

## A Closer Look at Distressed Jeans

I want to begin with a few definitions that will map out the territory

I will be moving through.

*Distressed*: adjective: afflicted with pain or trouble: of furniture, fabric, etc. with simulated or other features of age and wear.

*Distress*: verb: to *distress* a garment is to produce signs of wear by artificial means. It is the tearing, rubbing away, washing and scraping of the jeans to produce real abrasions and fading.

*Jeans* refers to trousers made of blue denim.

*Conventional dress* - indicates the broad, non-specific dress routinely worn by a population - male and female –in their daily lives.

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Blue denim is easily the most popular material to undergo distressing nor is it by chance that the ‘damage’ inflicted by the actions of distressing take place on the same material favoured by blue jeans. What is not permissible is to wear materials such as corduroy, or flannel trousers that have been ‘distressed’ simply by tearing open the kneecaps. However, not all types of denim jeans are considered suitable for distressing. For instance, I have never seen wide legged denim jeans in a distressed state. A lingering trace perhaps, of the moment when flared jeans crashed out of fashion.

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Many of the words used to describe the distressed openings have an element of violation and so human intent as part of their meaning. Gash, slash, tear, wound, cut, rip, etc. Given that these openings are the result of human intent then what are these many openings trying to look like, or better, trying to be? Could they be the result of human encouragement of a ‘natural looking’ kind of wear and how those openings that are the result of direct human action. How these two sorts of openings differ will be crucial in determining how conventional, non-modified blue jeans and their distressed varieties relate to one another.

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The openings at the knees are the most conspicuous of the distressed adjustments and it is there that the social, economic and aesthetic dimensions of distressing are at their most intense. All other signs of distress are subservient to these two breaks in the material integrity of the jeans. Whilst there is some variation in the shape and size of these openings, a result

of distressing the garments manually, the availability of commercially produced jeans with their built in, standardised, distressed features has lessened the variation to be found on an increasing number of jeans.

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The ideal distressed opening is one wide enough so that the skin of the kneecaps is visible. (There is no erotic intent in this display either on the part of male or the female wearer.) The opening will often have a circle of fraying threads that are allowed to hang loosely around the edges of the gap. Some of these threads are even allowed an unbroken stretch across the opening. It is important that these openings at the kneecaps not look as if they have just been opened up. Any trace of recent activity that might accompany a fresh tear will change the fashionable standing of the whole garment. That such aesthetic discrimination exists between these distressed features and accidental ones suggests that a theatrical element is at work where some rules of presentation are guiding the shape of the distressed openings and the pattern of their fraying.

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The distressed openings display a peculiar halting in their fraying; a kind of stalled unravelling that is constrained so that it may embody the preferred form of the gaps. This allows these jeans to enact, over and over again, the symbolic destruction of the garment, or at least show the continued presence of such intent. This anchors the garment in a permanent tense. I know of no 'retro' versions of distressed jeans.

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After describing those features of distressed jeans, in particular the 'fissures' at their kneecaps, consideration needs to be given to the second definition of *distress* offered at the start of the essay. Here the meaning of distress refers to the relationship between a garment whose features are the result of natural wear and tear and one that is a simulation of the former garment, especially the abraded features of an 'original'

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Distressed jeans are have a staged quality that casts doubt on any claim they may have to being products of 'authentic' wear and tear. Rather, what we have at the at the kneecaps is a strange, exaggerated form taken by their look of wear and tear, something like a *dress gesture* but of a completely different order to that of genuine wear and tear.

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At some historical point denim jeans jumped from being a working class garment to being worn by certain 'renegade' elements of the middle class. The American Beats come to mind. It was then that the jeans started to be manually worked on in an attempt to replicate the 'original' signs of wear and tear of working men. Finally, commercially produced blue jeans were offered for sale that had the signs of 'authentic labour' incorporated directly into their denims. It is the uniformity of the signs of wear and tear in the commercially produced jeans that casts doubt on them being expressions of eventful life experiences.

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The signs of wear and tear found on conventional blue jeans were given an emotional overlay by the advertising campaigns that helped the adoption of blue jeans by the non-labouring middle classes. The advertising messages suggested that when one pulled on a 'mature' pair of blue jeans one was at the same time stepping into a number of imaginary roles. Outlaw, cowboy, or just an all-round non-conformist leading a life of untroubled authenticity. It is because of these emotional halos that the wear and tear on these jeans is welcomed, even venerated.

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Distressed jeans are much favoured by adolescents, teenagers and individuals up to their mid to late twenties. Individuals within this age range are likely to be caught up, consciously or unconsciously, in some form of generational dissatisfaction. In particular, they will favour dress that deviates from that of their parents, and of adults in general. The sight of adults wearing blue jeans complete with the 'traditional' signs of wear and tear heightens this generational friction. Wearing what to the untutored eye might seem to be just a severely damaged garment might be a refusal to acknowledge any kinship with the signs of wear and tear of the parental blue jeans.

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A number of things, aesthetic, social and the styles of wearing, have pointed to distressed jeans being in an antagonistic relation to conventional blue jeans. The jeans are part style, part fashion and, as mentioned earlier, tend to be worn by teenagers through to individuals in their late twenties. After this there is a dwindling away of the original context-most likely familial and domestic-that had drawn them to wear these jeans in the first place. This suggests that these garments will start to feel inappropriate for a potential wearer in their late twenties or early thirties. Given the acceptability of blue jeans in semi-formal gatherings together with their increasing gentrification, the impulse to distress can be aroused by more than just the presence of denim but more to do with what has been done to the denim. Given that the most prominent feature of the 'adjusted' jeans is its distressed knees, it is these that are most likely to offend conventional ways of dressing.

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So the question remains: Why do distressed jeans, and especially their distressed kneecaps, appear so inimical to the conventional blue jeans dress of both males and females?' An opening at the kneecap means an area of flesh becomes visible. Furthermore, this gap opened up by distressing reveals an area of flesh not normally seen when wearing long trousers. Distressing has broken with the rules governing those places where glimpses of flesh are acceptable. A distressed gap at the knees may give an impression-and it is only an impression- of being the result of 'authentic' wear and tear. Just a few strategically placed cross threads make it seem that they are all that prevents the gap from breaking apart. These terminal threads are a feature found in both 'amateur' and commercial distressing and suggests that there is a common theatrical dimension to each of the appearances.

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To be the wearer of such 'damaged' jeans is to appear as someone indifferent to the dilapidation that seems to have overtaken their dress. These 'injured' kneecaps, and the jeans they are a part of, will be seen as garments at the end of their lives and it will be assumed that the person wearing them is unable to maintain a decent wardrobe. They are therefore individuals who, in the words of the sociologist Thorstein Veblen, lack pecuniary value and so, as a consequence, must lack any social worth. The very presence of these, apparently,

worn out garments in proximity to conventionally dressed individuals (conventional dress can here include the wearing of standard blue jeans.

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Whilst the pecuniary explanation of distressed jeans has a deal of validity, but just to explain these garments as being intentionally distressed so that they look decrepit and so cause offence is overly restricted. More is happening than an offensive pantomime of poverty. To undertake such a careful alteration of the garments, of the place and size of their abrasions, of the place and size of the gaps at the kneecaps, all suggest that more is happening than the creation of a general, non-specific effect. Jeans that have their kneecaps freshly slashed, or violently torn would surely unsettle the wearers of conventional blue jeans. The layers of familiarity and affection that are an integral part of the make-up of denim intensify the sight of denim being desecrated in this way.

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Distressed jeans reject the Outlaw imaginary that conventional blue jeans are caught up in. This product of the advertising industry has, over the years, established itself as a kind of fantasy universe where blue jeans (Levis in particular.) have acquired a number of romantic meanings. (see page 4) It is this romantic imaginary that distressed jeans begin their sartorial attack. All the details of distressing such as the work on the stitching, how much rubbing needs to be done for the 'authentic' appearance of the abrasions to be applied to just the right amount and the application of the right amount of fading so that the authentic marks of wear and tear are replayed as theatrical versions of the 'originals'. The distressing is completed by the gaps at the kneecaps. What results from this transformation is a garment bereft of the imaginary dimensions of blue jeans but not completely without meaning. The action of distressing produces a garment where the imaginary is present only in the form of its desecration.

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Distressed jeans and blue jeans originate from the same source- blue denim-but there is a crucial difference in the way each garment treats it. The marks of wear and tear on blue jeans and the apparent marks of tear and wear on distressed jeans belong to different orders. The marks of wear that appear on distressed jeans could be mistaken as belonging to the historical

pedigree of wear and tear typical of ‘matured’ blue jeans, but they are different. The marks on conventional blue jeans belong to this pedigree, which impart to these garments an unassailable authenticity. Thus the intention of distressing may not be a straightforward simulation of the marks found on ‘authentic’ jeans but rather the creation of an adjusted garment of a different order. Distressed jeans enact a symbolic transformation of blue jeans. However peculiar their relation to blue jeans may seem distressed jeans are not trying to copy them.

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On several occasions I have suggested that a carefully composed template guides the distressing of the jeans at the kneecaps. These openings are premeditated ‘more-thans’, knowing exaggerations masquerading as a continuation of the authentic wear and tear of blue jeans. In short, they are unbelievable exaggerations.

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There are several literary genres that can throw light on the uneasy relationship between distressed and blue jeans. Parody, satire, caricature, burlesque, and lampoon suggest themselves as they are overwhelmingly concerned with the kind of antagonistic relations that we find between the two sorts of jeans. What happens with these genres is that some object, person, or idea is transformed into something risible. I believe that parody is closest to what is happening between distressed and blue jeans.

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Parody is a work created to make fun of an original by means of an ironic imitation.

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Parody often transforms its chosen object into something ridiculous by way of exaggeration. As parody, distressed jeans both imitate and exaggerate (transform) certain features of blue jeans. Distressing appropriates elements from the historical tradition of wear and tear and makes them into a parodic form of the ‘authentic’ original. There is always an element of disdain in parody so that distressed jeans are a mild form of ridicule. The traditional understanding of the marks of wear and tear is condensed down into a hole at the knees. These are the unbelievable exaggerations mentioned earlier which swallow the fading and abrasions of the denim of conventional blue jeans.

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The imitation at the heart of parody turns an apparent similarity between conventional blue jeans and distressed jeans into one that is a fundamental difference. The similarity of their fundamental material, blue denim, becomes the stage upon which the parody of distressing is staged.

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The parody at work in distressed jeans is a way for a junior generation to create an identity by refusing the gift offered by the generation above. With the case of distressed jeans, a mild form of parody imparts to their refusal a satirical element that reinforces their disdain for the wear and tear aesthetic so beloved of previous generations.

(1) Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, The Modern Library, 2001.

Thanks to Laleen

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## Postscript

I decided to write a Postscript not to amend what I had written about distressed jeans and parody but to put in place those dimensions that gave a shape to it as an entity in general. To map out how it rested amongst other examples of jeans that had been distressed.

One of the irritating, not to say embarrassing, things that can happen when one's work finally goes public is for it to be judged solely on the basis of exceptions or irrelevancies. Questions such as 'But what about X?' or 'Surely this does not apply to Y?' These uncomfortable feelings often originate with an earlier encounter the author may have had with such exceptions. Rather than dealing with them immediately they could have been stored away with a promise to deal with them at a later date.

Towards the end of writing the account of distressed-jeans-as-parody I came across an example jeans that had been 'adjusted' in ways similar to those of 'our' jeans. But the context in which the jeans were worn had little to do with the barbed intentions of parody.

My first encounter with an exception to distressed jeans, as parody was a photograph of Meghan Markle wearing a pair of her favourite jeans. (image 1) must have been a relatively recent photograph (2016) because it appeared in an article twinning her with Prince Harry. She is wearing the distressed jeans as part of a casual look. Meghan Markle's fashion history reveals her to be fond of wearing jeans that had been 'distressed' at their knees.



Later I noticed distressed jeans were being worn in a variety of fashionable images that ranged from paparazzi shots through to straightforward clothing ads. In almost all of these images it was young women were wearing the distressed jeans.

(image 2: Sydney Morning Herald: April: 2019)



Assuming the distressing of Meghan Markle's jeans has not been carried out under the sign of parody there are still consequences for jeans-as-parody. If, as seems likely, there are different sorts of distressing that are not parodic then 'our' sort of distressed jeans cannot stand as a global model, something that regulates all the forms of distressing. If 'our' jeans are not the only form of distressing then it will have to take its place among all the other sorts of distressing. It will have both a conceptual and empirical edge, a place where parodic distressing comes to an end and where something else comes into being.

The differences between the various forms of distressing, sometimes of an historical nature, sometimes contemporary, rest with their meanings, not with the similarities of the physical pattern inflicted upon the jeans. This means that tracing affinities simply on the basis of physical marks alone can be misleading.

If these other kinds of distressing are different to parodic forms of distressing then Meghan Markle's jeans are not necessarily the way they are as a result of an influence flowing from the parodic sorts of distressing. This would make parodic jeans possessed of an animation lacking in other distressed jeans.

The physical marks of distress are scattered right across the landscape of dress, which means there is no central location controlling all of its manifestations. Nor is there an origin, a place where all the varieties of distressing find their source. Parodic distressing simply occupies a place. Nothing more, nothing less. These parodic jeans are a kind of jeans rather than the sort of jeans.

