

Literature Review

Capitalism, and the Evolution of Consumerism

Our consumer culture evolved from capitalism, (Orr, 1999, p. 141) without which, like the blue-green algae of Darwin's theory, life as we know it would not be possible. Karl Marx' critique of capitalism drew a line of cause and effect from industrial mass production to assembly-line labor and its repetitive tasks and lack of worker control and decision making, which alienated workers from the fruits of their labor due to their isolation from the production process in its entirety (from inception to completion).

This alienation led to commodity fetishism, in which a product hides the relations of its production, a seeming example of parthenogenesis, springing forth from the department store shelves. It is now part of the human experience for our needs to be built around objects.(Jhally, 1987, p. 2) Theorist Jean Baudrillard views hierarchized gamuts of objects and products becoming the foundation of group morality, replacing communal distinguishing values. (1988, p. 235) Twitchell concurs that, "We understand each other not by sharing religion, politics, or ideas. We share branded things." (2002, p. xv) Consumerism is personally fulfilling, yet simultaneously plays some form of an ideological role in actually controlling the character of everyday life. (Miles, 1998, p. 5)

The neo-Marxists of the 1950s and '60s perceived that consumer culture is a way to manage a potentially dissatisfied populace, a way to ensure political docility, much like the Roman Empire's use of bread and circuses. Instead, the consumer culture works through a mass policy of cars and television sets. (Slater, 2000, p. 180) Consumerism provides a form of escape from the real world, while the real world is in fact characterized by the everyday expression of consumerism as a way of life. In this sense consumerism provides no form of escape at all. (Miles, 1998, p. 64) However, consumer culture works because consumers want reality to be distorted; they want to believe they are escaping the mundanity of everyday life. (Miles, 1998, p. 65)

Consumerism, according to Orr's analysis, has even more deleterious causes and effects than mere escapism:

seductive advertising, entrapment by easy credit, prices that do not tell the truth about the full costs of what we consume, ignorance about the hazardous content of much of what we consume, the breakdown of community, a disregard for the future, political corruption, and the atrophy of alternative means by which we might provision ourselves. (Orr, 1999, p. 141)

Critics like Thorstein Veblen, the coiner of the phrase, "conspicuous consumption", viewed consumerism as a class struggle, each class trying to differentiate itself from the ambitious social climbers beneath them and trying to emulate the class above. Inflation is constantly introduced as scarce and restricted goods become marketed to the wider population or passed down the market causing a leap-frogging social race to maintain recognizable distinctions. Possession or consumption of these positional goods, these markers of the "elite" that function to separate the wheat from the chaff, dictate satisfaction. (Featherstone, 1991, p. 89) It became almost a duty to consume the "best" goods possible, to display one's status and wealth. Conversely, "the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit." (Veblen, 2000, p. 34) Women fulfill a prestige function to husbands and partners, and are socialized to visibly enjoy themselves and look attractive, becoming objects in the masculine competition. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 97)

Advertising plays into a status competition by targeting people in relation to others, in their hankering after reified social prestige. Advertising is never addressed to an individual, but aimed at defining how human beings differentiate themselves from the crowd. "Even when it seems to tap into their 'deep' motivation, it always does so in spectacular fashion." Advertising always creates a spectacle, a display of a person's "self" that calls in their friends and relations, the group, and society, to bear witness and validate it. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 64) Celebrity-endorsed products are yet another means of status competition. (Pavitt, 2000)

Consumerism as Democracy

Around the turn of the Twentieth Century, academics like Simon Patten (Wharton School) and Franklin Giddings (Columbia University) took a contrary view to Veblen's and wrote about the democratizing nature of consumer culture. Standardizing desire for and purchasing of commodities would bring equality to the classes and socially advance immigrants and the poor. Political journalist, Walter Weyl, a student of Patten's, stated, "Democracy means material goods and the moral goods based thereon." (Leach, 1993, p. 243) To put it in more contemporary terms,

Nobody checks the number of vowels in your name, or the color of your skin, or whether you know the difference between like and as when you are buying your Prada parka. (Twitchell, 2002, p. 29)

In this mythical equation, democracy is equated with a high standard of living and the attainment of well-being, which is derived from the variety of choice, the satisfaction of human needs through products, and even, the very multiplicity of advertising images. (Andersen, 1995, p. 66) Rosenblatt rephrases this, "America is a gigantic supermarket, and the consuming citizen is keeping it healthy by acting on free choice," (1999:18) all one needs to do is take an inventory of one's possessions to assure oneself that one is a worthwhile, substantial being. "To fortify this illusion, one may convince oneself that in the process of acquiring things, one is participating in, and touching the soul of, democracy. (Rosenblatt, 1999, p. 18) Twitchell defends the equation,

You may not like what is manufactured, advertised, packaged, branded, and broadcast, but it is far closer to what most people want most of the time than at any other period of modern history. (2000)

Featherstone posits a democratization of consumption occurring through changes in cultural goods to be consumed. High culture begins imitating lower cultural forms: museums and galleries become revamped to cater to wider audiences through trading in the canonical, auratic art and educative-formative pretensions for spectacular blockbusters, popular forms and works that are immediately accessible. In addition, he argues that there are further convergences between high cultural institutions, and the "low-brow" theme parks, tourist attractions, and shopping centres. (Featherstone, 1991, p. 97) The Guggenheim Museum in New York recently

mounted an exhibition of Giorgio Armani, highlighting the couturier as a “major artist.” (Twitchell, 2002, p. 73) Wernick sees this “adoption of majoritarian entertainment values” as an effect of consumer culture. (Wernick, 1991, p. 223)

Yet as consumer democracy flourishes, social and political democracy shrinks, as consumerism shifts people’s involvement in society as political citizens, and towards involving them as “consumption units in a corporate world.” (Edwards, 1986, p. 106) The democratic principle no longer refers to equal opportunity in education or the workforce, but to the right to purchase whatever products one desires. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 50)

For example, consuming is portrayed as doing one's part for the economy: since the economy is something we all share, when it is good we all reap the benefits. Around Christmas time, news reports always focus on whether it will be “a good season for retail sales.” If we do our part and spend, like good consumers, our efforts will be rewarded. In fact we do not all benefit when the economy is good. When corporate profits are high, corporations still downsize, a practice that continues to shrink the middle class and impoverish increasing numbers of Americans. (Andersen, 1995, p. 62) Edwards sees the notion of consumer democracy perpetuating the commodification of social values, through offering consumer goods as solutions to social ills, for which the consumer society and advertising are partly responsible. (2000, p.77)

Edwards theorizes that advertising and the increase in depictions of luxury commodities increases consumers’ feelings of relative poverty.

As displays of everything from convenience meals to luxury cars escalate in seductive significance, so the misery of those who cannot afford the commodities, haven’t the time to use the services, or simply can’t keep up becomes unremitting and interminable. (Edwards, 2000, p. 129)

This leads to increased spending and consumer debt. In a poll conducted by the Merck Family Fund in 1995, the fraction responding that they ‘watch too much TV’ rose steadily with level of indebtedness. (Schor, 1999, p. 45) There is also statistical data that links consumption of television to general consumer spending. In a study conducted by Juliet Schor, every hour of television watched per week raised annual spending by \$208 per year. (Schor, 1999, p. 45)

False needs

Integral to the academic discourse on consumerism, Theodor Adorno and his collaborator, Max Horkheimer, of the Frankfurt School theorized that consumers are compelled to desire and purchase the products of the consumer society through a systemic creation of false needs. (Miles, 1998, p. 110) Through this, consumer society has succeeded in hiding the very economic structure and social relations that account for its existence. (Andersen, 1995, p. 97)

Advertising is a mechanism that creates desire for products. To this end, advertising works to create false needs in people (false because they are the needs of manufacturers rather than consumers). (Jhally, 1987, p. 3) In his seminal critique of advertising, *The Hidden Persuaders*, Vance Packard slammed advertising for being overly manipulative, that it opposed and even subverted ‘man in his long struggle to become a rational and self-guided being’, and that it sought to transform us into a nation of Pavlovianly conditioned robot consumers. (Packard as cited in Frank, 1997) Advertising professionals responded that advertising was not manipulative or creating false needs. In their view, advertising merely informed the public about products available in the market. Galbraith, among others, perceived this response as naive and disingenuous, referring to theories of advertising’s role in want creation as elementary concepts to “the most retarded student in the nation’s most primitive school of business administration.” (2000, p. 219)

Daniel Miller criticizes Adorno and Horkheimer’s false needs theory for much the same reason as those critics who discredited their hypodermic theory of the media. Miller disagrees with theories that deny any degree of autonomy or individuality in social relations. (2000, p. 122) Campbell points out that consumers don’t merely passively ‘ingest’ commercial messages, “but respond, if only to a degree, in a discriminatory and purposeful manner.” (2000, p.58) Hence the development of motivation research, which seeks to discover the “dreams, desires and wishes of consumers so that advertisers may build upon these when devising product ‘messages’.” (Campbell, 2000, p. 58) Enzensberger’s response is that capitalism does not create false needs, but falsifies and exploits quite real and legitimate ones. (1986, p. 108) From the point of view of consumer satisfaction, one cannot distinguish between real and “false” desire.

The enjoyment of TV or of a second home is experienced as ‘true’ freedom; no one experiences these things as an alienation. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 73) What the capitalist system does manufacture, according to Baudrillard, is a generalized need to consume,

needs are not produced one by one, in relation to the respective objects, but are produced as consumption power, as an overall propensity within the more general framework of the productive forces. (1998, p. 74-5)

Twitchell espouses a pro-consumerism view, calling consumerism our better judgment, regardless of class or culture. He draws evidence of the rectitude of this judgment from the results of capitalist globalization, saying, “Now most of the world is lining up, pushing and shoving, eager to elbow into the mall. Woe to the government or religion that says no.” (Twitchell, 2000) While Baudrillard finds Adorno’s theory simplistic, he critiques the pro-consumerism view represented by Twitchell, the goal of capitalism is to integrate and control society through consumerism as hierarchy and religion have done in the past, (1998, p. 94) and is merely hiding behind the alibi of individual needs in order to expand its control. (1998, p. 65) Twitchell counters that humans are consumers by nature, and have built their heavens-on-earth out of consumer goods because we are innately drawn to them. (Twitchell, 2002, p.38) Wernick characterizes the sensibility of the average consumer as oscillating “between a playful willingness to be temporarily seduced and a hardened scepticism about every kind of communication in view of the selling job it is probably doing.” (Wernick, 1991, p. 223-4)

Like consumption itself, advertising habitually solves problems with products and promises that emotional happiness, and well-being in general, can be found within the sphere of consumption. This distracts our attention and prevents us from understanding how the economic world works. (Andersen, 1995, p. 66) Advertising speaks of products as evidence of “miraculous abundance,” rather than evidence of a well-oiled capitalist machine. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 165)

Advertisers argue consumers are savvy about advertising and have developed “marketing radar,” more easily identifying and presumably rejecting messages designed to manipulate them and sell them things they don’t need.

“Today, nearly half of all college students have taken marketing courses, so they know the enemy and are able to see through the obvious ploys.” (Two stars are born, 1999)

However, does knowing the enemy “protect” us from manipulative advertising?

In response to this consumer sophistication, advertising has grown more sophisticated. Television advertising seeks to combat this sophistication by creating more ads that resemble programs and spots that last about 10 seconds. At that length, experts calculate, viewers won't waste the energy skipping them. (Fetto, 2000) “Objective” sources of information, such as internet search engines sell relevance. Advertisers pay the search engine company, and the search engine finds the business's Internet address more often and puts it nearer the top of the list of recommended sites. (Lemmons, 1996) More advertising on the internet is designed to not resemble advertising. There are brands that pay people to talk favorably on message boards, in discussion groups or in news groups about their products, creating false peer recommendations. (O'Leary, 2000) In the future, people will do marketers' jobs for them, much as ATM users have assumed the tasks of the bank teller. Amazon.com has branded itself by gathering information from consumers and then returning it to them in the form of services, such as product recommendations, sales rankings and reader reviews that serve to further market Amazon.com's products, as well as becoming another Amazon.com product. (Goldman, 1999)

Advertising also makes a practice of incorporating antipathy to it into its bag of tricks. After Vance Packard published “The Hidden Persuaders,” Madison Avenue adopted a version of Packard's critique and cast products as solutions to the problems of mass society Packard had done so much to publicize. (Frank, 1997, p. 41)

Andersen cites several examples of advertising's hypocrisy. Nike's advertising campaign equating the company's shoes with human dignity and spiritual fulfillment is an ironic discourse, considering Nike's use of Third World slave labor to manufacture their shoes. (1995, p. 53-4) Both Budweiser and Dr. Pepper created ads that appealed to the desire for lost blue collar jobs and camaraderie in the 1980s, when the economy saw its largest loss of blue collar jobs, leading to a lot of unemployment in that area. Unfortunately, the desire—even the demand—for jobs will

not be satisfied by beer or soda. But it will maintain corporate profits. (Andersen, 1995, p. 65-6) Stouffer's Lunch Express is advertised as a solution to a stressful workplace and increasingly long work days. Control and fulfillment amidst unsatisfactory working conditions and increased responsibilities, the advertisement argues, can be found in convenience food; problems in the realm of production can be solved through the realm of consumption.(Andersen, 1995, p. 64)

Environmental concerns are also incorporated into marketing. One can demonstrate that such measures are a direct response to pressures from environmental groups, particularly at a government level. However, such measures, are, in turn, turned into a marketing device through which companies may maintain their profits through alternative means. For example, many domestic electrical goods such as washing machines and dishwashers are now sold quite flagrantly according to their energy-saving functions. (Edwards, 2000, p. 99)

The youth counterculture of the 1960s harbored a hostility to established tastes, and seemed to be preparing young people to rebel against whatever they had patronized before, thus being receptive to change and lacking suspicion of the new. (Frank, 1997, p. 27) Thus, the advertising and menswear industries chose "youth" and "youthfulness" as metaphors for their selling strategy of accelerating obsolescence and enhancing consumer friendliness to change. (Frank, 1997, p. 27) This led to designs changing at a much more rapid pace, which as Whiteley (1993) argues, plays an essential role in reproducing a socio-economic system that assumes limitless growth and a continual state of desire. (Miles, 1998, p. 44)

With consumption redefined as 'rebellion,' two of late capitalism's great problems were solved: obsolescence was more convincingly rationalized, and citizens could symbolically resolve the contradiction between their role as consumers and their role as producers. (Frank, 1997, p. 31) The countercultural style has now become a permanent fixture in American advertising,

impervious to the angriest assaults of cultural and political conservatives, because it so conveniently and efficiently transforms the myriad petty tyrannies of economic life—all the complaints about conformity, oppression, bureaucracy,

meaninglessness, and the disappearance of individualism ... into rationales for consuming. (Frank, 1997, p. 31)

Of course, the irony is, 'rebels' must obey the rules of image or risk not being recognized by their fellows as part of the rebellious group. (Andersen, 1995, p. 112) Being truly nonconformist would mean jumping off the acquisition treadmill and opting out of consumer culture. It would mean self-definition in ways less superficial than the purchase and display of commodities that confer social status. (Andersen, 1995, p. 114)

A good example of "rebellious consumerism," or what Frank terms, "hip consumerism," is a car stereo ad, in which a young man drives on a desert road in Monument Valley listening to U2 and Hendrix on his car stereo. It conveys a message of escapism, though ultimately one of acquiescence and submission to a world that must be accepted as unbearable. The only possibility for action is temporary escape into a realm of consumption.

But it is precisely the promise of weekend consumerist escape that keeps the young malcontents going back to work and putting up with all manner of abuse to obtain the income necessary to play the roles of stylistic urban weekend outlaws... (Andersen, 1995, p. 99)

Automobile advertising routinely perpetuates the mythic dimensions of modern driving: driving a certain car creates freedom, independence or personal success for its driver, as cars are presented racing across open roads, almost jumping or skipping around cities, thwarting crime and rendering their drivers relaxed, safe and joyful. Of course, the increasingly dismal reality of car ownership as a tiresome, uninspiring and costly necessity is avoided in advertising. The fantasy or ideal of car driving, often overrides the detailed significance of the car itself. (Edwards, 2000, p. 73)

Recently, the advertising industry has taken to co-opting grassroots cultural strategies in marketing to urban minority youth. Rap artists outside of the mainstream (like Eazy-E) sold music out of the trunks of cars, gave out free stickers, and held free concerts until the major labels paid attention to them. To create an illusion of populist, rather than corporate, backing the advertising industry has instigated street teams, groups of hired men and women who represent the targeted consumers' profile in terms of age, lifestyle and ethnicity. Street teams demonstrate

or give away the marketer's product to the targets. The street teams are considered part of the vanguard or trendsetters who influence other consumers to make similar purchasing decisions. (Hill, 1999)

Semiotics of Consumption

Originally, manufacturers competed with one another and differentiated their products from their competitors' based on price or functional considerations. Today, manufacturers spend a lot of money on research, design, and market preparation. Products are branded. This new strategy stems from "the profound need of the modern corporation to dominate and control all the conditions and variables which affect its viability." (Hebdige, 2000, p. 139) According to successful advertising men, Richard Kirshenbaum and Jonathan Bond, brands meet emotional, not physical needs. We are physically satiated but emotionally starved.

The other side of the coin, which illuminates the real importance of brands in our society, is that brands are not important to Third-World nations. Their needs are basic. They need chickens to survive, and they aren't concerned if the chickens have a Perdue label. (Two stars are born, 1999)

Consumption, then, must not be understood as the consumption of use-values, of functions, but primarily as the consumption of signs, what the commodity represents. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 77) Advertising practitioners create an array of mythic associations and arbitrary meanings for products. (Andersen, 1995, p. 88) The pleasure obtained from a product cannot be separated from the images and ideas with which it is linked, as, for example, that eating caviare or drinking champagne is associated with luxurious living. These images and signifieds are as much a 'real' part of the product as its constituent ingredients. (Campbell, 2000, p. 59) Mundane products, like dish soap or coffee, "become associated with luxury, exotica, beauty and romance with their original or functional 'use' increasingly difficult to decipher." (Featherstone, 1991, p. 85) Sociologists Douglas and Isherwood also perceive the act of consumption as inseparable from the meaning invested in it. "When a person purchases a particular bar of chocolate he or she is not simply buying sustenance, but a range of symbolic meaning expressing membership of a social world." (Miles, 1998, p. 29)

However, because a branded commodity's value is primarily symbolic, it fluctuates with the symbols/signifiers associated with it, making an object a "status symbol" one year, and a "white elephant" the next, all at the convenience of marketers. Commodity culture and advertising can be called triumphs of the signifier, as the arbitrary meanings and associations triumph over the product, itself. Advertising images are neither true nor false; they eliminate both meaning and proof. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 128)

Denim jeans are a commodity once purchased primarily for their use-value. However, jeans are now a product that confers differentiation through branding. Manufacturers exploit consumers' feelings that this particular brand of jeans serves their unique needs. It is not necessarily the actual design of the jeans themselves, which are quite similar, but the perception of that design that is important. (Miles, 1998, p. 41) Marketers are finding consumers desire more personalized relationships with products and services, leading even to personalized relationships with the makers of products, as represented by market researchers. Consumers are much more willing to reveal emotional and personal feelings affecting purchase decisions. (Bissell, 1995, p. 20) "Without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition and collective definition in this culture would be impossible. (McCracken, 1990, p. xi) Rising generations have faith in consumption. "They no longer merely inherit goods, but the natural right to abundance." (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 32) The teenage market is probably the most susceptible to brand image and most likely to regard brand-affiliation as a sign of personality. 35% of 16-to-34 year olds in a branding study admitted to being influenced by a brand image portrayed, as opposed to 13% of the over-35 age range. (Pavitt, 2000)

One of the primary ways the brand identities are conveyed to consumers is via product placement, in which branded goods appear in films and television. Product placement is a popular strategy among advertisers because of its global reach, powerful influence, and cost-effectiveness. It is the only form of advertising with a diminishing cost-per-thousand.

Once the product is in a film, it's there forever, delivering impressions and media values in perpetuity. Decades from now, Forrest Gump will still be enjoying the Dr. Pepper he drinks in the film bearing his name. (Marshall & Ayers, 1998, p. 16)

Examples of product placement are too numerous to list every single one. The list includes: McDonald's in "The Flintstones" movie (with a concurrent major summer Flintstones promotion); "Bullitt" featured Steve McQueen driving a Ford Mustang, (which drove potential Mustang buyers into Ford showrooms nationwide); Disney's "The Love Bug" was basically a 120-minute commercial for the Volkswagon Beetle; (McCarthy, 1994) Reese's Pieces in the film "E.T."; Ray-Ban sunglasses featured in a dozen movies from "Breakfast at Tiffany's" to "Men In Black;" and BMW's Z3 Roadster placed in the James Bond film, "Goldeneye," which resulted in discounts for the Z3 vanishing and waiting lists stretching out for months. (Kalisher, 1999) "Jurassic Park" (1993) produced one thousand official products worldwide. The film even depicted Jurassic Park-themed products that would later be available for purchase. (Andersen, 1995, p. 46-7)

Until recently, direct product plugging by television characters was resisted because of conflicts with spot advertising.(Andersen, 1995, p. 45) The television product placement floodgates were opened by the program, "Seinfeld," which was a veritable brand bonanza. Jerry haggled over a BMW, ate Cheerios breakfast cereal and wore Nike shoes. Regular watchers could rattle off the names of Elaine's favorite sweet treats and of Kramer's restaurant nemesis, all of which played pivotal roles in the show's storylines. (Stanley, 1998) "X-Files" Gillian Anderson uses a Nokia cell phone. Nokia phones are also featured in "Spin City," "Dharma & Greg," and ABC daytime soaps, the product of an ABC-Nokia deal. Aqua Java caffeinated water was written into the "Drew Carey Show." In a "Party of Five" episode, Neve Campbell grabs a clearly-labeled Dr. Pepper out of the fridge. The soft drink corporation promoted the show with advertising on its 12-packs. (Gunther, 2000) Ally McBeal eats Ben & Jerry's ice cream out of the carton, because it "fits with what her character's about". (Stanley, 1998) A recent episode of "Mad About You" centered on Paul Reiser's character scarfing down Pepperidge Farm Milano cookies and hiding them from others, mimicking the brand's former ad campaign. (Stanley, 1998) CBS's "Survivor" had 10 corporate sponsors, including Reebok, which found its way onto the top-rated show by outfitting the cast with hats and shirts featuring the company's logo. (Fetto, 2000) "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" provides a "lifeline for contestants" courtesy of AT&T, embedding the brand into the fabric of the show, making the advertising unavoidable. (Gunther, 2000, Fetto, 2000)

As brands possess their own identities, individual identity is signaled by the consumption of these differentiated products. (Angus, 2000, p. 121) Consumer culture is now all about 'keeping different from the Joneses'. (Slater, 2000, p. 178) Baudrillard speculates that areas of dense population spur the demand for differentiation through a larger competitive field. (1998, p. 64-5) Indeed, the romantic notion of life as art originated in urban areas, from Dandyism and Beau Brummel to Oscar Wilde and London's Bloomsbury Group of avant-garde writers and artists. What began as a heroic concern with the achievement of originality and superiority in dress, demeanour, personal habits and even furnishings has made its way down to the commons, so to speak, and is what we now call lifestyle. (Featherstone, 1991, p. 67)

The heroes of consumer culture, and we can all be heroes, regardless of age or class, "make lifestyle a life project." We become aware that we speak not only with our clothes, but with our home, furnishings, decoration, car and other activities which are to be read and classified in terms of the presence and absence of taste. "Consumer culture publicity suggests that we all have room for self-improvement and self-expression." We have only one life to live and must work hard to enjoy, experience and express it. (Featherstone, 1991, p. 95) According to the rules of consumer culture, it is our duty "to be happy, loving, adulating/adulated, charming/charmed, participative, euphoric and dynamic." (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 80) Lunt and Livingstone argue that the transitory nature of social life, notably in the consumption context, makes the construction of identity a particularly problematic enterprise. (Miles, 1998, p. 31) Helga Dittmar perceives a "materialism-idealism paradox" in which we are all individuals, but our possessions speak volumes about who we are. An individual may lose his or her subjectivity amidst a plethora of lifestyle choices, yet society puts considerable emphasis on the uniqueness of each and every person. (Dittmar, 1992) One must continually monitor one's own needs and well-being, that all one's potentialities and consumer capacities are mobilized. The good consumer is not passive. The good consumer is continually active, making him or herself happy. If one forgets to do so, one will be gently and insistently reminded that he has no right not to be happy. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 80)

One advertising agency capitalizes on the heroic status of individuals by appealing to people's desire for celebrity and importance in a project that is essentially market research. People get to be "stars" because of the products they consume, or their potential to consume products. Ogilvy & Mather's Discovery Group sends researchers into homes with hand-held cameras to get an up-close picture of how people live various aspects of their lives.

Hours of footage then are condensed into a documentary-like 30 minute video—often complete with a narrator to put the images in context—which gives marketers and agency staff the chance to see how people really communicate and interact in certain situations, (Goetzl, 2000, p. 6)

as well as how they use products and what products they have in their homes.

Advertisers try to persuade us "that we can buy whatever we want to be." (Minsky, 2000, p. 35) Advertising is the one space that sees the consumer as the center of the universe, whereas in most arenas, such as the workplace, one is a cog or an extra. Advertising executives like Young and Rubicam's, Woolmington, work from the mantra, "One has to begin with the fact that the consumer is the center of the universe." (Goldman, 1999) Featherstone theorizes that this heroic consumption provides everybody with a sense of control, the feeling that as consumers we gain some semblance of authority over the everyday construction of our lives through consumption. Indeed, the power to shop makes up for a sense of powerlessness in other areas of life and serves as a defense against "feelings of culturally or psychically induced emptiness and meaninglessness." (Minsky, 2000, p. 38) Research bears out Minsky's defensive shopping theory: from a list of values such as health, family and betterment of society, 'the materialist option—having a nice home, car and other belongings—ranked last'. In another survey, 'having nice things' ranked twenty-sixth in a list of twenty-eight. It is the associative values tied to objects, that people strive for. (Andersen, 1995, p. 89)

This striving is continuous, as the things presented as aids in one's self-creation are, new, modish, faddish or fashionable, always improved and improving. The very idea of consumer culture is constantly heralded as new: in each generation the Columbuses of capitalism rediscover the promised land of affluent freedom; (Slater, 2000, p. 177)

But to what degree is the consumer genuinely free? Andersen posits that external cultural images and societal constraints weigh heavily on consumer behavior. (1995, p. 104) Edwards points to the importance of social divisions, which he finds missing in many theories. Whether consumption is expressive or oppressive falls along class lines. (2000, p. 108)

The consumer society operates on all levels—the economy, knowledge, desire, the body, signs and drives. All these things are produced as commodities in an endless process of differentiation and super-differentiation. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 182) Yet, Campbell argues that contemporary consumers don't have an insatiable desire to acquire objects, rather they desire to “experience in reality the pleasurable dramas which they have already enjoyed in imagination.” (Campbell, 2000, p. 89-90) Each ‘new’ product is seen as offering a possibility of realizing this ambition. (Campbell, 2000, p. 90) Featherstone theorizes that consumer culture, through the continuous differentiation and subcategorization of products, works to bolster individuality, akin to psychologist Maslow's notion of “self-actualization”.(Featherstone, 1991, p. 96) Consumer capitalism thrives on the doctrine of liberation and continual transgression. It has taught [that] what is most ‘human’ about people is their quest after the new and their need to incorporate ‘more and more’—goods, money, experience, everything. (Frank, 1997, p. 20) “Awareness feeds dream, purchase makes dream come true, purchase redirects dreams to the next object.” (Twitchell, 2000, p. 189)

Consumerism and Infinite Growth

Mid-twentieth Century critic, Louis Althusser expanded on Marx' critique of capitalism. Marx wrote that in order for capitalism to continue, the conditions of production need to be reproduced. (Althusser, 1971, p. 127) Althusser included the reproduction of needs for commodities among those conditions (1971, p. 129). Stewart Ewen cites Edward Filene, an early practitioner of this theory and head of Filene's department stores in Boston in the 1920s, who aggressively pushed the values of the mass-industrial market on consumers. His ideology equated “social change and betterment to those commodified answers rolling off American conveyor belts.” (2000, p. 188) Filene's mass-market values were a challenge to the traditional patina system: the practice of familiar inheritance, where household items in particular were passed on from parents to children, most commonly on marriage. With the marketing of mass-produced

housewares, such as those sold in Filene's stores, the result was that inherited goods lost much of their personal value in favor of the perceived increase in the worth of newness in itself.

(Edwards, 2000, p. 108) Vance Packard quotes investment broker, Paul Mazur, who was instrumental in the creation of large corporate mergers and corporate buying cooperatives, (Leach, 1993, p. 284) about the economic necessity of increasing consumption.

The giant of mass production can be maintained at the peak of its strength only when its voracious appetite can be fully and continuously satisfied... It is absolutely necessary that the products that roll from the assembly lines of mass production be consumed at an equally rapid rate and not be accumulated in inventories. (Packard, 2000, p. 225)

Indeed, capitalism depends on growth, since only through growth can profits be assured and continuous accumulation of capital take place. (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 329) Capitalism needs to continuously expand its output, no matter what the social, political, geopolitical or ecological consequences. Lack of growth is considered a crisis for capitalism. "It is a corner-stone of capitalism's ideology that growth is both inevitable and good." (Harvey, 2000, p. 263)

Current growth strategies for marketers and manufacturers include an increase in the number and types of products marketed to children. Children are now targets of advertising for goods such as health products, cosmetics, and cars. Paul Kurnit, president of Griffin Bacal, New York, and founder of market consultancy Kid Think, commented on the increase of children's "brand savvy" at even younger ages than in past years. His aim, and that of other child-targeting marketers is to "build meaningful brand relationships with kids, [and] grow them into relationships with teens and adults." (Rosenberg, 2000) By conducting motivational studies, market researchers claim that they are ensuring that real demand and the deep wants of the consumer govern the market, yet this apparatus exists solely to stimulate that demand in order to create further outlets for products. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 72)

There is also an increase in American consumer culture marketed to the Third World. Not only are the advertisers marketing American goods, but they are also selling them in the American way. The life cycle of products is shortened, products are sold for their design rather

than functionality, and there are high levels of advertising and marketing relative to production costs as well as ecological unsustainability in production and use. (Schor, 1999, p. 48)

Further privatization of living functions and social life is characteristic of technological progress. (Edwards, 1986, p. 107) Both technology and consumer capitalism operate on the idea of 'progress'. The quest for lasting contentment through the acquisition of technological goods increasingly futile. (Miles, 1998, p. 83) The technology industry puts out "a vast plethora of overdesigned products that the consumer needs to buy in order not be left behind" (Miles, 1998, p. 45) Baudrillard emphasizes that consumer society is structured by planned obsolescence, "What is produced today is not produced for its use-value or its possible durability, but rather with an eye to its death," (1998, p. 46) We can easily imagine technology conspiring with consumer capitalism in its rapid turnover of obsolete technologies. Technology companies perhaps have control, not merely over their markets, but also over their consumers, inasmuch as they actively construct the parameters within which those people consume. (Miles, 1998, p. 76-7) In effect, technology provides the engine for the constant quest for desire that is so important to the long-term effectiveness of the capitalist economy." (Miles, 1998, p. 83)

Under the guise of increasing free time for consumers, technology actually expands the parameters of consumerism, which is constantly regenerated by consumers who seek new ways to consume. (For example, online auctions, home shopping channels, stock trading on Palm Pilots). "The abiding impression here is of a technology that promotes consumer choice, but which apparently does so as a means of maintaining consumerism as a dominant mode of life." (Miles, 1998, p. 88)

Indeed, there is a paradox of convenience. Americans are spending more money for products and services that are quick and convenient. U.S. consumers spend more than half of their food money on supermarket carryout and restaurant food, according to the National Restaurant Association. However, more Americans feel the need to slow down. People cope by taking up relaxing hobbies like gardening and fishing, or buying books and magazines that teach simplicity. (Johnson, 2001) One of the most notable simplicity movement tomes is "Real Simple" magazine, "dedicated to battling overconsumption by yet more consumption,"

(Twitchell, 2002, p. 36) replete with ads for DeBeers, Baby Gap, and Ralph Lauren, and to-do lists that primarily serve to pitch products. In its own words, the magazine is “dedicated to simplifying every aspect of a woman’s life,” arguing paradoxically that nonconsumption can be achieved through better consumption. (Twitchell, 2002, p. 152)

Fashion, also, does much to reinforce insatiable consumerism. Fashion is predicated on producing ever new artifacts and artifices. It perpetuates a condition of restlessness, always seeking what is new and admired, while avoiding what is old and passe. (Kellner, 1994, p. 161) Fashion, thus creates a perpetual cyclical process within which consumerism fails to offer the luxuries and freedoms that it appears to promise and yet simultaneously offers enough to ensure that the consumer continues to crave for more. (Miles, 1998, p. 104-5) Yet, for many individuals fashion is not a trivial matter, but often plays an active and positive role in his or her life.

For example, fitness fashion was liberating for women in that it contrasted with earlier visions of macho male exercisers, while presenting images of women as successful, independent, enterprising and fulfilled individuals. While it allowed women to take control of their bodies, it also simultaneously obliged women to define themselves through their bodies. (Miles, 1998, p. 102-3) More importantly, perhaps, this trend has made fitness more than something people do, but something people consume. (1998, p. 103)

Our bodies have become consumable goods. The female body, in particular, is treated like a capital asset to maintain properly so to not decrease its exchange value. It is invested in order to produce a yield. One of the imperatives of proper bodily maintenance is the ideology of freshness. Feminine hygiene products come in the same scents as room deodorants (floral, herbal, baby-powder), odors that represent “natural” smells, but by the products’ basic nature are artificial, and by their function and marketing, posit the natural odor of the female body as unclean. (Kane, 1990, p. 292-3) Advertising defines the body as a site of multiple pollution possibilities. “The human body, as written in American television commercials, is a composite of potential emissions that threaten to disrupt social order.” (Kane, 1990, p. 291) No one unconcerned with body odors will be attentive to successive pitches for deodorants and anti-perspirants.

It takes the whole television day to encode the positive images of smoothness, cleanliness, or blandness upon which the massive marketing of deodorants and soaps depends (Antin, 1986, p. 159)

This bodily investment is not for the autonomous ends of the subject, but “in terms of a normative principle of enjoyment and hedonistic profitability, according to the norms of a society of production and managed consumption.” (Baudrillard, 1986, p. 131) The understanding is that by pleasing oneself one is likely to please others. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 95) Through a strange twisted logic, many ads targeted at women equate commodification with feminism; standing up for one’s rights is conflated with spending money on feeling good. Feeling good about oneself is predicated on having purchasable items, rather than on personal growth or power or any such non-purchasable quality.” (Kane, 1990, p. 297)

Consumerism and Personal Growth

Consumer culture’s ongoing expansion has resulted in the commodification of the self. It has become an absolute imperative for individuals to take the same care of their faces and figures as they do of their souls. It is a bodily sign that one is a member of the elect, just as success is such a sign in business. (Baudrillard, 1986, p. 132) Like the goods they consume, individuals are taught to view themselves as products that need effective advertising and presentation in order to “find a market”. Echoing Baudrillard’s theorized obligation to make lives meaningful via product selection and lifestyle creation, Rose views consumer society as “a market in which one simultaneously purchases products and services, and assembles, manages and markets oneself.” (Rose as cited in Du Gay, 1997) Gordon terms this version of the individual, the entrepreneurial self. The entrepreneurial self is always busy making “adequate provision for the preservation, reproduction and reconstruction of one’s own human capital”. (Gordon as cited in Du Gay, 1997) also (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 329)

One of the most common aspects of the entrepreneurial self, is the commodification of self through labor. Work is no longer a task or a means to an end, but a fulfilling activity, “through which we produce, discover and experience ourselves.” (Rose as cited in Du Gay, 1997). Similar to the myths of the dot-com era and contemporary trendy business manuals, the

entrepreneurial self views labor as “a means to self-development, self-responsibility and individual empowerment.” (DuGay, 1997, p. 302) The rationales for management training seminars and other job-skills workshops are full of language equating becoming a better manager or worker with becoming a better person. “The values of self-realization, the skills of self-presentation, self-direction and self-management are both personally seductive and economically desirable.” (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 330)

Advertising mimics the therapeutic role commodities have taken on in consumer society, by piquing, then balming human anxiety. Advertisements will begin by introducing a painful or anxiety-inducing scene through quick-cut black & white images, uncomfortable angles, unattractive, noisy and crowded settings. The anxious scene will be followed by a scene of relief, featuring the product as remedy with soft-focus, color, soothing voices, and images of subjects in control. (Andersen, 1995, p. 83) A viewer confuses having with being when advertisements successfully strike this emotional chord. The objective of the advertisement is to spark a psychic conflict, or wish, and then to offer an “easy way out.”

It is easier to accept the product solution than to contemplate the affective difficulty of resolving psychological conflict, unpleasant working environments, urban problems, or lack of fulfillment. (Andersen, 1995, p. 83)

Ads for the modern day hair-tonic, Rogaine, are prime examples of ad-therapy. These ads use commonly shared elements, at some point experienced by virtually everyone--a missed opportunity, feelings of inadequacy and regret, failure at sports or at competition in general. This ambient anxiety is tied to the threat of not trying a product and going bald as a consequence. Rogaine, even if it does not prevent baldness (the commercial makes no promises) will heal the wound of a past torment. The ad offers psychic healing; the product and its functional qualities are irrelevant. (Andersen, 1995, p. 73) The effect of advertising-provided therapy is to constrain yearning for well-being within the realm of consumption. Advertising's therapeutic discourse, which promises that life will be good (for the price of the product), contradicts a political and economic context increasingly incapable of offering "the good life" (itself an ad slogan). (Andersen, 1995, p. 85)

Advertising further utilizes therapy techniques in focus groups, created to test market or style products. It is common for focus groups to feature sociologists and anthropologists as well as clinical psychologists using dream sequences and a variety of emotional and psychological probes to assess psychic passions, anxieties, and phobias. Often, focus groups target certain populations, such as sufferers from diabetes and migraines, who may have “distinct ways of communicating their discomfort, and an understanding of the vernacular they use can be helpful in crafting well-received marketing pitches.” (Goetzl, 2000, p. 6) Similarities to group therapy sessions are not coincidental: some of the same dynamics of therapeutic practice come into play during focus groups. “Both contexts allow participants to verbalize their desires and to express sometimes extremely intimate longings as well as pain.” (Andersen, 1995, p. 79)

Market research takes these 'emancipated moments' of unburdening, and distorts them.

As with the psychoanalytic practice of free association, the emotional revelations evoked by focus group techniques are released--but not to a healing professional. Rather, they are appropriated by the architects of persuasion. (Andersen, 1995, p. 80)

Are advertising and commodities good therapists, or do they exacerbate the “illness” they aim to treat? Gabriel and Lang see the consuming experience becoming increasingly spasmodic, contradictory and insecure, the consumer psyche unstable. The materials with which the consumer continually attempts to forge an identity are constantly shifting in meaning such that no genuinely expressive intention can be read. (Gabriel & Lang as cited in Wernick, 1991, p. 223) Schor states that evidence suggests consumption is a self-defeating system, a treadmill, in effect. (1999, p. 49) Jhally writes that while the market stresses satisfaction by marketable products, the things that are most satisfying are not commodities. The things that really make people happy are non-material things such as autonomy, self-esteem, warm family relations, tension-free leisure time, and good friendships. Commodities may market themselves as satisfying these things, but they are but a poor substitute. (1987, p. 17)

Advertising reinforces compulsive consumer behavior by continually making promises that an act of buying cannot fulfill. (Andersen, 1995, p. 90) Campbell considers the almost endless pursuit of desires, the essence of modern consumerism. This insatiability is

consumerism's most characteristic feature. (2000, p. 49) Baudrillard compares this insatiability to the Freudian notion of hysteria with its ever-changing illusory symptoms of illness; the unquenchable desire (which is based on lack) continuously manifests itself in needs for a succession of objects. (1998, p. 77)

Advertising plays to the consumer's Sisyphean insatiability through its prophetic language. Escape from our eternal burdens through learning or understanding are not addressed, but hope is. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 127) The advertised object is Excalibur, transforming our mundane existence into something magical, or the perfect tool that will prevent our boulder from rolling back down the hill, and freeing us from our penance.

The consumer is both god and pawn: marketers and manufacturers bow to the consumer and are dependent on her or his patronage. And yet the consumer is also a weak and malleable creature, easily manipulated, dependent, passive and foolish. (Gabriel and Lang, 1995, p. 1) The consumer's quest for self-improvement and self-discovery is an admirable endeavor and connotes independent thought and agency. Yet in embarking on that quest in our commodity culture, does the consumer merely find her/himself inside Plato's Cave, dazzled by shadows on the wall?

This question has been much explored in critical literature, but how would this discourse on the power dynamics of consumer, producer, and commodity be conveyed in an artistic work?