

**Here's Looking at Shoes:
Exploring the Relationship Between Popular
Representations and Embodied Experiences of Shoes.**

Alexandra Sherlock

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Abstract

According to Benstock and Ferris (2001: 67) “Shoes are hot”: from calendars, magazines, coffee-table books, postcards, fridge magnets and book covers to visual references in film, television and the popular press, shoes are everywhere. But how do these representations affect everyday embodied experiences of wearing shoes, and to what extent are these representations informed by these experiences? This paper takes a sociological and anthropological approach that departs from traditional semiotic interpretations of images to give an empirically grounded insight into the co-constitutive relationship between representations and embodied experiences of this ubiquitous item of material culture. Following several months of interviews and observations at Clarks UK headquarters, the Originals Desert Boot, steeped in a rich history within visual culture, has emerged as a case study through which to understand this relationship. The Desert Boot - despite its perhaps distinctly un-remarkable appearance - carries an extremely rich set of meanings and associations for both men and women across a broad range of age groups and cultures. This paper shows how these meanings are carefully negotiated and facilitated through the process of representation in a subtle and complex dialogue between consumer and producer. Ultimately, this research provides a new bridge between structure and agency by showing how these representations are embodied by the Clarks Originals team themselves, affecting not only their perceptions of the footwear they produce but also their own shoe-wearing experiences.

**1. Introduction: Shoes and Representation:
Metaphor and Metonymy**

It is well documented that certain shoes, such as, for example Dr Martens,

Brothel Creepers (Beetle crushers), Manolo Blahniks, ruby slippers, Chuck Taylors and Nike's become symbolically associated with, or 'stand' for, certain social groups or personalities (Roach, 1999, Peterson, 2007, Webster, 2009, The Design Museum, 2009, Davidson, 2006). Their repeated representation in such contexts enables them to become a 'loaded device' (Pine, 2006: 353) readily taken up as a metaphorical or metonymical aid in a range of contexts throughout popular visual culture to connote particular cultural or sub-cultural identities and as a narrative aid expressing various types of experience. Semiotologists may tell us that if products, for example a particular brand or type of shoe are represented enough in a particular context or on a particular person or group, the association becomes normalized or natural (Barthes, 2009 [1957]).

In his famous semiotic reading of British post-war subcultural styles Hebdige (1979) showed how rebellious youth groups such as the Punks and Skinheads reified political ideologies through the appropriation and subversion of material goods such as the Dr Martens boot. Through such use Dr Martens gained currency as a symbol of youth and rebellion; a currency capitalized on to this day. Clarks Originals (the focus of this analysis) are similarly culturally laden with meaning but while the semiotic approach might be effective at telling us that Clarks Originals are associated with the Mods of the 50's and 60's in the UK, musicians such as Oasis and the Verve, the post-colonial Jamaican dancehall scene or African American hip hop artists, it does not tell us why. Why *those* particular shoes in each instance and not others? Also, as Windsor points out, because the traditional approach often studies signs in relation to one another it makes it very difficult to understand how they relate to reality (2004: 179). How, for example, do these connotations impact the consumer? While a consumer might be visually literate, fully understanding the cultural connotations of a particular pair of shoes, and may indeed desire the identity the shoes promise, this certainly doesn't mean they would feel 'right' or convincing wearing them. So what has to happen and what has to be in place for them to make the decision to buy and feel comfortable wearing them?

This paper takes interview data conducted with the producers and wearers of Clarks Originals shoes to understand how images are perceived and embodied, successfully or otherwise through wear. The paper starts on the basis that shoes, both as material artifact and image can be considered cultural signifiers. Departing from traditional semiotic approaches however that see signs as relative and arbitrary systems of communication (Eco,

1979, Baudrillard, 1981, Barthes, 2009 [1957]). I will use an approach that sees them in terms of the ways they are perceived and embodied by those that produce and consume them.

2. Embodied Perception

Building on work by Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2002) and Gibson (1979) perception, rather than purely taking place in the mind, is increasingly understood to be a subjective and embodied process that takes place within a geographical/cultural environment (Csordas, 2003, Sobchack, 2004, Ingold, 2000). Indeed bodily and environmental constraints both have an impact on the ability of the sign – or shoes in this case – to effect a successful transformation of the user/wearer. Furthermore drawing on Gibson’s ecological psychology Ingold explains that rather than being static ‘lookers’ we are always in motion through time and place and “depending on the kind of activity in which we are engaged, we will be attuned to picking up particular types of information.” (2000: 166). He goes on to explain that the knowledge obtained through perception is therefore practical: when we encounter things, what we are actually doing is perceiving their affordances - we pick up and see what we might need to help us function in our own particular contexts or journeys.

Although Gibson and Ingold are mainly talking about the physical environment, in his *Ecological Approach to Semiotics* Windsor proposes cultural signs should also be approached functionally: rather than asking what the shoes mean, we should ask what they and their meanings afford a particular individual or ‘niche’ group. “Hence, interpreting a sign becomes not a matter of decoding, but a matter of perceiving an affordance.” (Windsor, 2004: 183) To use the insightful words of one of my participants:

“[I]t’s kind of where the shoe gets you to I suppose, and I don’t mean that in terms of walking, in a sense, I mean image-wise and psychologically where it puts you”.

In this paper I will be showing how shoes function to maintain a sense of identity or afford a transition between identities for a particular group of people – a small group of men in the North of England. By following this particular type of shoe and group of wearers I hope to give greater insight to the embodied process that leads particular shoes to become socially significant – and ultimately to show how representations are embodied.

3. Clarks Originals

Clarks Originals is a sub brand of Clarks International, the world's largest casual and smart shoe company and the fourth largest footwear company in the world (C&J Clark International, 2013). Although the Originals sub-brand was established in 1994, the shoes that comprise it have been around a lot longer. Clarks have produced the Desert Boot (perhaps the most famous) since the 1950's. Others include the Wallabee, Desert Trek, Lugger and Natalie. All sharing the crepe rubber sole, natural materials and uncomplicated yet distinctive design and construction they have achieved a 'classic', 'authentic' and timeless status around the world, generally through unsolicited endorsements throughout popular culture.

4. The Participants: 'Madchester' and Looking Authentically 'Normal'

Earlier this year I conducted some focus groups with Clarks Originals wearers in the North of England. One group consisted of 4 men in their 30's and it is data from this group that I'll be using for the purposes of this paper. Two of the men wore brown Desert Treks, one a russet leather Desert Boot and the other a black suede Wallabee – all classic designs. It quickly became apparent that they had all been attracted to the shoes through the Manchester Indie music scene of the 1980's – 90's which originated in the North of England. Although they were all strangers it was this connection that enabled them to bond very quickly throughout the discussion.

Named 'Madchester' the alternative music genre rebelled against the manufactured, sugar-coated pop of the 80s. Breaking with convention, many of the Madchester characters whose music and narratives were locally rooted in a particular time and place – as opposed to the placeless mass pop they were reacting against - portrayed an authentic sense of coolness associated with 'otherness' and non-conformity. Participants talked about glimpsing the shoes on bands at gigs, on TV and in magazines, seeing them on friends and subsequently recognising them in the shops or actively seeking them out. One of my participants explained the genre made it fashionable to look 'normal' again, and Clarks Originals with their simple classic style and natural materials epitomized this normality – the shoes became special for the very reason that they weren't very special, yet they were distinctive enough to be identifiable to those in the know.

There was a sense amongst participants that the bands wore what they wanted, what was practical and what fitted with the music and the,

sometimes bleak, northern climate and terrain. There was a perceived sense of authenticity here that they all identified with. One participant explained that no one had ever sat him down and told him that Clarks Desert Treks (the shoes he was wearing) were synonymous with the Indie scene. It seemed to be the fact they weren't intentionally marketed in association with the music genre that appealed so much to these wearers. There was a sense of satisfaction and pride that, rather than being sold them, they had recognized these connections themselves. One participant described a kind of epiphany, a sudden awareness that he knew he had perceived something significant that he identified with; the shoes had a resonance that made them feel 'right' and that added to the way he wanted to represent himself.

“You make that connection yourself, that again has to do with that [you make] the effort, [you have] the realization: what's the picture here? Like there's the shoes, and what's the picture around it?” [...] “So when I saw them in Manchester it was completely clear like, so many parts all of a sudden came together it was like [...] there is a resonance there that I find inherently attractive right? I like the music that they're associated with, you know. Settled in the North of England, so there's that, you know. There's a lot of different things that come together and you think well that adds to how I'd like to represent myself.”

It seems he needed to see the bigger picture in order to ascertain what the shoes could add or contribute to his own identity. Windsor cites Chimero (2001) and Heft (1990) to propose that the perception of a sign is not just the result of a singular object or event, but a complex of different sources of 'stimulus information' – information that is intermodal (Davidson, [1993] in, Windsor, 2004: 184) of which images are only a part of what might be considered a bigger picture.

But an awareness of the cultural connotations and connections wasn't enough for this participant to buy and wear the shoes himself. Originally from Austria he moved to Manchester in the 1990's and although he had always admired the shoes he had never before worn them, partly because the suede style he coveted simply didn't make 'sense' in the snowy Alps. It was this transition between *places* that provided the impetus for him to buy and wear the shoes. The shoes afforded and enabled him to make this cultural transition, but paradoxically, were it not for the move he

wouldn't have felt right wearing the shoes. He explained it in the following way:

"I don't know, like it's ok to wear, I don't know, flip-flops on the beach, but it's not ok to wear flip-flops in church, right? So wearing Clarks in the Austrian Alps seemed to me a bit like wearing flip-flops in church, whereas once you get to the beach it makes sense: you think of flip-flops, it makes complete sense. Once I got to Northern England and I walked past them: "ah that makes complete sense" now that I'm here - probably will be here for a while - that makes sense, with the music and everything else on top of it..." [...] so this is a very English thing to do "I'm in Manchester, you know, I almost have a swagger, I need to buy some Originals" [laughs][...]"

But while all participants spoke evocatively about the shoes 'making sense' or feeling 'right' and the importance of perceiving the bigger picture to understand where they and the shoes fitted,¹ it isn't really until we consider the shoes in movement that we are able to understand how these values are embodied and his use of the word 'swagger' is a clue to how to do this.

There was one quote that, for me, seemed to clinch this notion of cultural embodiment. This participant in his late 30's from Sheffield seemed to beautifully express the interconnectedness of all these influences through movement and mobility when reminiscing times spent dancing to his favourite bands in pubs. Recognising the connections between the music and the shoes I asked if he needed to wear his Desert Treks when listening to his favourite music:

"I could listen to it, but if I wanted... proper dancing to [M2 agrees] like particularly if it's like the Stone Roses, the Charletans, like proper Indie, you can't dance like I used to – a, I've given up smoking, but the best dancing ever was cigarette in hand, pair of flares on, pair of Desert Treks and then you'd just kind of shuffle around the dance floor in the vague hope that some woman goes "ah yeah" [laughter] It

¹ Other factors included the location, the music, the heritage and reputation of the brand, seeing or remembering the shoes on friends or family members and the ways the shoes fitted with the clothes they liked to wear.

never happens cos you always think that you're cooler than you are but [laughter]. But there was something about when we were younger and you could smoke inside, about a pair of these, and a pair of flares and a cigarette on the go and the Stone Roses or anything like that bangin' out - or Shaun Ryder singing *It's Gotta be a Loose Fit*, or whatever, that was just absolutely mint. You know? There was not much better really. And you could get away with it if you were wearing like Adidas originals, like a pair of Sambas or something like that, but other than that it just wouldn't be right.”

Both participants talked about the shoes affording a ‘shuffle’ or a ‘swagger’ that might be associated with the ‘baggy’ Madchester movement and characters such as the Gallaghers and Ian Brown. In this way the shoes with their flat bottomed, slightly sticky crepe soles allowed them to embody the cultural references by effecting a particular type of associated mobility which was connected to the geographical location, cultural heritage and music of the Madchester movement: a mobility that would have been out of place elsewhere and that would presumably also be difficult with other, differently designed shoes or soles.

5. Conclusion: Totemic Objects

Although this is only one case study of a particular group of consumers we are able to see a plethora of factors that are involved in the successful association between a subcultural identity and a signifier though the process of embodiment, particularly the way images are embodied in the ongoing process of identification. But there is something particular about Clarks Originals shoes that affords the expression of identity for many other quite diverse groups around the world - from young female Japanese or Korean cool hunters to the Jamaican rude boy or Italian gent. And this list includes the staff at Clarks headquarters themselves. At a potentially unsettling time of global expansion the staff at Clarks speak fondly of Clarks Originals using them almost as a totem that embodies the essence of what they consider their identity to be and the values they wish to portray – values of authenticity, democracy, integrity, credibility and simplicity perhaps rooted in their Quaker family heritage. This is not a corporate strategy, rather an tacit practice amongst staff that includes producing mini models, using the Desert Boot as a symbol in internal communications and

buying and wearing Originals for themselves and their families that affords them the ability to hang on to the values with which they identify. This can be explained through further analysis of the materiality of the shoes, which is a theme to be developed further in my PhD thesis and associated publications.

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Alexandra Sherlock

University of Sheffield

Blog: www.alexandrasherlock.wordpress.com

Alexandra is the postgraduate researcher for the ESRC funded research project 'If the Shoe Fits: Footwear, Identity and Transition' in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield (2010-2013). Her research is mainly conducted within the anthropological field of material culture studies and her current research, based on fieldwork at Clarks headquarters in Somerset, explores links between representations and embodied experiences of footwear.