The Nature of Alexander McQueen:
The Aesthetics of Fashion Design as a Site of Environmental Change

BY

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1.0 Introduction

In 1964, Marshall McLuhan revolutionized communication theory with his bold statement “the medium is the message.” He believed that in order to understand a society, we should look at the way they tell stories rather than the stories they tell. The form in which narratives are presented can give clues to how we might interpret the content (McLuhan 1964, 203). As a perfect example of “the medium is the message,” cubist paintings drop the “illusion of perspective” in favour of viewing the painting as a whole, rather than a sum of its parts (McLuhan 1964, 205). McLuhan continued to argue that humans interpret technology as an extension of themselves, giving it the ability to affect our social, cultural and emotional lives (McLuhan 1964, 203). New technologies can change how we relate to ourselves, and have a fundamental impact on who we are as people.

Television and books are not the sole definition of media, just as technology is not limited to cell phones and computers. Fashion seamlessly fits into the categories of media and technology, therefore we can analyze it with McLuhan’s insights in mind. Fashion, like art, is a form of media because they both have the power to reach a large audience through mass communication. Fashion is also a technology because we use it to perform a number of functions; to cover our bodies, keep us warm and express our identities. Despite the common trivialization of fashion as a serious field of study, we should not underestimate its ability to spread messages (Townsend 2002, 16). For example, the act of wearing fur can be read as either a love of luxury goods or a lack of concern for animal rights etc. Fashion is a crucial part of entertainment, pop culture and the economy, and can have its own unique impact on culture, such as the miniskirt craze of the 1960s. We had better start taking it seriously if we seek a deeper understanding of how it can affect our culture.

There is nowhere fashion seems more out of place than in the modern environmental movement, which tends to be visualized as fleece pullovers and dirty boots rather than glossy magazines.
and glamorous runway shows. Though the marriage between fashion and environmentalism is an unlikely one, we are far overdue to study the impact of fashion on the environmental movement. In the last 20 years, there has been increased focus on “eco-fashion” – clothing designed with the environment in mind, using sustainable textiles like organic cotton, hemp or attempting to close the materials loop by repurposing recycled fabrics into new garments. Yet fashion is in the business of creating new things and selling a desirable image, and we have yet to explore how the image of fashion can impact attitudes towards the natural environment. This paper delves into the significant ties between fashion and art, viewing both as vital tools of communication through which environmental messages are communicated. Both make a statement on the environment simply by transmitting images of nature from producer (artist) to consumer. I have chosen to develop my argument using the works of contemporary fashion designer Alexander McQueen (1969-2010) to articulate how images of nature represented in clothing on the runway can affect attitudes towards the environment. Alexander McQueen was a lauded British fashion designer who incorporated prominent images of nature into his designs, from gazelle horned jackets to bird-of-prey ball gowns. His work was both critically acclaimed and massively popular, and his designs are works of art in themselves, worthy of further examination.

2.0 What is art?

In order to successfully argue that Alexander McQueen’s fashion designs constitute works of art, we must agree upon a solid definition of art. The boundaries of what constitutes art are almost indeterminably wide and there have been innumerable arguments as to what should and should not be considered art. In 1982, art philosopher Monroe Beardsley wrote, “a work of art is...an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character” (Iseminger 2004, 5). Beardsley’s definition accounts for the fact that art takes a number of forms including, painting, sculpture, music and poetry.
The artist perceives the world through the artist’s unique lens and filters their perception to present an image of reality (or the absurd) that communicates a message on some aspect of the world to the viewer. Georg Hegel defined three conditions of art that position art as a tool of communication.

1. A work of art is no product of Nature. It is brought into being through the agency of [humans].
2. It is created essentially for [humans] and what is more it is to a greater or lesser degree delivered from a sensuous medium and addresses to [his or her] senses.
3. It contains an end bound up with it (Hegel 1886, 342).

Art not only gives us a way to be creative and express ourselves, it allows us to express our thoughts and feelings in a unique way. A work of art presents something that the artist wants us to see and think about differently and has the power to inspire ideas and action. Successful art is a form of communication, making a statement and creating an emotional connection between artist and viewer (Tolstoy 1896, 410).

However, a work of art does not necessarily have to be created by an artist in order to make a statement. Found objects can be art because even though they have been previously created to serve a different purpose, placing them into an artistic context forces us to view the object in a new light. The most famous example of a found object in modern art is Fountain by Marcel Duchamp, who purchased a porcelain urinal and proclaimed it art after scrawling the initials “R. MUTT 1917” on the side (Gayford, 2008). The public was incensed after Fountain was displayed in New York. People wanted it removed for being indecent or failing to meet their criteria of what constituted art. An image of Fountain was later reproduced in the avant-garde magazine The Blind Man, accompanied by an anonymous defense of its artistic quality. The author wrote “Whether Mr Mutt made the fountain with his own hands or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an article of life, placed it so that its useful
significance disappeared under the new title and point of view - created a new thought for that object" (Gayford, 2008). This defense of Fountain’s artistic integrity affirms that even art for art’s sake makes a purposeful statement.

In order to be art, it has to make us think about something (anything, really) in a very different way. Cubism heralded a new method of thinking about perspective in art (Hughes 1980, 16). Realistic art portrays a conventional way of seeing things, whereas cubism posits that our knowledge of object must take every possible angle into account (Hughes 1980, 20). In an effort to represent the world more accurately, ironically, cubism made it more abstract.

2.1 Art as a tool of visual communication

In one of the most-well known explorations of art, Leo Tolstoy wrote that above all else, art must be able to affect the viewer (Tolstoy 1897, 410). A work of art must create a specific emotional link between the artist and the audience (Tolstoy 1897, 410). Tolstoy treated art as a tool of visual communication, based on the transfer of ideas.

Upon closer inspection, there are a number of ways in which art can communicate with its viewers. Art is capable of communicating messages, information, mental states as well as a more direct artist-audience communication (Trivedi 1999, 3). The messages art communicates may have extreme political or social significance (Trivedi 1999, 3). Art can communicate mental states that include diverse human emotions and moods, as well as information about the world or the work of art itself (Trivedi 1999, 3). The last form of communication is artist-audience communication, which suggests a “correct” understanding of a work of art (Trivedi 1999, 3). There are a number of different philosophies on the ‘proper’ way to appreciate art. Some believe that there is only one correct way to appreciate art, to see exactly what the artist intended you to see. Others believe that the best form of
appreciation is the one that provides you with the most enjoyment of the art (Brady 2003, 75). However, not all artists work with rigorously defined standards of intention, and viewing art should be an experience unto itself rather than navigating a labyrinth of specific artistic intention.

When people claim that a work of art does not “speak to them,” they suggest only that they have failed to grasp the artist-audience communication (Trivedi 1999, 3). According to Tolstoy, artist-audience communication is the only form of artistic communication, as the purpose of art is to foster feelings of unity and universal brotherhood (Tolstoy 1897, 410). Tolstoy’s definition advances a very narrow understanding of artistic communication. Art has the power to communicate ideas and concepts across cultures and beyond spoken language, yet a universal interpretation of an artwork is impossible, as each person may perceive a different quality in the same work of art (Natural World Museum 2007, 170). Art does not have to convey something specific from artist to viewer, it merely has to convey something.

3.0 Art and the Environment

In his 1973 classic Shock of the New, Robert Hughes wrote that: “Until about 50 years ago, images of nature were the key to expressing feeling in art” (Hughes 1973, 324). Artists used the many aspects of nature - life, death, renewal, complexity – as metaphors for examining the Self and Other (Hughes 1973, 324). But as people migrated towards cities in an increasing number, this acute sense of kinship with nature has dimmed. We now live in what Hughes deems “a forest of media,” and turn to culture and mass media as an analogue for our feelings, instead of nature (Hughes 1973, 324).

Literary critic Northrop Frye claimed that the goal of art is to “recapture, in full consciousness, that original lost sense of identity with our surroundings, where there is nothing outside the mind of [humans]” (Evernden 1978, 19). Art is a function of culture, and as humans exist increasingly in the
built environment we call upon culture to bring us back to nature. Art created with a message to disseminate is purposeful; therefore all representations of the environment are purposeful. From the placidity of a Constable painting to the beautiful destruction encompassed in a Burtynsky photograph, all environmental art is created to make us think and feel a certain way about the environment.

3.1 **Art as a tool of environmental communication**

To experience raw nature, seemingly free from human influence is to experience profound emotions; one can be moved by the beauty of the landscape, or even experience a direct spiritual connection to place (Cronon 1995, 70). Landscape art helps communicate these emotions to those who have not had the chance to experience nature firsthand. The stretching photographs of Yosemite Park by Ansel Adams communicate this vast wilderness, yet they are most often viewed far away from the reach of nature, in the sterile environment of an art gallery or even from the comfort of your own home.

To connect with nature through art is to see and to feel the majesty of nature through the artist’s eyes. For example, Edward Burtynsky creates visually compelling photographic images of quarries, strip mines and tar sands. The environmental destruction he portrays is shocking, and yet the artists’ eye helps us find beauty in destruction. Burtynsky sees his own artwork as forbidden fruit; “we are visually compelled to look at the very thing we are trying not to see” (Natural World Museum 2007, 50). By making environmental destruction beautiful, it becomes something we can no longer ignore. Burtynsky makes us aware of the destructive processes that fuel our energy-dependent lifestyles and hopes that his work will persuade people to think about sustainability for the future (Natural World Museum 2007, 50). If art helps us to see beauty in nature, then we can hope that those who find beauty in nature are not inclined to harm it (Brady 2003, 259).
3.2 Art History: The Romantics as Environmental Artists

One of the earliest examples of art as a catalyst for environmental protection was the Romantic movement. Romanticism was a literary and art movement that originated in England during the 18th Century at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, and spread to Germany and France (Lister 1973, 8). Romanticism emerged as a critique of scientific rationality, and aimed to elevate sensory experience as a crucial part of understanding and appreciating life (Roszak 1973, 256). The preeminent scientists of the day were Francis Bacon and René Descartes, who aimed to devise a wholly impersonal way of knowing (Roszak 1973, 263). They sought universal truth through reason, untainted by individual perspective. Romantics saw this scientific method as a cold, calculating and joyless way of approaching the world and preferred an understanding of the world that was based on the imagination of the senses (Roszak 1973, 261).

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact impetus of Romanticism because it was so centered on individual sensory experience. Alice Mackrell wrote that romanticism was based on the expression of emotion and the power of intuition (Mackrell 2005, 46). Raymond Lister wrote that romanticism was characterized by curiosity and love of beauty (Lister 1973, 23). Both are correct. Overall, Romanticism emphasized the connection between raw emotions and the appreciation of beauty – awe, wonder, fear and terror were all closely aligned with the concept of the Sublime (Bolton 2010, 12). The Sublime is best described as a magnitude of greatness, often understood as an emotion expressed when encountering nature. The mathematically sublime happens when the magnitude of natural things surpasses our aesthetic imagination, and the dynamically sublime occurs when the might of nature overwhelms us and produces fear (Berleant 2004, 82).

Nature was often the subject of Romantic poetry and art as a device to portray “inner poetic reality” (Lister 1973, 165). Nature was beautiful on its own, but it also functioned as a tool for
understanding the human spirit. For example, some Romantics projected the human onto the natural by claiming their own transient spirit was reflected in the changing clouds (Lister 1973, 170). Romantics sought to live close to the land and believed that a lack of connection with nature debased the human spirit (Bate 1991, 33). John Stuart Mill wrote that “beauty, stability and endurance of nature” are necessary for human psychological and social well-being (Bate 1991, 33). However, Romantics understood nature from an anthropocentric rather than a biocentric perspective. They sought to elevate and preserve the natural environment through art and literature because of its resonance with the human soul, believing it was their duty to protect the landscape as “Earth’s thoughtful lord[s]” (Bate 1991, 40).

3.2.1 The Politics of Romanticism

As “Earth’s thoughtful lord[s],” Romantics may have placed themselves above nature on a fabricated natural hierarchy, but Romanticism instilled a new sense of responsibility in its disciples towards environmental preservation and wildlife. For example, William Beckford made his property, Fonthill Abbey, into a nature preserve where no hunting, shooting or fishing was allowed (Bate 1991, 160). In 1895, Rawnsley, Hill and Hunter created a charity titled “National Trust for Places of Historic Interest and Natural Beauty” to encourage nature appreciation and land preservation (Bate 1991, 48). William Wordsworth protested against the extension of the railway into England’s Lake District, and the Romantic movement as a whole inspired the creation of National Parks in England (Bate 1991, 48).

Romanticism provides us with a unique historical environmental perspective situated in “a respect for the earth and a skepticism as to the orthodoxy that economic growth and material production are the be all end all of our society” (Bate 1991, 9). The work of Romantics provided an alternative conception of nature to the one proposed by Industrialists, as William Blake wrote; “the tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others, only a Green thing that stands in the way”
(Lister 1973, 21). If seen purely from an economic viewpoint, nature is a resource that we can exploit to make a profit. But from a social viewpoint, nature becomes a source of inspiration, something to be appreciated rather than destroyed.

As previously stated, the two essential elements of Romanticism according to Lister are curiosity and a love of beauty (Lister 1973, 23). Curiosity necessitates the desire to explore and learn about nature, which in turn creates a sense of the recreational value of nature. Love of beauty corresponds with the desire to preserve nature due to its intrinsic value and experience nature for nature’s sake. In these ways, Romanticism gives nature an objective value and fosters a sense of nature appreciation within the individual.

4.0 What is fashion?

Fashion is often painted as the intersection of art and commerce, as designers walk a fine line between taking risks in their work to present a critically acclaimed collection versus making sure the clothing is practical and wearable enough to be sold in high-end department stores (Beckett 2007, 14). The two defining characteristics of fashion are popularity and change. Even if a garment appears on the runway, it is not necessarily fashion unless it become popular enough for consumers to adopt it (Wolfendale and Kennett 2011, 2). According to designer Cynthia Rowley “we have to sell something to continue to create” (Beckett 2007, 14). Fashion must have mass appeal in order to be economically sustainable.

Fashion changes each season, as it introduces new styles and silhouettes for the purpose of inspiring consumers to perceive a need for new, different items in their wardrobe (McRobbie 1999, 45). Consumers then fill that need by purchasing more clothing. Even the word fashion, as a verb means to alter. Art goes through periods where certain styles are prevalent among artists (cubism, abstract
impressionism). These could be considered ‘trends’, however they last longer than the change of seasons and are not necessarily market-driven.

4.1 Is Fashion Art?

Comme des Garçons designer Rei Kawakubo has stated: “Fashion is not art. You sell art to one person. Fashion comes in a series and it is a more social phenomenon. It is also something more personal and individual, because you express your personality. It is an active participation; art is passive” (Palomo-Lovinski 2010, 166). But if art is created to make people think and feel, it must be understood as active participation. People may not be able to wear a painting, but it can have just as much impact on their perspective as the clothing on their body. Art can engage in the dialogue of critical theory, taking an existing concept and reinterpreting it from the artist’s point of view to reveal elements that were previously unseen, therefore it plays an active role influencing attitudes and opinions (Townsend 2002, 16).

Regardless, the status of fashion as art remains a hotly debated topic. Historically, art was perceived as a noble pursuit, an expression of individual will where the hands (usually masculine) create what is inside the mind (Townsend 2002, 18). Fashion is not necessarily a ‘higher’ pursuit: its function is grounded in the practical construction of material into wearable garments. This early patriarchal conception of art is directly challenged by fashion, as sewing has long been associated with feminine gender roles. Sewing clothing for the family as a domestic activity done by women in the home dates back to Medieval and Early Modern Europe (Townsend 2002, 16). After the onset of the Industrial Revolution, women went to labour long hours as workers in garment factories. A blaze at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory on March 25th, 1911 killed a total of 146 people, mostly young women aged 14-23 who had recently immigrated to America (Marrin 2011, 3). Today, the fashion industry is dominated
by women who are involved in every step of the process from designing the garments to doing public relations for brand names, to modeling in runway shows (Townsend 2002, 16).

Despite their differences, fashion fits quite seamlessly into my aforementioned definition of art and can be viewed as its own unique branch of art, much like dance or poetry. Fashion fits into all three of Hegel’s conditions of art. Fashion is “no product of Nature” because it is designed by humans to be worn on the body (Hegel 1886, 342). It is addressed to both our visual and tactile senses. Different textures and materials in garments mirror the visual complexity of paintings and sculpture (Mackrell 2002, 156). Also, fashion has an “end bound up in it” (Hegel 1886, 342) because the garments were designed according to the specific intentions of the fashion designer.

The purpose of fashion is to create an image and make it desirable to consumers (McRobbie 1999, 13). Designers create their collections based around a specific idea, just like art. Each of Alexander McQueen’s collections had wide-ranging yet discernable inspiration behind each garment. For example, his first collection *Jack the Ripper Stalks His Victims* was based on portraying the dark, seedy side of Victorian London through clothing (Bolton 2011, 13). Also, the clothes are presented via runway collections that create an atmosphere based around the mood of the collection, an additional layer of artist’s intention in the presentation of the garment.

Not only do fashion designers have intention when they design garments, the person who buys and wears them also creates a mood depending on how they choose to wear the garment. A person can channel different moods, characters, time periods in their outfits depending on the garments and accessories they select to wear. Wearing designer clothing straight from the runway is a statement in itself: ‘I care about high fashion.’ The concept of art is often based on the pleasure of looking at something that produces an emotional reaction or inspires a thought, and the indulgence of fashion
brings us great pleasure as well (Townsend 2002, 18). Shopping is known to release small levels of serotonin in the brain, a chemical that is known to improve mood (Macnair, 2012).

Designer fashion can also become art based on the name printed on the garment label. Couturiers in the early 20th century had artistic aspirations and sought to distance themselves from the burgeoning mass production of clothing by sewing everything by hand (Mackrell 2005, 28). The famed designer Paul Poiret stated: “Ladies come to me as they go to a distinguished painter to get their portraits on canvas. I am an artist, not a dressmaker” (Mackrell 2005, 47). The designer label on a garment lends it an air of exclusivity and authenticity, which are important elements in the creation of art. Just as artists can sell limited editions of their prints in addition to the original work, haute couture is still an exquisite piece sold to a limited number of people (both have financial barriers to public accessibility). Bordieu and Desault back up Poiret’s personal assumption by writing “The couturier does nothing different than the painter who constitutes a given object as a work of art by the act of affixing [his/her] signature to it” (Mackrell 2005, 26).

Art borrows from fashion, and fashion from art. Fashion can exist as a branch of art or its own identity. In some cases, fashion and art have become so intertwined, so they are almost indistinguishable. In 1965, Yves St. Laurent showed dresses based on Piet Mondrian paintings (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2012). In 1982, the image of an Issey Miyake dress graced the cover of Artforum magazine (Townsend 2002, 59). Since then, the presence of fashion has grown in art museums around the world. Most people cannot afford to purchase original works of art, just as designer clothing is prohibitively expensive for all but the highest income brackets. The presence of high fashion in art galleries and museums make it more accessible to the public. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City staged a retrospective of Alexander McQueen’s designs shortly after his death in February 2010. This exhibit, Savage Beauty, was extremely popular with the general public and drew more than
660,000 visitors during its exhibition (Pollack 2012, 88). In a similar vein, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts presented The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk from June 17th to October 2nd, 2011 and an upcoming exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art will explore thematic similarities in the designs of Elsa Schiaparelli (1890-1973) and Miuccia Prada (1949-Present).

**4.2 Communication through Clothes: Fashion as a Tool of Self-Expression**

Humans have adapted to wear clothing for a number of reasons, including regulation of body temperature, concealment of the naked body and the construction of a visual identity. In Understanding Media, Marshall McLuhan articulated that clothing is worn directly on the skin to both cover and ornament the body and we use it to define ourselves socially (McLuhan 1964, 115). Clothing often helps to form the first impression we have of other people, and can be viewed as both an expression of individuality or as a marking of belonging to a particular group. For example, people might reject shopping at a chain stores where items of clothing are mass-produced in order to avoid owning a common garment. Conversely, people who want to align themselves with a particular subculture such as punk might adopt a particular style of dress in order to fit in. Fashion helps articulate who we are as people and can aide in translating our personal identity from inner dialogue to visual expression.

**4.2.1 Fashion and Social Change**

Fashion is capable of demonstrating not only personal identity, but cultural identity as well. Alexander McQueen himself stated: “Fashion is so indicative of the political and social climate in which we live, what we wear will always be a symptom of our environment” (Palomo-Lovinski 2010, 176). The visual aspect of fashion aids in its function as “a semiotic language through which cultural meanings are constructed” (Mackrell 2005, 11). As early as the French Revolution, clothing was a “nonverbal manifesto of political upset” in which style indicated political allegiance (McLuhan 1964,
Members of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women wore trousers and red caps to show their dedication to the revolutionary cause, while those who pledged allegiance to the Duke d’Orléans wore English-style riding coats (Fairchilds 2000, 419, 422).

Even when clothing is not directly political, it can still be affected by the dominant social, political and economic climate. Elinor Roth wrote a detailed analysis of the relationship of Western women’s fashion to social change from 1850 to 1950. She linked the rise of the women’s suffrage movement to increased mobility and comfort in women’s clothing. From 1890-1907, more women were employed as typists and the size of bustles on garments decreased to allow for more comfortable seating (Roth 1962, 136). From 1908-1929, cars became more prevalent and as Western society became more mobile, so did women’s fashions (Roth 1962, 166). Hemlines rose to knee-length, and the bust and hip were minimized as clothing became more casual and comfortable (Roth 1962, 161). During WWII, many women worked to replace the jobs left empty by male soldiers. There was very little adaptation to the service uniforms worn by women to differentiate them from the men’s (Roth 1962, 202). Pants became acceptable dress for women, as fashion required practicality and adaptability to get the job done.

5.0 Fashion as environmental communication

When fashion can be understood as art, we can logically accept that fashion is also a tool of visual environmental communication. Alexander McQueen was certainly not the first contemporary designer to communicate environmental messages through fashion design. His predecessors include designers such as Vivienne Westwood (1970s) and Katharine Hamnett (1980s), who utilized fashion design as a mode of communication to proclaim their political beliefs.

5.1 Vivienne Westwood
Vivienne Westwood entered the fashion industry in a rather unique way; through her involvement with the punk movement in London, England during the 1970s (Palomo-Lovinski 2010, 140). Westwood owned several famous shops on King’s Road in London that sold highly coveted bondage gear and ripped t-shirts, named Let It Rock and SEX (Palomo-Lovinski 2010, 140). The peg leg trousers, safety-pinned garments and S&M accessories flaunted by punks were seen as shocking and crude by the older generation, but in reality punk style was its own social critique that expressed anger about unemployment and questioned their parent’s conservative values (Palomo-Lovinski 2010, 140). Punk was nihilism, expressed through fashion. Westwood went from shop-owner to full-fledged fashion designer with her first pirate-themed runway collection in 1981 (Palomo-Lovinski 2010, 141).

Westwood has essentially based her entire career on fashion design as a form of social critique. In more recent years, her work has taken on an increasingly political tone, touching on climate change and environmental issues. For example, in 2008 Westwood showed a collection that featured the drawings of British schoolchildren who learned about climate change and were asked to draw a society of “jungle-dwelling eco-warriors” (Phelps, 2008).

5.2 Katharine Hamnett

Katharine Hamnett’s longest lasting contribution to the fashion industry were her slogan t-shirts from the 1980s, that proclaimed political messages in bold, black text such as: WORLDWIDE NUCLEAR BAN NOW, SAVE THE RAINFORESTS and CHOOSE LIFE (an appropriation of the pro-life/anti-abortion slogan) (Hamnett, No Date). Hamnett made her environmental messages perfectly clear, and used fashion as a mobile means of spreading her message. In more recent years, Hamnett’s interests have shifted from bold visual statements to quietly integrating her environmental beliefs into the production of her garments, using sustainable options to source fabric and manufacture clothing (Palomo-Lovinski 2010, 150). Hamnett is quoted as; “I thought I wasn’t hurting anyone by
making clothes, but when I did the research I realized I was wrong. I felt horrified and felt a moral imperative to do something” (Palomo-Lovinski 2010, 150).

6.0 The Career of Alexander McQueen

Lee Alexander McQueen was born on March 17th 1969 to a working class family. He left school at age 16 and began his career in fashion as a tailor on Savile Row in London, a street famous for its bespoke men’s tailoring. Early in his career, he was rumoured to have scrawled obscenities into a jacket made for Charles, Prince of Wales (Milligan 2011). After gaining professional experience as a tailor, McQueen earned a masters degree in fashion design in 1992 at the prestigious Central Saint Martins art school in London. The fashion collector Isabella Blow purchased his graduate collection Jack the Ripper Stalks His Victims in its entirety (Sowray 2011). Alexander McQueen began his own label shortly after graduating Central Saint Martins, for which he designed up until his death in February 2010. McQueen was hired as the head designer at the Givenchy label in 1997, but left in 2001 to focus on his namesake label (Milligan 2011). Alexander McQueen was a highly acclaimed fashion designer: named British Fashion Designer of the Year four times, received the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) Best International Designer Award in 2003 and was honoured with a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) badge from Queen Elizabeth II for his contribution to the fashion industry (Milligan 2011).

6.1 Alexander McQueen: Fashion Design as Art

If art exists to create an emotional connection between artist and viewer, then Alexander McQueen was a true artist whose medium was fashion (Tolstoy 1897, 410). McQueen wanted his clothing to be unique and exceptional, putting a greater focus on provoking an emotional response in the viewer rather than increasing the sales of the clothes (Frankel 2011, 25). The commercial aspect of
McQueen’s career was only emphasized when he became successful. In his own words; “I was quite happy just doing the performance, happy working as a performance artist…At the beginning, I never even used to sell the collection. I did that on purpose. It was all about making a statement and the communication of that statement was – and still is – very important to me” (Frankel 2011, 26).

Like most visual artists, McQueen found inspiration from a wide variety of sources and was able to synthesize them into a cohesive fashion collection. McQueen’s favourite sources of inspiration came from fine art, nature and science fiction programs, (Deeny, 2010). To describe where the ideas for his Spring/Summer 2010 collection *Plato’s Atlantis* come from, he named a range of sources, including the artist H. R. Giger, the movie *Alien*, the Great Barrier Reef and Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution (Deeny, 2010). When you read the collection in its entirety as text, those sources are visible only in theory and have been rendered into a fashion anomaly.

Each individual garment could be considered sculpture art, yet the clothes were presented in a runway show, which moves them into the context of performance art. Models are choreographed to move in certain patterns across the runway, which creates a context for the clothes to be understood within. Alice Mackrell likened Alexander McQueen’s S/S 2004 runway show to “performance art,” which featured twenty dancers and twenty models choreographed by contemporary dancer Michael Clark to explore the theme of racial discrimination in America in the 1930s (Mackrell 2005, 147). *Plato’s Atlantis* took the supernatural evolution vibe of the clothing and placed them on models in a bright room to a soundtrack of bright, triumphant electronic music. Halfway through the show, the lights dimmed blue and the music was punctuated by the sound of heavy breathing from an oxygen tank. The change in atmosphere completely affected our understanding of the garments themselves.

McQueen’s repertoire strayed far from the typical reinvention of the same garment commonly seen each season on the runway. He introduced new silhouettes of clothing that were both shocking
and influential. The earliest example is from his Autumn/Winter 1993-94 collection *Taxi Driver*, which introduced “bumster trousers” (Bolton 2011, 13). Bumsters feature a scandalously low waistband that exposes the top of the buttocks (Figure 1). McQueen’s intention was to change the silhouette of a woman’s body by elongating the torso through clothing and to expose what he believed was the most erotic part of the human body, the bottom of the spine. (Bolton 2011, 53-54). Bumsters were an extreme look, but they heralded an international lowering of waistbands and “hipster” jeans (slightly more modest than bumsters) were ubiquitous by the late 1990s (Vaidyanathan, BBC, 2010).

![Figure 1: Bumster trousers, Taxi Driver, A/W 1993-4](image)

After McQueen’s death, his designs were presented as works of art in the *Savage Beauty* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Pollack 2012, 89). *Savage Beauty* curator Andrew Bolton noted: “I thought that once people came to the show they would respond to the objects because they are extraordinary pieces of artwork, but I never thought that it would touch the hearts of so many people” (Pollack 2012, 89). Alexander McQueen created original garments that were arresting in their beauty, and managed to captivate a mass audience. Thousands went to see the *Savage Beauty* exhibit and there were no doubt thousands more (including myself) who were devastated by their inability to attend. McQueen’s garments connect with people on an emotional level, and he certainly met his goal of
provoking and emotional response to his pieces beyond the creation of beautiful clothes (Frankel 2011, 20). The unique perspective in his garments as well as their runway presentation afford him the status of artist as well as fashion designer.

6.2 Alexander McQueen: Modern Day Romantic

Alexander McQueen’s body of work fits in seamlessly with the conception of a Romantic artist, although he missed its heyday by over a century. McQueen described himself as “overly romantic,” focusing on expressing emotion and darkness through his work (Schwaller 2011). Romanticism delved into “the supernatural, into the human mind and emotions, into sexual perversions” (Lister 1973, 4). All three of these themes were explored thoroughly in McQueen’s work.

McQueen’s designs are grounded in the natural world by flowers, butterflies and bird feathers, yet contain an additional element of mystery to them. His designs were not supernatural in the traditional sense, focused thematically on poltergeists or extra-sensory perception (ESP), but almost seemed to belong not of this world. His A/W 2006-7 show *Widows of Culloden* projected a holographic image of supermodel Kate Moss, which made her seem ethereal and ghostlike, despite her real-life presence. The show employed a dated technique called “Pepper’s ghost,” which involves a plate of glass and special lighting techniques to make a person appear and disappear, and was often used during séances in the nineteenth-century (Bolton 2011).

Alexander McQueen designed to provoke a reaction from the audience, and his designs range from disturbing to transcendent. A/W 1995-6’s *Highland Rape* displayed torn garments that looked as if they had been slashed in a struggle with an attacker. According to Andrew Bolton: “His fashions were an outlet for his emotions, an expression of the deepest, often darkest, aspects of his imagination. He was a true romantic in the Byronic sense of the word – he channeled the sublime” (Schwaller, 2011).
McQueen’s clothing contained a dark sex appeal, with common use of fetish material such as black leather and latex. *Dante* (A/W 1996-7) featured a black lace dress with a hood that masked the entire face (Figure 2). *The Hunger* (Spring/Summer 1996) was based around a vampire sex story, and featured mouth gags, bound wrists, a men’s shirt with bloody handprints on the chest and ladies trousers with revealing slits in the bottom. Sometimes, McQueen literally incorporated sexual perversions into his designs; his S/S 1998 show was originally titled *The Golden Shower* and featured models being drenched in water at the end of the runway show, lit with yellow light. *The Golden Shower* was renamed *Untitled* upon objection from his sponsor, American Express (Bolton 2011).

**Figure 2: Dante, A/W 1996-7**

### 6.3 Elements of nature in Alexander McQueen’s work

Nature was a central subject of both Romantic art and Alexander McQueen’s designs. For Romantics, nature was the primary vehicle to the Sublime – a sense of awe accompanying the experience of nature (Bolton 2011, 15). To see the sublime is to soak in the incredible awe, beauty and
wonder in the world, but also the underlying sense of terror. All at once, nature can be wonderful and
cruel. According to Wordsworth, we live in “breathless Nature’s dark abyss” (Lister 1973, 9).

Nature’s dark abyss is a term that could also be used to accurately describe Alexander
McQueen’s body of work. The creation of something beautiful from something natural suggests that
nature is a source of beauty, inspiration and artistic food for thought. McQueen’s willingness to elevate
natural objects into the artistic realm implies a veneration of the natural world on the part of the artist.
Nature was a crucial part of McQueen’s art and identity. “Everything I do is connected to nature in
some way or another,” he explained. Andrew Bolton expands that McQueen loved nature so much
because it is spontaneous and uncontrollable, which corresponds to the lack of restraint of McQueen’s
designs (Bolton 2011).

Nature played a role in almost every single one of Alexander McQueen’s collections. Flora and
fauna were used as ornamental details on many of his garments. “Animals…fascinate me because you
can find a force, and energy, a fear that also exists in sex,” he explained (Bolton 2011, 156). He most
commonly utilized birds, butterflies and flowers, and his S/S 2001 collection, VOSS, included all three.
VOSS (which can be viewed here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=qynzgm9i4LJ) was dubbed the
“asylum collection” because the models wore white bandages on their heads and walked circles inside a
mirrored room (Harper’s Bazaar Staff 2011). Models wore floral scarves draped around the their
bodies, sometimes in place of a shirt (Figure 3). There were trousers with bird feathers splayed out from
the sides as well as a flouncy skirt made entirely of feathers, with the model wearing a hat made of three
life-size bird replicas. There were entire skirts and tops made from oyster shells (Figure 4). The most
shocking piece in the collection was a straitjacket finely embroidered with flowers and a bird.
McQueen also presented ungulate-inspired garments several times in his career. A/W 1997’s *It’s a Jungle Out There* was based on the Thomson’s gazelle, found in East Africa. The collection used many animal skins, and featured a brown fur jacket with horns protruding from the shoulders (Figure 5). *Dante* (A/W 1996-7) featured a headdress of deer antlers with the skull attached. Ten years later, *Widows of Culloden* (A/W 2006-7) featured a grandiose antler headdress, this time draped in lace (Figure 6).
Alexander McQueen began doing bird prints in S/S 1995, with a Hitchcock-inspired collection titled *The Birds*, which featured black silhouette bird prints on jackets (Figure 7). He referenced this earlier work in his A/W 2009-10 collection *Horn of Plenty*, which featured sweeping ball gowns with the same black bird silhouette (Figure 8).
Birds figured prominently in his S/S 2008 collection *La Dame Bleue*, a tribute to his friend Isabella Blow (which can be viewed here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=D2Cy0v5UjmY). The bird motifs were a tribute to her light spirit, in McQueen’s words: “Isabella flew” (Frankel 2011, 26). The collection featured rainbow-coloured dresses with a replicating butterfly pattern and a dress with feathers that made the model appear to have wings (Figure 9). One of the most memorable pieces in the collection was a Philip Treacy hat constructed of butterflies that appeared to be flying around the model’s head (Figure 10).

Lacy and feminine flower designs figured prominently into S/S 2007’s *Sarabande*. The dresses were romantic gothic, and the first nature-inspired garment was a sheer lace dress with a smattering of flowers on the skirt and feather details near the neckline. Jackets and skirts featured large prints of birds perched on branches. Flowers peeked out of the neckline and sleeves of an exaggerated feminine silhouette (Figure 11), and finally burst through the seams in the finale of the collection; a full-length
gown covered entirely in purple and green flowers (Figure 12). The nipped-waist, full-hipped silhouette of the collection suggested the confluence of nature and the feminine, as nature has always been given a feminine form in characterizations of Mother Earth.

6.4 Fashion as Mimesis of Nature

The representation of nature in Alexander McQueen’s designs is a strong example of mimesis in fashion. Mimesis comes from the root word ‘mimic’ and is a process of culturally and imaginatively constructing nature (McGinnis, 219). Mimesis relies on the spirit of imitation to help us regain our imagination and sense of the wild (McGinnis, 219). Michael McGinnis begins Re-Wilding Imagination: Mimesis and Ecological Restoration “I am convinced that the secrets of nature can be spontaneously portrayed in the arts, and that the arts are imperative to restore a culture’s relationship with nature” (McGinnis, 219). Essentially, artistic representation can unite the human condition with the natural world (McGinnis, 219). The Romantics did this in excess by giving the natural world human attributes and equating the wildness of nature with the human spirit.
Alexander McQueen celebrated the natural world by creating exceedingly beautiful garments with nature as their focal point. He created garments that are strikingly beautiful by virtue of their expert construction and visual design, evidenced in their spectacular colours, patterns and shapes, but also their channeling of the inherent beauty of nature itself. McQueen fused the human condition and nature even more effectively than Romantic painters, because his art is worn on the body. Garments that mimic nature are the complete realization that humans belong to the natural environment. The natural beauty of the garments completely subsumes any human element. They are statement pieces, not worn to accentuate the bum or flatter the stomach, but to decorate and disguise the body with nature. The presentation of nature in fashion reminds us that the biotic world exists outside of flashbulbs and front row seats, and it is magnificent.

6.5 Natural Dis-tinction, Un-natural Selection

6.5.1 McQueen’s inspiration

Despite McQueen’s continuous use of natural elements throughout his career, the first collection to have a distinctly environmental theme was S/S 2009’s Natural Dis-tinction, Un-natural Selection. Natural Dis-tinction, Un-natural Selection (available for viewing here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=pTQdfNO3t9Y) was inspired by McQueen’s reflections on the 150th anniversary of Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species and the effects of industrialization on the natural world (Bolton 2011, 15). The title of the collection appears to be wordplay on the philosopher David Lewis’ theory of natural/non-natural distinction and Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Lewis argued there are properties that differentiate objects as natural from non-natural, and calls for a graded distinction between properties (Hall 2010). Natural
selection also deals with properties in nature, whereby biological traits become more of less prevalent in a population based on reproduction (Wikipedia 2012).

6.5.2 Visual Elements of the Clothing Design

The show began with a projected image of the rotating Planet Earth. As the lights came up, the runway was flanked with a veritable Noah’s Ark of realistic animal replicas: a zebra, polar bear, elk and giraffe. The clothing began with an array of short dresses, some with natural wood grain prints (Figure 13) and others with colourful flowers atop mesh panels (Figure 14).

Waist-accentuating corsets resembled tree trunks and a delicate dress featured Japanese cranes over lace and mesh. A white mini dress with a skull emblazoned on the chest was a standout piece. The rotating Planet Earth morphed into a grotesque eyeball, which watched us as we watched the collection. The patterns moved from natural wood grain prints to more digitized multi-colour prints of granite and crystal (Figure 15). "The inspiration is still organic," the designer explained, "but it is
enhanced, synthetic – touched by man” (quote from the Independent, accessed in October 2011, no longer available online). The garments become darker and grittier; with metallic smoke colour and black leather dresses. The collection finished up with a number of full-stop sequined dresses (Figure 16).

6.5.3 Critical reception of *Natural Distinction, Un-natural Selection*

The critic Sarah Mower noted with overall surprise that McQueen chose to place a direct focus on the natural environment in this collection despite his common use of natural elements in his previous work. She began her review of the show for *Style.com* with the rhetorical question “Alexander McQueen, environmentalist?” (Mower 2008). Despite the ‘environmental crisis’ theme, S/S 2009 had a lighter mood than many of McQueen’s previous collections and the wood grain prints and silhouettes were deemed commercially viable (Mower 2008).
Womenswear Daily wrote that McQueen pulled off a powerful show, while showing considerable restraint in his designs. They echoed Sarah Mower by stating that McQueen showed a sense of humour in this collection, rather than unleashing anger over its serious theme, coming out for his final bow in a rabbit suit (WWD, 2008).

6.5.4 Analysis

For a collection so entrenched in environmental thinking, there was much less nature to behold than in previous collections. The evolution from natural to unnatural is clearly expressed in this collection, beginning with wood grain prints and ending in shiny, human-made sequins. McQueen stated: "This collection starts out [natural], following the colours, shapes and textures of the planet but, once technology takes over, things appear more alien and other-worldly. I suppose it is darker and maybe a prediction of things to come but there is room for optimism. We do have a choice" (quote from the Independent, accessed in October 2011, no longer available online). Perhaps with this brighter than usual collection, McQueen signaled with sequins that a bright, shiny future is possible if we can reflect on our consumer habits and make better environmental decisions.

6.6 Plato’s Atlantis

6.6.1 McQueen’s inspiration for Plato’s Atlantis

Alexander McQueen built on this environmental theme with his Spring/Summer 2010 collection titled Plato’s Atlantis (available for viewing here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zkvVgvaKJgA&feature=player_embedded), which envisioned the “devolution of humanity” after the ice caps melted, with people forced to live underwater as fish-like beings in order to survive (Bolton 2011, 15). A description of the collection reads: “when the waters rise, humanity will go back to the place from whence it came” (Alexander McQueen.com, 2010). The title of
the collection refers to the lost kingdom of Atlantis, a great island that sunk into the sea. The earliest mention of Atlantis came from the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who wrote of Atlantis as a powerful civilization, but the antithesis to the ancient Greece’s “perfect” society. Atlantis was sunk by an earthquake, presumably for moral reasons, and became a mud shoal that inhibited ocean travel (Wikipedia, 2012 b).

6.6.2 Visual Elements of the Clothing Design

After the lights dawned on the runway, models appeared one-by-one, with horned hairdos resembling the back plates of a Stegosaurus. Like *Natural Dis-tinction Un-natural Sélection*, the collection consisted primarily of short dresses. The digitized prints looked like snakeskin (Figure 17), bugs, butterflies (Figure 18) and fish in rich hues of green and blue. Natural elements were certainly present, but almost indiscernible beneath the influence of technology.

![Figure 17 (left): Digital snake print, Plato’s Atlantis, S/S 2010](image1)

![Figure 18 (right): Digital butterfly print, Plato’s Atlantis, S/S 2010](image2)
Halfway through the show, the runway was swathed in a blue light and the clothes went from predominantly brown and green to shades of blue, as the terrestrial morphed into the aquatic. The dresses began to resemble jellyfish, or were they aliens? The silhouettes had odd tubes and protrusions that resembled the breathing sacs of underwater creatures (Figure 19). The shoes resembled lobster claws and a full suit of iridescent scales looked like the exoskeleton of a particularly magnificent crustacean (Figure 20).

6.6.3 Critical reception of Plato’s Atlantis

The critical reception of Plato’s Atlantis was focused on two elements of the show: its technological innovation, and the shoes. Plato’s Atlantis was the first high fashion show ever to be broadcasted all over the world via the Internet. The experiment was so wildly successful that the host servers of SHOWstudio.com crashed, and Sarah Mower likened it to “the sensation of a young hopeful stuck outside a McQueen presentation, waving a standing ticket and being unable to get in” (Mower 2009). With the multitude of short dresses, McQueen didn’t necessarily break the design mold with this
collection but his “embracing new computer technologies and the drama of the moving image [put] him at the leading edge of change” (Mower 2009).

Dolly Jones for *British Vogue* noted the prevalent influence of evolution in the dresses, writing: “some morphed from a beaded top half into a sheath of silk skirt with no interruption in the print: the butterfly emerging from its less romantic former state” (Jones 2009). Of the “armadillo” shoes, Jones noted that the “huge blunt snakeskin platforms were built to hide any reference to toes,” which seemed to further McQueen’s vision of human evolution into aquatic creatures (Figure 21) (Jones 2009).

![Figure 21: Shoes, *Plato’s Atlantis*, S/S 2010](image)

Renowned *New York Times* fashion critic Cathy Horyn, mirrored the natural influence in the way she wrote about the collection. In discussing a particular coat, she wrote: “the coat seemed a different species of garment. It was most definitely a new silhouette” (Horyn 2009).

6.6.4 Analysis

What McQueen started in *Natural Dis-tinction, Un-natural Selection*, he explored further in *Plato’s Atlantis*. The brightly coloured digitized prints became even more so and he explored technology’s
influence on nature in a more profound way. Technology played an important part in the design of the clothing, the futuristic appeal of the models and the actual presentation of the collection. The focus on technology worked to highlight the natural elements of the collection rather than obscure them, as they stood out in comparison.

Alexander McQueen pushed the boundaries of the nature theme by creating a collection that was incredibly environmental, without his usual reliance on literal elements of nature. McQueen touched on themes of evolution and biodiversity without referencing them directly. The prints resembled a number of different animals (snakes, butterflies) but managed to stay cohesive with the help of digital manipulation. The direct environmental focus of Plato’s Atlantis provides us with a glamorous image of a bleak future.

Plato’s Atlantis says more about the natural environment in its subtlety than all of his previous collections combined. The message of environmental danger became ever more powerful when the outcome was terrifying rather than bright. It is almost a stretch to relate the garments to their environmental theme in Natural Dis-tinction, Un-natural Selection, but the connection in Plato’s Atlantis is absolutely clear. Alexander McQueen demonstrated his mastery of fashion as a medium of art by creating incredibly wearable garments wrought with environmental significance.

7.0 Dark Beginnings, Evolution, Technofutures: The Messages of Alexander McQueen

The currents of similarity running through the two collections, suggest that Alexander McQueen had his own distinct way of thinking and feeling about the environment that was reflected through the clothes. As works of art, the garments communicate the mental state of the artist (Trivedi 1999, 3). Both collections were borne of dark beginnings; Natural Dis-tinction Un-natural Selection from McQueen’s reflections on the impact of industrialization on the natural environment, and Plato’s Atlantis
from a post-apocalyptic underwater dystopia. These collections came from a place of fear, which suggests that McQueen felt concerned about the state of the natural environment - both collections occurred after the 2007 release of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, the documentary that catapulted concern for the environment back into the public consciousness.

McQueen used his designs to explore the scientific theory of evolution. Both collections reference evolution as a starting point, and emphasize change and difference rather than the immaculate preservation of nature. Living things evolve in order to adapt to changing conditions, just as wood grain evolved into sequins in *Natural Distinction Un-natural Selection* and terrestrial evolved to aquatic in *Plato’s Atlantis*. McQueen’s embrace of change suggests we cannot continue on our trajectory of unlimited natural resource exploitation, because our lifestyles are unsustainable into the long-term future.

*Natural Distinction Un-natural Selection* and *Plato’s Atlantis* both signify the importance of technology for human survival. McQueen used digitally altered prints to explore the dialectical relationship between technology and the environment. Many environmentalists claim technology is responsible for environmental destruction and ideologically embrace a return to low-impact, agrarian living (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997, 81), while others advocate for “techno-fixes,” wherein problems created by science are solved by human innovation (Foss 2009, 81). McQueen clearly valued the natural environment but was certainly not a Luddite, embraced technology as a harbinger of change whether positive or negative.

**8.0 Alexander McQueen, Environmentalist?**

Alexander McQueen is a trailblazer in the fashion industry because his use of nature imagery and contemplation of environmental themes carve out a niche for the appreciation of nature in the
fashion industry, where it tends to receive little concern. Fashion is a fast-paced industry primarily concerned with turning a profit, and it is only in rare instances, when the designer is talented enough to command attention such as McQueen, that people are willing to contemplate this meaning of the garments long after their season has passed. As an artist, McQueen created beautiful, nature-themed garments, which exist in themselves to be appreciated. As noted by aesthetic philosopher Emily Brady, “a positive aesthetic relationship with nature can engender a benevolent attitude towards it” (Brady 2003, 258). Alexander McQueen’s nature-inspired garments have the potential to inspire positive attitudes towards environmental conservation in individuals who do not have strong environmental leanings. However it is ultimately up to the individual to translate their connection with a McQueen garment into direct environmental action.

The connection between the beauty of nature exhibited in fashion garments and everyday human behaviour with environmental consequences is not demonstrated clearly enough for the average consumer to understand. The connections between behaviours and their environmental consequences are multifaceted and difficult to understand in their complexity. For example, it is not immediately intuitive as to why throwing plastic in the garbage instead of the recycling is responsible for environmental destruction unless you have an advanced understand the life-cycle of consumer products and waste management strategies. The best way to clarify these connections is to explain them in a comprehensive manner. Clothing does none of the explaining for you, and not everyone who appreciates these clothes will discover the connection on their own, especially when people already pay so little attention to where and how their clothing was produced. In the words of designer Stella McCartney, “we address these [ethical and ecological] questions in every part of our lives except fashion” (Black 2008, 239).
In order to determine the significance of Alexander McQueen’s impact, we must return to the writings of Marshall McLuhan. According to McLuhan, the medium in which messages are communicated create their own narrative that impacts how the content of the message is received. Alexander McQueen created garments under the pretense of exploring environmental themes, yet they have not been produced with any attention given to how the clothing production process might have negative impacts on the natural environment. Unlike the positive messages about the environment that his clothes communicate, Alexander McQueen’s garments are not produced under rigorous standards of sustainability. PPR, the parent company of Alexander McQueen announced it would undertake a group environmental profit & loss (EP&L) statement for the company’s luxury, sports and lifestyle brands in late 2011 (Guevarra 2011). PPR’s goal is to complete the EP&L by 2015, a move that aims to reduce costs and improve sustainability practices by placing an economic value on environmental impact (Guevarra 2011). In the meantime, the Alexander McQueen label has not yet focused directly on reducing the negative environmental impact of clothing production on the environment.

The fashion industry is responsible for a great deal of environmental pollution on a global scale. In the initial stages of gathering raw materials for fabric, pesticides and other harmful chemicals are used to grow the raw fibres such as cotton that eventually become clothes. In the production stage of the fibres, chemical products such as dye and natural resources like water are required to turn the raw fibres into material (de Brito et al., 538). The clothing, footwear and textile industries are second only to agriculture in their global consumption of water and contamination due to chemicals (Ulasewicz, 31). The drive for lower production costs has also forced the relocation of most production facilities to the Far East, which lowers labour costs but increases pollution emissions due to its lengthy transportation back to Western markets (de Brito et al., 538).
Ultimately, the physical garments (the medium) do not reflect the message of an optimistic future presented in *Natural Distinction Un-natural Selection*. Alexander McQueen’s environmental motives must be questioned when he failed to connect the messages bound up in his clothes with the significance they hold in the real world, where actions have direct consequences. In a sense, Alexander McQueen’s gratuitous use of nature imagery almost constitutes exploitation, if it celebrates the earth but underhandedly works to destroy it at the same time.

9.0 Potential of Fashion as a Site of Change

While the environmental movement has failed to make political gains in recent years – see Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger’s *The Death of Environmentalism* (2005) – eco-fashion is currently experiencing a surging moment of popularity. Stella McCartney designed an environmentally friendly collection for Barneys New York in 2007 that was “one hundred per cent organic, ethical and sustainable” and consisted of only 18 garments (Black 2008, 238). McCartney’s contemporaries in sustainable fashion design (besides Vivienne Westwood and Katharine Hamnett) include Edun, Rogan and John Patrick Organic.

At this time, these brands are unique in their commitment to environmental values, but we are seeing more and more instances of labels minimizing the environmental impact of their clothing production, which suggests that fashion is a realm where environmental change is within reach. But there is still a long way to go before the fashion industry even remotely resembles sustainability, as the majority of fashion designers still lag behind in their effort to keep clothing production costs as low as possible.

Eco-fashion may be produced with the environment in mind, but the environmental values of the clothing are not immediately discernable from a visual perspective. They do not loudly differentiate
themselves from the piles of cheaply made clothing that flood the market. They look like traditional fashion garments and generally do not incorporate a celebratory aesthetic of nature into the design, like Alexander McQueen. Perhaps if there were more designers willing to create nature-based, wearable art that backed up their visual message with sustainable production methods then fashion would have a solid foundation as a site of environmental activism. We need a precedent in order for fashion to communicate its messages of intent with a high degree of transparency, and for other designers to follow suit.

The mass-production and fast pace of fashion may seem at odds with the ‘reduce-reuse-recycle’ environmental movement, since the fashion industry consumes a great deal of natural resources very quickly. But this rapid pace may actually work in favour of sustainable fashion, because it imbues the fashion industry with a high adaptive capacity. Incorporating sustainability into fashion at the production stage has the potential to become a mainstream practice in a relatively short amount of time, given that “fast fashion” manufacturers have cut their manufacturing cycle down to six weeks or less (Black 2008, 180). It will certainly take additional time to source more natural materials and better factories to manufacture the clothes in, but the turnover rate suggests that eco-fashion could break the mainstream in a relatively short period of time.

10.0 Conclusion

Of course, the trend cycle of fashion dictates that elements of nature may not always be in season, however Alexander McQueen’s fashion designs were spectacular enough to stay relevant season after season. Alexander McQueen created garments that function as wearable art and invite interpretation on an intellectual as well as a visual level. He is not necessarily an environmentalist, as his celebratory stance on nature is not backed up by environmentally-safe production methods, however he is an environmental artist who communicated messages not just about nature, but life, death, sex and
power. McQueen’s work will no doubt be influential in the fashion world for decades to come, and will hopefully inspire a new generation of environmental artists who use fashion as their medium of choice.

In the words of Miranda Priestly, Meryl Streep’s character in *The Devil Wears Prada*: “Florals? For Spring? Groundbreaking” (IMDB 2006).


**Image Sources**

Figure 1. Retrieved April 10th, 2012 from http://www.harpersbazaar.co.uk/going-out/alexander-mcqueen-in-pictures-126189


Figure 3. Retrieved April 10th, 2012 from http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/slideshow/S2001RTW-AMCQUEEN?event=show664&designer=design_house43&trend=&iphoto=0#slide=7

Figure 4. Retrieved April 10th, 2012 from http://www.style.com/fashionshows/complete/slideshow/S2001RTW-AMCQUEEN?event=show664&designer=design_house43&trend=&iphoto=0#slide=43

Figure 5. Retrieved April 10th, 2012 from http://nicchezmoi.wordpress.com/category/mcqueen/


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