A GARMENT IN THE DOCK; OR, HOW THE FBI ILLUMINATED THE PREHISTORY OF A PAIR OF DENIM JEANS

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Abstract
This article looks at research carried out at the FBI Laboratory’s Special Photographic Unit in the identification of denim trousers from bank surveillance film. This research, which was published in 1998, showed that despite the ubiquity of jeans, each pair has individual identifying characteristics caused by the manufacturing process and by wear, and that these might be used as evidence in the identification of criminal suspects. What the FBI research also inadvertently illuminated was an otherwise hidden relationship between garment, maker and wearer, in an effective – if accidental – reversal of commodity fetishism.

Key Words
- CCTV
- clothing
- commodity fetishism
- criminalistics
- denim
- individuation
- jeans
- wear

So many things in an overcoat! – when circumstances and men make it speak.

H. de Pêne, *Paris Intime* (1859)1

Rag-picking amongst the research findings of other fields can pay rich dividends for the student of material culture. The by-products of military and state practices and investigations can sometimes furnish evidence for other sorts of investigation. In this way early 20th-century archaeologists discerned the signs of prehistoric settlement which inadvertently
appeared in aerial reconnaissance photographs taken during military operations in the First World War. New technologies can open up perspectives – the aerial perspective is both example and metaphor – where things can be seen to connect in ways that may often have been guessed at but never before made manifest. Well-funded and technologically advanced, the military, intelligence and law-enforcement divisions of state power have the tools and the specialist skills to make things as well as people speak. This article focuses on a particular criminal case in which the correct identification of a set of terrorist suspects was a matter of considerable urgency. Only employees of the FBI operating under these kinds of circumstances would presumably be given resources and leave to pay this sort of extraordinarily close attention to such apparent trifles as the seams of jeans. Whether or not this is so, the FBI’s research offers a fruitful scavenging-ground for the rag-picker. For one of its by-products is that it inadvertently opens up a vista in which – like aerial archaeology – the signs of an otherwise hidden history, this time of a garment, are brought to light.

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In the spring and summer of 1996 there was a series of bombings and robberies in and around the Spokane area of Washington. Police investigations led to the identification of four suspects, members of a white supremacist gang, who apparently funded their activities through crime. A successful prosecution would require positive identification, however, and these men had taken steps to ensure that this would be difficult. CCTV footage from a Spokane branch of the US Bank caught the appearance and movements of the robbers who mounted an armed raid there on 1 April 1996. A particularly clear image of one of the robbers was obtained (Figure 1), but any individuating characteristics of his body and face were obscured by a thick balaclava, gloves, and urban uniform of parka, denim jeans, and trainers. If the criminal’s face was invisible to the camera, however, what was particularly clearly revealed in the footage were the creases and wear-patterns of his jeans.

In connection with this case, Dr Richard Vorder Bruegge of the Special Photographic Unit of the FBI has investigated the individuating properties of worn denim jeans (Vorder Bruegge, 1999). Beyond ‘class characteristics’ of jeans such as manufacturer, style and size, individuating characteristics arise, according to Vorder Bruegge, as a result both of the manufacturing process, and through normal wear-and-tear. The way in which an individual washes and dries his/her jeans, whether they iron them, what they carry in their pockets, the way they walk, and so on, will all result in particular patterns of fading and wear. In particular, it is at the seams and hems where unique characteristics appear.
he who left some of his blood on this linen sheet' (1987: 44). The ‘ridges and valleys’ identified by Vorder Bruegge are just such indices inviting a ‘fantasy of referentiality’ which can be retraced to the act of sewing. These are the stigmata of labour; and we can trace them to Clarksville in 1991. The fantasy stops short, however, at the point of the ‘proper name’ of the machine-operator; the illumination, even by the FBI, even if it were crucial to the case, could not be that powerful or bright.

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Notes

3. Criminalistics has long paid attention to clothing in forensic investigations. What is different about Vorder Bruegge’s research is that it is concerned with ordinary wear rather than extraordinary marks [rips, blood-stains and so on] and has more in common with fingerprint or tyre-tread comparisons, where forensic scientists identify and match unique patterns.
5. It was reported, for example, on BBC Radio 1 and by Wired magazine.
6. ‘It sounds like voodoo to me’, said Jack King, Public Affairs Director at the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers [quoted in Philipkoski, 1998]. King’s skepticism was based partly on the ability of this type of photographic evidence to show tonal differences with sufficient clarity and resolution. For parallels between deduction and divination, see Ginzburg (1983).
7. Official state practices and the methods of fictional detectives were interestingly closely connected in fact, with borrowings both ways: see Truzzi (1983).
8. Vorder Bruegge points out that the quality of the film must be taken into consideration [Vorder Bruegge, 1999: 613, 621]. The US bank footage in question was high quality 35 mm, which facilitated the enquiry [Philipkoski, 1998].
13. In fact Vorder Bruegge is confident that these jeans were ‘wholly cut, constructed and finished in the US’: this, he says, is ‘how they do/did it at the Levi’s plant in Tennessee and that’s how it was described to me’ (personal communication, 14 Nov. 2002).

References
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