



Outgrown Clothes for Grown-up People

Constructing a Theory of Fashion

This essay tests the validity of the method – qualitative research – as a way of constructing a theory of fashion.¹ A theory can only be constructed if an interpretation, translation or meaning is made. To apply or map theories on to the subject is to assume their application. My aim is to ‘listen’ to the focus of study and articulate interpretations from it; to create a language from the object focus. I am concerned with seeing if a language can be made from an aspect of clothing.²

‘The cuff’ and ‘the turn-up’ are examples of components of dress.³ The feature which is the subject of this paper is a characteristic, rather than a component, of fashionable clothing, which became increasingly evident from 1986. Initially I termed it clothes that are ‘too small’, as it applied to numerous garment types, for example T-shirts, trousers and sweaters. Not clothes for small people but clothes which include in their design an element of ‘smallness’, and are within the reference system of Fashion.⁴ This becomes most obvious when the garment is being worn because it is the relationship between the ‘size’ and ‘fit’ of the object with the size and shape of the human body that allows us to ‘see’ the element of smallness. By 1986 the characteristic seemed to be a minor aspect of the stylistic language of clothing, but increasingly it became appropriated into a wider fashion framework, i.e. more types of garment, and therefore more conspicuous.

Smallness creates an impression of a garment in the process of being outgrown. In some ways (but not in all ways as the item would then be unwearable) the garment is insufficient in the fabric quantity and/or the size.⁵ A typology of when, where, and how the trait manifests itself, reveals parameters or a framework or a system on which to base hypotheses. In terms of manufacture, there appear to be two distinct means of production. Both are constructed to achieve the same reading (smallness) but their means of manufacture can be external or internal. By this I mean the former type is part of the industrial production system of Fashion, while the latter exists within a framework of customisation or individualisation of purchased

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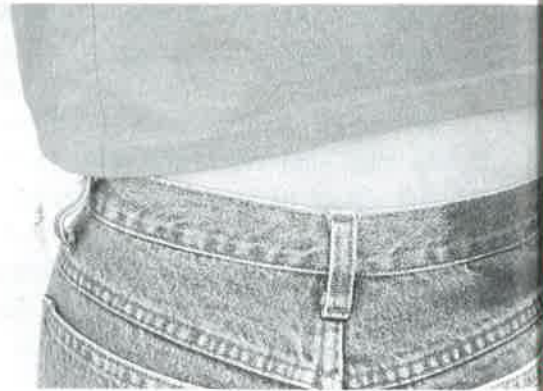
A man's sweater customised by the female wearer. The sweater body has been shrunk and now closely fits the female figure. The sleeves are too long but serve to exaggerate the body fit. The bottom has been cut to expose the undergarments and focuses attention on the waist of the jeans and the idea of the 'natural' waist which is covered.

Photograph by Lee Wright in 1990



clothing. Specific examples of the first type could be 'leggings', which are manufactured to reach the mid-calf, unlike the conventional trouser length (leggings fall into the generic category as a form of trouser) which reaches the ankle. These garments appear 'short' because we have inherent notions as to the conventions of what trousers are like; therefore the meaning and construction are symbiotic, that is, they are short and create an image of shortness. Of the second type the wearer has consciously and purposefully made, or chosen, an item with element/s which appear 'too small'. For example, within the culture of Heavy Metal, a sweater which has shrunk and of which the armholes are tight is a common piece of sartorial adaption.

Setting out the parameters which quantify the means of production allows for the separation of differences within a typology and is a useful exercise if the subject is based on 'fieldwork' (i.e. observation).⁶ It is this which allows for the distinction categorised above and indicates that the motif is part of an intra-culture. However, this also pinpoints a chronic problem which besets this case study. If I were to term the feature 'smallness', then it is obviously linked to ideas of 'bigness' and to an even wider framework of ideologies concerning the concept of size. Therefore the parameters are not just concerned with a 'littleness' but with its opposite. For example, what do we consider to be the 'correct' size of garment for our bodies? Is a 'tight' sweater perceived as 'small' at one point in time but correct at another? The 'skinny rib' sweater of the 1960s⁷ superseded the baggy, loose-fitting 'Sloppy Joe'. Therefore I am dealing with a shifting notion of aesthetics which may be in



The flesh is exposed through raising the arm. This garment is long enough to cover in some situations and short enough to expose in others. The

revelment/concealment issue is direct and is an external construction of 'smallness'.

Photograph by Lee Wright in 1988

a far more rapid transition as a beauty and body aesthetic than, for example, the fashions of fatness and thinness. Distinctions between bigness and smallness can be illustrated by their polarities. The differentiations in the idea of 'small' lie between 'being tight', a 'smallness' and 'too small'. At the point where a garment is too small it can no longer be put on the body. Only the other two distinctions are valid in this discussion as both relate to the notion of the 'fit' of clothing. In order to observe 'smallness' in clothes there has to be one or both of two elements – too short or too tight. To be just short and/or tight is not enough to create the image of smallness. It is within the ideology of 'too' that the transaction of meaning between sufficient and insufficient (the interpretation) can be made and significance given. The degree to which smallness can be perceived is the degree to which shortness or tightness exists and to what extent they are included as traits in a garment. A garment needs only a minimum of these features to indicate the notion; for example, trousers which are short but that 'fit' everywhere else; a loose-fitting T-shirt with tight sleeves. We know the values of 'loose', 'baggy', 'tight', as Fashion has a language which allows us to play off one against the other (relativity). It has constructed a system which is inherent to our perceptions of sizing of garments based on generalities of the proportions of human form.⁸ Consequently, it has systematised our perceptions of the fit of clothing; what is the 'right size' and the 'correct fit'. The predominant principle of 'smallness' is that it is visibly different from the size of other clothes. What it represents is dependent on how it has been reduced, by whom, and how it is worn. Is a mass-produced 'cropping' different from a customised one?

As a fashion form it occurs mainly between the ages of 16 and 35. This is important, as from the age of 16 the notion of outgrownness is concerned with grown-up-ness. As a motif it is worn by both male and female, which may indicate an absence of gender. However, the nature of the feature may make it an extreme example of gender-significant fashion. To explain further, by being small the motif fits the body closely, therefore indicating the shape beneath. In particular regions, for example the crotch, it begins to have readings connected to sex and sexuality, not just gender, although the two are closely related.

This type of framework, which links type, form and wearer, begins to map out the field more clearly. The use of 'grounded' research⁹ enables the study of clothing to have social meaning, which in turn informs us about social behaviour.

This type of garment is concerned with its own size and how it relates to body shape.¹⁰ The link between the two forms – the body and the object placed upon it – is crucial to the understanding of how 'smallness' can be linguistically deciphered. Of course, all clothing when worn acts as body packaging, and the process of wearing demonstrates that there is a relationship between the

two. However, some forms and aspects of clothing appear to be a more conscious and obvious display of this than others. Sometimes 'covering' is not the only issue; there is a secondary level of meaning which creates an interaction. It is not an exchange from one to another but one is mapped on to the other (a layering) and 'builds' on an existent sartorial language to create another. I suggest outgrownness is one of these, as smallness relies on ideas of non-fit on the body, of only just covering it. This is demonstrated when the garment is next to the skin. A further method for illustrating smallness is in the relationship to other clothes when a short or shrunken part of a piece of clothing is put with garments we understand to be the correct size. In both cases it makes itself 'known' by its differences. It visually throws the norm into slight disarray by mismatching notions of size and fit within the conventions of garment wearing. It is through this contradictory role that it relays images connected to self-identity. It identifies parts of the body for display and/or attention which may be part of a sexual politic; for example, a short sweater which is cropped in order not to meet the waistband of the lower garment exposes part of the torso. At the same time it can construct what I call 'focused anarchy', that is, a signal of disobedience against the hierarchical language of fashion. The 'incredible hulk' syndrome, in which the body appears to be larger and the garment stays the same size, illustrates that smallness cannot completely disregard a system but works within its confines. It works as a meaning because it works within a language pushing the parameters in only one or two ways. The contradiction between being totally anarchistic and being

Leggings are purchased as a 'small' garment as they are short in terms of conventional trouser length. The wearer is creating an even greater impression of smallness by wearing them with a skirt which implies that they are 'tights', yet we know them to be leggings. The skirt also covers the gender significant area of

the hips and therefore displaces the issue of sexuality on to femininity. The Doctor Marten boots, co-opted from a male sartorial system, continue the discourse as they create an impression of largeness and focus attention on the lower part of the leg which remains uncovered.
 Photograph by Lee Wright in 1989



anarchical only in a small number of ways, of being conventional and unconventional within the one garment and the wearing of it, sets a dualistic pattern of meaning.

- 1 Small but not too small
- 2 Fits but not quite fits
- 3 Short but not too short
- 4 Tight but not too tight
- 5 Conventional garment with unconventional aspects
- 6 Covers the body but not totally

The smallness continually places emphasis away from itself on to the body, therefore constructing a language which is not about Fashion but about the wearer. This is the point at which Body politics and Self-identity are realised through the vehicle of Fashion.¹¹ The smallness of a garment not only accentuates the body size and shape but can create an image of it being bigger. The iconoclasm is that smallness equals more not less, i.e. one gesture or detail can resignify the whole, and as such is a powerful and manipulative motif. It raises two issues: Is it reclaiming a sense of the past in terms of age and body growth? Or is it emphasising one of the basic expectations of clothing, which is to cover and fit? Is 'small' ageist? These clothes have been reduced in some way, i.e. miniaturised in order to achieve a discourse centred on body culture. It accentuates the adult body by conjuring up the child experience of growing



Making a garment smaller is based on the concept of correct sizing. In this case the garment has been made bigger by inserting fabric into a seam. This motif is interrelated to the culture of 'smallness' and continues the theme of individuation. Photograph by Lee Wright in 1990

out of clothing. 'Little' clothes on an adult point out the differences between the growing, the maturing and the fully grown physique (the child, the adolescent and the adult), demonstrating a display of power and control but also a sense of defeat.¹²

'Smallness' may be a way of imaging the Victim. The wearer becomes subjected to the characteristics this motif inflicts upon it. To what extent it victimises is in the control of the wearer. Anthropology calls clothes which directly inform the body of restricted mobility, 'movement shapes'. This aptly describes some of the elements of outgrownness as it can physically restrict movement and simultaneously be a representation of restriction. To explain further I will use the example of a cropped and tight (through shrinking) T-shirt. The tightness of the armhole prevents free arm movement; this is a physical connection between the armhole, its size and the arm. The cropped aspect enforces the message by inflection; that is, it introduces an element of danger, where the higher or more vigorous the arm movement, the greater the exposure of the torso. This secondary level represents rather than constructs the restriction, and supplies an indirect control on to the wearer. So the system is:

ARMHOLE - SMALLNESS - ARM
SHORT - EXPOSURE - BODY

Tightness can restrict the body and determine that movement is confined to less energetic gestures. Shortness exploits this, as body movements such as bending over increase the shortness. The mini-skirt is an example of this. It is both a small item, i.e. a miniaturisation of a 'real' size of skirt, and cropped and tight.¹³ Exposure and the potential for revealing parts of the body is inbuilt into the notion of smallness and can be of three types:

- a) exposure of the body THROUGH clothes, e.g. tight jeans
- b) exposure of the REAL body, e.g. leggings
- c) exposure of OTHER CLOTHES, e.g. underwear

The expectations of shortness are therefore both explicit and implicit. The degree to which it covers, and the part of the body it reveals (the midriff, for example) adds to the social significance. On one level outgrownness is a Body Specific Form and the secondary level makes it a Gender Significant Form.

The tight variety can achieve both, as it clings to the body, therefore insisting that it covers it, yet the extent of the tightness also exposes, by making known the physical shape beneath. Conversely, it disallows total exposure because the integral function of clothing is to cover. The motif is interacting with the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour patterns by shifting notions of revealment and concealment. It can be simultaneously chaste and

boastful. The revealing and concealing element is achieved through the reduction in size of the garment. Its smallness can be seen to be in opposition to excesses in terms of both the fabric and demonstrative opulence. In some instances it can be interpreted as symbolic of a minimalist approach to garment construction in a purely Modernist aesthetic of Form follows Function. The varying degrees of reduction of shorter and tighter, parallel the degree to which the garment represents an opposition to wastefulness and conspicuous consumption.¹⁴ It is signalling an opposition to excess and the tighter and shorter the garment, the greater the demonstration and the more it illustrates outgrownness. This possibly explains its use within student fashions and subcultures.

However, it can also be a tool in order to illustrate waste in other garments, so that it is not just a meaning applied to itself but shifts on to the whole image. The example cited earlier of wearing it with or over 'normal-sized' garments pinpoints similar and dissimilar aspects. The fashion content of 'smallness' seems to be so important that price is not dictated by the reduction of size. Cropped sweaters are often more highly priced than their less fashion-conscious sisters. The material content is overridden by the monetary value



These jeans are tighter in some areas on the body than in others and tacitly display both gender and sexuality. This is an example of a garment which

becomes gender significant via the wearer as the garment without the body could be non-specific. Photograph by Lee Wright in 1989



The 'small' feature is conveyed through a form-fitting shape which is tight in specific areas. Paradoxically, with the more wrinkled parts of the jeans (and therefore there is more fabric) greater predominance is given to their smallness. The thin body is exaggerated by a closeness of the clothing, simultaneously implying the 'Incredible Hulk' syndrome where the body has nearly outgrown the garment. Photograph by Lee Wright in 1989

of a recognisable fashion motif. The minimal content in the industrially produced item is little more than a fashion, but the rejection of excess in customised clothing may be a stronger social statement concerning necessity and/or allegiance to a particular subculture. Ironically, the same motif is upholding capitalist principles of fashion from one type to the other, which through poverty can easily be conveyed. The collapse of financial sustenance ('I can't afford anything else') of the customised version can be distinct and powerfully portrayed by such details as not hemming the 'cut-off' edge, thus rejecting the mass-produced aesthetic of neat finishing. Therefore there can be a split of meaning depending on the type even with the same feature, where one becomes part of a fashion system while the other implies the rejection of it. It is obvious that in one case the wearer is a 'direct' consumer, in the other an 'indirect', as the original garment has been recycled through change.

In this sense the 'small' motif has created a *new order* distinct from the manipulation of an ordered fashion system. It has achieved this by creating a disruption in the normal pattern of the way we wear clothes and the size of clothing. In all types it is a *contrived* disorder within the conventional language in clothing shapes, as for many people an item which is too tight or too small is the sign that it should be discarded. The 'outgrown' impression, whether 'built-in' or 'applied' (mass produced with the feature or customised to create it) challenges the 'ideal' or 'universal' system of Fashion Language because it contradicts many of its rules. However, because the 'small' feature is just a PART of a garment, it can only disrupt the established fashion system and not wholly change it. Therefore it can be argued that it embraces an existent interpretative culture of clothing and can never be hegemonic.¹⁵

Fieldwork of this sort has its limitations in that it isolates the activity of the focus of study from the culture to which it belongs. But this was one of the initial intentions: to see if theories could be made from an a-historical and a-cultural perspective. Although isolationist, it has allowed for a case study which can now be slotted back into wider parameters of motifs and meanings in a fashion system.

Notes and References

- 1 The method is constructed through 'participant observation' which means that the wearers define the terms rather than other determinates such as the manufacturers. It tries to make sense of social phenomena and attempts to *build theory* rather than *test hypotheses*. This is useful in an area such as Fashion Theory and Discourse which is at present underwritten. As Qualitative Research embraces both the *deductive* and *inductive* (i.e., one informs the other in an integral process) it allows for a dualistic study of Popular Culture which simultaneously deconstructs representations and constructs new languages based on data collection. In this case study there were the visual manifestations of 'smallness' in fashionable clothing.
- 2 See A. Lurie *The Language of Clothes*, London, 1981. This is one example among many which accepts that styles of clothing in general have significance and meaning.
- 3 For example, D. Colle, *Collars, Stocks and Cravats*, London, 1974.
- 4 1990 fashions for women such as 'the body' (an all-in-one form-fitting garment) indicate that the 'smallness' feature has progressed into a 'second skin'. I see this as a linear development from aspects of 'outgrown'.
- 5 This excludes those wearing 'outgrown' as a necessity for purely economic reasons.
- 6 See R. Ellen (ed), *Ethnographic Research*, London, 1984, for an excellent introduction to the subject and method.
- 7 This is an interesting example of terminology as it gives the type of construction, i.e. 'rib', and the meaning, i.e., 'skinny'. Another example is 'tights'.
- 8 The UK sizing for women's clothes (8, 10, 12, 14, 16) is based on statistical research of body proportions. It is a universal system based on averages.
- 9 Anthropological term meaning research carried out 'on site' or 'in the field'.
- 10 This is an area I have worked on before using a different type of methodology. See my essay entitled 'Objectifying Gender', in Attfield and Kirkham (eds), *A View from the Interior*, London, 1989.
- 11 See E. Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self*, London, 1969.
- 12 See M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, London, 1966.
- 13 Miniaturising was a part of the 1960s pop culture. The car 'The Mini' is another example.
- 14 See T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, London, 1957. (Originally published in 1899.)
- 15 This theory indicates that the motif of smallness is useless in the construction of 'revolutionary' garment design. The point at which Fashion Design might engage with a political discourse is a redundant notion if it utilises the outgrown feature for anything other than a systematic visual language.