

CULTURE AND CONSUMPTION: NEW APPROACHES TO THE SYMBOLIC CHARACTER OF CONSUMER GOODS AND ACTIVITIES, Grant McCracken. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988, 174 pages, \$27.50.

Arriving as it does in the swell of critical interest in postmodern inquiry into consumer behavior, this eclectic volume will challenge researchers to examine the metatheoretical bias of the discipline and encourage instructors to broach much larger questions in the classroom. The author, an anthropologist in the Department of Consumer Studies at the University of Guelph, provides an articulate and occasionally eloquent treatment of a range of Western (particularly EuroAmerican) consumer behaviors, illustrating at once the substantively rich potential of our discipline and the role of rhetorical style in shaping our consumption of scholarship. To a discipline whose time horizons have been lamentably short and whose purview prematurely circumscribed, the author brings a comprehensiveness and enthusiasm of persuasive dimensions. The book is both a material and stylistic delight.

The essays included in the volume, some original, others redactions of previous publications, converge upon the notion that "culture" and "consumption" are mutually constituting. The logic of presentation is straightforward, proceeding from a historical consideration of the origins of consumer society, through a theoretical meditation on the meanings of consumption, to a set of exemplary illustrations that suggest the ways in which synergy is derived from and imparted to sociality by consumer goods. McCracken is earnest in attempting to ground abstract formulations and speculative assertions in ethnographic particulars, so that many of the margin comments a reader may scribble in pursuit of the author's line of argument are eventually addressed with specific examples. Further, consumption is regarded as more than an epiphenomenon of marketing, which is a valuable perspective to adopt.

In reviewing the recent and expanding historical literature treating the "consumer revolution" that has given Western culture its contemporary shape, the author examines several critical episodes punctuating the development of modern consumption that generally are overlooked in discussion of the "great transformation" of the West. Both physical and symbolic properties of material culture—the relationship of patina to social status, curatorial patterns of consumption, the mnemonic function of heirlooms, intergenerational transfer of meaning—are probed for their processual, constituting essences. The author advances a semeiotic theory of culture change in his treatment of clothing as an expressive yet conservative communication code and of meaning as a polysonic product ritually transferred through domains of

experience via consumption. By examining the role of the evocative power of objects in stimulating desire, the complementarity of goods that fosters both stability and change in social group membership, and the transmuting of consumer goods to object codes that render culture intelligible, he embeds consumer-object relations in a matrix of socially negotiated meaning.

Far from being a pathology or mere engine of mobility, the materialism McCracken detects in the modern world is part of the infrastructure of contemporary Western society. The "worlds" of advertising, fashion, design, and product development that literally shape this materialism are acknowledged, but remain to be explored with the same ethnographic tenacity with which anthropologists approach village-level realities. McCracken's discussion of one informant's relationship to her possessions is just such a contextually sensitive description and interpretation needed to illuminate the dynamics of each of these "worlds." One hopes such inquiry is next on the author's research agenda. Similarly, his insightful interpretation of the "Diderot effect"—a force that encourages the individual to maintain a cultural consistency in his/her complement of consumer goods—has implications beyond the ones he derives for contemporary consumer culture. Finally, the recovery of "displaced meaning," a fascinating project the author attributes to consumer-object relations, is even more properly a public policy issue in need of a worthy champion. The work begun in *Culture and Consumption* will clearly radiate to other niches in the discipline.

In reading and recommending the volume, my reservations are few. As in most edited volumes, the continuity and flow of chapters are impeded where segues are offered in lieu of cogent transitions. A linking precis before each principal section and a single authorial voice offset this moderate annoyance. The materials upon which the author's perspective is built are almost exclusively EuroAmerican, leaving the reader to wonder how the author's formulations might fare in cross-cultural perspective or what their significance might be in societies whose economies are currently undergoing "globalization." Further, little mention is made of the methods (historiographic, ethnographic, semeiotic, etc.) by which the author's style of consumer research might be propagated. Finally, though the volume is nicely produced, carefully copy edited, and usefully indexed, its price undoubtedly will retard adoption. This is unfortunate, as the book would prove useful at the graduate level in survey and theory courses in consumer behavior. I hope the publisher will see the utility of issuing a paperback edition.

Elsewhere (Sherry 1989) I have described the confluence of literatures contributing to the emergence of postmodern inquiry in consumer research. McCracken's volume complements recent work in anthropology (Appadurai 1986), sociology (Campbell 1987), history (Agnew 1986), and consumer research itself (Hirschman 1988), which is fueling investigation into macroconsumption patterns, alternative methods of inquiry, and experiential dimen-

sions of consumer behavior. *Culture and Consumption* provides a useful introduction to some of the key concerns and players in the emerging field. The volume will help balance the prevailing cognitive and social psychological cast of consumer research and should stimulate more comprehensive investigation into consumer behavior.

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THE FRONTIER OF RESEARCH IN THE CONSUMER INTEREST, E. Scott Maynes, Editor. Columbia, MO: American Council on Consumer Interests, 240 Stanley Hall, University of Missouri, 1988, 889 pages.

This book reports the Proceedings of the International Conference on Research in the Consumer Interest (often referred to as the "Wingspread Conference" because it took place at the Wingspread Center in Racine, WI). The conference was held August 16-19, 1986. This "invitation-only" conference brought together 75 of the leaders in consumer research, marketing research, public affairs, consumer affairs, and consumer education from the United States, Europe, and the Far East. Participants in the conference came from diverse groups with an "interest" in the consumer interest: businesses, government agencies, universities, secondary schools, consumer organizations, law firms, professional associations, and research organizations. A significant number of well-known marketing researchers who specialize in consumer behavior and consumer decision-making processes were participants in the conference and their substantial contributions to the conference are of special interest to the readership of *JMR*.

The goals of the conference were to assess the state of the art in consumer interest studies and to identify new directions for future research focusing on consumer interests. On the premise that "the consumer interest" involves anything that furthers the attainment of the consumer's rights, the conference sessions presented in the book are organized around six major consumer rights: (1) The Right to Safety, (2) The Right to be Informed, (3) The Right to Choose, (4) The Right to be Heard, (5)