POLITICAL STATEMENTS IN CONCEPTUAL FASHION:
THE VOICE OF NATIONAL SENTIMENTS
AS A SELF-REFERENCE IN THE READY-TO-WEAR COLLECTIONS
OF ALEXANDER McQUEEN AND HUSSEIN CHALAYAN

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Abstract

This paper explores conceptual approaches to designing and presenting ready-to-wear fashion collections. The research focuses on political and cultural identity statements expressed in the work of contemporary fashion designers Alexander McQueen and Hussein Chalayan. They both use much of their personal histories, cultural identities and political concerns as a self-referent standing point for the conceptual frame of their seasonal fashion collections. The analysis shows that although they use their work to convey political and social messages, a risky and courageous artistic approach for fashion business, their collections (and other fashion projects) remain commercially successful.

Keywords: fashion, conceptual fashion, ready-to-wear collection, political statements, national and cultural identity, national sentiments, artistic self-reference.
Introduction:

The politics of identity are closely associated with the clothing we choose to wear. Clothes are our important personal system of visual communication, through which we express our sexual orientation, social affiliation, profession, lifestyle, ethnic identity and other personal attributes. But when we speak of fashion, we need to make a clear distinction between “ceremonial, occupational and ethnographic” dress and the clothes chosen for our “desire for stylistic novelty”. The hunger for “new” fashion products has established the fashion system around the seasonal schedule of Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter Ready-to-Wear collections. Such strictly defined fashion cycle puts apparent pressure on designers to deliver their creative products in timely fashion, considering the nature of the whole process that includes research, designing, prototyping, orders, manufacturing, marketing and so on. The high pressure caused by this tight schedule and the unavoidable industry-for-profit dependency puts on table the cultural significance of produced fashion designs/products. Anti-fashion emerges as a response to temporary character of fashion, articulating the artistic needs of fashion designers for leaving behind a deeper and long-lasting cultural impact. On the other side, many artists of the 20th century used their artistic freedom to explore clothes as an important form of artistic expression. “Artwear”, “unwearables”, “conceptual clothing” are the forms in which artists searched for a form to manifest their personal, social and political anxieties.

Throughout history the relationship between art and fashion has become deep and complex, with many ways of connection. As Germano Celant, Luigi Settembrini & Ingrid Sischy, curators of Art/Fashion Biennale di Firenze 1996 point out: “The Biennale spotlight their relationships in all types of ways; you will find examples

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3 Ready-to-wear or prêt-à-porter is the term for factory-made clothing, sold in finished condition, in standardized sizes, as distinct from bespoke clothing made to measure for a particular person. http://www.answers.com/topic/ready-to-wear
of cross-pollination\(^5\), differences, collaboration, conflict and inspiration”. Constructivism, Surrealism and Conceptual Art are the art movements that offered a solid framework for flourishing relationship with fashion: Constructivism, with its ideological platform of “art for a purpose” and utilization; Surrealism, with its desire for inventions and unconventionality and Conceptual art for its aim to create a meaning, to boost intellectual processes and raise levels of consciousness. Artists and designers have become aware that fashion that can challenge our memories, archetypes, fears, anxieties, desires. Many contemporary artists such as Alexander Rodchenko, Sonia Delaunay, Giorgio de Chirico, Joseph Beuys, Lucio Fontana, Christo and Roy Lichtenstein have created artifacts that are bright evidence of these relationships. The collaboration of Elsa Schiaparelli and Salvador Dali is a bright example: the Skeleton Dress (Figure 1), the Desk Suit (inspired by Dalí’s sculpture in (Figure 2) and the Shoe Hat (Figure 3) are just a few products of their shared artistic inquiry.

Figure 1 – Schiaparelli & Dali, Skeleton Dress (black crepe), Circus Collection, 1938
Figure 2 – Salvador Dali, Venus de Milo with Drawers, 1936. Idea later used by Schiaparelli for the Desk Suit
Figure 3 – Elsa Schiaparelli, Shoe Hat, 1937. Inspired by Salvador Dali once putting a slipper on his head

Schiaparelli is a fashion avant-garde who has employed artistic innovations into her designs while managing to keep her fashion business commercially successful. The pioneering collaboration between Schiaparelli and Dali led the way for other designers to take the risk of experimenting with art while balancing with the fashion momentum.

\(^5\) Means transfer of pollen or influence / inspiration between or among diverse elements (www.thefreedisctionary.com/cross-pollination)
Conceptual Fashion and its Political “Warriors”

“Conceptual fashion” should not be mixed with “conceptual clothing”. While conceptual clothing is an artistic instrument for conveying certain messages and can be unwearable, conceptual fashion is a wearable category of a commercial value. Nonetheless, it is not so “much about forms and materials, but about ideas and meanings”\(^6\). Having all this in mind, we now raise the question of how a fashion designer can beat dualism between commercialism and conceptuality? Or, how one designer can retain the practical (wearable) side of their products while using them for conveying deep philosophical, social and political messages? Apparently there must be designers who want to use fashion for such messages and customers who are interested to wear such fashion as a symbol for identification. According to Joshua Miller\(^7\) clothes serve two political functions: 1) they challenge the society’s dominant symbols, and 2) they unite groups that challenge the society’s dominant ideas and imagery. Clothes are important symbol of collective identity, therefore can foster feelings of pride and community. In the 20th century T-shirts turned into a popular media for expressing political thoughts and collective affiliation. The T-shirts with the portrait of revolutionist Che Guevara are still one of the best-sellers, from the Sixties to present days. But an important change occurred in the beginning of the Eighties, when some brave designers like Katharine Hamnett and Vivienne Westwood made political statements themselves, wearing their provocative fashion designs. For example, Hamnett met the Prime minister Margaret Tatcher wearing a T-shirt saying “58% don’t want Pershing”. This T-shirt was a part of Hamnett’s Ready-to-Wear collection “Choose Life”, Autumn/Winter 1983/84.

90’s and the New Consciousness in Fashion - it is undoubtedly clear that fashion reflects the spirits of the times. After the hedonism of the eighties, a new wave of social consciousness and avant-garde approach has colored the fashion industry. The reaction against Globalism, consumerism and culture of excess has injected the notions of social consciousness, spirituality, authenticity and ecological awareness. Designers came up with minimalistic design concepts influenced by non-Western cultural traditions. Designers like Issey Miyake, Rifat Ozbek, Dries van Noten, Martin Margiela brought modernity on the fashion stage. Rei Kawakubo referenced the horrors of Auschwitz in his Spring collection 1995 for Comme des Garçons titled “Sleep”. But it was Alexander McQueen and Hussein Chalayan, both students of London’s Saint Martins College of Art & Design, who fascinated the fashion public with their graduation shows in 1993 and 1994 and

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soon established themselves as the fore-fronts of British conceptual fashion. Both are dealing with various provocative themes in their work, but one of these themes is very common for them: their national and cultural identities. The two designers have ethnic backgrounds from small and oppressed nationalities (Scotland and Northern Cyprus) and both developed professionally in the realm of the British culture, so they have plenty to say on their personal cultural experiences. They bring the element of self-referencing as quite courageous and unusual in the array of fashion inspirations. Mostly, inspirations are drawn from the outside world (nature, artifacts, historical costumes, fashion products etc.)\textsuperscript{8}. McQueen and Chalayan will refer to their personal histories and identities for some of their most exciting fashion projects to date. Moreover, they didn’t dare to hide their thoughts on some of the hottest political issues in the past decades: Scottish independence and the political status of Northern Cyprus.

**Alexander McQueen**

Alexander McQueen\textsuperscript{9} was born in London in 1969 as the youngest of six children. At the age of 16 he started his apprenticeship in Saville Row, learning the secrets of bespoke English tailoring. With the theatrical costumiers Angels and Bermans he mastered 6 methods of pattern cutting from the melodramatic 16th Century to the razor sharp tailoring which has become a McQueen signature. After working with Koji Tatsuno and Romeo Gigli, he returns to London in 1994 to complete the MA course in Fashion Design at St. Martins.

He soon became known for his highly provocative and emotional collections. Juxtaposing contrasting elements and the principle of chock in his work, he contextualized much of his historical and cultural background in the avant-garde collections and catwalk shows.

The enfant-terrible of British fashion infused the power of conceptual art performances on the catwalk, the power that has been brought to art scene earlier by another enfant-terrible: the German art colossus Joseph Beuys. But, it is not only the desire to “trigger intellectual processes, strengthening and developing consciousness”\textsuperscript{10} through their work, but an emotional wound that both suffered from: their countries’ defeat at some point in history. Beuys had the trauma of his country’s defeat in the Second World War (he was directly involved as a fighter pilot in the Luftwaffe) while McQueen could not put out of mind the “ghost” that has chased him following his Scottish ancestors’ defeat by the British in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century.


\textsuperscript{9} Biographical data source: www.alexandermcqueen.com

\textsuperscript{10} Franz Meyer quoted in The Art of Modernism, pp. 507.
Of course, being of a Scottish descent, McQueen could not avoid his national identity and inclusion of elements of the Scottish traditional dress in his designs. But from there he went furthermore, waving some visible threads of his ancestral history in his collections. The strong national sentiments towards Scotland were the autobiographical reference in his 1995 collection “Highland Rape” (figures 4 - 11). “Highland Rape” clearly shows that McQueen is dealing” with unresolved past events”11.

The story is about the “rape” of the Scottish nation done by the British. McQueen’s ancestors - the Jacobite Highland-Scots, were defeated in the Battle of Culloden in 1746 and then expelled by the British troops under the Duke of Cumberland. But McQueen’s angst is much more targeted to Cumberland’s 1746 Dress Act clause in the Act of Proscription, which made it illegal to wear Highland-Scot pieces of clothing, the tartan kilt and Highland military shoulder belt12. The tartans (and the clothes themselves) are the main identifiers of the Highland clans system, so this act was seen as a brutal “murder” of the Scottish cultural identity (at the catwalk show there were fake battle wounds, thorn clothes and ripped kilts). According to David Miller13 national beliefs can only be transmitted through cultural artifacts which are available to everyone who belongs. With his “Highland Rape” collection McQueen sought the freedom of cultural expression, but at the same time he emphasized the importance of dress in one’s personal and collective identity. Nationality, identity and culture are inseparably connected in symbiosis. McQueen proved that nationality as a crucially important concept of collectivity is part of each personal identity and as such may also have an important influence in one’s professional life.

12 Ibid 
McQueen shocks the fashion stage with his avant-garde fashion concepts but the brand remains commercially successful. The label has survived the turmoils of the highly competitive market. In 2000, 51% of Alexander McQueen was acquired by the Gucci Group, where he remains to this day as Creative Director. Collections include women’s ready-to-wear, men’s ready-to-wear, accessories, eyewear and fragrance. Expansion followed and included the opening of flagship stores in New York, London and Milan. Alexander McQueen collections are distributed in 39 countries through 194 wholesale accounts including specialty shops and department stores. McQueen also made successful partnerships with Puma and Samsonite. He has won a number of prestigious awards in fashion and was included in the list of the 25 most influential people in Britain’s fashion industry today.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Hussein Chalayan}

Hussein Chalayan\textsuperscript{15} is a Turkish Cypriot born in Nicosia in 1970. He started his education in Cyprus and then moved to London, where he graduated from Central St. Martins College of Art and Design in 1993. With his graduate collection “Tangent Flows” he immediately launches himself as innovative designer, burring his iron filings-covered silk dresses in the ground for months before exhuming them. Since his first commercial collection in 1994, Chalayan has delivered more than 30 ready-to-wear collections, without losing his conceptual and visionary approach in work. As stated in “From Fashion and back”\textsuperscript{16} exhibition brochure, “Chalayan’s work demonstrates his unique ability to combine beautiful and wearable clothes for today with an intriguing vision of the future”. What he wants to offer through his shows is a “cultural experience for the spectators”. Chalayan is

\textsuperscript{14} Voted by the British Fashion Council Press Committee (www.husseinchalayan.com)
\textsuperscript{15} Biographical data source: www.husseinchalayan.com
\textsuperscript{16} From Fashion and Back, 22 January – 17 May 2009, Design Museum London
dedicated to attain a high place in the cultural sphere, doing art projects, art exhibitions and collaborations. On the commercial side of the business, he sells worldwide and continuously gets sponsorship support by the big industry players like Swarowski, Marks & Spenser, Dupont, Turquality, Arcadia Group and Puma. His designs are nowadays wore by celebrities like Jennifer Lopez, Katy Perry and Lady Gaga. For his achievements Chalayan has been awarded a number of prestigious awards in fashion and like his colleague McQueen was included in the list of the 25 most influential people in Britain’s fashion industry today\textsuperscript{17}.

Conceptual and visionary approach for Chalayan means quest into interdisciplinary spheres. His work is inspired by technology, science, philosophy, anthropology, politics, architecture. With Chalayan we cannot witness a typical visual inspiration reference to historical costumes or art pieces (as with i.e. Vivien Westwood or John Galliano). Hussein Chalayan rather digs into his personal history and cultural identity. What has defined him as author is his life torn between two cultural identities – the Cypriot and the British. The complexity of living with multiple ethnic and cultural identities has led him to themes such as nationality, migration, refugees, forced displacement, and ethnic cleansing. The collection “After Words” for Autumn/Winter 2000 bursts with ethnic-cultural self-references. In one of the most exciting fashion presentations in the past decades, Chalayan makes a strong political statement on the terrors of war and displacement. Very short after the Kosovo crisis in 1999 and the huge swathes of Albanian and Serbian refugees, he used his collection to remind on the Cyprus dispute and the ethnic cleansing in 1974. His own family has struggled in the period of displacement, when Cyprus has been divided in two parts – Greek domination in the South and Turkish domination in the North. It is estimated that up to 200.000 Greek Cypriots and 65.000 Turkish Cypriots were displaced by the Turkish invasion on the island\textsuperscript{18}. Chalayan presented its collection as artistic performance, moving away from a typical catwalk show. He used Sadler’s Wells Theatre in London for staging the performance. Moreover, he produced the “After Words” video from the performance, which entered the portfolio of his art projects. The performance starts with 5 people sitting on chairs, representing a family (Figure 12). There is a round coffee table in the middle. When the models appear on stage, they clothe themselves with the clothes hidden on chairs (Figures 13 – 16); the coffee table becomes a skirt (Figures 17 – 19). The furniture transforms into wearable pieces and embodies Chalayan’s concept for a mobile environment.

Chalayan’s aesthetical concept is evident: he goes back to Constructivism\textsuperscript{19} and its geometry, reductionism, sculpturalism, kinetics, and apparent absence of

\textsuperscript{17} Voted by the British Fashion Council Press Committee (www.husseinchalayan.com)
\textsuperscript{18} According to UNHCR
\textsuperscript{19} Constructivism is artistic and architectural movement born in Russia 1913, which found followers across Europe.
emotions. The whiteness of the stage (a room) where the show is held emphasizes the moods of minimalism and calmness. It is obvious that Chalayan doesn’t want to evoke feelings of anxiety. Instead, he offers a sanctuary. He makes a safe heaven, a shelter for the refugees he refers to. Giving refugees a chance to take their possessions with them, is a way of self-healing for Chalayan. He finds a design solution to the problem of displacement and gives his family, his people and at the end all other refugees a compensation for their emotional struggle. In other words, he expresses his deep sentiments of belonging and compassion.
In his “Ambimorphous” collection (2002), Hussein Chalayan again refers to his ethnical roots and plays with his personal experience of dealing with two cultures: Eastern (Turkish) and Western (British). He uses a traditional Turkish dress as a starting point, which gradually transforms into a black, modern western coat. The
process reversibly moves back to the traditional dress. All phases of these transformations are “frozen” into separates of the collection. The concept clearly points on Chalayan’s concerns about the place of traditions into the modern, globalized world. At the same time, the audience can witness his personal sentiments towards the oriental culture and the desire for keeping this part of himself very much alive.

![Figure 22 - 25 Hussein Chalayan, “Temporal Meditations”, Ready-to-Wear collection, Spring/Summer 2004. Photo credits 22, 23 © Gordana Vrencoska. 24, 25 source: www.husseinchalayan.com](image)

The collection titled “Temporal Meditations” brings a journey in time, connecting past and present of his native country – Cyprus. Through narrative
illustrations of historical routes of migrations, he once again wants to remind on his ethnical roots and preserve the heritage of his people’s history. The illustrations are printed on the fabrics used for the separates. These garments become “an archeological talisman”\textsuperscript{20} and frozen fragments of one’s “meditations” for his national and cultural identity.

Alexander McQueen and Hussein Chalayan are certainly not alone in their artistic passion for their national and cultural identity. There are many other artists and designers who are dealing with these issues, but a strong connection can be made with one lady who dealt with multiple identities much earlier than themselves, and used clothing to express belonging in her art works. Frida Kahlo, one of the greatest artists of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, has been obsessed with her complex personal and national identity throughout whole life and career. Kahlo is of a mixed race – German Jewish and Mexican. The influences of the indigenous Mexican culture on one side and the European culture on other side are seen in greater part of her work.

“It is only when you meet someone of a different culture from yourself that you begin to realize what your own believes are” Gorge Orwell once said. After spending 4 years in the USA, Frida Kahlo’s patriotism towards Mexico has strengthen even more. In one of her paintings titled \textit{Self-portrait on the Borderline} she juxtaposes both cultures, the rural Mexican and industrialized American, placing herself in the middle. By wearing traditional Mexican Tehuana dress and holding the Mexican flag in her hands, she expresses her loyalty to her native country. In his text for the retrospective exhibition of Frida Kahlo in Tate Modern London, 2005, Burton argues that Kahlo makes “a political statement in support of an authentic and independent Mexican heritage”\textsuperscript{21}

In the painting \textit{Tree of Hope} there are two Frida Kahlos, two distinct selves (and the struggles between them); one of them is closer to her public personality, the proud and exotically dressed Mexican woman who identified strongly with her homeland, and the other the more private self, the woman who suffered harsh pain. Showing the other self lying on a hospital bed, she shows her history of the countless medical operations she had to undertake for recovering from the traffic accident she had as a young woman.

\textsuperscript{20} As cited in the exhibition’s brochure. \textit{From Fashion and Back}, 22 January – 17 May 2009, Design Museum London
Conclusions:

Clothes are important instrument for personal and collective identification. They are also used by artists and designers for conveying important social, cultural and political messages. In fashion design, there is a movement called “conceptual fashion”, which aims at using wearable clothes for raising consciousness and dealing with important social issues. As fashion is highly commercial system established around the seasonal collection schedule Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer, it is difficult for conceptual designers to juggle between their artistic conceptual needs and the commercial demands of the industry. Two successful contemporary conceptual designers - Alexander McQueen and Hussein Chalayan are managing the above mentioned fashion dualities even though they tackle highly provocative, often self-referential issues in their work (Ready-to-Wear collections): political disputes, national and cultural oppression, ethnic cleansing, displacement, diminishment of local cultural values, etc. We assumed that Alexander McQueen and Hussein Chalayan’s formula for successfully managing the fashion dualism is based on several important principles:

- Continuous presence in the fashion industry and “disciplined” consideration of the fashion cycle Autumn/Winter and Spring/Summer
- Employing innovation in designing and presentation
- Powerful, narrative and memorable catwalk shows, mostly presented as art performances (unusual content within a usual context)
- Employing high-level design concepts and innovative couture techniques
- Nurturing the cultural aspect of work, involving deeply human concerns and modern anxieties in a fashion context
- Partnership with strong fashion industry players who financially support the designers’ labels and experimental projects

Заклучок:

Облеката е важен инструмент за лична и колективна идентификација. Исто така, облеката е средство што уметниците и дизајнерите го употребуваат за испраќање на важни општествени, културни и политички пораки. Во модниот дизајн постои правец наречен концептуална мода, во кој дизајнерите се стремат кон употреба на нослива, готова облека за зголемување на јавната свест и поставување на важни општествени прашања. Бидејки модата е високо-комерцијален систем, еставиран околу сезонското производство на колекции Есен/Зима и Пролет/Лето, за концептуалните дизајнери претставува тешкощца да балансираат помеѓу нивните уметнички потреби и комерцијалните барања на индустритата. Успешните современи концептуални дизајнери Александар Меквин и Хусеин Чалајан умешно се справуваат со модниот дуализам, иако во своите модни колекции допираат провокативни, често и автореферентни прашања: политички спорови, национални и културни потлачености, етничко чистење, раселување, намалување на локалните културни вредности и сл. Нивната формула за успешно балансирање на модниот дуализам можеме да ја согледаме преку следниве важни принципи што ги применуваат:

- Континуирано присуство во модната индустрија и дисциплинирано почитување на модниот циклус Есен/Зима и Пролет/Лето
- Примена на иновации во дизајнирањето и презентирањето
- Мощни, наративни и впечатливи модни ревии, презентирани како уметнички перформанси (необична содржина во вообичаен контекст)
- Примена на издржани дизајн концепти и иновативни техники на кроење
- Негување на културниот аспект во работата, вклучувајќи актуелни теми со голема важност за човекот, во моден контекст
- Партнерство со моќни играчи од модната индустрија, кои ги подржуваат дизајнерите и нивните брендови и експериментални проекти.
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