help us remove our residues from the clothes we have worn. Its electric motor may reduce the effort of washing but when it stops we must bend down and reach into it to get the washing out and then dry and iron it if we want clean laundry. The dwelling activities of sitting and laundering – and all the others mentioned in this chapter – are not simply about consuming goods but about living with them, appropriating objects into our everyday lives. As a billboard advertisement declared:

> We shape the things we build, thereafter they shape us.
> (advertisement for Caterpillar clothes, March 1998)

But as we live with things, using them, working with them, altering and adding to them, the work of building is continuous – and so is the process of mutual shaping.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the patterns of consumption and the influences on choice within the home see Putnam (1990) and other contributors to Putnam and Newton (1990).
2. See Madigan and Munro (1990) who discuss the impact of gender on contemporary western housing.
3. Riggins uses the term 'flavor' to refer to the same overall impression of an inhabited room as he draws on Goffman's ideas to explore the place of domestic objects in micro-social processes (1990: 357–8).

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5

WEARING IT OUT: WRITTEN AND MATERIAL CLOTHING ■

> Our clothes are too much a part of us for most of us ever to be entirely indifferent to their condition: it is as though the fabric were indeed a natural extension of the body, or even of the soul.
> (Bell 1992 [1947]: 19)

Of all things, apart perhaps from things that we eat, clothes are the material objects that are most consistently part of our individual and our social lives. As Quentin Bell suggests, they are so close to our bodies for so much of the time they become like an extension of that body, an outer layer or shell with which we confront the social world. Clothes are something we wear on the outside of our bodies, wearing them out into the environment and the social world and wearing out the material of the fabric through use and through washing. In some ways clothes are like rooms and houses – containers in which we are able to live out our lives. But they are less like containers or mini-environments (except perhaps space suits or diving suits – see Chapter 9) as they are like screens or fences. They cover us, affording us protection, but they allow us to look out, over or through the screen. They only partially hide and protect us;

the other side of being able to take in the world through our clothes is that we are also able to present ourselves to the world through them. Clothes are a relatively malleable material form so that the wearer can adjust the screening effect by, for example, taking off an overcoat to enter a building that is warmer than outside and in which a more personal and discerning gaze can fall upon the more complex ensemble previously hidden under the coat.

Clothes are objects that we co-opt as we confront the natural world of sun, wind, rain, heat and cold and the social world of sex, status, power and communication. They have a multitude of properties that we confer and exploit through this co-option. There are three key ways in which clothing has effect as material culture that I shall consider in this chapter. First, as fashion – the link between the shape and look of clothes and a temporal sequence of change in those forms. Much of the attention paid to clothing in social and historical discussions has focused on 'fashion' because of its potential to signify social distinctions of age, gender and status. Second, and deriving from the signifying function of fashion, is the capability of clothing to communicate between members of the culture through forms that may be more or less static over time. The idea that clothes are a form of writing on the body has been inverted by Roland Barthes to treat writing about clothes as an inseparable part of the system of difference between items of clothing. The third key issue I shall raise is the idea that a single garment may be significant because of the relationship between its particular material form and the body that wears it.

FASHION AND MODERNITY

The social distinction of fashion can work without clothes. Journalist Barbara Ellen commented on a 'clothing-optional resort':

> Ironically, the most bizarre sights seem to have sprung from some deep-rooted nudist urge to make a 'fashion statement': the men like to wear tops but no bottoms, leaving their genitals dangling beneath the cloth like giblets escaping from a Thanksgiving turkey; while the women favour the 'shaved crotch' look. However, the

> fact remains that, here [in the clothing-optional resort], it is I who am the freak in my prim little sundresses and 'daringly' sheer tights.
>
> (*Observer Life Magazine*, 30 March 1997)

One of the attractions of nudism is that the absence of clothes could be expected to limit the possibilities for social distinction by fashioned appearance. But here distinctions are being made within the community not only between members (unclothed) and outsiders (clothed) but also among members (more or less unclothed). The male fashion of tops-but-no-bottoms modifies the un-dress code by adding clothes but without disturbing the signal of complete undress – exposed genitals. This fashion does allow some 'management' of the code: sitting down, in a car, with a newspaper on the lap or at a table one could pass for a non-nudist. For women the 'shaved crotch' removes a sign of nudity – the pubic hair – while being consistent with the un-dress code. Its absence suppresses the signal of sexual maturity that is normally covered in even the briefest of conventional bathing costumes.

Simmel's justly famous account of fashion locates two dynamics in fashion which are almost contradictory – imitation and differentiation (1971 [1904]: 296). To follow a fashion is to imitate the norm so that outsiders (such as those wearing sundresses) feel uncomfortable while the insiders enjoy the feeling of inclusion. The code of un-dress is modified by innovations such as tops and shaved crotches, which, when they are imitated, differentiates a new 'in-group' within the resort. The in-group display their familiarity with the un-dress code by their adoption of the two variants which also 'culturalize' the natural differentiation of the sexes.

Simmel suggests that innovation is a result of a 'weakening of nervous energy' (Simmel 1971: 302) that is characteristic of both modernity and the upper classes; simply the widespread adoption of a fashion or clothing style causes its appeal to fade and leads to a desire for the new. He suggests that while simpler cultures resist novelty and strangeness, the complexity of modern society and its vulnerability to foreign influence lead it to be charmed by the new:

> Whatever is exceptional, bizarre, or conspicuous, or whatever departs from the customary norm, exercises a

> peculiar charm upon the man of culture, entirely independent of its material justification.
>
> (Simmel 1971: 300)

The cycle of fashion, of new styles replacing old, has been around since the fourteenth century (Braudel 1981: 317) but the fashion cycle has accelerated since the nineteenth century and even more so since the Second World War (see Davis 1992: 105). The work of individuals became distinctive and known following the introduction of the couture system of designers producing from ateliers which began in the middle of the nineteenth century. Vittoria de Buzzaccarina (1990: 254) precisely dates the emergence of the *haute couture* fashion industry from the trade of dressmaking as beginning in 1858 when Charles Worth opened a *maison* on the Rue de la Paix in Paris. Rather than designing for a specific client, Worth produced designs for wear in different settings which would then be made up to each client's particular measurements and wishes. Although fashion designs had been presented as sketches in magazines, suggesting ideas and ways of using new textiles, Worth introduced *design* as a distinct part of the process of producing high quality clothing. This included presenting the designs as three-dimensional 'models' on living bodies (known then as *sosie*, later as *mannequins* and now simply as 'models').

The introduction of designs and models was still linked to a made-to-measure system of producing individual clothes for specific clients. The development of machine based, mass production techniques was kept in check by the dominance of the ateliers and hand production so that even when industrial production was well established the dressmaking industry was forced to

> adapt hand-sewn garments to machine production, to mimic the very techniques of manufacture it was designed to replace . . . The dominance of couture design, therefore, can be viewed as perpetuating a retrograde orientation in production which trickled down through all layers of dressmaking.
>
> (Fine and Leopold 1993: 112)

On the other hand, the mechanisms for distributing, advertising and retailing the clothes once copied, transformed fashion into a high volume

commodity system. The effect seems to have been one of reducing the fashion cycle so that changes are more frequent. The cyclical nature of fashion means that clothes say something about history, locating wearers at a vague point in the passing of social time, cross-connected with the wearer's position in the generational structure. While nothing like as precise as dating a tree by its rings, the width of a man's trousers or tie, whether he wears turn-ups or indeed a tie at all, seem to situate him according to his age and the age he lives in.

Both Simmel (1971[1904]) and Veblen (1953[1899]) are famous for regarding fashion as something that affects only the upper classes and trickles down through the lower classes, maintaining status distinctions through a continuous process of novelty, differentiation and imitation. For Veblen (1953: 121) the clothes of women's fashion such as high heels and skirts were designed to show that their wearer did not work. However, Quentin Bell shows that historically the distinction between breeches and skirts is much more closely linked to occupation than gender (1992: 36) and, what is more, crinolines were worn by domestic servants and even women working in the fields (1992: 109). A more powerful explanation for form in women's clothes fashion, is to do with physical presence; high heels, skirts, bustles, piled hair, hats etc. make the woman appear bigger, strengthening her physical presence in interaction (Bell 1992: 39).

Simmel sees the way that people adopt clothing fashions – ignoring them, embracing them to excess, striving to lead fashion or at least be 'in' fashion, or by standing apart from the whole thing – as reflecting the way in which individuals orient themselves to society. In his account, fashion represents society, something mutable and changing against which the consistency of personality can emerge. So for example, those who accept blind obedience to fashion use it as a 'sort of mask' in order to reserve their personal feeling and their taste:

> It is therefore a feeling of modesty and reserve which causes many a delicate nature to seek refuge in the levelling cloak of fashion: such individuals do not care to resort to a peculiarity in externals for fear of perhaps betraying a peculiarity of their innermost soul.
>
> (Simmel 1971: 312)

More recent accounts have, like Simmel, emphasized the role of fashion

in modernity but also linked it to other changes in society. Campbell (1987: 76) has argued that the tolerance of new social and political ideas, which has its origins in Romanticism, led to the emergence of a new form of hedonism that took pleasure in imagination and emotions. He links the pleasure that can be derived from new ideas and stimuli to the modern desire for novelty including new fashions in clothes. Elizabeth Wilson (1985) sees wearing fashionable clothes as a reaction to enlightenment thought that became possible due to the relative cheapness of machine based production techniques. The continuous expression of the new

> does suggest what is *common* to much of modern art: its oppositionalism and iconoclasm, its questioning of reality and perception, its attempt to come to grips with the nature of human experience in a mechanized 'unnatural' world.
>
> (Wilson 1985: 63)

For Herbert Blumer fashion is not driven by class distinction but by a 'collective groping for the proximate future' (1969: 281) and he suggests that the individual's engagement with fashion is not so much the desire to explore new ideas or to express opposition but more prosaically the '*wish to be in fashion, to be abreast of what has good standing, to express new tastes which are emerging in a changing world*' (Blumer 1969: 282 – emphasis in the original). But how, Blumer's study wanted to find out, can this collective response operate through the *haute couture* fashion system? Of the hundreds of designs presented to buyers, whose professional skill was in guessing how new fashions would be received by their customers, only about 10 per cent were ordered. The buyers, however, apparently acting independently, made very similar decisions, even though they were only able to explain their choice of an item as its being 'stunning' (Blumer 1969: 279). The designers and buyers were of course steeped in a fashion culture that was concerned with the recent development of clothing forms and styles, as well as developments in other cultural forms. For Blumer, fashion is a dynamic of modernity, a system of change and innovation that always understands the past, particularly the recent past and distinguishes itself as new in contrast to that past. Collective taste, which is expressed in fashion, is a product of social interactions and experiences.

The particular role of fashion in the lives of some women is nicely summed up by Sarah Mower, Fashion Features director of *Harper's Bazaar*, originally writing in the *Evening Standard*:

> Fashion is our play. It's our dialogue with ourselves. It's our backchat to other women and underneath that, our coded competition with one another. Fashion is what we do instead of cricket or duffing each other up on a Saturday night.
>
> (*The Guardian* 2, 19 September 1996: 6)

This sort of view might be held by only some women and perhaps a few men but it does show how fashion is a social engagement within culture. Much of the *haute couture*, catwalk fashions are designed to be seen rather than worn but there is a 'spin-off' effect as certain designs or features are picked up by other designers and, more importantly, appear in mass produced garments. Fashion is also incorporated into individual clothing styles by altering clothes and recycling old fashions through second hand markets and hand-me-downs.

FASHION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Angela McRobbie (1989) describes the mixture of market stall holders who recognized some value in second hand clothes and the imaginative customers who found ways to integrate them into their own wardrobe. To begin with, these markets were outside the circuit of fashionability defined by couture houses, fashion magazines and fashion editors in newspapers. In the 1960s a generation of young people were attracted by the natural fabrics and craftmanship of clothes that had survived to be recycled. The old styles were recovered, not through nostalgia, but for an enthusiasm for putting together new and old ideas of what would look good. For example, the colour and decoration of military dress uniforms was taken at face value, not as an insignia of rank or membership of a particular unit, and were worn by the hippies unbuttoned, with jeans and long hair. McRobbie's short history shows that between the 1960s and the end of the 1980s a series of recyclings of clothes were connected with the development of punk, the new romantics, glamour and cross-dressing styles. All of these were street 'fashions', created on the margins

of commodity capitalism which in time began to feed back into the fashion industry which either reproduced the originals or mimicked the modifications achieved by street fashion.

The idea of fashion as part of youth culture has become a theme in British cultural studies (Willis 1975; Hebdige 1979) and disturbed the traditional ideas of fashion as something associated with the upper classes and 'trickling down' through the class structure or with *haute couture* and dispersal through the high street. Instead, fashion, or the wearing of clothes to distinguish social groups, has become associated with the idea of style 'bubbling up' from the street to influence high fashion. The plethora of styles that remain in fashion in the 1990s has led Ted Polhemus (1994: 130–4) to write of a 'supermarket of style' available for the young or would-be-young to choose from. The emergence of a 'fashion pluralism' has been noted before of course (Bell 1992; Davis 1992). What the account of second hand and 'alternative' or 'subcultural' styles tells us is that the material culture of clothes is not simply determined by a single hegemonic cultural process, although commodity capitalism and the ideological fashion system is never far behind.

If the idea of fashion becomes disconnected from the macro-social changes of modernity and linked to the later emergence of subcultural styles, the relationship between fashion and individual identity becomes more important. Joanne Finkelstein (1991) argues that a particular sensibility linking appearance and image to a subject's personality and character emerged at the beginning of the modern period, and has led to strategies oriented to 'fashioning the self' in late modernity. This fascinating argument explores responses to human deformity, literature about changed bodies, and medical interventions to create 'beauty' as well as the role of clothes. Finkelstein argues that the features of clothing such as the necktie, a garment that is useless for keeping the body warm and protected, function to support the personal and social identity of the wearer:

> The tie must be worn as if it were a natural appendage: from its pivot at the throat, the tie should hang along the body as if it belonged. Thus, the status generated by the tie is paralleled by its unobtrusiveness.
>
> (Finkelstein 1991: 126)

The tie is a small part of a dress code that seems very simple; it is

associated with masculinity,[1] a white collar job and a claim to power and status. It is also the site within the sombre uniform of the business suit in which adornment and colour in male attire can be expressive of allegiance (old school tie) or personality (exuberant patterns and shades). The material of the tie can express luxury and status not only through the richness of its material (silk, crêpe de chine) but also through the difficulty of cutting and working such materials. Finkelstein points out that the tie is 'a sign of conspicuous immobility' (1991: 120) worn to best effect when the wearer is inactive or idle. She makes a powerful argument that a series of clothing indicators such as the necktie, the business suit, lipstick, dresses, skirts, stockings and heeled shoes carry straightforward messages of gender and status. The fact that such clothing features may be used as masks to hide behind or subverted through people 'dressing-up' or 'cross-dressing' does not alter the power of these messages to communicate about human character (see Ash 1996). The argument presents the modern person as one who controls her or his own distinct 'self' not through rumination or reflection but through external objects, often commodities (Finkelstein 1991: 172). For Finkelstein, the delusion of late modernity is the excessive concern with image, surface and appearance rather than personality (Finkelstein 1991: 119).

Jean Baudrillard (1993a [1976]) is much more ambivalent about the role of fashion in modernity and steers a fluid line between any essential notions of self or society. As he compares pre-modern cultures with modern, he reveals the quality of symbolic exchange and shows how the signification of clothing and the signifieds of fashion become unthreaded in late modernity. He suggests that fashion itself is indicative of life in late modernity; indeterminate, stripped of reason and liquefying of values and meaning. Compared to moral, linguistic or political codes, clothing codes are a relatively trivial part of people's lives but for the sociologist the play of the codes provides an indicator of the state of culture. For example, Baudrillard notes the way that fashion plays promiscuously with the past, reviving styles and cuts, colours and features, and as it does so, recalling but not readopting the values and meanings associated with them. Fashion acts as a living museum that stockpiles signs, extracting them from the flow and change of culture. Whereas the historical time of production and technology is linear, the time of fashion is cyclical.

For Baudrillard fashion is not reducible to anthropologically interpreted rituals and dress codes, it has to be grasped

aesthetically and in relation to modes of thought. Fashion signs are 'afloat' in their indeterminacy, no longer connected to class, gender, occupation. The forms of fashion have no model; they are not derivable from another system so, as Baudrillard puts it, they are 'never produced, but always *reproduced*. The model itself has become the only system of reference' (Baudrillard 1993a: 92).

This field of signs, floating, influenced by previous signs but undetermined by the practicalities of experience, cannot be reduced to the operation of individual will or consciousness. Those entering the field of fashion (not only fashion as clothing of course) might feel that they are playing freely, letting their creative energy and imagination guide them to choose one sign rather than another. But for Baudrillard the fashion strategies of recycling, mix and match, subverting established dress codes, founding new ones, all demonstrate the *pulsion* (the drive) of late modernity to desire the code itself rather than to communicate messages of substance. The same happens with poetry which intentionally explores the possibilities of the linguistic code, or other art forms where an 'avant-garde' plays with conventions and traditions.

So far the idea of wearing clothes as fashion has tended to suggest that it is to do with the relationship of the individual to the society in which they live. The cycle of fashion, its speed of change, the sources of new ideas, all seem to be linked to the historical changes that occur in modernity. But perhaps this link between fashion and culture has run its course: the 'supermarket of style' indicates a breakdown in what was once a system of cultural communication that used the material form of clothes to carry messages about status, gender, wealth and the integration of the individual. Even if this link between fashion and the form of society is breaking down, fashion as distinction in the dress codes of work and domestic life, of street and party clothes, sustain meaning for wearers and their viewers while catwalk fashion suffers from the 'the subversion of all order' and the 'hell of the relativity of all signs' (Baudrillard 1993a: 98). It is in the routine of everyday life that such simple clothing codes as dressed/un-dressed, tops-but-no-bottoms/shaved crotches become established.

CLOTHES AS WRITING

The idea of wearing clothes as a way of communicating meanings that are more or less independent of fashion has always been popular. In 1957 Barthes distinguished the *langue* and *parole* of the clothing system as *costume* (the social institution of style, the store of possible styles) as opposed to *habillement* (the individual choice from the possible choices, the clothes actually worn) (Barthes 1957: 435). The system of relations between these two structures, one social and held in the awareness of the community of users, the other personal and manifest in material culture, makes up the *langage* or clothing system. The whole clothing system changes over time, not in a mechanical or wholesale way but by tendencies in a flexible system. As with a language, the whole system cannot change simultaneously or the individual capacity to make clothing choices (*habillement*) would collapse but changes to the clothing system can be far more rapid than those in a language. To illustrate his argument, Barthes uses the example of funeral clothing which used to be white but now is black (see also Hollander 1993: 373). The actual colour is not in any natural way tied to the social act of mourning but what is important is the social recognition of *a* colour for mourning clothes in a culture (*costume*) and then individuals recognizing that colour in their choice of clothes when grieving (*habillement*). Barnard (1996) draws out the logic of a structuralist approach to clothing as meaningful communication; his example of the arbitrary link of signifier to signified is pink and blue booties to indicate the sex of a baby.

Barthes's structuralist approach to treating clothing as a language system is not widely referred to although the general idea has become commonplace. Rubenstein (1995) for example borrows Goffman's (1959, 1963) dramaturgical metaphor to describe how clothes create particular images of power, authority, gender and seduction. People dress for 'front stage' when they wish to impress with their seriousness and worthy intentions. In the 'outside region' clothes wearers relax, taking off their ties and changing into 'casual clothes'. Rubenstein calls the clothing cues that identify wearers as a member of a social subgroup 'clothing tie-signs' (1995: 191). She gives the examples of Hare Krishnas, the Amish and Rastafarians but we could include the un-dress codes of the clothing optional resort. Tie-signs often link groups who are somewhat marginal in society, especially groups who dissent with society-wide cultural values. 'Clothing tie-symbols' on the other hand are expressions of support for an idea or a cause such as lapel ribbons or badges: they express values that the individual has consciously chosen rather than acquired through adopting a style (Rubenstein 1995: 206). Rubenstein is drawing on an interactionist approach which owes much to Stone's (1962) work exploring how people responded to each other's dress.

Allison Lurie (1981) has used the metaphor of clothes as a language to enable her to interpret the tone of what clothes are saying:

> Casual dress, like casual speech, tends to be loose, relaxed and colourful. It often contains what might be called 'slang words': blue jeans, sneakers, baseball caps, aprons, flowered cotton housedresses and the like. These items could not be worn on a formal occasion without causing disapproval, but in ordinary circumstances they pass without remark.
>
> (Lurie 1981: 8)

This simple level of meaning in clothes can however become very confused. Cullum-Swan and Manning (1994) look at the simple T-shirt as a casual clothing item that becomes the bearer of ever more complex codes as it is drawn into mass production and the fashion system, until finally it becomes a surface on which language itself in the form of text, slogans and image can be presented. The meaning of the words, let alone the garment, becomes confused by irony ('This is a T-shirt') and cultural references (Bart Simpson screaming 'Cool your jets man') when clothing and language are combined.

Whether it is the writing on the clothes or clothes as writing, there are problems about the capability of these material objects to communicate meanings specifically and flexibly. Fred Davis (1992) points out that ordinary language is a communication system in which complex messages impart abstract information in an interactive process and in comparison clothing is 'undercoded' in that the link between signifier and signified is unreliable:

> *meaningful* differences among clothing signifiers are not nearly as sharply drawn and standardized as are the spoken sounds employed in a speech community.
>
> (Davis 1992: 13)

A further problem with analysing the meaning of clothing as a language is that it is unable to take account of 'fashion'; the system of signifieds is on the one hand fixed in contextual styles (such as uniforms or subgroup codes) and on the other changing so rapidly that 'meaning' is in constant flux. Campbell (1996) also argues that we cannot conflate meaning with the clothing object itself. A fur coat might have symbolic meanings associated with class, glamour and animals but there are also instrumental reasons for using the object (warmth, comfort) and perhaps personal meanings (it belonged to a beloved grandparent). Clothing items cannot be treated as signifiers in a system of meaning constituted by the material of all other possible items of clothing. Interpreting the meanings of clothing objects requires looking at them in the context of a lifestyle along with other clothing choices, objects and activities. So, for example, failure to follow a clothing code would disturb the flow of interaction – 'forgetting' to wear a tie to a business meeting may unsettle the other participants. The habitual wearing of a style of clothing, say, a woman wearing fitting trousers and a bare midriff, may be construed as a lifestyle choice to fit with the flow of action and interaction at her evening dancing in a club. In these instances the clothes have meanings which are not properties of garments but of the garments-in-a-situation.

WRITTEN CLOTHING

Barthes (1990 [1967]) recognized this problem with clothes – that they don't speak for themselves – when he came to apply his semiological approach to the fashion system. This work was not a great success (Moriarty 1991; Calvet 1994) in applying the tools of semiological analysis to clothing and has largely been ignored or referred to obliquely in the literature on clothing. This is because the book is about what Barthes calls the 'fashion system', a cultural system that includes language, images and clothes, but he chooses to study only the linguistic component of this system by analysing the statements made in a series of fashion magazines. From these statements he derives a 'vestimentary code', more or less equivalent to the signifiers out of which clothing fashion is constructed. This analysis is detailed and painstaking and so rather tedious. It seems to lack the flow and imagination of Barthes's earlier analyses of cultural forms in *Mythologies* (1973; 1979) which link the distinction of form to cultural and ideological importance. In *The Fashion System* (Barthes 1990[1967]) the discussion of meanings, of the possible signifieds, is dealt with separately in an analysis of the 'rhetorical system' in the second half of the book. The failure of the work is perhaps in terms of these two subsystems not adding up to make a coherent and graspable 'fashion system'. This 'failure' of semiology came to be a

strength of Barthes's later works, especially *S/Z* (1975 [1970]) and led to the post-structuralist realization that there is no fixed or determined relationship between signifier and signified in mythic systems. Meaning is more fluid than can be captured by a single code; different codes within the same system do different ideological work.

The remarkable thing about *The Fashion System* is that the vestimentary code is a linguistic system that has almost a direct equivalence to the material stuff of clothes. It provides the means for describing the *substance* of clothing as items ('objects' organized as 'species', 'classes', 'genera') that have components ('supports') which vary ('variants') and exist in relations with each other – and to the human body. For example the variants of connection are to do with how two garments in an ensemble are connected together: '*a blouse floating over a skirt; a toque matching the coat; a twin set brightened up with a silk scarf*' (Barthes 1990: 151 – I have added underlining to indicate the variants). The limitations of this system are material; the properties of different garment-making materials and the usual form of the human body which those garments will cover. The combination of materials and body limit the range of possible garments, though not the precise form of the garments for which there is, potentially, infinite variation. But Barthes is deriving the system from examples of language used routinely to describe changes in clothing and not from a phenomenology of the material world or an analysis of wardrobes. What he is doing, via his analysis of the statements in fashion magazines, is to set out what I shall call a 'material discourse' of clothing. This is both the *language* that must be used if clothing is to be described in sufficient detail for the changes in fashion to be apparent and at the same time the *material* system of clothing items and features by which fashion, in the form of material clothes, is realized. The vestimentary code is not the language of a dress-maker or a specialist in making cloth, but it is the language of the fashion watcher, both the writer of the fashion magazine and its reader.

The language of the vestimentary code is what makes the clothes part of the fashion system; Barthes is pointing out that fashion does not exist in the form of clothes themselves but must be modified through discourse if the values of 'in fashion' or 'out of fashion' are to be distributed through the culture:

> In the vestimentary code, inertia is the original state of those objects which signification will seize upon: a skirt exists without signifying, prior to signifying; the meaning it receives is at once dazzling and evanescent: the 'speech' (of the magazine) seizes upon insignificant objects, and, *without modifying their substance*, strikes them with meaning, gives them the life of a sign.
>
> (Barthes 1990: 64–5)

There are potentially many sources and types of utterances that give significance to items of clothing (ordinary talk between clothes wearers for example) but Barthes has found in fashion magazines an accessible set of statements available to be analysed. Prior to some sort of discourse, clothing has no meaning; Barthes's analysis shows how clothing objects are appropriated by a culture through discourse such as that of fashion magazines.

The rhetorical code is that which gives meaning to the formulations in the vestimentary code. In its simplest form the rhetorical system of fashion is the utterance which tells you what is, or will be, the fashion:

> *Women will shorten skirts to the knee, adopt pastel checks, and wear two-toned pumps.*
>
> (Barthes 1990: 37)

This statement has a structural form:

> short skirts • pastel checks • two-toned pumps ≡
> Fashion clothing ≡ Fashion

The fashion statements in magazines also describe the clothes in relation to the world, suggesting the sorts of places or activities that particular garments or ensembles will go with.

> *This blazer is for the girl who's something of an Anglophile, perhaps smitten with Proust, who spends her vacations at the shore.*
>
> (Barthes 1990: 247)

The structure of this statement is more complicated:

blazer • Anglophile • Proust • seaside ≡ Fashion
clothing ≡ world ≡ Fashion

The wearer of the blazer is inserted into a set of worldly relations which give value to the blazer (Anglophile, Proust, seaside) but they are in turn given the value of being fashionable.

The rhetorical system is the way that fashion becomes linked to the flow of the modern world. It is not the real world of action and interaction or even of material clothes, it is the world of fantasies and ideas, of images and significances, in short the world of ideology. The rhetorical system has three registers according to Barthes – the poetic (alliteration, rhymes), the world of fashion (association, place, activities, types of people) and the reason for fashion (function of the item or ensemble). The problem with the rhetorical system is that the link between written clothing and ideology is vague and, compared to the systematicity of the vestimentary code, analysis of the rhetorical code is also forced to be less formal and precise. As Barthes accepts, the realm of the rhetorical signified is usually 'nebulous' and 'this is where the system, touching the entire world, comes undone' (Barthes 1990: 232).

The fashion statements that Barthes analyses are from the sorts of magazines that are characterized by photographs of the clothes mentioned and the settings they are worn in.[2] They will be worn by models who give the clothes a certain shape and pose that is also part of the fashion system, but Barthes has hardly anything to say about this despite his interest in the photographic message (Barthes 1977a; 1977b). He does point out that in image-clothing the whole ensemble, or at least what is visible, absorbs the whole being of the garment in what he terms a 'configuration (*form, fit, movement*)' (Barthes 1990: 119). Written clothing focuses on specific features giving them value and making them signify through the force of the abstraction from real to written. For example the complex feel of a garment can be represented by a single word such as 'clinging'. What written clothing does is to attach meaning to what is a small, finite element which in the real or image-form is part of a complex structure. This is precisely why the written system is ideal for analysing the fashion system, which is one of change.

But the 'look' of clothes is part of the way that they are appropriated as material objects. Anne Hollander puts it like this:

> The way clothes look depends not on how they are designed or made but on how they are perceived . . . People dress and observe other dressed people with a set of pictures in mind – pictures in a particular style. The style is what combines the clothes and the body into the accepted contemporary look not of chic, not of ideal perfection, but of natural reality.
>
> (Hollander 1993: 311)

There is a 'scopic regime' (the term is Christian Metz's: see Jay 1992) of clothing as well as a written fashion system. Ways of seeing are an important aspect of distinguishing between clothes as material objects. The detail as articulated in the vestimentary code may signify the specifics of fashion, but the look of the ensemble, including the setting, is a key aspect of fashion that is irreducible to words. Hollander argues that our perception of what we see when we look at clothes on someone else or on ourselves in a mirror has already been acculturated by our visual learning. It is through paintings, photographs and cinema that we learn what things should look like; what is beautiful and pleasing, what is natural, what is shocking. Hollander looks at the relation between clothing and the body and figurative representation. She shows how what is taken to be acceptable in fashion, what is 'normal' whether in body shape or costume, is established through a visual culture of the image. She argues for example that the way female social and sexual freedom is expressed through dress is not through a particular form of dress but through a reaction to the accepted norms. A new sense of freedom can be conveyed through trousers, short skirts or long skirts but it is what went before that determines which specific form carries the new message (Hollander 1993: 312–13). She dismisses the emergence of women's trousers as a dominant fashion in the middle of the twentieth century as being more 'comfortable' – the actual reason she claims was 'visual indigestion' with the variations on the skirt (Hollander 1993: 349).

Visual culture makes values such as beauty appear natural and timeless; the ideological effects of the visual codes are at least as difficult to unpack as the linguistic codes of fashion but Hollander's analysis points to the historical contingency of ways of seeing clothes.

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 re-introduced 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 1993: 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.[3] 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 woollen 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 coded 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 flies, 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,[4] 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 of 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 woollen 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.[5] 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.[6] 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 any 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 conventional long tie runs from the prominent male larynx, along the torso and terminates as a signal to the male sex organ, particularly when the man is seated. In this capacity the tie links together the physical symbols of virility, and as such, can be used as a psychoanalytic proboscis that demarcates a line from manhood to manliness.
>
> (Finkelstein 1991: 121–2)

2 Barthes says very little about his method of working, which was based on a corpus of statements gathered from four magazines (*Elle, Le Jardin des Modes,* plus *Vogue* and *L'Echo de la Mode*) between June 1958 and June 1959. He does not tell us how many magazines he studied or how he chose certain statements for quotation, nor does he identify the sources of the statements he quotes.

3 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 Nîmes'. Serge is a woollen fabric of twill weave; denim is a cotton variant.

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

5 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).

6 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 bustle. 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)