

## Bottomless Cup, Plug-in Drug: A Telethnography of Coffee

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In this paper, I use an anthropological perspective to explore the dimensions of “coffeeworld” as it is depicted on prime time network television programming. I do not examine coffee commercials, but rather the programming context that conditions in part viewers’ perceptions of coffee, which ostensibly delivers a receptive audience to prospective marketers. I explore the cultural significance of coffee in the form of themes emerging from a close viewing of top-rated programs.

### INTRODUCTION

In the following pages, I provide an anthropological review of selected aspects of the mass mediation of consumption, interpret the cultural meanings of coffee as depicted on prime-time network programming, and suggest some directions for future research into the built environment of consumer behavior. This exploration of “coffeeworld” is an effort to help account for some of the ways in which consumers produce their experience of coffee, and to examine how consumption myths [Sherry 1987] speak to and through themselves in the world of goods.

As an anthropologist, I have long been interested in advertising as a way of knowing [Sherry 1987], but less attuned to the television programming that lights up the way. I share Taussig’s [1993: 23] belief, derived in turn from Walter Benjamin, that advertising helps restore the particulate sensuality that gives goods their fetish quality in consumer culture. I am accustomed to thinking of advertising as a projectible field [Leiss, Kline and Jhally 1986], and of goods less as an extension of myself [Belk 1988] than as a vehicle for getting outside of myself, in Benjamin’s sense of sentience [Taussig 1993: 97]. That is, consumption is not merely about incorporation and personal appropriation, but more about tactile knowing and proprioception [Taussig 1993: 25–26; 97]. That TV in even its least interactive form is just such a conducive medium—the agar of popular culture in a petri CRT—had not struck me as forcefully for the very reason of its vehicularity,

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until I began to foreground its props and scrutinize its sets. On television, as in the "real world," coffee is a singular property that supports the round of life.

#### A Consumer Anthropology of Programming

While it is possible to cite empirical studies demonstrating that we have less leisure time than ever or more leisure time than ever [Baldwin 1993], one of the interesting correlates of perceived time famine in this culture is that we are spending greater amounts of time in front of the television. While some of that time is "white noise therapy" [McKibben 1992: 200] for the truly tired, and much of it is occupied with additional activity simultaneously undertaken [Holbrook 1993; Kottak 1990]—achronic and polychronic experience, respectively—the cumulative effect of hours logged before the tube is estimable. Whether we consider the influence exerted through the creation of new cultural experiences and meanings (or the reinforcement of older ones), or the "teleconditioning" phenomenon that encourages individuals to duplicate inappropriately in other lifeways the behavioral styles they've developed through televiewing [Kottak 1990: 3, 9], the impact of television upon consumers is profound.

Television has been charged with socializing and narcotizing, with gate-keeping and reifying. It is a source of liberation and hegemony [Kottak 1990; Williams 1974]. The ontological structures of capitalism are both reproduced and resisted through televiewing. Yet its effect on everyday life, through the depiction of the ritual substratum of consumer behavior that undergirds everyday life, is little understood [Goffman 1976]. While we have toured the badlands of daytime game shows [Holbrook 1993] and nighttime soap operas [Hirschman 1988] to encounter the *ideology* of materialism, we have neglected its *ecology*. We have slighted infrastructure in our enthusiasm to reveal metasocial commentary. Carey [1988: 14] has challenged culturally sensitive media analysts to identify "the most durable features of our temporal condition" by drawing from the disciplines of anthropology and history. In this essay, I use an anthropological lens to read the accretion of meanings attaching to one of those features—the product complex of coffee—in an effort to bring a diachronic perspective to the ethnographer's synchronic enterprise. I seek to move beyond Thorburn's [1988: 56] notion of an "aesthetic anthropology" that "strives for a simultaneous awareness of TV programs as manufactured cultural artifacts *and* as fictional and dramatic texts," to a consideration of the cultural artifacts that make TV programs possible. We require a "commodity aesthetics" more literal than the one proposed by Haug [1986], that would antedate and integrate our experience of brands. The artifactual affordances that underwrite dramatic texts demand investigation. As an exploratory outing, mine

is largely a "producerly" enterprise [Fiske 1989b: 103–105] devoted to understanding the meanings viewers negotiate with programming.

Programming is not just the epiphenomenal context of advertising, it is the process of product placement writ large (or, rather more literally, small). That is, it employs the stuff of everyday life, albeit in extraordinary circumstances, to create verisimilitude. In contrast to advertising, it provides us with some of the fuzzy logic that shapes and reflects cultural perception. Programming is not simply advertising for advertising, nor are commercials solely intertextual to programs themselves. If we acknowledge the pervasiveness of late 20th century cathodic homilies [Haineault and Roy 1993: 158], programming is the ordinary to advertising's canon. The props undergirding programming are infused with and infuse cultural meaning [McCracken 1986]. Programming does not merely deliver audiences to marketers. It also delivers images of material culture, products in particular, to viewers. The televisual product is the subject of my essay; coffee is my particular focus.

As an ideological anchor for this essay, I adopt a cultural forum model of television, and embed that model in the tradition of cultural production. As a cultural forum [Newcomb and Hirsch 1984], television is a liminal realm that generates rich patterns of meanings from among which viewers select to suit their own personal straits. Television presents society's myths to society at large. Viewers use television to help produce culture; they interpret programming to "explain," "extend" and "contain" their lives, rather than merely or routinely succumbing to false consciousness [Jensen 1984: 109]. Programming provides a complex (polysemic) projectible field for its viewers.

The ability of television to relate products (in the form of "decor") to characters in an apparently naturalistic and hence believable context, and to harness that relation to consumers' "already highly charged acquisitiveness" by objectifying their continually transforming inner desires [Himmelstein 1984: 3], is of particular interest to me. The evocative power of things [McCracken 1988] to make our categories of culture stable and visible [Douglas and Isherwood 1979] has become a truism of consumer research [Belk, Sherry, Wallendorf, and Holbrook 1991]. The evocative power of televisually virtual artifacts—the prop value of coffee to a consumer's understanding of product, category and cultural meanings—is less well understood.

Taking a culture-centered view [Davis and Puckett 1992: 11] of programming that focuses on the "creation, dissemination, and consumption of meaning," and tempering that view with a reception theory framework [Real 1992] that emphasizes active audience involvement in the transformation of televised meanings, I produce in the following pages an account of my own production of consumption. As a "resourceful reader" [Living-

stone 1992]—or, more aptly, a vigilant viewer—I have trained my observations upon props rather than the narrative structure or characters that are the conventional objects of media analysis. While ethnographers have come lately to the study of programming [Ang 1990; Bryce 1987; Jenkins 1992; Kottak 1990; Lindlof and Meyer 1987; Traudt and Lont 1987; Wilk 1993; Wolf 1987], and have illuminated local phenomena such as the dynamics of fandom, family viewing practices or the cultivation effect, they have not adopted the product-based frame of reference favored by ethnographers of consumption. In this paper, I adopt such a frame.

## METHODOLOGY

The data base for this project is drawn from nine of the ten top-rated prime-time network television shows of the American 1992–1993 season: *Coach*, *Cheers*, *Full House*, *Home Improvement*, *Love and War*, *Murder She Wrote*, *Murphy Brown*, *Northern Exposure* and *Roseanne*. Every appearance of or reference to coffee in these shows was excerpted in context and transferred to videotape for analysis. The data base includes 196 segments (reduced from an earlier 198 that included two repetitions) of coffee-related material.

While a detailed description of individual television shows is beyond the scope of this paper, a summary overview is indicated. The shows are principally situation comedies, with the exception of two that observe a drama format. A range of household structures, gender roles, occupational groupings, social classes, geographic locales and situational settings is represented in the shows. While sports, news and talk show formats are not sampled in this study, they turn up (almost as self-referential parodies of telereality) within the sampled programs themselves. A variety of commercial sponsors underwrites the shows, and while none of the shows has an explicit product focus, products may figure more prominently as material props in some shows than in others. For example, the show *Home Improvement* incorporates the occupation of its principal character—host of a television show called “Tool Time”—so fully into its storyline, that product props bear an inescapably (and perhaps incomparably) heavy burden in performance. Beer has a similar iconic valence in *Cheers*. As historical artifacts, the shows reflect their 1992 context; while current cultural practice is most prominent, some temporal lag and trend potential is reflected in the programming.

If television programming can be construed as myth [Silverstone 1988], the units of analysis presented here can be considered mythemes, as they are building blocks. In the case of coffee, we are even closer to the level of oral formulaics undergirding the telling of myth. Coffee-getting, as demonstrated below, is meta-activity accompanying other behavior (as televiewing itself often is); in much the same way as are the stock phrase runs employed by oral poets, who use them to go offline and buy time while

they retrieve and compose the next significant portion of their tale [Finnegan 1977]. The coffee mythemes are the warp and woof of much televisual myth. Coffee sustains the narrative. Programming is consensus narrative that articulates a culture's central mythologies in an accessible format [Thorburn 1988: 57]. The coffee clips in the data base are examples of a sociocultural dimension so fundamental to viewers' common experience (a cultural "place," so to speak) that it is part of the tacit connective tissue knitting together the meanings of myth [Hoover 1988: 176].

### Analytic Procedure

I analyzed the tapes, as a solitary ethnographer, in the following fashion. I viewed the entire corpus of material three times, in episodic style. Because the excerpted material runs to several hours, and it is discontinuous in a way that conventional videonarrative is not<sup>1</sup>, I parsed each viewing over several separate installments to help minimize fatigue. I made observations and gross analyses on the first pass. I deepened my analyses and refined my observations on the second pass. I used the third pass to capture remaining complementary insights that might have occurred as a result of the interaction of prior reading and experience with the backburner simmering of the two previous viewings. I made handwritten notes in real time, used both the fast forward and rewind buttons as aids to memory, and drank coffee during several viewings. Finally, I reduced my initial observations and interpretations to a schematic document, prior to drafting an extended interpretation<sup>2</sup>.

Clearly there are limits to generalization in this study. As a lineal descendant of McKibben's [1992] inspired interpretation of an entire day's worth of wideband programming and Newcomb's [1988] polyvocal analysis of a single night's worth of prime-time programming, this essay is personal and focussed. I present an idiosyncratic account in the following pages. It is the perspective of an anthropologically informed, coffee-drinking active televiewer with no direct access to the world of set designers that Solomon and Greenburg [1993] have challenged us to enter. While neither introspective [Wallendorf and Brucks 1993] nor existential-phenomenological [Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1990] in any strict sense, as an exercise in intraceptive intuition [Sherry 1991], the enterprise combines elements of each of these approaches. The essay is written by a native anthropologist who is heir to the assumptions of the culture in which the phenomenon is embedded [Messerschmidt 1981]. I began the analysis with the expectation that coffeeworld would be presented in an impoverished fashion, and tried to be alert to this bias as I searched for meanings. By avoiding both affective and intentional fallacies—and staying at an entirely etic level of analysis<sup>3</sup>—I hope to reveal something of the significance of coffee as conveyed by prime-time programming.

## QUINTESSANCE OF COFFEE: A PRIME TIME PERSPECTIVE

Given its history and pervasiveness, it is not surprising that the importance of coffee as a commodity is rivalled by its semiotic significance. Coffee is among the preeminent vessels of meaning in consumer culture. More than a rich, polyvocal symbol, it may be considered a key symbol [Ortner 1973] of our time. Because of the polysemy of prime time network programming [Fiske 1989a,b; 1991] itself, coffee is able to bear a powerfully condensed symbolic load of physiological and normative connotations and denotations [Turner 1974]. Its pivotal meanings are best engaged in cultural biography [Kopytoff 1986], but such a heroic undertaking exceeds the scope of this paper. In the following pages, I will examine the primary mass-mediated meanings attaching to coffee and its consumption. I dwell in particular on the sensual, social and spiritual dimensions of coffeworld, and develop six interpretative themes from the database. These themes are interpenetrating, and do not exhaust the local detail of individual television shows. I have used clip numbers to illustrate each of these themes. Table 1 identifies the clips by program.

## Coffee is Fundamental

If there were a fifth essence, it would have to be coffee. Coffee is *sui generis*; its creation is rarely depicted. It is *prima materia* (2, 4). Coffee just is (it always was and always will be). It is fundamental and ubiquitous (81, 108,

TABLE 1. Coffee Incidents By Program.

Program	Coffee incidents	Segment clip numbers
<i>Coach</i>	16	1, 15, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 81, 115, 116
<i>Cheers</i>	14	55, 56, 67, [84], 95, 106, 122, 123, 146, 154, 155, 163, 180, 187, 194
<i>Full House</i>	10	6, 54, 71, 72, 88, 100, 109, 131, 156, 187
<i>Home Improvement</i>	8	5, 8, 13, 80, 93, 104, 113, 114
<i>Love and War</i>	33	31, 68, 85, 86, 96, 97, 98, 107, 117, 118, 119, 120, 127, 128, 129, 130, 133, 145, 151, 152, 153, 160, 161, 165, 166, 167, 168, 175, 176, 183, 184, 185, 193
<i>Murder She Wrote</i>	32	18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 47, 48, 57, 76, 77, 78, 79, 92, 102, 103, 111, 112, 132, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 162, 171, 172, 181, 182, 191, 192, 197, 198
<i>Murphy Brown</i>	24	10, 17, 29, 43, 49, 50, 52, 58 [60], 62, 63, 65, 69, 70, 87, 99, 108, 124, 139, 150, 158, 159, 164, 173, 174
<i>Northern Exposure</i>	35	9, 14, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 45, 46, 59, 66, 82, 83, 94, 105, 121, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 147, 148, 149, 157, 169, 170, 178, 179, 188, 189, 190, 195, 196
<i>Roseanne</i>	24	2, 3, 4, 7, 11, 12, 16, 30, 44, 51, 53, 61, 64, 73, 74, 75, 89, 90, 91, 101, 110, 125, 126, 177

[ ] indicates duplicate clip.

114, 174, 188). It is *aqua vitae* (2, 9, 17, 62, 75, 139, 176), and is frequently consumed with the staff of life, donuts (17, 58, 65, 124, 139, 158, 164, 173). It is remarkable in its abundance (57, 118) and in its ability to evoke oceanic connectedness (118). Coffee is both base and basic (30). It requires no complement or ceremony (5), although it may sustain either. It is mundane stuff; it epitomizes the ordinary (188). It embodies propriety. It may symbolize spontaneity or closure (149). It may inaugurate new beginnings, or provide stability in the face of change (1).

Coffee is so intimately associated with life (our inability to consume it being the hallmark of death [161]) that it assumes the proportions of an autonomic nervous system. It's "getting" and consumption are so unconsciously or unreflectively linked with sustaining behaviors from mere motor activity to eloquent conversation (24) that it is almost like breathing. Coffee and its accoutrements become the preeminent parasomatic prop, demonstrating just how fluid and negotiable the boundaries between self and environment can be. Coffee is caught up in the ritual of paralinguistics and proxemics. It is something to be occupied with while activity occurs (11); it is employed offline as an adjunct to conversation (20). It is a fluid part of the flow of interaction, carried with consumers on the myriad micro-journeys of their daily routines (24, 59). It is also a distractor from uncomfortable conversations and situations; it allows consumers to tangibilize stress that might otherwise be somatized (71, 79, 119). It may actually function as an extension of the self, a prosthesis that manifests itself in gesture (129, 164) or when it becomes a phantom limb, somehow forgotten only to be remembered when it causes a disruption (94, 172). Most tellingly, coffee may confer invisibility, like Perseus' helmet, upon its bearers, such as waiters and waitresses (21), or upon consumers in a position to eavesdrop (43). It is the cultural camouflage of inconspicuousness, part of the cultural furniture of the built environment.

Coffee is perhaps the primary key symbol in contemporary consumer culture. Above all other products, it is alive. The coffee experience is commonly anthropomorphized (35). Coffee is a fetish focus, and calls attention to the commodification of relationships. One series of clips in particular (33–42) does a wonderful job of lampooning commodity fetishism and the technology of influence by using coffee as an example of the prototypical advertising vehicle. In this spoof, coffee is emblematic of commodification even as it resists commodification. A hated brand is nonetheless endorsable as a bridge to women entering the paid labor force. Consumption fantasy is celebrated and derogated in the same breath; the "Tony and Sarah" motif of Taster's Choice (itself a deliciously oxymoronic name) is ruthlessly exploited. The "amorous glance" [Marx 1967] that commodities throw consumers as the person/product boundary dissolves [Freud 1961] is captured in this pastiche. Coffee is depicted tongue in cheek as an aphrodisiac, a status marker, a bonding agent, a diuretic and a vehicle

of female liberation. It is a companion to courtship that leads to the "heaven" of sexual bliss. Like Magritte's pipe or Freud's cigar, it is also sometimes *only* coffee. Most of all, coffee is emblematic of the self-consciousness with which we suspend our disbelief. It is a vehicle of the fantasy/reality dialectic that drives consumer culture, and an occasion for "programming" to parody the medium, advertising, to which it is entirely beholden. The joking relationship we recognize with this commercial ritual is a symptom of denial and discomfort. Like Molière's character, it is delightful to discover that we have been speaking prose, but just momentarily; complicity demands that we acknowledge the emperor's new clothes. We remain oblivious to the degree that programming shapes our cultural perception, especially when we can bracket commercials as smugly as we believe we do.

This smugness extends to the ambivalence attached to the suspect trendiness of specialty coffees and our tolerance of oxymorons. The trite anti-ritual lampoon of GFIC flavored coffee—a sarcastic invitation to "celebrate the moment" (110) delivered to resonate with jaded counter-sophisticates, as well as the nervous joking accompanying an offer of hospitality tendered with instant specialty coffee (131)—is an indictment of the inauthentic. Cappuccino machines turn up in unexpected places as a source of wonder (47) and in predictable places as cliché (68, 86, 192); they can become objects of suspicion and derision (153) when viewed as needlessly complex. And yet, the functional utility/bundle of benefits dimension of coffee can be evacuated entirely from the product without disturbing the aura of the coffee experience. Instant coffee is an oxymoron (3). Decaf is an extended oxymoron; decaf to go (105) intensifies the disconnect. Decaf served by a bartender (26, 189) would seem to qualify as a double oxymoron. The bathos of decaf cappuccino (180) fuses the sublime with the ridiculous. The authenticity of coffee resides in its semiosis.

### Coffee is a Drug

A palpable ambivalence attaches to our experience of coffee as a drug. We both acknowledge and deny its classification as a psychoactive substance. It is an appropriate symbol of our ambivalent cultural attitude toward drugs (14). Like beer, consumers grant coffee dispensation from the dark side of drug use (81). It is often contrasted with real or toxic drugs (25). In a sparsely equipped doctor's office, the coffee maker becomes a symbolic analog of the dialysis machine (27). Coffee is a strong medicine (66, 197) that is potentially dangerous (7). It is an anodyne and a stimulant (10, 96, 121, 144, 155, 176). While it is not a super-ego solvent—it is frequently contrasted with alcohol (55, 67, 75, 194) and may serve as a hang-over cure (56, 106) or Antabuse (187)—coffee often functions as an aphrodisiac (36, 38, 51). Coffee is antithetical to alcohol insofar as it encourages and potentiates work (144, 148). It is an appetite suppressant as well (31, 174). It has addictive potential



(79, 97). Coffee drinking may promote recklessness, truth-telling and disinhibition along the lines of sodium pentathol (89). That such an oxymoronic notion as "decaf" exists at all is countered with the belief that coffee should be stronger than dishwasher (105). The consciousness-altering properties of coffee abound. It has visionary properties, and is often drunk in connection with creative work (18, 23, 153). It resembles soma (73). Its aroma may be associated with a vivid dream (29). On a purely practical level, coffee stimulates behavior and produces movement, which reinforces cultural beliefs about drug action, while providing a "natural" excuse for characters to enter and exit scenes (16). It keeps people moving (32).

As it has shed and acquired meanings over time, coffee has shifted from a sacramental to a secular psychoactive, from a physic to a meta-physic [Hattox 1985; Schivelbusch 1992; Siegal 1989]. Because its set and setting [Weil and Rosen 1983] have been so thoroughly domesticated, and because its effects can be so idiosyncratic, coffee becomes a symbol of prosocial substance use [Szaz 1974]. It is a culturally acceptable drug, but a drug nonetheless, whose effects must be harnessed. The kind of altered consciousness it produces is socially sanctioned. As an ergodisiac, it both exhorts its users to greater effort, and affords them momentary release from their travails. The cultural ideology of coffee is ambivalent. While coffee is the mythic antithesis of alcohol, it also promotes a liminal "time-out" kind of meditative state that is clearly an out-of-body experience. Programming celebrates the kind of ceremonial chemistry [Szaz 1974] U.S. audiences find acceptable. Coffee is a benevolent drug.

### Coffee Means Emplacement

The coffee maker, whether a mundane Mr. Coffee, a more elaborate Bunn coffee service or an ornate Rancilio espresso machine, acts as a site magnet in contemporary experience. Coffee is a beacon product, and people are drawn to the site of its production. (Interestingly enough, coffee is rarely shown being prepared [179 *only*] or flavored to personal taste [85, 98, 169, 195]. It always *is*; it is *enough*. It is elemental and embodies instant gratification.) As a site magnet, the coffee machine and the beverage it produces help emplace and embed consumers in existentially profound quality space. Three types of such space are depicted: home, work, and "third places" [Oldenberg 1989] such as restaurants or bars. In each of these places, coffee is the *genus locus* (53, 67, 72, 129). It is also a companion spirit (13, 14, 59, 104), a portable vessel of domesticity and collegiality, that can be carried forth into the world.

Coffee emplaces domesticity and homeyness [McCracken 1988]. The coffee pot is the central focus of the domestic built environment (90). It is enshrined on the kitchen counter; it is the first stop upon entering the kitchen (44). This is a critical component of household ritual. The ritual

substratum of morning is enacted in the kitchen (53, 54, 64, 141, 186). Meals are ritually closed with coffee (3). It closes the day (12). One's degree of intimacy with others is measured by one's unimpeded, uninvited access to their coffee machine (61, 62). Hearth is symbolized by mugs around the breakfast table (88). Coffee is principal among the household gods.

Coffee is a staple on every workplace desk (18, 22, 32). Where smoking in the workplace is prohibited, coffee drinking is celebrated (82). Coffee is often positioned as a technological aid or power tool (24, 80, 148). The coffee (and donut) counter is a central focus of the workplace (49, 52, 58, 65, 78, 111, 112, 113, 150, 156, 173). It symbolizes the intrusion of informality into formal structure, the domestication of the political economy, and perhaps even the feminization of the androcentric space. Coffee enables consumers to work more productively, and to recreate on the job. It is essential to taming and humanizing what is potentially threatening space (47). Coffee is emblematic of *Homo faber* (13).

Coffee helps sacralize "third places" [Oldenberg 1989], which are those "core settings of informal public life"; they are the "regular, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work." The restaurant sign that advertises free refills (11, 30, 73, 91) is emblematic of the bottomless cup [Taylor 1976] that is industry's traditional gift to the consumer in the service of relationship management (171). The coffee machine is the visible, front-stage symbol of kitchen and service. The restaurant booth-with-coffee-drinkers tableau (102) is a cultural icon of the third place, as are the circulating waiters with the "cuppa Joe" (135), and the mocha Java capstone of large meals (137). It may be an indicator of the up-market status (68, 128, 129, 165, 183, 184, 193) or egalitarian nature (14, 31, 55, 67, 122, 123, 146, 147, 148, 154, 163, 187) of a bar. It is also an indicator of relative intimacy and comfort, when patrons are allowed to serve themselves (118), so that the third place maintains its ties to home and work. The resurgence of the coffeehouse [Hattox 1985], acknowledged, burlesqued and fueled in part by its portrayal on such current network programming favorites as *Frasier*, is a remarkable trend in American culture.

I use the term "emplacement" to describe the contribution that artifacts make to our definition of the spatial situation, and the reciprocal, amplifying effects that occur when artifacts resonate with space [Sherry 1994]. The term derives from work in environmental and architectural phenomenology, and the notion promotes a phenomenological understanding of ecology [Seamon 1993; Walter 1988]. Televisually, just as in everyday life, coffee is a place-making product. Its grounds are fundamentally geomantic. It situates its users in a moral geography of culturally significant quality space. It creates an atemporal community in its shared partaking that sacralizes the site of its consumption. The virtual community created by viewers with the characters of network programming is emplaced to a good degree through

the coffee sharing rituals depicted on screen. When the steam and aroma of coffee have pervaded a space, and communicants have drunk together in that space, the space becomes a "place," humanized through the agency of the product.

### Coffee Embodies Sociality

Coffee is about sociality. It is an invitation to conviviality and an overture to intimacy. It moves acquaintances from front stage to back stage accessibility (9). It is a reason to socialize (8). It is the ritual substratum of interaction (44, 63). Coffee is the spirit or essence of civility and hospitality (113, 181); it is used to include people into greater degrees of intimacy (61, 62). Its withholding or refusal marks pettiness and baseness; declining coffee is the hallmark of the truly abrasive individual (45), although it may signal a simple unwillingness to participate in the round of interaction ritual that builds social solidarity (78, 103). While dinner is a greater interpersonal commitment than coffee, coffee is a prelude to a deeper relationship (87). Going out for coffee is a ritual of friendship (159). Coffee drinking is tied to intimate conversation (92), and may have feminine overtones (76, 104). Matched mugs are a further indication of intimate compatibility (104, 113, 119). Coffee is also tied to the watercooler banter of the workplace (101), with predictably androcentric overtones (124). Coffee ritual provides ample opportunity to enact the service behaviors that underlie civility (12, 21, 57, 132, 171, 178, 197). Coffee getting (99) may be our most habitual interaction ritual. Coffee is often a status-leveler or democratizing agent (12, 31).

Coffee is also about individuation. It is a symbol of adulthood and focus of a generational rift (6). It marks a psychological coming of age (15, 93, 154) as much as a chronological arrival (83). Coffee may be the embodiment of the contemplative individual; it is a liminal time-out (22, 48, 50, 64, 119, 160) that affords introspection. Personalized and mismatched coffee mugs are the hallmarks of individuality (5, 19, 44, 63, 65, 116, 126, 159, 164, 173, 198). Sophistication and gourmand status may be evoked by coffee (37, 46, 68, 165, 168, 175, 183, 191, 192); so also may the exotic erotic (12, 153).

This dialectic between community and individuality is perhaps the most potent dynamic currently operating in American society. Calibrating a comfortable relationship between the values seems problematic for many of us, as we try to plot a course between mindless conformism and nihilistic autonomy. That this drama would be enacted in a variety of channels on television is entirely predictable. The polysemy of coffee nicely complements the polysemy of television. Coffee can be used to mark the communal and the individual, the self and the other. The mental set and social setting [Weil and Rosen 1983] of coffee predispose us to these alternative meanings.

## Coffee Evokes Sensuality

Coffee is a primary intermodal experience. It engages all the senses and induces a kind of video synaesthesia among viewers. Given the overwhelmingly visual bias of this paper, the look of coffee must be assumed (63). It is visually abundant in its generic aspect. It remains projectible, therefore singular, by virtue of never being shown in its customized in-the-cup state, although preparation *rituals* may be emphasized. Coffee is aromatic (7, 29), steamy and warm (74, 93, 125, 171). It is associated with spices and sweet tastes (47, 76, 85, 98, 134, 195); it may be bitter as well (45, 170). Coffee is seductively aural, the sound of pouring (57, 107) and the familiar rattle of coffee cups (162) helping to limn our acoustic environment.

Coffee as televised is an instructive example of the power of what Benjamin called the "optical unconscious"; coffee is a potent vessel of "tactile knowing" [Taussig 1993: 25–26, 97]. Because I apprehend coffee as an intersensory experiential complex, through a primarily visual (and to a lesser extent, auditory) medium, coffee may serve as a cue to encourage me to relax my vigilance or suspend my disbelief with respect to the unreality or artificiality of the scene in which it is embedded. That is, I may become more sensorily engaged with a flat depiction (and hence, flesh it out) if coffee is used to trigger proprioception. Coffee can be used to draw the viewer into greater intimacy and immediacy with the program.

## Coffee is A [The] Gift

Coffee is clearly the quintessential gift in the contemporary United States [Sherry 1983; Taylor 1976]. This theme is reflected in programming (114). The second or bottomless cup of coffee as the restaurant's gift to patrons has been discussed. The gift circulates constantly in restaurant settings. Coffee's potential for sharing (19) makes it an appropriate gift. It is depicted as a gift given from parents to a grown child in a Christmas setting (29) (the aroma of this coffee is linked to the spirit of the gift [Mauss 1924; Weiner 1992]). It is a courtship ritual bonding agent (39). In intensely intimate interactions, coffee may provide the gift of distraction (52). The gift of hospitality embodied in coffee (118) has already been discussed.

While the theme of dyadic giving is strong in network programming, monadic giving [Sherry, McGrath and Levy 1995] is also apparent. Coffee is a gift given to one's self. It may be featured as an indulgence (2), a reward (47), or a therapeutic intervention (29), as consumer research would indicate [Mick and DeMoss 1990]. It may be consumed in private (9), and transport its consumer to other times and places. Its mnemonic function may be highly idiosyncratic.

As the embodiment of infrastructural or token giving, which underlies more ideologically-freighted gift exchange relations [Sherry 1983], coffee

represents the mundane aspect of the spirit of the gift described by Weiner [1992]. Coffee is invested with accumulated meanings and is highly charged semiotically. However, as a plentiful commodity, it is an easily alienable possession. It can be given away, with the assurance that it will be returned in kind, bearing not only its culturally mandated meanings, but also something of the essence of the donor, with whose mental and emotional labor the gift is invested. Thus, coffee sharing is a low-budget exercise in "keeping-while-giving" [Weiner 1992], although its gendered underpinnings have been politicized and are in flux in contemporary U.S. society. It is the lowest threshold for establishing, deepening, and sustaining an exchange relationship in which the extraordinary spirit of the gift can be made manifest.

#### FAST FORWARD: DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A number of gaps are evident in the present anthropological analysis. I subordinated the issue of dramatic realism to my interest in the development of cultural categories. I might profitably turn my anthropological lens on the issues of program content and structure, and thus explore the embeddedness of coffee in terms of the programming vehicle itself. Similarly, the gendered nature of coffeeworld demands anthropological scrutiny. Coffee as a characterological marker is effectively ignored by my focus on culture. Locating culture in the individual is an appropriate next step for an anthropological videography of coffee. Material cultural inventories or typologies (of coffees and containers) might open fruitful areas of inquiry for anthropological analysis.

Several extended research directions suggest themselves beyond these obvious gaps. The first avenue begins with my initial belief that the product would be presented in an impoverished fashion. As my analysis has shown, coffee is depicted in a fairly rich fashion. This might also be the case for other products in categories that are strategically important to dramatic realism. Identification of these categories—beverages, clothing, automobiles, furniture and the like—and examination of particular products are clearly warranted.

A second avenue of exploration leads directly to the major stakeholders associated with prime time network programming. Set designers and property masters might be engaged through observation and depth interview, and invited to articulate their theories of verisimilitude. Scriptwriters might also be valuable informants, as might the actors themselves. Commercial sponsors are potentially viable informants, as advertisers create the other vehicle through which product worlds are explored. Commercials themselves, as textual artifacts, are appropriate units of analysis for comparative study, as some of my teammates have observed. Consumers themselves are perhaps the most appealing subjects of further research. Their

reception of product worlds is a topic of considerable importance. Demassified consumer research is clearly indicated, given our multicultural society. For example, African-Americans exhibit a considerably different viewing pattern than whites when their top ten prime time preferences are examined [R 1994].

A third avenue of exploration leads away from prime time network programming, and forks in two directions. On the one hand, other types of network programming are appropriate fieldsites, and may yield additional polysemic insight. On the other, non-network, or cable programming is an alternative field site whose narrowcast character might be expected to produce more precise or discrete product connotations. Clearly, similar investigations of media other than television—cinema, theater, literature and the like—would yield interesting comparative insights.

Finally, a comparative study of supermediated images of products with the product worlds of everyday life is a heroic task well worth the effort of undertaking. Such a study would recognize the multistranded ways of knowing that support consumption systems in contemporary society. It would also help banish the term “the real world” from the lexicon of consumer research.

#### INTERPRETATIVE SUMMARY: INTEGRATING THE THEMES

Consider an obverse strategy to the one McCracken [1988: 105–106] has called meaning displacement. Just as a culture will remove its ideals from the threat of corruption by relocating them to pristine quality space, to be recovered often at considerable peril, through embodiment in goods, so also will culture instantiate the mundane by encoding its folkways in holographic fashion into the material vehicles of social life, to be recovered discontinuously, and often outside conscious awareness. The mnemonic function of goods [Belk, Sherry, Wallendorf, and Holbrook 1991] we find so personally compelling as individual consumers because it is so idiosyncratic operates at a cultural level as well to reinforce the axiomatic nature of our basic categories of experience, without calling attention to the reinforcement.

In this sense, coffee is the ultimate “transparent tool” [Dubinskas 1993: 3–4], because we can see through it to the underlying analytical and emotional processes it embodies, without these logics interfering with our present task, which may involve drinking, televiewing, or both. Thus, while it is clearly essential to our cultural understanding of television to listen to how viewers talk about the medium [Wilk 1993], it is just as essential, and perhaps more difficult, to apprehend what viewers don’t talk about: the unremarkable, unthought known of properties. (Lloyd De Grane’s [1991] evocative photographs of American televiewing suggest a route such a projective anthropology of the ordinary might take.) The

associative learning encouraged by the vehicular use of goods that television demands [Faber and O'Guinn 1988: 61, 65] is an aspect of consumer socialization that empirical (i.e., noncritical) mass media research has largely overlooked. Consumer researchers are in a position to channel the three principal agendas of popular culture researchers—the production, content, and reception of cultural objects [Schudson 1991: 50]—into a common, literal focus on the objects that underwrite the popular.

We are at a cultural watershed, where the pervasiveness of super media and our ambivalent relationship to them [Real 1989] promise to deepen profoundly. An anthropology of these media is desperately needed [Spitulnik 1993]. Some of us will become “poaching nomads” [De Certeau 1984: 174] on the information superhighway, actively appropriating cultural goods as our hedonic impulses direct. Others of us will remain “couch potatoes” rooted firmly to the electronic hearth, in imminent danger of amusing ourselves to death [Postman 1985]. Each of us, however, will have his or her cultural understandings mediated to an unprecedented degree by televisual images. Images of goods, in particular, will help us maintain stability and negotiate change during this time. A cultural poetics of consumption is needed to unpack these images. I have moved toward such a poetics in this essay.

## NOTES

1. I was unable to enlist my own children in this postmodern exercise for any but the briefest of durations, as it appeared to take channel surfing to unprecedented levels in our household.
2. This project was initially conceived as a joint undertaking by colleagues from different disciplines. I forwarded this document to all members of an interdisciplinary team as my contribution to a communal data set. I made these initial analyses without benefit of consultation with teammates, as we had agreed for the first phase of the project. Subsequently, I forwarded as well a draft of the present interpretation. At some later phase, we intend to pool interpretations, in a quasi-content analytic-Delphi-technique-style negotiated analysis of the televisual coffeeworld. As my teammates' accounts are available elsewhere [Griffin 1993; Hirschman 1993; Scott 1993], I do not rehearse them here, but report only my own interpretations in depth.
3. Because I am both analyst and informant in this exercise, my etic perspective is even more hopelessly confounded with my emic perspective than is usually the case.

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