Fashion Theory

A Reader

Edited by Malcolm Barnard
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discourse of advertisement. The age of these things and the very fact of their having been used may make them unattractive to others but does not mean that for us they are no longer useful. Some of these things are on the way to becoming rubbish when the next clearout comes. Some may have a residual value in an exchange circuit that is not part of the high intensity market – the jumble sale or car boot sale. Other household items that slip from the useful to the useless status will be thrown away, perhaps to be recycled (newspapers, bottles, cans). Some things will be ‘recovered’ from their status as rubbish to regain value and re-enter the cycle of exchange (Thompson 1979).

I have argued that consumption is a restricted way of understanding how material culture shapes and reflects social forms and processes. It has raised a number of interesting themes for the analysis of objects in material culture:

- as signs of status and identity (Veblen, Bourdieu)
- as vehicles of meaning and equivalence within and between different cultures (Appadurai, Sahlin, Douglas and Isherwood, Baudrillard)
- as bearers of aesthetic value (Simmel, Baudrillard, Featherstone)
- as components of ritual (Douglas and Isherwood, McCracken)
- as indicators of lifestyle and identity (Featherstone, Dittmar, Lunt and Livingstone)
- as knowledge and ideas (Appadurai, Campbell)
- as potentially inalienable (Miller)
- objects as the focus of discourse, both institutional and local, about their value (Léiss, McCracken, Jhally, Ewen and Ewen)

. . . I shall argue for an eclectic approach that brings material objects into the foreground of modern social life. One key element of this that will recur . . . is the idea that humans interact with objects, sometimes as if they are human, sometimes because through them we can interact with other humans and sometimes because they reflect back something of who we think we are. I shall argue that material culture involves taking on cultural practices in relation to material objects which define the uses and the values of those objects in everyday life. Their importance is not reducible to their political effects or to economic calculations but emerges through grasping the way that objects are fitted into ways of living.

[. . .]

Material surfaces

The discussions of clothes and fashion considered so far have been macro-social in that ideas of what is appropriate to wear derive from values that are sustained through cultural dissemination, through cultural groups, through the accepted meanings of clothes and through the fashion system including images. Peter Corrigan (1994) has looked at a more intimate economy of clothing – people’s wardrobes. He found that between a quarter and a third of items were ‘gifts’ – some bought, others cast-offs, some had been borrowed without permission. This very
small study reminds us that clothes are often acquired, chosen and worn through a variety of social processes that are on the margins of anything approaching a fashion system. Corrigan writes of a ‘familial-sartorial world-view’ (1994: 443) that refers to the non-cash, non-public, informal economy that determines what many of us actually wear. Within the family, in peer groups and among friends, ideas about what is appropriate clothing are passed on, criticized, refused and revised. These ideas moderate the influence of culture-wide forms of mediation – magazines, newspapers, television, film – and of style leaders – actors, singers, models, designers and so on. This informal approach to wearing clothes is not anti-fashion (as Baudrillard points out, ‘fashion makes the refusal of fashion into a fashion feature – blue-jeans are an historical example of this’; 1993a: 98) and will take place within some established codes of appropriateness of different clothes for gender, occasion and activities. The everyday response to the clothes is oriented to what they look like rather than what they look like in a photograph, how they feel rather than how they are described, how others respond to them not as abstract indicators but as particular clothes on a particular person’s body and how the garment ages. In other words, how clothes are when they are being worn out.

Blue jeans are something of a conundrum because while they clearly are part of fashion in that they constitute a recognizable style of clothing, at the same time they express an ambivalence to fashion. They have remained a style of clothing that makes a fashion statement for 50 years but have never the less remained available for many different meanings to be attributed to them – as well as being regularly reintroduced as a ‘classic’ form of clothing. These features of jeans as fashion have often been commented on (Fiske 1989: 1–21; Davis 1992: 108; Fine and Leopold 1993: 140; R.R. Wilson 1995: 98) and some commentators have given direct attention to jeans as a fashion classic with a remarkable design history (Sudjic 1985; Cuomo 1989; Rica-Lévy 1989; Scheuring 1989; Finlayson 1990). But I wish to argue that there is something in the nature of the material form of the garment that makes jeans available for this particular fashion history and ambivalence of meaning.

Denim jeans threatened to break with the tranquil order of modern life when they moved from rural work clothes to become an emblem of urban youth reacting to authority. These meanings became attached to the garment, according to the commentators, as they girded the loins of James Dean and Marlon Brando in films of the 1950s (Scheuring 1989: 227). Jeans went against the grain of the dominant clothes culture of western modernity and reversed many established clothing signifiers. They were made of cotton (vegetable) instead of wool (animal); fixed in shape instead of tailored; had visible seams but no pressed creases; revealed the form of the body rather than covering it. This can be summed up as a set of reversals of the material features of the tailored lounge suit (see Wright 1996). The tailored suit presents fineness of material, cloth which is smooth, consistent and restrained in colour but hangs from the body, seams which are invisibly stitched, buttons which blend in colour even when they are decorative. In contrast with the formality of the tailored suit, jeans are ‘casual’ or ‘leisure’ wear. But they are also ‘workwear’ in so far as that was how they originated – so the oft-repeated story of origins goes – and continue to be workwear for many people, both in paid work and private domestic work. Jeans are made from hardwearing cloth that is resistant to ripping when stressed through bending and stretching, many seams are double stitched and there
are ‘strengthening’ rivets at key points. These are material indicators of the appropriateness of jeans for activities that will put the clothing under stress — using the body for lifting, pulling, carrying heavy objects, dealing with dirty or potentially damaging materials. They are of course no more appropriate for these tasks than overalls, work trousers and dungarees, all of which have become ‘fashion’ garments for periods of time. The difference is that jeans are made from denim and are cut in a distinctive way.

As leisure wear for men, jeans have replaced a range of trouser styles that retained a much closer affinity with the dark lounge suit:

- slacks — lighter in colour and material than the lounge suit but retaining the crease and the fineness of material and cut
- tweeds — a rougher, aristocratic form of the worsted suit, appropriate for the countryside, shooting, fishing, walking
- flannels — the soft light woolen version of suit trousers, used for sports like cricket and golf
- twills — the diagonal wool weave that tolerated the knee bending of horse riding

The tweed ‘sports’ jacket or blue blazer together with slacks or flannels provided the ideal leisure wear for the white, western classes who could afford clothes purchased for leisure. Poorer classes traditionally wore third best clothes, originally bought to fit into a cycle of best, everyday work clothes and weekend clothes. In postwar USA the khaki cotton twill chinos, white T-shirts and leather ‘bomber’ jackets of ex-service personnel provided the model for leisure wear.

Perhaps the most powerful cultural feature of jeans as clothing objects is that they are worn by both sexes. The wearing of jeans by women signals their release from the gendered clothing of formal dress. Trousers became acceptable for women first of all in sporting and leisure situations (there is a long tradition of women wearing trousers or breeches for riding). Although designed for men (work trousers, front fly), jeans became an acceptable substitute for slacks and other leisure trousers (capri pants, pedal pushers) that women wore in the USA in the 1950s. These cotton, close fitting trousers often cued the gender of the appropriate wearer with a zip located at the side or the back with a minimal placket or overlap. Although masculinizing with their front flys, jeans became an acceptable substitute for other leisure trousers for women and they were possibly the first unisex garment. Jeans came from the same pattern, the same pile, in the same shop, whereas suit jackets and riding breeches were structurally the same but tailored to distinguish the sex of the wearer. In the 1950s and early 1960s, jeans on women would have been regarded as a possible sign of lesbianism, along with short hair and no make-up.

In wearing jeans for leisure there is a parodic form of conspicuous consumption. For the office worker, wearing jeans to the cinema, the coffee bar, the pub or just for lounging, there is a display that the wearer is not working. There is a display of ‘pecuniary strength’, as Veblen (1953[1899]) puts it, in being able to purchase jeans just for leisure, but it is parodic of the display by the wealthy of their continuous leisure with the elite hallmarks of tailoring and quality cloth because jeans are workwear. Jeans are democratic rather than elite. Each pair is mass produced and cut
the same, regardless of the shape of the body they cover, and all are made from the same, basic quality cloth in exactly the same colour — blue, the colour of the blue collared industrial worker, working with metals and machines.

Of course the fashion system has produced designer jeans with labels that signify degrees of pecuniary strength and the form and jeans has varied with fashion (flares, bell bottoms, hipsters, baggies etc.) as has the colour (black, white, stonewash etc.). But the 'authentic' or 'original' form and colour has remained dominant with its visible material features: dark blue colour; brass rivets; orange stitching; double seams on inside leg, back pockets, flies placket, crotch and back seam; through-stitched hem; belt loops; ticket pocket and the 'yoke seam' that gives the characteristic shape between hips and waist. This classic form also includes brand name indicators visible on the outside: stitching on the back pocket, 'leather' label on the outside of the waistband; tags inserted into seams. Jeans have always asserted their commodified, mass manufactured form by being self-advertising.

Distinctive and visible seams have been a constant features of jeans in all variants. With the exception of the outside leg seam, the interlocked joins of the main structural seams (inside leg, back, yoke) are strong but bulky, emphasized by the orange thread of double, parallel stitches. The visual effect of the seams is to dissect the form of the body, revealing it as made up of parts (legs) that are joined at the top (crotch, flies, back seam) and merge into a unity (the waistband). This material feature of jeans presents the body as a fetishized object, chopped up ready for consumption like the images of women in soft porn when clothing is used to divide parts of bodies — belt and garters, bra straps, shoe straps, stocking tops, half removed clothing. The cutting of the body by the seams of the jeans even presents the sexual parts. The buttocks are separated by the back seam, their cleavage is reflected in the yoke seam (and the Levi’s pocket logo). The patch pockets, like a brassière, mark and emphasize the presence of buttock shapes. The flies, in true pornographic style, both hide and represent the sexual parts with a single seam on the opening edge and double seam parallel on the trouser front, both picked out with surface stitching in orange to create a six-inch long tube, running vertically from crotch towards the navel, which is both a flap and a gap in the material.

If the seams emphasize the form of the body underneath, this form is re-emphasized by the material of the denim. The cotton twill material does not 'hang' as woolen fabrics or thinner cotton weaves do. Unlike close fitting garments like tights, hose or stockings that fit with the form underneath, the cut and material of the jeans means they are stretched against the skin, moving against it, as the body moves. The material takes up some of the shapes of the particular body that is wearing it. Knees, buttocks, testicles, labia, hips, thighs, all stretch the material, moulding it in a way that doesn’t fall out when the pressure is released. The stiffness of the material gathers in creases which also become impressed in the material – beside and behind the knees, at the crotch, radiating from the top of the legs, under the buttocks. The twill weave, involving three directions (up, down and diagonal) retains distortions impressed upon it and even 'remembers' them after washing and ironing.

The regular process of washing actually reinforces this reflection of the body underneath on the surface of the denim. Denim is usually a mixture of white and blue dyed cotton yarns and when new, the outer surface is mainly dark blue, the
inner surface white, but the colour is not smooth and continuous. As the jeans are worn and washed, their colour fades. The effect is variegated according to the thickness of the material and the creasing. Where the body pushes at the surface, knees and buttocks especially, it fades most. The bottoms of creases remain bluer and the tops fade most so that those features of the jeans that they take up as shape are re-emphasized as colour. The effect of fading is to re-emphasize the impact of the form of the body on the surface of the jeans like shading on a pencil drawing; the colour is darkest on those points furthest away from a viewer and bodily shape is picked out in a ‘relief’ effect in which the closer surface is lighter in colour. As the material wears out, the body may begin to represent itself, exposed through tears and damage to the fabric. As a unisex garment, jeans reflect the body and sex of the wearer while at the same time neutralizing gender distinction through form, material, colour or decoration.

The ambivalence of blue jeans is that they are all, more or less, the same cut and colour, but each pair becomes different when they are used. They take on their identity through being worn and washed and worn; it is the identity of the wearer, not of the designer or even the manufacturer. The form of the garment has very little to say for itself, which is precisely why manufacturers have such an aggressive branding and advertising strategy. The form of jeans does not carry strong connotations of class, sex or even nationality.

Conclusions

Wearing clothes is social in that what people wear is treated by those around them as being some sort of indicator of who they are. The cultural system by which the values of clothing and people are connected is generally agreed to be ‘fashion’. This is a system of relationships between ideas and values, material things (clothes) and people – who wear clothes out into society. The fashion system is in constant flux in modernity and it cannot be pinned down to one system; there are competing influences and ideas that have an influence but are not precisely represented in fashion. The fashion system does not represent in any direct way social relationships of status, gender, occupation or allegiance, but it does allow for these relationships to be reflected through the changing orientation to clothes. There are also competing fashion systems within the cultural field of clothing; second hand clothes, street styles, family and peer groups, that cut across the production/consumption system of mass manufactured clothing.

Following Barthes we found that the fashion system is not accessible as a linguistic code or as a material system but only through a combination of both. Material discourse is the term I have used to point to the connection between language, material and cultural values. Hollander (1993) is also persuasive (as are many books on clothing and fashion by their example) that images are as important as words and ideas in contributing to the material discourse of fashion.

What the discussion of fashion often avoids are the characteristics of clothes as they are worn. By discussing how the materiality of blue jeans works, I have tried to show how their status as clothes is not determined simply by the fashion system or language of clothes but emerges from the interaction between the wearer and
the garment. Wearing clothes is a material experience; they are available to be looked at on other people and to be worn by ourselves. Clothes are given meaning in the fashion system by the aesthetics of design, the mechanics of production and the inducements of consumption. But the engagement of the wearer with the garment such that they become part of each other, also gives clothes meaning. Jeans more than many garments have a rigid form as fashion but become a vehicle for individual identity through their material malleability.

Notes

1. The name 'jeans' derives from the material, 'jean fustian', the tough twill weave, cotton fabric used for workwear. Jean seems to be a transformation of Gene, for Genoa, indicating the original location of the material or its manufacture. Fustian is a hard wearing fabric in which cotton is mixed with flax or wool. The plural form, 'jeans', refers to the garment, which like the word 'trousers' is pluralized presumably to indicate its two legs. The word denim also derives from a place, 'serge de Nimes'. Serge is a woolen fabric of twill weave; denim is a cotton variant.

2. Manufacturers have in recent years diversified the form of jeans so that different body shapes, including women's, can look similar when wearing jeans.

3. Umberto Eco writes entertainingly of the sensations of wearing jeans, of having 'a sheath around the lower half of my body' so that from waist to ankles his body was 'organically identified with the clothing' (Eco 1987: 192). The encasement within the clothing affects the way he moves; walking, turning, sitting, hurrying are all changed. In turn this affects his demeanour and the constraint on his body led to constraint in his behaviour. But the transformation did not stop there: 'A garment that squeezes the testicles makes a man think differently' (Eco 1987: 193).

4. In doing so, the sellers of jeans will reassert distinctions of taste, gender and sexuality. Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen are repulsed by a 1980s advertisement on a bus for Gloria Vanderbilt jeans that shows

an assembly line of female backsides, pressed emphatically into their designer jeans. . . . These buttocks greet us from a rakish angle, a posture widely cultivated in women from time to time, in place to place. What was termed in nineteenth century America the Grecian bend. The hustle. Foot-bound women of China. Corsets. High heels. Hobble skirts. Here it is, women hobbled in the finery of freedom.

(Ewen and Ewen 1992: 75)

Bibliography


