? Given his outrageous gimmicks and shocking fashions, one would think that McQueen was a risk. Paris fashion is somewhat devoid of the British individual and creative approach, preferring understated classical garments.



(i)



(ii)

Figure 35 (i) Audrey Hepburn in tulle and sequin ballgown by Givenchy
(ii) Givenchy placing finishing touches to a garment in his studio

McQueen states that Bernard Arnault, head of LVMH, chairman of the parent company of Givenchy, understands what he has been trying to do and is committed to creativity 'one hundred and twenty percent'. (FALLON, 1996, p.126 and p.128).

Just as McQueen is labelled the latest *enfant terrible* by journalists, so was Hubert de Givenchy. Givenchy's work was most prominently characterised for his love of fantasy and classicism (Fig 35). At the beginning of his career he was known for his inventiveness and drew his inspiration from the world around him. There are many similarities in Givenchy and McQueen, although the changing times can tend to hide this. What unites them is their desire to see couture remain and flourish and their ability to create beautiful clothes. Over four decades later there is a different emphasis on fashion, ready-to-wear is now prominent, and couture's clientele is slowly diminishing. McQueen in one sense has more of a task than Givenchy; whilst he has still to create the collections he also has to put back the life and vitality into couture clothing and bring it into the next century. He has commented that

"Couture is seen as a fad today, but I want mine to sell. Couture in the 1940s and 1950s actually sold to regular clients and I want to bring that back. I want to dress both the mothers *and* their daughters... At first I thought the Givenchy job might be too much of a challenge and that is why I couldn't decide. But now I view it as a conquest. I'm excited now."
(FALLON, 1996, p.128)

No doubt McQueen will need some time for adjustment, success in a vastly different arena will not come immediately. His first couture collection for Givenchy (Fig 36) did not receive the best responses from the fashion journalists; overall, they



Figure 36

Examples of McQueen's
debut collection for
Givenchy: mythical Greek
Goddesses



commented that his collection, based on Greek mythology, had not yet achieved the finesse and resolution expected at the House of Givenchy, but on a more positive note stated that he simply needed more time in his new role. The next few years will determine the outcome of McQueen's success at Givenchy, and many wait in anticipation to see what maturity makes of McQueen.

CONCLUSION

Alexander McQueen is currently enjoying growing success in his career and is viewed as one of the major catalysts in fashion today. Why is this, given that his work is disturbing, shocking and toys with misogyny and violence?

Violent aspects of our culture have gradually infiltrated fashion advertising and fashion since the emergence of the punks in the 1970s identifying with the cult status. Films such as 'Reservoir Dogs', 'Natural Born Killers', Reality TV and the public's fascination with media coverage of wars and conflicts testify to how violence and shock have become an integral part of popular culture, something that today's generation can automatically identify with. To them violence as a style prop is not as displaced as one automatically would assume. Today's generation is somewhat more cynical than previous generations; it claims to question more and rejects more, religion, politics and war included. It could be said that Alexander McQueen has become a success partly because he identifies with this culture and seeks to highlight controversial issues in his work. His work is seen as shocking and subversive, it shocks the established and more mature members of the fashion world, always a more or less foolproof way of obtaining publicity and cult status.

McQueen seems to be motivated by a concern for public morality, highlighting society's voyeuristic infatuation with social injustice in war, famine and lack of human compassion. Wanting to change attitudes through his work, McQueen feeds off today's culture in order to make his point. By choosing to work from disturbing realism, and confronting through shocking reality, his work can be said to be a derivative of Vivienne Westwood and Katherine Hamnett's expressions of political angst through clothing in the 1970s and 1980s. McQueen strives to highlight the

brutalities and injustices of mankind in a more confrontational way, using the past and the present to show ongoing flaws in human nature. But one must ask if his motivations are simply utilising clever marketing tactics in order to obtain better sales and success. No information was available that told us, for example, of any financial donations McQueen made to Ethiopian aid, which possibly could legitimise his reasons for creating the 'Ethiopian child' photo-print jacket. Therefore, one must question McQueen's reasons for creating the jacket; one wonders whether McQueen is simply exploiting those who suffer injustices in order to achieve notoriety. Although McQueen raises issues that prompt discussion, he appears to offer no solutions or aid. Also, most people take fashion at face value, the majority do not extract contextual meanings in clothing, even if they are offered in the blatant manner common to McQueen. Thus, one wonders whether what McQueen strives to say through clothing is actually making the impact McQueen says he desires.

All aspects of McQueen's work have shocked those who viewed it over the past three years. The accusation that McQueen is a misogynist is somewhat difficult to draw a definite conclusion on; one can say that McQueen uses misogynistic elements in his work. He flatly denies that he detests women and his sentiments are quoted in this study to support his denials. One can, however, strongly speculate that McQueen is exploiting the unspoken parameters of fashion. By constricting and detracting from the finesse and gracefulness of the female models he invites outrage and conflict.

However much McQueen shocks with his nihilistic and misogynistic concepts, his experience in Saville Row tailoring, combined with innovative and radically novel designs, have ensured the fact that McQueen's career will grow. His background in tailoring has allowed him to experiment greatly, his work is inventive with the added benefit of being well-resolved in terms of construction and finish. Those who wear McQueen do so because of their desire to look individual.

Bernard Arnault of the House of Givenchy recognised that McQueen had the necessary abilities to create couture clothing, hence his recent contract designing their collections for the next two years. This reinforces the fact that McQueen is perceived as one of the formidable influences in fashion today. His debut collection for the House of Givenchy was not well received by the fashion critics. McQueen, however, remains undeterred by this and stated in an article for 'W' Magazine, December 1966

"I'm not going to be intimidated by the people of the Parisian haute couture. People aren't going to get wonderful things overnight. I don't expect everyone to love what I do right away."

McQueen seems aware of the fact that his clientele will be different with Givenchy, and also of his immediate limitations of designing for this clientele until he settles into his new role. His collection for Spring/Summer 1997 saw a marked change in direction. There was an emphasis on wearability and innovative finesse, proving that McQueen is growing and maturing as a designer. He has proved that he has what it takes to be successful in the late 1990s and has learnt the valuable lesson of combining creativity with wearability.

“People are idiots if they keep expecting me to put on outrageous shows. At the end of the day I’d have to go home looking like a tramp with no food on the table.”

ALEXANDER McQUEEN

(RUMBOLD, 1966, p.31)

With this shift in focus from outrageousness to refinement, one can conclude that McQueen’s career is only now coming out of infancy and will develop and mature into the next millennium.

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