Jeans

A: al-ğīnz. – E: jeans. – F: jeans. – R: džinsy. S: jeans, vaqueros. – C: niuzifu 牛仔服

Term for a type of pant – and more. The phenomenon of Jeans is paradigmatic of how inseparable an object-history is from the realm of the imaginary. Jeans can only be grasped as a node of diverse interests, strategies and attributions that overlap and stand in contradiction with one another. The history of Jeans is at heart a history of acceptance and refusal with respect to Fordist society. The dialectics of the relation becomes particularly tangible in the history of Jeans in the German Democratic Republic.

1. The history of Jeans begins in the mid-nineteenth century in California. A robust, indigo-coloured cotton from Nîmes, denim ('de Nîmes') was imported via Genoa (French 'Gênes', hence English 'jeans') for the manufacture of a work pant durable enough for the needs of the gold-miners. For several decades, Jeans remained primarily a work pant for agricultural workers and ranchers, but they had already begun to acquire a complex imaginary significance. Beginning around 1910, denim overalls and Jeans contributed to the articulation of film as 'a specifically American art form' (**Schober** 2001, 85). As the war-production clothing of American women during World War I, denim overalls came to be the 'emphatically brandished sign of the acceptance of national strategies' (116). After the War, artists' colonies and drop-out groups emerged, positioning Jeans for the first time as anti-fashion and oppositional culture (118). According to information released by the firm Levi Strauss, which proliferates the 'history' of Jeans as a mix of marketing and myth, Jeans made their way into the cities during the Great Depression of the 1930s by means of still-solvent city dwellers who had availed themselves of the new dude ranch vacations hosted by farms and ranches threatened by ruin. They took the pants they discovered there back home with them. The documentary photographers of the Depression era contracted by the Roosevelt administration disseminated the image of impoverished farmers and unemployed industrial workers as suffering Everymen of a largely Jeans-wearing populace, who, like film figures of the 1930s (e.g. *Grapes of Wrath*), were presented as 'American' and 'social-planning-progressive' (140). Leftist intellectuals of the period identified themselves by wearing Jeans, among others the exiled Bertolt **Brecht** (162).

The breakthrough to its paradoxical existence as a uniform of those striving to set themselves apart, as a medium between identity and identification, as a mass phenomenon, came in the 1950s. Rebel films such as *The Wild One* (USA 1954) proliferated a Jeans image that quickly elevated Jeans to the trademark of the teenage dropout par excellence. This fad soon made its way to Europe as well, launching the 'rowdy [*Halbstarken*]' discourse in both German states, culminating on occasion in a mass brawl (for example at the 1958 Bill Haley concert in Berlin). Jeans became the symbol of a youth stylised as 'rowdies'. In the GDR as well, where the very word 'Jeans' was so provocative that, even as late as the early 1970s, in the context, of developing the domestic production of Jeans, specialists in the garment industry were instructed to use the term 'double-stitched fell-seam pants' rather than 'Jeans' (**Kramer** 2002, 129). In the FRG as well, wearing Jeans was considered by some to be an indicator of 'a cultural decline resulting from "Americanisation"' (**Schober** 2001, 216). In the West, the subculturalisation of Jeans reached its apex in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They were held to be the typical pant of US-American hippies and opponents of the Vietnam War – despite the fact that members of fraternities and supporters of the War also wore them. Wearing Jeans (in the US especially in combination with granny specs and a blue work-shirt) became the

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brand-mark of leftist American, later European, students.

In the countries of the Comecon, Jeans were a hot item among the youth and in young intellectual circles. As long as they could only be procured from foreign countries in the West (via friends or relatives who lived or were permitted to travel there), demand reached such proportions that, in the Soviet Union, a pair of Levis Jeans would sometimes sell for a full month's salary – a late and rather ironic fulfilment of the proclamation of the revolutionary artist 'Varst' (Varvara **Stepanova**), who in 1923 wrote, 'contemporary clothing is the work overall [*Prozodeza*]' (quoted in **Schober** 2001, 15). A truce in the battle against Jeans in the GDR was called in the 1970s. Manfred **Wekwerth** recalls a satirical poem that he and others composed on the occasion of the Sixth Party Congress of the Socialist Unity Party (the ruling party of the GDR): 'In the poem, we congratulated the Party on the heroic struggles that it had waged to attain many a lofty goal. In 1948 against the dangerous striped sock, "an expression of American freeloading and a dandy-attitude", until our labour force succeeded in producing even more colourful socks, celebrating them as an expression of our unbroken *joie de vivre*. Then in 1950, the war against "rivet pants" (*Niethosen*, i.e. Jeans) as "the expression of American barbarism in the realm of the garment and ideological subversion of our youth", until our people's-own industry itself became capable of producing this "typical garment of the American working class" in good quality under the brand name "Sonnidee", thereby satisfying the "natural needs of our young people for practical clothing"' (2000, 204). The breakthrough to Socialist acceptability ran parallel to the shift of the image of the Jeans-wearing Westerner from rowdy to Vietnam War opponent (**Kramer** 2002, 141 et sqq.). But even in the 1970s, when Jeans were being successfully produced in the Comecon, the brand-name Jeans of the West continued to be a prestige currency. The Jeans wave, having captured the masses, there surpassed even the popularity of the pants in the West (where sales sporadically dropped drastically) – so that, in retrospect, it is not so much the USA as the GDR that will be remembered as 'the Jeans-wearing country par excellence' (**Hahn** 2002).

2. Our concern here, though, is not Jeans as a garment nor their system-transcending popularity, nor even their paradoxical ability to signal individuality as a mass consumption article, nor their demonstrated potency as an object of capital valorisation in the garment industry. Rather: the way those things interconnect. Closer examination shows the Jeans phenomenon to be complex. It is not without irony that the article of clothing that, at least at certain times, was considered to be the symbol of opposition, of dropping out, of protest per se, should be the leading object of capital valorisation in the history of the clothing industry. By 1989, the firm Lee alone had used enough denim in the production of Jeans to cover all of Italy, including the Alps (*FAZ*, 29.3.1989, 18) and the firm Levi Strauss had six years earlier already sold twice as many Jeans (*The General Merchandizing Magazine*, Sept. 1984). The anti-hero Edgar Wibeau of *The New Sorrows of Young W.* (**Plenzdorf** 1979, 14) put it succinctly and accurately: Jeans is an attitude, not a pair of pants. The marketing division of Levi Strauss came out with an ad in 1984 asserting that the 'signal' of Jeans is the expression of an attitude towards life.

It would appear that the tough weave of Jeans consists of Gordian knots. Celebrated social theorists have attempted, on the multiply occupied terrain of cultural studies, to untie them. The topic requires interdisciplinary analysis, and it tempts the analyst to cross the boundary to the anecdotal; everybody has a Jeans story to tell. Time and again, you think you have grasped it, but the hand turns out to be empty.

Those who have taken on the challenge of investigating Jeans culture – or, more precisely, the social phenomenon it embodies in such exemplary fashion – have contributed in varying degrees to our understanding. In 1973, Pier Paolo **Pasolini** concerned himself with the phenomenon in the context of a linguistic analysis of an advertisement of the brand Jesus-Jeans: 'You shall have no other Jeans before me.' This ironic-blasphemous rendering of the First Com-

mandment is, for **Pasolini**, symptomatic of the new 'worldliness' in neo-capitalist society, that needs 'consumers with an exclusively pragmatic and hedonistic mentality' and tolerates the continued presence of religion 'merely as the natural basis for mass consumption and exploitable folklore' (1975/1998, 31 et sq) – a condition he criticises as 'hedonistic fascism'. The resounding outrage of the Vatican over this advertising slogan was not only helpless, as **Pasolini** asserted, but also cynical: The factory in which Jesus-Jeans were produced belonged to the Catholic Church (**Haug** 1987, 160).

In the most productive approach to date, Wolfgang Fritz **Haug** treats Jeans as an exemplary phenomenon whose analysis requires theoretical clarification of the relationship between ideology theory and commodity aesthetics in the context of the study of culture. Ideology theory distinguishes between 'horizontal' disciplines – i.e. conceptions of behaviour necessary for life that are articulated in association, that modify the unmediated driving motivations for individual action and further the maintenance and development of the capacity to act – and 'vertical' disciplines (1980, 126) conducted by overriding powers with the intent of socialising the individuals in 'ideal socialisation from above' (128; see **PIT** 1979, 181). Through their instantiations, the 'ideological powers' try to move 'individuals to the "voluntary" adoption of their activity-regulators and thereby to inner subjugation' (128); **Haug** calls this process *ideological subjection*, its effect (drawing upon Louis **Althusser**), the *ideological subject-effect* – the subjectivising of power relations by the individuals.

In the case of commodity aesthetics, the primary issue is not socialisation but rather the satisfaction of needs, specifically in the mode of the use-value promise. This fundamental category of commodity aesthetics requires subjective realisation: it is not the use-value itself that triggers the act of purchase, but rather the believed promise of use-value. Under investigation is the type of promise, given the 'form in which commodity aesthetics gives use-value to be understood' (129), in the first instance, as the body of the commodity. With Klaus **Holzkamp** (1973, 25 et sqq.), **Haug** calls the way the body of the commodity 'gives itself to be understood as use-value' (ibid.) its 'object-meaning'; the object-meaning does not *re*present the use-value (like advertising, packaging, etc.), it *presents* it – whereby, contrary to being identical with it, it is separable from it. That is, the object redoubles into the object and the appearance that is constituted, in accordance with general cultural codes, for that use-value. This process is not ideological, either. In the era of monopoly commodities, a new semiological structure, one that resembles the ideological, emerges: the signifying characteristics of the commodity body no longer denominate merely the presence-representation of culturally defined use-values but at the same time the valorising capital as well, that 'over the heads of the merchants . . . addresses the population of purchasers directly (**Haug** 1980, 131). The use-value promise of the commodity enjoys thereby both a rear wind and an open road; the aesthetics of the monopoly commodity erect around the body of the commodity an 'imaginary space' (132) and 'initiate thereby not only the connotations of characteristics or values, but also the imagination of wishful acts, more precisely of satisfaction acts' (ibid). Just which needs are invoked are extraneous to this structure; the prerequisite is simply that 'their satisfaction can be imaginatively linked to a specific commodity' (ibid.). The imaginary spaces can be understood as activity spaces – they 'urge the production of "thought films" in the form of half conscious, casual-fragmentary wish-dreams' (133). While the commodity is being used they induce a commensurate 'meaning-activity' (ibid.) Commodity aesthetics in this instance behave in a mode analogous to the ideological in an Althusserian sense: they 'organise imaginary relations of the individuals to certain objective conditions of their lives' (133 et sq). **Haug** grasps the thing hereby imagined as self-identity and investigates it with the reflexive socialisation mechanism articulated by George Herbert **Mead** as the 'generalised other': 'Its "gaze" and my "image" become factors of my identity' (134). The communicated need-satisfaction functions thereby as 'prescriptive appearance or ideal in the eyes

of the generalised other'; and this becomes a 'compulsively desired appearance . . . by virtue of the fact that social integration and identity adhere to it' (ibid.). This aesthetic subjugation, analogous to the ideological, can be characterised as the *subject effect of commodity aesthetics*, that, similar to the ideological, become the agency of 'alienated socialisation' (137) in the realm of the socio-aesthetic. Its power derives from private isolation. As an alternative, **Haug** describes how organised or informal, culturally resourceful collectives – often subcultures in the sense of 'insubordination cultures' (137 et sqq.) – rework the imaginary material and integrate it into identities that bear the imprint of real collectives.

The power of Jeans culture originates for **Haug** in the way it strikes a compromise between the insubordination culture and the mass culture organised by the mass media and the monopolies (137). Behaviour and attitudes/assumptions of individuals can, to be sure, be differentiated analytically in that charged field between capital interest and insubordination culture, but they do not represent different modes of behaving, but rather a single behaviour beset with contradictions.

Instead of the intersection point between the ideological and the commodity-aesthetic hereby revealed, one encounters in the older literature anthropologically conceived fashion characteristics in their historical modes of appearance – from pomp to protest, so to speak – often spiced with common sense and tautologies, for example in the case of John Carl **Flügel** (1930), who, on the one hand, seems numbed by the 'mystery' of fashion and, on the other, reduces it to simple truisms of the sort: 'It is obvious . . . that in dealing with fashion, we have to consider not only the individual creators of clothes but the group mentality of those who wear them' (148). Even Thorstein **Veblen**, whose critique of the 'leisure class' introduced such potent descriptions as 'conspicuous consumption' (1899, Chapter 4) and moved the discussion of fashion into the proximity of economics, produced, in the words of Theodor W. **Adorno**, 'a critique not of political economy, but rather of its non-economic life. The perpetual recourse to psychology and habits of thought as a means of explaining economic realities is not compatible with the Marxian objective law of value' (*GS* 10.1, 75), whereby the 'attempt to grasp the antagonisms in the process of human adaptation that [**Veblen**] conceives pragmatically does bring dialectical motives to the surface. His thinking is an amalgam of positivism and historical materialism' (76). And whereas Quentin **Bell** (1947) contributes rich material to the theme of fashion and, instead of generalising it anthropologically, conceives of it as a socio-historically conditioned behaviour of European humans, he fails to isolate its socio-aesthetic mainspring.

In wider circles of the leftist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Jeans were frequently chosen as the exemplary object for analysing alienation phenomena in 'consumer society'. Günther **Anders**, for example, concerns himself with this 'historico-philosophically so fascinating pant' (1980, 284), specifically with the paradoxical instance of 'manufactured poor quality', i.e. pants that are produced as frayed or patched; only yesterday-ness is 'up to date'. But he erodes the contradiction between subjective use-value and objective characteristics when he insists upon a presumed 'fiat' of 'collective fashion' (ibid.). What is interesting is not that a garment becomes a uniform; noteworthy are the mediating instances whereby the drop-out impulse and commodity-aesthetically facilitated capital valorisation enable one another.

Anna **Schober** concerns herself with the same paradox **Anders** addresses and describes thereby succinctly what so often fascinates European theorists about the Jeans phenomenon: Jeans are used 'in order to stand out unmistakably from the crowd while they simultaneously offer us an opportunity to immerse ourselves in the crowd' (2001, 9). The foremost object of her attention, though, is a reflexive phenomenon that at first appears to bear resemblance with the complex of effects analysed by **Haug**. The potency that emerges around Jeans 'bears witness to the fact that in the twentieth century we increasingly find out who we are and where we stand by seeking out images and commodities and transforming them into self-images' (ibid.) The approach

is promising, but the attempt to grasp the reflexive mechanism falls short. The foreground here is occupied by 'aspirations, wishes, fears, and utopias that take up residence in the blue pants in respective use contexts' (10); we create 'personifications of ourselves in that we seek domicile in an object, a detail, an image' (9). Metaphors of a homelessness of the soul reveal a point of departure that is incapable of grasping the social phenomenon; the mechanism gets mired in its instantiation, the phenomenon of the Jeans cult per se. But despite the fact that **Schober**'s book does not dispose of analytical instruments adequate to achieving the goal she sets, it is a rich source for the study of Jeans culture as an example of the interconnections articulated by **Haug**.

The generational conflicts between youths ('rowdies', 'hippies') and adults (parents, good citizens, 'Babbitts') formed a specific conflict zone from the 1950s until the 1970s in which Jeans developed into a widely understood symbol for a non-conforming counter-culture. According to Thomas **Barfuss**, this evidenced an 'un-mixing of bizarrely combined consciousness in generations', i.e. 'more or less complementarily structured forms of integration . . . that enable the subjects to exist in and to generalise the Fordist postwar order under the conditions of inequality and non-contemporaneity that are characteristic of the process of capitalist modernization' (2002, 156). That does not mean that the process of a disputed symbolisation came to an end with the crisis of Fordism and the common aging of hippie and good citizen (10); the meaning of an article of clothing is not writ in stone. But its 'mythology' (**Barthes**) is not random. Not all things are do-able, at least not all at once; the functionalisation via anti/politics is not set for all time. The appearance and meaning of Jeans have multiplied and morphed many times over. Levis 501s have had 'more influence and meaning in more places than any other single item of clothing known to man' (*Bedford Times-Mail*, Nov. 30, 1981). This expresses itself qualitatively therein, that not only an attitude of dissidence from 'below' defines itself through Jeans, but also an attitude of apparent independence from these constraints establishes itself from 'above': the careerist, who attempts by means of this symbol to represent a 'different difference'; s/he does not wear a worn-out pair of blue Jeans but perhaps designer Jeans, and maybe even irons them. The Jeans-dominated 1970s retro of the 2001–2 season was not a drop-out retro. It is telling that the German feature film *Jeans* (Nicola **Kribitz**, 2002) has virtually nothing to do with Jeans pants; the film is about narcissisms, the meeting and passing-in-the-night of Berlin singles – as though the mere reference to Jeans in the title suffices to thematise the symbolic processes on which Jeans, too, thrive.

The way in which sexuality is encoded in Jeans is multiply occupied as well; that Jeans revealed the contours of the male member contributed to the early scandals that surrounded the pant in the post-war period (compare in particular the dust cover of the Rolling Stones album, *Sticky Fingers*). In certain periods, at least, gay men signalled their identity by wearing Jeans. In the words of Jean **Genet**: 'Jeans that fit so snugly around the butts and thighs of the young guys were erotic and pure at once, so beautiful was the harmony between the beauty of the lines and the darkness of the night' (*Prisoner of Love*; quoted in **Schober**, 235). The ambiguity of the sexual reference of Jeans in the famous photo of a young auto mechanic, 'Fred with Tires' (Herb **Ritts**, 1984) is as flagrant as it is subtle. A thin but muscular young man with a naked torso wearing enormously oversized, tattered Jeans filthy with grease, twists half toward the camera to exaggerate the sinews, in each hand a tire. The sexual references are ambivalent: a he-man beyond doubt, but the crotch of his pants, that cover the genital without concealing it, has taken on the contour of a vaginal slit through multiple patching; this form is repeated in the worn tread of the tire that he holds in his left hand, split by a long tear. At the same time, this image quotes the photos of the Farm Security Administration of the Roosevelt era – poverty without shame, embedded in the national belief in progress: In his right hand, Fred holds a new tire that will replace the old one. This photo was not taken in the Dust Bowl era, however, but in postmodern Hollywood.

Ironically, it is precisely the vested standpoint of exchange-value that, by means of the commodity aesthetics of monopoly goods, provides the insubordination culture with a medium of expression. Not only did the insubordination culture transform the meaning of Jeans; it was precisely the monopoly character of Jeans that enabled them to function as mediator of a supranational culture 'from below'.

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