Body Language—The Language of Contemporary Fashion

Curriculum Unit 85.06.03
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The bell signals a rush of adolescent bodies from the doorways of classrooms. A myriad of styles of clothing covers these forms of contemporary teenagers of the mid1980's, as they move with exuberant energy. Eye popping flourescents bounce from the legs, arms, torsos, and hair of the girls. Stockings of every hue and texture rise to meet short skirts. Wide metallic belts are slung across their hiplines. Skin tight pants, cut above the ankles, swing rhythmically along the hallways. Glittery, sparkling bracelets reach almost to the elbow, musically jingling. Bare fingers emerge from a leather palm and raise to signal recognition. Military camouflages, pressed striped jeans, and denim jackets saunter past other males. Grafitti—vibrant jackets identify the wearer, symbols and words move and turn in every direction like personal billboards. Sneakers complete the male uniform, each day brings a new model.

This is the clothing of the 1980's adolescent. Like all clothing, it says something about the wearer. Since this unit is intended to meet teenage requests in middle school art classes, six issues are worthwhile exploring.

1. *Adolescent dress is a form of communication* . It carries nonverbal messages to its audience composed of teenage peers and adults.
2. *Adolescent dress represents teenage values* of identity with a particular peer group, and at the same time expresses a need to be different from adults.
3. *Adolescent dress differences symbolize a need for autonomy* . Teenagers strive for independence.
4. *Adolescent dress as different from adult dress is a relatively recent historical phenomenon* . Previous to the 1950's the dress of young people mimicked adult fashions.
5. *Adolescent dress of the 1980's appears to have a historical connection with the teenage clothing of the late 1950's and early 1960's* . Fashions styles manifest a cyclical nature. What is new and apparently original dress to one generation has its derivation in the past.
6. *Adolescent dress of the 1980's is influenced by the media* . The recent development of the music video demonstrates the powerful effect clothing of popular rock stars has on teenage audiences.

Clothing is a language, a nonverbal system of communication that through its symbols conveys much about the wearer to the viewer. Before people speak to one another, their clothing makes a statement that expresses their sex, age, class, occupation, origin and personality, as well as what they are or what they want

to be at a particular moment. A businessperson is recognized in a well tailored suit.

As a language clothing can range from conventional to eccentric styles. Dress can identify its wearer with a social group or role that the individual wants to emulate. Notice how significant jeans are to teenagers. Importance is placed upon style, cost and labels that identify them as designer. As a nonverbal language, the jeans may signal that they are all members of the same group, no matter how different they may be socially or intellectually. Teenage girls carry the group identification a step further by sharing clothes. In this way they share their friendship and group identity, just as they share their slang in creating their own verbal language. [1] But clothing can and does express more than identity with a group or role. It can also express the value of that group.

Teenage clothing communicates messages other than that of belonging and similarity, for teenagers are working out their own set of values different from those of their parents. Clothing can also express the psychological need for adolescents to rebel against their parents and other adults in authority in order to seek autonomy.

The process of personal development and growth in adolescence is a complex one. Protest and rebellion against parents and adults in authority are commonly observable behaviors. Protest can take the form of enjoyment and pleasureseeking. Enjoyment conveys messages of freedom and autonomy. The objects and activities important to the teenager are valuable in developing his/her independence. [2]

One example of adolescent protest is seen in their choices of clothing. In the 1950's teenage "greasers" wore leather jackets possibly with leather pants in an attempt to appear "tough". Contemporary teenagers adopted the "Punk" or "New Wave" look. The "Punk'' look originated in England in the late 1970's. It's appearance combines the conflicting emotions of rage, fear and pity for the injured child. "Punk" dress of boys can include black leather jackets, studded jeans, torn shirts and pants held together with safety pins, exposed skin that is bruised and scratched, and multipierced ears. Girls may wear styles similar to the boys or vary it with slit skirts, tight fitting hot pants and sweaters. Hair and makeup styles include: shaved heads, hair dyed in vibrant hues, faces heavily powdered, eyes darkly made up and lips painted with gaudy lipstick. Metal bicycle or dog chains can hang around the neck or wrapped around the hips or legs. [3]

As a language of clothing, the "Punk" style transmits a double message. From one view "Punk" clothing conveys an angry statement that is sexually charged with energy and violence. Outfits of leather, chains and exposure of the skin with real and artificial scars are intended to threaten the adult audience through fear. Another aspect of "Punk" clothing that may not be as obvious, but adds to the disturbing effect that it has on adult viewers, is its image of the wounded child. Examples of this are the hair colors one may find in dyed Easter chicks, poorly fitting jackets and pants, scratched and scraped faces and knees, and the use of the safety pin to pierce the ear, cheek, etc. The "Punk" look is less dramatic in the version know as "New Wave". "New Wave's" message is one of restlessness and boredom. [4]

Historically, the phenomenon of distinct teenage dress did not develop until the 1950's. War had reduced the numbers of a bridging age group. Young people who were born after the war, or were too young to remember, did not share the adult memories.

Following World War II, and particularly during the 1950's and 1960's, a new development in fashion emerged, clothing designed specifically for teenagers. By the mid1960's, one half of the population of the United States was under the age of thirty. Prosperity had increased since the end of World War II in America. Teenagers had

more disposable income. A culture that glorified youth had arrived.

Teenagers of the 1950's were differentiated from adults. Luxury businesses, in a time of increased affluence, saw the advantage of creating a separate youth market. Businesses made money while teens spent their income on products that gave them status and identity. Though teenagers were relatively unproductive members of American society, due to the fact that young people did not enter the world of work until their late teens; adolescents were consumers of product specifically designed for the young. In 1958 adolescents spent twenty million dollars on such products as cosmetics, T.V. sets, phonographs, records, cars and clothes. [5]

Many factors contributed to the value placed upon being young. Progressive education stressed the uniqueness of the child in contrast to the child as being an imperfect adult. The American educational system reflected society's value placed upon business and consumerism. Social obedience and conformity pervaded. The valued of political naiveté, caution, commercialism, status seeking and apathy were rewarded by adult institutions. Child rearing practices were introduced to the public as a product in Dr. Benjamin Spock's *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care(1946)* . Youth of the 1950's were labeled the "Silent Generation". Not all were silent, but they were aware of the adult pressures to conform that was shaped by middle class values. [6]

By the end of the 1950's dissension from the existing values was evident in young people. The 1960's saw the birth of civil rights activism, New Left political policies and pacifism.

Teenage clothing styles of the 1950's grew out of economic prosperity following World War II. Along with this fact a consumer market was directed at adolescents who were more pampered and had money to spend. At first adult designers dictated the teenage styles; but teens began to see clothing in a new way, as a means of selfexpression. They bought only what they liked.

Contemporary adolescents of the 1980's live in an American society that differs in time, technological advances and social changes from the late 1950's and early 1960's. Yet some similarities can be identified. Teenagers of the mid1980's do not have the personal memories of the Viet Nam War. They, like their predecessors of the 1950's, are too young to remember. A conservative politics exists that encourages a conformity to past values. Advances in the areas of civil rights have moved haltingly. Patriotism is prompted with a belated recognition of Viet Nam veterans, ten years after the fact. Adolescents are pampered by society. A vast consumer market of young people are bombarded with advertising from the media. The messages glorify youth. Energetic sensual bodies sell products ranging from soda and fast foods to popular music stars.

With the technological advances in communication, specifically the video tape, teenagers now have their favorite rock stars in their living rooms. Twentyfour hours a day, M.T.V.(Music Television) plays the latest music for its adolescent audience. Sophisticated visual and auditory technology produces rock music stars. Video tapes guarantee rock performers the publicity needed for success. The clothing styles worn by popular rock stars is creatively adopted by teens.

Popular rock music stars are numerous. Within the limits of this unit, twelve personalities groups are selected as examples representative of the varying musical tastes of teenagers. Their clothing styles are just as diverse as their musical expressions, as well as their racial and ethnic origins. Photographs of these personalities can be readily found in such rock publications as *Bop, Super Stars, Stars Hits* , and *Video Rock Stars* .

1. *Agnostic Front* wears camouflage military dress.
2. *Billy Idol* wears black leather with metallic chains.
3. *Bruce Springsteen* wears denim and cutoff plaids
4. *Cyndi Lauper* wears denim, lace and piles of costume jewelry.
5. *David Lee Roth(Van Halen*) wears vibrant skin tight prints, metallic glitter and one cutoff white glove.
6. *Duran Duran* wears both tight leather and soft loosely hanging fabrics with metallic chains.
7. *Kool and the Gang* wears casual knits with soft leather.
8. *Lionel Richie* wears easygoing sports clothes.
9. *Madonna* , the rage of the moment, wears lace mini skirts, heaps of bracelets and prints.
10. *Menudo* wears youthful sports clothes of comfortable fabrics.
11. *Prince* wears ruffles, satin and bejeweled costumes.
12. *Tina Turner* wears sensual mini skirts, lace, leather and spangled outfits.

The six issues discussed above apply to the following twofold lesson plans. The major emphasis is placed upon the cyclical nature of teenage fashions: the late 1950's and early 1960's compared to the mid1980's. What seems to be new in contemporary teenage dress mirrors the styles of 25 years ago, ie. miniskirts, leather jackets, and crop pants.

The twofold lesson plans that follow: 1. Analyze an object of clothing from the 1950's, a pair of Capri pants, utilizing Professor Jules Prown's methodology of object analysis and 2. Design an outfit that a teenager would like to wear that reflects one of the functions of clothes: utility, status, and sex.

Lesson Plan 1: Method of Object Analysis

Utilize *Figure 1* —Capri pants of the 1950's

I. DESCRIPTION
What can be objectively observed in the object?
A. *Substantial analysis*
What are the physical description of the object?—measurement, weight, materials used, articulation of materials. How many inches/ feet long and wide are the Capri pants? How much do the pants weight? light? heavy? What kind of fabric is used? How are the pants constructed? sewn?
B. *Content analysis*
What iconography is observed on the object? designs, words, inscriptions, diagrams. Are there any designs on the Capri pants?
C. *Formal analysis*
What are the object's twodimensional and threedimensional characteristics? lines, areas, forms, color, light, texture. What lines are applied to the surface of the fabric? Are the pants flat(twodimensional) or do they have form(three dimensional)? What forms are observed? What

color(s)?

II. *DEDUCTION*

What would it be like to interact with the object? handle, lift, use, wear. Can you hold the object in your hands? Can you wear the object?

A. *Sensory engagement*

How does the object feel, taste, smell, sound? How does the object feel? soft? hard? smooth? rough?

B. I*ntellectual engagement*

What does the object do? How does the object perform? What role might we play with the object? Would adults use the object? small children? teenagers?

C. *Emotional response*

What is our emotional response to the object? fear, joy, indifference, curiosity, revulsion, excitement. Be aware of cultural biases.

III. *SPECULATION* What is in the mind of the perceiver? creative imagining, free association.

A. *Theories and hypothesis*

Review all of the above information. Since none of the students were alive when Capri pants were produced in 1957 it can be appropriate to consider what teenagers may have been like in the late '50's. What may be similar or different about the teenager of the '80's who wears Crop pants?

B. *Program of research*

Develop a program to investigate the questions posed by the material evidence. [7]

Lesson Plan 2: Teenage Clothing Design

Two objectives are inherent in this clothing design plan: to successfully learn to draw the human body in relative proportion, and to design an outfit that a teenager would wear, as well as explaining why s/he would like to wear it. Basic supplies needed would be pencil, eraser, ruler, drawing paper, magazine pictures of people and clothing, assorted scrap fabrics, and tracing paper. Markers and pen and ink may be utilized on final clothing design drawing.

I. *Drawing the Figure*

A. Basic Female and Male Proportions.

Figure 2

B. Block Forms (Cube, Cylinder, Wedge)

Figure 3

C. Figure Balance and Action Line

Figures 4 & 5

D. The Head, Hands and Feet

Figures 6 & 7

E. Spiral Forms

Figure 8

II. *Texture and Pattern of Fabrics*

Utilize scrap fabrics and magazine photographs to simulate in drawing two or three of the choices below.

Prints
Lace
Checks
Velvet
Plaids
Knits
Stripes
Denim
Metallic
Leather

III. *Teenage Design Themes*

Utilize one or more of the purposes of wearing clothing in order to design an outfit that a teenager would wear.

Human beings wear clothing for three reasons: *utility* , *status* , and *sex* . Seldom do we wear a particular style of clothing for one reason. People often have two or more motives for wearing an outfit. We may buy a coat to protect us from cold weather and at the same time want to convey a message: conservatism, flamboyance, sophistication, or toughness. During the 1930's, J.C. Flugel published one of the earliest theories on the psychology of clothing, in which he stated that clothing is worn to satisfy the contradictory need for modesty, the desire for attention, and protection. [8]

Clothing chosen for the purpose of utility can protect people from the extremes of climate, make working easier or more comfortable, or provide safety in sports and warfare. Practical clothing at times becomes fashionable rather than protective. Leather driving gloves with cutoff fingers may never touch the steering wheel of a car. Camouflage/military clothing is worn by teenagers who have never experienced war. Throughout the history of man what is called practical clothing sometimes has a magical purpose. From the earliest discoveries of man to present times a particular piece of protective clothing, a decorative object or body paint(cosmetics) can symbolize some magical power. Examples may be found in sports or entertainment clothes. Tshirts and sweat shirt may have inscriptions that symbolize good luck. A teenage girl may wear her boyfriend's sports jacket to symbolize their affection for one another. [9]

One's position could be determined by clothing. The only people who could wear sandals in ancient Egypt were in high position. The Greeks and Romans determined a person's social class by the color, the number of clothes worn and the type of embroidery that was applied to the clothing. As time passed the more clothes one had the higher one's status was. [10]

For today's teenagers it is not just enough to have more clothing as a sign of one's status. It is necessary to have separate outfits for each activity that one participates in; this clothing must have the currently popular brand names and be obviously labeled. Adolescents' jeans and sneakers have status symbols applied to their rear ends and feet. Advertising expenses has caused the labeled clothing to be more expensive, yet the quality of the materials is not necessarily any better than unlabeled clothes. Gold jewelry, especially in the form of neck chains, is a status symbol for many young people as well as adults.

Since many urban teenagers are members of minority groups, it is important to understand how status affects their choices in dress. When a minority group is denied access to the status symbols available to the rest of a population, as a result of oppression; the minority group will seek out a means to raise selfesteem. Clothing is one of the most easily exhibited symbols of status available. In a research project (1963) it was found that black people spent far more money on clothing than white people. Black dress, particularly of males, is distinctive, and has a great influence upon mainstream fashions. [11]

Beyond identifying whether people are male or female, clothing conveys some obvious and many more subtle and disguised sexual messages. Teenagers dress to attract the attention of their peers both male and female. Clothes that bare specific parts of the teenage body do not necessarily mean that the individual is making an overt advance to the opposite sex. Sexual messages in adolescent dress are dramatically influenced by the

media through advertising. Personalities in both music and the movies direct their appeal to their youthful audience. The flamboyant and sensual dress of contemporary teenagers primarily emanates from M.T.V.(Music Television). Twentyfour hours a day visual and auditory messages bombard young people through the technology of video tapes. Video music stars dress and perform in order to appeal to the developing sexuality of teenagers. Adolescents creatively borrow the clothing styles of popular music personalities to suit the image(s) they wish to convey. Contemporary teenage styles offer a variety of choices of sexual display, which is as changeable as the behavior of adolescents. Since the 1950's sexuality has become a more openly discussed issue. Adolescnece is a time of awareness and experimentation with sexual identities which are reflected in the choices of dress. Sexual identities range from heterosexual, homosexual, unisexual to androgynous.

Notes

1. Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* . (New York, 1981), pp. 3-26.
2. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene RochbergHulton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* .(Cambridge, 1981), p. 140.
3. Lurie, p. 162.
4. *Ibid.* , pp. 161164.
5. Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were.* (New York, 1977), p. 272.
6. Miller and Nowak, pp. 285 287.
7. Jules D. Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method", *Winterthur Portfolio,* vol. 17, no. 1, Spring 1982, pp. 710.
8. J.C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* . (London, 1930), pp. 16 24.
9. Lurie, pp. 2934.
10. *Ibid.* , pp. 115 120.
11. J, Schwartz, "Men's Clothing and the Negro", *Phylon* 24 (1963): pp. 224231.

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Page 141 begins a discussion of teenage clothing as it reflects the values of the 1950's. Found in Mudd Library.

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Pages 252 to 273 discuss the historical development of freedom in clothing styles since the 1940's.

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Perutz, Kathrin. *Beyond the Looking Glass: America's Beauty Culture* . New York: William Morrow and Company, 1970.

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Professor Prown's essay that defines material culture and his methodology of object analysis.

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(figure available in print form)
Figure 1. Capri Pants
(figure available in print form)
Figure 2. Body Proportions
(figure available in print form)
Figure 3. Block Forms
(figure available in print form)
Figure 4. Balance and Action Line. Relaxed pose-weight on one foot. Horizontal lines follow one direction

above waistline—opposite direction below.

(figure available in print form)

Figure 5. Balance and Action Line

(figure available in print form)

Figure 6. Female and Male Head

(figure available in print form)

Figure 7. Hands and Feet

(figure available in print form)

Figure 8. Spiral Forms