

The Social Life of Unwanted Clothes

Annebella Pollen (2022)

Clothes are the most peopled of objects. We might even think of clothing as persons with social lives and stories to tell, in the mode of anthropologist Igor Kopytoff. “In doing the biography of a thing”, he suggests, “one would ask questions similar to those one would ask about people”. These include: “Where does the thing come from and who made it?” and “How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?”

We are what we wear and, equally, we are what we throw away. The devaluing and revaluing of clothes can be a personal act, but it can also be a complex global process. These are tales left untold. To uncover what is usually concealed, in 2019 I followed a British house clearance company whose high-speed methods move garments, in less than a week, out of wardrobes and into the hands of secondhand dealers and consumers, through declining scales of value, until garments are given away for free. This process reveals how clothes move from wanted to unwanted, and shows lives lived and lost.

The wearer

For house clearers, every day is busy: sorting, dumping what won’t sell, selling what will, and dumping again. Jobs may be grand or modest; some they charge for and some they pay to clear. There may be cash in the garage or hypodermic needles in the carpet. On my visit, we are in a cul-de-sac in a small coastal town. An elderly widow – I will call her Judy - has recently died. Relatives have gone through her possessions, as is usual, but leave five wardrobes’ worth of clothes. Surveying a recently-deceased stranger’s bedroom feels uncomfortable – her dressing gown still hangs on the back of the door – but this is what house clearers do, all day, every day.

The clearer

House clearance sits at the intersection of refuse disposal, the death industry and the antiques trade. Its operators are part dustmen, undertakers and dealers. As they work, they decide which items can be sold on. Underwear, for example, is unlikely to find buyers. Anything that will not make immediate profit goes to the tip: rusted tools from the garden shed, chemicals from under the kitchen sink, pharmaceuticals from the bathroom cabinet and miscellaneous personal items, from utility bills to family photographs. Judy’s dressing gown is the first garment to be tipped off the truck.

The garment

How might we compose a cultural history of such an item? In 1796, Denis Diderot wrote a whimsical essay, "Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown". The old faithful brown belted garment on which the philosopher regularly wiped his pen is rashly disposed of in favour of a new red version, leading to a set of ill consequences bound up in metaphors about manners and morals. This does not seem quite right. In another attempt, a domestic robe plays a key role in the British 1957 film, *Woman in a Dressing Gown*. Here it signals an unhappy marriage, loss of public persona and female entrapment. For an elderly woman in the present-day, however, a pale blue polyester robe from Bonmarché is neither poetic trifle nor cinematic plot device. It is a modest home comfort amid poor health, what is worn when no-one is watching. It is not highly prized culturally, and neither is its producer, the mid-price high street womenswear retailer catering for over-45 plus-size customers.

The maker

Dressing gowns retail in Bonmarché for £15 but have little resale potential. Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe's research into secondhand cultures found that used bedwear features prominently among items that shoppers reject. Intimate objects, bearing imprints of former owners, are the least desirable of old garments. This is heightened if they are connected to the elderly or recently deceased. There's little fantasy to be found in an old dressing gown; its origins are less glamorous.

Bonmarché was one of the companies implicated in the Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh that collapsed in 2013 killing 1,134 people and injuring 2,500 more. Judging by its current labels, it continues to manufacture clothing in Bangladesh, and China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Morocco, Sri Lanka, Turkey and Vietnam, suggesting that it goes where costs are cheapest. It certainly pulls out as it pleases, as documented by fashion industry campaigners, *Labour Behind the Label*. In 2016, Cambodian garment workers were stranded when factories supplying Bonmarché, among others, closed without warning or compensation.

The market

Judy bought garments from her nearest Bonmarché. After her death, some were dumped close to her house, while others travelled to a car boot sale ten miles away. Their production and disposal were both international and very local; similar circuits can be traced as the garments sell on.

Bundled into sacks made of bedspreads, clothes are hauled off the clearance trucks at 5.30am in a coastal car park each Sunday. Dealers cluster to get first dibs. Some are traders who have not yet set up their stalls. Sara, for example, sells flamboyant womenswear; she picks up Judy's shiny shirts for a few pounds a time. Minutes later they are on her rails, priced at £15.

Others move goods further. As one of several regulars who ship overseas, Amir sends garments to his native Sudan where, he says, “they have nothing”. He fills a bag, which the traders let him take for nothing as he helps pack away each week, unrequested. He too has little, as a cleaner supporting his wife and three children in their eighth-floor council flat. Scholars of secondhand clothing’s global export have noted how clothes donated to UK charity shops now dominate provision in Zambia, Mozambique, Ghana and beyond. On a smaller scale, individuals who ship from the car boot sale contribute to garments’ ongoing geographical journeys.

As clearers dispose of all remaining stock, by 11am, everything is a pound; by 11.30am, 50p. At midday, punters can take it away for nothing. Some collect clothes for Calais or bedding for animal charities. Staff explain, “in the end, someone will want it. Even Primark clothes that might otherwise be rejected go when they are free”.

The end

Yet, recognisable items from Judy’s wardrobe remain. By this time, they’ve been rained on, dragged through the mud and rejected at every price. They go back on the truck with the chipped crockery, bent cutlery and CDs without sleeves to be reclassified as rubbish.

What constitutes waste is a central philosophical consideration in Discard Studies. Michael Thompson, for example, characterises rubbish as a covert category lying at the intersection of transient goods (whose value is in decline) and durable goods (whose values are in the ascent). Waste is also the subject of categorical scrutiny in the pragmatics of its management.

Defined legally, material becomes waste “when the producer or holder discards it, intends to discard it, or is required to discard it”. If reusable items enter the waste area of a disposal site, they become waste. If recyclable items are mixed with waste, the whole body becomes waste. Finally, if items have “low or negative economic value” and constitute “a burden” on the holder, they become waste. Each of these transitions happen to Judy’s items between the close of the Sunday market and when the tip opens on a Monday. In a further few days, the newly classified waste will be burned in a local incinerator. Judy’s body and its wrappings are both ash within a month, within a few miles of her home. The biography of person and thing coincides.

In his 2015 analysis of detritus, Brian Thill argues that “waste is every object, plus time”. In Judy’s case, the movement from everyday wear to never-to-be-worn again is rapid. Spatially, clothing encompasses the local and the global; temporally, fashion’s transitions hurry from treasure to trash. Perhaps Diderot is not so out of place after all. As he reflected in 1767, “The ideas ruins evoke in me are grand. Everything comes to nothing, everything perishes, everything passes”.

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