

The Simple Life

by Silvia Bombardini



Shrimps, SS19 – via shrimps.com

Blue is the new white, as far as workers' collars go. This in itself is hardly news: the fascination of idle urbanites for utility clothes lies at the root of the success stories of some of the most resilient staples in city folks' casual wardrobes – think denims and t-shirts, Carhartt and Dickie's. But alongside factory uniforms, it's the appeal of farmland workwear that in recent months has reached new highs, while yet more luxury brands hitherto best-known for their delicate gowns capitulate to its charm. Functional clothing is in vogue for longer, its comeback quicker or so it seems, than that of any other trend in the city. Indeed, the spring 2019 runways are awash once more with the fisherman's cargo pants we had given up on in the mid-oughts. They were at Givenchy, Isabel Marant, Alexander Wang, Prabal Gurung and Fendi to name but a few, the latter pairing them up with tool-kit utility belts to boot. Popped-collar youths – that is, young people with no stable blue- or white-collar employment, but still somehow getting by in the gig economy of the world's metropolises – have taken to dress daily as if on their way to milk a cow that they might never have seen. The ubiquity of heavy-

duty, countryside sensible clothing in fashion capitals can come across as a welcome if incongruous equalizing force: when the mud-streaked, sun-faded dungarees of the socialite and the ploughman differ in price if at all, it can't but be a good thing. Although there's a lot to question too, in the romanticizing of hardship and manual labour that the style avows, with oftentimes crass oversimplification and sometimes classist presumptions. But what is it about wellies and straw hats that makes them so attractive to townspeople around the planet?

It might have something to do with the passing of time, which everybody knows goes faster in cities. This is not just because of the distractions they offer: the wealthier and more populous an urban centre, the quicker it seems to metabolize urgency. We like to think of life in the country as if in sync with the movements of the sun; the city never sleeps instead. It is perhaps to catch up with it that city dwellers, as studies have noticed, walk so much swifter than countryfolks, and all the more so in the richest metropolises. Time means money in town, in a more straightforward and pressing way than it does elsewhere. Indeed, the purpose of innovative technologies is always to save it: to have us do in minutes what once took hours, so that the pace of life is not only faster in the city than it is in the countryside, but so that it is forever faster than it previously was too. This has some radical consequences for fashion. It's always been in cities that trends began and ended, but the continuous acceleration of their cycles now leads them to conflate, or implode – it leads to what Jean Baudrillard once called *vertigo*, the loss of every system of reference. From being a language with stable signifiers and signifieds, fashion becomes a spectacle. Take cool, for instance. According to Andrew Potter, it was the time lag that there used to be between a cool style and its co-optation by the masses, that allowed us not to see how coolness had become the dominant status symbol of urban life, from the mid-1960s to the early 2000s. But by virtue of the timesaving proclivity of new tech, that time lag has grown thinner and thinner ever since. *"Cool fizzled out"* he writes for *Vestoj*, *"when it was exposed as not a political agenda, but just another status hierarchy"*. Nonetheless, even in postmodern times, the urge to ascribe meaning to our clothing persists. In its place, those who pursued coolness are now on the lookout for authenticity. And where better to find it than in the great outdoors?

Of course authenticity, for Potter, is now no less a status symbol of urban life than cool ever was. It just isn't yet as obviously so. That is, except for when it is: he cites by way of example the backlash caused by fake mud smears on some \$425 jeans by PRPS, a label whose profile on the Nordstrom website defines it as *"a luxury denim brand ... whose philosophy is that authenticity is priority number one"*. For the illusion of authenticity to work, its flaunting of status needs to remain implicit. Still, it's not only because of symbolism that we wear the clothes we do, and the reasons why someone would wear PRPS' Barracuda Straight Leg Jeans aren't necessarily the same as to why others would opt for a Carhartt boilersuit. Carhartt's boilersuit – which, authentically enough, is still sold at home improvement retailers like Home Depot as well as to the fashion crowd – is compelling because of its relative affordability, comfort, and longevity, not just in terms of construction but for its championing of colours and fits less prone to be swayed by the whirls and loops of fashion: occasionally, workwear can appeal to us purely as a sound financial investment. But these qualities, though often associated

with it, do not intrinsically belong to the authentic. What authenticity means, what it stands for in the cities where it is sought, is exoticism – which is to say the foreign, or rural.



Valentino, SS19 – via papermag.com

In *Commodities and the Politics of Value*, cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes of “the diversion of commodities from their original nexus” of which a great example “is to be found in the domain of fashion”, as well as in the display of indigenous objects in the best museums of the world’s capitals. “Value, in the art or fashion market, is accelerated or enhanced by placing objects and things in unlikely contexts” he argues, and that “diversions of things combine the aesthetic impulse, the entrepreneurial link, and the touch of the morally shocking” all of which fashion has mastered. Remember the imposing barn facades rising inside the American Stock Exchange building in New York’s Financial District, as the set of Calvin Klein 205W39NYC’s fall 2018 show? Or more recently, Marine Serre’s spring 2019 evening gown crafted from recycled fishing vests she reportedly sourced on eBay, or the slab of black leather at Alexander McQueen, tied at the waist on top of a sheer lace opening look and worn to the side, that a Vogue review found best described as a blacksmith’s apron. Think of all the straw hats, too: this year it was the turn of Valentino, Ambush, Issey Miyake and Dolce & Gabbana, after Jacquemus broke them in as gargantuan must-haves last summer. Jacquemus who, for his part, has just launched the brand’s second ever menswear collection, inspired by ‘traditional French workwear’ but distinctly Carharttian in cuts and colours – which points to the fact that utility clothes may be more universal, have less of a distinctive national identity than this designer tends to rely upon in his work. The lookbook is shot on a farm, featuring wind mills and scarecrows, models walking on stilts as shepherd used to in the Landes, a goat, a horse, and a flock of sheep. Shrimps’ spring campaign was shot on a family farm too: among other scenes, it shows their essential accessory for the season, the beaded Prairie Bag, perched on a pony’s bum.

Like the red-brick farmstead it pictures, these works are fanciful portraits of a vanishing world. Humanity is fast becoming an urban species. According to data published by the World Bank, the percentage of world's population living in cities was 34% in 1960, it reached 50% in 2007, and has continued to increase since. By 2050, it is estimated that 68% of humankind will be city dwellers. In China, the most populous country on the planet, the urbanization curve looks steeper still: 39% of the country's population lived in urban areas in 2002, yet it is expected to reach 70%, 1 billion people, already by 2030. Farmland workwear in the hypercity is clothing replete with nostalgia, fashion spinning around itself on the brink of the future, yet wistfully orbiting the past. Functional clothing whose function has become foreign to us, lost in translation, which allows for city natives around the planet to speculate and fantasise about it. Valentino's wide-brimmed straw hat, crowned with straw feathers, is to its humble woven ancestor what Calvin Klein's barn front, painted with Andy Warhol's 1963 silkscreen print of a car crash, *Five Deaths on Orange*, is to actual countryside granaries – which is the same as what Warhol's artwork had been to the newspaper photograph it was based upon: an ornamental legacy of heightened value which secures the permanence of these objects in time, even as they outgrow their purpose. In a recent newsletter, trend forecasting agency WGSN proclaims cowhide, as seen in Victoria Beckham's resort and Jil Sander's pre-fall 2019 collections, the 'new leopard print'. It was also, and maybe more notably, part of Burberry's spring 2019 show, cut into a miniskirt with two leg loops, and paired with a t-shirt spelling out COW, for those perhaps who may be unfamiliar with the brown and white speckled pattern. For the cow to have become so exotic in our imaginary so as to replace the leopard, testifies to our estrangement from the farmland. This is particularly true for younger generations, those who came of age after the 2007 turning point in the urban/rural world's balance. Like Giuliano Calza, creative director of GCDS, who was born in 1988. For the streetwear label's spring 2019 collection, featuring overalls and cargo pockets and sun blocker hats, WWD reports that he was "*imagining a day when all the computers crash and society has to look back and appreciate the old way of doing things*".

Imagining, not remembering, being here the operative word. Perhaps millennials' nostalgia for the farm has already less to do with the actuality of rural life than it does with some of its better-known representations on reality TV. On board with the Y2K style revival of recent seasons, *The Simple Life* celebrated in 2018 its 15th anniversary with newfound cult status, just as the bleached jeans, velour and saddle bags we had worn back then, then recoiled from, are unironically in fashion once more. A zip-up pair of patchworked denim bib-and-brace overalls with built-in stilettos at Jeremy Scott's spring 2019 show, for instance, would surely have done Nicole Richie proud. But to criticise this now would be unfair: romanticization is fashion's trade, and a faithful reconstruction of times past was never its goal. Fashion gives the people what they want, what they think they want, or what they can get: the illusion of an authentic, exotic, slow-paced life in the countryside with cows, to contemplate on our way to the office, on crowded trains, surrounded by all these people who almost look like they might be farmers, but aren't.