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Question 1:

What is the role of the designer/maker in the 21st Century and how might this role change in the next 10 years? Discuss your ideas with reference to two of the practitioners or thinkers discussed in your lecture strand.

The role of fashion designers in the 21st century has changed significantly. Designers not only create clothing, but have also become artists, technological innovators, and inspirers, expressing cultural and social ideas through their work. Fashion has become a space where various ideas clash – from traditions to technological experiments, and even social and political issues. In this paper, I will analyze the role of fashion designers in today's world, focusing on two designers – Jean-Paul Gaultier and Lee Alexander McQueen. Both designers go beyond traditional boundaries, combining their artistic visions with personal beliefs and a unique view of the world.

The aim of my paper is to show how Gaultier and McQueen changed the face of fashion by combining aesthetics, technology, and social ideologies. I will focus on their innovative approach to design, which not only set new trends in fashion but also influenced the way fashion is perceived as a form of artistic expression. I will analyze their work, highlighting key moments in the careers of both designers that demonstrate their exceptional role in the fashion world. The paper will also address social issues that were important elements of their designs, such as diversity, identity, and equality.

The Role of a Fashion Designer in the 21st Century

Blending Styles and Traditions

Designers often work at the intersection of cultures, eras, and disciplines, combining elements that seem mismatched into a integrated whole. This skillful blending of diverse inspirations allows for the creation of unique works that surprise audiences and reveal new possibilities. For example, combining traditional craftsmanship techniques with modern technologies or merging classic patterns with provocative elements can lead to designs that are both familiar and unfamiliar, attractive though unsettling. These contrasts create tension, which is often the key to success in design.

Evoking Reactions

One of the key goals of contemporary fashion designers is to evoke emotions, whether positive or negative. A well-designed piece never leaves the viewer indifferent — it can inspire, evoke admiration, but also provoke discussion or even opposition. Examples include designs that break social taboos, question aesthetic standards, or challenge existing power structures and hierarchies. In this way, the designer becomes not just a creator, but also someone who forces the audience to reflect on their lives and what they consider to be "normal".

Jean-Paul Gaultier is a prime example of this. His work stands out due to a distinctive style that combines extravagance, courage, and unconventionality. In his designs, he frequently experimented with gender norms, questioning the traditional divisions between men's and women's clothing. He approached his designs in a way that “*Avoiding making designs which had any obvious commercial application, he radically examined what he knew about fashion.*” (McDowell, p.65). Examples of this include men's skirts and outfits that blended elements traditionally assigned to both genders.



Fig. 1 Jean-Paul Gaultier Catwalks Spring/Summer 2011

His collections draw inspiration from various subcultures, such as punk, goth, and drag queens, as well as cultural traditions from different parts of the world, including African and Asian motifs. His designs also feature references to nautical culture and BDSM aesthetics. Gaultier valued this diversity not only in his choice of inspirations but also in the selection of models, creating clothes for people of different races, body types, and ages. For him, there were no boundaries or taboos. His runways featured older individuals, as well as those with various body shapes, gender identities, and ethnic backgrounds.

His shows were spectacular performances that went beyond just showcasing garments. Each one told a story and had a cohesive artistic concept, often inspired by culture, art, and social themes. Gaultier broke the stereotypes in fashion by involving people who did not fit into the traditional norms of the industry. His runways featured drag queens, dancers, artists, and celebrities, making them appeal to a broader audience.



Fig. 2 Jean Paul Gaultier, Spring/Summer 2015

Jean-Paul Gaultier used fashion as a platform to express his views on important social issues such as tolerance, equality, and diversity. His works were not just aesthetic creations, but also served as commentary on contemporary problems and challenges. Through his collections, Gaultier addressed topics related to culture, identity, and social change, proving that fashion can be both an artistic and a political tool.

In today's world, fashion designers have a huge impact on how we perceive reality and how we discuss important issues. Fashion has become more than just clothing – it is a way to express oneself and engage in current topics. Gaultier, with his courage and creativity, showed how fashion can be a space where discussions about equality, openness, and freedom take place.

Gaultier's example proves that the role of a designer goes far beyond creating clothing. His work not only broke taboos but also explored diversity and addressed important social issues. His courage in experimentation, drawing inspiration from subcultures and global traditions, as well as his commitment to tolerance and equality, show that the designer becomes both an artist and an activist, influencing the way key social issues are perceived. This demonstrates that contemporary designers, by combining various aspects of creativity, use fashion as a tool to express their views and respond to a changing world.

Introducing Innovation

Design is a field that is constantly evolving, which forces creators to search for new forms, technologies, and materials. Designers of the 21st century experiment with modern solutions, using technologies including 3D printing, artificial intelligence, and augmented reality (AR) to create projects that go beyond traditional boundaries. This innovation not only affects aesthetics but also the practicality and functionality of clothing, inspiring other creators to take risks and introduce new ideas.

Lee Alexander McQueen used technology in his designs in ways that went beyond traditional fashion design methods. In his work, technology involved various advanced tools and machines that influenced both the production process, and the fashion shows themselves. *"McQueen saw the advent of new media and the ascent of the internet as a means to further spread his vision abroad and reach a new, wider and even more international audience"* (Knox, p. 18). His ability to harness technology allowed him not only to expand the reach of his work but also to make his shows more multimedia-driven and interactive.

One of the most famous examples of McQueen's use of technology was his Spring/Summer 1999 collection presentation, in which the model Shalom Harlow was "painted" by robots. The robots, installed on stage, applied paint to her body, which became the highlight of the show. The use of robots in this context not only brought modern technology to the runway but also created a unique interaction between human and machine, where the model's clothing became a transforming canvas. McQueen also utilized modern machines, such as laser cutting machines, which allowed for the creation of precise and intricate patterns in fabrics.



Fig. 3 Alexander McQueen Spring/Summer 1999 Runway Show



Fig. 4 Alexander McQueen Pleated laser-cut leather midi dress

During his shows, McQueen used advanced multimedia technologies, such as video projections, lighting, and sound, which became an integral part of the overall experience. An example of this was his collaboration with videographer Bailie Walsh during the Fall/Winter 2006 show, where a holographic projection of Kate Moss appeared on stage inside a glass pyramid, surprising and captivating the audience with its innovative creativity and the possibilities offered by emerging technology.

In his 2010 collection "Plato's Atlantis," McQueen showcased garments featuring digitally printed patterns created by layering images of various reptile skins. *"Such vivid rendering was made possible by new graphics software, ink-jet printing and Photoshop, which offered an infinity of permutations, providing the opportunity to over-layer patterns of great complexity."* (McQueen, p.89).



Fig. 5 Alexander McQueen's "Plato's Atlantis" Spring/Summer 2010

Thanks to modern technologies, McQueen revolutionized the way fashion is perceived, creating a space where technology, art, and design coexist. His creative approach made fashion not only an aesthetic expression but also a field of experimentation that continues to inspire fashion creators around the world. He proved that the role of a designer in the 21st century goes beyond traditional boundaries, combining fashion with modern tools and technologies. His innovative designs inspired others to explore new methods that transformed the fashion industry, making it more interactive and multidimensional.

McQueen's visionary approach had a lasting impact on the future of design, demonstrating how technology can become an integral part of the creative process. By showing that the modern designer is not only a creator but also an experimenter, McQueen proved that 21st-century fashion is a space where art and technology intersect, redefining the role of the designer as both an artist and an innovator.

How might this role change over the next 10 years?

In the next decade, designers will increasingly utilize advanced technological tools that will allow them to push the traditional boundaries of fashion. In particular, artificial intelligence (AI), 3D printing, and augmented reality (AR) will be key elements in creating modern collections. AI will enable designers to quickly generate new patterns, analyze market demands, and predict trends. Additionally, AI will become an invaluable tool in customizing clothing, offering the ability to create garments tailored to the individual needs of the customer.

3D printing, on the other hand, will allow for the creation of garments using new, unique materials, as well as experimentation with form and structure. Designers will be able to print clothing elements that would have previously been impossible to create using traditional sewing methods. Additionally, as 3D printers become more accessible, individuals will be able to print their own accessories at home, further personalizing their style. Moreover, 3D printing will enable made-to-order clothing production, eliminating overproduction, which offers a solution to the issue of sustainable fashion.

Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) will not only be used in the design process but also in the presentation of collections. Thanks to these technologies, designers will be able to create virtual fashion shows that allow audiences to interact with the designs in an entirely new way.

Clothing that changes color, shape, or even size depending on emotions or external conditions will not only become possible but will likely become commonplace. In this way, fashion will become interactive, engaging users in the process of creation and personalization.

In the upcoming decade, fashion designers will not only be more involved in social issues but also play a role as leaders who shape attitudes, ideas, and values within society. Fashion, which has long been a tool for expressing individuality, will also become a platform for manifesting ideas, expressing political views, and responding to social and environmental changes. We can expect designers to increasingly use their media platforms and collections to comment on current political events, social changes, and environmental issues, while simultaneously influencing public opinion and defining the dominant trends of the moment.

Fashion will become one of the main tools for communicating ideological and social beliefs. We will increasingly see fashion collections directly addressing current political issues such as the fight for equality, migration, climate change, and minority rights. Designers will take on the role of opinion leaders, setting new social and political norms through their designs and campaigns, shaping not only aesthetics but also values.

One possible direction is the use of fashion to create class divisions. Similar to the past, when fashion helped distinguish social status, in the future, designers may begin creating collections that symbolize not only fashion style but also affiliation with specific social, political, or ideological groups. These divides may take the form of clothing that clearly identifies the wearer with a particular circle, for example, through the use of specific colors, materials, or symbols. In this way, fashion could become a tool not only for expressing personal identity but also for manifesting membership in a certain social group, class, or movement.

Fashion designers already have the ability to break taboos, question traditional beauty standards, and challenge social norms. In the future, as society becomes increasingly open to diversity and changing definitions of identity, fashion may venture into even more extreme territories. Designers could take more daring stances, creating statements that shock audiences while simultaneously changing the way these norms are perceived. Over the next ten years, fashion could become a space where the most controversial ideas are tested, such as those related to the roles of men and women, sexuality, the fluidity of identity, or the boundaries of personal freedom.

An example could be designs that clearly manifest a political or social ideology, ones that not only give a voice to minorities but also aim to challenge society's perception of what is considered "acceptable". Fashion will transcend its role as a mere expression of individual tastes and evolve into a platform that stimulates profound discussions on what is considered permissible within culture and society. Fashion creations could serve as tools for expressing opinions on significant issues that will dominate social life in the coming years.

Over the next decade, the role of fashion designers will experience a significant transformation, driven by three interconnected changes: advanced technologies, engagement with social and political issues, and the questioning of societal norms. Modern technologies such as artificial intelligence, 3D printing, and virtual reality will enable the creation of more interactive and personalized designs that respond to emotions or external conditions. Meanwhile, the growing role of fashion as a tool for expressing social and political views will leverage these technologies to further influence society, with designers becoming opinion leaders who not only shape trends but also address important issues. In response to these changes, fashion will increasingly challenge societal taboos and norms, using new tools to express controversial ideas, thereby influencing the perception of the boundaries of acceptability. These three areas will complement and drive each other, creating a new fashion reality in which technology, social responsibility, and artistic provocation are closely intertwined.

In conclusion, it is important to note how the role of the fashion designer, represented by figures such as Jean-Paul Gaultier and Lee Alexander McQueen, has seen a significant transformation in the context of the contemporary world. Both designers, through their innovative approach, not only influenced the aesthetics of fashion but also changed the perception of fashion as a tool for expressing social, cultural, and technological ideas. Gaultier and McQueen, by leveraging their unique talents and courage, managed to merge art, technology, and social issues, creating fashion that transcended the boundaries of traditional design.

Although both designers had different approaches, their shared ability to experiment and break conventions demonstrated how fashion can be a powerful medium for expressing emotions, protests, and, ultimately, social challenges. The influence that Gaultier and McQueen had on fashion is still felt in our present day, where their ideas and approach to design continue to inspire contemporary creators. The development of technology and social changes, which are an integral part of their legacy, open up new possibilities that only highlight the relevance of their visions.

Their work not only changed the way fashion functions today but also paves the way for a future where designers will have even greater freedom to express themselves through innovation and technological progress. In this way, fashion, which was once purely functional, will become increasingly multidimensional, shaping our culture and responding to the challenges of the future.

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