Elevating the Other: A Theoretical Approach to Alexander McQueen

Keri Rowe
Brigham Young University - Provo

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd
Part of the Classics Commons, and the Comparative Literature Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Rowe, Keri, "Elevating the Other: A Theoretical Approach to Alexander McQueen" (2015). All Theses and Dissertations. 4394.
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/4394

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
ABSTRACT

Elevating the Other: A Theoretical Approach to Alexander McQueen

Keri Erdmann Rowe
Department of Comparative Arts and Letters, BYU
Master of Arts

This thesis examines the relationship between art and fashion in order to first, justify fashion as an art form, and second, demonstrate the applicability of critical theory to the study of fashion through an examination of Alexander McQueen’s Spring/Summer 2006 menswear collection, titled “Killa,” presented in Milan, Italy, in 2005. “Killa,” loosely based on William Golding’s 1954 novel Lord of the Flies and its 1963 film adaptation, opens with crisp, white, tailored suits worn by neatly groomed models. Steadily throughout the collection, these tailored suits are exchanged for wide-legged, cropped shorts, and tanks in browns and beiges. By the end, models appear on the runway with painted faces, wild hair, and highly patterned, dark-colored body suits and billowing capes.

While “Killa” appears to demonstrate the narrative regression from civilized to savage demonstrated in Golding’s novel, this thesis argues that McQueen’s collection actually strives to promote a more positive ennobling of the Other. A careful study of his life and career suggests that McQueen perceived himself as the Other within the community in which he worked and lived. Frustrated by frequent misinterpretations of his work and false accusations of his character, “Killa” becomes McQueen’s ultimate confrontation with Otherness. Positioning the Other at the climax of an elite fashion show, represented by Mesoamerican designs depicted through the highest quality tailoring, McQueen’s Other is respected and revered, rather than looked down upon. In this way, McQueen challenges the perception of his own character within the fashion community.

Ultimately this thesis seeks to demonstrate the necessity of the application of critical theory to objects of fashion. As demonstrated through the case study of McQueen’s 2006 menswear collection, this academic consideration has the potential to reveal important overlooked meanings within the art of fashion. This suggests that McQueen’s work, as well as the work of other contemporary fashion designers, merits more thoughtful and careful interpretation in the study of postmodern art history.

Keywords: Lee Alexander McQueen, Killa, menswear, fashion, fashion as art, subaltern, Other, post-colonialism
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to the many individuals who made it possible for me to complete this project. I would especially like to thank Dr. Martha Peacock for all her support, encouragement, and advice. Without her influence and confidence, I would not be where I am. I am deeply grateful for Dennita Sewell, for allowing me to work with her in the museum, and for inspiring me to continue my education. I would also like to extend my gratitude to my friends and family, who went through this process with me. You know who you are, and I could not have done it without you. Finally, to my husband, whose love, support, and admiration gave me the confidence to finish.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page ......................................................................................................................................... i

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................ iii

Table of Contents ........................................................................................................................... iv

List of Figures ................................................................................................................................. v

Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 1

Fashion as Art ................................................................................................................................. 6

McQueen as Artist .......................................................................................................................... 11

“Killa” ........................................................................................................................................... 15

McQueen as Other ........................................................................................................................ 22

The Subaltern Voice: Confronting the Other ................................................................................ 25

Fashion and Meaning .................................................................................................................... 30

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................... 35

Figures ........................................................................................................................................... 37

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................. 44
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. “Killa,” Look #1, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.

Figure 2. “Killa,” Look #45, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.

Figure 3. “Highland Rape,” Bumster Trouser, Alexander McQueen, Autumn/Winter 1995, Ready-To-Wear.

Figure 4. “Voss,” Look #76, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2001, Ready-To-Wear.

Figure 5. “Killa,” Look #2, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.

Figure 6. “Killa,” Look #42, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.

Figure 7. Alexander McQueen for Givenchy Couture, Autumn/Winter 1998-1999.

Figure 8. “Irere,” Look #53, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2003, Ready-To-Wear.

Figure 9. “Killa,” Look #36, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.

Figure 10. Sunburst pattern, Chichicastenango. Photo courtesy of Dr. Allen J. Christenson.

Figure 11. “Killa,” Look #44, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.

Figure 12. “Killa,” Look #33, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.

Figure 13. Traditional Mayan costume, Chichicastenango. Photo courtesy of Dr. Allen J. Christenson.

Figure 14. “No. 13,” Aimee Mullins, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 1999, Ready-To-Wear.
Introduction

In 2005, Alexander McQueen staged an elaborate runway presentation for his Spring/Summer 2006 menswear collection, which he titled “Killa.” The collection, loosely based on William Golding’s novel, *Lord of the Flies*, seemingly told the story of a group of schoolboys stranded after a plane crash on a desert island, and their slow descent from proper British upbringing to primitive savages. The series of forty-five ensembles began with tailored summer suits, models dressed as schoolboys with caps and knee socks, clean white canvas shoes and neatly combed hair (Figure 1). Steadily throughout the collection, suits became less tailored, white blazers were traded for gray tanks, hair became more tousled, and canvas shoes were exchanged for crude sandals. Eventually all sense of British tailoring was abandoned for baggy cropped pants, wild, geometric patterns, feather capes, and war paint. While the collection began with a sophisticated white poplin suit, it ended with a billowing black cape (Figure 2), demonstrating a complete transition between binary opposites – civilized to savage. However, while Golding’s novel, tells the story of the horrifying regression of proper to primitive society, Alexander McQueen’s collection tells a very different story. McQueen’s collection may fit into the general narrative of Golding’s literary masterpiece, but the collection and its strategic presentation demands a more critical analysis, which reveals the collection’s autobiographical nature.

After his tragic death in 2010, the life and work of McQueen became a popular topic in various fields of scholarly discussion. The 2011 blockbuster exhibition of his work, *Savage Beauty*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, remains today one of the world’s most popular fashion exhibitions, attracting over 600,000 visitors in only three months.¹ Several biographies

and photographic surveys of his work have been published in the few years since his death. Yet
despite the intense interest in the British designer’s work or the general acknowledgement of the
complexity of his craftsmanship and showmanship, few scholars have sought to understand
McQueen’s fashions as objects of art through critical analysis. Unfortunately this failure to apply
art theory and methodology to objects of dress extends to the entire realm of fashion.

Such a lack of theoretical interpretation of fashion is alarming considering the extensive
history of critical conversations regarding fashion. As early as the fourteenth century, society
experienced a considerable increase of interest in fashion and an awareness of the roles it plays
in human interaction and communication. Fueled by developments in technology, history, and
society, fashion has evolved over hundreds of centuries and remains a significant area of human
interest today. Since the 1960s, the relationships between art and fashion have increased while
the differences between artist and fashion designer have decreased. McQueen himself is perhaps
more comparable to artists like Damien Hirst and other Young British Artists than to
contemporary designers like Michael Kors or Ralph Lauren. Yet despite the increasing
importance of fashion within visual culture, it is still neglected as a field of serious theoretical
inquiry.

Fashion as a field of theoretical investigation has been studied primarily by scholars of
anthropology and philosophy, rather than by art historians. In 1723, the philosopher Bernard
Mandeville wrote an essay entitled “Pride” in which he observed the way individuals are
identified by their manner of dress, thus making material apparel a symbol of wealth and pride as
well as an indicator of identity. In 1792, Christian Garve observed that changing fashions in a
society are indicative of creativity and ingenuity. He also suggests that fashion is a means of
connecting with others within a society. Thorstein Veblen suggested in 1899 that apparel is the
greatest evidence of monetary standing, demonstrating the lack of a need to perform labor and the ability to pay. Focusing more specifically on women’s fashion, Simone de Beauvoir’s 1953 publication, *The Second Sex*, interpreted fashion as an oppressive label associated with women. As an object of the male gaze, a woman’s purpose is limited to her appearance. Ten years later, Roland Barthes explored the semiotics of clothing and how it communicates with its viewers, examining the differences between images of clothing and the tangible object of clothing itself. Other scholars such as Georg Simmel (1904), Herbert Blumer (1969), Ted Polhemus (1994), and Joanne Entwistle (2000) have offered theories as to how and why fashion evolves over time, exploring patterns and trends that spread through class structures and the necessary social conditions required to perpetuate creativity in society. And yet while many scholars in the past decade, including Sanda Miller, Peter McNeil, Georgio Riello, and Michael Carter, have emphasized a great need for a more theoretical study of fashion as a material object of contemporary art, none have offered a means of furthering the discussion. As a result the field has largely been left unexplored.

As scholars have begun to acknowledge that this conversation about fashion as an art form should take place, a few attempts have been made to define the role of fashion within the world of art. Unfortunately, none have succeeded in establishing a concrete and universal model for studying fashion as art. Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas’ recent publication regarding this topic incorporates essays on art and fashion from a variety of influential scholars in both fields of study. Yet in their introduction to the text, even they acknowledge that because of the complexity of the definitions of both art and fashion, they are unwilling to argue decisively whether fashion is art or not. Their text focuses instead on the relationships of art and fashion, or “critical
crossovers,” throughout history, highlighting the myriad occasions in which the fields of art and fashion have intermingled. A few contemporary scholars, such as Alison Bancroft and Victoria L. Rovine, have also contributed to this scholarship by publishing theoretical interpretations of fashion. Bancroft offers a psychoanalytic approach to controversial designs by John Galliano and Alexander McQueen, exploring the difference in each designer’s depiction of women. Rovine addresses the profound influence of France’s colonization of Africa on early twentieth-century designers, like Paul Poiret, from mimicry to reproductions. Despite these notable efforts, the conversation about fashion as art remains incomplete.

Given the substantial increase of fashion exhibitions in museums of fine art in the last forty years, as well as their rise in popularity over the last decade, it is now more crucial than ever that objects of fashion be recognized and critically viewed as a form of contemporary art rather than as historical artifact. More specifically, the growing field of fashion studies demands that objects of dress be analyzed through the same theories and methodologies applied to objects of art. Art historian Jules David Prown has argued extensively on the meaning to be found in all objects, not only objects of art. His claims demonstrate the expanding definition of contemporary art, and diminishing barriers between objects of art and fashion. Within this context, it is necessary to clearly demonstrate the extent to which the realms of fashion and art have overlapped.

---

3 Geczy and Karaminas, 4.
4 The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibition, *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* attracted over 660,000 visitors during its four month run in 2011, placing it among the top ten most visited exhibitions in the Met’s history. Other popular exhibitions hosted by the Met’s Costume Institute include *Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House* (2001), *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy* (2008), and *Charles James: Beyond Fashion* (2014), each of which broke 500,000 visitors. The Victoria and Albert Museum’s recent exhibition, *Hollywood Costume* attracted more than 250,000 visitors making it the second most popular exhibition in the museum’s history. These numbers clearly demonstrate an increase in the popularity of fashion exhibitions within museum settings, particularly within the twenty-first century.
In his introduction of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibition catalogue for *Savage Beauty*, museum director Thomas P. Campbell stated, “There are any number of fashion designers with the creative distinction to warrant a presentation of their work in an art museum. But I can think of few whose careers fit as easily within the language and methodologies of art history as that of Alexander McQueen.”5 Indeed, few fashion designers more fully offer a means of clearly bridging this gap in scholarship than the so-called “l’enfant terrible,” Alexander McQueen, whose often un-wearable designs are more artistic expressions presented in elaborately staged performances than objects of dress in a fashion show. Each McQueen design was carefully tailored and crafted by the designer himself through an instinctive, visual process that awed even his design assistants. In the words of Sarah Burton, McQueen’s successor as creative director at the label after his death, “His eye was so amazing he could drape an engineered print.”6 However, McQueen did not limit his artistry to the designs themselves, but deliberately staged each show, from lighting to location, to fit the often autobiographical themes of his collections. In this way, his work became more of an artistic performance than a presentation of his craft.

McQueen admitted that his runway productions frequently referenced his own life. Unfortunately, most of these personal interpretations have been glossed over by mere surface level readings based on the more obvious influences of each collection. This has resulted in an incomplete analysis or a misunderstanding of the designs, the presentation, and the man behind them. Because of the obvious artistry involved in McQueen’s processes of development, from design to runway, it is clear that there is a more complex message to be taken from his work than 

6 Bolton, 230. An engineered print is a design digitally printed onto a textile that has been calculated to occur in a specific place on the finished garment. McQueen’s ability to drape an engineered print suggests his ability to position a print by eye alone – a feat normally accomplished by computer software.
the mere visual interest of the garments themselves. As Campbell stated, few designers present a
more ample opportunity for discussion within the realms of art history than McQueen, due to the
elaborate staging of his runway shows and the frequent lack of wearability of his designs.
Acknowledging fashion as art, beginning with McQueen, is the first step to initiate a more
theoretically-based inquiry into the realm of fashion and thus opening the way for a more
sophisticated understanding of the work of McQueen and other designers.

This thesis will seek to justify fashion as an artistic medium worthy of critical academic
consideration through a case study of Alexander McQueen’s Spring/Summer 2006 menswear
collection and its runway presentation. Hiding behind the facade of a literary narrative, the
collection actually demonstrates, in its performance, McQueen’s attempt to confront his feelings
of Otherness, stemming from his subversive childhood and lifelong homosexuality, by elevating
the Other. This is achieved through his juxtaposition of Mesoamerican inspired designs and
British fine tailoring staged together on a high fashion runway. The show climaxes at the idea of
the primitive, revealing McQueen’s intent to celebrate the idea of the Other through Western
fashion. Through this critical analysis, the benefits and possibilities of applying theoretical
methodology to objects of fashion will become clear, thus justifying fashion as a legitimate form
of art.

Fashion as Art

As early as the eighteenth century, scholars and philosophers noted the great potential
that clothing has to carry meaning. However, it was not until the late twentieth century, amidst
the rise of postmodernism, that scholars began to consider whether or not fashion qualified as an
art form. The irony of this delay in academic consideration is that a clear relationship between art
and fashion existed since at least the nineteenth century and was deeply connected to avant-garde
artists of the early twentieth century. In their collection of essays exploring the relationship between art and fashion, Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas trace some of these overlaps between two seemingly different worlds of design, citing artists like Theo van Doesburg, Jean Arp, and Andy Warhol as a few who “understood the provocative power of clothing in creating an identity and establishing their work as a global brand.” Each adopted a very particular style of dress that related directly to their individual choices of artistic expression. Dada artist Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, for example, is better remembered for her Dada way of dressing – including a dress designed with a taillight on the bustle and jewelry made of found objects – than she is for her sculptural assemblages.

Other early modern artists dabbled in both art and fashion design. Sonia Delaunay, wife of the founder of Orphism, Robert Delaunay, applied the influences of Picasso and Braque to her textile designs and quilt patterns, believing that these objects, traditionally defined as craft, were just as important an artistic media as paint and canvas. Giacomo Balla, better known for his role in the Italian Futurist movement, similarly participated in textile design, even sketching suits and producing self-designed neckties.

The early twentieth century also saw a wealth of collaboration between artists and designers, such as Salvador Dali’s famous collaborations with French designer Elsa Schiaparelli, which resulted in the iconic “Lobster Dress” and “Shoe Hat.” In the mid-1960s, Yves Saint Laurent also began experimenting with methods of incorporating famous artworks into his designs. His Mondrian collection, a series of simple sheath dresses based on Piet Mondrian’s red, yellow, and blue grid-patterned artworks, remains one of the most iconic twentieth-century

---

7 Geczy and Karaminas, 2.
designs today. In the last ten years, digital printing technologies have made it cost-effective to print complex images directly onto textiles, which can then be incorporated into designs. Embracing this technique, designer Lisa Perry’s collaborations with Jeff Koons have resulted in a number of whimsical cocktail dresses. Alexander McQueen, also embracing this technique, has been known to incorporate digital prints of photographs or Medieval and Renaissance altarpieces into his collections.

In the 1960s, the line dividing art and popular culture began to blur.\(^{10}\) Arthur Danto cites Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box* (1964) as the beginning of the end of art, or rather, as the point at which art stopped following a continuous narrative and the definition of art began to expand, encompassing even the most non-traditional of mediums.\(^{11}\) It is in this postmodern context that art began to explore complex philosophical issues, like identity and culture, and scholars began to perpetuate theories like feminism, psychoanalysis, and post-colonialism. It seems appropriate, then, that this era of change in contemporary art also reflects an increase in scholarly debate about the differences between fashion and art. As the definition of contemporary art expanded, so did the possibility of utilizing fashion as an artistic medium.

Not surprisingly, the 1960s also marked a shift in the way fashion is viewed and presented, enhancing its potential as art. Designers stopped presenting their collections in showrooms and moved their presentations to the catwalk. Thus the fashion show was born, and the production thereof has become increasingly exaggerated and elaborated upon ever since.\(^{12}\) Fashion’s increasing infiltration into the fine art museum was a simultaneous development of equal importance. Though costume collections in museums existed even in the nineteenth

---

\(^{10}\) Ibid, 3.  
century, they were often displayed as anthropological artifacts presented chronologically and were given little attention. When Diana Vreeland, former editor of Vogue, took charge of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1971, she made radical changes to the methods of displaying fashion. While her exhibitions lacked historical accuracy, they displayed an aesthetic spectacle that intrigued the public and increased the attention given to exhibitions of objects of dress. This elimination of antiquarian approaches to the display of fashion – as well as the general increased attention to fashion within fine arts settings – suggests an increasing elevation of fashion from artifact to contemporary art.

The postmodern world of art, as it developed after the 1960s, created an atmosphere in which fashion could easily be considered art. Contemporary artists, such as Matthew Barney and Vanessa Beecroft deal with many of the same issues and methods that designers like McQueen incorporate into their runway performances. Clothing design and over-performance are at the core of Barney’s CREMASTER Cycle. Beecroft’s performances, projections of her self-identity, focus on the display of the female body, often nude, tied to the fashion industry through, for example, the incorporation of Manolo Blahnik heels. Much like fashion shows, performance art is not necessarily created with the intent of ending up in the museum, but portions of the original performance can be displayed as a remnant of the performance. Likewise, when these remnants are observed separate from their original context, a part of the original meaning or impact is lost. Considering fashion within the context of these artists, the lines separating fashion from contemporary art are nearly indiscernible.

13 The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has collected textiles since its founding in 1870.
15 Ibid, 11.
Yet, while the discussion of fashion as art has increased significantly since the 1960s, there is still a reluctance among scholars to specifically designate fashion as art, rather than simply acknowledging the relationship between the two. During his career, Charles Worth, a nineteenth-century fashion designer and perhaps the father of *haute couture*, suggested that the difference between his designs and paintings on canvas was a mere technicality.\(^{16}\) Indeed, the historical relationship between art and fashion, as well as the growing spectacle of runway shows clearly supports his claim. Since the 1990s, the runway presentation has become increasingly important. Today, models are reduced to canvases – a means to display the designs they bear. These models are rail thin so that no curve interrupts the design of the garment they wear, and their faces are washed out so as not to detract from the clothing. Some designers have begun to renounce wearability for the sake of dramatic performance. Even those collections intended to be wearable must endure significant modification and redesign before they are sold to the general public.\(^{17}\) Every aspect of the runway presentation is carefully calculated in advance, from the location, to the lighting, to the music. For example, Marc Jacobs’ recently spent roughly one million dollars in the production of the runway presentation for his Fall 2011 collection.\(^{18}\) These ostentatious expenditures suggest what scholars have been afraid to admit for decades: the world of fashion is not about presenting a line of wearable clothes; it’s about artistic performance.

Art historian Jules David Prown wrote extensively on the meaning found in man-made objects. He argued that any object made or modified by man reflects the beliefs of its creator,

---

\(^{16}\) Geczy and Karaminas, *7. Haute couture* refers to custom-designed, custom-fitted garments constructed entirely by hand from high quality materials. The finished product is typically the result of hundreds of hours of work. *Haute couture* represents the highest, most costly level of fashion design.


suggesting, “Every work, high or low, embodies belief, consciously or unconsciously.”

Objects of fashion are not only consciously and deliberately made by man, but they are also products of extensive training and genius; they demand study and interpretation as objects of art.

Unfortunately, despite the tentative acceptance of fashion as an art form, critical analysis of these objects is still relatively non-existent. This is largely due to the perception of clothing as a frivolous, purely functional commodity, or the strong association of clothing as an everyday experience rather than as an object of creative construction.

It is this lack of critical theory in the field that continues to relegate fashion to a category that is less than art. Filling this void in the study of fashion will allow for the ultimate acceptance of fashion as an art form, and perpetuate opportunities for greater understanding of objects of fashion. Through a critical interpretation of a collection by a canonized, highly influential contemporary designer, this thesis will demonstrate the potential of theory to give greater insight into the artistic production of fashion, as well as to solidify the claim that fashion is indeed a form of art worthy of academic study.

McQueen as Artist

No designer so clearly demonstrates the overlap between art and fashion as Lee Alexander McQueen, and yet, very few scholarly attempts have been made to analyze his work as objects of art through the lens of critical theory. Born in 1969 in London’s East End, McQueen’s love for design began at a very young age. Before the age of twelve, McQueen was drawing and designing dresses and scouring fashion books. While his academic performance at Rokeby Comprehensive School for boys was lacking, McQueen was a gifted visual learner,

21 Roberts, 244.
receiving outstanding marks only in his art classes. At the age of sixteen, McQueen dropped out of school and took an apprenticeship at Anderson & Sheppard on London’s famous Savile Row, the heart of fine tailoring. There he learned the rules and skills of tailoring while constructing suits for many of London’s elite. Years later, after working as an apprentice for Italian designer Romeo Gigli, McQueen enrolled at Central Saint Martin’s College of Art and Design where he earned his Master’s degree in fashion design in 1992.

Though his friends and acquaintances knew him as Lee, McQueen dropped his first name for the title of his brand, Alexander McQueen. From 1994 to 1996 he presented several collections in London under this label, including his iconic “Highland Rape” which featured his signature “Bumster” trousers (Figure 3). The pants sat so low on the hips that the buttocks were partially exposed, inspiring the trend of low-rise jeans. In his early years, he struggled financially, and one collection featured pieces made of discarded builders’ plastic because he could not afford fabric. From the beginning McQueen had a flair for drama and theatrics. He was not above spreading absurd rumors to increase attendance at his shows, and he knew that shocking his audience earned him this much-needed attention. With each successive collection he gained more recognition and his shows, both the designs and the productions, became increasingly sophisticated artistically.

These early solo collections showcased McQueen’s iconoclastic roots. Often labeled by critics as “l’enfant terrible,” or the “bad boy” of fashion, McQueen was part of a subculture that felt that fashion could be much more than Parisian haute couture. His designs were intended to break the rules of fashion while maintaining the traditions of high quality tailoring that he learned on Savile Row. In his own words, “You’ve got to know the rules to break them. That’s

21 Ibid, 69.
24 Watt, 18.
what I’m here for, to demolish the rules, but to keep the tradition.”25 McQueen’s designs never catered to the pleasure of his audience, but rather they expressed his own point of view.26 In line with this aesthetic, his shows often featured themes of violence, death, and the macabre, yet often with the intent to promote deeper thinking of a particular story or subject. Forsaking pure visual pleasure, his models became victims of each collection’s greater message, often promoting the hidden, animalistic strength or fearsomeness of women. Unfortunately, these more complex interpretations of McQueen’s collections were frequently lost on his most devoted critics: the press. Throughout his early career in particular, McQueen received a myriad of undeserved accusations, ranging from racism to misogyny. His audiences were quick to judge his collections solely on what they saw rather than searching for context.

In 2000, after McQueen’s brief and heavily criticized career as chief designer at Givenchy, the Gucci Group bought fifty-one percent of his self-named label, giving him the opportunity to invest his interests full time in his own brand. Under his own label, free from the expectations of Givenchy couture, and with real money and support for the first time, McQueen was able to experiment more with artistic expression in his collections.

While every show is aesthetically and visually stimulating, each of Alexander McQueen’s runway performances provokes questions of wearability. It seems that some of his designs could never be worn in public, much less sold in a store. In fact, for some of the pieces, wearability is indeed impossible. An interview with the general manager of the New York flagship store, Catherine Flynn, revealed that a large portion of the pieces presented on the runway never makes it to the inventory of the McQueen stores. Those that do – tamer cocktail dresses and suits – are significantly modified to make them more consumer-friendly. Those that

do not are archived, only to be made available for photo-shoots, museum display, or for the occasional celebrity special request. For example, in his Spring/Summer 2001 collection, titled “Voss,” McQueen showed a glittering dress made of two thousand, glass microscope slides, each hand-painted red, and completed with a skirt of ostrich feathers (Figure 4). The dress, which took six weeks to make, was only shown on the runway for a few minutes. It made appearances at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a version of the dress was worn by Björk for a single concert performance. The dress’s purpose was never to be marketed and worn, but to be a showpiece in McQueen’s artistic performance. In fact, most of the designs from “Voss” never went into production.

Like with “Voss,” a more comprehensive study of McQueen’s collections makes one thing clear: fashion was never just about wearable clothing. McQueen saw himself as an artist, and fashion was his medium. Consequently, the production surrounding the presentation of his designs was as significant in conveying this message as the actual garments themselves. McQueen’s shows were more like performance art pieces than mere presentations of his designs. The designs themselves are relics of the original performance – the meaning is lost when taken from its original context. After the 1960s, when designers first began displaying clothing on the runway, the runway show evolved into a theatrical spectacle, often directed by a theme. While the initial trend for sensational shows dropped off at the end of the twentieth century, it was something McQueen – and other conceptual designers, like Hussein Chalayan and Viktor&Rolf – embraced. McQueen’s visions for his collections included their eventual presentation. According to Sarah Burton, McQueen’s successor, “[E]very collection began with a show. To

---

27 Catherine Flynn, telephone interview with author, September 15, 2014.
29 Ibid, 99.
30 Brand, 105.
start work on designing the collection, he’d have to visualize how it would be seen.”31 Each runway production had its own producer and art director, as well as custom designed lighting and soundtrack. Venues were either uniquely chosen or custom designed to match the atmosphere intended for the show.32 The set for “Voss,” for example, a large one-way glass box with several mechanical release systems, took seven days to build, and the entire production cost over £70,000.33 McQueen is not the only designer to invest such significant sums of time and money into set design, nevertheless it can been seen that for him, the designs and the runway show are one and the same; they are intended to be viewed as an art performance, rich with hidden meaning.

“Killa”

Alexander McQueen’s Spring/Summer 2006 collection, titled “Killa,” represents his fourth consecutive menswear collection. The show was staged in a large warehouse space in Milan with large parachutes draped across the top of the runway, as if they were caught in tree branches. Models emerged from among the folds of parachute at the top of the runway and made one pass down and back up the runway before disappearing back again into the silk. The collection was most directly inspired by the 1963 Peter Brook film, Lord of the Flies, which was adapted from William Golding’s 1954 novel. A casual viewing of the film reveals many of McQueen’s more obvious design influences, including the school boys’ uniforms, the choir boys’ hats, and the face painting the boys adopt as the narrative progresses. Like the film and novel, McQueen’s forty-five piece collection shows how the dignified school boy, dressed in his sharply tailored, double-breasted white blazer and fine shirting fabrics (Figure 5) devolves into the savage primitive man, face painted and dressed in a cape of leather leaves (Figure 6). The

31 Bolton, 226.
32 Ibid, 223.
33 Evans, 99.
change is gradual, with each silhouette slightly softer and more deconstructed than the one before it. Fine Oxford fabrics are exchanged for rough linens, and clean-cut stripes are abandoned for elaborate embroideries, shells, and even soft drink cans.\textsuperscript{34} While the opening ensemble is pure white, the final look is pitch black.

Though McQueen only officially identifies the influence of \textit{Lord of the Flies}, a more thorough study of the collection reveals other crucial influences. While the first half of the collection appears distinctly British in tailoring, the latter half of the collection clearly demonstrates influence by Mesomerican cultures, as well as fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spanish tailoring. This unique combination of influence suggests that for his collection demonstrating a Western encounter with the primitive, McQueen was exploring ideas related to the Spanish conquistadors and the colonization of early America. These are themes that McQueen had visited before and, given his tradition of revisiting his favorite influences in successive collections, it would not be unusual for him to draw upon these influences again for “Killa.”

Throughout his career, McQueen developed a reputation for creating shows that demonstrated extensive background research.\textsuperscript{35} According to Burton, “Lee got inspiration from anything.”\textsuperscript{36} Each collection began with multiple display boards covered with both new and old inspirations. While it may be difficult to determine precisely where McQueen drew his influences for the representation of the savage in “Killa,” it cannot be doubted that he had access to images of both ancient and contemporary Southern and Mesoamerican cultures. He had a


\textsuperscript{35} Watt, 28. This methodology may have been inspired by his time working in Romeo Gigli’s workshop. Gigli’s collections have been described as “encyclopedic” for the broad range of research and influence they encompassed.

\textsuperscript{36} Bolton, 237.
great love for history, history books, the Discovery Channel, and magazines like *National Geographic*. This last resource was a particularly frequent source of inspiration.\(^\text{37}\) It is no surprise then that he would frequently draw on themes he found in other cultures to influence his own collections.\(^\text{38}\) In the years preceding and surrounding McQueen’s 2006 menswear collection there were a significant number of articles published in *National Geographic* exploring cultures in ancient and contemporary South and Mesoamerica. Some of these articles include “Descent into the Maya Underworld,” which explored ancient rituals in contemporary Guatemala,\(^\text{39}\) and “Ancient Peru’s Power Elite,” which discussed pre-Columbian pyramids in Peru.\(^\text{40}\) While it does not appear that McQueen is referencing images from these articles specifically, it would be logical to assume that the increased interest in ancient and contemporary cultures of South and Central America in *National Geographic* piqued McQueen’s interest and gave him reason to search out related images from other sources.

This interest in primitive South American cultures had been manifest in several earlier womenswear collections. His Autumn/Winter 1998-1999 womenswear collection for Givenchy couture explored indigenous peoples of South America, among other cultures (Figure 7).\(^\text{41}\) The most obvious visual references in this collection include his use of feathers, face paint, the occasional elaborate headdress, and of course, the wild, overgrown greenery surrounding the runway. Just a few years later, his Spring/Summer 2003 collection, “Irere,” told the story of a

\(^{37}\) Ibid. In an interview with fashion journalist Tim Blanks, Sarah Burton, creative director at Alexander McQueen describes McQueen’s many inspirations, including Discovery Channel and *National Geographic*.

\(^{38}\) It should be noted that *National Geographic* emphasizes cultural difference, including exotic indigenous costumes, making it a likely source of influence for “Killa.” For more information, see Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 87 – 117.

\(^{39}\) “Descent into the Maya Underworld,” *National Geographic*, November 2004.


\(^{41}\) Watt, 131.
shipwrecked girl living with indigenous people in the rain forest when the Spanish
Conquistadors arrive (Figure 8). Once again, McQueen showcased feathers and headdresses, as
well as some unique elements referencing sixteenth-century Spanish tailoring. McQueen drew
inspiration from a reprint of Juan de Alcega’s 1589 Tailor’s Pattern Book, which he found in a
secondhand bookstore.42 The book contains illustrations and detailed instructions in Old Spanish
for patternmaking in sixteenth-century Spanish style and tradition. His use of this book directly
explains some of the Spanish construction techniques that appear in “Irere,” such as Spanish
ruffs and high-collared doublets. Some of this distinctly fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spanish
tailoring can be seen in his earlier collection for Givenchy as well as in “Killa” (Figure 9),
clearly demonstrating McQueen’s interest in the history of this era.

In addition to Spanish tailoring, “Killa” features several uniquely Mayan motifs,
suggesting a particular interest in the cultures of ancient and contemporary Guatemala and their
designs.43 The sunburst pattern frequently adorns the neckline of tunics and the legs of cropped
pants in Mayan costume (Figure 10). This same pattern can be found in several of McQueen’s
looks, such as the tunic and pants of look forty-four (Figure 11). He also uses the sunburst
pattern as an embroidered decorative roundel on sleeves and jacket fronts, as in look thirty-three
(Figure 12). The eagle pattern, traditionally found on the chest of Mayan costume, also makes an
appearance on a tunic front in McQueen’s collection. The repetition of a basic construction of
loose, cropped pants worn with a tunic also references traditional Mayan costume in Guatemala
(Figure 13). Look thirty-three also incorporates a soft hat that directly resembles Mayan
costume. These symbols and motifs are unique to specific communities and have been used by

42 Ibid, 63.
43 Dr. Allen J. Christenson, in discussion with the author, Provo, October 23, 2013.
those societies for at least a century or more.\textsuperscript{44} Thus, the use of these particular motifs suggests that McQueen may have been at least partially inspired by the community of Chichicastenango in Guatemala.\textsuperscript{45} Other more generic motifs, such as the geometric patterns of concentric triangles that McQueen favors, are not only used by contemporary Mayan societies, but can also be traced back to ancient Mayan civilizations, as seen in decorative stone lintels from the seventh and eighth centuries.

These evidences of design influence from both fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spanish tailoring, as well as traditional Mesoamerican patterning reinforce the idea that McQueen was influenced by the Spanish invasion of early Mesoamerica and by the art and designs that they imported. McQueen’s interest in this historical event may be explained by his seeming empathy towards this history of colonial oppression and domination. This is yet another theme that he had frequently explored in previous collections, including his iconic “Highland Rape” and “In Memory of Elizabeth Howe, Salem, 1692.”

McQueen’s Autumn/Winter 1995 collection featured shredded and worn fabrics on dazed models. Influenced in particular by the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 and the Highland Clearances of the early nineteenth century, “Highland Rape” was McQueen’s attempt to destroy the romanticized version of Scotland’s history and emphasize instead what he considered to be the rape of a culture. McQueen inherited his mother’s love for his Scottish ancestry, and when asked in a 2004\textit{ Guardian} interview what his roots meant to him, he replied, “Everything.”\textsuperscript{46} From its inception, the show was controversial and highly criticized. However, McQueen’s aggressive choice in title alone betrays the strong sense of loyalty he felt toward his Scottish ancestry.

\textsuperscript{44} Christenson.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Watt, 82.
this collection, Bobby Hillson remarked, “It was overwhelming, a very powerful story that he
was telling in his way, with a purely intuitive empathy.”

A decade later, McQueen referenced another story of oppression from his family history.
His mother had discovered the family’s distant relation to Elizabeth Howe, one of the innocent
victims hanged during the Salem Witch Trials. McQueen’s Autumn/Winter 2007 collection,
aesthetically influenced by ancient Egyptian themes, was his expression of disgust against the
injustice that took place in seventeenth-century Salem. To fully express his empathy, McQueen
visited Howe’s grave in Salem as research for the collection.

These repeated displays of empathy for the unjust treatment of innocent victims can be
explained by Gombrich’s studies of empathy. His theories suggest that McQueen’s interest in
and relation to issues of persecution would make him sympathetic toward other victims of
oppression. Exploring empathy on a neurological level, Vittorio Gallese suggests that
immediate, unconscious understandings of others are based on a “strong sense of identity binding
us to them.” He goes on to suggest that when individuals recognize shared experiences in one
another, they feel the same emotions for others’ experiences as they do for their own. Thus,
McQueen’s apparent interest in and apparent empathy towards examples of oppressed or
misunderstood cultures or individuals throughout history suggests that he too has felt oppressed
and misunderstood in his own life. In other words, because McQueen himself had experienced
false accusations and injustice in his own life, he was drawn to similar emotions he sensed in the
historical stories of Scotland and Elizabeth Howe. Already intrigued by the patterns and
decoration of Mesoamerican cultures, McQueen would have also felt a kinship with the violent

48 John Onians, Neuroarthistory: from Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki (Yale University Press:
New Haven, 2007), 160.
49 Vittorio Gallese, “The roots of empathy: The shared manifold hypothesis and the neural basis of
intersubjectivity,” Psychopathology. 36 no. 4 (2003), 171.
colonization of the ancient Americans by the Spanish, thus making them a logical source of influence for “Killa.” However, due to the doubly personal nature of his menswear designs, his collection, under the guise of Lord of the Flies, became a more profound call to amend the injustice McQueen felt in his own life.

Critical reviews of McQueen’s collection after Milan Fashion Week in June 2005 readily identified the influence of Lord of the Flies, suggesting it had been clearly made known to the audience. However, critics also commented on the striking lack of wearability in the majority of the collection, suggesting that, “McQueen needed to find a bridge between his fetid imagination and the reality of dressing, beyond his excellent tailoring.”\(^5\) This indicates that critics failed to consider this collection beyond the obvious interpretations. An archive of Alexander McQueen’s past collections briefly acknowledges the exploration of power and hierarchy of society that is demonstrated in “Killa.”\(^5\) This widely understood narrative of Lord of the Flies provides a convenient framework in which to consider complex questions of identity within society. It can therefore be assumed, that while the overarching, easily recognizable narrative of the show is the devolution of civilized man into primitive savage, there are more intricate themes at play beneath this surface level reading. Deeply empathetic for the native Mesoamericans conquered by the Spanish conquistadors, McQueen plays on the transition from civilized to uncivilized to highlight the savage in a positive manner. This is done as a confrontation of the oppression he has experienced in his own life: constant misinterpretation and relegation to the Other.

---


McQueen as Other

Despite his eventual success, McQueen’s life and career were riddled with instances that caused him to perceive himself as the Other. In his discussion of Queer and Gender Theory, Riki Wilchins relates Derrida’s theories of literary binaries to Otherness. Wilchins suggests that in a system of binaries, one half is always associated as a positive existence and the other as negative. Furthermore, the negative half of the binary is always described in terms of what it is not. If the positive half is one thing, the negative is whatever is left over – the Other. The Other exists to give meaning to the positive binary, but has no inherent meaning in itself.\(^{52}\) Reflecting on McQueen’s life, it seems that much of his Otherness is indeed configured on what he is not, or rather, how he is not like the rest of the fashion world. It is this self-perception that McQueen confronts in “Killa.”

Born to working-class parents, McQueen was raised in lower class London’s East End. He had a rocky relationship with his father, who was a cab driver, and throughout his life he felt only the support of his mother, a housewife and genealogy enthusiast.\(^{53}\) He struggled in school, excelling only in his art classes. Openly homosexual by the age of eighteen, McQueen often jokingly referred to himself as the “pink sheep” of the family.\(^{54}\) However, he was repeatedly teased about his sexual orientation by his peers first at Anderson & Sheppard and later at Gieves & Hawkes. He was known to have said that he had no luck in love, and was criticized for his heavier weight by others in the industry.

During his time as creative director at Givenchy, McQueen was under constant pressure to live up to the glamorous French house’s reputation. The house was famously known for

---


\(^{54}\) Watt, 12.
dressing Hollywood icons like Audrey Hepburn, and McQueen’s aesthetic simply did not live up to the Givenchy label.55 His first collection at Givenchy, inspired by the Greek mythology of Jason and the Argonauts, was deemed a disaster by the press. In the words of Judith Watt, author of McQueen’s biography, “No longer just a designer, Lee McQueen was now also a celebrity – the one thing he did not want to be. Worse still, he was working for a house whose style was not his own, and he couldn’t tell the critics to get lost.”56 McQueen himself admitted that he would never have used the same gold and white color scheme for his own collection, but was attempting to conform to Givenchy’s long-established, stylistic legacy of elegant taste. While his later collections for Givenchy improved in the view of the critics, they were always a much tamer, more subdued McQueen.

Indeed, the members of the press who followed McQueen’s success were always reluctant to forget his past. Journalists writing about McQueen and his work repeatedly emphasized his lower-class upbringing and his taxi-driving father.57 McQueen spoke openly of his frustration with the stereotype forced upon him by the media, stating,

> There has been this thing about the East End yob made good. But, you know, the press started that, not me... It’s not true. At the end of the day you’re a good designer or not and it doesn’t matter where you came from. But the press always wanted more. The East End boy who worked on Savile Row. The East End boy who worked wherever... Everyone knows the story and it’s tiring.58

Furthermore, McQueen was continually forced to defend himself against accusations of misogyny by his critics. The ravaged look of his models in “Highland Rape” was one such occasion. While McQueen sought to convey his anger at the nineteenth-century oppressions of Scotland, critics hung up on the word “rape” saw only half-naked women stumbling around a

56 Ibid, 113.
57 Evans, 157.
58 Frankel, 20.
runway. Other collections depicted women with similar marks of apparent abuse. However, McQueen’s ultimate goal was to create a woman who looked fearsome. In the words of Caroline Evans, “Criticisms of McQueen’s work as misogynist, however, tended to obscure its defining characteristic, the theatrical staging of cruelty.” In other words, viewers were quick to interpret a surface level reading of abuse towards women, while completely missing the intended reading: awareness of the violence women endure.

Of all the criticisms, insults, and accusations directed toward McQueen, it was this label of misogynist that truly upset him. As a child, McQueen witnessed his sister’s husband violently beat her almost to death. In his words, “I was this young boy and I saw this man with his hands round my sister’s neck, I was just standing there with her two children beside me . . . Everything I’ve done since then was for the purpose of making women look stronger, not naïve.” The incident left a significant impact on McQueen, who repeatedly strived to make women look stronger in order to intimidate men.

A similar misinterpretation can be seen in his Spring/Summer 1999 collection, which featured Aimee Mullins, whose legs were amputated below the knee. When McQueen’s intent to use Mullins as a model first became known, the public was outraged, sure that McQueen would turn it into a circus act. In the actual runway performance, Mullins was dressed like every other model, aside from an elegant pair of hand-carved wooden legs that melded with the rest of the collection (Figure 14). Yet again, McQueen’s presentation sought to elevate the overlooked, essentially launching Mullins’ modeling career. These identifications of the naïve misinterpretation of McQueen’s collections again and again by the press and the general public.

---

59 Evans, 142.
60 Frankel, 20.
61 Evans, 149. Caroline Evans presents an assortment of direct quotes from McQueen in this regard.
62 Frankel, 21.


audience suggest that there is a much deeper level of meaning in “Killa” that extends beyond a reenactment of *Lord of the Flies*, and one deeply connected to misunderstanding.

Above all, McQueen wanted to be recognized for his talent, not for his notoriety, hence he was never completely satisfied with how his work was received.\(^{63}\) It seems that the popularity of his shows was frequently related to the draw of the shock factor and the elaborate staging, rather than the sophistication of the artistic ideas and immaculate tailoring he presented. For the ambitious “pink sheep” who had worked hard to defy the clichés of his upbringing, the constant relegation to the Other would have seemed to him to be the difference between success and failure. The constant misinterpretation of his character is mirrored in the misinterpretation of his collections, making his chosen medium of expression the most appropriate and effective place to confront the public’s perception of his identity.

**The Subaltern Voice: Confronting the Other**

McQueen presented his first menswear collection, entitled “Texist” for the Spring/Summer 2005 season. He had experimented with menswear in 2002 but said he had made the mistake of designing with a customer in mind. For his 2005 collection he chose instead to design clothes with himself in mind.\(^{64}\) The military-inspired collection adopted themes he had used in womenswear over the years, as well as influences from his own surroundings. This exploration of his own style and tastes yielded a significantly more successful and complete menswear collection than his earlier attempt and represented the birth of the official McQueen menswear line.

If McQueen ultimately found success in designing menswear for himself, it is not difficult to surmise that subsequent collections bore similar personal interpretation. Furthermore,

\(^{63}\) Watt, 94.

\(^{64}\) Watt, 214.
having spent much of his career defending the strength of women in his collections, it is fitting that in approaching menswear, he would defend his own vulnerabilities. McQueen often stated that his collections directly referenced his own life. In his own words, “My collections have always been autobiographical, a lot to do with my own sexuality and coming to terms with the person I am – it was like exorcising my ghosts in the collections. They were to do with my childhood, the way I think about life, and the way I was brought up to think about life.”

Building on his perception of himself as the Other throughout his life, McQueen found fashion to be a creative outlet for grappling with his feelings. While hints of these emotions can be observed in other collections, “Killa” appears to be his ultimate confrontation with his Otherness. In a discussion of craft and queer theory, Lacey Jane Roberts suggests that stereotypical identities can be revealed and replaced through acts of over-performance. In other words, acknowledging, accepting, and exaggerating a stereotype is part of the process of dismissing the stereotype and asserting a new identity. Combining a traditionally understood identity with other elements that challenge it in a performance setting is a means of breaking out of a stereotype, thus leaving the individual free to choose his own identity, rather than to have one forced upon him. In his theories of self-fashioning, Stephan Greenblatt offers a similar discussion of the process of creating identity. He suggests, “Self fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other ... must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed.” In order for McQueen to replace the negative connotation of his Otherness with a positive one, it was necessary for him first to embrace and publicly exaggerate his Otherness.

65 Bolton, 16.
66 Roberts, 246.
It appears that in “Killa” this is precisely what McQueen is attempting to do. He confronts his Otherness by opening his show with the traditional, positively associated binary of the polished British male, then transforming that identity into that of the primitive savage. However it is this savage Other that McQueen assimilates, and instead of portraying the Other as the primitive lesser, McQueen embraces this identity by situating it as the dramatic climax of his performance.

Traditionally, Western interpretation, or depiction of the Other, has been filtered through the negative lens of exploitation. Not only does McQueen not fit into any of the tenets outlined by post-colonial theorists, but he actually defies them. In his essays on Orientalism, Edward Said argued that Western depictions of the Orient suggest a western domination of the Orient, who is then subject to the exploitation of the West. Furthermore, if the Orient (in this case, the negative binary, or the Other) is not considered totally inferior to the West (the positive binary, or the standard), it is at least in need of corrective study by the West. Such was the case of the Spanish interest in the early Americas and their self-proclaimed mission to convert the natives to Catholicism. This theoretical position, however, is defied by McQueen’s collection. In the case of “Killa,” it is the West that is corrected and essentially dominated by the Other. While Lord of the Flies provides the framework for the regression of the West to the Other, McQueen forsakes the cynical moral of Golding’s story by instead championing the Other as an ennobled being.

Alan Chong has provided a new post-colonial framework in which to study McQueen’s collection. He argues that scholars approach topics regarding the interaction between multiple cultures with predetermined biases – too often they look first to determine which culture is the civilized and which is the Other. This approach ignores the overlapping that is evident between the cultures. This overlap indicates a much more symbiotic relationship than one of domination.

As an example, he considers the existence of a delicate ivory and mica pipe case. The object itself is uniquely Dutch, but the carving technique is clearly Sri Lankan. Chong suggests that this object was a diplomatic gift given to a Dutch official after the Dutch gained control of the formerly Portuguese trade routes with Sri Lanka. This gift, a Dutch luxury crafted by Sri Lankan craftsmen, suggests that Dutch trade with Sri Lanka was not exploitation, but a positive trade relationship that resulted in a significant number of objects hybridizing styles from two different cultures. A similar relationship can be seen in early Dutch trade with Japan. Chong’s study suggests that not all Western interactions with the Other involve exploitation and submission to a dominant force. Rather, there can be positive cultural influences from and representations of the Other.

These positive, hybridized cultural encounters can also be found in fashion. Adam Geczy explains that the influences of other cultures have always been evident in the world of fashion, and he suggests that these encounters are not always negative. He instead acknowledges the two-sidedness of cultural encounters, seeing them rather as instances of “imbrication and exchage” as opposed to one party clearly dominating another. Rather, the ideas and styles of different cultures overlap and can be traded and shared. In this way, two different cultures or groups are able to coexist within a setting, positively influencing one another, with neither seen as the inferior.

These discussions are a few of the many overlooked examples of the subaltern voice. In any society with colonizer and colonized, the dominant group’s voice is the prevailing voice of the narrative and the Other perspective tends to be subverted. Ranajit Guha explains that in

---


colonial India, the British colonizers and the indigenous elite of India managed politics, leaving the lower-classed masses without a voice. Even without a voice, the masses thrived beneath the surface of public politics, yet their perspective was overlooked.  

Stuart Hall expands on these ideas, suggesting, “It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that ‘knowledge.’” That is to say, in a society where one party is suppressed, the Other is not always entirely subdued, but is in fact also active in preserving its own way of life. Through “Killa,” McQueen reveals this subverted Other as a vibrant and thriving identity, and re-appropriates it as a positive cultural phenomenon, rather than an object of mere exploitation. Throughout his career, the press relegated McQueen to a single identity: the poor boy from London’s East End who had risen from the ashes to celebrity status. Above all, McQueen wanted to be known for his artistic talent, and not simply for being famous. Unfortunately, throughout his entire career, the press was largely ignorant of the underlying complexities of his collections, particularly in relation to the unique construction of his identity. Yet while the press’s condescending label persisted, McQueen actively worked to change this misperception, and “Killa” was his attempt to be heard.

The subaltern voice is precisely what McQueen acknowledges in his collection. McQueen elevates the Other through the Western construct of a fashion show, placing Mesoamerican inspired designs on a high fashion runway right next to his traditional, impeccably tailored suits. His intent is not to reinforce a negative association with the primitive, rather, it is to demonstrate the transition to the primitive “Other” in a positive light, concluding with the Other as a highly fashionable and ennobled being. McQueen once stated, “Fashion can

---


be really racist, looking at the clothes of other cultures as costumes . . . That’s mundane and it’s old hat. Let’s break down some barriers.”

This reinforces the argument that McQueen’s use of Mesoamerican influences is not intended to be read as a negative adaptation of the Other. Rather, it suggests a profound respect for the designs and implies a richer meaning behind their incorporation within “Killa.” Merely viewing “Killa” through the lens of *Lord of the Flies* obfuscates McQueen’s intended meaning. His designs are not intended to be negative or degrading, but are intended to address his concerns about what society has determined as acceptable in fashion. The performance subverts traditional concepts of Western fashion and civilization. It establishes the primitive as a new and dynamic style, influenced by the Other, and embraced by Western fashion. Thus, the Other, which dictates the climax and finale of the show and creates a vivid and lasting impression, surpasses the civilized West.

**Fashion and Meaning**

After his year in Italy, McQueen returned to London in 1991 seeking a teaching position at Central Saint Martin’s College of Art and Design. Instead, he was awarded a position as a student in the MA fashion program. Bobby Hillson, a professor at Central Saint Martin’s who met with McQueen during this time, later noted that she had not only observed his talent and determination, but also his desperate inability to verbally communicate his ideas and emotions. It seems that McQueen found in fashion design a way to express the thoughts and opinions he struggled to share verbally. This can be explained by Andrew Jackson’s discussion of men who craft, which suggests that people who make objects depend on that interaction both as a means of communication and a means of pleasure. In this way, the object becomes an extension of its

---

73 Bolton, 130.
74 Watt, 36.
75 Ibid.
creator’s mind. Despite the loud and extreme persona he often projected to the press, McQueen was, throughout his life, a deeply shy and sensitive individual. He was known to make quick getaways immediately following fashion shows in order to avoid fans and the press. Fashion was McQueen’s passion from a young age, and those who worked with him observed that he was never more himself than when he was designing. In addition to bringing pleasure, fashion ultimately provided McQueen with the means to communicate the ideas he could not express in any other way. In his own words, “For me, what I do is an artistic expression which is channeled through me. Fashion is just the medium.”

A closer examination of theories of fashion, community, and materiality reveals that fashion may indeed have been the most effective medium for McQueen to confront these issues of his self-identity. In the early twentieth century, Georg Simmel identified fashion as a balance between identifying the self with a group, or a community, and at the same time retaining individuality. For centuries, the rise and fall of fashion trends have demonstrated this inherent need to be a part of the community of fashion, as well as an individual within that community. Realizing that he did not quite fit into the extroverted and aggressive fashion community, McQueen felt a need to associate himself with a new community in order to assert his individuality within the world of fashion. In his discussion of craft and community, Dennis Stevens argues, “When groups of people feel dominated, subordinated, or exploited, they can challenge the hegemony through radical forms of protest, even, at times, forming themselves into subcultures which differentiate themselves by new values, often defined by their opposition to

77 Bolton, 230.
78 Bolton, 92.
the values of the larger culture or community of practice to which they belong.”80 Always the iconoclast, McQueen challenged the hegemony of the fashion world by openly protesting the longstanding definitions of good taste. He built his career by breaking the rules. In doing so, he asserted his individuality within the larger fashion community, essentially aligning himself with a new community, which gives power to the outsider. In doing so, he attributed a new level of value to the Other.

McQueen’s assertions about community and Otherness are highly successful because of the nature of his chosen medium. The entanglement, or the relatability, of clothing within society makes it a more approachable medium for the viewer. Furthermore, the context in which McQueen’s ideas are presented, as well as his reputation for quality craftsmanship, convey a necessary level of importance and respect, without which his message would be lost. These qualities, essential to the accurate interpretation of “Killa,” are unique to the medium of fashion, and must be considered as a part of McQueen’s success.

The theory of entanglement as discussed by Ian Hodder suggests that there is interdependence between man and objects, and that there are complex relationships of reliance between man and objects.81 These relationships result in a unique relatability between man and object. Fashion, or clothing, depends on man for form, and man relies on clothing for decoration, protection, and modesty. Consequently, man has a more intimate relationship with clothing than with an object he does not depend on. Art historian David Jules Prown takes this idea one step further suggesting that because objects are used by a large part of the population, or because this interdependence exists, objects have the potential to communicate ideas more thoroughly than

---

words or other artistic media. Clothing, or fashion, as an object used by every member of almost any given population, thus has the potential to communicate complicated ideas simply because it is relatable to a wide audience. While its definition as a commodity that is interacted with on many different levels has in the past been an obstacle in terms of applying critical analysis, McQueen has taken advantage of the fact that it is relatable and recognizable. In other words, because people rely on clothing, it is a more accessible medium for communicating. McQueen chooses a widely relatable object and adapts it as a means of communicating complex ideas.

However, McQueen is not communicating through ready-to-wear, mass-produced apparel. The ultimate success of his particular message is its placement – his designs depend on their context. According to Prown, objects imbued with high value tend to be the objects (and consequently the ideas) that survive over time. Placed on a high fashion runway where it is treated as the avant-garde of fashion, McQueen’s Other is given attention, and bestowed with respect and authority. Because being at the forefront of fashion has always been associated with the elite, displaying primitive designs on the runway of Milan fashion week automatically raises them to a level of respectability and nobility. Furthermore, by this point in his career, McQueen had established an international reputation for his talent and unique designs. Only a designer with his particular reputation, the notorious “bad boy” of fashion, could successfully accomplish such an audacious task.

It should also be noted that the emphasis on the primitive occurs at the climax of the runway performance. This complies with the narrative in Lord of the Flies, but while the narrative of Golding’s novel shows a regression of civilization to savagery, the context of the

---

82 Prown, 73.
83 Ibid.
fashion show builds an opposite *progression* from traditional to innovative. There is a general expectation for fashion shows to progress in interest, completing the show on a high note with a “showstopper.” The interest of the audience is built to anticipate the most celebrated pieces of the collection, which arrive near the end. In this case, the finale or the climax of the show is the Other, the exact opposite of the show’s more reserved beginning. This arrangement suggests that McQueen is promoting a more positive view of the Other. Positioned as the most anticipated event of the runway performance, the Other is elevated from the negative, overlooked status traditionally awarded by stereotypical societal values.

This more positive view of the Other is solidified by McQueen’s impeccable British tailoring, which he began studying at the age of sixteen on Savile Row. Strongly influenced by the iconoclastic subculture of his youth, McQueen broke many rules of fashion; yet he never forsook the power and taste of fine tailoring and craftsmanship. While some of his looks may be described as “slouchy,” none are sloppy. In fact, it has been suggested that McQueen’s designs belong not in ready-to-wear collections, but rather in couture, due to the hundreds of hours of meticulously detailed work devoted to every single design. Even his more relaxed fit blazers and trousers bear signs of careful tailoring and patternmaking with each style masterfully crafted to hold a very specific shape. His craftsmanship is particularly evident in the quality of the embroideries, the geometric mosaic patterns, and careful details of the cut leather leaves. While he may have been influenced by primitive Mesoamerica, McQueen elevates the Other by hybridizing it with his high standard of quality British workmanship, thus attributing Otherness as something worthy of both attention and appreciation.

As scholars have considered the role of fashion in determining identity for centuries, it would seem that McQueen, as artist, also found tailored textiles to be an appropriate medium for

---

84 Flynn.
confronting his own identity. This exploration of the role of the Other in the hierarchies of society depends on elements unique to the medium of fashion. The entanglement of human dependence on clothing, the traditional expectations of fashion shows, and McQueen’s international reputation for impeccable tailoring are all key components in the success of his concept. The designs and performance must be considered as a whole and complete act of conscious artistry, and it cannot be denied that fashion was ultimately his most effective medium with which to challenge the traditions of fashion and of society.

Conclusion

Throughout his career, McQueen maintained, “I want to be the purveyor of a certain silhouette or a way of cutting, so that when I’m dead and gone, people will know that the twenty-first century was started by Alexander McQueen.”85 This statement, combined with his iconoclastic desires to defy the standards of traditional couture, suggests that McQueen was indeed seeking to redefine how fashion was perceived. Furthermore, it reveals McQueen’s concern with how he was received and the type of legacy he established. Working in an era where post-colonialism had finally been introduced to fashion studies, McQueen was able to reexamine how the Other is perceived, and in doing so, redefine his own identity. Much like the early modern artists who specialized in breaking the rules of art as they moved into the twentieth century, McQueen set the pace for twenty-first century design by breaking down the paradigms of fashion. His elevation of the Other is only one example of this redefining process.

While “Killa” is certainly not one of McQueen’s most remembered or iconic collections, it provides a fascinating example of the intense sophistication of his collections in terms of both design and narrative. While critics have revered and respected his designs for their masterful construction and avant-garde vision, far too little attention has been given to the complex ideas

85 Bolton, 30.
behind the designs. Throughout his career and into the early years of his legacy, the underlying motives in each of McQueen’s collections have been misunderstood. As is the case in this 2006 menswear collection, the intellectual ideas behind the designs are often more revealing and engaging than the designs themselves. What may casually be received as a predictable retelling of *Lord of the Flies*, an interesting juxtaposition of two cultures, or even a negative association of the idea of “the savage” is actually a much deeper insight into the life of Alexander McQueen and a fresh take on his self-identification with Other. Through the artistic medium of fashion, McQueen is able to elevate the idea of the Other from primitive costume to high-end couture and, above all, to create a stunning collection that is in so many ways inherently McQueen.

Despite centuries of a common understanding of the potential of clothing to communicate ideas, scholars have largely failed to bring fashion under the scope of critical theory. Though the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century have yielded an increased interest of fashion within the fine arts museum, as well as a greater academic demand for the treatment of fashion as an art form, this refusal to apply theory to objects of fashion has persisted. As the lines between fashion and art continue to blur, particularly within the museum, it is critical that fashion be awarded the same academic attention and study as canonical works of art. This thesis on Lee Alexander McQueen and his Spring/Summer 2006 menswear collection has demonstrated the great potential for a fuller understanding of fashion that is achieved by the application of art theory to objects and artists of fashion. It indicates that his work, as well as the work of other contemporary fashion designers, merits more thoughtful and careful interpretation in the study of postmodern art history. Fashion is indeed a form of art and must be studied as such.
FIGURES

**Figure 1** – “Killa,” Look #1, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.

**Figure 2** – “Killa,” Look #45, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.
Figure 3 – “Highland Rape,” Bumster Trouser, Alexander McQueen, Autumn/Winter 1995, Ready-To-Wear.

Figure 4 – “Voss,” Look #76, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2001, Ready-To-Wear.
Figure 5 – “Killa,” Look #2, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.

Figure 6 – “Killa,” Look #42, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.
**Figure 7** – Alexander McQueen for Givenchy Couture, Autumn/Winter 1998-1999.

**Figure 8** – “Irere,” Look #53, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2003, Ready-To-Wear.
Figure 9 – “Killa,” Look #36, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.

Figure 10 – Sunburst pattern, Chichicastenango. Photo courtesy of Dr. Allen J. Christenson.
Figure 11 – “Killa,” Look #44, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.

Figure 12 – “Killa,” Look #33, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 2006, Menswear.
**Figure 13** – Traditional Mayan costume, Chichicastenango. Photo courtesy of Dr. Allen J. Christenson.

**Figure 14** – “No. 13” Aimee Mullins, Alexander McQueen, Spring/Summer 1999, Ready-To-Wear.


