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Creative Project Proposal Draft 2

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## Introduction

“Most of the world most of the time spends most of its energy producing and consuming more and more unnecessary stuff.” (Twitchell, 2002, p.58) The object of a substantial number of communicating acts is some kind of self-advantaging exchange; something is being promoted for sale. (Wernick, 1991, p. 221) In today’s consumer culture, almost everything, including virtue, love, knowledge, consciousness, falls into the sphere of exchange value. That is, it can be bought or sold. (Jhally, 1987) Material goods and commercial services are what link individuals to society (Featherstone, 1991, Miles, 1998).

The nature of shopping has changed to emphasize the relationship between consumer and product. In the past, one entered single stores or market stalls with a shopping list, that was then negotiated with individual shopholders or market traders (Edwards, 2000, p. 114). Today’s shopper is submerged in environments of electronically priced and mass-distributed goods, with limited interaction and negotiation between consumer and salesperson, which increases the importance of display, packaging and the role of the manufacturer in the the process. (Edwards, 2000, p. 113) This is in the interest of the system.

Life would be impossible if each individual entered a fast-food restaurant demanding his or her own idiosyncratic meal, just as it would be if the employees of McDonald’s were to spend 10 minutes chatting to each and every customer they encountered. (Miles, 1998, p. 63)

It would also severely cut down the McDonald’s corporation’s profit margin. While engaging in the traditional style of transaction, by patronizing independent “Mom and Pop” stores, farmers’ markets, or craftspersons’ booths at fairs, is one of the free choices consumers can make, these “personalized” acts of consumption are increasingly uncommon. The concentration of goods

production and sales is in the hands of relatively few corporations that have assumed the dominance once shared by numerous individuals.

Tom Frank, a contemporary cultural critic, terms our culture one of hyperconsumerism, in which the production of image, consumer and corporate identity, and publicity strategies have taken precedence over the actual production of goods. The frenzied obsolescence of fashion has been introduced into all manner of cultural endeavors, across a wide swath of life-styles and recreational activities. (1997, p. 25) Featherstone notes a connection between consumerism's rise and the expansion of the cultural sphere. More forms of leisure emphasize consumption of experiences and pleasure, such as theme parks, tourist attractions, and nature preserves. (1991, p. 96) Edwards concurs, pointing to dating services, weekend courses in personal fulfillment, and a wide-ranging selection of counseling services commodifying personal needs such as love and happiness. (2000, p. 5) "Happiness has to be measurable. It has to be a well-being measurable in terms of objects and signs; it has to be 'comfort'" (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 49)

This commodification has grown to encompass many aspects of life. Products are replacing people in health care. A prime example of this is direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising, where advertising replaces the physician in the "consultational" role (though we are always told to ask our doctor about...) Since the mid-1970's, public funding for mental health facilities has been cut drastically. Now, doctor/patient therapy is not based on talk, but on pills. Pills are substantially cheaper than nurses and therapists. (Andersen, 1995, p. 86) A study from the admittedly self-serving Television Bureau of Advertising, nonetheless shows positive action by viewers from DTC [direct to consumer] drug advertising. Of consumers who saw a prescription drug ad, 32.4 percent consulted a doctor and 9.4 percent talked to a pharmacist about the product. (Medical Marketing and Media, 2000)

Consumers are increasingly dependent upon skills and services which need to be paid for in the marketplace. Fifty years ago, a consumer may have had the ability and willingness to repair his or her car, television set or radio, today one takes these things "into the shop to have them fixed". (Miles, 1998, p. 74)

Americans receive knowledge of consumer goods primarily through the mass media in their role as mass communicators of advertising messages. Adorno and Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School saw the mass media as rendering workers passive, stunting their imagination and spontaneity. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. 107) Adorno refers to the mass media as part of a culture industry, purposely churning out standardized entertainment products that merely stimulate and distract benumbed workers, rather than creating truly individualized works that demand intellectual interaction, so that passive consumers stay passive. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997)

This is considered the hypodermic theory of the media, in which the manipulative, dominant media injects messages into a passive audience. (Campbell, 2000, p. 57)

While the hypodermic theory is largely discredited, contemporary critics agree with some of its tenets. Formally, all media are manipulative, in that they are manipulated. There is no such thing as unmanipulated writing, filming, or broadcasting. All media production, “from the choice of the medium itself to shooting, cutting, synchronization, dubbing, right up to distribution,” are all filtered through the culture industrial process. The issue is the agenda of those who produce the media. (Enzensberger, 1986, p. 103) “Information for which there is not a market will not be produced.” (Edwards, 1986, p. 107) Baudrillard sees the function of the mass media to “neutralize the lived, unique, eventual character of the world and substitute for it a multiple universe of media” which are homogenous and constantly refer back and forth to each other. They each become the content of the others (which is ever more the case with consolidation of media ownership a la Disney/Capital Cities/ABC, AOL/Time Warner, and Sony), which Baudrillard terms “the totalitarian message of a consumer society.” (1986, p. 123)

The economic engine of mass media, advertising, “is the invisible web between us and objects. Without it ... we would not be able to choose from among 32 different brands of sport utility vehicles.” (Twitchell, 2002, p. 58) However, its images do not replace experience — for example, advertisements featuring parent/child bonding do not actually bond child to parent. “It can only give them the opportunity to purchase a simulacrum of that state.” (Andersen, 1995, p. 109) In the case of parents and children, this serves to erode and cheapen the meaning of nurturing language and emotions through the associative responses which advertising itself

engenders. “This cheapening of the symbolic currency becomes general and feeds back.” (Wernick, 1991, p. 223) Advertising produces an atmosphere of faux-friendliness and intimacy, aping personal styles of communication.

“It attempts to speak to the housewife in the language of the housewife next door, to speak to the executive or the secretary as a boss or colleague, to speak to each of us as our friend or our superego or as an inner voice in the confessional mode.” (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 161)

This simulation of intimacy is the true object of consumption in advertising. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 161) Advertising expresses desire with the hope of exploiting it. (Twitchell, 2002, p. 157)

To analyze contemporary culture requires an examination of the complexities of consumption and how consumerism has come to be the dominant way of life in America. How do subjects of a consumer culture use material goods to fulfill their needs and desires? How does the economy of goods fulfill the needs of the capitalist system via supply and demand, accumulation of capital, competition and monopolization, the mass media and advertising? (Featherstone, 1991, p. 84) In this “euphoric Age of Consumption,” is justice is at last done to Man and his desires? (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 82)