

Ugly beautiful?
Counting the
cost of the
global fashion
industry

Ugly beautiful?

Counting the cost of the global fashion industry

Louise Crewe

ABSTRACT: *This article asks you to think geographically about fashion. We all wear clothes, but how often do we reflect on who makes our clothes, where and under what conditions? Why do we buy and wear the clothes we do and how often do we think about where the value lies in a garment? Why do the phrases 'Made in Italy' and 'Made in China' have such different connotations? How can a child in Cambodia working in a denim factory have any geographical connection to a Prada store on Bond Street? The following article argues for a relational approach to the study of fashion, one that brings these complex connections between production, branding, retailing and wearing into simultaneous and mutually constitutive view. The article shows how the global maps of clothing supply and retailing expose our complicity as consumers in the production of deeply unequal geographies of fashion.*

Introduction

'In 1997 Nguyen Thi Thu Phuong died in Vietnam while making Nike trainers. She was struck in the heart by a piece of shrapnel that flew out of a sewing machine' (McIntyre, 2006).

In August 2006 a 22 year old Uruguayan model died of heart failure, allegedly as a result of starvation, while participating in a fashion show during Fashion Week (BBC News, 2006).

In August 2008 the summer Olympic Games will be hosted by Beijing, China. The Olympic Games are the most effective international corporate marketing platform in the world (Playfair, 2008).

In September 2008, international Fashion Weeks will take place in Milan, Paris, New York and London.

What unites these seemingly unconnected events that span continents and decades, and speak of both death and celebration, the individual and the crowd, labour and leisure? The answer is the global significance of the fashion industry and the contradictions that lie at its heart. These events reveal how the geographies of fashion connect people, places, practices and objects in ways that are scarcely imaginable. Think for a moment about some of these connections. From the sweatshop worker making premium branded sportswear for the Beijing Olympics, to the clothes-hanger models on the catwalk prepared to die for their careers, to the unemployed young designer fresh from college who dreams of a highly paid job in the fashion industry that is unlikely ever to come to fruition, to the under-paid and over-worked shop assistant in Primark, and to us, the consumer, faced with the constant anxieties about what to buy, where to shop, what to wear and how to wear it. It would appear that there are a great many fashion victims, all connected by the invisible threads binding this global system of garment design, production, retail, consumption and wear.

Framing fashion geographically

But why does fashion matter geographically and why might we as geographers be interested in it? It is undeniable that fashion has had a difficult time breaking into the discipline of geography. The icon of shabby non-style, the geography teacher in his (for, traditionally, he was a man) corduroy jacket with

Photo: © Justin Jin/
Panos Pictures.



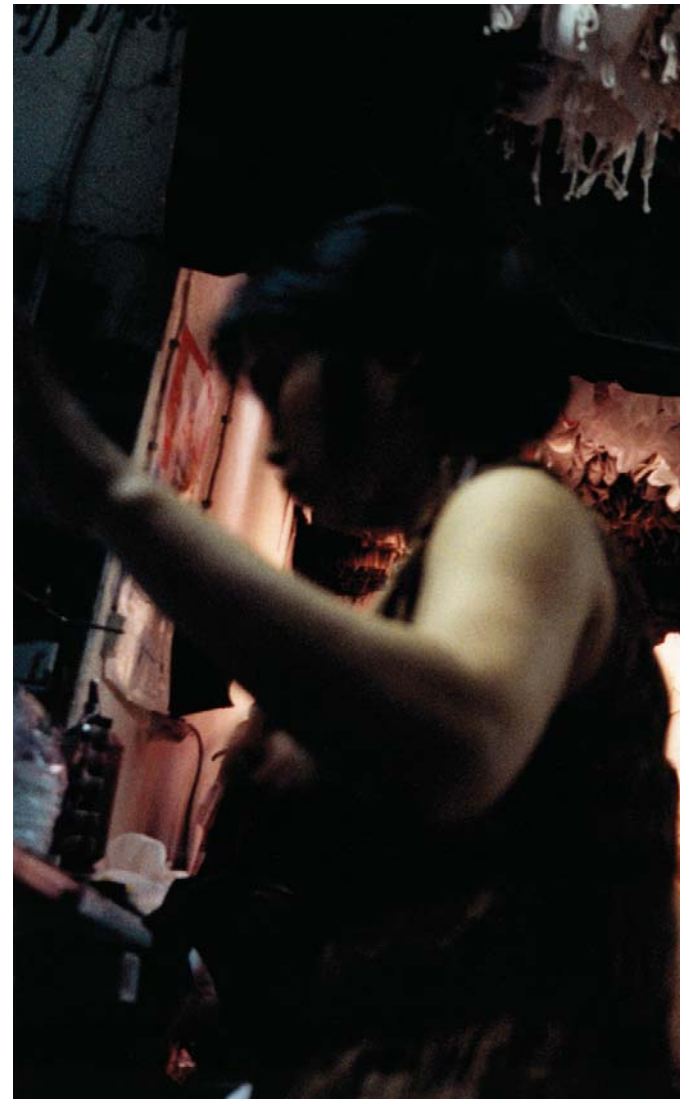
Ugly beautiful? Counting the cost of the global fashion industry



patched elbows and 'practical' footwear, was always rather more rivers than River Island, more meteorology than metrosexual. The preoccupation of a largely male collective of economic geographers with the 'real' business of industry and finance meant that the geographies of fashion and consumption were neglected, pushed to the intellectual margins and deemed trivial, superfluous or even wanton. Those geographers who did engage with questions of fashion typically framed their enquiries in terms of retail geography, looking at catchment areas, drive-times or the modelling of store location. Argued to be an introverted, under-theorised segment of economic geography, retail geography was blinkered and seemingly oblivious to developments outside its self-contained, applied and largely descriptive or predictive loop (Blomley, 1996, p. 238).

But there are signs that this is changing as academics acknowledge the economic, political, cultural and symbolic significance of fashion. The fashion industry is an important creative component in the making of the economy and has made a major contribution to the contemporary proliferation of material culture and ways of narrating self and identity. It has been suggested that understanding the secret life of things may reveal profound insights into the society, economy, culture and polity of commodity-producing systems (Watts, 2005, p. 533). Fashion is one of the most global and the most intimate of commodities. Its chains of sourcing, production, supply and consumption span, unite and divide every imaginable geographical scale, from the world to the body. It is also a ubiquitous commodity, and one that can be both mundane and extraordinary. And of course we all wear clothes. But how often do we reflect upon who made these clothes, where and under what conditions? If our clothes could talk, what geographical stories would they tell (Cook, 2006)? Do we think enough about where our clothes travel around the world, through fields and factories, oceans and air, into shops, homes, wardrobes, onto bodies? How often do we ponder on where the value lies in a garment? Think for a moment about your most valuable item of clothing, and reflect on why it means so much. Is its value derived from where in the world it was produced? (compare the symbolic geographical significance of 'Made in China' to 'Made in Italy', for example). Or perhaps you cherish the brand or its marketing message (Primark versus Prada, Burton versus Boss). Perhaps the garment was a gift from someone special, or was purchased as a souvenir or memento of a trip, or is unique? Or maybe our clothes accrue value through ownership, possession, history and authenticity, as layers of meaning and memory are trapped within the warp and weft of the fibres. I would suggest that value resides in all of these places and more.

I hope to bring into view these mutually constitutive relations between production, sale, consumption, possession and space. Together they reveal how the geographies of fashion cannot be reduced simply to fibres or garments, or production sites, or to shops, or consumers, but must be understood in terms of relationality; as a recursive loop that is characterised by complexity and connection, fragility and instability, likened to dancing on a tightrope (Rantala and Lehtonen, 2001). Together these concepts of **scale** and **relationality**, both central concepts within current geographical enquiry, may help us on our journey to understanding why fashion matters. By emphasising the relational nature of geographical scale I hope to connect the complex geographies of fashion in ways that go beyond the binary imaginings of spaces 'over there' (sweatshops in China, for example) or 'over here' (designer stores in London, for example) (Breward and Gilbert, 2006). As Jonathan Murdoch explains, 'spatial scales are not stacked on top of one another in discrete layers; rather, scale is generated by distance – that is, it stems from the consolidation of power relations between dispersed sites' (2005, p.



27). Garments connect global geographies in fascinating ways and reveal highly significant spatial relations, both home and away.

Scale, journeys and the relational geographies of fashion

It is tempting to see the fashion commodity chain as a series of discrete and distant places each with their own specific economic and social geographies (international designer hubs, global production sites, retail stores). And in many ways this has been a spatial construction that has suited big business well. It has enabled brand managers and designers to seduce fashion consumers into paying hugely inflated prices for branded goods while masking the global inequalities that lie at the heart of the international fashion industry. In a classic example of the international division of labour, global companies in an increasingly borderless world have been able to use wage differentials in order to derive competitive advantage. The late Anita Roddick, the founder of The Body Shop, noted how

'Money without borders leads to sweatshop exploitation of the world's poorest. Industry after industry seems perfectly happy to use sweatshops and the globe is quickly becoming a playground for those who can move capital and projects quickly from place to place. When business can roam from country to country with few restrictions in its search for the lowest wages, the loosest environmental regulations and the most docile and desperate workers, then the destruction of livelihoods, cultures and environments can be enormous' (Roddick, 2000, p. 7).

But the excessive attention paid to distant sweated labour practices within the fashion industry has masked a number of other inequalities, asymmetries and connections that begin to scramble many of our trusted assumptions about the taken-for-granted distinctions between production and consumption, near and far, us and them, now and then.

I will draw on a number of commodities (jeans, trainers, t-shirts) to illustrate the importance of

Ugly beautiful?
Counting the
cost of the
global fashion
industry



Photo: © Justin Jin/
Panos Pictures.

Ugly beautiful?
Counting the
cost of the
global fashion
industry



thinking relationally about fashion space. The first is the example of a pair of branded Lee Cooper jeans, available for sale at a large discount store called Cromwell's Madhouse in a provincial British city. The jeans sell for £19.95 – cheap for a global brand – and include a label instructing the consumer to ‘wash inside out separately’. The label tells us nothing about the origins of these jeans, and I suspect few of us would spend much time thinking about where the product was made, or by whom. Yet this pair of jeans connects us, the consumer, to people and places we can scarcely imagine, and reveals that we are complicit in determining the conditions of their production simply by turning a blind eye in our pursuit of cheap fashion. The retail store is one stop on a 40,000 mile journey where raw materials and components criss-cross the globe. The jeans arrived in a van that came up the A12 from Lee Cooper's warehouse at Staples Corner, just at the bottom of the M1 in north London. Before that they came through the Channel Tunnel in a lorry from France, and before that by boat and train from Ras Jebel in Tunisia, colloquially termed ‘Lee Cooperville’. In one of the three Lee Cooper factories in Ras Jebel, 500 women work furiously, eyes down, muscles clenched, amid the heat and noise of the huge grey factory. Each individual here functions like an automaton, hurling garments onto machines and roaring their sewing machines down seams, over and over again. There are no safety guards on the machines and the women work hard and fast and have to concentrate to avoid the pounding needles punching through their fingers. It

is alarmingly simple to imagine how the fatal accident that began this article took place. The average pace is three tasks per worker per minute and there are eight lines, each with more than 60 people and each producing 2000 garments per day (Abrams and Astill, 2001).

If this pace of work is difficult to conceptualise, the online game www.simsweatshop.com (Figure 1) may clarify things a little. Here you can become a virtual sweatshop worker. You are invited to enter the world of the sports shoe maker. The clock ticks away while you frantically try to put the trainers together. If you work hard you will be paid your full wage. If you make a mistake you will be punished accordingly.

If we return now to Ras Jebel and investigate the geographies of jean production in more detail we see that this tiny, busy node is just one moment in a much more extensive journey for our pair of jeans. It is here that dozens of different components converge and are transformed: the cotton is grown in Benin, West Africa; the raw denim comes from Milan; the indigo with which the denim is dyed comes from Frankfurt; it is stonewashed with pumice from Turkey; the thread is made in Northern Ireland, Turkey and Hungary and is dyed in Spain; the rivets and buttons are manufactured from zinc and copper from Australia and Namibia. And these components in turn raise a whole series of questions about the real social, economic and political costs incurred in the making of a pair of jeans: stonewashing produces several tons of powdered pumice each year that is discarded in Tunis; indigo leaches into local streams and kills plants and fish; Benin's cotton industry is haunted by corruption and mismanagement, its labour is hard, the rewards slight and people are dying from insecticide and pesticide poisoning (Abrams and Astill, 2001). A pair of jeans uses three-quarters of a pound of pesticides and synthetic fertilisers (Harkin, 2007). Pollution from the copper mines in Namibia is toxic, but concern about the environmental and health impacts is a luxury when the alternative is no job and no income.

Figure 1:
The SimSweatshop
website.



But the tortuous geography that is the making of a pair of jeans doesn't stop here. This is a partial story of production. For these jeans have been designed in the US, advertised globally and will end up in someone's wardrobe, on someone's body, ready to begin another set of journeys and transformations in their biography: they will be worn, soiled, washed, dried and perhaps even ironed. But as a recent report on the life cycle of a pair of jeans reveals, from production to daily use, washing your jeans can cost the earth (Boeglin, 2006). Machine washing, tumble drying and ironing results in 47% of the eco-damage caused by an 'average' pair of jeans that is worn one day a week for four years and washed every third wear at 40°C. This is the

equivalent of burning 4000 light bulbs for an hour (Boeglin, 2006). And it is highly likely that our jeans will wear, perhaps tear, undergo repair, be stashed or stored, customised or cannibalised, discarded, donated or given away. Here we begin to see something of the hidden lives of things and how their stories and journeys speak geographically. The vast expansion of the global denim market reveals a fascinating political-economic geography and has undoubtedly been a good double fix for capitalism, enabling the super-exploitation of global labour and the creation of a generic yet ever-changing global uniform (Guthman and DuPuis, 2006). In a number of ways jeans embody the dynamism and the contradictions of capitalism. Jeans are everywhere and nowhere, a source of both creativity and constraint, comfort and discomfort, individuality and conformity. They reveal rich historical geographies yet are very much of the here and now. Their presence in the world is both global and intimate; as a commodity form they are both mundane and extraordinary. Jeans are the most ubiquitous form of everyday attire, the most popular item of clothing in the world (Cotton Incorporated, 2005) and a key referent of contemporary consumption. They are worn throughout the world by people of all ages, by the fashionable and unfashionable, by those who want to stand out and those who want to fit in (Candy, 2003). It is estimated that American women own on average nine pairs of jeans (WGSN, 2005) and over half of adults in the UK reportedly 'usually' wear jeans (Mintel, 2007). The UK denim market is currently worth £1.51 billion and it is estimated that 86 million pairs of jeans will be sold in Britain in 2007 (Mintel, 2007; Smithers, 2007). And as our Lee Cooper jeans reveal, a little geographical detective work uncovers tortuous and labyrinthine connections (see too Allen, 2007). The global maps of denim supply and retail expose our complicity in the production of deeply unequal economic geographies. They underscore the importance of thinking relationally about global inequalities.

The fashioned body

While we may (un)intentionally ignore the ethics of denim production and retail, jeans can nonetheless provoke anxiety in the minds of consumers. The global denim market may have been a successful fix for global capitalism, but it may be an altogether less satisfactory solution when viewed from the perspective of the embodied consumer who has to search for an acceptable public self in the face of unachievable body ideals perpetuated by marketeers, advertisers and celebrities. Hyper-thin has become the new industry standard in fashion, where a UK size 10 is seen as too large for the catwalk and emaciated size zero bodies cease to shock. Clothes, after all, look better on a skinny frame (Spencer, 2006). While fashion has always been notorious for perpetuating abnormally thin

bodies (the average model weighed 9% less than the average woman in 1989; she now weighs 23% less (Spencer, 2006), skeletal thinness is increasingly ubiquitous across television, magazines and the screen – the everyday wallpaper of our lives. Victoria Beckham, for example, has a 23 inch waist and wears jeans designed for a seven-year-old child. She has become a macabre icon on pro-anorexia websites, revealing the dark, shadow geographies that fashion and the internet enable. The UK helpline ChildLine has reported an increased number of calls from children as young as ten seeking help for eating disorders, and the Rhodes Farm Clinic for eating disorders in north London has noted a startling increase in the numbers of very young children suffering from anorexia and bulimia (Spencer, 2006). Fashion's effects can be profound and tragic, as the second statement in the

Ugly beautiful?
Counting the
cost of the
global fashion
industry



Ugly beautiful? Counting the cost of the global fashion industry



introduction to this article reveals. And while it is debatable whether the fashion industry and its promoters and supporters can be held responsible for the tyranny of skinniness that can disrupt and destroy lives, the point remains that the normalisation of emaciated bodies in the fashion world and the objectification of the celebrity body undoubtedly has real, material effects, and one is left wondering whether more models will die on the catwalks during Fashion Week in Paris, Milan or London.

If nothing else, the media's promotion of ideal fashioned bodies endorses the anxieties consumers face when shopping for clothes. Think for a moment about the hours spent trying to find the perfect pair of jeans – the looking, trying, gazing in and at mirrors, mannequins, models and changing rooms. How do we manage our own embodiment in the public space of the store where we are visibly reminded of the materiality of our bodies and haunted by their inability to fulfil their fantasies? (Guthman and DuPuis, 2006). Clothes shopping can be an ethical, an economic and an embodied nightmare. Why do we buy the clothes we do? Is it a function of cost, and do we reflect on how Primark and Wal-Mart can sell jeans for £6.00, or simply turn a blind eye to the distant exploitation that enables us to buy cheap, fast fashion for a few pounds? A recent War on Want report argues that there is a hefty price to pay so that British high street retailers such as Tesco, Asda and Primark can sell jeans for £3, namely driving down wages paid to garment workers in supplying countries such as Bangladesh which has the cheapest garment workers in the world, working the longest hours, and living in the most crowded and unsanitary slums. Wages have halved in Bangladesh in the past 10 years (War on Want, 2006). Do we feel just a little bit uneasy as we mobshop at dawn to grab the latest Kate Moss collection from Topshop, knowing that Mauritian factory workers are paid less than £4 per day to make these clothes? Whose responsibility is it to ensure that fashion has a social conscience? Is it the Cambodian factory managers who work their child employees like slaves? (Just-style.com, 2007). Or is it the billionaire retail magnates such as Sir Phillip Green, whose clothing empire Arcadia (which includes Dorothy Perkins, Miss Selfridge, Wallis, Topshop and Topman) refuses to join any ethical standards organisations and continues to source garments from Asian factories that pay workers less than £4 per day? Should we point the finger at celebrities such as Kate Moss, Stella McCartney and Lily Allen who put their names to shoddily-made collections for high street chains such as New Look, Primark and Topshop without so much as a nod or a wink to the unethical conditions under which their designs come into being? Or perhaps we should open our eyes and see the global price that is to be paid in order to satiate our

hunger for new, fast, cheap fashion? Do we think about how and why China produces 30% of all jeans in the world as we pull our credit card out of our wallets and bargain boast about how we are too clever to be ripped off by up-market retailers? (Research and Markets, 2005). This is just another manifestation of commodified contemporary Britain, where consumers know everything about price, but nothing about value (Leader, 2006). In a recent exposé on the health and environmental catastrophe that is 'Made in China', we see how many of the goods being supplied for the 2008 Beijing Olympics are being manufactured by children as young as 12, working 15 hours per day, seven days per week in Chinese sweatshops (Taylor, 2007). And in a curious twist of fate it emerges that children in western consumer societies may be more closely connected to children producing cheap goods in China than we might have imagined. The recall of millions of toys and games such as Barbie and Polly Pocket that were made in China and sold in the US and UK in August 2007 endorses the global connections between producers, consumers and their commodities (BBC News, 2007). The toys, imported by Mattel from China, contain dangerous levels of lead, toxic both to those who produce the games and those who buy them. The global spectacle of the Beijing Olympic Games reveals a series of less celebratory economic geographies. The cost of cheap goods is high, and we are connected to others in ways we may prefer not to know.

But perhaps the buying of clothes is less about cost and more about fashion, fit, brand and seasonality (there are, for example, dedicated fan-sites for jeans and trainer 'heads', where rarity is value and price is no object). Are we, perhaps, the victims of a fickle fashion system that dictates we buy skinny jeans in summer 2007, high-waisted boyfriend cut in autumn 2007, jodhpurs in winter 2007? Do higher price points have any material effects on global labour or environmental standards? And if it is the brand that governs our purchasing decisions, how do we self-justify spending in excess of £120 on a pair of premium denim jeans or a pair of 'old skool' Adidas trainers? Fashion consumption, it appears, is both troublesome and troubling. Aesthetic management is hard work and the labour involved in achieving a particular image and identity can be time-consuming and depressing.

The important point here is that fashion is rarely, if ever, simply about surface display and superficiality (Crewe and Gregson, 1998; Clarke and Miller, 2002; Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe, 2007; Woodward, 2007). Although fashion is traditionally seen as wanton, indulgent, frivolous or trivial, I would argue that it is rarely thus. Our individual clothing choices and desires are a means of seeking identification and

materialising the self. Fashion is no less than 'personhood in aesthetic form' (Gell, 1998, p. 157) and far from wearing clothes to hide or disguise who we are, it may be that we confront and create our sense of self through the clothes we buy and wear. Fashion is far more than a casual carapace; it is about the projection of self and identity. Our clothes conduct and connect our sense of what lies inside and outside ourselves. And far from being a functional or benign surface, clothes have power. They can fail us and have the capacity to eat us up with anxiety (Woodward, 2007). Our clothes can betray us, they can expose our bodily failure and social ineptitude. In spite of our best endeavours to be who we would like to be, our clothes have the capacity to let us down.

Break-out?

The above discussion has taken you on a long journey through fashion's geographies. While I hope it has emphasised the geographical significance of fashion and made you think critically about the power and responsibilities we wield as global consumers, the journey hasn't, I suspect, been a particularly enjoyable one. The relational geographies I have discussed make for a rather pessimistic reading of an industry famed for fun, theatre, performance and superficiality. The power of clothes and the global reach of the industry make for depressing reading: from the global asymmetries of sourcing and production, through the exploitative fashion circus of catwalk shows inhabited by emaciated models, to the environmental and social impacts of fashion supply – wherever we look the vision appears to be intolerable. And our own positionality within the fashion system offers little more by way of optimism – whether we buy cheap throwaway clothes, or premium design-led garments we are complicit in perpetuating a profoundly unequal set of geographies. Add to this the social and economic anxieties that confront us in the buying and wearing of clothes, and there is little, it seems, to celebrate.

But by way of conclusion I suggest three possible ways in which we might engage with fashion in more productive and participatory ways. They acknowledge the importance of thinking, seeing and acting relationally, and require that we free up our bounded notions of the organisation, the consumer, the commodity and place. Significantly, these alternative ways of thinking and acting about global fashion emphasise the very real possibilities that we as consumers have for exerting our agency.

First, and developing the idea of the life-cycle and biography of things, there are interesting possibilities for extending the life of our commodities. Figure 2 shows a pair of trainers that have been imprisoned, sprayed with Old Spice after-shave and free-fallen out of aeroplanes. These Worn Again trainers have been

made from old prison blankets, car seats, parachutes, old suits and towels. Each pair is unique and made from 99% recycled materials. The producers of the shoes, Terra Plana, argue that the trainer business isn't pretty, but that there are ways to produce sexy, guilt-free, ethical trainers that address issues of global trade and sustainability and help to build social and environmental enterprises (www.wornagain.co.uk/



story). And while the words 'recycled' and 'fashion' may not immediately sit comfortably together, second-hand worlds open up enormous possibilities for new ways of doing fashion (Gregson and Crewe, 2003). There are many who believe that the fashion industry is at a tipping point and that the business model will increasingly have to incorporate an ethical or eco stance. The fashion designer Katharine Hamnett, for example, launched a new range in 2007 that is sourced entirely from an ethical supply chain and uses 100% organic cotton. Eco-style, she argues, is 'no longer about brown teeth and ugly shoes' (in Harkin, 2007). In 2006 Topshop launched the ethical concession, The People Tree, although quite how this sits alongside over-priced and shoddily made ranges in the same store remains to be seen. Companies such as Howies use bicycle tyres to make belts, while Goodone scour the recycling textile warehouses of London to create one-off pieces from old clothes. All, in rather different ways, are revealing the creative potential of second-hand fashion.

Second, digital technologies such as the internet are opening up new possibilities for consumer connectedness and control. Consumers are relying less on the authority of conventional branding and

Ugly beautiful?
Counting the
cost of the
global fashion
industry

Figure 2: Terra Plana Worn Again Trainers.

Ugly beautiful?
Counting the
cost of the
global fashion
industry



advertising campaigns for their consumption knowledges, and consumption is increasingly determined by consumer-based opinions, reviews and recommendations. Large organisations are, in turn, desperately seeking out new mechanisms to harness the knowledge of consumers and to refresh their enthusiasm to consume. The ability of consumers to short-circuit, or see through, the hitherto concealed suite of corporate sales and marketing tactics is enabling new levels of transparency where there is less scope for hype, spin and con. This may in turn offer at least the possibility for new forms of agency and self-determination by consumers who can increasingly bypass organisations whose strategies they find unacceptable. This is offering new ways for consumers to engage with and be critical of commodification and their objects of desire.

Third, the economic and political significance of consumption gives consumers (potentially) unprecedented powers as global citizens. As a whole range of recent forms of consumer mobilisation such as *No Sweat*, *Buy Nothing Day* and *Students Against Sweatshops* have revealed, consumer activism, boycotting and buy-cotting can have significant economic and political ramifications. As consumers acknowledge the profound geographical inequalities resulting from globalisation, they may use their economic and cultural capital to resist the worst excesses of the free market. And what is for me particularly exciting about this is that it opens up new possibilities for more ethical and equitable systems of provision. As David Harvey (1996) argued so well, 'it is important for the politically responsible person to know about and respond politically to all those people who daily put breakfast upon our table (or clothes on our bodies), even though market exchanges hide from us the conditions of life of the producers' (author's emphasis) (Harvey, 1996). A widely circulated report of e-mail correspondence between Nike and one of its consumers reveals the enormous negative impact that activist consumers can have on brands. Nike launched an internet promotional scheme that enabled consumers to buy personalised Nike trainers. While superficially this may have been a smart marketing move, Nike hadn't anticipated the ways in which consumers would attempt to subvert the brand message. Having selected the word 'sweatshop' to be stitched onto a personalised pair of Nike shoes, Jonah Peretti received the following correspondence:

From: nikeid_personalize@nike.com

Your NIKE iD order was cancelled for one or more of the following reasons: 1) your Personal iD contains another party's trademark or other intellectual property. 2) Your personal iD contains the name of an athlete or team we do not have the legal right to use. 3) Your personal iD was left blank. Did you not

want any personalisation? 4) Your personal iD contains profanity or inappropriate slang.

From: peretti@media.mit.edu

My order was cancelled but my personal NIKE iD does not violate any of the criteria outlined in your message. The Personal iD on my custom ZOOM XC USA running shoes was the word 'sweatshop'. Sweatshop is not: 1) another party's trademark, 2) the name of an athlete, 3) blank or 4) profanity. I chose the iD because I wanted to remember the toil and labour of the children that made my shoes. Could you please ship them to me immediately?

From: nikeid_personalize@nike.com

Your NIKE iD order was cancelled because the iD you have chosen contains, as stated in the previous email correspondence, 'inappropriate slang'.

From: peretti@media.mit.edu

Thank you for your quick response to my enquiry ... Although I commend you for your prompt customer service, I disagree with the claim that my personal iD was inappropriate slang. After consulting Webster's Dictionary I discovered that 'sweatshop' is in fact part of standard English and not slang. The word means 'a shop or factory in which workers are employed for long hours at low wages and under unhealthy conditions' and its origin dates from 1892. So my personal iD does meet the criteria detailed in your first email. Your website advertises that the NIKE iD program is about 'freedom to choose and freedom to express who you are'. I share Nike's love of freedom and personal expression. The site also says that 'if you want it done right, build it yourself'. I was thrilled to be able to build my own shoes, and my personal iD was offered as a small token of appreciation for the sweatshop workers poised to help me realise my vision. I hope that you will value my freedom of expression and reconsider your decision to reject my order.

From: nikeid_personalize@nike.com

Regarding the rules for personalization it also states on the NIKE iD website that 'Nike reserves the right to cancel any personal iD up to 24 hours after it has been submitted'... With these rules in mind, we cannot accept your order as submitted.

From: peretti@media.mit.edu

Thank you for the time and energy you have spent on my request. I have decided to order the shoes with a different iD, but I would like to make one small request. Could you please send me a color snapshot of the ten-year old Vietnamese girl who makes my shoes?

<no response>

When consumers become politically and economically aware, their power opens up interesting possibilities. As the e-mail correspondence between Nike and one of their consumers reveals, gestural marketing politics by big organisations simply won't work and there are some very real corporate dangers in ceding creative control to unpredictable consumers. Perhaps it is time for a re-framing of economic geography and a return to an activist relation to the world?

Useful websites

www.labourbehindthelabel.org
 www.cleanupfashion.co.uk
 www.cleanclothes.org
 www.ethicalconsumer.org
 www.tuc.org.uk/extras/playfair.pdf

References

- Abrams, F. and Astill, J. (2001) 'Story of the blues', *Guardian*, 29 May. Available at www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,497788,,0.html
- Allen, J. (2007) 'Claiming connections', in Barnett, C., Robinson, J. and Rose, G. (2007) *Living in a Globalised World*. Milton Keynes: Open University.
- BBC News (2006) 'Is ultra-thin going out of fashion?', 27 September, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/5384106.stm>
- Blomley, N. (1996) 'I'd like to dress her all over: masculinity, power and retail space', in Wrigley, N. and Lowe, M. (eds) *Retailing, Consumption and Capital: Towards the new retail geography*. London: Longman.
- Boeglin, N. (2006) *Washing Your Jeans Could Cost the Earth*. France: Bio Intelligence Service.
- Beward, C. and Gilbert, D. (2006) *Fashion's World Cities*. Oxford: Berg.
- Candy, F. (2003) 'The fabric of society: a proposal to investigate the emotional and sensory experience of wearing denim', *Proceedings of Conference on Designing Pleasurable Objects and Interfaces, Pittsburg, USA*. June 23-26.
- Clarke, A. and Miller, D. (2002) 'Fashion and anxiety', *Fashion Theory*, 6, 2, pp. 191-213.
- Cook, I. (2006) 'Geographies of food: following', *Progress in Human Geography*, 30, 5, pp. 655-666.
- Cotton Incorporated (2005) *Lifestyle Monitor Denim Issue*. Available at www.cottoninc.com/LifestyleMonitor/LSMDenim2005/
- Cravey, A.J. (2004) 'Students and the anti-sweatshop movement', *Antipode*, 36, 2. Available at www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2004.00400.x
- Crewe, L. and Gregson, N. (1998) 'Tales of the unexpected? Exploring car boot sales as marginal spaces of contemporary consumption', *Transactions IBG*, 27, pp. 39-53.
- Featherstone, L. (2002) *Students Against Sweatshops*. London: Verso.
- Gell, A. (1998) *Art and Anthropological Theory*. London: Clarendon Press.
- Gregson, N. and Crewe, L. (2003) *Second Hand Worlds*. Oxford: Berg.
- Gregson, N., Metcalfe, A. and Crewe, L. (2007) 'Identity, mobility and the throwaway society', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25, 4, pp. 682-700.
- Guthman, J. and DuPuis, M. (2006) 'Embodying neoliberalism: economy, culture and the politics of fat', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24, 3, pp. 427-48.
- Hale, A. (2000) 'What hope for "ethical" trade in the globalised garment industry?', *Antipode*, 32, 4, 3, pp. 349-56.
- Harkin, F. (2007) 'The cotton wars', *Financial Times*, 2 March.
- Harvey, D. (1996) *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Johns, R. and Vural, L. (2000) 'Class, geography and the consumerist turn: UNITE and the Stop Sweatshops Campaign', *Environment and Planning A*, 32, 7, pp. 1193-1213.
- Klein, N. (2000) *No Logo*. London: HarperCollins.
- Leader (2006) 'Skinny pickings', *Guardian*, 23 September.
- MacIntyre, R. (2006) 'Are workers rights human rights and would it matter if they were?', *Human Rights and Human Welfare*, 6, pp. 1-12.
- Miller, B. (2004) 'Globalization, sweatshops and glocal organizing', *Antipode*, 36, 4, pp. 575-580.
- Mintel (2007) 'Jeans: UK', *Mintel Market Research April 2007, Market Report*. London: Mintel.
- Murdoch, J. (2005) *Post-Structuralist Geography*. London: Sage.
- Playfair (2008) <http://www.playfair2008.org/>
- Rantala, K. and Lehtonen, T.K. (2001) 'Dancing on a tightrope: everyday aesthetics in the practices of shopping, gym exercise and art making', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4, 1, pp. 63-83.
- Research and Markets (2005) *China Sourcing Report: Denim*. www.researchandmarkets.com/reportinfo
- Rivoli, P. (2006) *The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Roddick, A. (2000) *Business as Unusual*. London: HarperCollins.
- Ross, A. (1997) *No Sweat: Fashion, free trade and the rights of garment workers*. London: Verso.
- Smithers, R. (2007) 'Cut-price jeans send denim sales soaring', *Guardian*. 1 June. Available at www.guardian.co.uk/business/2007/jun/01/fashion.lifeandhealth
- Spencer, M. (2006) 'The shape we're in: why women are to blame for our obsession with being thin', *The Observer*, 6 August.
- Taylor, A. (2007) "'Sweatshop" alert for 2012 Olympics', *Financial Times*, 11 June.
- War on Want (2006) *Fashion Victims: The true cost of cheap clothes at Primark, Asda and Tesco*. London: UK CCC/War on Want.
- Watts, M. (2005) 'Commodities', in Cloke, P., Crang, M. and Goodwin, M. (eds) *Introducing Human Geographies*. Second edition London: Hodder Arnold.
- WGSN (2005) 'Ethical fashion: myth or future trend?' *WGSN News*, 15, October.
- Woodward, S. (2007) *Why Women Wear What they Wear*.

Ugly beautiful?
 Counting the
 cost of the
 global fashion
 industry

Louise Crewe is Professor in the School of Geography, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD (tel: 0115 951 5441; e-mail: louise.crewe@nottingham.ac.uk).