Fads, Fetishes, and Fun
A Sociological Analysis of Pop Culture

By Andrew R. Jones

Included in this preview:
• Copyright Page
• Table of Contents
• Excerpt of Chapter 1

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Fads, Fetishes, and Fun:
A Sociological Analysis of Pop Culture

Andrew R. Jones

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT EXACTLY IS POP CULTURE?

What Exactly Is Popular Culture? 3
By Andrew Jones

CHAPTER 1: COMMODITY FETISHISM AND POP CULTURE 7
“I bought these boots ‘cause they make me look cool.”

Commodity Fetishism and Pop Culture 9
By Andrew Jones

The Theory of Commodity Fetishism 11
By Dominic Strinati

Fetishism and Magic 15
By Sut Jhally

Alt.Everything: The Youth Market and the Marketing of Cool 29
By Naomi Klein

Where Stuff Comes From: Changing Goods 49
By Harvey Molotch
## CHAPTER 2: LEISURE AND POP CULTURE

*“I’m bored … let’s go shopping.”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leisure and Pop Culture</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Andrew Jones</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconfiguring Time and Space</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Raymond F. Betts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilizing the Social: Mobile Phones and iPods</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Michael Bull</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wedding-Industrial Complex</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Chrys Ingraham</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport, Culture, and Society: An Introduction</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Grant Jarvie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point of Purchase: New Yorkers Learn to Shop</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Sharon Zukin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER 3: POP CULTURE AND MASS MEDIA

*“Let me entertain you!”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pop Culture and Mass Media</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Andrew Jones</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Advent of the Media</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Paul Starr</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supersaturation, or, The Media Torrent and Disposable Feeling</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Todd Gitlin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism, News, and Power in a Globalised World: Cultural Chaos</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Brian McNair</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Labor of Fun: How Video Games Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play
By Nick Yee

American Pop Culture Sweeps the World
By Herbert Schiller

CHAPTER 4: MANIPULATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS
“'It’s bright and shiny … and for some reason, I want it.”

Manipulation of Consciousness
By Andrew Jones

Power and Culture
By John R. Hall, Mary Jo Neitz, and Marshall Battani

The Meaning of Style: Subcultures and Power
By Dick Hebdige

Gangsta Culture—Sexism and Misogyny
By bell hooks

Social Communication in Advertising:
Understanding Ads as Privileged Communication
By William Leiss, Stephen Kline, Sut Jhally, and Jacqueline Botterill

Rules and Ruling: Proms as Sites of Social Control
By Amy Best

The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators
By bell hooks
Identity and Branding as Elements of Pop Culture 381
By Andrew Jones

‘Anything but Heavy Metal’:
Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes 385
By Bethany Bryson

Brands and Informational Capital 407
By Adam Arvidsson

Fashion(able/ing) Selves:
Consumption, Identity, and Sex and the City 423
By Cara L. Buckley and Brian L. Ott

Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids:
Teenagers, Status, and Consumerism 441
By Murray Milner

Sweetback’s Revenge:
Gangsters, Blaxploitation, and Black Middle-Class Identity 461
By Mark Anthony Neal

When Fangirls Perform:
The Gendered Fan Identity in Superhero Comics Fandom 491
By Karen Healey
## CHAPTER 6: REPRESENTATION WITHIN POP CULTURE

“I am not a stereotype.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Representation Within Pop Culture</td>
<td>513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Andrew Jones</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies:</td>
<td>517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decoding Cultural Oppression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Kenneth Allan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances:</td>
<td>527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying Sexuality in Video Games</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Mia Consalvo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoke and Mirrors:</td>
<td>551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulating Racial Images in Cigarette Advertising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Fern L. Johnson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic Integrity: Race and Accountability</td>
<td>581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By bell hooks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cybertyping and the Work of Race in the Age of Digital Reproduction</td>
<td>589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Lisa Nakamura</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

What Exactly Is Pop Culture?
What Exactly Is Popular Culture?

By Andrew Jones

What exactly is popular culture? When presented with this question, some of us immediately think of television shows, the latest music sensation, blockbuster films or the comings and goings of famous celebrities. While these are all elements of pop culture, they do not capture the full extent of pop culture’s penetration into our daily lives. Pop culture involves the “commodification” of most aspects of life that revolve around production and consumption, meaning most goods and services produced must have some degree of “marketability,” and we are appealed to by businesses and other institutions as consumers to engage in consumption of those commodities. As we consume, we also engage in production, which may take the form of creating other cultural artifacts subject to commodification (customizing motorcycles, designing a new game using proprietary software, creating a work of art using materials purchased at a hobby shop, etc.). This is not to say that pop culture is synonymous with mass culture or consumer culture, but in order to understand the transformative aspects of pop culture, one must understand pop culture’s relationship with capitalism. At its core, pop culture represents the synthesis of market economics with culture.

This synthesis involves a multiplicity of relationships: how we relate to ourselves, to one another, to the artifacts contained within the culture, and to both our natural and built environments. What this synthesis of a market economy with culture entails is what Karl Polanyi describes as a market society. Prior to capitalism, economic relationships were embedded within social relationships. With the advent of mercantile capitalism, this relationship is reversed, with social relationships now embedded within economic arrangements. As capitalism expands, the reversal of economic and social relationships intensifies. The result is a market-oriented culture, where meal times correspond to the needs of capitalist production, leisure time is expressed through consumption of television programming or other pop culture artifacts, profit maximization for the
producers of pop culture outweighs social needs, and success in life is measured in terms of accumulation of wealth and material possessions that are deemed valuable in a capitalist culture.

As we discuss pop culture in these terms, some defining qualities emerge which signify pop culture. The meshing of pop culture with capitalism indicates commodification as one of these qualities. The fact that everyday mundane items can become collectibles is evidence of this quality as applied to pop culture. Coupled with commodification is the concept of consumption. Prior to the 20th century, people engaged in consumption of basic necessities. Capitalists had to create a new field—advertising—to create artificial needs within the populace, with the aim of extending consumption beyond basic necessities. The emergence of contemporary pop culture corresponds to the development of fossil-fuel-burning technologies and urbanization of human populations. Thus two additional qualities that define pop culture are enhanced energy usage and high population density. As pop culture is intertwined with capitalism, another prominent quality of it is an emphasis on “newness.” The logic of capitalism requires constant expansion of markets, and to that end, we see a continual promotion of new versions of existing products, with advertising demanding that we consume the latest variant of whatever artifact happens to have just come on the market. Another quality of pop culture is a heavy emphasis on visual stimulation. Pop culture artifacts are all about style over substance, and to that end, we see form and function meshed together in an effort to make whatever the product happens to be (potato peeler, leaf blower, cordless drill, DVD player, cell phone, etc.) as “cool” as possible.

The above qualities may serve as the hallmarks of pop culture, in terms of the artifacts of the culture. What of the social traits? What are the hallmarks of a society embedded within popular culture? Culture lag is a defining trait of a society that has embraced pop culture—with each new technological artifact, we see social norms and laws having to catch up with the uses and abuses the technology presents. Cell phones are a perfect example of this phenomenon. As cell phones have proliferated among the population, issues of social etiquette have become more pronounced, as people are engaged in conversations and texting in venues for which such activities are quite inappropriate. To date, the worst story I’ve heard regarding inappropriate cell phone use involved a doctor performing a gynecological exam on a woman who decided to chat with a friend on the phone while on the table. The woman proceeded to describe to her friend the procedure she was experiencing. More and more businesses now have signs posted that request patrons finish their conversations prior to engaging in a business transaction. States, California among them, are passing laws making it illegal to text or talk on a cell phone while driving.

As a result of this culture lag, we see a high level of deviance within such a society (as noted in the cell phone example above). The media’s promotion of celebrity worship
leads to people emulating their behaviors, and while the behavior of a celebrity may be excused as one of the perks of his or her fame, those emulating such behavior do not have the same status. Ordinary people may be confined to jail for behaviors for which celebrities often receive rehabilitation or the proverbial “slap on the wrist.” With the emphasis on consumption, we see deviance in the form of body types: either we are morbidly obese or so thin as to resemble a survivor of the Holocaust. This polarization of body types stems from the conflicting messages we receive from our mass media. Being thin is in, but at the same time, we are encouraged to eat and drink to excess. Such excess is part of the reason why the medical establishment considers obesity an epidemic in the U.S. Additionally, pop culture, with its emphasis on consumption, encourages wastefulness. Thus we see another form of deviance in the form of a “throw away” society, where disposal of the packaging for our food and material possessions is an acceptable form of behavior.

Another social characteristic of pop culture society is that of alienation. As people develop “relationships” with the artifacts of pop culture, we see a weakening of the social bonds indicative of communities. To illustrate this point, people may have hundreds of friends on social networking sites, but these “friends” are for the most part familiar strangers—people may know detailed information about their friends, but lack real social contact. Face-to-face encounters are infrequent—replaced instead by interactions with technological devices (computers, game consoles, cell phones). Ultimately, the relationship is with a keyboard/game controller and LCD screen. As we embrace such technology, we separate ourselves from those around us—we are never “in the moment,” as the pop culture artifacts compel us to “multitask,” and do things quickly, as speed is another characteristic of pop culture. We are oblivious to our surroundings, rushing from task to task, from life event to life event, and thus alienated from the real world and, ultimately, from ourselves.

Pop culture could best be described as a cultural form rife with contradictions. It has tremendous potential to educate us through its artifacts, yet often serves as a form of distraction. It contains subversive elements that allow people to question authority, yet serves as a form of ideological social control for the benefit of elite interests and for promotion of the status quo. It serves as a means of promoting multiculturalism by preserving and exposing us to different cultural forms while eroding those cultural forms through culture contact, resulting in homogeneity. It simultaneously promotes deviance and conformity among members of society. It creates time- and labor-saving technologies to provide us with more leisure time, but offers us leisure activities that end up resembling work.

At the outset, we must understand that it is impossible to encompass all that pop culture entails in a single volume. With this anthology, we explore some of the facets of popular culture. Chapter 1 focuses on commodity fetishism, examining the “magical”
qualities of pop culture artifacts, and the mystification for us as consumers and citizens of the processes by which such artifacts are produced. Chapter 2 examines the concept of leisure, and how leisure time is expressed through pop culture. Chapter 3 revolves around the connections between pop culture and our system of mass media. Chapter 4 builds on concepts presented in the previous chapters, looking at the ways in which our social institutions that serve as transmitters of pop culture influence our consciousness as individuals and as a society. Chapter 5 elaborates on such influence, exploring the development and maintenance of individual and collective identities. Finally, Chapter 6 examines some of the issues regarding representation of race, class and gender within pop culture.
Chapter 1

“I bought these boots ‘cause they make me look cool.”

Commodity Fetishism and Pop Culture
It would probably be safe to say that all of us have experienced an incident where we believed some pop culture artifact would grant us special abilities or enhance some aspect of our lives. When *The Road Warrior* hit American movie theaters, I thought Mel Gibson’s character was the coolest individual ever portrayed on film. I wanted to be like the Road Warrior! Though I didn’t opt for carrying around a sawed-off shotgun or getting a pet dingo, and at the time I was just under the age to legally drive (precluding my driving around like Mad Max), I did search far and wide for a pair of boots like the ones the Road Warrior wore. This was at a time prior to the Internet, which meant physically searching stores for the item in question or looking through catalogs, and it wasn’t until I was in college that I happened upon a pair. One day, strutting around in my boots on campus, I encountered a sociology professor, who remarked on the style of boot I was wearing. Relating the above story to him, the professor remarked, “That is a perfect example of commodity fetishism,” and proceeded on with his walk. Not elaborating on his comment, I was left wondering what he meant by commodity fetishism.

Upon discovering the meaning of his remark, I wonder to this day whether he’d meant it as an insult or merely as a sociological observation. In any event, that incident introduced me to the concept of commodity fetishism. When I looked up the phrase, I found a one-sentence description, the upshot of which stated that we tend to imbue special powers to the commodities we consume, and the process by which those commodities were produced is mystified for us as consumers. We buy a particular brand of running shoe, thinking it will make us faster (and do not dwell on the sweatshop labor conditions people suffered under to make them). We run out and buy the style of clothing being worn by a famous celebrity, thinking the attire will make us as cool and hip as the celebrity. We present our significant others with diamond rings, thinking this will ensure a long-lasting romantic relationship (and think nothing of
how the diamonds were derived, i.e., blood diamonds). We go to the grocery store, passing by farm laborers picking crops, and make no connection with the labor they are performing to the produce we purchase cheaply at the store. We get vanity tattoos, using symbols of other cultures, and have no idea what those symbols mean to their respective cultures. All of these examples denote a form of commodity fetishism, and if one is to understand pop culture, one must first and foremost appreciate the concept of commodity fetishism.

We see the promotion of commodity fetishism all around us. Advertisements showing animated objects abound—talking pieces of candy that are afraid of being consumed because they are so delicious, characters jumping off of cereal boxes imploring us to eat the contents of the box—and the creators of such ads are all too familiar with what commodity fetishism entails. Ads that tell us if we purchase and consume particular brands of beer, we’ll be surrounded by people who are sexually desirable (and who see us as sexually desirable). Ads that compel us to buy certain types of automobiles, as their purchase will bring us closer to nature. The commonality with all of them is a displacement of a relationship: a relationship between an individual and his or her environment, or between an individual and other human beings becomes a relationship between the individual and a pop culture artifact. What should be a social relationship becomes a relationship between a person and an object.

Dominic Strinati, in “The Theory of Commodity Fetishism,” lays out explicitly what commodity fetishism entails. Using Theodor Adorno’s analysis, Strinati discusses capitalism’s entrenchment as an economic system as the result of, in part, fetishism, and how the exchange value becomes more important than the use value of our cultural artifacts.

Sut Jhally, in writing “Fetishism and Magic,” explores the historical origins of fetishism, its link to cultural beliefs in magic, the connection between fetishism and sexuality, and how advertising employs commodity fetishism to its advantage in getting us to consume. He also touches on the social consequences of having a world filled with “an immense collection of commodities.”

Naomi Klein investigates the marketing of cool and the promotion of fetishism to young people with her piece, “Alt.Everything: The Youth Market and the Marketing of Cool.” Of interest is Klein’s discussion of people’s efforts to avoid marketing and commercialization—seeking out “authentic” cultural expressions, and how the culture industry inevitably co-opts such expressions, selling them back to us in a commodified form.

In juxtaposition to the above articles, Harvey Molotch explores how commodities are actually produced in “Where Stuff Comes From: Changing Goods.” Molotch provides a brief historical overview of human production, the cultural meaning groups attach to artifacts and, through the insights he provides, demystifies production. To an extent, Molotch gives us some of the tools to help us avoid the “fetishizing” of commodities.
The Theory of Commodity Fetishism

By Dominic Strinati

Adorno once wrote that ‘the real secret of success … is the mere reflection of what one pays in the market for the product. The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert’ (1991: 34). Few statements could more graphically summarise the relevance of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism for Adorno’s attempt to use the idea of the culture industry to understand modern popular culture. For Adorno and the Frankfurt School, commodity fetishism is the basis of a theory of how cultural forms such as popular music can secure the continuing economic, political and ideological domination of capitalism.

Adorno’s argument is that money—the price of commodities or goods, including a ticket to a concert defines and dominates social relations in capitalist societies. The inspiration for this view is Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, which suggests that ‘the mystery of the commodity form … consists in the fact that in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as … a social natural quality of the labour product itself, and that consequently the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.’ Thus, ‘a definite social relation between men … assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.’ This is what Marx calls ‘fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities’ (Marx 1963: 183).

According to Adorno, ‘this is the real secret of success’, since it can show how ‘exchange value exerts its power in a special way in the realm of cultural goods’ (1991: 34). Marx distinguished between the exchange value and use value of the commodities circulating in capitalist societies. Exchange value refers to the money that a commodity can command on the market, the price it can be bought and sold for, while use value refers to the usefulness of the good for the consumer, its practical value or utility as a commodity. For Marx, exchange value will always dominate use value in capitalism because the production, marketing and consumption of commodities will always take precedence over people’s real needs. This idea is central to Adorno’s theory of capitalist culture. It links commodity fetishism with the predominance of exchange value. Money exemplifies how social relations between people can assume the fantastic form of a relation defined by a ‘thing’, that is money, and is the basic definition of the value of commodities for people in capitalist societies. This is why we are supposed to venerate the price we pay for the ticket to the concert rather than the concert itself.

What Adorno has in fact done has been to extend Marx’s analyses of commodity fetishism and exchange to the sphere of cultural goods or commodities. The example cited concerns the market for music for which he elaborates ‘a concept of musical fetishism’. Adorno argues that ‘all contemporary musical life is dominated by the commodity form; the last pre-capitalist residues have been eliminated’ (ibid.: 33). This means that what Marx said about commodities in general also applies to cultural commodities which ‘are produced for the market, and are aimed at the market’ (ibid.: 34). They embody commodity fetishism, and are dominated by their exchange value, as both are defined and realised by the medium of money. What is, however, unique to cultural commodities is that ‘exchange value deceptively takes over the functions of use value. The specific fetish character of music lies in this quid pro quo’ (ibid.). With other commodities, exchange value both obscures and dominates use value. Exchange value not use value determines the production and circulation of these commodities. However, cultural commodities such as music bring us into an ‘immediate’ relation with what we buy—the musical experience. Therefore their use value becomes their exchange value such that the latter can ‘disguise itself as the object of enjoyment’ (ibid.).

So we come back to the statement we started with, hopefully now more aware of its rationale. We are said to worship the price we pay for the ticket to the concert, rather than the performance itself, because we are victims of commodity fetishism whereby social relations and cultural appreciation are objectified and dominated by money. This, in turn, means that exchange value or the price of the ticket becomes the use value as opposed to the musical performance itself, the real underlying use value. This is only part of a more general analysis of popular music to which I shall return below. We have seen here how the School’s theory has been based on some of Marx’s ideas despite its challenge to some of the fundamental principles of classical Marxism. These ideas
The Theory of Commodity Fetishism

have played their part in the School’s interpretation of the development of modern capitalism, and in Adorno’s formulation of the concept of the culture industry.

THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL’S THEORY OF MODERN CAPITALISM

The School’s theory argues that modern capitalism has managed to overcome many of the contradictions and crises it once faced, and has thereby acquired new and unprecedented powers of stability and continuity. A good example of this theory is to be found in the work of the philosopher Marcuse, a member of the School who stayed in America after the Second World War, and witnessed its economic growth, affluence and consumerism, as well as its continuing problems of inequality, poverty and racism. This theory also brings out the intellectual and political distance between the School and Marx’s analyses of capitalism, which usually defined it as a crisis-ridden and unstable system. The School does not deny that capitalism contains internal contradictions; for Adorno, the art of dialectical thinking necessarily involves identifying these contradictions. But insofar as capitalist societies can provide higher levels of economic well-being for large sections of their populations, including their working classes, their eventual overthrow and the rise of socialism appear less likely to occur. The School sees a durability in capitalism many others have doubted, and argues this rests upon affluence and consumerism, and the more rational and pervasive forms of social control afforded by the modern state, mass media and popular culture.
The theft of meaning

I started this chapter with a concern with the kind of information available through the market about the production of goods. Marx’s analysis of the structure of social relations showed how this leads to misinformation about the way capitalist society functions. The focus particularly on the way the process of production is hidden in the objects of production was vital. The question remains, however, whether this is still a useful way to examine the capitalist market. Marx, after all, wrote about nineteenth-century capitalism and the twentieth century has seen many changes in the way goods are produced that might lessen the ‘fetishism’. I wish to argue in this section that fetishism still provides the basis for understanding the mystification that capitalism produces about itself and the meaning of goods. To accomplish this, however, means that we have to extend Marx’s original vision concerning commodity fetishism. Particularly, we have to integrate advertising into the context within which the use-value-exchange-value relationship is formed. I will seek to show in this section how mystification reaches today also into the realm of use-value such that the symbolic processes of capitalism concerning the discourse through and about goods are largely based upon structures of falsification. This extends the argument that in Marxian analysis use-value is not naturalised, although the economic conditions did not exist in the nineteenth century for Marx himself to develop this particular view. What follows, however, is a logical extension of the foundation he established.
There are two major domains in which people come into contact with goods—as producers and as consumers. I will deal with goods as producers and as consumers. I will deal with each of these in turn. One of the fundamental characteristics of capitalist commodity production is the sale by workers to capitalists of their *labour-power* (their capacity to labour) as a commodity. They enter into the process as just another (although vital) *means* of production. By selling their labour to employers, workers have thus lost control of their activity—in the realm of work our activity is alienated from us and belongs to someone else. Control of labour has been transferred to the owner of the means of production, the capitalist. However, it is interesting to ask what else workers have lost over the course of time by the sale of their labour-power. Most importantly, they have lost access to knowledge of the process of production. In this context, control is knowledge.

The best and most sophisticated historical account of the degradation of labour under capitalism is Harry Braverman’s *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (1974). Braverman starts his analysis by discussing the specificity of human labour and its potential for utilization as labour-power. Because labour is not an instinctive activity (as in animals) but is preceded by a *conception* of the action, it is not tied to one particular kind of activity but can perform many varied and complex tasks. However, at the same time, there is a potential for the *unity* of this process to be dissolved. Conception can be achieved by one and executed by another. However, labour-power cannot be separated from the owner of the labour-power so to use that capacity to labour involves an appropriation and control of the owner of that labour-power.

Thus for humans in society, labour power is a special category, separate and inexchangeable with any other, *simply because it is human*. Only one who is *master of the labour of others* will confuse labour power with any other agency for performing a task, because to him, steam, horse, water of human muscle which turns this wheel are viewed as equivalents, as ‘factors of production’. For *individuals who allocate their own labour* (or a community which does the same) the difference between using labour power as against any other power is a difference upon which the entire ‘economy’ turns. And from the point of view of the species as a whole, this difference is also crucial, since every individual is the proprietor of a portion of the total labour power of the community, the society and the species (Braverman 1974, p.51).

Capitalist relations of production have transformed the historic unity of conception and execution (the ‘organic unity’) into a situation where the working class fulfils only the latter while the capitalist class concentrates control of the former in its own hands. Mary writes (1976, p.799):
all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment; they alienate [entfremden] from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power.

In the early history of capitalism, workers held and controlled much of the knowledge of the labour process and organized the productivity to their own pace and created social relations of their own choosing. The ‘irrationalisation’ of this in terms of the efficient mobilization of labour for profit maximization led to the movement of ‘scientific management’ as systematised by Frederick Taylor. ‘Taylorism’ involved three explicit principles:

1. The disassociation of the labour process from the skills of the worker in that management assumes the ‘burden of gathering together all the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then of classifying, tabulating and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws and formulae’. (Taylor, cited in Braverman 1974, p. 112).

2. Access to and the concentration of this knowledge within management so that conception is divorced from execution. Braverman (1974, p.118) writes:

   Both in order to ensure management control and to cheapen the worker, conception and execution must be rendered separate spheres of work, and for this purpose the study of work processes must be reserved to management and kept from the workers, to whom the results are communicated only in the form of simplified instructions which it is thenceforth their duty to follow unthinkingly and without comprehension of the underlying technical reasoning or data.

3. The use of this knowledge by management to lay out, control and separate the labour process into its constituent elements. Management systematically preplans and precalculates all the elements so that the labour process now exists completed only in the realms of management, and not in the minds of workers who view it in a particularistic and fragmented manner.

   Conception and execution are not only separated, but become hostile and antagonistic ‘and the human unity of hand and brain turns into its opposite, something less than human’. One result of this is that a whole host of new occupations are created
whose central concern is the flow of paper rather than the flow of things. Thus, while knowledge and control of the production process is concentrated in the hands of management, the working classes gain only in ignorance of their own activity. A group of managers and engineers have been created who continually fragment the labour process and return it in an alien and separated form to the working class, who are robbed of the potential to view the labour process in total.

Braverman’s argument is a general analysis of labour relations under capitalism. But consider also the individual case. What does an individual worker know of the product he/she has a hand in producing? The specialized division of labour ensures that the worker will have only partial knowledge of only one part of the production process. Where the product comes from and where it goes remains mystery to the ‘direct producers’. This specialization is exacerbated in the modern age by different parts of one product being produced in many different factories in many different countries. The worker thus from his/her position as a material factor of production cannot see the whole process of the production of commodities. It is structurally impossible for this to take place in a consistent or total manner. The structures of capitalist property relations work against acquisition of such knowledge.

Moreover, the number of workers engaged in industrial production has been declining through this century as capital-intensive investment (in technology) decreases the reliance on human labour. The new service and clerical industries are supports of the system of industrial production, although the same process of scientific management is visible there also. The only time the vast majority of people come upon products thus is in the marketplace where completed products magically appear with great regularity. The only information we have of these products is what the marketplace (through advertising) provides us. The only independent information we can gain of products is provided by consumer magazines which focus largely on performance features. Moreover, exchange in the market is the only time that we have a social dimension to the production and distribution that allocates social resources in various directions.

What exactly, then, is hidden? As Marx (1976, 163) says: ‘A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.’ Marx did not see the consumer society emerge, but he did spot the first form of this peculiar feature in a market economy, remarking that the objectified forms for what is produced and consumed there have an ‘enigmatic’ or ‘mysterious’ character: Although marketed goods have a richly-textured social composition, involving a co-ordinated production, distribution, and consumption system on a global scale, their social character is not immediately apparent. Thus commodities are ‘sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social’: A unity of features that we can see, touch, and smell, on
the one hand, and of those (the complex but hidden social relations orchestrated by the market economy) that remain out of view, on the other.

Commodities are, therefore, a unity of what is revealed and what is concealed in the processes of production and consumption. Goods reveal or ‘show’ to our senses their capacities both as satisfiers of particular wants and as communicators of behavioural codes. At the same time they draw a veil across their own origins: products appear and disappear before consumers’ eyes as if by spontaneous generation, and it is an astute shopper indeed who has any idea at all about what most things are composed of and what kinds of people made them.

Marx called the fetishism of commodities a disguise whereby the appearance of things in the marketplace masks the story of who fashioned them, and under what conditions. Were it thought to be important for us to hear this story, our being deprived of it would constitute a systematic misrepresentation or distorted structure of communication within the world of goods itself.

What commodities fail to communicate to consumers is information about the process of production. Unlike goods in earlier societies, they do not bear the signature of their makers, whose motives and actions we might access because we knew who they were. Specifically, the following kinds of information are systematically hidden in capitalist society: the process of planning and designing products; the actual relation of production that operate in particular factories around the world; the conditions of work in factories; the level of wages and benefits of workers; whether labour is unionised or non-unionised; quality checks and the level of automation; of producing goods through particular industrial processes; the renewable or non-renewable nature of the raw materials used; and the relations of production that prevail in the extraction of raw materials around the world. All of these things constitute part of the meaning (information) that is embedded in products.

Information such as the above, if available to people, would affect their interaction with goods because products are the objectification of human activity. Our interaction with products is also an interaction between people. Consider how consumers would react if the following kinds of meaning were associated with particular commodities: that a product was produced by child labour in a Third World dictatorship; that raw materials were mined by young children; that a product was produced by someone working eighteen hours a day for subsistence wages in nations such as Korea or Taiwan; that making a product used up scarce non-renewable resources or destroyed traditional ways of life for whole people (as in the Amazon region); or that a product was produced by scab labour. All these things, I believe, would severely impact on the meaning of consumption, on the way we buy. Even the conditions of exchange embed themselves into the meaning of things (for example, the sentimental gift). Meaning is always more than just the product as a purely material object. Its use-value is socially determined.
Moreover, we know that when this type of information becomes available, it becomes an important factor in terms of consumers’ perception of products. For instance, the publicity surrounding the marketing of powdered baby milk by Nestle in Kenya which resulted in a large number of infant deaths became part of the meaning of all Nestle products. This resulted in many consumer’s boycotting their products. Also, the revelation of the reactionary racial views of Adolph Coors (owner of Coors breweries), once known, led to a concerted effort by minority groups to effect a large-scale boycott of the product in the marketplace. The meaning of products in these cases was extended beyond the meaning only to be derived in the market. But the structures of capitalist social relations outlined in this chapter ensure that the full social significance of products will not be known in a systematic manner. The real and full meaning of production is hidden beneath the empty appearance in exchange. Only once the real meaning has been systematically emptied out of commodities does advertising then refill this void with its own symbols. Thus when products appear in the marketplace, although we may well be aware of them as products of human labour because there is no specific social meaning accompanying this awareness, the symbolization of advertising appears as more real and concrete. The fetishism of commodities consists in the first place of emptying them of meaning, of hiding the real social relations objectified in them through human labour, to make it possible for the imaginary/symbolic social relations to be injected into the construction of meaning at a secondary level. Production empties. Advertising fills. The real is hidden by the imaginary. The social significance of the marketplace is only possible after the social significance of production disappears beneath the structure of capitalist property relations. The hollow husk of the commodity-form needs to be filled by some kind of meaning, however superficial.

It is for this reason that the ‘triviality’ of advertising is so powerful. It does not give a false meaning per se to commodities, but provides meaning to a domain which has been emptied of meaning. People need meaning in their interaction with goods. Capitalist social relations break the traditional ‘organic unity’ between producers and goods. At the same time capitalism weakens other institutions that could have filled this void (family, community, religion). Advertising then derives its power because it provides meaning that is not available elsewhere. Its power stems from the human need to search for meaning and symbolism in the world of goods.

In seeking to extend the discussion of fetishism in advertising in this way I believe that I have not departed from the logical scheme that Marx identified as the dynamic of capitalism. However, the argument just developed does mean that we have to rethink the relationship between the ‘symbolic’ and the ‘mysterious’. Marx recognized the variability of use-value but not its mystery. The introduction of the messages of advertising into this discourse and the increasing spilt between mental and manual labour throughout this century force us to rethink the relation between symbol and
mystery. In the modern age, use-value (defined as the symbolic constitution of utility) is stuck within systematic structures of mystification concerning the world of goods. It is not just that the ideology surrounding goods is couched in mysterious terms (this is the case with all types of religious belief) but that in modern society the mysticism arises not from the realm of ideology but from the realm of production directly. The mystery of modern symbols is manifested in consumption but is rooted in the structures of industrial production.

From this perspective we can see the mistake that perceptive commentators such as Sahlins and Baudrillard make: they have succumbed to the mystification of commodity fetishism—they make a fetish out of consumption. What they see are vast proliferations of commodities capable of taking and reflecting multiple symbolic forms and they look exclusively to consumption to explain this multiplicity, forgetting the deeper reality of commodity production. In separating commodities from their material basis in production, they drift off into the idealist ‘iconosphere’ of the ‘code’ or ‘culture’.

Marx’s coining of the mystification of exchange-value as ‘fetishism’ was not the first use of this term to refer to the relationship between people and things. He derived the term from the early anthropological writings. The word itself is of Portuguese origin, being a corruption of feitiço, meaning an amulet or charm (such as relics of saints, charmed rosaries, and crosses). A manufacturer or seller of these was called a feiteceiro and, in the African Portuguese colonies in the late nineteenth century, it was used to describe a maker of charms, as well as the more modern meaning of sorcerer or wizard. The word itself means ‘magically active’ according to W. Hoste (1921), although the famous English anthropologist Edward Tylor writes that it derives from the Latin facitius and means ‘magically artful’. At the time of the European ‘voyages of discovery’ (1441–1500), when Portugese sailors found the natives apparently ‘worshipping’ or paying reverence to objects, they termed these feitiços.

Much of the early anthropological work concerning Africa consisted of accounts by missionaries, travelers or colonial military officers. Unfortunately, the unsystematic and biased nature of these early accounts renders them unreliable for serious students. However, their appearance did stimulate a fresh interest among scholars who needed relevant examples to illustrate various theories on the origins of human culture, and especially the origins of religion. In 1760 de Brosse, in his Du culte de dieux fétiches, remarked that fetishism was the first stage of general religious development, with monotheism the belief in the one God, being the second and last stage. (Marx’s source for the term ‘fetishism’ is de Brosse.) His definition of a fetish is ‘anything which people like to select for adoration’. Most importantly, he believed that these fetishes were worshipped on account of the powers that they were believed to possess in and of themselves alone.

August Comte, the ‘father of modern sociology’, slightly modified de Brosse’s theory and located fetishism as the first of three stages in the development of religion (followed
Fetishism here describes a necessary stage in the development of all religion, in which all material bodies are supposed to be animated by souls essentially similar to our own. This theory was generally accepted until the middle of the nineteenth century when Tylor (1871, p. 230) proposed that Comte’s theory should more properly be labelled as animism and that the term ‘fetishism’ should be restricted to the ‘doctrine of spirits embodied in, or attached to, or conveying influence through certain material objects’. Tylor is especially concerned to distinguish the spirit and the material object in which it is located. Fetishism is seen here as the practice by which objects become the temporary home of some spirit which if worshipped and appeased can have a beneficial influence on the worldly existence of the owner of the fetish. There is nothing intrinsic in the object that qualifies it as a fetish and the imposition of a spirit takes place within a religious (and ritualistic) context by the performance of a priest or fetishman. Once this spirit is installed in the object then it is treated as being able to see, hear, understand and act. However, this is not a case of blind faith, for the fetish must pass the test of experience. If it fails it will be discarded.

In a move which extended the concept even further, Herbert Spencer (1879) considered fetishism as an extension of ancestor worship, by which the spirits of the dead inhabit objects and places of ‘striking or unusual aspect’. Fetishism has also been used to describe the capture of embodiment of natural forces in an object, whereby things such as an eagle’s talons or the claw of a leopard become valuable fetishes because one may avail oneself of the powers inherent in these objects. In summary, then, it can be seen that until the end of the nineteenth century the term ‘fetishism’ was very loosely applied and covered phenomena as disparate as animal, nature and spirit worship.

Much of the later work in this area has tended to accept this fuzzy and confused terminology regarding fetishism. As a result of this confused usage, recent anthropological writings have criticized and tended to drop the term from their analytical vocabulary. Indeed, the use of fetishism has caused such a conceptual muddle that an ‘anthropological committee’ suggested that the word ‘fetish’ be retained for ‘a limited class of magical objects in West Africa’ (Parrinder 1961, p. 9). For our purposes here it is important to distinguish the level of everyday activity to which the term fetishism should apply.

Fetishism is not a total spiritual belief system: rather, it is part of a much larger one. In all societies where the term has been applied, there are different levels of spiritual belief and an acceptance of the powers of the fetish should not blind us to the possibility that its user may also have belief in a higher spiritual power, such as a supreme being. There is no denial of God but merely an indifference to him as regards the conduct of everyday life. It is the vast number of spirits in the air that affect physical human conduct and it is to their influence that attention is directed. Thus, for Rattray (1927, p. 23), ‘a fetish is an object which is the potential dwelling—place of a spirit or
spirits of an inferior status, generally belonging to the vegetable kingdom’. The location of one of these lesser spirits in an object is the result of ritual and religious activity. As Rattray (1927, p. 90n) says: ‘the African with his charm of fetish is infinitely more logical and sensible in his ideas and application of such than is the European with his or her mascot. The African knows why his *suman* should have power and whence that power is derived. We do not.’ Thus, almost anything, however small or insignificant, can be considered for use as a fetish, but when the spirit is supposed to have abandoned the material object, it will be thrown away, ‘a perfectly empty and useless object’.

What exactly does the fetish do? Rattray (1927, p. 23) in his definition of the fetish writes that it is ‘directly associated with the control of the power of evil or black magic, for personal ends, but not necessarily to assist the owner to work evil, since it is used as much for defensive as offensive purposes’. For Tylor (1871, p. 245), their purposes include guarding against sickness, bringing rain, catching fish, catching and punishing thieves and making their owners brave: ‘there is nothing that the fetish cannot do or undo, if it be but the right fetish’. For Hoste (1921), fetishes serve many ends: they protect against evil spirits as well as detecting them; they cure disease; they are ‘an incentive to affection’; and they predict when to do certain things (such as journeys). Nassau (1904) has an interesting chapter on the fetish in daily life and its role in hunting, fishing, planting and love-making. The latter of course especially pertinent for a study of modern advertising and the examples that Nassau gives could in fact be taken from network television. Rattray (1927) also has an illuminating chapter on the fetish and its everyday use. For example, the following words are chanted as the object is being turned into a fetish: ‘if anyone poisons me, let it have no power over me, do not let it have any power over me’ (Rattray 1927, p. 14). In summary then, we can see that the work of the fetish takes place at an everyday, daily level. Its effects are short-term and immediate and concern the practical welfare of its possessors. It does not operate at a higher spiritualistic or vague futuristic level, for which other spheres of religion are more appropriate.

**The devil and commodity fetishism**

In the last section, I examined some traditional modes of belief concerning the person-object relation. An interesting question to consider from this perspective is what happens when the ‘old’ fetishisms come into contact with the ‘new’ fetishisms of capitalist commodity relations. The result is the development of practices representing a blend of old fetishisms with other elements, devised in response to pressures exerted on traditional societies in the twentieth century by market forces operating on a global scale. Michael Taussig (1980) has studied in detail two such cases in South America. There some traditional societies have called upon a mixture of folklore and Christian
doctrine to construct an adequate representation for themselves of what has happened to their way of life, particularly in the domain of producing goods. In the two cultures studied by Taussig (in Colombia and Bolivia), it is held that the devil is responsible for visiting such severe stresses upon them.

Among the Bolivian tin-miners, the mythic structure of explanation says that people have been seduced away from their traditional agricultural pursuits by the promise of great wealth to be gained by labouring in the mines. But the mineowner is actually the devil, and it is he who deludes the workers into accepting this bargain. To protect themselves against the resultant misfortune and death occurring in the mines, the workers adapted peasant sacrifice rituals to their new situation, seeking to propitiate the devil-owner with gifts and ceremonies, chewing coca together and offering it to the icon that represents the devil-owner (Taussig 1980, p. 143):

His body is sculptured from mineral. The hands, face and legs are made from clay. Often, bright pieces of metal or light bulbs from the miners’ helmets form his eyes. The teeth may be of glass or crystal sharpened like nails, and the mouth gapes, awaiting offerings of coca and cigarettes. The hands stretch out for liquor. In the Siglo XX mine the icon has an enormous erect penis. The spirit can also appear as an apparition: a blond, bearded, red-faced gringo wearing a cowboy hat, resembling the technicians and administrators … He can also take the form of a succubus, offering riches in exchange for one’s soul or life.

In both cases materials from fetishistic practices were adapted and transformed from older, in order to provide a workable representation of what was happening to the relation between human agents and the material world upon the introduction of wage labour. The personification of the agent who is behind these changes (the devil) is anchored in the idea of the seduction of material wealth to be gained by accepting the rules of the game in a market economy founded on working for wages and producing sugar or tin for world markets.

What prompts cultures to create such representations is the need to supply a coherent account (however implausible it may appear to outside observers) of changes that have a major impact on established ways. In these cases social relations orientated around long-standing modes of production—subsistence agriculture, extended family or kinship groups, barter exchange—began to dissolve as private capitalists and market economics took control. But what is visible and tangible among these new events? Not capital investment decisions, international corporations in foreign countries; rather, what is visible is loss access to land, cash wages determined and paid by strangers, radically different types and conditions of work, breakdown of kin groups, and so
forth. For the indigenous peoples of Columbia and Bolivia in recent times, just as for European and other populations earlier, structures of life and experience familiar to countless generations suddenly disintegrated before their very eyes. It is hardly surprising that they should suspect the devil of having a hand in it.

For the material world and activities that sustain life, including the ensemble of objects produced from its resources, no longer make sense when assayed by the accepted standards of judgement. The communication lines running through the world of goods snap, so to speak. In the course of becoming predominant, a market economy unravels and discards not only specific things, habitual routines, and norms, but also the integument holding them together, the sense of a collective identity and fate. At first no new means for binding together our experience of the material world is proffered. It appears only as an ‘immense collection of commodities’.

**Fetishism and sexuality**

The area in which there is the most substantial sustained body of literature on fetishism is undoubtedly Freudian psychoanalytic theory. It is also the area in which the term has been applied with the most beneficial results. The clinical usage of fetishism has its basis in Freud’s theory of ego development and infantile sexuality, especially as concerns the phallic-genital-oedipal stage. Much of the literature uses this as the starting point and within this framework, the theory of fetishism is part of the theory of sexual perversion in general, including also transvestism, transsexuality, sadism and so on. It is also a strictly male phenomenon and refers to situations whereby sexual satisfaction is impossible to obtain without a non-genital part of the body or some inanimate object being present and attended to.

Fetishism is regarded as a ‘perversion’—an abnormal development of the sexual instinct. As such it is useful to consider what is normal within this theoretical context. Freud (1953) posits an intimate connection between infantile sexuality and the development of normal sexuality at, or following puberty. Infantile sexuality is the transformation of an instinct through various developmental stages in the first four or five years of life. The particular instinct that Freud is discussing can be labelled ‘libido’, which in the early years is connected with other functions of life. The first occurrence of this is breast feeding, the need for nourishment. However, the infant repeats this when there is no need for nourishment and this ‘pleasure sucking’ is the first form of sexual satisfaction. The second stage is the anal stage and is connected with the process of excretion. The third period is called the phallic stage and it is here that the first differentiation between the sexes occurs. For the male in this period, the sexual urge towards his mother increases and the boy’s love for her becomes incestuous. As a result, he becomes afraid of his rival, the father. This Oedipal stage is characterized
by castration anxiety whereby the fear is that the father will remove the offending sex organ of the boy. Consequently, the boy represses his incestuous desires for his mother and his hostility to his father and the Oedipus complex disappears. For the female, the girl’s first love object is also the mother, but when she notices that she does not possess the noticeable external genitals of the male, she feels castrated and blames the mother. The girl begins to prefer the father but this is mixed with envy because he possesses something she does not have and leads to penis envy. Gillespie (1964, p.127–8) sums this up as follows:

During the first few years of the child normally undergoes a process of psychological development which differs in many ways from the normal adult sexuality, and especially in its earlier phases, possesses a number of characteristics which, when they occur in adults are regarded as perverse … There is a gradual increase in genital interests which culminates in the oedipal stage of development. This is followed by the rather puzzling ‘latency period’ when there is recession of sexual activity during which the ‘shades of the prisonhouse begin to close upon the growing boy’; a period when the instinctual pressures and inner defences against impulses. The onset of puberty upsets the equilibrium established in the instinctual forces, aggressive as well as sexual. The stormy period of adolescence normally leads to transformations of psychosexuality of such a kind that the sexual impulse becomes concentrated in a Heterosexual, genital drive directed towards non-incestuous objects.

This, then is the normal model of heterosexual development of which fetishism is a deviation or ‘perversion’.

The classic work in this field is Freud’s 1927 essay titled simply ‘Fetishism’. Here he states categorically that the fetish of adulthood is a penis substitute.

It is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular, quite special penis that has been enormously important in early childhood but was afterwards lost. That is to say: it should normally have been given up, but the purpose of the fetish precisely is to preserve it from being lost. To put it plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (mother’s) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forgo.

This belief, then, is at the expense of a denial of reality and the ‘token triumph over the threat of castration and a safeguard against it’. The fetish is activated by the trauma of seeing the female genitals and is an attempt to ease the castration anxiety this causes.
The fetish is the penis that the mother must have if the anxiety is to be resolved, it is the *imaginary* penis of the mother. Freud (1953, Vol. 21, p. 206) writes:

> Probably no male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals. We cannot explain why it is that some of them become homosexual in consequence of the experience, others ward it off by creating a fetish, and the great majority overcome it.

Subsequent work in this area has sought to answer this problem posed initially by Freud by concentrating on the process of the splitting of the ego and events that might lead to an abnormal development of the sexual instinct. The post-Freudian development of this concept has not sought radically to alter its content but basically to extend it to disturbances in ego development in the pre-oedipal stage that magnify the contradictions of the phallic stage.

In the psychoanalytic literature, fetishism is treated as strictly an adult male phenomenon which manifests the traumas of childhood. Its major effect is that for the fetishist any kind of sexual activity with females is *impossible* to engage in without the fetish being present, for it is only that which prevents the outward manifestation of the castration anxiety (impotence) that would be caused if the reality of the penisless female were to be directly perceived. Without the fetish, the fetishist cannot engage in heterosexual sexual activity, for it represents the lost phallus of the mother by which the castration anxiety is overcome. The fetish thus has no power, it does not do anything. It merely completes the scene: it becomes a sign without which the semiological consummation of sexual activity is literally impossible. Social relations thus of sexual activity is literally impossible. Social relations thus are mediated through the fetish. It completes the scene and without it there can be no action. It makes possible the continuance of social life. Given the phase-specific castration anxiety lying behind male fetishism it should not be surprising that there is not one accepted case of female (see Bak 1974).

Within Freudian theory, then, fetishism is connected to the development of sexuality in all the early oral, anal and phallic stages and especially to castration anxiety in the Oedipal period. All males go through this process, but depending on events during this there can be a healthy or unhealthy consequence. The healthy consequence is the development after puberty of heterosexual activity whereby the male can relate to the female in an unmediated manner and achieve satisfaction therein. The unhealthy activity whereby the male can relate to the female only through the mediation of an inanimate object which has effect of seeing the woman as a phallic woman, and thus denying her natural sexual definition. The latter is a real need *falsely* fulfilled by distorting reality. At the heart of this lies a real, natural and universal need (sexual satisfaction). It is the manner of its satiation that defines whether it is unhealthy.
Conclusion

I attempted in this chapter to come to a proper understanding of the relationship between use-value and exchange-value. The analysis of the work of Marx on this point and the addition of advertising to the more general concept of fetishism provides, I believe, the most advanced conceptualisation of this relationship in modern society. Particularly here, I was concerned with demonstrating the manner in which use-value is subordinated to the strictures of exchange-value. Thus before we can understand the ‘content’ of advertising, we must contextualize it concretely in the modern economy. The symbolization of commodities is not merely about how goods are consumed—it is also about how goods are produced. The use-value-exchange-value relation shows the manner in which the domain of appropriate symbolization and meaning is narrowed in the capitalist marketplace and the role of advertising in this process.

The ‘fetishism of commodities’, then, provides a broad framework for an understanding of the modern relationship between persons and objects. However, the concept of fetishism is a very rich one indeed. Its use in anthropology and psychoanalysis provides us in addition with a very specific description of some ‘problematic’ person-object relations. The intriguing question that derives from this genealogical exploration of the concept is whether or not it is a useful way to examine the relations between persons and objects as they exist in advertising in the modern age. I attempt to answer this question in Chapter 5 and the conclusions to be derived from this are outlined in Chapter 6. However, before we arrive at a point where we can attempt an empirical study of advertising, we still need to lay the groundwork by filling in the material context within which it is located. The domination of use-value by exchange-value in the general economy is the first and more general context for an understanding of the person-object relation. A more specific realm in which the material context shapes symbolic content and style is the communications industry. There, too, the search for exchange-value (profits for media investors) dominates the search for meaning (use-value).
Alt.Everything: The Youth Market and the Marketing of Cool

By Naomi Klein

It’s terrible to say, very often the most exciting outfits are from the poorest people.
—Designer Christian Lacroix in Vogue, April 1994

In our final year of high school, my best friend, Lan Ying, and I passed the time with morbid discussions about the meaninglessness of life when everything had already been done. The world stretched out before us not as a slate of possibility, but as a maze of well-worn grooves like the ridges burrowed by insects in hardwood. Step off the straight and narrow career-and-materialism groove and you just end up on another one—the groove for people who step off the main groove. And that groove was worn indeed (some of the grooving done by our own parents). Want to go traveling? Be a modern-day Kerouac? Hop on the Let’s Go Europe groove. How about a rebel? An avant-garde artist? Go buy your alterna-groove at the secondhand bookstore, dusty and moth-eaten and done to death. Everywhere we imagined ourselves standing turned into a cliché beneath our feet—the stuff of Jeep ad copy and sketch comedy. To us it seemed as though the archetypes were all hackneyed by the time our turn came to graduate, including that of the black-clad deflated intellectual, which we were trying on at that very moment. Crowded by the ideas and styles of the past, we felt there was no open space anywhere.

Of course it’s a classic symptom of teenage narcissism to believe that the end of history coincides exactly with your arrival on earth. Almost every angst-ridden, Camus-reading seventeen-year-old girl finds her own groove eventually. Still, there is a part of

my high-school globo-claustraphobia that has never left me, and in some ways only seems to intensify as time creeps along. What haunts me is not exactly the absence of literal space so much as a deep craving for metaphorical space: release, escape, some kind of open-ended freedom.

All my parents wanted was the open road and a VW camper. That was enough escape for them. The ocean, the night sky, some acoustic guitar … what more could you ask? Well, actually, you could ask to go soaring off the side of a mountain on a snowboard, feeling as if, for one moment, you are riding the clouds instead of the snow. You could scour Southeast Asia, like the world-weary twenty-somethings in Alex Garland’s novel *The Beach*, looking for the one corner of the globe uncharted by the Lonely Planet to start your own private utopia. You could, for that matter, join a New Age cult and dream of alien abduction. From the occult to raves to riots to extreme sports, it seems that the eternal urge for escape has never enjoyed such niche marketing.

In the absence of space travel and confined by the laws of gravity, however, most of us take our open space where we can get it, sneaking it like cigarettes, outside hulking enclosures. The streets may be lined with billboards and franchise signs, but kids still make do, throwing up a couple of nets and passing the puck or soccer ball between the cars. There is release, too, at England’s free music festivals, and in conversions of untended private property into collective space: abandoned factories turned into squats by street kids or ramped entrances to office towers transformed into skateboarding courses on Sunday afternoons.

But as privatization slithers into every crevice of public life, even these intervals of freedom and back alleys of unsponsored space are slipping away. The indie skateboarders and snowboarders all have Vans sneaker contracts, road hockey is fodder for beer commercials, inner-city redevelopment projects are sponsored by Wells Fargo, and the free festivals have all been banned, replaced with the annual Tribal Gathering, an electronic music festival that bills itself as a “strike back against the establishment and club-land’s evil empire of mediocrity, commercialism, and the creeping corporate capitalism of our cosmic counter-culture” and where the organizers regularly confiscate bottled water that has not been purchased on the premises, despite the fact that the number-one cause of death at raves is dehydration.

I remember the moment when it hit me that my frustrated craving for space wasn’t simply a result of the inevitable march of history, but of the fact that commercial co-optation was proceeding at a speed that would have been unimaginable to previous generations. I was watching the television coverage of the controversy surrounding Woodstock ‘94, the twenty-fifth-anniversary festival of the original Woodstock event. The baby-boomer pundits and aging rock stars postured about how the $2 cans of Woodstock Memorial Pepsi, festival key chains and on-site cash machines betrayed
the anticommercial spirit of the original event and, incredibly, whined that the $3 commemorative condoms marked the end of “free love” (as if AIDS had been cooked up as a malicious affront to their nostalgia).

What struck me most was that the debate revolved entirely around the sanctity of the past, with no recognition of present-tense cultural challenges. Despite the fact that the anniversary festival was primarily marketed to teenagers and college students and showcased then-up-and-coming bands like Green Day, not a single commentator explored what this youth-culture “commodification” might mean to the young people who would actually be attending the event. Never mind about the offense to hippies decades after the fact; how does it feel to have your culture “sold out” now, as you are living it? The only mention that a new generation of young people even existed came when the organizers, confronted with charges from ex-hippies that they had engineered Greedstock or Woodshlock, explained that if the event wasn’t shrink-wrapped and synergized, the kids today would mutiny. Woodstock promoter John Roberts explained that today’s youth are “used to sponsorship. If a kid went to a concert and there wasn’t merchandise to buy, he’d probably go out of his mind.”

Roberts isn’t the only one who holds this view. Advertising Age reporter Jeff Jensen goes so far as to make the claim that for today’s young people, “Selling out is not only accepted, it’s considered hip.” To object would be, well, unhip. There is no need to further romanticize the original Woodstock. Among (many) other things, it was also a big-label-backed rock festival, designed to turn a profit. Still, the myth of Woodstock as a sovereign youth-culture state was part of a vast project of generational self-definition—a concept that would have been wholly foreign to those in attendance at Woodstock ’94, for whom generational identity had largely been a prepackaged good and for whom the search for self had always been shaped by marketing hype, whether or not they believed it or defined themselves against it. This is a side effect of brand expansion that is far more difficult to track and quantify than the branding of culture and city spaces. This loss of space happens inside the individual; it is a colonization not of physical space but of mental space.

In a climate of youth-marketing feeding frenzy, all culture begins to be created with the frenzy in mind. Much of youth culture becomes suspended in what sociologists Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson call “arrested development,” noting that “we have, after all, no idea of what punk or grunge or hip hop as social and cultural movements might look like if they were not mined for their gold …” This “mining” has not gone unnoticed or unopposed. Both the anticorporate cultural journal The Baffler and the now-defunct Might magazine brilliantly lampooned the desperation and striving of the youth-culture industry in the mid-nineties. Dozens, if not hundreds, of zines and Web sites have been launched and have played no small part in setting the mood for the kind of brand-based attacks that I chronicle in Part IV of this book. For the
most part, however, branding’s insatiable cultural thirst just creates more marketing. Marketing that thinks it is culture.

To understand how youth culture became such a sought-after market in the early nineties, it helps to go back briefly to the recession era “brand crisis” that took root immediately preceding this frenzy—a crisis that, with so many consumers failing to live up to corporate expectations, created a clear and pressing need for a new class of shoppers to step in and take over.

During the two decades before the brand crisis, the major cultural industries were still drinking deeply from the river of baby-boomer buying power, and the youth demographic found itself on the periphery, upstaged by the awesome power of classic rock and reunion tours. Of course actual young consumers remained a concern for the industries that narrowly market to teens, but youth culture itself was regarded as a rather shallow and tepid well of inspiration by the entertainment and advertising industries. Sure, there were plenty of young people who considered their culture “alternative” or “underground” in the seventies and eighties. Every urban center maintained its bohemian pockets, where the faithful wrapped themselves in black, listened to the Grateful Dead or punk (or the more digestible New Wave), and shopped at second-hand clothing stores and in dank record stores. If they lived outside urban centers, tapes and accessories of the cool lifestyle could be ordered from the backs of magazines like Maximum Rock ‘n’ Roll, or swapped through networks of friends or purchased at concerts.

While this is a gross caricature of the youth subcultures that rose and fell during these decades, the relevant distinction is that these scenes were only halfheartedly sought after as markets. In part this was because seventies punk was at its peak at the same time as the infinitely more mass-marketable disco and heavy metal, and the gold mine of high-end preppy style. And while rap music was topping the charts by the mid- to late eighties, arriving complete with a fully articulated style and code, white America was not about to declare the arrival of a new youth culture. That day would have to wait a few years until the styles and sounds of urban black youth were fully co-opted by white suburbia.

So there was no mass-marketing machine behind these subcultures: there was no Internet, no traveling alternative-culture shopping malls like Lollapalooza or Lilith Fair, and there certainly weren’t slick catalogs like Delia and Airshop, which now deliver body glitter, plastic pants and big-city attitude like pizzas to kids stuck in the suburbs. The industries that drove Western consumerism were still catering to the citizens of Woodstock Nation, now morphed into consumption-crazed yuppies. Most of their kids, too, could be counted on as yuppies-in-training, so keeping track of the trends and tastes favored by style-setting youth wasn’t worth the effort.
The Youth Market Saves the Day

All that changed in the early nineties when the baby boomers dropped their end of the consumer chain and the brands underwent their identity crisis. At about the time of Marlboro Friday, Wall Street took a closer look at the brands that had flourished through the recession, and noticed something interesting. Among the industries that were holding steady or taking off were beer, soft drinks, fast food and sneakers—not to mention chewing gum and Barbie dolls. There was something else: 1992 was the first year since 1975 that the number of teenagers in America increased. Gradually, an idea began to dawn on many in the manufacturing sector and entertainment industries: maybe their sales were slumping not because consumers were “brand-blind,” but because these companies had their eyes fixed on the wrong demographic prize. This was not a time for selling Tide and Snuggle to housewives—it was a time for beaming MTV, Nike, Hilfiger, Microsoft, Netscape and Wired to global teens and their overgrown imitators. Their parents might have gone bargain basement, but kids, it turned out, were still willing to pay up to fit in. Through this process, peer pressure emerged as a powerful market force, making the keeping-up-with-the-Joneses consumerism of their suburban parents pale by comparison. As clothing retailer Elise Decoteau said of her teen shoppers, “They run in packs. If you sell to one, you sell to everyone in their class and everyone in their school.”

There was just one catch. As the success of branding superstars like Nike had shown, it was not going to be sufficient for companies simply to market their same products to a younger demographic; they needed to fashion brand identities that would resonate with this new culture. If they were going to turn their lackluster products into transcendent meaning machines—as the dictates of branding demanded—they would need to remake themselves in the image of nineties cool: its music, styles and politics.

Cool Envy: The Brands Go Back to School

Fueled by the dual promises of branding and the youth market, the corporate sector experienced a burst of creative energy. Cool, alternative, young, hip—whatever you want to call it—was the perfect identity for product-driven companies looking to become transcendent image-based brands. Advertisers, brand managers, music, film and television producers raced back to high school, sucking up to the in-crowd in a frenzied effort to isolate and reproduce in W commercials the precise “attitude” teens and twenty-somethings were driven to consume with their snack foods and pop tunes. And as in high schools everywhere, “Am I cool?” became the deeply dull and all-consuming question of every moment, echoing not only through class and locker rooms, but through the high-powered meetings and conference calls of Corporate High.
The quest for cool is by nature riddled with self-doubt ("Is this cool?" one can hear the legions of teen shoppers nervously quizzing each other, "Do you think this is lame?") Except now the harrowing doubts of adolescence are the billion-dollar questions of our age. The insecurities go round and round the boardroom table, turning ad writers, art directors and CEOs into turbo-powered teenagers, circling in front of their bedroom mirrors trying to look blasé. Do the kids think we're cool? they want to know. Are we trying too hard to be cool, or are we really cool? Do we have attitude? The right attitude?

The Wall Street Journal regularly runs serious articles about how the trend toward wide-legged jeans or miniature backpacks is affecting the stock market. IBM, out-cooled in the eighties by Apple, Microsoft and pretty well everybody, has become fixated on trying to impress the cool kids or in the company's lingo, the “People in Black.” “We used to call them the ponytail brigade, the black turtleneck brigade,” says IBM’s David Gee, whose job it is to make Big Blue cool. “Now they’re the PIBs—People in Black. We have to be relevant to the PIBs.” For Pepe Jeans, the goal, articulated by marketing director Phil Spur, is this: “They [the cool kids] have to look at your jeans, look at your brand image and say ‘that’s cool …’ At the moment we’re ensuring that Pepe is seen in the right places and on the right people.”

The companies that are left out of the crowd of successfully hip brands—their sneakers too small, their pant-legs too tapered, their edgy ads insufficiently ironic—now skulk on the margins of society: the corporate nerds. “Coolness is still elusive for us,” says Bill Benford, president of L.A. Gear athletic wear, and one half expects him to slash his wrists like some anxious fifteen-year-old unable to face schoolyard exile for another term. No one is safe from this brutal ostracism, as Levi Strauss learned in 1998. The verdict was merciless: Levi’s didn’t have superstores like Disney, it didn’t have cool ads like the Gap, it didn’t have hip-hop credibility like Hilfiger and no one wanted to tattoo its logo on their navel, like Nike. In short, it wasn’t cool. It had failed to understand, as its new brand developer Sean Dee diagnosed, that “loose jeans is not a fad, it’s a paradigm shift.”

Cool, it seems, is the make-or-break quality in 1990s branding. It is the ironic sneer-track of ABC sitcoms and late-night talk shows; it is what sells psychedelic Internet servers, extreme sports gear, ironic watches, mind-blowing fruit juices, kitsch-laden jeans, postmodern sneakers and post-gender colognes. Our “aspirational age,” as they say in marketing studies, is about seventeen. This applies equally to the forty-seven-year-old baby boomers scared of losing their cool and the seven-year-olds kick-boxing to the Backstreet Boys.

As the mission of corporate executives becomes to imbue their companies with deep coolness, one can even foresee a time when the mandate of our elected leaders will be “Make the Country Cool.” In many ways, that time is already here. Since his
election in 1997, England’s young prime minister, Tony Blair, has been committed to changing Britain’s somewhat dowdy image to “Cool Britannia.” After attending a summit with Blair in an art-directed conference room in Canary Wharf French president Jacques Chirac said, “I’m impressed. It all gives Britain the image of a young, dynamic and modern country.” At the G-8 summit in Birmingham, Blair turned the august gathering into a basement rec room get-together, where the leaders watched All Saints music videos and then were led in a round of “All You Need Is Love”; no Nintendo games were reported. Blair is a world leader as nation stylist—but will his attempt to “rebrand Britain” really work, or will he be stuck with the old, outdated Brit brand? If anyone can do it, it’s Blair, who took a page from the marketers of Revolution Soda and successfully changed the name of his party from an actual description of its loyalties and policy proclivities (that would be “labour”) to the brand-asset descriptor “New Labour.” His is not the Labour Party but a labor-scented party.

The Change Agents: Cooling the Water Cooler

The journey to our current state of world cool almost ended, however, before it really began. Even though by 1993 there was scarcely a fashion, food, beverage or entertainment company that didn’t pine for what the youth market promised, many were at a loss as to how to get it. At the time that cool-envy hit, many corporations were in the midst of a hiring freeze, recovering from rounds of layoffs, most of which were executed according to the last-hired-first-fired policies of the late-eighties recession. With far fewer young workers on the payroll and no new ones coming up through the ranks, many corporate executives found themselves in the odd position of barely knowing anyone under thirty years old. In this stunted context, youth itself looked oddly exotic—and information about Xers, Generation Y and twenty-somethings was suddenly a most precious commodity.

Fortunately, a backlog of hungry twenty-somethings were already in the job market. Like good capitalists, many of these young workers saw a market niche: being professionally young. In so many words, they assured would-be bosses that if they were hired, hip, young countercultures would be hand-delivered at the rate of one per week; companies would be so cool, they would get respect in the scenes. They promised the youth demographic, the digital revolution, a beeline into convergence.

And as we now know, when they got the job, these conduits of cool saw no need to transform themselves into clone-ish Company Men. Many can be seen now, roaming the hallways of Fortune 500 corporations dressed like club kids, skateboard in tow. They drop references to all-night raves at the office water cooler (“Memo to the boss: why not fill this thing with ginseng-laced herbal iced tea?”). The CEOs of tomorrow aren’t employees, they are, to use a term favored at IBM, “change agents.” But are they
Fads, Fetishes, and Fun

 impostors—scheming “suits” hiding underneath hip-hop snowboarding gear? Not at all. Many of these young workers are the real deal; the true and committed product of the scenes they serve up, and utterly devoted to the transformation of their brands. Like Tom Cruise in Jerry Maguire, they stay up late into the night penning manifestos, revolutionary tracts about the need to embrace the new, to flout bureaucracy, to get on the Web or be left behind, to redo the ad campaign with a groovier, grittier feel, to change quicker, be hipper.

And what do the change agents’ bosses have to say about all this? They say bring it on, of course. Companies looking to fashion brand identities that will mesh seamlessly with the zeitgeist understand, as Marshall McLuhan wrote, “When a thing is current, it creates currency.” The change agents stroke their bosses’ middle-aged egos simply by showing up—how out of touch could the boss be with a radical like this on the same intranet system? Just look at Netscape, which no longer employs a personnel manager and instead has Margie Mader, Director of Bringing in the Cool People. When asked by Fast Company, “How do you interview for cool?” she replied, “… there are the people who just exude cool: one guy skateboarded here for his interview; another held his interview in a roller-hockey rink.” At MTV, a couple of twenty-five-year-old production assistants, both named Melissa, co-wrote a document known as the “Melissa Manifesto,” calling on the already insufferably bubbly channel to become even more so. (“We want a cleaner, brighter, more fun MTV,” was among their fearless demands.) Upon reading the tract, MTV president Judy McGrath told one of her colleagues, “I feel like blowing everybody out and putting these people in charge.” Fellow rebel Tom Freston, CEO of MTV, explains that “Judy is inherently an anti-establishment person. Anybody who comes along and says, ‘Let’s off the pig,’ has got her ear.”

Cool Hunters: The Legal Stalkers of Youth Culture

While the change agents were getting set to cool the corporate world from the inside out, a new industry of “cool hunters” was promising to cool the companies from the outside in. The major corporate cool consultancies—Sputnik, The L. Report, Bureau de Style—were all founded between 1994 and 1996, just in time to present themselves as the brands’ personal cool shoppers. The idea was simple: they would search out pockets of cutting-edge lifestyle, capture them on videotape and return to clients like Reebok, Absolut Vodka and Levi’s with such bold pronouncements as “Monks are cool.” They would advise their clients to use irony in their ad campaigns, to get surreal, to use “viral communications.”

In their book Street Trends, Sputnik founders Janine Lopiano-Misdom and Joanne De Luca concede that almost anyone can interview a bunch of young people and make generalizations, “but how do you know they are the ‘right’ ones—have you been in
their closets? Trailed their daily routines? Hung out with them socially? … Are they the core consumers, or the mainstream followers?” Unlike the market researchers who use focus groups and one-way glass to watch kids as if they were overgrown lab rats, Sputnik is “one of them”—it is in with the in-crowd.

Of course all this has to be taken with a grain of salt. Cool hunters and their corporate clients are locked in a slightly S/M, symbiotic dance: the clients are desperate to believe in a just-beyond-their-reach well of untapped cool, and the hunters, in order to make their advice more valuable, exaggerate the crisis of credibility the brands face. On the off chance of Brand X becoming the next Nike, however, many corporations have been more than willing to pay up. And so, armed with their change agents and their cool hunters, the superbrands became the perennial teenage followers, trailing the scent of cool wherever it led.

In 1974, Norman Mailer described the paint sprayed by urban graffiti artists as artillery fired in a war between the street and the establishment. “You hit your name and maybe something in the whole scheme of the system gives a death rattle. For now your name is over their name … your presence is on their Presence, your alias hangs over their scene.” Twenty-five years later, a complete inversion of this relationship has taken place. Gathering tips from the graffiti artists of old, the superbrands have tagged everyone—including the graffiti writers themselves. No space has been left unbranded.

**Hip-Hop Blows Up the Brands**

As we have seen, in the eighties you had to be relatively rich to get noticed by marketers. In the nineties, you have only to be cool. As designer Christian Lacroix remarked in *Vogue*, “It’s terrible to say, very often the most exciting outfits are from the poorest people.”

Over the past decade, young black men in American inner cities have been the market most aggressively mined by the brandmasters as a source of borrowed “meaning” and identity. This was the key to the success of Nike and Tommy Hilfiger, both of which were catapulted to brand superstardom in no small part by poor kids who incorporated Nike and Hilfiger into hip-hop style at the very moment when rap was being thrust into the expanding youth-culture limelight by MTV and *Vibe* (the first mass-market hip-hop magazine, founded in 1992). “The hip-hop nation,” write Lopiano-Misdom and De Luca in *Street Trends*, is “the first to embrace a designer or a major label, they make that label ‘big concept’ fashion. Or, in their words, they ‘blow it up.’”

Designers like Stussy, Hilfiger, Polo, DKNY and Nike have refused to crack down on the pirating of their logos for T-shirts and baseball hats in the inner cities and several of them have clearly backed away from serious attempts to curb rampant shoplifting.
By now the big brands know that profits from logowear do not just flow from the purchase of the garment but also from people seeing your logo on “the right people,” as Pepe Jeans’ Phil Spur judiciously puts it. The truth is that the “got to be cool” rhetoric of the global brands is, more often than not, an indirect way of saying “got to be black.” Just as the history of cool in America is really (as many have argued) a history of African-American culture—from jazz and blues to rock and roll to rap—for many of the superbrands, cool hunting simply means black-culture hunting. Which is why the cool hunters’ first stop was the basketball courts of America’s poorest neighborhoods.

The latest chapter in mainstream America’s gold rush to poverty began in 1986, when rappers Run-DMC breathed new life into Adidas products with their hit single “My Adidas,” a homage to their favorite brand. Already, the wildly popular rap trio had hordes of fans copying their signature style of gold medallions, black-and-white Adidas tracksuits and low-cut Adidas sneakers, worn without laces. “We’ve been wearing them all our lives,” Darryl McDaniels (aka DMC) said of his Adidas shoes at the time. That was fine for a time, but after a while it occurred to Russell Simmons, the president of Run-DMC’s label Def Jam Records, that the boys should be getting paid for the promotion they were giving to Adidas. He approached the German shoe company about kicking in some money for the act’s 1987 Together Forever tour. Adidas executives were skeptical about being associated with rap music, which at that time was alternately dismissed as a passing fad or vilified as an incitement to riot. To help change their minds, Simmons took a couple of Adidas bigwigs to a Run-DMC show. Christopher Vaughn describes the event in *Black Enterprise*: “At a crucial moment, while the rap group was performing the song [“My Adidas”], one of the members yelled out, ‘Okay, everybody in the house, rock your Adidas!’—and three thousand pairs of sneakers shot in the air. The Adidas executives couldn’t reach for their checkbooks fast enough.” By the time of the annual Atlanta sports-shoe Super Show that year, Adidas had unveiled its new line of Run-DMC shoes: the Super Star and the Ultra Star—“designed to be worn without laces.”

Since “My Adidas,” nothing in inner-city branding has been left up to chance. Major record labels like BMG now hire “street crews” of urban black youth to talk up hip-hop albums in their communities and to go out on guerilla-style poster and sticker missions. The L.A.-based Steven Rifkind Company bills itself as a marketing firm “specializing in building word-of-mouth in urban areas and inner cities.” Rifkind is CEO of the rap label Loud Records, and companies like Nike pay him hundreds of thousands of dollars to find out how to make their brands cool with trend-setting black youth.

So focused is Nike on borrowing style, attitude and imagery from black urban youth that the company has its own word for the practice: *bro-ing*. That’s when Nike
marketers and designers bring their prototypes to inner-city neighborhoods in New York, Philadelphia or Chicago and say, “Hey, bro, check out the shoes,” to gauge the reaction to new styles and to build up a buzz. In an interview with journalist Josh Feit, Nike designer Aaron Cooper described his bro-ing conversion in Harlem: “We go to the playground, and we dump the shoes out. It’s unbelievable. The kids go nuts. That’s when you realize the importance of Nike. Having kids tell you Nike is the number one thing in their life—number two is their girlfriend.” Nike has even succeeded in branding the basketball courts where it goes bro-ing through its philanthropic wing, P.L.A.Y (Participate in the Lives of Youth). P.L.A.Y sponsors inner-city sports programs in exchange for high swoosh visibility, including giant swooshes at the center of resurfaced urban basketball courts. In tonier parts of the city, that kind of thing would be called an ad and the space would come at a price, but on this side of the tracks, Nike pays nothing, and files the cost under charity.

**Tommy Hilfiger: To the Ghetto and Back Again**

Tommy Hilfiger, even more than Nike or Adidas, has turned the harnessing of ghetto cool into a mass-marketing science. Hilfiger forged a formula that has since been imitated by Polo, Nautica, Munsingwear (thanks to Puff Daddy’s fondness for the penguin logo) and several other clothing companies looking for a short cut to making it at the suburban mall with inner-city attitude.

Like a depoliticized, hyper-patriotic Benetton, Hilfiger ads are a tangle of Cape Cod multiculturalism: scrubbed black faces lounging with their windswept white brothers and sisters in that great country club in the sky, and always against the backdrop of a billowing American flag. “By respecting one another we can reach all cultures and communities,” the company says. “We promote … the concept of living the American dream.” But the hard facts of Tommy’s interracial financial success have less to do with finding common ground between cultures than with the power and mythology embedded in America’s deep racial segregation.

Tommy Hilfiger started off squarely as white-preppy wear in the tradition of Ralph Lauren and Lacoste. But the designer soon realized that his clothes also had a peculiar cachet in the inner cities, where the hip-hop philosophy of “living large” saw poor and working-class kids acquiring status in the ghetto by adopting the gear and accoutrements of prohibitively costly leisure activities, such as skiing, golfing, even boating. Perhaps to better position his brand within this urban fantasy, Hilfiger began to associate his clothes more consciously with these sports, shooting ads at yacht clubs, beaches and other nautical locales. At the same time, the clothes themselves were redesigned to appeal more directly to the hip-hop aesthetic. Cultural theorist Paul Smith describes the shift as “bolder colors, bigger and baggier styles, more hoods and cords, and more
prominence for logos and the Hilfiger name.” He also plied rap artists like Snoop Dogg with free clothes and, walking the tightrope between the yacht and the ghetto, launched a line of Tommy Hilfiger beepers.

Once Tommy was firmly established as a ghetto thing, the real selling could begin—not just to the comparatively small market of poor inner-city youth but to the much larger market of middle-class white and Asian kids who mimic black style in everything from lingo to sports to music. Company sales reached $847 million in 1998—up from a paltry $53 million in 1991 when Hilfiger was still, as Smith puts it, “Young Republican clothing.” Like so much of cool hunting, Hilfiger’s marketing journey feeds off the alienation at the heart of America’s race relations: selling white youth on their fetishization of black style, and black youth on their fetishization of white wealth.

Independent Inc.

Offering *Fortune* magazine readers advice on how to market to teenage girls, reporter Nina Munk writes that “you have to pretend that they’re running things. … Pretend you still have to be discovered. Pretend the girls are in charge.” Being a huge corporation might sell on Wall Street, but as the brands soon learned on their cool hunt, “indie” was the pitch on Cool Street. Many corporations were unfazed by this shift, coming out with faux indie brands like Politix cigarettes from Moonlight Tobacco (courtesy of Philip Morris), Dave’s Cigarettes from Dave’s Tobacco Company (Philip Morris again), Old Navy’s mock army surplus (the Gap) and OK Cola (Coke).

In an attempt to cash in on the indie marketing craze, even Coke itself, the most recognizable brand name on earth, has tried to go underground. Fearing that it was too establishment for brand-conscious teens, the company launched an ad campaign in Wisconsin that declared Coke the “Unofficial State Drink.” The campaign included radio spots that were allegedly broadcast from a pirate radio station called EKOC: Coke backward. Not to be outdone, Gap-owned Old Navy actually did launch its own pirate radio station to promote its brand—a microband transmitter that could only be picked up in the immediate vicinity of one of its Chicago billboards. And in 1999, when Levi’s decided it was high time to recoup its lost cool, it also went indie, launching Red Line jeans (no mention of Levi’s anywhere) and K-1 Khakis (no mention of Levi’s or Dockers).

Ironic Consumption: No Deconstruction Required

But Levi’s may have, once again, missed a “paradigm shift.” It hasn’t taken long for these attempts to seriously pitch the most generic of mass-produced products as punk-rock lifestyle choices to elicit sneers from those ever-elusive, trend-setting cool
kids, many of whom had already moved beyond indie by the time the brands caught on. Instead, they were now finding ways to express their disdain for mass culture not by opting out of it but by abandoning themselves to it entirely—but with a sly ironic twist. They were watching *Melrose Place*, eating surf ’n’ turf in revolving restaurants, singing Frank Sinatra in karaoke bars and sipping girly drinks in tikki bars, acts that were rendered hip and daring because, well, *they* were the ones doing them. Not only were they making a subversive statement about a culture they could not physically escape, they were rejecting the doctrinaire puritanism of seventies feminism, the earnestness of the sixties quest for authenticity and the “literal” readings of so many cultural critics. Welcome to ironic consumption. The editors of the zine *Hermenaut* articulated the recipe:

> Following the late ethnologist Michel de Certeau, we prefer to concentrate our attention on the independent use of mass culture products, a use which, like the ruses of camouflaged fish and insects, may not “overthrow the system,” but which keeps us intact and autonomous within that system, which may be the best for which we can hope. … Going to Disney World to drop acid and goof on Mickey isn’t revolutionary; going to Disney World in full knowledge of how ridiculous and evil it all is and still having a great innocent time, in some almost unconscious, even psychotic way, is something else altogether. This is what de Certeau describes as “the art of being in-between,” and this is the only path of true freedom in today’s culture. Let us then be in-between. Let us revel in Baywatch, Joe Camel, *Wired* magazine, and even glossy books about the society of spectacle [touché], but let’s never succumb to the glamorous allure of these things.

In this complicated context, for brands to be truly cool, they need to layer this uncool-equals-cool aesthetic of the ironic viewer onto their pitch: they need to self-mock, talk back to themselves while they are talking, be used and new simultaneously. And after the brands and their cool hunters had tagged all the available fringe culture, it seemed only natural to fill up that narrow little strip of unmarketed brain space occupied by irony with preplanned knowing smirks, someone else’s couch commentary and even a running simulation of the viewer’s thought patterns. “The New Trash brands,” remarks writer Nick Compton of kitsch lifestyle companies like Diesel, “offer inverted commas big enough to live, love and laugh within.”

*Pop Up Videos*, the VH1 show that adorns music videos with snarky thought bubbles, may be the endgame of this kind of commercial irony. It grabs the punchline before anyone else can get to it, making social commentary—even idle sneering—if not redundant then barely worth the expense of energy.
Irony’s cozy, protected, self-referential niche is a much better fit than attempts to earnestly pass off fruit drinks as underground rock bands or sneakers as gangsta rappers. In fact, for brands in search of cool new identities, irony and camp have become so all-purpose that they even work after the fact. It turns out that the so-bad-it's-good marketing spin can be deployed to resuscitate hopelessly uncool brands and failed cultural products. Six months after the movie *Showgirls* flopped in the theaters, for instance, MGM got wind that the sexploitation flick was doing okay on video, and not just as a quasi-respectable porno. It seemed that groups of trendy twenty-somethings were throwing *Showgirls* irony parties, laughing sardonically at the implausibly poor screenplay and shrieking with horror at the aerobic sexual encounters. Not content to pocket the video returns, MGM decided to relaunch the movie in the theaters as the next *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. This time around, the newspaper ads made no pretense that anyone had seriously admired the film. Instead, they quoted from the abysmal reviews, and declared *Showgirls* an “instant camp classic” and “a rich sleazy kitsch-fest.” The studio even hired a troupe of drag queens for the New York screenings to holler at the crowd with bullhorns during particularly egregious cinematic moments.

With the tentacles of branding reaching into every crevice of youth culture, leaching brand-image content not only out of street styles like hip-hop but psychological attitudes like ironic detachment, the cool hunt has had to go further afield to find unpilfered space and that left only one frontier: the past.

What is retro, after all, but history re-consumed with a PepsiCo tie-in, and breath-mint and phone-card brand extensions? As the re-release of *Lost in Space*, the *Star Wars* trilogy, and the launch of *The Phantom Menace* made clear, the mantra of retro entertainment seems to be “Once more with synergy!” as Hollywood travels back in time to cash in on merchandising opportunities beyond the imagination of yesterday’s marketers.

**Sell or Be Sold**

After almost a decade of the branding frenzy, cool hunting has become an internal contradiction: the hunters must rarefy youth “microworlces” by claiming that only full-time hunters have the know-how to unearth them—or else why hire cool hunters at all? Sputnik warns its clients that if the cool trend is “visible in your neighborhood or crowding your nearest mall, the learning is over. It’s too late. ... You need to get down with the streets, to be in the trenches every day.” And yet this is demonstrably false; so-called street fashions—many of them planted by brandmasters like Nike and Hilfiger from day one—reach the ballooning industry of glossy youth-culture magazines and video stations without a heartbeat’s delay. And if there is one thing virtually every young person now knows, it’s that street style and youth culture are infinitely marketable commodities.
Besides, even if there was a lost indigenous tribe of cool a few years back, rest assured that it no longer exists. It turns out that the prevailing legalized forms of youth stalking are only the tip of the iceberg: the Sputnik vision for the future of hip marketing is for companies to hire armies of Sputnik spawns—young “street promoters,” “Net promoters” and “street distributors” who will hype brands one-on-one on the street, in the clubs and on-line. “Use the magic of peer-to-peer distribution—it worked in the freestyle sport cultures, mainly because the promoters were their friends. … Street promoting will survive as the only true means of personally ‘spreading the word.’” So all arrows point to more jobs for the ballooning industry of “street snitches,” certified representatives of their demographic who will happily become walking infomercials for Nike, Reebok and Levi’s.

By fall 1998 it had already started to happen with the Korean car manufacturer Daewoo hiring two thousand college students on two hundred campuses to talk up the cars to their friends. Similarly, Anheuser-Busch keeps troops of U.S. college frat boys and “Bud Girls” on its payroll to promote Budweiser beer at campus parties and bars. The vision is both horrifying and hilarious: a world of glorified diary trespassers and professional eavesdroppers, part of a spy-vs.-spy corporate-fueled youth culture stalking itself, whose members will videotape one another’s haircuts and chat about their corporate keepers’ cool new products in their grassroots newsgroups.

Rock-and-Roll CEOs

There is an amusing irony in the fact that so many of our captains of industry pay cool hunters good money to lead them on the path to brand-image nirvana. The true barometers of hip are not the hunters, the postmodern admen, the change agents or even those trendy teenagers they’re all madly chasing. They are the CEOs themselves, who are, for the most part, so damn rich that they can afford to stay on top of all the coolest culture trends. Guys like Diesel Jeans founder Renzo Rosso, who, according to Business Week “rides to work on a Ducati Monster motorcycle.” Or Nike’s Phil Knight, who only took off his ever-present wraparound Oakley sunglasses after Oakley CEO Jim Jannard refused to sell him the company. Or famed admen Dan Wieden and David Kennedy who built a basketball court—complete with bleachers—in their corporate headquarters. Or Virgin’s Richard Branson, who launched a London bridal store in a wedding dress, rappelled off the roof of his new Vancouver megastore while uncorking a bottle of champagne and then later crash-landed in the Algerian desert in his hot-air balloon—all during the month of December 1996. These CEOs are the new rock stars—and why shouldn’t they be? Forever trailing the scent of cool, they are full-time, professional teenagers, but unlike real teenagers, they have nothing to distract them from the hot pursuit of the edge: no homework, puberty, college-entrance exams or curfews for them.
Getting Over It

As we will see later on, the sheer voracity of the corporate cool hunt did much to provoke the rise of brand-based activism: through adbusting, computer hacking and spontaneous illegal street parties, young people all over the world are aggressively reclaiming space from the corporate world, “un-branding” it, guerrilla-style. But the effectiveness of the cool hunt also set the stage for anticorporate activism in another way: inadvertently, it exposed the impotence of almost all other forms of political resistance except anti-corporate resistance, one cutting-edge marketing trend at a time.

When the youth-culture feeding frenzy began in the early nineties, many of us who were young at the time saw ourselves as victims of a predatory marketing machine that co-opted our identities, our styles and our ideas and turned them into brand food. Nothing was immune: not punk, not hip-hop, not fetish, not techno—not even, as I’ll get to in Chapter 5, campus feminism or multiculturalism. Few of us asked, at least not right away, why it was that these scenes and ideas were proving so packageable, so unthreatening—and so profitable. Many of us had been certain we were doing something subversive and rebellious but … what was it again?

In retrospect, a central problem was the mostly unquestioned assumption that just because a scene or style is different (that is, new and not yet mainstream), it necessarily exists in opposition to the mainstream, rather than simply sitting unthreateningly on its margins. Many of us assumed that “alternative”—music that was hard to listen to, styles that were hard to look at—was also anticommercial, even socialist. In Hype!, a documentary about how the discovery of “the Seattle sound” transformed a do-it-yourself hardcore scene into an international youth-culture-content factory, Pearl Jam’s Eddie Vedder makes a rather moving speech about the emptiness of the “alternative” breakthrough of which his band was so emblematic:

> If all of this influence that this part of the country has and this musical scene has—if it doesn’t do anything with it, that would be the tragedy. If it doesn’t do anything with it like make some kind of change or make some kind of difference, this group of people who feel this certain way, who think these sorts of things that the underdogs we’ve all met and lived with think—if they finally get to the forefront and nothing comes out of it, that would be the tragedy.

But that tragedy has already happened, and Vedder’s inability to spit out what he was actually trying to say had more than a little to do with it. When the world’s cameras were turned on Seattle, all we got were a few anti-establishment fuck-yous, a handful of overdoses and Kurt Cobain’s suicide. We also got the decade’s most spectacular “sellout”—Courtney Love’s awe-inspiring sail from junkie punk queen to high-fashion cover girl in a span of two years. It seemed Courtney had been playing dress-up all
along. What was revealing was how little it mattered. Did Love betray some karmic debt she owed to smudged eyeliner? To not caring about anything and shooting up? To being surly to the press? Don’t you need to buy in to something earnestly before you can sell it out cynically?

Seattle imploded precisely because no one wanted to answer questions like those, and yet in the case of Cobain, and even Vedder, many in its scene possessed a genuine, if malleable, disdain for the trappings of commercialism. What was “sold out” in Seattle, and in every other subculture that has had the misfortune of being spotlighted by the cool hunters, was some pure idea about doing it yourself, about independent labels versus the big corporations, about not buying in to the capitalist machine. But few in that scene bothered to articulate these ideas out loud, and Seattle—long dead and forgotten as anything but a rather derivative fad—now serves as a cautionary tale about why so little opposition to the theft of cultural space took place in the early to mid-nineties. Trapped in the headlights of irony and carrying too much pop-culture baggage, not one of its antiheroes could commit to a single, solid political position.

A similar challenge is now being faced by all those ironic consumers out there—a cultural suit of armor many of us are loath to critique because it lets us feel smug while watching limitless amounts of bad TV. Unfortunately, it's tough to hold on to that subtle state of de Certeau's “in-betweenness” when the eight-hundred-pound culture industry gorilla wants to sit next to us on the couch and tag along on our ironic trips to the mall. That art of being in-between, of being ironic, or camp, which Susan Sontag so brilliantly illuminated in her 1964 essay “Notes on Camp,” is based on an essential cliquiness, a club of people who get the aesthetic puns. “To talk about camp is therefore to betray it,” she acknowledges at the beginning of the essay, selecting the format of enumerated notes rather than a narrative so as to tread more lightly on her subject, one that could easily have been trampled with too heavy an approach.

Since the publication of Sontag’s piece, camp has been quantified, measured, weighed, focus-grouped and test-marketed. To say it has been betrayed, as Sontag had feared, is an understatement of colossal dimensions. What’s left is little more than a vaguely sarcastic way to eat Pizza Pops. Camp cannot exist in an ironic commercial culture in which no one is fully participating and everyone is an outsider inside their clothes, because, as Sontag writes, “In naive, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails.”

Much of the early camp culture that Sontag describes involved using an act of imagination to make the marginal—even the despised—glamorous and fabulous. Drag queens, for instance, took their forced exile and turned it into a ball, with all the trappings of the Hollywood balls to which they would never be invited. The same can even be said of Andy Warhol. The man who took the world on a camping trip was a refugee from bigoted small-town America; the Factory became his sovereign
state. Sontag proposed camp as a defense mechanism against the banality, ugliness and overearnestness of mass culture. “Camp is the modern dandyism. Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture.” Only now, some thirty-five years later, we are faced with the vastly more difficult question, How to be truly critical in an age of mass camp?

Or perhaps it is not that difficult. Yes, the cool hunters reduce vibrant cultural ideas to the status of archeological artifacts, and drain away whatever meaning they once held for the people who lived with them—but this has always been the case. It’s a cinch to co-opt a style; and it has been done many times before, on a much grander scale than the minor takeover of drag and grunge. Bauhaus modernism, for example, had its roots in the imaginings of a socialist utopia free of garish adornment, but it was almost immediately appropriated as the relatively inexpensive architecture of choice for the glass-and-steel skyscrapers of corporate America.

On the other hand, though style-based movements are stripped of their original meanings time and time again, the effect of this culture vulturing on more politically grounded movements is often so ludicrous that the most sensible reaction is just to laugh it off. The spring 1998 Prada collection, for instance, borrowed heavily from the struggle of the labor movement. As “supershopper” Karen von Hahn reported from Milan, “The collection, a sort of Maoist/Soviet-worker chic full of witty period references, was shown in a Prada-blue room in the Prada family palazzo to an exclusive few.” She adds, “After the show, the small yet ardent group of devotees tossed back champagne cocktails and canapés while urbane jazz played in the background.” Mao and Lenin also make an appearance on a Spring 1999 handbag from Red or Dead. Yet despite these clear co-optations of the class struggle, one hardly expects the labor movements of the world to toss in the towel in a huff, give up on their demands for decent working conditions and labor standards worldwide because Mao is suddenly the It Boy in Milan. Neither are union members everywhere accepting wage rollbacks because Pizza Hut aired a commercial in which the boss delivers pizzas to a picket line and all anti-management animosity is abandoned in favor of free food.

The Tibetan people in the West seem similarly nonplussed by their continued popularity with the Beastie Boys, Brad Pitt and designer Anna Sui, who was so moved by their struggle that she made an entire line of banana-print bikini tops and surfer shorts inspired by the Chinese occupation (Women’s Wear Daily dubbed the Tibet line “techno beach blanket bingo”). More indifference has met Apple computers’ appropriation of Gandhi for their “Think Different” campaign, and Che Guevara’s reincarnation as the logo for Revolution Soda (slogan: “Join the Revolution”; see image on page 62) and as the mascot of the upscale London cigar lounge, Che. Why? Because not one of the movements being “co-opted” expressed itself primarily through style or attitude. And
so style co-optation—and indeed any outside-the-box brain-storming on Madison Avenue—does not have the power to undo them either.

It may seem cold comfort, but now that we know advertising is an extreme sport and CEOs are the new rock stars, it’s worth remembering that extreme sports are not political movements and rock, despite its historic claims to the contrary, is not revolution. In fact, to determine whether a movement genuinely challenges the structures of economic and political power, one need only measure how affected it is by the goings-on in the fashion and advertising industries. If, even after being singled out as the latest fad, it continues as if nothing had happened, it’s a good bet it is a real movement. If it spawns an industry of speculation about whether movement X has lost its “edge,” perhaps its adherents should be looking for a sharper utensil. And as we will soon see, that is exactly what many young activists are in the process of doing.
As with first names, internal mechanisms and external forces make both change and stability part of the goods story. Parallel to the strain any of us can feel about whether to change job, car, or diet, forces in the artifact system simultaneously augur for stability as well as for doing something new. Tension is everywhere and probably always has been.

Even the bugaboo of “fashion”—a never-ending flux of socially mandated change—has been around quite a while. Just how long? Some point, usually accusatorily, to the rise of couture in the late nineteenth century—when “dictate” from Parisian ateliers created yearnings for the new.1 But earlier dates are also cited, starting when mass manufacture made consumer goods plentiful enough for people to use commodities to follow trends and distinguish themselves from others; fashion textile prints were widespread in the late eighteenth century.2 And still earlier dates surface: fashion magazines showed up in Paris in 1677. Earlier still, French royal courts stimulated change in furnishings and dress, with each successive monarch setting off new styles.3 About 1350 European men’s jackets grew shorter—a fashion change, the historian Fernand Braudel calls it.4

To the east, a surviving Chinese document from 1301 A.D. contains advice as to what kind of writing brushes, ink, and hardwood furniture one should properly have, including recognition of what we would consider a vogue for emulating others.5 Artisans of the late Chinese Ming dynasty (sixteenth century) created porcelain and silks, a world of

“superfluous things” in a “relentlessly fluid game of emulation.” Evidently “the ferocious pursuit of getting and spending has a long history. The feverish pursuit of fashion is just as ancient,” says Neil McKendrick after decades of study in the history of consumption. All this makes a search for “the beginning” seems pointless; there may never have been a time of unchanging objects locked in the “still waters of ancient situations.”

One cause of change, forceful in any era, is contact among strangers and groups, whether coerced in conquest or more voluntarily in trade, intergroup mating, or happenstance. Some now “classic” Greek motifs arose from contact with Pharaonic Egypt, as did more basic changes in design and construction technology. Within Greece, the architectural motif of the acanthus plant (used atop the Corinthian column) evolved in this way from simpler to more complex forms to yield what we now take to be their classic shapes. The Greeks’ and Romans’ foreign exploits brought them not just design motifs to imitate, but the convenience of slaves, which also affected their goods. Togas, which themselves were a fashion item—they varied by weave and material as well as by clasps that changed in elaborate ways—made the left hand largely useless. This feature could work only when others were available to do hard labor and to serve. Access to slaves and the toga, along with body stance and mode of gesture, made up a coherent configuration—lash-up of body, costume, and social organization. As access to “help” waxes and wanes among specific groups, their stuff changes.

Whether in contemporary design studios or ancient craft settings, the creators have their own pecking orders of emulation, based on personal and professional admiration and disdain. Anthropologists report that Luo potters (people in the Lake Victoria region of Africa) would add a motif used by an especially popular potter to their repertoires, just as a personal antagonism led them to deliberate differentiation. Change also happens because of human limitations in ability to mimic one another and conform to those traditions they value. As with parents who choose wrongly in trying to provide their child with a common name—because its time may be up just at that moment—people are limited in their capacities to imitate other conventions of their time and place. Given the large number of items, motifs, and ideas that exist even in so-called simple societies, reproduction is a challenge, one bound to small errors or even large mishap. Imagining unchanging style presumes that people can unproblematically categorize just what fits or does not fit the canon of their moment. This is a doubtful proposition, given changes in weather, membership, personality, technologies, and contact. Every instance is a chance to get it wrong; as a single new detail gains acceptance, ramifications occur in other parts of the composition that also need adjusting.

Commentators easily exaggerate similarities within bygone groups—at the extreme putting human figures in natural history museum dioramas “as a changeless natural species.” Also not helping matters is the tendency for the “indigenous” tourist industry to select certain artifacts as the essence of the traditional and to churn them out as
souvenirs. Malinowski reported difficulty in appreciating the small differences in Kula people’s goods that made them more or less valuable in trade—it “took a connoisseur’s eye to spot the differences.”

It makes a good thought experiment: What would future excavators from a culture that did not use chairs (or blouses or computers) make of them if unearthed in the absence of contemporary commentaries, advertisements, and other documentation? If the discovering people found them utterly strange and useless, it might take some special subtlety to see the kinds of evolving differences that mean so much in today’s context. A “traditional” artifact (or event) is only “traditional” when, Gell puts it, “viewed from a latter-day perspective.”

Change itself can be part of a venerated tradition. Tamil women used colored and white powders (some still do) to create home threshold floor “paintings” every morning to honor the cobra deity of fertility, and in their mazelike complexity, ward off or ensnare demons. Within this genre, thousands of variations arise in response to fashion as well as convention. In “traditional” Bali, dance was and still is a basis of competition among village troupes, and innovations are made continually in moves and stances. Indigenous American peoples such as the Yurok-Karon of northwestern California worked the twigs, roots, and grasses of their baskets into a never-ending variation of new styles, which they recognized as passing fads and which did not detract from more constant designs they also used at the same time. Slaves in the U.S. South dyed their plain rough clothing with bark from local trees and found ways to create ornamentation on their bodies and headgear. As with other poor people in their era, they apparently responded to the local social currents, purchasing such goods as tea, buckles, and velvet with their meager resources. From whatever combination of forces, slavery—according to one historian—“helped create a people keenly interested in fashion, intensely aware of personal style, and fervently committed to expressiveness in their everyday life.” Prisoners and soldiers struggle to adjust and modify their uniforms; Mennonite women manipulate collars, cuffs, and buttons to resist conformity.

For Veblen himself, “no class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, forgoes all conspicuous consumption” or deny themselves “all gratification of this higher or spiritual need.” Veblen’s complaint was that anonymity under modern conditions increases the conspicuous waste of goods. But contemporary extravagance, distinct in volume and material waste, is not evidence—even for Veblen—of radical break. Newness, just for the sake of the new, “serves to detach the grip of the past in a moving world.” “To introduce difference,” as Bourdieu says, “is to produce time.” That is a good basis for thinking fashion is not news. If goods did not change so quickly in the past as they now do, this probably less reflects any essential psychological or fundamental difference in the way of doing things than limits in technology and opportunity.

Just as there was more change among past peoples than often meets the eye, so there is more stability in the modern world than might be thought. Individual choices
change gradually, as when “new” first names build on old first names—adding the “lyn” sound to the more common “Mary,” for example. And some names, even in the United States, like “John,” remain over generations. A given product does not easily pass away just because of changing whims or even if some other item performs the same task in a better way. The Gem paper clip has been around since the late nineteenth century and shows no sign of letting up, even in the face of innovations, including colored plastic versions (less likely to dent paper or rust), and the advent of the stapler. The Gem clip has become familiar enough to be workable to large numbers of people, to have encouraged cheap methods of fabrication, and to have prompted other uses—such as a place marker or wire tool for retrieving diskettes from computer drives. It has become a handy friend and virtually defines the product type. Nor did the computer do in the paper clip—or paper or file cabinets. The “paperless office” was a chimera; computer users need the security of hard copy, and they use the computer to produce even more of it. This is not to say, of course, that once something exists, it inevitably becomes permanent. But changing one thing means having to have other things change as well, including fears and enthusiasms. All the past mutual enrollments press to keep something if not as it always was, then at least not that different from before. The system has inertia. If anything, the denser array of enrollments that come with a richly complex society may increase inertia rather than decrease it.

The inertia we see in the paper clip—or goods that last “only” a decade or generation, like the Toastmaster IB-14 pop-up—corresponds to the parallel phenomena at a deep cognitive level. People think in blends, and goods also come in blends. We can imagine these composites—consistent with archaeological ideas on the linkage of form and function—as styles. Style means recognizable coherence among things that are at least somewhat distinct in what they do and how they appear. For my purposes, style is both the actions of people who make things cohere and the visible achievements of that activity. Style provides stability in that individual items are not free to change willy-nilly on their own; they have to work within a larger context of how things are done and get recognized. Clinician Oliver Sacks says that this aspect of style involved in recognizing coherence and adhering to it “is neurologically, the deepest part of one’s being, and may be preserved, almost to the last, in a dementia” (he is speaking of actual Alzheimer’s cases). The philosopher John Dewey pointed out generations ago that “habits” free us to entertain innovation. It is reasonable that people should, at least on some occasions and in regard to some objects, expect the material fodder of personal and social habits to “keep still.”

Plausibly enough, then, when things do change, there are forces at work that cause the change to be gradual and small, rather than sudden and large. The close study of changes in surface decoration and images on Polynesian artifacts indicates they underwent only minor variations over time. For example, creators may reverse a stick-figure
leg design by pointing feet inward rather than outward. Motifs change in this modest way, evolving along “axes of coherence.”27 It happens like this across different types of objects as well as over time, for example when a decorative element travels from a ceramic pipe to a small bowl to a larger one and then an urn. Working under what Gell called the “principle of least difference,” successive innovations involve “the least modification of neighboring motifs consistent with the establishment of a distinction between them.”28 So new styles emerge from prior styles. The results are not unlike the marginal differentiation once associated with U.S. car maker’ annual design changes. In the words of a designer I spoke with, “we edit here.”

Even within couture and high fashion, where radical change is often thought to be de rigueur, year-to-year style alterations are subtle adjustments of prior versions. This is what appears true from a systematic comparison of high-style women’s clothing over the period from 1760 to 1960.29 Thus even fashion change corresponds more to the principle of least difference than to radical shift. Any designer must, in product design pioneer Henry Dreyfuss’s words, “be able to anticipate the public’s desires, yet guard against being too far ahead.”30 Once again, this does not mean that some “fashion forward” producers, for example in a realm like couture, do not sometimes try (and succeed) in shocking.31 But when they do so they are creating artistic spectacle, not clothes people will wear—and even the shocks are in line with aesthetic fashion of that world and what the first adopters will find almost practical. The avant-garde deploys just the right kind of outrage that will sell their more conventional goods on the racks.

Small variations, however limited in their scale, do mean a lot. What, after all, could Marilyn Monroe have done with a name like “Mary Monroe”? A furniture company rep in the LA Design Center waxed eloquent to me on the innovative use of a single oval covered button on the back of an upholstered chair as setting it apart from “what everyone else is doing.”32 Details in merchandise, as in conversation, diction, and body movements, are seen even when they are not noticed—“unspeakably significant,”33 in Balzac’s characterization of what he thought of as the moral universe of merchandise specifics. So it is that while contemporary commentators can so easily perceive change in the familiar world around them, they miss the small variations that happen among people who are distant.

Type Form: Some Specifics of Stability

Designers notice that most items—cars, houses, and bathtubs—achieve a widely accepted “type form,” as some of them call it. Consistent with the least difference principle, people resist variations that depart too strongly from what they think “a thing like that” ought to be. Although designers may at times balk at what they take as overly rigid expectations, they know type form well as something to work with or at least work around.
Adherence to type form is a reason that new products often “unnecessarily” resemble a prior item that performed a similar function. Hence the first cars looked like carriages without horses; Benz called his first version the “oil spirit motor tricycle,” and it had three wheels in tricycle format. Archaeologists call functionally unnecessary imitation “skeuomorphism.” A familiar case is the architectural dentil adorning the cornice of Greek buildings and persisting in neoclassical architecture. Though they play no functional role in buildings of stone, they mimic the familiar protruding ends of wood joists and helped bring acceptance for the “new” material, becoming an essential element of the classical style. Another architectural example is the layout of the House of Commons; it replicated the choir section of the Royal Chapel that Parliament had “borrowed” from the Royals for its first meetings. The building burned down several times, but in each instance the replacement repeated the original scheme—in this case, one not exactly functional for parliamentary use in the first place. What was originally, in today’s language, an “adaptive reuse,” came not just to define the British parliamentary environment, but sanctify it.

Type form particularly constrains products that consumers do not often replace—what are called “slow turn” goods. Even small variations may find resistance when people plan to buy only one model over a generation. When people purchase a bathtub, they know it may be for a lifetime, so they choose one with a prior satisfactory history. Slow turn generates conservative design. Various products fall on different points of the fast-slow continuum. Automobiles turn faster than, say, farm machinery. In clothing and music CDs, stuff is cheap enough to generate very fast turn. Entry is easy for new producers who are quick to respond to changing tastes and consumers are ready to take chances with a fresh approach. But even in realms of fast turn, subcategories can have highly developed type form. Despite efforts by the formalwear industry to encourage novelty, men who own tuxedos do not wear them often enough to justify the expense of variety. This means the one in the closet needs to be conservative. At the other end of the sartorial spectrum, Levi “501” jeans also became a standard retail item for decades—a virtual fetish. It led to countless “jeans-like” imitations, but always revolving around the Levi original. Other standards include khaki pants and skirts and the Izod cotton pique knit shirt (the one with the alligator); the Land’s End imitation alone sold more than 10 million copies, although with evolving color variations.

Cognitive Limits
A first constraint on change comes from human beings’ cognitive limits; if objects are to serve as the mental landmarks that allow thinking to occur, everything cannot be in continuous flux. In a more everyday way than we are sometimes consciously aware, there is limited time to learn new tricks. I suspect there is a better software program
than the one I use to handle the citations in this reading, but I am not going to take it on at this stage of my writing.

These limits translate into goods production. The oft-cited historic example is the QWERTY keyboard that, despite its ergonomic and speed inefficiency, just goes on like John. Typewriter keyboards are built into people’s fingers and minds through rote training—there are no mnemonic devices for figuring out how it works. Mastery is not to be given up lightly. Hence when the computer came along, it had to fit the old order—the skills and customs bequeathed by prior goods’ configuration. In the contrasting case of touch-tone telephones, the adding machine was the keyboard precedent, one with a bottom-up array (lowest numbers at the keyboard base). But since few had mastered the adding machine and because it takes less effort to learn the relevant skills anyway, Bell Telephone could switch to a top-down layout when replacing the old dial mechanism with a keypad version. In the early history of home radio, push-button controls dominated, rather than toggle switches or pull levers, despite what some have argued was their inferiority in dealing with signal drift. People may similarly prefer analog to digital indicators on things like dashboard gauges because they are cognitively accustomed to the old-style movements. And that may be enough to keep them in use.

**Cultural Meanings**

Another kind of stickiness comes from cultural meanings, “cultural” in the sense of an identifiable social group’s shared orientation of how things should be. Analogous to the traditions in various societies of naming children from a small repertoire drawn from deceased relatives, religious artifacts tend to resist change. Although books in general are fast turn, Bibles are not and resist alteration of type-form. Bible publishers avoid contemporary graphics, experiments in formatting (oversize or cutouts, or odd-shaped pages) or novelty treatments like scratch ‘n sniff. Ceremonial goods in general tend in the same direction—think of wedding dresses. People insist their wine come in glass bottles with a cork top, despite the fact that paperlike cartons can keep a vintage equally well—they were tried but failed in the marketplace. Plain metal screw tops (with plastic liners, of the type used on only cheap drink) are better to keep bottled wine from going bad, but people resist buying wine that way. Adhering to the principle of least difference, some wine makers are replacing real cork with cork-colored plastic versions that can be removed only with corkscrews. It’s less convenient than screw tops but keeps the ceremonial aspect alive.

Particular cultural contexts affect the nature of type form in different ways. British bathroom spigots or taps, as they call them, are a mystery for Americans and many others in the world. Still in the new millennium, separate, unconnected hot and cold
“pillar taps” account for the majority of sales. Hot comes out of one side of the sink and cold out of the other. In using British sinks, I rush to get my business done under the “hot” during those few moments before the scalding sets in. I know the approved method is to stop up the sink or tub and fill with appropriate proportions of hot and cold to get the right mix. Presuming there is a stopper around, this takes time and if the solution turns out too hot, one loses more time making adjustments, including the pain of reaching into hot water to retrieve the stopper. From a resource point of view, this system loses hot water down the drain and cold water to rebalance the mixture. When I asked a friend in London why he preferred separate taps over what the British call the “mixer tap” he fell back on a cognitive, rather than cultural, explanation: “You know where you are.” Others insisted U.K. plumbing was incompatible with mixer taps. I pursued such explanations at the British Bathroom Council, two British designers of bath fixtures, and several bath fixture shops. There is no technical constraint. The stores sell mixer taps or pillar taps based on people’s sense of fashion and whim. Customers do not discuss their infrastructure circumstance, nor is it relevant for them to be asked. Unconnected pillar taps persist as a matter of style preference, maybe reflecting a vogue for “Edwardian looks” in the bath.

Besides national difference, type-form content often varies among groups in other ways, including by gender. So we end up with pink for girls and blue for boys, large and heavy for males (or larger number of controls and knobs), even when there is no clear functional reason. Bell Telephone made its “princess phone” diminutive not because women have smaller ears or fingers; they did not need to service gender, they needed to signal it. Motorbikes, like the Harley Davidson, are deliberately loud with exposed engine parts to help provide an “exaggerated look of fierce power”—a “mechanical sexism,” in Dick Hebdige’s phrase. In contrast, motor scooters are marketed to women as well as men and have their engines “dressed” (that is, enclosed). Italian maker Lambretta quickly discontinued its “undressed” 1951 model because of poor sales. As a matter of type form, and linked to gender, motorbikes come undressed and motor scooters dressed. Women’s bicycles, with the dropped frames originally designed to handle large skirts, are more easily mounted by anybody—and also offer more comfortable rides. But now, even with the heavy skirts gone, men do not go near the dropped frame. Females often use the male diamond form frame, as for competitive racing, but the “girl’s bike”—like girls’ names—stigmatize those of the opposite sex. They thus remain gendered, and hence when bikes are done up in pastels and with feminine baskets, they are of the dropped-frame variety.

Cultural context and historic time influence how color and texture play into type form. The popularization of the germ theory of disease led to a new anxiety of cleanliness, prompting appliance makers to sheath kitchen equipment and bathroom fixtures in white porcelain. When hard-scrubbed to a high gleam, such shiny whiteness could
proclaim family protection. Some of these goods have since gone through stylistic changes (pastels hit big in the ’50s, followed by—in rough U.S. sequence—avocado, harvest gold, gleaming black, brushed steel). The bathtub is an especially hard case of germ consciousness. Its obdurate surface, of whatever color, provides cold, hard discomfort and is a frequent cause of injury and death. Softer, resilient plastic tubs have been unable to find a good market. Compromised plastic versions, still rather hard, are used in more down-market settings to save money—a case of the less well off having a safer experience than the affluent.

White can have other meanings; it signifies mourning in some parts of the world. Black also varies, connoting death in Europe but rebirth in Egypt. Red is a favorite for sports cars in the United States, but doesn’t work well in China, where red is the color for mourning and is politically charged. Splashes of color can be used to imply “fun” in products; in the mid-1990s I was told that Spaniards prefer such goods (and also amusing shapes, like a steam iron with ears). Americans want black on black in their high-fidelity equipment, which once was the preference among Germans, who later moved on to a small use of color (like a spot of red) amid the black.

Type form also has sound that varies across cultures and product. Compared, for example, to Japanese, Americans typically have high tolerance for loud products—their dishwashers, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners make more noise than those in other countries. While larger houses allow Americans to distance themselves from whirring motors, they may take loudness as evidence of serious capability (the Harley effect). On the other hand, Europeans, according to a GM official explaining their taste for stick shifts, “prefer the acoustic acceleration experience, whereas for Americans the big selling point is a quiet car.” But not for all car models; Chrysler made its 1963 turbine cars deliberately louder to imply jetlike speed.

Type form also has touch; besides the hard smoothness of tubs, each part of the car has a specifically favored feel (and sound). So it goes across the goods: pens can be, depending on time and place, hard or a bit soft but not sticky; refrigerator handles must not feel warm; keyboard keys ought to be springy. Sensations of slime or anything resembling the texture of human wastes seems wrong for any product among virtually all peoples.

**Talkability and Taboo**

Products differ in their “talkability”; some goods, or at least their key attributes, appear to be unspeakable in any culture. This greatly reinforces type form because marketers cannot tout features and users do not spread word informally. In the extreme case of the toilet, marketers cannot discuss what the product actually does (even the word “toilet” is not used). So they bring up aesthetics and water savings. The closest I’ve
seen advertisers come to a straightforward toilet pitch is in an ad by the global maker “Toto,” which carried the headline: “Its FORM speaks to those with an eye for beauty. Its FUNCTION speaks to those whose eyes are floating [sic].” Given this peculiar way of having to talk, there is little incentive for toilet designers to develop a functionally superior product. Indeed if the resulting product would look off type form, there would be no way to explain why, and consumers would avoid it (toilet accessories, like plungers, carry a similar liability).

But clearly, there are reasonable alternatives to the toilet as we know it. The so-called Turkish toilet, which requires a squatting position, is ergonomically superior and more sanitary. “Thighs against abdomen provide the stomach muscles with the support they need for pushing action,” according to a closely reasoned analysis. Less skin touches what others have touched and with less chance of contact with fecal matter. But toilets of any sort have their own lash-up, including a forbidding discourse of distaste and ribaldry. To change toilets would require discussion of how the body works, the need for a different physical approach and sense of dignity. Clothing would also have to change so that lower-body garments could function without becoming soiled; plumbing infrastructure might also need to change. An effort, unsuccessful, was made to adapt to all this in a modest way by adding raised footrests and configuring handholds to existing models to make squatting possible over a conventional toilet.

Across industrial Europe, toilets keep their idiosyncratic liabilities and benefits (for those who can handle it, some unspeakable pros and cons of various toilets are listed in the footnote at the end of this sentence). There are indeed some superior features that might serve global needs if there was a way for them to travel. A Swedish toilet separates urine and feces in the plumbing system. Relatively harmless, urine becomes immediately useful as fertilizer (merely diluted 10:1 with water before application). Some Swedish toilets use dry systems to deal with feces. Certain Japanese toilets are, in effect, combination sink-toilets. Pressing the flush lever simultaneously sends clean water out of the spigot on top, drawn from the building’s water supply while releasing the tank water to flush away the waste. The sink water then runs down into the tank ready to flush away the next user’s deposit. This means that people can wash their hands before touching anything besides the toilet itself (like the release door lever of a public stall). The toilet’s automatic recycle of the water used for hand washing is an ecological gain. Other Japanese toilets (Italian ones, too) have separate controls to unleash a heavier wash for solid excrement than for urine. Some have heated seats or upward sprays that rinse body parts. But none of these advantages can easily move beyond national borders.

Taboo more subtly affects a wider range of products, like the French bidet, which plumbing fixture companies have long tried to transfer to the United States and Britain. Besides their enhancement of women’s personal hygiene and use as a contraceptive aid, they are good for rinsing feet, bathing babies, and have their “especial value to the many
who suffer from hemorrhoids.” New York’s Ritz Carlton Hotel installed them at the beginning of the twentieth century, but protesting crusaders, considering them immoral, forced removal. Other goods related to human wastes (toilet paper, wipes) as well as any sex products (whips, vibrators, condoms, and dildoes) also engender circumspection.

Some products are more than mentionable; people may enjoy giving consumer tips to one another on computer equipment or sports gear and feel free to spontaneously comment on a new jacket or sofa. Lots of things are midrange. Washing machines are kept relatively apart—both physically in the utility room and topically out of dinner parties—because they are just not interesting in social life (which is why TV ads with homemakers going on and on about their clean wash seem comically forced). That likely helps sustain top-loader tub versions within the United States, even though European diagonal axis models are quieter and use less water.

In societies where death is taboo, the specifics of burial products cannot come up. Undertakers thus face challenges when trying to introduce new artifacts like jewelry to hold human ashes (offered by CEI/BACO in Aurora, Illinois) or molten glass sculpture incorporating cremation remains (marketed by Companion Star of Hinsdale, Illinois). But the silences do provide undertakers with special advantages in selling extravagant products that do conform to type form. Goods associated with infirmity and disease are often off-limits for casual banter, making it hard for remedial products to easily respond to changing taste systems or even functional needs. Hence things like wheelchairs and crutches were produced in neutral colors and conservative forms—their applications tinged with the closet. The same is true for the larger array of tools and equipment used by sick people—bedpans, urine flasks, and colostomy pouches (the latter made to be imperceptible on the body). Those who end up needing such goods—often unexpectedly—have little foreknowledge that might influence market demand. The stigma shapes the goods and inhibits them from changing.

Prior Configurations and Tipping Points

Previously established products and physical infrastructure thwart innovation and hold type form. To put a train on U.S. tracks, its wheels need to span the standard 56 and a half inches, a convention that Americans adopted from the British rail system. That standard derived, in turn, from the road ruts inscribed by the Romans two millennia before. The Roman road measurements stemmed from the rear-end widths of the two horses pulling war chariots. Now it turns out the same dimension carries into the solid rocket boosters used to launch the U.S. space shuttle. The boosters had to be shipped from the Thiokol Corporation’s Utah factory by rail—which required that they be sized to fit through rail tunnels configured for the standard gauge. There could have been a better railroad—maybe even a better booster rocket. An 84-and-one-quarter-
inch-gauge system did come into being at one time in England. It allowed train wheels to be larger, permitting an increase in train speed of about 40 per cent (although it did require a wider swath of land). It was abandoned in the mid-nineteenth century because too many miles of the narrow-gauge track had already been installed in the United Kingdom (274 miles of broad gauge compared with 1,901 of the narrow).

This is a classic case of “tipping point,” the moment at which it becomes too hard to switch or go back. Another is the demise of Sony’s Betamax in the United States, generally considered the technically superior option to VHS. It lost because too many consumers came to have VHS machines; at a certain point, Sony was locked out.53 Today, a bathtub with even slightly different dimensions will not fit the place where tubs go in people’s houses. Fixture elements would misalign with pipe locations in the wall—or with the skills and habits of plumbers. In a case of very low-cost infrastructure still mattering a lot, a smaller version of paper towel, ScotTowels Junior, failed in the U.S. marketplace because it did not fit on conventional paper-towel holders.54 A new-model car radio has to contend with how car dashboards (and electrical systems) are configured. In contrast, if the core product itself has an especially fast-turn potential, there is less need to conform to prior types. To market a new razor blade, the company can just tie it in with a new razor.

Taxicabs show still another way—access to spare parts—that prevalence of an existing product can in itself maintain sales momentum. In New York, the Ford Crown Victoria, a fairly old and uncomfortable vehicle, had about 90 percent of the market in the late ‘90s. The prevalence of Crown Vics banging into each other on the city’s streets provides a valuable spare parts supply for fleet owners; this encourages continued use of the model.55 The British company making the London cab remains in a strong position perhaps for the same reason, but also because it is not worth the while of a new investor to share so small a vehicle market.

Factory tooling, evolving from prior manufacturing activities, massively influences prospective stuff, but it limits some kinds of products more than others. The making of goods like toys, software, clothing, and, to some degree, houses all allow easy entry and agile experimentation because they rely on equipment and skills that small producers can attain for themselves. But to make even a simple can opener, you need a factory with the right equipment. Although furniture and appliances may seem to be similar products, the former permits innovation in ways the latter does not. Hence washing machines stay more nearly the same (and are more uniform) than chairs. In media products, the drop in video equipment costs allowed small operators to create without access to legitimate studio resources; this encouraged pornography—with its own distribution apparatus—to increase its markets and evolve as a genre.

In the rise of any product, the surrounding artifact world often affects the specifics of the new thing. In configuring the Palm Pilot, its designers were creating a product.
that would interface with personal computers as well as with habits and other physical elements in people’s lives. Palm users typically interchange their data with desktop PCs. Besides having a direct effect on the Palm’s operating system, such links mean that having multiple Palm Pilots does not make sense. A “wardrobe” of Palm Pilots (or laptop computers) would require repeated downloading and uploading and confusion as to just what information was where. To avoid such problems, the market had to be one unit per customer (no matter how affluent), and this implies, in turn, a conservative design that can “go with” any sort of outfit or occasion. As the Palm V designer at IDEO explained, it would be “something you’d wear,” like eyeglass frames or a man’s wallet, a slow-turn wearable for the pocket. Previous set-ups of what a computer is like, a pocket is like, what people wear (and how factories are set up) give rise to this “new” thing.

Lash-up Conspiracies

Some type forms result from corporate strategies, with varying degrees of deliberateness, to lock in a whole system of consumption. The idea is to succeed not just with a particular element but with all the elements that intertwine—the razor and the razor blade that can be used only with one another. To a degree, this resembles creating a monopoly like the ones Rockefeller patched together, but instead of manipulating organizational forms, physical design becomes a key part of the strategy. Rockefeller united scattered businesses—oil companies, refiners, and railroads—into a set of interlocking trusts under his control but did not change the nature of oil, refining, or railroads to do it. In contrast, Edison set up companies, including one to generate electric power, because of the technical qualities of his inventions. No power source means no lightbulb. He needed mechanical complementarity as well as organizational coordination, financing, and popular enthusiasm.

Companies can, at various levels of ambition and scale, try to use physical design to enroll consumers in a larger array of goods than they might otherwise have bargained for. For example, a firm can deliberately create a product inconsistent with competitors’ surrounding peripherals to stimulate a complete switch into a new product line. Harman/Kardon high fidelity broke with prior forms in a way that encourages purchasers of one of its pieces (tape deck, amplifier, or CD changer) to buy all pieces from Harman/Kardon. Until the company’s gambit, audio components were almost always done in Bauhaus rectilinear form, allowing buyers to easily mix brands; the stack would still look pretty good. Harman/Kardon’s concave fronts not only made its goods distinctive, but did so in a way that inhibits combination with other product brands. There has to be a sizable group of first adopters willing to replace their entire system either to get the “total look” of the new stack or because one item of the ensemble is so superior they will chuck out everything else so they can have it.
The Apple computer, with the high level of confidence its creators had in the core product, displays such a gamble—one that gave Apple a quasi monopoly over the new type form it created. For many years, Apple benefited from the unity of its product elements in terms of color, buttons, and plugs, icons, mouse, sounds, and lights and, of course, the basic operating system (with closed architecture). For its approximate decade of prominence after 1984, the Apple ensemble created barriers for competitors’ peripherals as well as for other computer makers. When lacking such a breakthrough element or system of elements, it becomes smarter to design a product as conventionally as possible so users can add it into other systems.

In a still more ambitious and, it seems, more successful effort than that of early Apple, Microsoft has enrolled a world of software and hardware peripherals around its central products. Intensely fought by other corporate actors, some of them huge like Netscape, the Microsoft lash-up aims to keep expanding and intensifying the shared expectation of what all these products should be like: they should look, act, and think like Microsoft. “Outside” inventors are led to create nothing else and consumers come to be in a position to find that nothing else works as well, given their other stuff and personal habits and practices. Perhaps such guided innovation is the heart of hegemony; producers’ and consumers’ creativity, at every stroke, reinforces the power of the central force.

This becomes a way to recast the meaning of corporate power over consumption. Once corporate stakeholders are in place, they will indeed act to sustain the array of interconnections that define the way of doing things that bring them most benefit. Their efforts offer more than plausible evidence that structures of power are an influence on the dynamics of demand. But they are only part of a story that ordinarily involves not a single plot, but the intersection of many schemes, dreams, and games to form a particular “fix.” And sometimes it is corporation against corporation; the steam car champions were commercial operations in the same way as the fledgling and hyper-competitive gasoline engine advocates. The Beta system lost out to corporate capitalists, but itself arose from Sony Corporation, not some indigenous social movement. How much does a private corporation’s capacity to enforce standardization restrain innovation compared to encouraging it? This was a central issue in the federal government’s litigation against Microsoft—one that admits of less than obvious answers because sometimes a stable type form at the core, like a standard set of weights and measures, helps stimulate inventiveness at the periphery.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What are some reasons for change? What about reasons for stability?
2. What are some ways you strive to make subtle changes that set you apart from your peers?
3. Explain the concept of type form and its significance to change and stability in product design.
4. Discuss the concept of the tipping point and give some examples of how it influences the market for new products.
5. Answer Molotch’s question “What would future excavators from a culture that did not use chairs (or blouses or computers) make of them if unearthed in the absence of contemporary commentaries, advertisements, and other documentation?” for something innocuous or commonplace in today’s society.

NOTES
5. Bray, Technology and Gender, 138.
14. Ibid., 84.
15. Stephan Huyler, From the Ocean of Painting: India’s Popular Painting Traditions, 1589 to the Present (New York: Rizzoli, 1994).
24. Cranz defines style as the “way all the parts of a composition are assembled around its main idea or attitude” Cranz, The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design, 69.
28. Ibid., 218.
33. Balzac, quoted in Williams, Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France.
40. Hebdige, Hiding in the Light, 86.
41. Ibid., 96.
44. At least these are the impressions of Mike Nuttal, principal at Palo Alto’s IDEO Design.
46. For general access to plumbing companies’ promotional materials, as well as anthropological interpretations of bathroom modernity, see the website www.thethirdfloor.com/toilet/.
49. Toilets vary, by country, in terms of tendency for all material to disappear without leaving a trace; ease of flushing away fecal material while still sitting; odors emitted from standing waste; tendency for droppings to “splash back”; capacity to
visually observe waste (sometimes medically important); likelihood of overflow and mechanism for dealing with it should it occur.

52. So, in the words of NASA Flight Center engineer Howard Winsett, “A major design feature of what is arguably the world’s most advanced transportation system was determined over two thousand years ago by the width of a horse’s ass.” Forwarded e-mail message from Howard Winsett, NASA Dryden Flight Research Center.

REFERENCES


