

# *The Place and Space of Consumption in a Material World*

## Abstract

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The twentieth century can be characterized by the intense movement of art, science and literature toward abstraction, toward the reduction of the meaning of lived experience to sign, subject or system. One need only refer to the development of linguistics, poetics and semiotics from Saussure to Greimas to underscore the overarching priority given to formal system over content in the study of language and cultural production in our time. By the 1960's this trend had reached its zenith: Roland Barthes announced the death of the author and reference of literature, structuralism reigned and it appeared that all of Western culture would soon be minimalized to a set of abstract relations on a chess board.

It then comes somewhat as a surprise that the 1990's should witness a proliferation of humanistic research devoted to the empirical study of daily life, replete with demographic and statistical grids, historical documentation and even field interviews. Whether symptomatic of a kind of *fin de siècle* decadence, of a breakdown of the intense theoretical work driving critical theory in the twentieth century, or a radical challenge to the intellectual elitism of the past twenty years, books such as *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption* and *A Primer for Daily Life* take theory "on the road" as they apply semiotics, psychoanalysis and the Marxist critique to the study of culture and consumption. Their preoccupation with the meaning and function of consumer goods and services for the constitution of personal and social identity testifies to the growing awareness that contemporary life is being played out in the marketplace, not the theater, the political forum, or

A review of *Lifestyle Shopping: the Subject of Consumption* by Rob Shields and *A Primer for Daily Life* by Susan Willis.

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even the family. The market thus conceived is neither a place for the exchange of goods between producers and consumers nor a symbol for the economic infrastructure shaping material life, but an imaginary/symbolic site for staging the post-modern self in consumer culture.

### **The Meaning of Place for Private Space**

The mall spectacle duplicates the controlled, self-contained environment of the cinema which supports the shot-by-shot control of the spectator's gaze as he/she "moves" through the fiction film.

The poet Baudelaire offered a semiotic interpretation of culture in "Correspondences" when he claimed that the world is composed of signs and that social life is an endless performance of signs in culture. Extending this view to consumer culture, we will look at ways the personal, psychological drives of consumers intersect with the public, semiotic organization of consumption sites such as malls, theme parks and museums. Rather than describing consumption sites in their physical dimensions alone, we will interpret the physical *places* of consumption as symbolic sites for the construction of personal, subjective *space* or lifestyle.

In *Lifestyle Shopping* Rob Shields explains the meaning of public place for personal space for social scientists at the end of the millennium. He claims that the socio-semiotic function of the mall to foster communication and social interaction overshadows its economic function to distribute goods. You don't just go to the mall to buy something you need - you go to see and be seen, and to internalize icons of consumer culture in the form of lifestyle shopping.

Lifestyle shopping represents nothing less than a cultural revolution. Malls and other consumption sites such as theme parks, museums and festivals testify to the breakdown of traditional distinctions between various spheres of value, including private and public realms of experience, between leisure and consumption, between

culture and economy, between art and life. Shopping has become a kind of primary bonding experience, mediating intimate relations among families, friends and new acquaintances which are too difficult at home. The change in the meaning and function of public place for the social self implies profound changes in the nature of humankind. We've lost a sense of "universal Man," a transcendent being oblivious to fashions and cultural difference, and are left with a fragmented and transitory self totally contingent on its role in spectacles of consumption.

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Scopophilia, a form of perversion focussing on the gaze, underlies the drive to see and be seen in mall culture. Unlike voyeurism, a form of scopophilia which requires that the spectator remain anonymous and that the object of the gaze remain at a safe distance, shopping maintains a tension between seeing, being seen, and symbolic possession which collapses as soon as the purchase is consumed. In a sense shopping constitutes an institutionalized form of perversion: the thrill derives not so much from the actual possession/ purchase of the desired object as from participating in the spectacle of shopping. The shopper cruises the mall, shifting his/her gaze between commodities displayed in shop windows and other shoppers gazing in their turn. The pane of glass separating the object of desire from the shopper resembles a psychic "mirror", a surface for receiving and reflecting back the projections of the shopper both looking and being looked at.

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Looking skews meaning and being along the lines of an irreparable division between the outside - the external representation of meaning to others, and the inside - the internal presentation of representation to consciousness. As a result, the spectating subject can only be conceived as divided in its very essence, as a permanently-seeking incompleteness. The psychological division driving consumption cannot be satisfied once and for all, so it guarantees an unquenchable passion to consume and perpetuates the repetition of the shopping ritual.

### **Entertainment Consumption**

As visual consumption, mall shopping can be compared to film spectating. The controlled, self-contained space of the mall resembles the space of the cinema theater. Architecture and visual cues guide shoppers through the mall in much the same way that the shot-by-shot architecture of film editing controls the spectator's gaze, moving him/her through the fiction film. Window displays, walkways and escalators move the consumer/spectator through a kind of ritual play which has less to do with the exchange of goods than the pursuit of pleasure via the gaze. In the mall an economy of desire intersects with an economy of commodity consumption, radically altering the consumer's interpretation *place* as private *space* or identity at the end of the millennium. Mall culture deconstructs the metaphysical notion of universal Man into what Lauren Langman describes as a "plurality of disconnected, recognition-seeking spectacles of self-presentation" (in Shields, p. 40). In the mall consumers internalize brand image to form a personal if transitory identity, and look to being looked at to confirm their social and existential reality.

While Shields insists that consumers do not have to spend money to participate in mall culture, we are loathe to dismiss the actual purchase of goods from the

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shopping experience, since the exchange of goods for capital drives mall culture and marks the articulation of capitalism and desire in consumer society. While the spectacle of consumption is played out to a great extent on the imaginary/symbolic plane of looking and being looked at, the actual purchase of a product/brand is necessary, inasmuch as it implicates the individual in the inexorable movement forward of the market, and marks the intersection of desire and commodity capitalism, of personal "space" and public place in the mall. By purchasing goods, shoppers guarantee the future of consumer culture and perpetuate their place in the spectacle of consumption.

### **Branding Lifestyles**

Mall culture highlights the semiotic dimension of consumption, since, for the most part, the "objects of desire" are not objects at all, but meanings or brands endowed with value by consumer culture. Kids buy Nikes, not shoes, and along with the acquisition of the brand goes participation in the Nike image and the Nike philosophy, "Just Do It!" Consumer economy departs from capitalist economy inasmuch as the goods offered at the mall have long ago lost their value relative to the work which produced them. Brands replace use-value with image value, reduce goods to stand-ins for the real thing. The movement of goods/brands between producer, distributor and consumer is mobilized by the circulation of looks from consumer to brand to other consumers looking and back again, whether the "look" occurs literally in mall space or via the media.

Since brand image is subject to the pressures of fashion and cultural change, brands lose their meaning and value as quickly as they earn it. The built-in depletion of brand value motivates consumers to repeat the consumption ritual over and over again, since the endless quest for an

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identity is tied to the insatiable thirst for "image." Just as the mythical Don Juan failed to satisfy his penchant for women by the physical possession of any one woman, condemned as he was to seduce and abandon one woman after the other without satisfaction, the post-modern subject is driven to recreate itself repeatedly by means of brand consumption. Likewise, marketers and advertisers, the image-makers of consumer culture, track the life of brands and try, with more or less success, to anticipate the limits of the consumer's desire.

In consumer culture the self is always and already contingent upon the subject's participation in the spectacle of consumption. In the mall, the display window symbolizes both a surface for the consumer's projections into the brands on display [the window as mirror] and a passage into the rite of consumption [the window as opening]. The display window acts like the inner "mirror" of psychoanalysis inasmuch as it symbolizes the surface on which the consumer plays out the formation of personal and social identity through *semiosis* - meaning production. In spectacle, meaning production depends upon a dialectic of looking implicating spectators and spectated in the performance. In the mall goods-*cum*-brands provide material for the performance, provide masks shaping the subject's identity in the moment by moment spectacle of shopping.

The subject of consumption is nothing if not an actor in search of an identity. Rather than bringing a ready-made inner self to the mall for a change of clothes, the subject of consumption produces and is the product of styles, trends and marketing strategies. The subject thus conceived eludes the metaphysical hierarchy which grants fixed, original status to the self and secondary status to the roles it plays on the stage of life.

Lacking a basic core identity, the post-modern subject

constructs itself around the image it projects for others in consumer culture: "I am what you perceive me to be." Consumption enables the individual to change "hats" as the occasion demands. As a result, the meaning of products, their "brand image," is central to the formation of personal and social identity in consumer culture. Products-*cum*- brands constitute signs, symbols whose meaning and value are inseparable from the role they play in an economy of looking and being looked at.

### **Unwrapping the Logo**

Brand logos map the consumer's journey through the looking glass of mall culture. In *Primer for Daily Life*, Susan Willis looks at logos in the broader context of the role of packaging in the rituals of daily life. As she explains, in consumer culture consumption is alienated from the forces of production - we work in jobs that have little or no direct relationship to our means of survival. Rather than produce the food we eat or use our hands to craft our lifestyles, we work away from home, earn money to buy products which in their turn have been measured out, sanitized and packaged. In commodity capitalism both work and the products of work are abstracted and take on meanings which transcend their use values: the value of bottled water, for example, cannot be reduced to the labor which produced it or its benefits for the consumer. Packaging, the semiotic aura surrounding goods, creates this value.

Packaging conceals the split between the use value of the product, its intrinsic worth for the purchaser, and its exchange value, its worth relative to the labor which produced it, by creating semiotic value or brand image. Though we speak of use-value as a frame of reference for discussing value in general, goods have no more intrinsic worth than signs have intrinsic meanings. Consumers participate in consumption rituals the same way speakers

participate in language, inasmuch as they must agree to some extent on what brands mean and what values these meanings have for maintaining self-image and lifestyle. We all buy goods which are not absolutely necessary for physical survival. However, such products acquire indispensable social value by virtue of the meanings they convey through packaging and advertising. For example, while the intrinsic value of such products as anti-perspirants might be dubious, marketing communication persuades us of their necessity for social or emotional survival.

Broadly conceived, packaging constitutes the semiotic dimension of goods, their brand image for consumers. While Willis focusses on the actual wrapping used to package goods for distribution and sale, packaging, in a broad sense, could include everything which contributes to the semiotic aura surrounding goods, including brand legacy and brand story, produced by advertising, point of purchase display and logos circulating in the popular imagination.

Packaging also serves as a prelude or introduction to the consumer's experience of the product. Willis draws attention to the pleasure of unwrapping the package: packaging both seduces the consumer by attractive imagery and teases the consumer by delaying the moment of possession. The anticipation of use-value becomes a kind of value of its own, which explains why actually purchasing and using the product are not as meaningful as the experiences leading up to them.

Packaging does not simply identify or imitate its contents, but stands alone as a **text** whose meaning transcends the object it represents - Tony the Tiger has no generic connection to cornflakes! Packaging constitutes what Baudrillard calls a *simulacrum*, a stand-in which has become more important than the original



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commodity. What drives consumption is the desire to penetrate the surface image and participate directly in the symbolic world of the brand.

The semiotic dimension of consumption is compounded by representations of the brand in advertising, especially in the media of photography and television, which add yet another layer of skin to the play of appearances. The mechanical reproduction of the simulacrum lends an *appearance* of reality to the *appearance* of use-value, in other words - produces an imitation of an imitation. This type of "screen play" (Brunette and Wills) drives entertainment consumption, teasing the spectator with the promise of endless gratification.

### **Building Brand Loyalty**

The semiotic dimension of commodities achieves its most concrete representation in the brand **logo**. Logos introduce the brand world and invite the consumer's participation in it whether an actual product is attached or not. Take for instance the Mickey Mouse logo. At once an abstraction of the Mickey Mouse character made famous by Disney cartoons and also an emblem for membership in Disney commodity culture, the Mickey Mouse logo symbolizes a rite of entry into the Disney *world*.

Commodity capitalism, as the argument goes, has "alienated" consumption from production - we're no longer in touch with the products of our labor, nor do we recognize the labor that went into the products we use. This isn't the whole story, however. Brand identification shifts the terms of commodity exchange from the realm of products to the realm of signs, and engages consumers in the active production and exchange of meanings. By actively participating in meaning production, consumers enjoy an illusion of unity with the brand, *there* where

commodity capitalism has created division and lack.

Logos play an important part in this process, **branding** the product with the promise of community among consumers and unity with cultural production. For this reason logos build consumer loyalty. Branding activates a drive to possess the product because it both manifests - in the realm of the real - the lost use-value of primitive economies, and promises - in the realm of representation - a more direct, human relation between work, the products of work and other consumers.

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In other words, what was lost in the realm of economic exchange is reclaimed in the realm of cultural/semiotic performance. Branding also identifies the product relative to the chain of signifiers constituting its brand "family," in the same way that ranchers brand livestock with the sign of their ranch. Products branded in this way offer membership in a kind of private club where the only privilege offered is belonging itself. The logo constitutes the site of entry into the world of the brand by transforming the product into a sign, a stand-in and a fetish for the lost use-value of production economies.

The logo is not the entire picture, however, since the ability of the brand to transcend the original division between the semiotic and economic meaning of use-value depends upon the consumer's investment in the brand "story." Sometimes consumption narratives are built around products by marketers, as in the case of the Marlboro cowboy or the Disneyland fantasy. At other times narrative evolves out of our own experiences with products, as products enter into social rituals such as gift giving or holiday meal preparation.

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Narrative codes join the static space of the image to the movement forward of narrative through time, and determine the spectating subject's moment by moment investment in narrative discourse. Narrative keeps the circulation of goods moving forward by sustaining the illusion that sign consumption will succeed where the actual purchase of the product fails - to deliver an immediate and pleasurable connection between consumption and the source of production. Narrative prolongs the meaning-life of commodities by holding the consumer/spectator there where the commodity "lives."

### **The Spectacle of Consumption**

"Contemporary mass culture," claims Willis, "yearns for the recovery of use value," of an illusion of original continuity with the products of our labor. This explains the force of historical theme parks on the modern tourist. Theme parks such as the reconstitution of colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, revive the appearance of earlier, more direct relations between production and consumption. The staff poses as actors posing as villagers seized in daily life activities of another era. The modern tourist "performs" history, as it were, yearning not so much for knowledge about the past as for the apparent connectedness between work, goods and social bonds. Producers, staff and tourists play at overcoming the original sin of capitalism, namely alienating production from consumption and thus alienate the self from itself and others. Ironically, since the theme park is itself a commodity fetish, a stand-in for lived experience and an appearance of an appearance of daily life, the consuming subject is caught once again in a hall of mirrors, grasping in vain for the ontological certainty of an origin.

The theme park epitomizes visual, or what I would call *semiotic* consumption, since the *product*, per se, consists primarily of the pleasure derived from participating in the

Always  
Audi  
Clearasil  
Compaq  
Disney  
Evian  
Ford  
Gramercy Pictures  
Halston  
Kraft  
Lever 2000  
Lincoln Mercury  
Nokia  
Marlboro  
Vidal Sassoon

production of the worlds called forth by brands, whether fictional or real. Links between spectator "I", eye and the logo form "pleasure points" which engage the spectator in the theme park fantasy as lived experience.

Spectacle has become the model if not the condition of lived experience in the our time, and vision the medium in which the post-modern subject moves through the spectacles of consumer culture, including malls, theme parks and the mass media. By looking closely at the implications of spectacle for consumer research, we are able to link logos to looks in a theory of personal space, keeping in mind the power of signs to form the popular consciousness.

