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Study of Fashion and Politics

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Jacqueline Arena

Fashion and Politics

Usually controversially, self-expression has always been rather political and specifically, fashion has always been used as a vessel for political statements. Over decades the nature of these statements has changed to become more direct. The reason for this can be analyzed by looking at the success of designers such as Jean Paul Gaultier and Alexander McQueen who first tested the public's reception to the cross-over of politics and fashion. Their type of controversy was exciting, and they were seen as trailblazers to a camp style of fashion, and to using your voice through your work. Today, as many fashion designers and celebrities are vying for success and relevancy, their messages become more direct, and in some cases, they have become harmful.

Jean Paul Gaultier has been making clothes since 1976 and has been a major influence both on the fashion community and through his work as a fashion designer. He was previously labeled the “L’enfant Terrible” (the terrible one) of fashion and the “Agent Provocateur” for his controversial statements on the runway (Lewis, 2014). He was rather ahead of his time in terms of pushing the boundaries. Gaultier released his first collection for men titled “Man as Object” in 1984 which tested the waters of abolishing gender norms with low-cut tops and bottoms for men; Following this collection was his 1985 collection entitled “And God Created Man” where he sent men down the runway in skirts, jewelry, and makeup, subsequently causing the staff of the three largest fashion magazines in attendance, Vogue, French Elle, and Marie Claire, to exit the show (Lewis, 2014). This was the first time men were seen in skirts on the runway. Despite the ill-received nature of this collection, Gaultier did not back down from the challenge and the next

season he designed his first dress for men and started experimenting with more male nudity on the runway. At the time, these statements seemed large and bold, however, they were rather indirect and Gaultier avoided sharing his opinion on a specific event or topic, which is much of what is seen more recently.

Despite the controversy he sparked, Gaultier's influence has been one of the most long-lasting and positive, especially in queer communities, but also on the fashion community as a whole. His work promoted acceptance and self-expression, and he is openly queer himself. Gaultier's contribution to queer fashion has been seminal; He transformed many traditional forms of fashion and influenced later queer designers (Vänskä, 2014). His "bad boy" reputation was what made this influence so great, and sent the message to others that making political statements through their work can be beneficial to their work and their career. Today, Jean Paul Gaultier is considered a fashion icon and his success will continue on long after his career has ended.

Alexander McQueen followed in Gaultier's footsteps and when he arrived on the scene in the 90s he was the next proclaimed "L'enfant Terrible" of the fashion community. From the very beginning of his career he made historically based, politically charged fashion collections. His graduate collection from the fashion school Central Saint Martins was titled "Jack The Ripper Stalks His Victims" and portrayed McQueen's perception of the bloody history of Jack the Ripper through fashion (Bolton, 2021). Included as well in the collection were locks of McQueen's own hair sewn into the clothing, representative of victorian era prostitutes who claimed their clients with locks of hair (Bolton, 2021). McQueen learned very quickly that the boldness that brought such success to designers such as Gaultier could work in his favor as well. His graduate collection was bought outright by Isabella Blow, a wealthy fashion collector who provided

McQueen with enough money to start his own fashion house (Bolton, 2021). This level of success as a graduate student is rare and McQueen is one of few fashion designers who can boast such an accomplishment before his career even started. This collection foreshadowed and perhaps motivated McQueen's flair for the dramatics along with his historical interest.

Alexander McQueen's most controversial collection was his fall 1995 collection entitled "Highland Rape" (Elenowitz-Hess, 2020). This show was designed to represent the historical "ethnic rape" of the Scottish highlands (McQueen's heritage home) by the English, as well as was partly influenced by the abuse McQueen witnessed his older sister suffer from her husband (Elenowitz-Hess, 2020). The collection showcased women dressed in clothing resembling battle armor, women who were meant to be depicted as survivors not victims. The designs varied from dresses appearing to be hard and metallic, to spiked weapon looking corsets, and torn remnants of clothing clinging to the body, all in Scotland's colors (Elenowitz-Hess, 2020). This collection was not well received by the public and at the time McQueen was labeled terribly. Many called him a misogynist, but McQueen said to call him misogynistic was to acknowledge the misogyny bred into society because highland rape specifically was intended to mirror how society treats women (Bolton, 2019). This collection was only McQueen's third professional display and it has been one of his most profound and successful pieces of work he produced, even if many called it a failure at the time. It is still one of the most talked about fashion collections to date, and is often used as a typifying example of McQueen's genius and success that has been analyzed and honored by many.

Vivienne Westwood, the so-called "Princess of Punk", was one of the first designers to leave little to the imagination with her statements on the runway. Westwood carries the title of fashion designer as well as activist. She first began her famous climate change protests in 2013

with her runway “climate revolution”, followed it in 2014 with “climate change zombies”, and continued in 2016 when her models displayed signs saying “Fracking is a crime” and “Austerity is a crime” (Chan, 2019). Westwood has publicly donated the proceeds of these shows to climate change efforts. She has even gone as far to request her previous work no longer be sold, and began manufacturing single copies of each of her designs in 2013 to not add to landfills (Alvarez, 2014). This shows that the statements weren’t just meant to be flashy and to bring attention to the brand, but rather the issues Westwood felt passionately about. Climate change is just a small example of the activism Vivienne Westwood has done through her work as a fashion designer. In 2006 her brand released T-shirts with the words “I’m not a terrorist, please don’t arrest me” displayed in response to Britain’s strict anti-terror laws (Chan, 2019). While Westwood’s statements are never indirect and certainly contribute to her fame in the fashion community, she seems to have different motivations than other designers.

Another designer who has not shied away from making direct statements is Demna, the creative director of Balenciaga who has shocked many with the work he’s released since joining the fashion house in 2015. A key difference between Westwood and Demna is that as a new member of the brand, Demna orchestrated his controversial shows to frame him as cutting-edge and worthy of a long-lasting legacy. For example, Demna has taken to tapping into his own trauma from growing up a refugee of the Russo-Georgian war and putting warnings to the threat of war in his designs (Judd, 2022). These messages have been displayed over a series of apocalyptic scenes including fiery pits and muddy ditches, but his Fall 2022 collection was the most abrasive and unsettling. The collection was revealed in a setting of “nuclear winter”, with the speakers chanting warnings of nuclear destruction, and messages of Demna’s own sorrows of the Russia-Ukraine war, from the perspective of a refugee (Judd, 2022). This show, as well as the

series that came before it, brought upon a lot of attention, a mix of controversy and respect to Demna as a designer and Balenciaga as a fashion house.

Demna's experimentation with controversy has taken a bad turn and there has been little variation in public opinion of his brand's latest scandal. Specifically, many celebrities and figures within the fashion community have spoken out against Balenciaga as a whole after their most recent holiday campaign. The campaign labeled "Balenciaga Gift Shop" included photographs of children holding monster-like teddy bears in bondage gear, next to gift bags with copies of paperwork regarding child pornography laws (Paton, Friedman, Testa, 2022). The message Demna was trying to send is unclear, however it is clear he was trying to one-up himself in his ability to push the boundaries. Perhaps he craves the beloved troublemaker status of the previously mentioned designers, seeing as pushing the envelope was what defined their success. This decision was a damaging blow to Demna's career and has the ability to spread a dangerous influence as Balenciaga is one of the most famous fashion brands today.

During the most recent fashion week in Paris, Kanye West angered a lot of people with his Yeezy Season 9 show. The show was kept a secret until just hours before, yet a considerable audience attended, perhaps drawn by the very unpredictability that surrounds Kanye West and his fame (Satran, 2022). In 2009 he made the switch to fashion designer and with his level of fame and exposure he has the ability to spread his messages far and wide. During his most recent show West displayed T-shirts with the words "White Lives Matter" printed on them and later in the same day took to Instagram to share the message "Everyone knows that Black Lives Matter was a scam. Now it's over - you're welcome" (Satran, 2022). Considering the following he has on Instagram alone, it is dangerous for Kanye West to be sharing such ideas.

His fame can be traced back through a series of public scandals and bad decisions, yet these recent actions seem to mark a new turning point in West's reputation. His status has begun declining after this display at his show and various other hateful words shared on social media and in interviews. Kanye West has been publicly dropped from 90% of his professional partnerships in 2022 alone (Satran, 2022). There is a shared sentiment through most that the Yeezy Season 9 show, as well as other actions taken by the designer of the brand, have crossed the line and cannot be accepted. It is likely that Kanye West will not recover from the damages this is going to cause his career, as some of the biggest names in fashion today have condemned him and will no longer support his brand.

The fashion industry is a never-changing one, with endless open doors for new talents, all of whom fight for the spotlight. Fashion designers such as Jean Paul Gaultier and Alexander McQueen are examples of fashion designers who have successfully crossed the lines of fashion and politics, leaving long-lasting legacies in their wake. The two designers learned that making controversial statements would get people talking about their work, and they ended up being some of the most well-known and influential names in fashion. They both had a perfect balance of controversy and expression, supporting what they believed in but leaving a sense of mystery and abstractness to their collections. Vivienne Westwood took influence from both Gaultier and McQueen, but transformed her messages into direct protests, never afraid of sharing her opinions on a plethora of topics, but mostly climate change. Unlike designers like Demna and Kanye West, Westwood's statements are born from a place of true passion and activism while the two male designers seem to try something new for fame and relevancy. The messages they spread in this fight for attention are dangerous. While they might strive for the positive instigator status of

fashion icons like Jean Paul Gaultier and Alexander McQueen the nature of their work cannot be emulated.

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