

*REBELLION. IT'S IN OUR JEANS.*

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## *ABSTRACT*

Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek founded the theory of interpassivity, which refers to a situation in which an object deprives a subject of its passivity through the use of an ‘other’. My research explores the way in which rebellion and counterculture can be transferred from an active process, into something much more passive. Using the theory of interpassivity through the advertising case study of Levi Strauss & Co., this piece analyses the way in which brands are able to unburden consumers from any desire to *act* on rebellious impulse. It is by brands allowing consumers to unburden themselves of any anger or frustration towards the system they are a part of, without any action required on the part of the subject, which allows for the mainstream and the counterculture to live harmoniously alongside one another. I conclude on a paradox, that society may now continue to go about their consumer-capitalist fuelled lives, safe in the knowledge that they tried to change it through their consumer-capitalism.

*Key words:* *Interpassivity, Rebellion, Counterculture, Levi Strauss & Co, Passivity, Unburdening*

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ABSTRACT.....	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	II
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	III
LIST OF FIGURES .....	IV
GLOSSARY .....	V
INTRODUCTION .....	1
<b>CHAPTER 1: BIRTH: LEVI STRAUSS &amp; Co. CASE STUDY.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: LIFE: LEVI STRAUSS &amp; Co. CASE STUDY.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3: DEATH: LEVI STRAUSS &amp; Co. CASE STUDY .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: THEN &amp; NOW: INTERPASSIVITY OVER TIME.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>CONCLUSION: JEANS, RIPPED JEANS AND THE CANVAS OF REBELLION TODAY.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>37</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>FIGURE 1: LS&amp;CO. ORIGINAL TWO HORSE® DESIGN, A GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF HOW STRONG THE PANTS WERE. (LS&amp;CO. 2014).....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>FIGURE 2: GO EAST YOUNG MAN (LS&amp;CO. 2016A) .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>FIGURE 3: 'FROM BROADWAY TO CHEYENNE' FILM POSTER (IMDB 2016) .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>FIGURE 4: 'THE DESERT TRAIL' FILM POSTER (IMDB 2014).....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>FIGURE 5: LS&amp;CO. IN-STORE SALES AD FROM THE 1950S (TELEGRAPH 2013).....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>FIGURE 6: MARLON BRANDO'S BIKER COOL IN 501'S FROM THE FILM 'THE WILD ONE' (LS&amp;CO. 2016C) .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>FIGURE 7: MARILYN MONROE PHOTO SHOOT, WEARING LEVI'S DENIM (LS&amp;CO. 2016C) .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>FIGURE 8: 'RUGGED PANTS FOR RUGGED GUYS' COWBOY (LS&amp;CO. 1966) .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>FIGURE 9: 'RUGGED PANTS FOR RUGGED GUYS' FIST PUMP (TROTMAN 2011).....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>FIGURE 10: 'THE AMERICAN WAY OF PANTS' (VEDA VEDA VEDA 2012) .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>FIGURE 11: MUSICAL ARTWORK MONTAGE FROM THE 70S (HERRON 2015).....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>FIGURE 12: PEOPLE STAND ON A SECTION OF THE BERLIN WALL AT POTSDAMER PLATZ (BOSTON GLOBE 1999) .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>FIGURE 13: 'I LIKE THEM BEST JUST BEFORE THEY FALL APART', LEVI'S AD FROM 1990 (CREATIVE REVIEW 2011) .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>FIGURE 14: 'WHEN THE WORLD ZIGS, ZAG', 1982 – BBH'S FIRST EVER POSTER FOR LEVI'S LAUNCHED THE BRAND'S BLACK DENIM JEANS. (CREATIVE REVIEW 2011).....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>FIGURE 15: 'GO FORTH' POEM, LEVI'S PRINT AD FROM 2009 (MACLEOD 2009) .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>FIGURE 16: 'ALL I NEED IS ALL I GOT', LEVI'S PRINT AD FROM 2009 (MACLEOD 2009) .....</b>	<b>34</b>

## *GLOSSARY*

COUNTERCULTURE: A WAY OF LIFE AND SET OF ATTITUDES OPPOSED TO OR AT VARIANCE WITH THE PREVAILING SOCIAL NORM.

INTERPASSIVITY: A TERM COINED BY ROBERT PFALLER AND SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK. IT COMBINES THE WORDS INTERACTIVITY AND PASSIVITY AND DENOTES A STATE OF PASSIVITY IN THE PRESENCE OF THE POTENTIAL FOR INTERACTIVITY OR ACTIVITY.

REBELLION: THE ACTION OF RESISTING AUTHORITY, CONTROL, OR CONVENTION.

“Are we just like bored, spoiled children  
who’ve just been lying in the bathtub all day,  
just playing with their plastic duck and now  
they’re just thinking, ‘Well... What can I do?’”

(My Dinner With Andre 1981)

There are some who deem that the 1960s represented the last surge of the human being before being extinguished (My Dinner With Andre 1981). The mainstream culture and the counterculture seem to have blended so far together as to create a ‘cultural mush’ in which the parameters of ritualistic and stylistic affectations have become so ill-defined that they have merged into one homogenous lump. One in which on every city street, the same clothes are worn by people with the same hairstyles, all going to the same cafés on the same corners of every other adjacent avenue. Extremes have become so rare and diluted that people have become anaesthetised and numbed in the way they respond to the world around them. In the words of the infamous John Cleese, “The idea that you have to be protected from any kind of uncomfortable emotion is one I absolutely do not subscribe to” (Big Think 2016). This was said in interview on the subject of mainstreaming, political correctness gone mad and people refusing to *act* on feelings or emotions in the fear that they might offend others. What happened to

*true* expression? To the *active* search for the miraculous? Is it just boredom through passivity to the point of not caring anymore?

It is becoming ever clearer that trends, brands and social movements are adopting the use of explicitly countercultural communications, often shrewdly suggesting a defiance of the very consumer culture that they depend upon. So could it be said that these brands are exercising the counterculture for us? Is this the reason *action* is no longer necessary? Has society been led to believe that these trends, brands and social movements are acting on our behalf so that people may continue to consume with impunity? Are people finding ways to avoid accessing certain parts of the emotional spectrum by passing off their feelings and desires onto their consumption? Is this the paradox of products? Do brands that promote countercultural rebellion, whilst relying on the mainstream consumer, actually jeopardise countercultural rebellion?

It is argued that society has in fact been living a myth of its own making, the very fabric of which has lead to countercultural rebellion becoming so puzzled and conflicted that it actually lives quite harmoniously alongside the very thing it professes to want to change (Fisher 2009). It seems today's society cannot live without the comforts of this myth, and therefore change has become a very difficult thing to achieve. Debord (1994, p.7) in his writings, *Society of the Spectacle*,

(originally published in 1967) exclaimed that the spectacle of society was, even then, acting as “*a means of unification*” in which people have become so dependant on the system that society will fight to defend, and protect it through conformity.

Everything has to be polished, clean and well-funded or else it will not fit with the *spectacle* society has become accustomed to. Take a scene from the film *My Dinner With Andre* (1981), in which Wally describes his new electric blanket – a new comfort to warm his bed at night, a comfort he could have lived without once upon a time, but one that he could no longer conceive of letting go of. Andre despairs, what Wally had in fact done is create a new reality, in which something so significant as temperature; the weather; the very changing of the seasons no longer had a role to play in his life. Andre goes on;

“I mean, if you don't have that electric blanket and your apartment is cold and you need to put on another blanket or go into the closet and pile up coats on top of the blankets you have well, then you know it's cold. And that sets up a link of things. You have compassion for the person next to you. Well, is the person next to you cold? Are there other people in the world who are cold? What a cold night! I like the cold? My God, I never realised. I don't want a blanket. It's fun being cold. I can snuggle up

against you even more because it's cold. All sorts of things occur to you.

Turn on that electric blanket, and it's like taking a tranquiliser."

(My Dinner With Andre, 1981)

Wally had become separated from the reality of the world. He had become tranquilised in a kind of fantasy. The electric blanket meant that Wally no longer needed to act on the desire for warmth. Is this not what Freud meant in his piece '*Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness*' (2014) when he stated that our civilisation is "founded on the suppression of our instincts" (2014, p.11). Is consumption actually taking away our ability to react to the world around us? In some warped way, are products, things and media acting for us? Have we reached a stage whereby deviation from the norm would be so uncomfortable that we consume comfort and conform out of sheer necessity; out of a neurotic fear of the difficulties of being without this comfort? Does this therefore make us mechanical, unfeeling individuals, going about our days, doing that which is routine because anything else is so alien and scary that we simply cannot conceive of it? No. It is not that our instincts are gone entirely, there is still a desire for self-expression, still a yearning for going against the grain, but somewhere along the way society has lost its ability to *act* on these desires (Žižek 1998).

Counterculture has reached a point of total stylistic affectation, a minimal approach to the way social movements are supported. Whilst people feel as though their efforts in liking, sharing or wearing things that *symbolise* the rebellion they claim to be a part of, these efforts are not only perpetuating the problem, but also hiding the reality that there is one. As the spectacle of reality becomes the perceived reality that we reside within, counterculture can be defined as that which acts in opposition to *the spectacle* (Heath and Potter 2004; Debord 1994). However, it is becoming ever clearer that brands adopting explicitly countercultural communication - often shrewdly suggesting a defiance of the very consumer culture they reside within - have allowed people to feel relieved in their countercultural inaction.

This is an important idea that leads to the founding theory of this paper, the theory of interpassivity (Žižek 1998; Fisher 2009; Pfaller 2014), which refers to a situation in which an object deprives the subject of its passivity through the use of an ‘other’. Žižek argues that when you watch a comedy on television that uses canned laughter for instance, you may begin to feel relieved, in spite of the fact that you may not have actually laughed yourself. It can be said that the canned laughter has acted interpassively on your behalf – enjoying the programme for you – so that you do not have to. It is in many ways not dissimilar from the theory of *Altercasting* put forward by Paul Deutschberger and Eugene A. Weinstein (1963), in which they

call forward the idea of “projecting an identity, to be assumed by other(s) with whom one is in interaction.” But, in the case of interpassivity, the subjective ‘other’ is not an active subject, and it is not merely a ‘projection’ of identity, but an actual *unburdening* of feeling and/or action.

This is an idea furthered by the academic Mark Fisher (2009), when he makes reference to the Disney/Pixar film *Wall-E*. The film shows a bleak future earth, upon which humanity, driven by consumer capitalism and corporations, has made the planet uninhabitable. The entire human race is shown aboard a gargantuan spaceship, having left behind robots to try to find a way to save earth so that one-day humans can return. The film portrays human consumption and the progression of the society in an extremely negative light. From this portrayal, the righteous moral conveyed to the audience is one of needing to change behaviours and consumption habits in order to save the planet. However, after viewing the film, our society still continues to consume as before. It is Fisher’s view that this film actually acts on our behalf, and “performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity” (2009, p.12).

This view is furthered in Žižek’s work (1989 cited by Sullivan 2014, p.63) when he states that “the most intimate beliefs, even the most intimate emotions such as compassion, crying, sorrow, laughter, can be transferred, delegated to others

without losing their sincerity". Therefore dismantling aspects of Freud's view of society's subjugation of instincts, but also italicising that though consumers may remain passive and inactive, the sincerity of their interpassive consumption endures, thus relieving them of any guilt. In this sense, the subject fully experiences the interpassive emotions, even after they have been transferred onto the other. This is what solidifies Fisher's (2009) notion of impunity; as long as consumers that hold the moral standpoint believe deep down in their core that capitalism is bad, they are free to continue to partake in capitalist exchange.

However, an 'it's the thought that counts' mentality does not *actually* aid in movements that require an *action* to have a real impact. Using the concept of interpassivity and semiotic analysis of brand communications, this paper intends to explore an alternative explanation for the purchasing choices of explicitly anti-systemic brands. The Levi's case study will be used to illustrate the way in which brands have the ability to unburden consumers by acting as the counterculture, in the place of the subject.

*At this point it is important to note that this work avoids some areas that should be explored in further research. Though touching upon feminism at points and acknowledging that much of the theory presented here could be applied to the subject, it is largely avoided in this context due to the size of the topic. Furthermore, the*

*concept of ‘cool’ and role it has played in the uniform of rebellion has also been largely ignored because of its illusive and untameable nature. Instead, this research focuses on rebellion and counterculture as an overarching ideology, and speaks largely in a distinctly countercultural voice to bring forth a more immersive perspective on the role of interpassivity. For further information and definitions, please see the Glossary.*

## BIRTH: LEVI STRAUSS & CO. CASE STUDY

The Levi Strauss & Co. (LS&Co.) 501 jeans have been at the forefront of the denim industry since their inception. But why have they been so successful? Where does the brilliance in their advertising reside? Levi's jeans have been sold to the rebellious masses for decades, the staple of anyone looking to demonstrate their unadherence to the whims of a society run by, as they so aptly put it, *the men in suits* (Macleod 2009). The story of jeans marketing has resulted in a general perception that wearing jeans is the embodiment of active rebellion, however today's wearer is unarguably rather passive in this act. The denim industry has, perhaps unknowingly, amplified the theory of interpassivity to a point where there is no longer any actual act of rebellion that takes place when someone wears denim jeans. The product now merely serves as an illusion of rebellion, which unburdens and relieves the wearer from the need to act rebelliously. Because of the history of denim, wearers may now persuade themselves that 'acting' and 'wearing' are interchangeable. This case study will demonstrate that in fact, it is merely a stylistic reflection of past transgressions, which can run quite happily alongside a conformist, mainstream way of life.

If we look at the way in which our society constructs meaning, and appreciate that we actually know nothing of anything other than what is dictated by

our perceptions, we can begin to appreciate that a different perspective can become, quite simply, a different *version* of reality (Kant 1922). A version that Baudrillard (1983) has argued leaves any originally intended form of reality totally corrupted.

Baudrillard (1988) confesses that there are four phases of image simulation that construct this perversion of reality. The first originally intended form of reality presented to us by Levi's is that of the order of sacrament, it is the *reflection* of a basic reality. California, the year 1873: Miners needed tough trousers to withstand the wear and tear of the mines. On the 20th May, a Bavarian goods salesman named Levi Strauss and a tailor named Jacob Davis obtained a U.S. patent on the process of putting rivets in men's work pants at points of strain: the 501 jean was born in answer to the miners' plight (LS&Co. 2014; Figure 1).

*FIGURE 1 HERE*

These jeans had the ruggedness and the durability necessary for workers at the time and the product was conceived from pure functionality. The 501's were greeted with great approval from the working classes of the American West (Downey 2014). Levi's served working-folk from miners, farmers, cattle raisers and labourers, to factory and construction workers, and as American industry changed, so did the 501. Salesmen began travelling to the West to meet with their retail

customers and went armed with colourful flyers demonstrating the quality of the jeans (LS&Co. 2016a).

Before World War II, jeans were only worn by workers in America's western states, and this was portrayed in Levi's advertising messages of the time; "The miner, farmer, mechanic and cattle raiser all over the country prefer Levi's", "Levi's, for men who toil" (Vintage501s 2010; Of a Kind 2013). These messages demonstrate Baudrillard's (1983) basic reflection of reality, the sacrament of men working hard in the mines whilst wearing their sturdy Levi's denim overalls. Conversely, perhaps this would be better articulated as an example of Levi's co-opting a strategy expressed best by Judith Williamson:

"Advertisements are selling us something else besides consumer goods: in providing us with a structure in which we, and those goods are interchangeable, they are selling us ourselves." (1978, p.13)

Insinuating that even in the early stages of Levi's history, the brand had begun selling the idea that you could only be a working man if you wore Levi's denim, when in reality there were *already* working men long before LS&Co. Now, though it could be argued that interpassivity started to come into play here, it would not have affected the working lives of 501 wearers at the time. This is largely because one could not have only *passively* worked. To stay in the job these men would have

still had to *actively* toil in the mines, irrespective of the interpassivity of their consumption.

In the 1920s, Levi's waist overalls became the first choice for men's working attire in the Western states (Downey 2014). As time progressed, what had started as a rugged, functional item of clothing worn by the working classes of Western America became a symbol of the rugged western cowboy. The popularisation of cowboys through cinema in the 1930s meant that everyone wanted a piece of the cowboy lifestyle, and 'authentic' cowboys of the American West were granted mythical status in the hearts of the nation and the rest of the world (Downey 2014; Holt and Cameron 2010).

In this case it can be argued that Levi's began to give their customers more than just the material value of their jeans. They had in fact combined the social meaning of the rugged, independent cowboy with the material value of ruggedness in the product itself. By applying Judith Williamson's (1978) ideas we can see that this '*works*' because it is formulated from a very real '*use-value*'. This is because, aside from the need for social meaning, we do clearly need material goods. What LS&Co. were therefore able to do is combine the two, so as to generate a new shade of significance for the product (Williamson 1978). The material good (the 501 jean) was made to represent another, non-material thing that we need (a social place in

the world, in this case represented through a cowboy archetype). It is this point of exchange between the two, which is argued by Williamson to create the overall ‘meaning’ of the product.

*FIGURE 2 HERE*

*FIGURE 3 HERE*

*FIGURE 4 HERE*

This meaning can be seen in the brand communications of the era, utilising the stylistic affectations of the Hollywood cowboy in their imagery, which attempted to compare the strength of 501s with the rigor of the American frontier (LS&Co. 2016b). These similarities are vivid when the comparison is made between a Levi’s ad from the 1930s and film posters from the same era (Figure 2, 3 & 4). Easterners in search of an ‘authentic’ cowboy experience would head to the dude ranches of the ‘Wild West’, as at the time this was the only place you could buy Levi’s denim (Downey 2014). Soon, the Levi’s ideology, perpetuated through Hollywood myth, meant that Western clothing – Levi’s in particular – became “synonymous with a life of freedom and independence” (LS&Co. 2016a). Moen and Roehing (2004) assert that it was a fusion of the time’s cultural codes of the ‘American Dream’. This was the point at which the Levi’s brand started to shift into the second phase of

Baudrillard's order of image simulation, "the order of malefice" (1983, p.12). It reveals quite clearly that the Levi's brand had cleverly started to move its symbolism away from that of the hard working miners from the start of the twentieth century.

It would appear from the selection above that Levi's seemed to have attempted to mask and cover up the reality that their jeans were once used by toiling miners and labourers.

This shift demonstrated LS&Co.'s attempt to change their strategy in order to attract an audience more interested in the *symbolic* nature of the American Dream (Holt and Thompson 2004). It is argued by Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) that not only were people increasingly self-identifying through their consumption as opposed to their own production via professional output, but they were also succumbing to the symbolic nature of their purchasing habits. That is to say, Levi's audience were starting to find value in the symbolism of what they consumed, as opposed to the arbitrary, functional attributes of their material possessions (Levy 1959).

## LIFE: LEVI STRAUSS & CO. CASE STUDY

In the 1930s, finally people were wearing the 501 jean for its look and the symbolism of what was perceived as the rugged, free west (LS&Co. 2016b). Between the 1930s and 1950s the original frontiersmen began to dwindle, but the cowboy archetype remained present in popular culture and within the Levi's brand. This was perhaps the first time that interpassivity had influenced the quelling a real way of life, into a mythical symbol. As historian Richard Slotkin has instrumentally determined, the myth of frontiersmen has routinely reinvented itself throughout American history (cited by Holt and Cameron 2010). Popular culture reproduced the image of the cowboy in films such as *Stagecoach* (1939), in which the infamous John Wayne sported a pair of Levi's 501s. The cowboy was not only seen as a figure of rugged independence, but was imagined to live free of societal authority and is argued by Holt and Thompson (2004, p. 436) as symbolising "rebellion against the constraints and conformist pressures of modern life". This can be referred to as a tipping point, where Levi's image of the cowboy began to move into Baudrillard's (1983) third successive phase of the image. It is that of the *order of sorcery*, whereby the image in fact masks the *absence* of a basic reality.

According to Baudrillard's process of simulacrum, this is where we can see that after continuous replication of the image of the cowboy, the original image had

become distorted. In fact, the frontiersman had been misrepresented to a point where it actually bore little resemblance to the original cowboy figure of the 30s, and hid the reality that acting cowboys were all but extinct. Only their stylistic, interpassive shadow remained.

This is an important component in Levi's history, as at the time, post-war ideologies and deindustrialisation had brought forward the rise of what Whyte (2002) calls the '*organisation man*'. Industrialisation and urbanisation lead to an incremental shift in men's work arrangements. Jobs were shifting from small businesses and rural agricultural trades, to white-collar careers in rapidly expanding organisations. But what we began to see was not simply a change in work patterns or behaviour, but an even more substantial change in the *American Dream* dogma. As the "growing members of white-collar bureaucracy that worked in offices, not on factory floors" (Moen and Roehing 2005, p.5) increased, the American dream moved towards a much more corporate ideology. These careers were hallmarked for men as the only path to success, status and fulfilment in the new post-war world (Moen and Roehing 2005). However, this change also brought about a new age in the way Levi's denim was consumed, the age of rebellion.

The young and working classes backlashed against the 1950s ideology of the American Dream as it threatened to stamp out the "needs of the human spirit for

freedom and creativity" (Heath and Potter 2004, p. 71). These were people that didn't want to submit to the whims of big business, or the vivid picture Sloan Wilson's paints of '*The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*' (1956). An idea furthered by Slotkin (1998) in his book 'Gunfighter Nation', where he suggests that the frontier fiction had become just that: fiction. A myth of total gunslinger outlaw masculinity, determined to undermine the societal codes of the time. It is clear that the disciples of the gunfighter cowboy had become distinctly stylistic, countercultural figures in opposition to the '*organisation man*' ideology.

*FIGURE 5 HERE*

If we take a look at Figure 5, we can see a Levi's ad from the 1950s. The ad presents a frontier cowboy in his perceived natural environment, capturing many of the symbolic attributes of the 30's frontier (Slotkin 1998). Raw, rugged [perceived] masculinity, which is amplified by the cowboy's dominance over nature and his surroundings as he strides his denim-clad leg over a submissive horse, whilst brazening Levi's iconic red tab. This ideology is furthered by the copy, "RUGGED as the men who wear 'em!"; though the ad speaks *in* the colloquial language of the working class, it is actually speaks *to* a different audience (Heath and Potter 2004). The ad in fact speaks to those who aspire to the ruggedness of the mythical frontiersmen. What it quite cleverly conceives is what Williamson (1978) would

describe as an insinuation of the ‘absence’ of *ruggedness* in the reader, signalling that if they want to have the feeling of frontier ruggedness, they need to be wearing Levi’s.

However, in the context of this argument, the most important element to take away from this advertisement is that though the symbolism of the cowboy plays a role in communicating ruggedness and independence from the constraints of modern life, the ad is not explicitly *about* rebellion. This inexplicit nature of Levi’s advertising at the time allows us to assimilate that the jean itself could not have taken on an element of *rebellion* on the behalf of the subject. Even if it does begin to take on some elements of frontier freedom on the wearer’s behalf, rebellion was not something that could be taken interpassively (Žižek 1998). In other words, it was not Levi’s intention to explicitly associate their products with acts of rebellion. At least, not yet.

It would be forgiven to assume that the rebellion residing within the Levi’s product arrived artificially through the brand’s communications alone. However, after considering the influence of external factors, it would be more accurate to consider other cultural icons of the time, and how they were in fact leading the charge in the symbolism of blue jeans (LS&Co. 2016b). Jeans gained cult status through cinema and television that continued to perpetuate the myth of the frontier,

and further its symbolic rebellion through cultural figures. James Dean wearing jeans in the 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause* and Marlon Brando, who appeared in the 1954 film *The Wild One* with the symbolic entourage of leather jacket, motorcycle, and Levi's 501s, catalysed nonconformist values (Figure 6; Solomon 1986). Both films and many more of the era brought to light the new dawn of rebel in American culture (History of Advertising Trust 2014).

*FIGURE 6 HERE*

*FIGURE 7 HERE*

It is clear that the rebellion of the Levi's jean did not come explicitly from the Levi's brand itself, but from these cultural codes of the time. This was visibly amplified when women started wearing the product. Feminists often identify the 1950s as the pinnacle of gender inequality (Catalano 2002), after men returned from World War II to resume their jobs and the re-domestication of women took hold. However, the spike in sales of Levi's denim to women, the perceived symbol of male rebellion against the 'organisation man' ideology of the time, suggests a reactive resistance to this (LS&Co. 2016b). Of course, it would be narrow minded to ignore that this is just one minor element of possible female resistance at the time. However, this argument clearly has merit in establishing an external trend of

rebellion, which became attached to denim jeans (Solomon 1986) in spite of the manufacturer's intentions.

This is an idea that is furthered when looking at cultural female idols of the time such as Marilyn Monroe. Monroe appeared in Levi's denim in a number of iconic photographs, turning denim into not just a sign of male rebellion, but of the upcoming female sexual revolution against the constraints of feminine fashion at the time (Figure 7; Allyn 2001). Moreover, Lady Levi's jeans were not sold outside of the USA until the 1970s, which lead to many women internationally wearing jeans intended for men. This is undoubtedly a further sign of rebellion, and according to LS&Co. (2016b), went a long way to testing the accepted norms of masculinity and femininity at the time.

Post-war America also sparked one of the most pinnacle countercultural movements in history. Biker clubs. Though the first biker clubs were forged much earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hayes 2014), after the war many GIs came home with mechanical skills and a latent desire for adrenaline and brotherhood that they had gotten used to in the military (LS&Co. 2016b). The trademark of these clubs? Denim. During the war the US government outfitted soldiers with 501's and not only did it become a symbol of being a soldier after the war, but continued to serve as the uniform of biker clubs up and down the country (Yafa 2006; Hayes 2014).

Now, whilst all of these cultural appropriations of denim at the time may appear to potentially lead to interpassivity, the argument presented here is that actually it was not the jeans themselves that were an embodiment of rebellion at the time. It was, conversely, a product that ran alongside the lifestyles of culturally rebellious individuals in the modernist era (Akker and Vermeulen 2010). From this perspective the jeans were not facilitating the rebellion interpassively *for* the subjects (Pfaller 2014), because for them to gain the symbolism of rebellion organically, they still needed to be worn whilst adhering to the lifestyle of the socialist counterculture. Furthermore, as the Levi's brand was still only touching on symbols of rebellion, it was then from other cultural codes that the rebellious symbolism subsequently derived itself.

This was poignantly demonstrated when Levi's jeans were actually banned outright from schools, particularly those in the Eastern States of America. Young farm workers and labourers turned 'rock 'n' rollers', sported the Levi's product and wore them on stage at performances. The likes of Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash and other afore mentioned performers and entertainers continued to spur on the youth culture of sexual longing and rebellion whilst wearing Levi's jeans (Bresler 2000). Teenage delinquency rates skyrocketed and it was clear that teenagers both male and female were, as put by Devlin (1997p.157), "engaging in behavior that they knew would be considered either delinquent or threatening-behavior that the

community-at-large branded unacceptable or even deviant.” It was clear that the mainstream culture of America at the time had officially branded denim jeans as no longer just a symbol of the working classes, but as a unanimous, threatening sign of outright rebellion.

So given that this was the case, that Levi’s had in fact become synonymous with rebellion at this time, surely interpassivity would have played a role in forging a more passive form of rebellion? Well, the 60’s, 70’s & early 80’s beg to differ.

## *DEATH: LEVI STRAUSS & CO. CASE STUDY*

Many argue the 1960's demonstrate that when prevalent cultural myths are brought into question, a critical public consciousness can be stimulated (Jamison and Eyerman 1994). The opposition to this view is that actually the change in mindset and principle that came about during the 1960's was not abrupt but part of a course of changes in the progression of modernism (Petigny 2009). This evolution of modernism and the desire for a liberated, progressive and supposed 'classless' society led to people wearing Levi's in protest movements. They were worn in rallies against the Vietnam War and in protests for Civil Rights to show solidarity with the working classes, and were used as a symbolic canvas to amplify the rebellious spirit of the era (LS&Co. 2014; Solomon 1986). Amid a tumultuous cultural revolution, denim became a staple in activist wardrobes. The 501 jean was a symbol for a wide range of countercultures such as biker clubs, punk, rappers, skateboarders and art movements. They can be seen on crowds through decades of activism: from beatniks to hippies, LGBTQ rights protests, all the way to the fall of the Berlin Wall (LS&Co. 2016b).

*FIGURE 8 HERE*

*FIGURE 9 HERE*

Going back to the 1960s, we can see that this was a time when LS&Co. started to amplify and encourage the rebellious symbolism of their products. Their advertising officially adopted the term '*jeans*', the slang term used by teenagers (LS&Co. 2016b). Illustrating that for the first time Levi's were adopting the language of the teenage rebel: an admission of their endorsement of countercultural behaviour, and their movement away from the classic 'working man's overall' of the past.

However, it was not a sudden move for Levi's to shift into rebellious messaging, it was in fact a much more subtle process. If we take the two early-1960's Levi's advertisements above, we can see first of all (Figure 8) that Levi's still held on to the myth of the gunslinger-outlaw frontier. This symbolism, though heralding rebellious signs, did not relate directly to the countercultural movements of the time. Rather, the cowboy actually only hinted at the rebellious archetype, expressed in the other forms of popular culture discussed earlier – the glorification of which came through music and film. Furthermore, if we look at Figure 9, we see the same initial copy 'Rugged pants for rugged guys', but instead of the cowboy imagery, Levi's have opted for an arguably less mythical approach. Using the visual codes of a member of the young, working class (or perhaps even insinuating a member of the middle class, dressed in the clothes of a working class man), Levi's were implicitly furthering their brand's association with a rugged anti-organisation man ideology,

left arm raised in triumphant defiance, without *explicitly* condoning the countercultures of the time.

In fact, though these selections, like many other Levi's advertisements of the time can be seen as 'rebellious' in their use of the cowboy and other 'rugged dude' archetypes, they do not specifically reference the countercultural codes of the time, in this case the beat or hippie movements. Therefore the advertisements themselves cannot be said to have carried out the counterculture in the place of the wearers. Furthermore, these messages are front and foremost about *ruggedness*, not *rebellion*. The ruggedness implied in the line 'Rugged pants for rugged guys' implies that the ruggedness of the wearer had to have existed prior to the Levi's jean. In this sense the ad is, in spite of the order of the line, putting the action of ruggedness first, and the ruggedness of the product second. Therefore, it impairs the message's ability to act interpassively (Pfaller 2014). This is because the *perceived* ruggedness would have still required an *action* of ruggedness, which in turn would have prevented much of clean, mainstream society from wearing the product.

However, this started to change as the decade progressed and the countercultural movements of the time developed and spread. What had started in Levi's advertising as implicit references to culturally rebellious symbols, gradually turned into unequivocal countercultural endorsements. It was the beginning of

what Heath and Potter (2004) call the ‘mainstreaming’ of anything that began as ‘cool’ or ‘alternative’, because there is nothing genuinely subversive about wearing jeans, only a perceived association with subversive behaviour. In this sense, there is nothing stopping the mainstream from adopting it for themselves. This shift is demonstrated by Levi’s use of countercultural musicians in the late 60’s, such as *Jefferson Airplane* (Gair 2007) and *Paul Revere & the Raiders*, who recorded many the brand’s radio advertisements. These radio commercials are wonderful examples of Levi’s advertising from the early 70s, that show the brand adopting the rebellious counterculture and drawing it into the mainstream.

By the 70’s, Levi’s had fully endorsed the hippie counterculture, and jeans had fallen into the final successive phase of Baudrillard’s (1983) order of the image. This is in so far as to say that the jeans had actually left the order of appearance, and fallen into the order of simulation. It had become its own *simulacrum*, baring no relation to any reality. The use of countercultural musicians and psychedelia in their advertising illustrates the illusion of a promise of hippie rebellion and psychedelic enlightenment through the consumption of the Levi’s product.

*FIGURE 10 HERE*

*FIGURE 11 HERE*

Figure 10 is a wonderful example of where we see this taken even further, to a point where the counterculture begins to merge seamlessly into the mainstream. This print advertisement for Levi's Dacron Denim from the early 70s, when compared to the album artwork of many countercultural musicians of the 60s (Figure 11), clearly displays semiotic notes of the countercultural movements from the previous decade. It is clear that this comparison demonstrates the way in which Levi's had taken the stylistic cultural codes of the hippie movement from art, concert posters and music album artwork of the era and reproduced them in a way that brought the movement into the mainstream of American life. It is this paradox of conflicting messages, which combines countercultures with the mainstream. "The American way of pants" (Figure 10), brazening the American flag behind an ordinary looking man wearing Levi's products, demonstrates LS&Co.'s endorsement of both sides of the coin: the hip, and the square. It is a classic example of Levi's advertising from the time and works interpassively to encourage wearers to feel relieved of their need to *act* as a member of the hippie movement of the 60s by wearing LS&Co. jeans in the 70s.

Heath and Potter (2004) state that counterculture is in a constant state of cyclical motion; a movement is born, finds its footing, becomes mainstream, gives life to a new movement in response to itself, and eventually dies out. It is clear that this carousel can be applied to the way in which jeans became mainstream. Once

Levi's began explicitly bringing hippie signifiers into their communications, the *act* of being part of the hippie movement was no longer necessary; wearers of the Levi's product would simply feel unburdened of the action, by *passively* wearing jeans.

*FIGURE 12 HERE*

However, this argument finds difficulty when presented with the strong arguments that show serious rebellion against the system remaining widespread until the mid-late 1980's (Figure 12; Solomon 1986; Kilbourne 2000; Heath and Potter 2004; Gair 2007; Fisher 2009). So given the progression of explicitly countercultural LS&Co. advertising from the 70's onwards (Figure 13; Figure 14), why did the interpassivity of jeans not have such an impact in quashing real acts of rebellion as one might expect? The next chapter will explore this question in an attempt to distinguish why real acts of rebellion were still synonymous with blue jeans, as opposed to the expected *passive* rebellion caused by Levi's advertising.

*FIGURE 13 HERE*

*FIGURE 14 HERE*

## *THEN & NOW: INTERPASSIVITY OVER TIME*

Mark Fisher (2009) argues that there are a number of reasons for the difference in rebellion and activism today compared to the decades preceding the mid 1980's - when Jameson first advanced his thesis around postmodernism. He asserts that there were still, even if just in name, political alternatives to capitalism. However, today we are experiencing a time of a far more "pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility" (2009 p. 7), this is what Fisher calls 'capitalist realism'. Fisher's counsel here is invaluable, as he surmises that though in its final stages, 'Really Existing Socialism' remained resolute until the 1980's. He marks the example of the Miners' Strike of 1984-1985 and the miners' ultimate defeat as a pinnacle moment in the development of capitalist realism. The miners lost their fight precisely on the grounds of it not being 'economically realistic' to keep the pits open. Margaret Thatcher's doctrine of 'no alternative', which Fisher (2009, p.8) argues is "as succinct a slogan of capitalist realism as you could hope for", meant that Thatcher's words became the self-fulfilling prophecy of the inception of capitalist realism.

Furthermore, Jameson and Baudrillard's ideas of postmodernism confront modernism on its ability to stage revolution. To paraphrase the words of Jameson, words cherished by the likes of Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School,

modernism possessed revolutionary potential by virtue alone (Jameson 1991; Baudrillard 1988; Adorno and Horkheimer 1997). Capitalist realism however challenges this, and no longer harbours this confrontation. Capitalist realism takes “the vanquishing of modernism for granted” (Fisher 2009 p.9). Essentially, what we can infer from Fisher’s observation is that though the potential for revolution or ‘real rebellion’ is something that can “periodically return”, it will only be a shadow, a “frozen aesthetic style, never [as] an ideal for living” (2009, p.9). In other words, even if this kind of rebellion were to be replicated, it would never result in a real act of socio-poetic modernist (or otherwise) rebellion, but in a passive, stylistic reflection (Holland 2006).

This is a stance supported by Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen’s work (2010) who use the term ‘metamodernism’, instead of capitalist realism. Akker and Vermeulen simultaneously define and embody the metamodern spirit as;

“move[ment] for the sake of moving, [metamodernism] attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find.”

This brings to light the way in which in today’s society, we are not so cynical (postmodern) as to simply give up on contemporary activism. It is in spite of our

awareness of the impossibility of founding a new utopia (Kadagishvili 2013) that we continue to strive for one nonetheless, through interpassive rebellion.

An entire generation has passed since the collapse of the Berlin Wall (Engel 2009), and many more since the 60s and 70s. In these decades, capitalism had to confront the difficulty of how to contain and absorb forces from external influences. Whereas now, it has the opposite difficulty, it is argued by Fisher that; having all too successfully incorporated externality, how can capitalism function without an outside it can inhabit and appropriate? However, Fisher (2009 p.9) goes on to state, “For most people under twenty in Europe and North America, the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue. Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable.” Therefore adding further value to Heath and Potter’s work (2004), in which the stylistic rebellion of countercultures is presented as running so seamlessly alongside the capitalist mainstream that is no longer even seen as an issue. It could then be assimilated that it is in fact not so simple as there no longer being an ‘issue’ with the mainstream, but a sense that people are relieved of any rebellious tendency through interpassive stylistic choices.

It can be seen that the reason why the interpassivity of LS&Co. did not have such a significant effect pre-*capitalist realism* or *metamodernism* is because of the heightened possibility for alternatives to capitalism at that time. These alternatives

invigorated the subject to carry out the real *action* of rebellion whilst *passively* wearing denim jeans, because there was a perceived possibility for change. Whereas today the phrase attributed to Slavoj Žižek (2009) and Fredric Jameson (2003, p.73), “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” has become the credo of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This insinuates that there is actually no feasible or conceivable way to end the machine of the system, an idea is also stressed by Chris McMillan in his book ‘*Žižek and Communist Strategy: On the Disavowed Foundations of Global Capitalism*’ (2012). In the words of Heath and Potter (2004, p.7), “traditional political activism is useless. It’s like trying to reform political institutions inside the Matrix. What’s the point?” It can be concluded that in today’s society, following the inability to envisage a world beyond capitalism; the plane of perspective inhabited; the mainstream culture resided within; the interpassive nature of consumption habits; actually act as what Baudrillard (1983, p.25) has described as a “deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real”. Thus, the mythical fiction of action through consumption is maintained, and in the age of metamodernism this is a deterrence machine to encourage consumers to believe that making a difference can only be achieved through wearing products such as denim jeans. They are in fact deceiving themselves, not only through the *passivity* of their consumption, but also by feeding

the very beast that advertising and other forms of media profess their product can *actively* rebel against.

Consequently, successful *real* rebellion was still seen as feasible pre-metamodernism, and therefore rebellious activity continued during the time that Levi's first incorporated rebellion into their advertising. However, it would not have served as a force for *real* rebellion as it would have only perpetuated the interpassivity of their product. Furthermore this shows that today, in the early years of a supposed metamodern society, interpassivity is likely to have a much stronger impact on the method of rebellion.

## CONCLUSION: JEANS, RIPPED JEANS AND THE CANVAS OF REBELLION TODAY

Using the arguments presented in the previous chapter, it can be seen that much of the denim industry today, though seemingly seeking to inspire a movement, has actually acted as a dangerous deterrent against any real *act* of rebellion against the current system.

*FIGURE 15 HERE*

*FIGURE 16 HERE*

The Levi's *Go Forth* campaign (Figure 15 and Figure 16) is a perfect example of the aforementioned *metamodern spirit* outlined by Akker and Vermeulen (2010). It is clear that though the advertisements make reference to rebellious, countercultural signifiers, the order of significance does not lead to any real act of rebellion, it is purely stylistic. The use of anti-systemic poetry (Figure 15) and anti-materialistic/consumerist imagery, showing models wearing only Levi's 501s with the line "All I need is all I got" (Figure 16), totally rejects material consumer goods, whilst fortuitously filling the void with the Levi's jean. Having totally rejected material consumer culture, Levi's jeans remain and act as a calamine lotion, to let

the audience know that it will still be ok to buy their product, preventing any real escape from capitalism.

Furthermore, when we look at how jeans are perceived today, we can see that whilst once they were a symbol of actual rebellion, they are now only passive rebels, in a society whereby wearing jeans is now acceptable in much of today's workplace. "Once, jeans might have meant someone to look out for—but no longer. So the link with transgression is lost" (Miller 2010, p.20). Yet wearers feel relieved in their ability to wear them, as though an actual change has taken place. This allows wearers to remain totally passive and guilt free in the illusion that they are actively against the grain. In fact, the original 501 jean has been so widely adopted that Time magazine dubbed it the "fashion item of the 20th century" (2000 cited by Downey 2009, p.111). This idea is moved forward further by the resurgence of ripped jeans into high fashion trends of recent years. Manufactured rips have much more substantial implications than one might initially consider. The jeans have, in effect, interpassively experienced rebellion for us. Not only this, but there is relief in the thought that there is actually no longer any need to experience something that would really rip the jeans, because it is instilled that the jeans have deprived the wearer of that activity, by passing it onto the subjective 'other' (Pfaller 2014) portrayed in the brand's image.

It is by brands allowing consumers to unburden themselves of any anger or frustration towards the system they are a part of, *without* any real action required on the part of the consumer outside of initial purchase, which allows these brands to become so successful: it is the *formula for unburdening*. “What makes advertising effective is the match between the values in the advertising message and the values of the receiver.” (De Mooij 2014, p.46) For a brand to successfully target this group they must act interpassively to ‘fill the gap’ as and when it is needed, to satisfy their desire towards rebellion. Therefore they might continue to go about their consumer-capitalist fuelled lives, safe in the knowledge that they tried to change it through their consumer-capitalism.

*Cultural mush is here to stay. Brands that operate in the very culture their communications profess to want to change have been the pestle, and the mortar.*

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FIGURE 1



Figure 1: LS&Co. original Two Horse design, a graphic representation of how strong the pants were.  
(LS&Co. 2014)

FIGURE 2



Figure 2: Go East Young Man (LS&Co. 2016a)

FIGURE 3

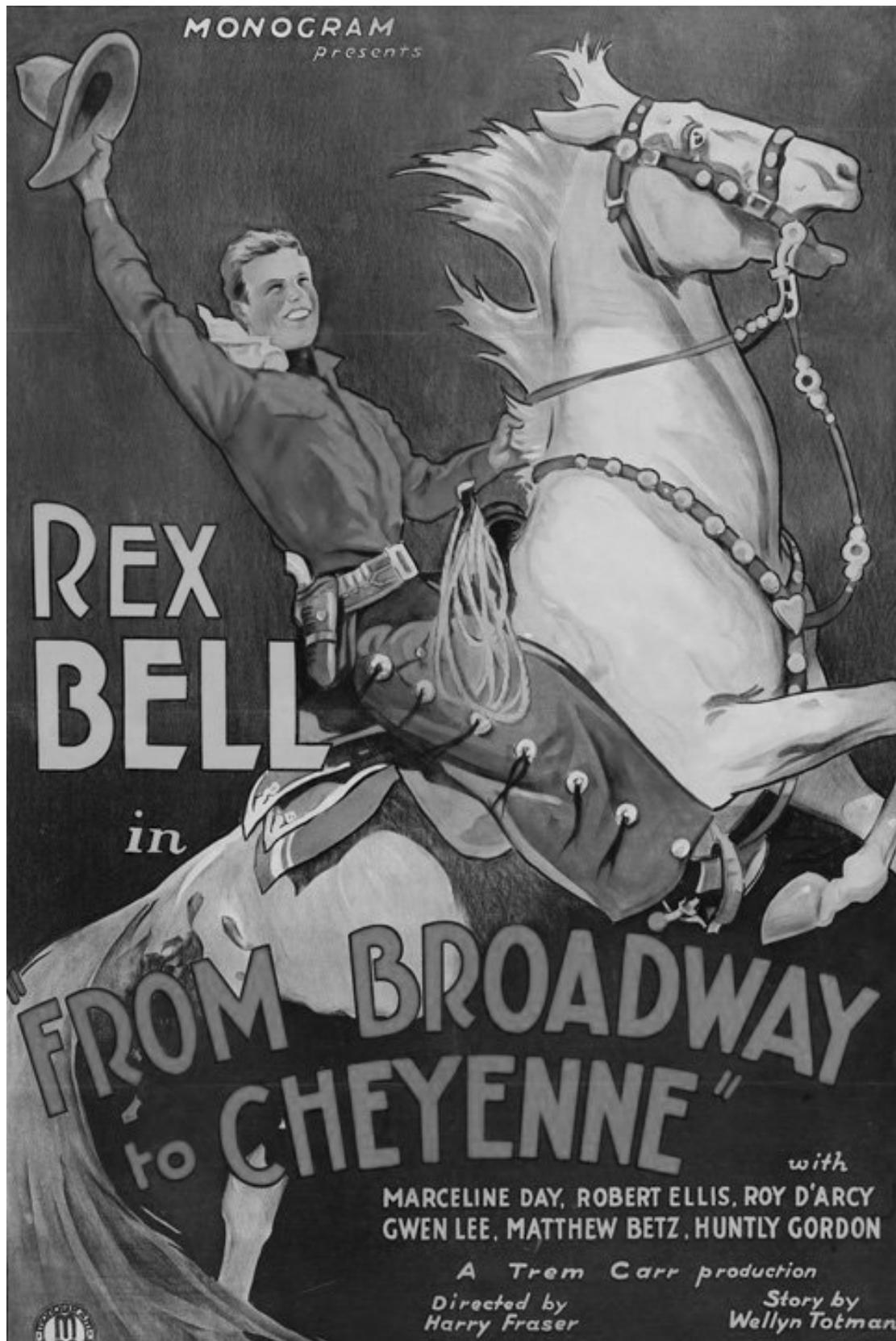


Figure 3: 'From Broadway to Cheyenne' Film Poster (IMDb 2016)

FIGURE 4

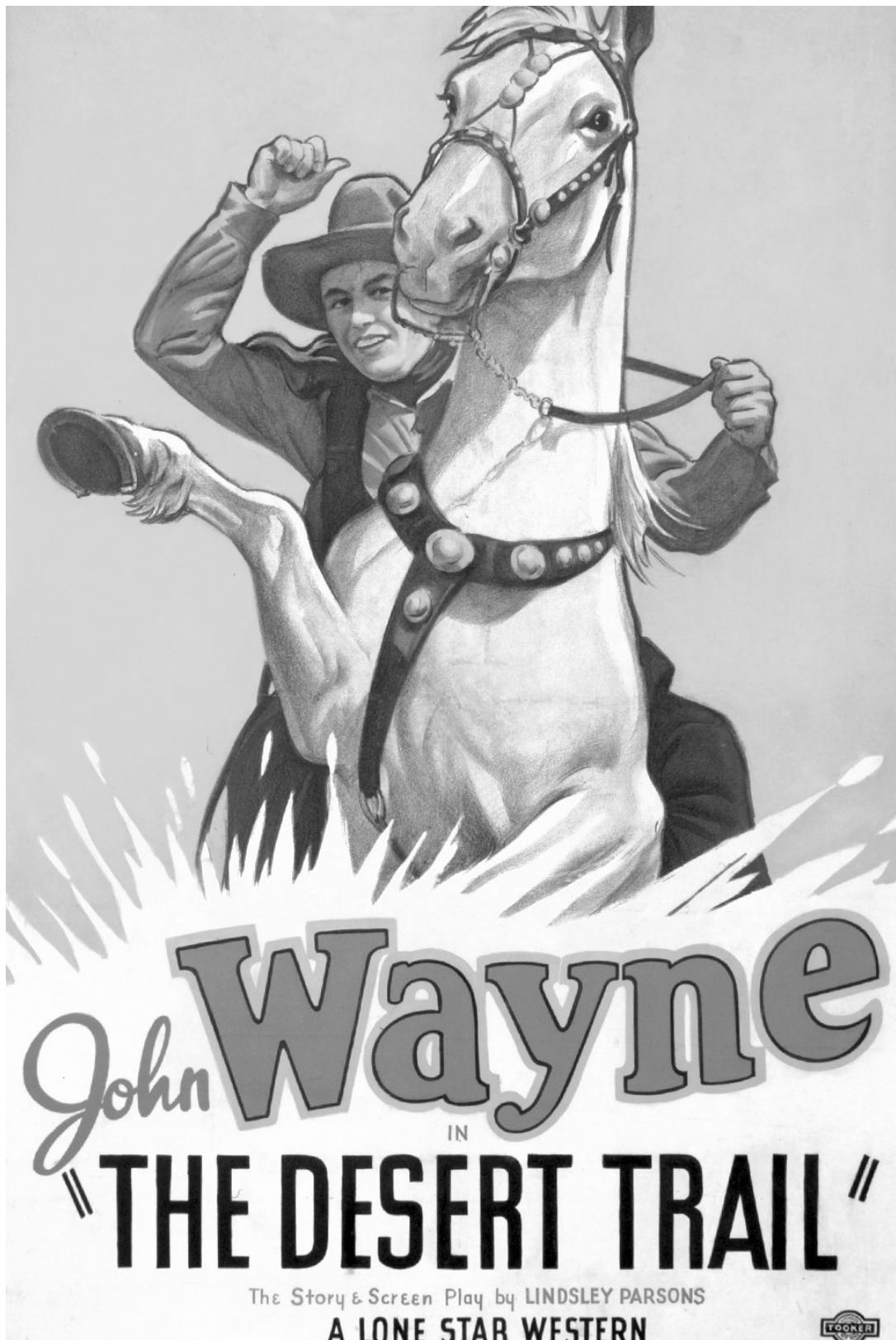


Figure 4: 'The Desert Trail' Film Poster (IMDb 2014)

FIGURE 5

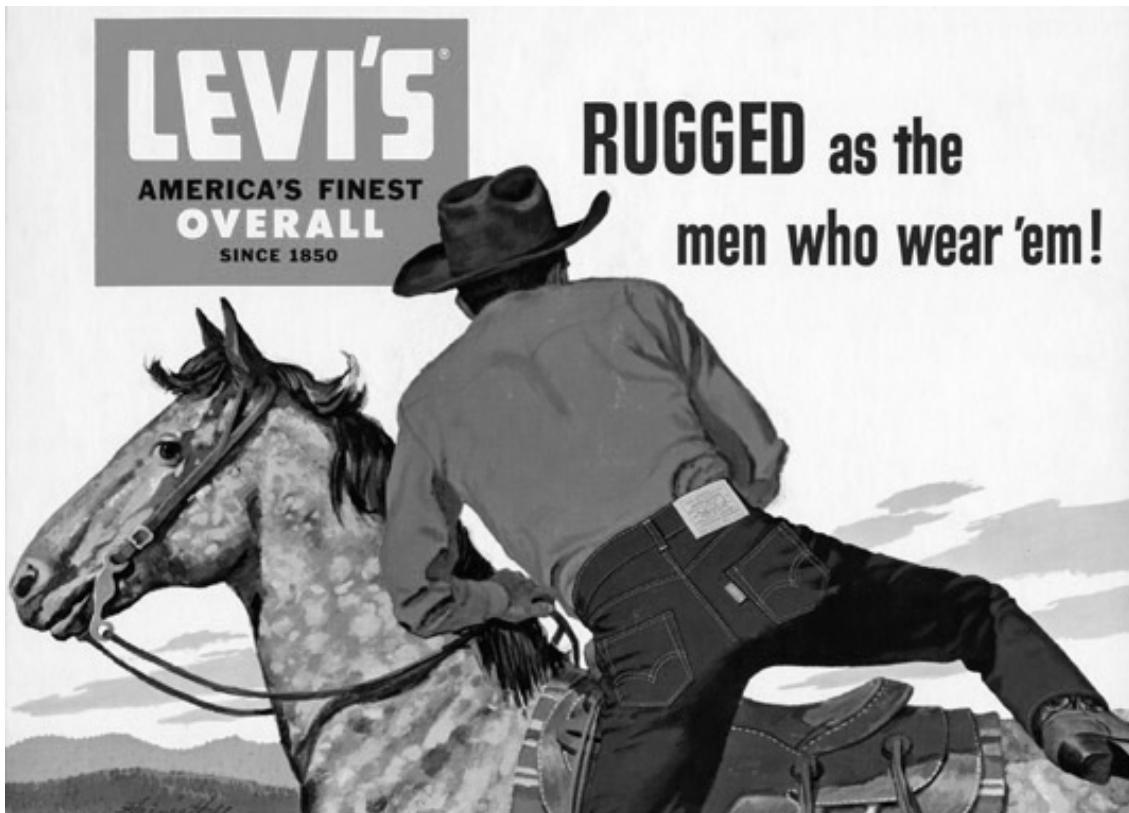


Figure 5: LS&Co. in-store sales ad from the 1950s (Telegraph 2013)

FIGURE 6

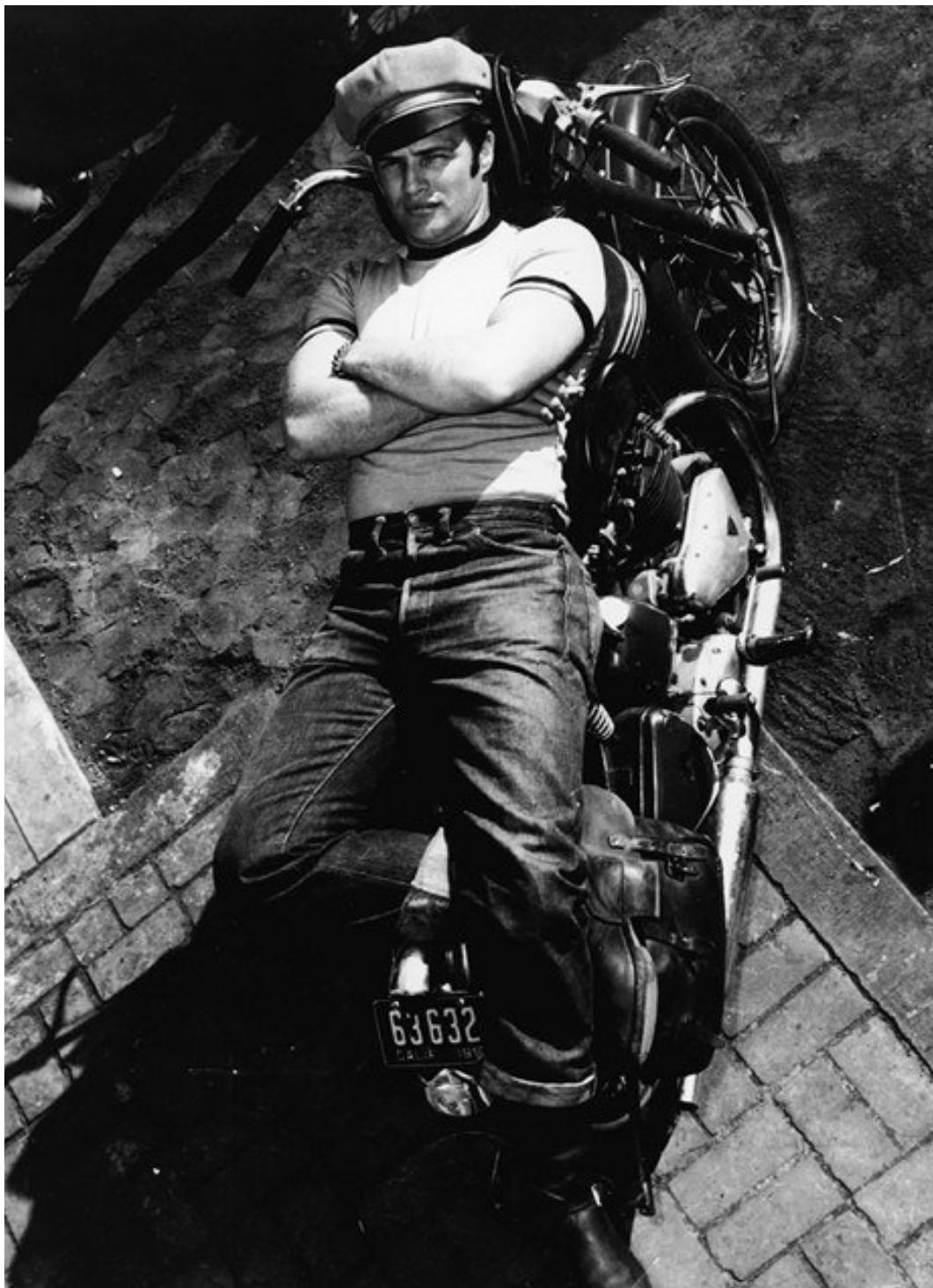


Figure 6: Marlon Brando's Biker Cool in 501's from the film '*The Wild One*' (LS&Co. 2016c)

*FIGURE 7*



Figure 7: Marilyn Monroe photo shoot, wearing Levi's denim (LS&Co. 2016c)

FIGURE 8



Figure 8: 'Rugged Pants For Rugged Guys' Cowboy (LS&Co. 1966)

FIGURE 9



Figure 9: 'Rugged Pants For Rugged Guys' Fist Pump (Trotman 2011)

FIGURE 10



Figure 10: 'The American Way Of Pants' (Veda Veda Veda 2012)

FIGURE 11



Figure 11: Musical artwork montage from the 70s (Herron 2015)

FIGURE 12



Figure 12: People stand on a section of the Berlin wall at Potsdamer Platz (Boston Globe 1999)

FIGURE 13

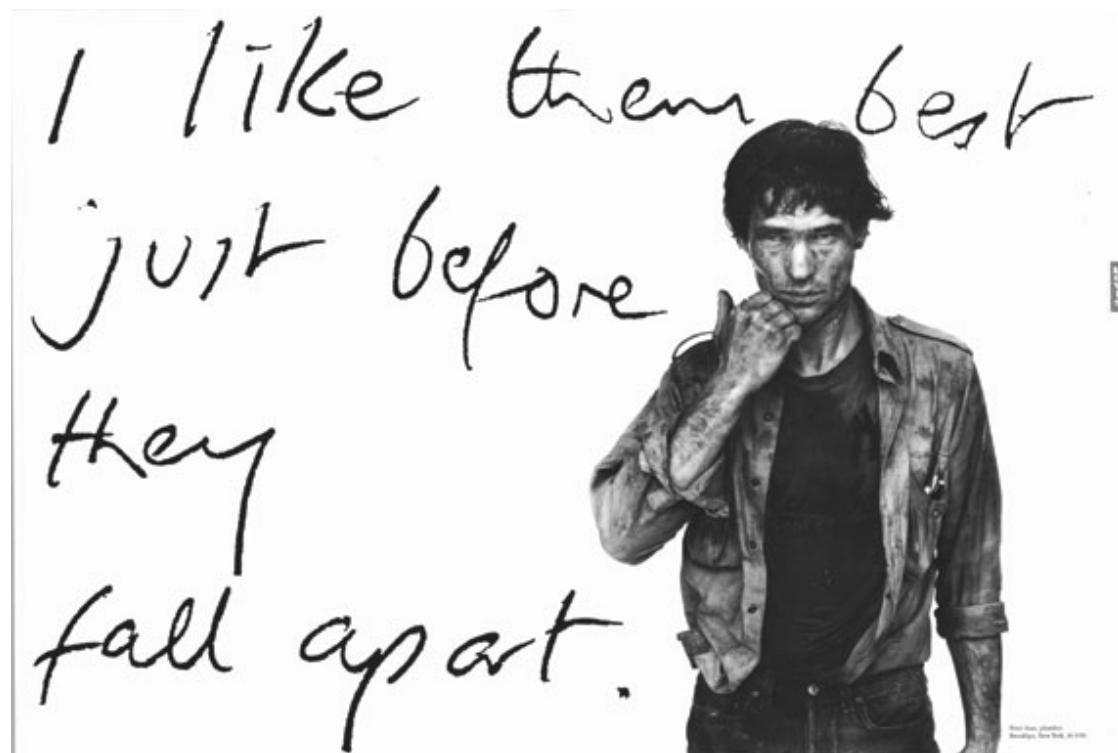


Figure 13: '*I like them best just before they fall apart*', Levi's ad from 1990 (Creative Review 2011)

FIGURE 14

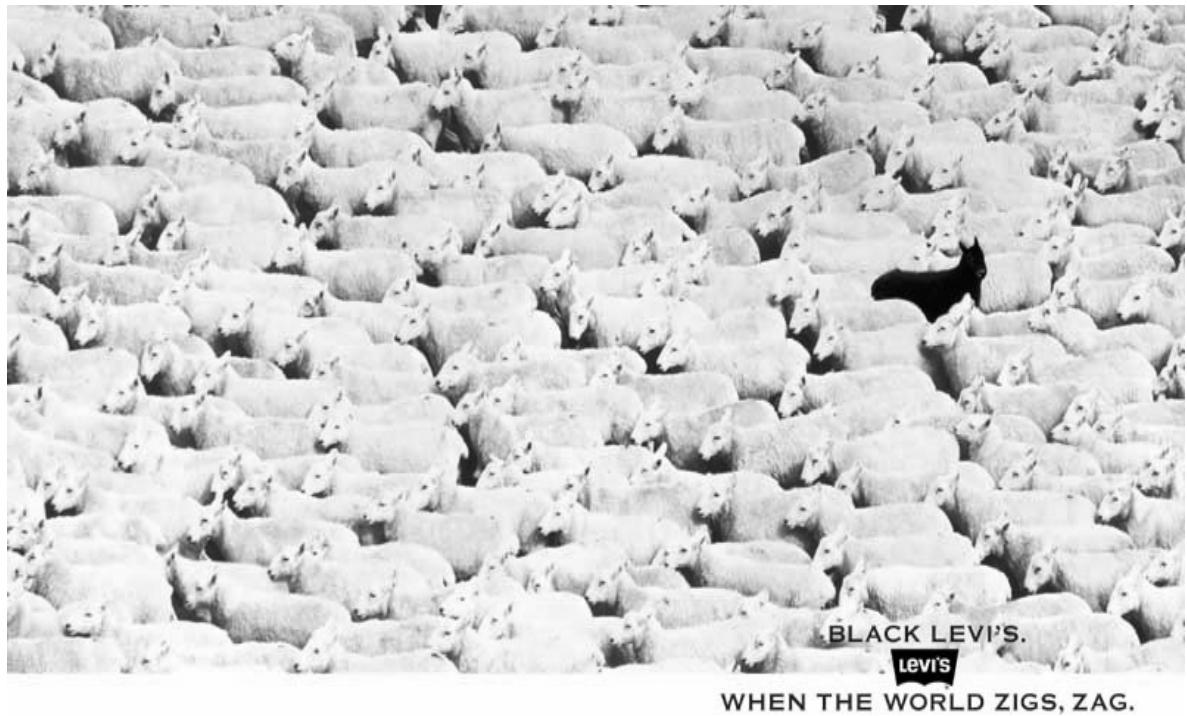


Figure 14: 'When the world zigs, zag', 1982 – BBH's first ever poster for Levi's launched the brand's black denim jeans. (Creative Review 2011)

FIGURE 15

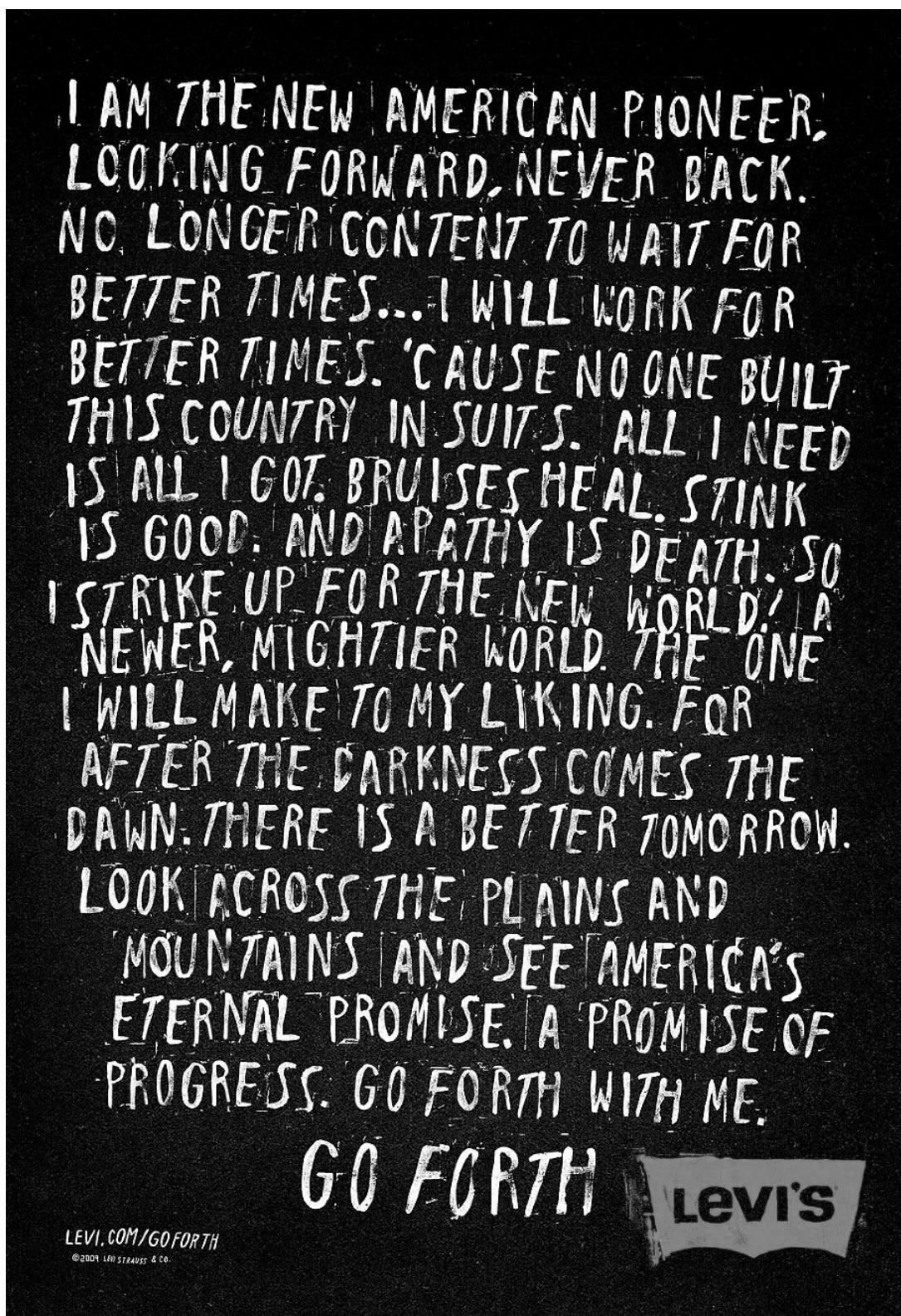


Figure 15: 'Go Forth' poem, Levi's print ad from 2009 (Macleod 2009)

FIGURE 16



Figure 16: '*All I need is all I got*', Levi's print ad from 2009 (Macleod 2009)

## ETHICS CHECKLIST CONFORMATION



Dear George Bartlett,

Your checklist has been approved by Clifford Van Wyk.

You can now print a hard copy of the checklist at <https://ethics.bournemouth.ac.uk>.

Thanks,

Research & Knowledge Exchange Office

For enquiries, please e-mail [researchethics@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:researchethics@bournemouth.ac.uk).

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- *THANK YOU* -