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The phenomenon of the rise in success of British fashion in relation to British fashion designers and Parisian haute couture in the 1990s.

by

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**INTRODUCTION:**







London is a unique city in the manner in which it emerges and submerges itself in fashion consciousness. Most notably since 1955 and the emergence of Mary Quant and the mini-skirt (which is undoubtedly one of the most enduring style icons of the 20th century), Britain has been gaining a respected reputation in the fashion world. London triumphed on the fashion scene during the 1960s only to lose respect in the 1970s. This was followed by a brief revival in the 1980s with the rise of fashion names such as Vivienne Westwood, John Galiano and Katherine Hamnett. Now in the 1990s the fashion world is proclaiming the return of the British as the mavericks of international style.

It is almost impossible to open a contemporary fashion magazine - whether a British or international edition without registering a feature or article on how Britain is at 'The Cutting Edge' of the fashion empire. A variety of magazines from the glossies - Vogue, Elle, Cosmopolitan, etc. to those such as Scene and The Face, magazines aimed at a younger audience have all paid homage to the state of the British fashion industry and its effect on international fashion. Journalists such as the Observer's Judy Rumbold and the curator and author Colin Mc Dowell are among those who have penned articles around British





fashion and its supposed icons. Whether these articles have attempted to be objective or more often to hype the British fashion industry is one of the concerns of this thesis.

Every retail outlet worldwide has seen more than its fair share of 'decent, well behaved suits'. Retailers are bored with minimalism and in an industry practically dominated by France and Italy and the immense wealth of America, the fashion world particularly France is looking to Britain for the creative influence it needs to inspire the fashion empire. "The run - up to the millennium is provoking a hunger for bold, inventive radicalism, for ideas that challenge and inspire". (Brampton, 1997, p. 57.)

British fashion flaunts individuality, and with its appropriation of styles from the street, the British are gaining themselves the title of 'style icons'. For years British design graduates have worked abroad, with fashion names such as Calvin Klein and Gucci - often going uncredited for their work. But now in the 1990s that has changed. British designers are considered highly directional designers. This respect they have earned is reflected in the appointments of John Galiano, Alexander McQueen and Stella McCartney as chief designers for the French couture houses, Dior, Givenchy and Chloe respectively. There





is also the emergence of design talents such as Antonio Berardi, Owen Gastor, Hussein Chalayan, Clements Ribeiro, Julian McDonald and more recently Tristan Weber and Matthew Williamson who are earning both respect and attention for themselves from the international fashion brigade.

While the main concern of this thesis is to examine the success of British designers both at home and abroad I shall not be analysing their success based on their abilities as designers and the clothes that they produce. But through exploring the opinions and views put forward by fashion writers I aim to draw my own conclusion as to whether the British can truly be considered fashion leaders in the 1990s or whether this theory is purely a myth created by the fashion media.







## CHAPTER 1







Why the British? What is it that has led to the phenomenal rise in success of the British fashion industry? Perhaps it is to quote Jean Cocteau that the British "know how to go too far" (Cocteau, quoted in Holgate, 1997, p.185). On the streets of London you can do just about anything with your clothes and go unnoticed.

As Ernestine Carter, the legendary editor of the Sunday Times said "America invented the teenager, but Britain dressed her". (Brampton, 1997, p.58).

One of the reasons put forward by Sally Brampton for the inventiveness of British designers and the outpouring of design graduates from British art colleges onto the fashion scene is that Britain has one of the finest mass-marketed fashion industries in the world. Fashion chain stores such as Oasis, Warehouse, Miss Selfridge and French Connection are present in practically every high street - including Dublin - often with many more than just one outlet. Marks & Spencers exist throughout Britain and Ireland with outlets in Dublin, Cork and Belfast. They also trade in Italy and France where for example Toulouse is resident to the British tradition of Marks & Spencers. These outlets are testament to the fact that Britain can





mass produce clothes of high quality and increasingly, good design at affordable prices.

This powerful mass production system is encouraging to those considering a career in the fashion industry and thus inspires school leavers to enter the industry therefore creating an increased creative awareness in fashion. With designers like Jasper Conran and Philip Treacy producing diffusion ranges for Debenhams and likewise Julian McDonald - acclaimed British knitwear designer - designing a diffusion range for Marks & Spencers, the employment prospects within the British mass-marketed industry are increasing.

The influence of the thriving British music industry on the fashion world is huge. Since the 1960s British fashion has been seen as creative and daring by the fashion media. "Music has played a strong part in shaping British fashion since the Swinging Sixties to Punk, the New Romantics and the House/Techno Scene". (John Galiano, quoted in de la Haye, ed, 1997, p.192).

Katherine Betts in Vogue magazine has written about the influence of techno music on the fashion world paying tribute to the British music scene "as 'genius' as the New York raver kids may be, its in Britain





that the mixing of fashion and club music in the nineties is at it's most exciting" (Betts, 1997, p.114). John Galliano has attributed alot of his inspiration to the British music scene: "The passion for music and energy in the clubs here is overwhelming - you can't help but be inspired by it" (John Galliano, quoted in Betts, 1997, p.114). He finds going to British clubs an essential form of inspiration. "The energy and passion generated by music in British clubs is awesome....Britain has a very rich street culture and it is as much the attitude of people that is inspiring as the appearance." (John Galliano, quoted in de la Haye, 1997, p.200).

Many designers over the years have been influenced by the British music culture perhaps because it is one of the most influential and commercially renowned successes of Britain. The sociologist Angela McRobbie put forward this theory: "de-industrialization, class de-alignment, the changing place of women and the consolidation of black people at the bottom end of the labour hierarchy, have all affected young people during the 1980s. The turn to fashion and music as career choices represents a strong preference for the cultural sphere" (McRobbie, 1994, p.161). There seems to be a constant buzz about the British cultural scene, both in the British glossies and international editions whether it be a commotion about a British movie, the attitude





of a model, a British band, or the cut of a skirt, the cultural scene has had a profound influence on its designers for example Patrick Cox. Cox is a native of Canada who has been based in London since he trained and initiated his career there in the early 1980s. "Living in London, is my main source of inspiration....the scene, the attitude of the British youth, the flea markets, the pop music industry, current creativity in magazines and the monarchy" (Patrick Cox, quoted in de la Haye, 1997, p.199).

The sociologist Herbert Blumer's study of the women's fashion industry led him to observe that trends can be set through "developing a deep familiarity with recent expressions of modernity - whether they be manifest in the arts, literature, politics or elsewhere and translating the themes they uncovered thereby into dress designs". (quoted by Brahms in Du Gay, (Ed.), 1997, p.114). This observation reflects the emergence of Britain as fashion heroes. Perhaps it could be contributed to the contemporary British music scene which is at the height of success in the 1990s with bands such as Pulp, Blur, Oasis, The Verve even the Spice Girls all having broken into the music scene. Oasis have even been compared to 1960s music heroes The Beatles. As Blumer explains because fashion is perennially modern it must keep





up with developments not just in its own field but also relate to changes in other areas of popular culture, such as music.

Clothing sells not merely for its practical and aesthetic properties but consumers buy clothes that they relate to fashion trends. Trends that are in the case of British fashion generated by the fashion media, the average consumer will relate trends to what they see in the glossies . If a consumer reads a number of articles or views the same style advertised in a variety of magazines, the consumer presumes this is what she has to be seen in, and thus this is an example of the glossies promoting a trend, hyping it and successfully selling it. With Britain being advertised as style icons, "London is the global capital of cool" (Holgate, 1997, p.28), consumers want to be trendy and hip, they therefore are buying British fashion and increasing the popularity of British designs. But it is not just the media who are advertising the British at the moment, and helping to increase British popularity.

This consumption of fashion has been influenced strongly by the power of the supermodel in the world in the 1990s."Institutions themselves have been alerted to the question of women and young women as economic agents, participating, in the economy for the greater part of their lives" (McRobbie, 1994, p.157).





We have seen since the mid 1980s the emergence of the phenomenon of the supermodel. The first batch of supermodels were Americans - Cindy Crawford, Linda Evangelista, and Christy Turlington. But after constant exposure American girls begin to look bland. Decadence is considered to be back in style and who are best at displaying decadence but the British.

British fashion models since the 1960s have been critical to the marketing of high fashion both in Britain and Worldwide. In the 1960s, a new generation of models, including Jean Shrimpton, Celia Hammond and the highly celebrated and remarkably thin Lesley Hornby, nicknamed 'Twiggy' were given celebrity status by the public and were greeted with the same adulation as pop stars received, especially Twiggy. Twiggy was considered the face of the Sixties and she has been compared to Nineties supermodel Kate Moss. "She was as different as her lookalike Kate Moss was to become to the sex goddess image of Cindy Crawford in the Nineties." (Quick, 1997, p.76.)

In 1990 Kate Moss emerged onto the fashion scene earning a huge contract with Calvin Klein. Despite that she has been labelled flat chested, short and waif-like she epitomises the fashion model of the 1990s with her quirky charms. Honor Fraser, Stella Tennant and Iris





Palmer (all members of the British aristocracy) have become sought after models on the catwalk. In 1996 Stella Tennant replaced Claudia Schiffer as the Chanel girl while Gucci's latest advertising campaigns have featured unknown British girls. Unlike the supermodels of the late 1980s the new British girls rarely think of modelling as a career yet alone a vocation and perhaps it is their detachment that has led to their success. They do not foresee longterm careers as models but for now their innate Britishness is keeping them busy. This popularity of the English model can be seen to further contribute to the theory that Britain remains a site of cultural innovation and domination.

The supermodel phenomenon has also had a direct influence on the success of some of Britain's recent design talents, most notably Stella McCartney, Matthew Williamson and Antonio Berardi. In Stella McCartney's degree show at St. Martin's College of Art, London it was not enough for her to bask in the attention of having one of the infamous Beatles - Sir Paul McCartney as her father, she went one further with supermodels Naomi Campbell, Kate Moss and Yasmin Le Bon wearing her clothes on the runway. Even without her father's name her show was bound to attract press attention, and with the supermodels wearing her clothes the average customer is bound to be interested in them too.





"When I'm in the middle of production and having a nightmare, knowing that someone has seen Kate (Kate Moss) in my stuff and asked her where she got it - that makes it all worth it." (Stella McCartney, quoted in Moore, 1997, p.99). Very few graduates straight out of college can have the world's top models wearing their clothes. Matthew Williamson is another who is receiving acclaim at the moment, for his Spring/Summer 1998 show, "Matthew Williamson, a 26 year old St. Martin's graduate became this seasons instant hero by putting on a little show that charmed the pants off the international press and buyers" (Mower, 1998, p111). His first show last Autumn featured Kate Moss, Helena Christensen and Jade Jagger who all offered to help out (Fig. 1). With a celebrity line up it was destined to receive attention - and attention is what he got. "It was very cute, very connected - and very very London now" (Mower, 1998, p.111).

Antonio Berardi is another British graduate who had the help of a few supermodels to gain press attention. Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell, who reputedly earn up to £10,000 for a day's work appeared in Berardi's show for a fee of one dress and £50, it was definitely one of those fashion moments for the press to capture. (Mower, 1998, p.111)







**Figure 1:** Supermodel Kate Moss parades on the catwalk for Matthew Williamson's debut show





"Antonio Berardi's show at the Brixton Academy was the highlight of a very stellar week - when Kate and Naomi cut a mean dash in his gorgeous ruffled micro dresses and tailoring" (Armstrong, L, 1997, p.131) While these designers, McCartney, Williamson, and Berardi are all talented designers, having their designs associated with top supermodels can only increase public awareness towards their names and thus their clothing.

Whether it is purely coincidental that these three designers managed to achieve notoriety for their degree shows or whether it is evidence that it was a clever ploy to gain press attention, either way, it has definitely worked in their favour. Stella McCartney is now chief designer with Chloe, while Berardi is rumoured to be headed for every design house including Versace. "Berardi is very up on incessant rumour syndrome because in the last few months he has been the subject of any number of them. He's going to Celine, he's going to Chloe, he's going to Balenciaga. And the biggie, the really tantalising one - he's going to Versace" (Armstrong, 1998, p.131).

But are these rumours to be believed or is this purely the journalist Lisa Armstrong joining in on the rumour syndrome by actually encouraging them ? By printing what she herself calls rumours, the author is



becoming a victim of the hype, and reinforcing the rumours in people's consciousness. Or has Berardi himself raised them with the author so that she will repeat them causing more press attention to be directed to Berardi. Either way it has succeeded, Berardi is receiving a lot of acclaim and whether the rumours are true or not it is not just the critics who believe in his talents.

Manolo Blahnik, one of the industry's most renowned shoe designers has praised Berardi's talents, calling him "this country's real big hope. He's got a level of taste and technique that you just don't find very much- anywhere" (Manolo Blahnik, quoted in Armstrong, 1998, p.131). The backbone of the designer industry can be divided into two parts. One is financial backing and the other is media attention, and financial backing is easier to get with media attention. Designers rely on press coverage, and it is up to the designer to attract the press, something done successfully by McCartney, Williamson and Berardi and therefore they are now reaping in the rewards of being under the media spotlight.





## CHAPTER 2







One of the key developments in the contemporary fashion industry is the growth in ready to wear clothes, both in department stores and in mail order catalogues. The consumer market has increased considerably in the late 20th Century. In the 1950s Paris was accepted with no dispute as the centre of fashion but in more recent times couture has had less of an influence on the consumers. It has become recognised that often, trends arise from street styles, rather than having "trickled down" from the catwalk, styles have "bubbled up" from street level and appeared on the catwalk in various forms. Parisian haute couture in particular has in recent times been rumoured to have lost a lot of its appeal. The couturiers have been accused of lacking inspiration and innovation. "For many including much of the press, couture has become an uninteresting Madame in a thrill a minute world" (Foley, 1997, p.242.). Perhaps it is this loss of interest in the couture world that has led to the injection of fresh blood into the French haute couture arena.

There has arisen the reiterated claim that designers, rather than inspiring new creation, have fallen back on recreating past successes and trends. Instead of merely reproducing past trends designers need to learn from and build on the past. The fashion industry appears to feel a need to continuously remind itself of past successes. This could





be contributed to the rapid pace of fashion. In recent years the fashion industry has increased its pace considerably thus making the industry more erratic.

"The most important single factor in precipitating this profound change is said to be the emergence in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century of the independent couturier". (du Gay, (Ed.), 1997, p.131).

The most significant of these couturiers was an English man, Charles Frederick Worth. The couturiers originated as designers for the upper middle class women - a market which although small was a significant increase to the earlier domination of fashion by the haute bourgeois and aristocracy. Since the arrival of the couturiers fashion cycles have become very erratic with trends sometimes barely surviving a season and perhaps it is this influence that has forced the fashion world to rethink its design forces.

"The cycles in fashion get shorter and shorter. How many times have the 60s been revived since the 60s? They're never out long enough to be completely out. Soon all the decades will overlap dangerously. Soon everything in will be simultaneously out." (Hochswender, 1991, quoted in du Gay, (Ed.), 1997, p.131.)

This quote combines both the point that fashion has increased its tendency to recreate the past and also the point that the rapid and



erratic fashion cycles are affecting couture. This may well be part of the reason why the British are at the moment so powerful in the French haute couture industry. With three British designers all under the age of 30 as leading designers in large French design houses perhaps one of the reasons they were awarded their positions was because of their youth. With youth as an asset they are likely to be more inventive and less inclined to re-invent the past as they have a lot of fresh ideas to inspire their work.

The designer, Gina Fratini believes that 90% of new trends originate from Britain (de la Haye, (Ed.), 1997, p.196.). It is a general consensus in the fashion world that Britain turns out some of the most creative individual designers. "British youth are very tribal. They create new movements to belong to, new music and new fashion. The fashion identity of the British is very experimental and youth-orientated". (Patrick Cox, quoted in de la Haye, (Ed.), 1997, p.192).

Style icons such as the late Gianni Versace have paid homage to this British inventiveness "I am in love with British culture and British fashion is a great expression of it from Worth to Alexander McQueen" (Gianni Versace, quoted in Holgate, 1997, p.184.) "These days I love the interesting work that comes from designers who are not enslaved





by marketing. The following are incomparable; Zandra Rhodes, Ossie Clark, Vivienne Westwood, John Galiano, Alexander McQueen and Hussein Chalayan" (Christian Lacroix, quoted in Holgate, 1997, p.185.)

The haute couture industry has long been considered the most supreme, and most elitist area of the fashion industry. It is quite a coup to be admitted into the sanctum of French couture at all "Quite apart from a prodigious talent, you must satisfy the chamber syndicale that your house complies with strict criteria. You need two ateliers; one which specializes in *le flou* (fluid, light dressmaking) and one that devotes itself to tailoring" (Armstrong, 1997, p.148). Couture is dedicated to the finest traditions of dressmaking. January 18th to 23rd 1997 will be a memorable fashion week of 1997. This was the week in which the first Englishman to head a French couture house since the war moved from Givenchy to the house of Dior and John Galiano's old job was filled by another Englishman, Alexander McQueen. But the English influence on French haute couture didn't stop there. In April 1997 Stella McCartney was installed as chief designer at Chloe (an appointment she inherited from Karl Lagerfeld). But the British influence has affected nearly every couture house.

Stephen Jones, the milliner, lent his talents to Ungaro and Dior.





Knitwear designer Julian McDonald has proved a huge hit with Karl Lagerfeld and he has produced crochet dresses for Chanel ever since Karl Lagerfeld awarded him a "special prize just for his degree projects at the Royal College of Art" (Leon Talley, 1997, p.146). Amanda Harlech former muse of John Galiano has joined Karl Lagerfeld at Chanel as a stylist. Slim Barrett contemporary jeweller has been linked to Ungaro's creations. Even British hairdressers are teasing the tresses on the French couture scene in houses like Versace and Ungaro. So desperate seemingly are the French to be connected with the British that even the badly dressed Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson was reputed to have been paid a premium of £300,000 to write a few articles for the French newspaper "Paris Match." (Armstrong, 1997, p.147.) There has been a lot of media hype and attention surrounding the British influence in Paris. "It's been two years now and it's becoming an indisputable fact the Brits rule Paris couture" (Harris, 1998). While this statement by Constance Harris in the Sunday Independent after reviewing the latest Spring shows seems somewhat exaggerated and hyped it is difficult to deny the strength of the British influence on haute couture with so many British designers playing a part in the haute couture arena.



Alexander McQueen is creating a lot of media interest in his position as chief designer in the couture house of Givenchy. Alexander McQueen has been labelled the latest "*enfant terrible*" by journalists or more appropriately "*enfant sauvage*". In comparison Hubert de Givenchy was also well known for his inventiveness. Givenchy's work was characterised by his love of fantasy and classicism. He drew his inspiration from the world around him. There are many similarities between McQueen and Givenchy. McQueen too has a great love for fantasy (Fig. 2). Just as Givenchy had the desire to see couture flourish so too does McQueen. Since Hubert de Givenchy's time as chief designer at the house of Givenchy there is a different outlook on the world of fashion - especially haute couture. Ready to wear is now more prominent and couture's clientele is slowly diminishing. McQueen's task at Givenchy is now greater than Hubert de Givenchy's ever was. Whilst McQueen has to create collections he is also responsible for putting life and vitality back into the couture industry.

"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 daughters" (Alexander McQueen, quoted in Fallon, 1996, p.128.).









**Figure 2:**

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







Alexander McQueen is determined to live up to his position at Givenchy but if anything is holding back his deserved appreciation for his couture it is his own reputation as a bad boy.

"McQueen seethes with contempt for the press and many of the players in the fashion game, but he's made a career out of transgression, violating moves, upsetting conventions, and crossing boundaries -sexual, cultural and emotional. Along with his talent for cutting clothes, transgression may be his most brilliant skill."  
(Betts, 1997, p.383.)

In her article "McCabre, McQueen" in Elle magazine Katherine Betts is clearly aware of McQueen's ability to generate controversy. She picks up on the fact that it is difficult to ascertain whether McQueen deliberately riles the press to gain media interest which will reflect then off his clothes. The outlandishness, which may well be a form of hype, is so intense it's hard to tell what's authentic and what is manufactured"(Betts, 1997, p.386). McQueen claims to hate the media yet he is an expert at getting their attention. He denies acting outlandishly in order to receive press attention but yet how can he explain what compelled him to flash, at his show at London's fashion week in October 1995, "a pale chunky boy" said one observer, "he shouldn't have bothered" (Helewell, 1996, p.125).

By now, though, McQueen's shock tactics are part of his allure. He is the son of working class London East Enders, the youngest of six



children raised in Stepney. He left school at 16 and headed for Savile Row where for two years, in Anderson & Sheppard, he mastered the art of tailoring.

Then he joined the theatrical costumier Bermans & Nathans where he worked on costumes for the musical, "Les Miserables". Next came employment with Koji Tatsuno and then a brief stay in Italy with Romeo Gigli before he headed to Central St. Martin's to earn himself an MA. From the very beginning McQueen has been breaking fashion taboos. At one of his first London shows he sent his models out in Mohawks and scotch tape G-strings. He is also renowned for his shocking use of accessories, notably when he sent his models down the catwalk with their faces bound by muzzles, masks and antennae.(Fig. 3)

For his first collection for Givenchy, McQueen based his designs on the "surgical capers of a migratory mad scientist who travels the world in search of women to dissect and recreate to his liking" (Fallon, 1996, p.127) McQueen staged his show in the appropriately creepy chambers of a local medical school (Universite Rene Descartes) and he used a few false bones as accessories. But the day before his show the Sunday Times of London got wind of this and they ran a story saying





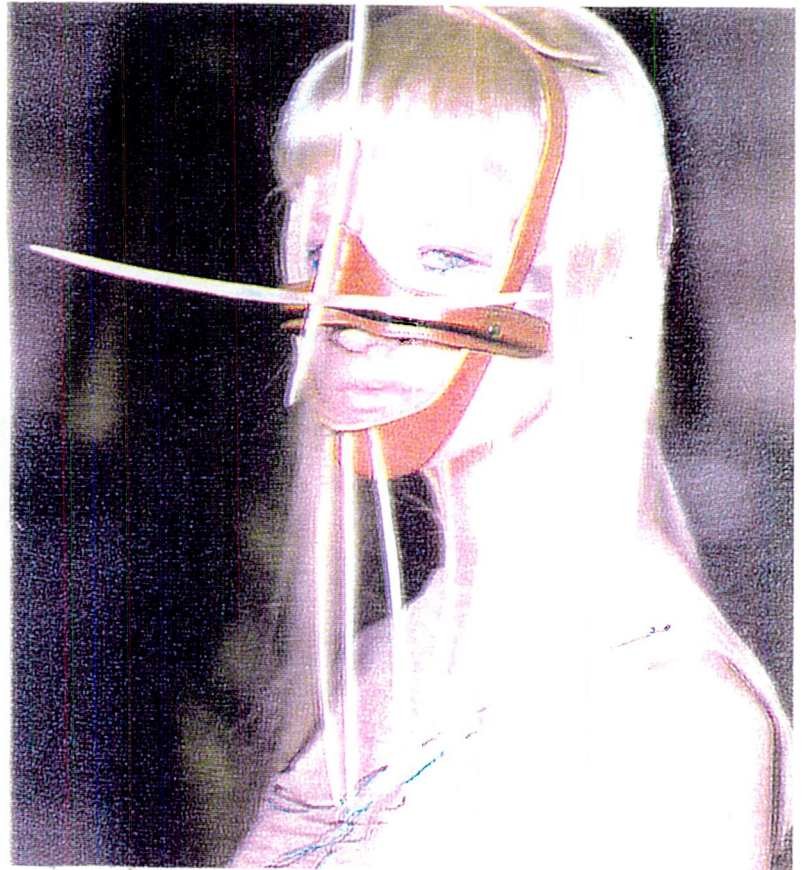


Figure 3: McQueen's muzzles masks and antennae





McQueen was under police investigation for using "human bones, teeth and other body parts for his collection". The story which was completely fictitious, crossed the Channel in no time and was soon circling the fashion brigade. "It is clothing not morphology" said Givenchy President, Georges Spitzer, "It's a lie from beginning to end". (Fallon, 1996, p.127). How the rumour began is not incidental, the facts were that it created interest especially amongst the media already in Paris awaiting the couture shows.

By the time his collection was shown, every editor, buyer and photographer was there to capture his collection - afraid that they might miss out on headlines. Where the rumour originated from is unknown but suspicion lies solely with the Givenchy camp. McQueen has learnt hype and the art of "Chinese whispers" and despite his claimed contempt for the fashion press, McQueen knows how to attract their attention and generate controversy. This is a major factor in his appointment at Givenchy, while McQueen is undoubtedly a capable tailor, the media's constant interest in him has only been a bonus to him. Even Georges Spitzer who appointed McQueen to the job that propelled him into fashion's highest ranks admits that he picked McQueen for the Givenchy job "for his ability to attract attention" (Betts, 1997, p.150). It would appear that he has hired McQueen for



his media attraction skills. "Designers are told by the businessmen who employ them that their couture collections don't have to do anything so mundane as sell, as long as they gain acres of publicity" (Armstrong, 1997, p.148.), and it is apparent that Bernard Arnault, the head of LVMH, the conglomerate which owns the Houses of Lacroix, Dior, Givenchy and Louis Vuitton is complying with Armstrong's theory that McQueen was hired for his ability to create press just as much as he was hired to create couture. This is a view shared by others in the haute couture industry. Valentino's business partner, Giancarlo Giametti says of McQueen "I see Arnault's point of view, you can't make money on couture so you might as well make press" (Irvine, 1997, p.378).

Despite the claims in the glossies by journalists Armstrong, Betts and Irvine that McQueen was hired for his ability to attract attention it's hard to ignore the influence he has had on fashion. Everywhere in the Winter 1997 shows McQueen's influence was evident.

"At Versace the models sported pinstripe trousers with embroidered flowers. At Valentino, spiky hair, dark eyes and swashbuckling frock coats, At Chanel, wild hair, dark eyes and the brooding romantic mood that is McQueen's trademark" (Betts, 1997 p.150)

But it is generally through media attention that designers are awarded pivotal position in the media industry and both Alexander McQueen and





John Galliano have been accused of attention seeking for England "Galliano and McQueen have the exhibitionist market sewn up... and some of their stunts would make a demanding toddler blush" (Rumbold, 1997, p.29.). But at the end of the day it is the media who generate an image, and they are adept at creating controversy around a designer. "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).

Here Barthes is discussing the concept that a fashion magazine can promote a look an idea, a feeling to its readers. Through advertisement or layout, they are selling not just clothes to their audience but a miniature life. At present the press is selling the whole concept of Britain. London's popularity is being marketed by the media for international audiences "Britain are the freedom fighters of fashion" (Brampton 1997, p.58). Despite the fact that McQueen is suspected to be creating his own press on purpose, the media spotlight has definitely enhanced his career, it has assisted him in gaining his job as head of Givenchy and it has also supplemented the intense media speculation surrounding Britain.





It is dubious whether Stella McCartney, now head of Chloe would have received such a prestigious position just two years out of college if it weren't for the media's intense interest in everything British. It was a publicity stunt hard to equal when Chloe appointed Stella McCartney their chief designer, not only is she young and from London, assets greatly prized at the moment but she's also the daughter of Sir Paul McCartney, ex-Beatle. So she was bound to create media interest.

Chloe is an upmarket but somewhat faded Paris fashion house, (McDowell, 1997, p. 5.), and it required that extra media attention to help increase interest and sales. McCartney inherited her position from Karl Lagerfeld who in comparison to McCartney's two years professional experience outside college has 40 years more experience than her. Chloe needed to attract attention and this they did through McCartney. "I think they should have taken a big name. They did, but in music, not fashion. Let's hope she is as gifted as her father". (Karl Lagerfeld, quoted in Rumbold, 1997 p.28).

The British media are eager to keep attention surrounding the British, Judy Rumbold in her article in the Observer paralleled McCartney's work to her father's music claiming that it has been an influence on her. "It was only natural that Stella should gravitate towards lilting



melodies and plaintive refrains, finding their sartorial equivalents in silks, delicate ribbonwork, frills and lace trim"(Rumbold, 1997, p.27) Although this is quite a 'pretty' way of describing McCartneys designs it is quite insulting to the designers intelligence. It is derogatory to the designers skills and is quite a desperate attempt by Rumbold to relate McCartneys work to her fathers music.

McCartney has undoubtedly contributed to her success through the commercial pull of her showbusiness name, but there is support for her design talents also. Grace Bradberry, Style Editor of The Times has said that "although the name has undoubtedly helped, fashion insiders are insistent that she has real talent" (Bradberry, 1997). She also in her article quoted Lisa Armstrong, fashion features director of Vogue, "It is a surprise but you can see a certain logic because Chloe has traditionally been a feminine, bohemian hippy deluxe label, and Stella does very pretty clothes with a Nottinghill bohemian feel"(Armstrong, quoted in Bradberry, 1997).

As H. Blumer said "style comes into fashion only if it corresponds to what he terms the incipient taste of the fashion consuming public" (Blumer, quoted in du Gay, (Ed.), 1997, p.139). At present the fashion consuming public see style as anything connected with Britain and it





is difficult to ascertain whether McCartney and McQueen, although undoubtedly talented designers, were hired for their design talents or their innate Britishness and also their ability to attract media attraction.

John Galliano is another designer who is helping Britain in their fight for supremacy as the fashion capital. (Fig. 4) Promoted from chief designer at Givenchy to the house of Dior, his first collection for Dior coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the 'New Look'. The 'New Look' was launched in February 1947 by Christian Dior. The curator and author Colin McDowell noted in his biography on Galliano that the introduction of the 'New Look' was:

"the moment that was, at least temporarily, to change fashion with a suddenness never previously seen, and to set it on a course that proved irresistible to women, despite initial shock, hostility and public condemnation on the highest level." ( McDowell, 1997, p.10.)

The 'New Look' was revolutionary with its trademark sloping shoulders, wasp waists, padded hips and big skirts. Galliano was introduced to the house of Dior to help recreate the interest that had been there in its namesakes era. "Galliano's appointment at Dior is expected to revive its dusty image." (Webb, 1997, p.72.)

The couture houses rely heavily on their perfume sales, the income from these being crucial to the profits of their companies. Dior had







**Figure 4: John Galliano, 1993**



healthy perfume sales and it is received wisdom that perfume sales are kept high not by advertising alone. As Colin McDowell commented

"they need the profile of couture and its media coverage around the world. Although couture has only a limited number of customers, it is important that a house keeps its name prominent by its clothes being worn by the sort of high-profile, newsworthy women who attract the paparazzi and who like their clothes to be by high-profile, newsworthy designers who do the same."(McDowell, 1997, p.173.)

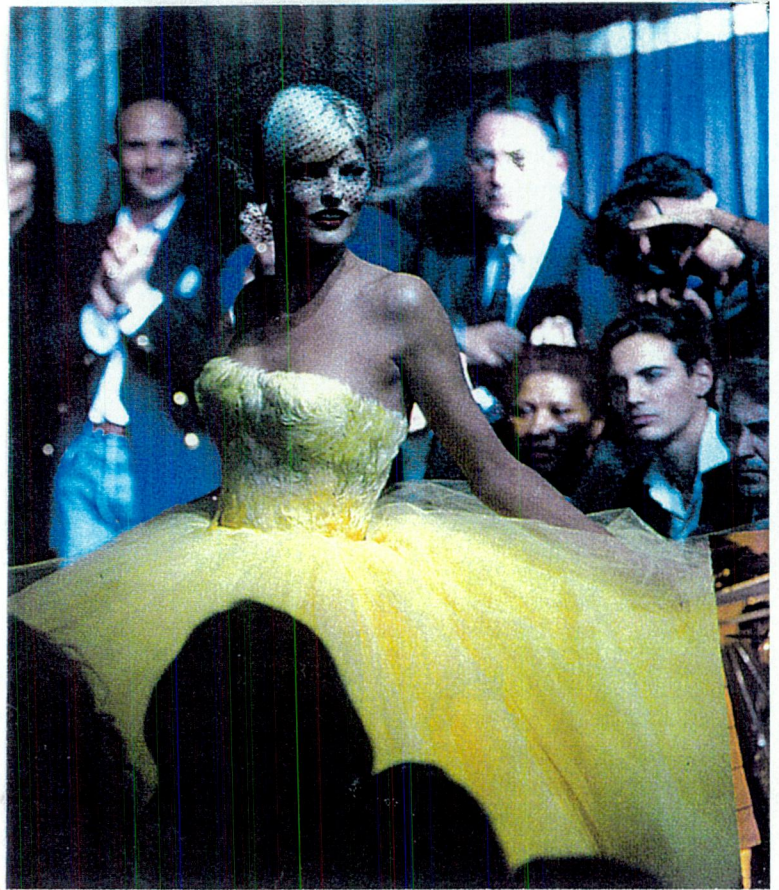
Galliano's work has been compared to Dior's for a number of years especially since his Spring/Summer collection in 1995, when he revisited 1940s and 1950s haute couture when he put "meticulously groomed models into pencil-thin hourglass suits, ballerina-length skirts puffed up with frothy tulle petticoats, and soigne evening gowns."(Webb, 1997, p.72.) The similarities between Galliano's work and Dior's is evident in Figure 5.

John Galliano attributes a lot of his inspiration behind his designs to Britain. Much of his research is done in London. Steven Robinson, Galliano's right hand man says: "More and more, we need to take in London. We visit London six to eight times a year, to get its spirit. We use the streets, the clubs, the libraries." (Robinson quoted in McDowell, 1997, p.47).





**Figure 5:** Right, One of Galliano's evening gowns inspired by 1940s and 1950s couture and Below original Christian Dior, similar in style and design



Original Dior,  
left and below







John Galliano has made his presence known on the fashion stage since his emergence in the 1980s. John Galliano, as Colin McDowell noted, had become "the golden hope of young British fashion, just as David Hockney had for British art in 1962 with his degree show at the Royal College of Art" (McDowell, 1997, p.84). But the 1980s were a difficult time for the emerging talents in Britain. Surrounded by hype, a lot of the designers to emerge in this period, notably Katherine Hamnett and Body Map, folded due to financial failure. This failure was attributed to the amount of hype awarded to the young talents by the press and buyers which led to their suffocation and downfall.

"London fashion in the mid-eighties was a complicated cocktail of hope and hype, idealism and cynicism, volatility and predictability. As seasons passed, one of the most predictable of all developments was that young talents would be overstretched; they were given too much too soon, and ended up burned-out and rejected." (McDowell, 1997, p.94).

But thanks to shrewd foresight, John Galliano was fed a lifeline by, amongst others, Joan Burstein, co-owner of Brown's, who stepped in and helped Galliano to gain sponsorship which has been crucial to his survival in the fashion industry. This paved the way for his appointment, firstly at Givenchy and now at Dior. We can be in no doubt as to the accolade these appointments gave to British fashion, and that John Galliano's role is central and hugely significant to Britain's success in the fashion industry.





## **CHAPTER 3**



Through media attention designers have been awarded a "pivotal position" in the media industry, their declarations on skirt lengths and fashion styles being "greeted with the sort of respect usually accorded to international statesmen"(du Gay, (Ed.), 1997, p.132)

This worship of designers has increased greatly the amount of attention given to the British. With three British designers as chief designers for top French fashion houses in Paris it is bound to influence the fashion world.

"The essence of fashion in clothes is that it compels us to discard a garment before it has outlived its usefulness" (du Gay, (Ed), 1997, p.121). This is a condition referred to in cultural studies as "semiotic redundancy" a term which can also be applied to the way we elevate and similarly disregard entire nations as fashion icons just as at present Britain is being elevated by the fashion brigade. Brahms discusses the concept that fashions emerge due to a small group of "players" who are compiled of designers, buyers, publicists, editors and a small portion of consumers and how the majority of "attention is devoted to the power and influence of those producing haute couture in Paris"(du Gay, (Ed.) 1997, p.143) and perhaps it is the strong evidence of British influence within Parisian haute couture that has led to the rise of all

these theories that the British are the kings and queens of the contemporary fashion empire. Since the 1960s we have seen an increase in what has been variously termed "polycentrism", "polymorphism" and "pluralism" in fashion which is the theory that fashion trends arise from a diverse range of more than just designers but also groups and sources such as the critics.

"Fashion had its own establishment, a kind of Vatican, in the 1950s and 1960s and in this set-up they had dictators who set the lines for everybody to follow....They were set by magazine editors for magazine readers. Vogue used to announce the colour of the season and up and down the land shops presented clothes in banana beige or coral red or whatever". (Peter York quoted in Polhemus, 1994, p.9)

As Barthes argued "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.28) and at present the fashion press is selling Britain. But this is not the first time that the fashion industry has tried to sell Britain as a product.

During the 1960s there was a surge of creativity in London. A new generation was born, they were young, talented and obsessed with image. London's Royal College of Art, which opened its school of





fashion in 1948 began to produce some of the most creative names for years to come in the fashion and artistic world; Barbara Price, Jean Muir, Mary Quant, Zandra Rhodes, Ossie Clark and Barbara Hulanicki of Biba. By 1962, London Fashion Designer Week produced more than a million pound worth of additional export business. The new optimism surrounding the fashion industry was not just the figment of a fertile imagination.

There was a huge upsurge in the boutique businesses which inspired a huge fashion story worldwide. Streets such as Kings Road, the Portobello Road and Carnaby Street all became fashion history due to their designer shops and also their outrageous and individualistic clientele. Carnaby Street was probably the leading mecca for the young as it attracted music heroes such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and their fans, keen to show their dedication, followed their muses to the hip outlets on the London Streets.

Two of the most memorable fashion names to emerge at this time were undoubtedly Barbara Hulanicki of Biba and Mary Quant. Mary Quant (Fig. 6) became one of England's best exports of the 1960s with her perfectly timed introduction of the 'mini-skirt' causing worldwide sensation. Such was her influence on the English fashion





Figure 6: Mary Quant, 1965





trade that she received an O.B.E. for her contributions to British fashion and appropriately she wore a mini-skirt to Buckingham Palace to receive her award. This was a reflection of the individuality and confidence of young British designers at the time. The beauty of the 1960s was that fashion designers had increased creative freedom. There was no shortage of demand for their wacky creative ideas.

The 1960s propelled Britain into the ranks of fashion leaders. The glossies overpoured with approval of British fashion, similar to today's epidemic. In April 1966 Time magazine published its famous article on 'Swinging London' celebrating Britain's youth revolution and the new boutique culture with a front cover layout with entitled 'London: The Swinging City', (Fig. 7). Vanity Fair relaunched this 'Swinging London' concept again in 1997 with their cover featuring icons of pop and style, Liam Gallagher of Oasis and his wife, Patsy Kensit above the caption: 'London Swings Again', (Fig. 8).

In the 1960s the media opened up to the voice of the youth. Society magazine Queen was overhauled to reflect the new youth spirit that emerged during the Sixties. Vogue magazine first introduced its 'Young Ideas' section, and in 1965, youth founded its most radical expression with the emergence of the fashion magazine, NOVA. (Quick, 1997,







**Figure 7:** The memorable 1966 cover of Time magazine





Figure 8: Vanity Fair's Swinging London cover in 1997





p.93-95.) London's street culture was revived on the fashion pages of a new wave of style magazines which emerged in the 1980s; FACE, i-D, and the shortlived Blitz. These style magazines became a breeding ground for Britain's foremost talents. The glossies were becoming increasingly more important. The fashion imagery was not just there to be ogled at, but was there to be read.

Many fashion editors are comparing today's upsurge in British popularity to a revival of what occurred in the 1960s. "London is generally thought to be swinging in a way it hasn't swung since the 1960s" (Rumbold, 1997, p.66). But this is a cliché that has been played many times by the press. The moment there is a hint of British fashion talent the fashion media -especially the glossies- jump on the hype bandwagon and compare it to the 1960s. Judy Rumbold in her article 'That was the year that was' -which was a summary of the year 1997- succumbed to this cliché, when she made the comparison between the 1960s and the 1990s. Fashion journalists need to take a more critical view of what is happening in the 1990s. During the 1960s the fashion industry in Britain had a huge effect worldwide. It influenced trends throughout America -especially the mini-skirt- and the Western World.





Giorgio Armani remembers fondly British fashion of the 1960s.

"Everything was so new, different and full of life and I'm not just talking about Mary Quant, or the creative genius of Ossie Clark and Zandra Rhodes, but about the atmosphere you breathed in the streets, of how the young were dressing, on this incredible wave of creativity that swept up the whole world". (Giorgio Armani, quoted in Holgate, 1997 p.184).

London's fertile counter culture has played a dominant role in fashion both in the 1960s and today. British photography and art were peripheral to the success of Britain in the 1960s. Former model and renowned 1960s photographer, Corinne Day attributes her success to Britain in the 1960s. "I love the style on the street in London, it's like no other place in the World. British youth has a sense of individuality and style unlike any other place in the World." (Day, quoted in Quick, 1997, p.163.).

Alexander McQueen's former colleague Andrew Groves, 29, who graduated from Central St. Martins College of Art and Design in 1997 has received a lot of press attention for his work. Andre Leon Talley referred to his work and noted Grove's use of contemporary art in his article for American Vogue.

"It's no surprise that Groves, who had his surreal bride, in white cotton wadding, tear open her cocoon dress to release a host of half-dead and some very living flies, would have found them through Damien Hirst, the most famous artist from England since David Hockney and Francis Bacon" (Leon Talley, 1997, p.144.)



Groves is not the only designer who has been inspired by British art. Rifat Ozbek used Damien Hirst's household renowned dot paintings two years ago as a print for his Spring collection. Bella Freud had Sarah Lucas (an artist who showed in the legendary 'Freeze' exhibit curated by Damien Hirst in 1988) model in her show. While Manolo Blahnik, the shoe designer, has been producing collections based on Sixties pop art and his signature stilleto mules have been photographed with Jasper John's Target paintings, as well as Ellsworth Kelly and Rothko minimalism.

While British fashion today is certainly at an extremely powerful position and the economic outlook has improved greatly in the 1990s. Recent sales figures show that in 1994 British clothing exports were up by 11.1% to £2.5 billion in 1994. (Jones, 1996, p.37.) A British fashion council assessment of attendance at London Fashion Week showed that the attendance of American buyers alone in 1996 was up by 25% which is proof that the British designers despite the hype are being taken seriously.

The sheer quantity of articles about the success of Britain in the fashion industry with captions screaming Britain creative genius (Fig. 9), corroborates with the concept that the media have induced and





promoted the idea that London is the capital of fashion creativity so much, that it is having a direct effect on the industry.

Despite the claims that the couture heads are not that concerned with selling couture, but more with reviving interest in the houses themselves, a review of sales from the couture houses since John Galiano's first couture collection for Dior shows that some of the regular couture consumers are transferring their allegiance to Dior.

"Usually I order 10 evening dresses at Chanel and three everywhere else, but this time I will do ten at Dior and three at Chanel" (Mouna Al-Ayoub quoted in Betts, 1997, p.377).

With the fashion media's intense interest in all that is British, they are helping to attract an audience to the British shows. Consumer affluence has increased in the direction of the couture houses run by the British. General public awareness has increased in the direction of the haute couture industry since the British have entered the Parisian arena.





"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, (Eds.), 1991, p.26)

Clothing as a communicator is almost always seen from the 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 we live. British fashion designers are in a pivotal position within the industry at the moment to communicate to the world through their clothes.

The 1990s, especially 1997 has been an era when the British have been central in the world news. It has been an era when the British reputation as a whole has been completely altered through the death of Princess Diana and also with the emergence of the Labour party as a political leaders in England. The shock value of fashion plays a crucial role in it's success in the 1990s. Fashion 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 morals.

To stay on top in the fashion industry British fashion it appears has



now transcended the clothes. The outfits still have to be good but the press and buyers now also want a spectacle that goes beyond this. In Katherine Hamnett's spring/summer '98 show she went beyond the usual catwalk show and showed a short film instead called 'lost luggage' where two models Iris Palmer and Annie Molton go on an American road trip their objective within the film being to change outfits as many times as possible (Bartley, 1998, p.121).

One main influence on the fashion industry in 1997 was the violent death of Gianni Versace - a legend in the fashion industry - and Princess Diana. It was a year which opened the hearts of the nations to the idea of death, and in the shock of these deaths, the fashion world was certainly not going to shock by designing a jacket which gaped to reveal a breast.

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 they are taught to design from the world around them 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.

Perhaps that is why British designer Hussein Chalayan felt the need to send naked women down the catwalk at his spring/summer '98 show (Fig.9).

Chalayan's show was closer to performance art than fashion. Anna Wintour, editor of American Vogue was appalled. "It looks tacky and ridiculous and we won't see it for much longer" (Anna Wintour, quoted in Blanks, 1998, p.34). It was practically commercial suicide by Chalayan, so why did he do it ? The most obvious answer to that question is rather ironic "the shock value of bare flesh generates media interest" (Blanks, 1998, p.34). 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





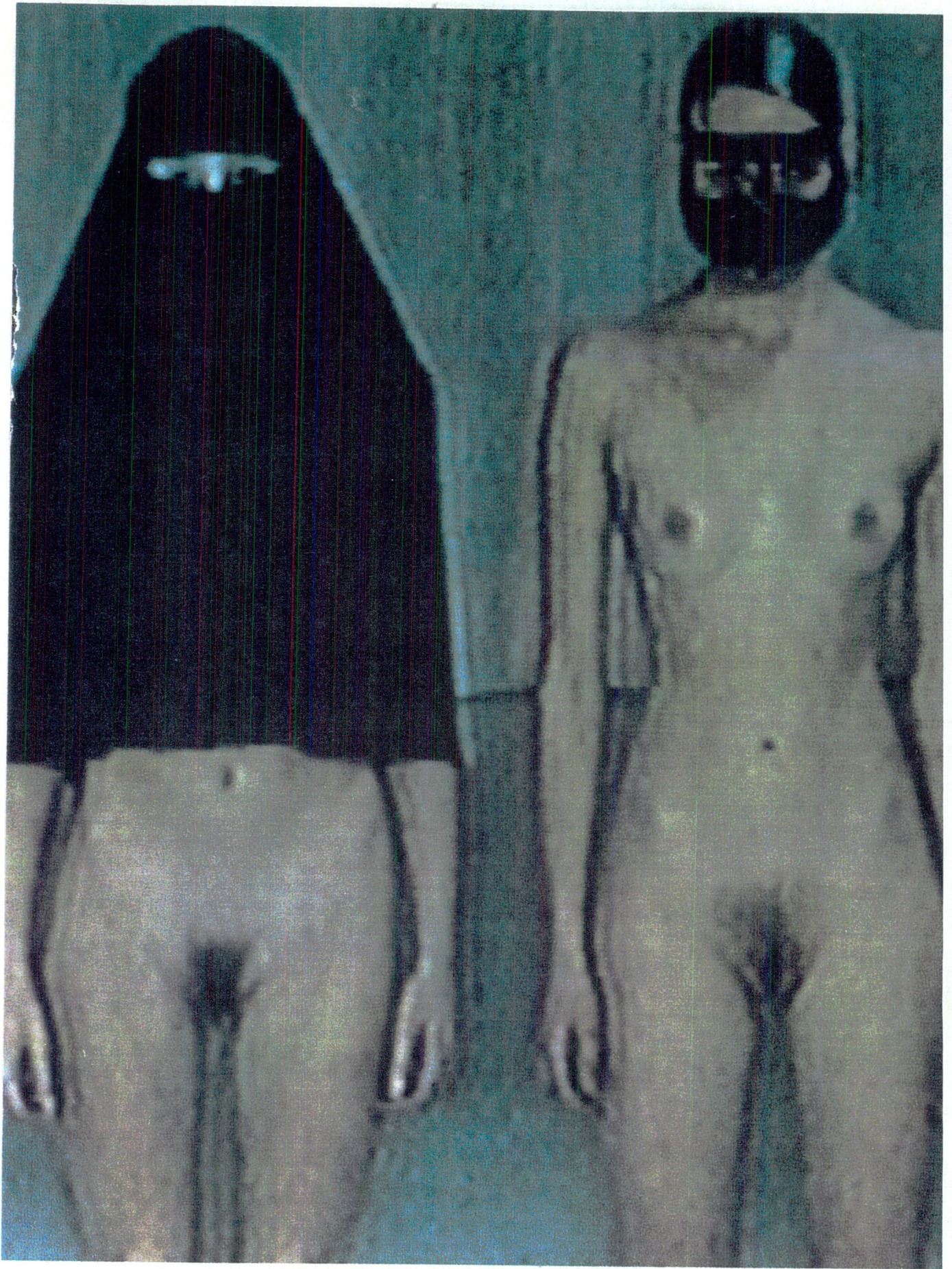


Figure 9: Hussein Chalayan's controversial catwalk creations  
51





that it produces sales. Chalayan was aware that in a year that had seen so many genuinely shocking deaths that he had to pull out all the stops to attract media attention, and it is well known that the best way to attract media attention is to shock.

In the early 1960s American designer Rudi Gernreich received notorious press coverage with his topless dress and swimsuit which graced the cover of life magazine. In 1968, Yves Saint Laurent introduced a see-through blouse under his signature 'smoking' jacket and he shocked. But the pace of fashion has increased considerably since then and designers have to work much harder to shock the public, never mind shock the fashion brigade. That is one of the reasons that the British are so acclaimed at the moment, they are resilient in their ability to shock.

"Nobody can deny that London... does a good line in '*enfants terribles*'. Almost every season there is a new one touted as the international messiah of style". (Reed, 1996, p.50).

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. Fashion





designers are well aware of the effect advertising and publicity has on their sales. The author, James Brady, remarked on couturiers ability to utilise the fashion press to achieve publicity.

"a good paris collection will contain a half dozen dramatic numbers for the fashion press, items that are simple to describe and which are rather different from what went before. No need that they sell; their publicity value is what makes them worth doing" (Brady, 1974, p.49).

Publicity is the life blood of the fashion enterprise, and publicity only comes to the new and extreme. Clothes must be seen but more importantly they must be presented. Marjorie Ferguson in her work on women's magazines in the late twentieth century identified the role they play in the success of fashion.

" Alongside other social institutions such as the family, the school, the church, and other media, women's magazines contribute to the wider cultural processes which define the position of women in a given society at a given point in time.....here is a very potent formula indeed for steering female attitudes, behaviour and buying along a particular female world-view of the desirable, the possible and the purchaseable." (Breward, 1995, p.195)

In the century defined by an explosion in communications media the magazine image has dictated both consumer choice and fashion direction.

"The world of the fashion correspondent is a hysterical and uncertain one. It is because there are no fixed rules that praise frequently becomes not only extravagant but hyperbolic. Words change meanings. Absolutes and





superlatives abound. And, beneath it all, lies a deadening sense of futility, fatuity and shallowness. (McDowell, 1997, p.144).

Colin McDowell realised how effectively fashion editorials both in trade magazines, the glossies and newspapers have effected the success or failure of fashion in the 1990s. He has noted how they often misjudge what is actually occurring in the fashion industry and succumb to hype and exaggeration, yet it is uncertain whether he realises the full extent this can have on the fashion world. Central to Britain's success in the 1990s has been the media's - in all forms - willingness to promote the British and sell them. The image, the look, the designs that we have to have are all being sold to us through the media glorification of all that is British.





**CONCLUSION:**







As the twenty-first century approaches, British fashion is enjoying a peak. This success has emerged due to a number of cultural influences.

In chapter one I looked at how modern culture has influenced the role of British fashion. Music and the vibrant atmosphere on the street in Britain has been detrimental to British fashion success. It has been an obvious inspiration to designers in Britain. The iconoclastic British supermodel has also played a central role in influencing the success of British designers. I have discussed and analysed the effect supermodels have had on the designers, Berardi, McCarthney and Williamson and it is clear that these designers owe their success, at least partly, to British supermodels.

In chapter two I examined how Parisian haute couture and more specifically the British designers Alexander McQueen, Stella McCartney and John Galliano have led to the media's (the glossies, the trade magazines and newspapers) interest in Britain as a fashion empire.

It is ironic that the media who are now promoting Britain, were hugely responsible for propelling these designers to such powerful positions in Paris in the first place. Through the glossies especially, fashion journalists have been victims of exaggeration and hype. Through the manner in which they responded to the innovative and sometimes





admittedly shocking designers who were emerging in Britain they helped to advertise these designers. This advertisement has been extremely beneficial to Galliano, McQueen and McCartney. It has clearly been an asset greatly appreciated by the French haute couture industry which was badly in need of rejuvenation.

Chapter three is concerned with the media's conclusion that Britain is going through a revival of the success it achieved in the 1960s. While it is obvious that Britain is enjoying a boom period, especially in the fashion industry, I believe it is too soon for journalists to make the comparison. It is true that British fashion designers have been considered to be talented and innovative designers over the past two years and their clothes have been highly sought after Worldwide.

But we have seen how rapidly fashion moves and by the end of the month we could see another nation being elevated to the position Britain is currently credited with.

Britain has one of the largest turnovers of design graduates in the World. It is therefore conclusive that we are going to continuously see new talents emerging in Britain. It takes more than media attention to sustain a career in fashion. While we have seen how powerful media influence can be on designers careers, designers need more than the



ability to attract attention. They also need talent as a designer.

Audiences soon tire of designers repeatedly creating clothes that shock and expect to see progress from designers. British designers have matured greatly since the 1980s. The new wave of designers that have emerged from Britain in recent years have displayed cautiousness and maturity that defies their youth. It is now time for the British industry to stand behind these talents and support them. To conclude this thesis I am finishing with the words of fashion historian, Amy de la Haye, where she warns the industry to support its designers.

" Britain's fashion strength has been celebrated for the diverse creative drives of its designers. The combination of modernity and tradition has facilitated the development of an iconography that is peculiar to British fashion. If the industry is to advance into the next century with confidence, it needs to continue to develop the infrastructure that other nations enjoy." (de la Haye, 1997, p.35)





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