

# What's Past Is Prologue

## Retrosapes in Retrospect

---

---

*John F. Sherry, Jr.*

It was one of those late winter days in Evanston, Illinois. Overcast grey sky. Overcold windchilled thirty-something degrees. Overly humid lake effect dreariness. A fitting day for my quarter grading finally to be over. Donning my overcoat, I got into my car and sped to the airport, there to collect my collaborator on this retrosapes project, Stephen Brown, on the last leg of his jaunt across the pond. While the coming vernal equinox portended the kind of light-and-shadows balance I hoped our partnership would bring to the project, I couldn't have orchestrated a more fitting climatic embrace.

Not only would this weather welcome remind him of the damp charm of his native Belfast, it would also ease his transition into Chicagoland culture, well in advance of my weaning him off Ulster fries and hooking him up to deep dish pizza and wet beef sandwiches. Best of all, it was St. Patrick's Day in the Windy City, an alignment of adjectives so appropriate to the occasion a more auspicious augury could not be imagined.

Stephen debarked upon the adventure this present volume represents with a foot-wiping on the antiseptic astroturf carpet our customs inspectors required of U.K. visitors. Back in the day, hoof-and-mouth and mad cow disease seemed our principal threat of foreign invasion. We were oblivious to plastic explosive shoe soles. In the postapocalyptic aftermath of 9/11, we are transformed udderly, and we in the midwestern heartland have experienced this bovine reversal as our personal *Tain*. I was to return Stephen to this same airport six months later, in much better weather, but in a martial climate far more similar to that of his hometown than anyone might

ever have predicted. A brave new world for me, back to the future for Stephen, is what I imagined then.

This project has continued to unfold in a retro-atmospherics of meteorological palpability. Our brandscapes were once alive with totems and fetishes, bracketed by Barbarism and Kenosis. They are now pervaded by a new set of Ps—patriotism, parochialism, profit, and prophecy—as world systems recollide, reconfigure, and recombine, and they are wrapped in a polysemous package of public paranoia. Marketing, consumption, and state ideology have become more interpenetrating than ever before. Advertisers are now our official diplomats. America's most recent premiere annual secular ritual, its perennial paean to civil religion, Super Bowl XXXVI, is a testament to this perfusion. The event comprised a retroscape of spectacular proportion, replete with stirring performances of tribal militarism, culture nationalism, and pluralistic solidarity. Warrior sodalities and vestal virgins, high priests and sacred harlots, Americana reprised in genuflecting Clydesdales and Pepsi pastiche, a focal contest with an underdog yet predestined protagonist, and countless other strands of retropageanty were woven together by marketers in the warp of everyday heroism and the weft of quiet desperation. It is against this conservative-to-reactionary mythological backdrop of a return to Eden through enlightened consumption that the retroscaping of America, if not the Western world, will accelerate for the foreseeable future.

As I complete the draft of this chapter, it is St. Patrick's Day once again. This is dramatic unity on an anthropological scale, the year being the ethnographer's ritual equivalent to the psychoanalyst's fifty-minute hour. There is a satisfyingly calendrical correctness to the feel of a yearlong immersion in a project, and of emerging from the overwhelming welter of the mundane exotic into the relative clarity of written accounting. The effort has allowed me, as a consumer ethnographer—a deep hanger-out, a loiterer with intent—to illustrate the portion of my life project that is unfolding among fanatics, cultural transvestites, and hermenauts. So also have my colleagues revealed something of themselves in their own accounts of their encounters with retroscapes. Like some melancholic Nipper® before the gramophone, I strive to hear disaster's voice in the revolving grooves of my informants' enthusiasms, but fail miserably in the attempt, managing simply to chronicle my own willing descent into the vortices of retrotopia. I offer my own abjection to the forces of the retroscape as a warning to critical thinkers and liberation theologians, and toss conventional canons of programmatic closure to the winds, in offering these concluding remarks.

In his trenchant lampoon of marketing practice (in particular, the cool-hunting of trend analysts) Alex Shakar (2001) describes a "post-ironic" culture so saturated with ironic doubt that it comes to doubt its own mode of

doubting, causing its members to blur the boundaries between irony and earnestness; thus does schizophrenia, if not multiphrenia, become a characteristic mode of apprehending, as opposites are suspended. He coins the term "paradessence" to capture the paradoxical essence of products that fosters their mystical relationship with consumers, when opposites are suspended. In keeping with the vampiric models of marketplace behavior afloat in cultural studies today, we can appropriate Shakar's criticism and harness it to our understanding of the dynamics of the retroscape's appeal. Designers exploit our Mobius-strip grasp of time, and our human groundedness in place (whether we are nomadic or sedentary), while consumers willingly suspend their disbelief and collaborate in creating an illusion of authentic time travel, in the realization of the retroscape. When we experience the present as a disconnected series of fragments of immediacy, and exist primarily (and perhaps, more accurately, simultaneously) in the past and the future, we have succumbed to the retroscape's aura.

Our contributing authors have variously storied the topography of the retroscape, providing us with what the punning an-trope-ologist, Roy Wagner, might call both "near-life" and "near-depth" experiences of this nominally retail world. According to Wagner:

Time is always the *beginning* of space, wherever it may be and whatever the circumstances, so that space is the only part of it still left around to tell us what it *was*. (2001, p. 187)

He understands styles of architecture and ritual to be temporal phenomena, but their defining moment to be a spatial one. Whether the retroscape occurs in cyberia or suburbia, in the desert or at dessert, in hestial or hermetic surroundings, on fields or screens, among Lincoln logs or catalogs, or in paradise or the mind's eye, it manages to collapse our sense of a spatiotemporal continuum inward upon itself. Our authors ground us in a land where time stands still, even as we pay attention to the man behind the curtain, helping him sustain the illusion of progressive conservatism. We are natives in a familiar land, our hosts having tamed the exotic appeal of "there" and harnessed it in such a way as to refresh or renew our identities through our dwelling in that "then." Everything old is new again; *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Marketers strive mightily to keep the product life circle turning (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2002).

When it comes to charting retroscapes in the cartography of moral geography, clearly one critic's "architecture of reassurance" (Marling 1997) is another's "anthropological recrudescence" (McMurtry 1999). Our volume's authors have displayed emotions ranging from a nativist disdain worthy of a

Carl Hiaasen to a childlike enthusiasm characteristic of a Joseph Pine. They have told realist, confessional, and impressionist tales (Van Maanen 1988), making full use of introspection and exteroception (Sherry 2000). Evocation of place requires representation that encourages the reader to vibrate with the same resonance the author has achieved when he or she held up the turning fork of intraceptive intuition to the retroscape of interest (Bochner and Ellis 2002; Sherry and Schouten 2002). Further, our authors have generally grounded their interpretations in encounters with consumers who are actually engaged in cocreating these retroscapes, providing an empirical cast to their critical commentary, a kind of countercultural studies tack that incorporates emics into etics, and interdisciplinary insight into complex phenomena, a vigilance and holism missing from otherwise often exemplary accounts of servicescapes from thinkers such as Gottdeiner (2000, 2001), Satterthwaite (2001), and Ritzer (1999), and just beginning to appear in work by Miller (2001) and Twitchell (2002).

From the flamboyant opulence of the ersatz ancient Roman mall that is the Las Vegas Forum Shops, to the hauntingly evocative verisimilar starkness of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., the retroscape acts as a vehicle of cultural memory that encourages its dwellers to reflect upon the impact that time continues to have on his or her life project. Memory is selectively stored in and retrieved from such sites, affecting the shapes our futures assume; history is remade upon each successive visit. Our identities are also (re)constructed in transit through these places (Ben-Amos and Weissberg 1999; Brown 2001). Further, the invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) embodied and emplaced in many retroscapes suggest just how contingent our identities are upon the careful positioning of temporally bounded cocreation or coproduction of the consumption experience. This is as true for such ideologically freighted consumption as the "Americanizing" of the Holocaust (Cole 1999) as it is the romanticized consumption of cowboy culture at stock shows and rodeos (Peñaloza 2001). This marketing mythopoeia, this retrofuturistic revisionism, is equal parts *découpage* and *bricolage*, and seems as emancipatory as repressive. But how best to calculate the net present value of nostalgia?

I have heard my futurist colleagues cackle with pencil-headed glee at a notion they label "aiglatson," a condition they describe as a romantic attachment to the future. This is the figurative (and virtually literal) mirror-image of nostalgia, and is a culture-bound syndrome most U.S. (if not European) consumers will recognize. Grosz (2001, p. 145) understands this syndrome as the essence of the utopian: "the projection of a past or present as if it were the future":

The utopian is in fact a freezing of the indeterminable moment from the past through the future that the present is unable to directly control. . . . The utopian mode seeks a future in which time will cease to be a relevant factor, and movement, change, and becoming remain impossible.

This timelessness, however, is ultimately antithetical to the aura of the retroscape, as the dweller must continually renegotiate a relationship with time while on the premises, and the marketer must constantly refresh the ambience of the site.

Describing the "ultimate homelessness" that is part of our human condition, and the penchant for revivalism that is "quintessentially American," Tuan (1996, pp. 93, 188) anticipates the rise of retroscapes we have experienced in the United States. Consumers are spatiotemporal nomads who can be enticed to dwell in the "there and then" by the inherently exotic and romantic nature of retrospace. The utopian cast of this space is not lost on Tuan (p. 181), who cites the philosopher Kolakowski on cosmopolitanism:

When I am asked where I would like to live, my standard answer is: deep in the virgin mountain forest on a lakeshore at the corner of Madison Avenue in Manhattan and Champs-Élysées, in a small tidy town.

This archetypical longing for a no-place animated by a dialectic of regression/progression, purity/turpitude, serenity/turbulence, hestial/hermetic, aboriginal/modern . . . is enflamed by the retroscape, which promises momentary satisfaction to its dwellers-in-transit. As the American apotheosis of retail theatre proliferates around the globe via the thematization (Gottdeiner 1997) of both the so-called new means of consumption (Ritzer 1999) and new forms of consumption (Gottdeiner 2000), and as the experience and entertainment economies (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Wolf 1999) widen their theatres of influence, pattern-standardized retroscapes smoothe the transition of consumer diasporas parsing through customs.

The culture of memory that has diffused through Euro American societies since the late 1970s has both a global register and local manifestations (Huysen 2001). Extending the philosopher Lubbe's concept of "musealization" in accounting for modernism's inevitable shrinking of the lived experience of the cutting-edge present, Huysen (pp. 70–71) describes the way in which

the present of advanced consumer capitalism prevails over past and future, sucking both into an expanding synchronous space [and weakening] its grip on itself [providing] less stability . . . for contemporary subjects.

Memory culture advances as a form of “historicizing restoration” and “self-musealization”; its spread is accelerated by the new media (Huysen 2001, pp. 61, 66), among which we must include marketing, which is ultimately charged (*pace* Benjamin) with the reauratization of what amounts to a cocreated or coproduced “original.”

As commercial utopianism rushes to fill the gap created by collapsing ideological and scientific utopianisms (Bindé 2001), the retroscape is in the vanguard. As suggested in Stephen’s introduction to this volume, the mystic chords of memory resonating in the retroscape are not nostalgic in the stripped down American sense of that term, but rather in the more evocative Greek etymological sense. Nostalgia is

the desire or longing with burning pain to journey [home]. It also evokes the sensory dimension of memory in exile and estrangement; it mixes bodily and emotional pain and ties painful experiences of spiritual and somatic exile to the notion of maturation and ripening. . . . [Finally, it] evokes the transformative impact of the part as unreconciled historical experience. (Seremetakis 1994, p. 4)

Marketers as often blunt as sharpen the pain of nostalgia, converting the neuralgia of exile to the ataraxia of homecoming, but they strive to craft the retroscape in such a way that the past commingles intimately with the future. This retrofuturism is as palpable in the technoutopias of cyberspace (Barbrook and Cameron 2001) as it is in the paraprimitive precincts of the Black Rock Desert (Finkel 2000, Hamrah et al. 2000). Our contributing authors are bent on recovering the meanings consumers generate in encounters with the retroscape, irrespective of the marketer’s intention. Such meanings have generally been lost to conventional marketing research (Maclaran and Brown 2000). Some seem subversive of the marketer’s intention, others affirming. Whether critical or complimentary, we have tried to pin them to the board.

I’m reminded of a prospecting trip I made with Jim Twitchell last autumn, to the Willow Creek Community Church, of Harvard Business School case study fame, an institution that can fairly be described as a postmodern chautauqua enterprise creolizing such secular venues as the mall, food court, rock concert, theatrical performance, sporting event, community college, day care center, cinema, and living room in its liturgy. Two knaves (naifs?) in the nave, we prowled the grounds, attending services, talking with “seekers” and “believers,” observing the activities of a host of ministries, browsing the bookstore, and roaming backstage to the degree propriety allowed, marveling at the ways in which high technology and secular rhetoric were imagined to produce contemporary communities of biblical proportions.

The sanctuary we experienced flowed as much from the spigots of Starbucks’ coffee urns and state-of-the-art audio systems as it did from the vernacular commentary on the Good Book, delivered in street clothes by a minister onstage and amplified on two enormous viewing screens. Pomo-proselytizing, e-evangelizing, and retro-recruiting appeal to contemporary consumers of religions, whose flagging brand loyalties have left them unchurched, if not all together unhoused. We felt unthreatened, unchallenged, and comfortable as we were led back to the source (at which point we balked, bugged out, and debriefed at a local deli).

Retrosapes share precisely this utopian essence, their managers eager to immure consumers within a total institution, their residents willing to suspend disbelief and collude in the staging of the eternal return to Never/Always-land. Our resurrection, our salvific consumption, requires, in the words of John Denver’s song, going home to a place we’ve never been before. Paradoxically, that place is always Kansas, for, as Dorothy discovered (and as heroes from Odysseus through Col. George Taylor always do), there’s no place like home. On behalf of the authors in this volume, “Welcome home” and as T.S. Eliot might wish, may you know the place for the first time.

## References

- Barbrook, Richard and Andy Cameron (2001), “Californian Ideology,” in *Crypto Anarchy, Cyberstates, and Pirate Utopias*, ed. Peter Ludlow, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 363–87.
- Ben-Amos, Dan and Liliane Weissberg (eds.) (1999), *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.
- Bindé, Jérôme (2001), “Toward an Ethics of the Future,” in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 90–113.
- Bochner, Arthur and Carolyn Ellis (eds.) (2002), *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature and Aesthetics*, New York: Altamira Press.
- Brown, Stephen (2001), *Marketing—The Retro Revolution*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Brown, Stephen, Robert Kozinets, and John F. Sherry, Jr. (2002), “Still Ahead, A Look Back: Reconnoitering Retromarketing,” unpublished working paper, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60208.
- Cole, Tim (1999), *Selling the Holocaust*, New York: Routledge.
- Finkel, Michael (2000), “Burning Man,” *Hooked on the Outdoors*, 2 (3): 132–37.
- Gottdiener, Mark (1997), *The Theming of America*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- (2000), *New Forms of Consumption: Consumers, Culture and Commodification*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- (2001), *Life in the Air: Surviving the New Culture of Air Travel*, Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Grosz, Elizabeth (2001), *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hamrah, A.S. et al. (2000), “Dunking Booth at Burning Man,” *Hermeneut*, 16 (Winter): 140–47.

- Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger (eds.) (1983), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Huysen, Andreas (2001), "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 55–77.
- Maclaran, Pauline and Stephen Brown (2000), "The Future Perfect Declined: Utopian Studies and Consumer Research," *Journal of Marketing Management*, 17 (2–3): 367–90.
- Marling, Karal Ann (1997), *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance*, New York: Flammarion.
- McMurtry, Larry (1999), *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen: Reflections at Sixty and Beyond*, New York: Touchstone.
- Miller, Daniel (2001), *The Dialectics of Shopping*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Peñaloza, Lisa (2001), "Consuming the American West: Animating Cultural Meaning and Memory at a Stock Show and Rodeo," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (2): 369–98.
- Pine, Joseph and James Gilmore (1999), *The Experience Economy*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Ritzer, George (1999), *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Satherthwaite, Ann (2001), *Going Shopping: Consumer Choices and Community Consequences*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Serematakis, C. Nadia (1994), "The Memory of the Senses, Part I: Masks of the Transitory," in *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*, ed. C. Nadia Serematakis, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, pp. 1–18.
- Shakar, Alex (2001), *The Savage Girl*, New York: HarperCollins.
- Sherry, John F., Jr. (2000), "Place, Technology and Representation," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (2): 273–78.
- Sherry, John F., Jr. and John Schouten (2002), "A Role for Poetry in Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (1): 218–34.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu (1996), *Cosmos and Hearth: A Cosmopolite's Viewpoint*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Twitchell, James (2002), *Living It Up: Our Love Affair with Luxury*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Van Maanen, John (1998), *Tales of the Field*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wagner, Roy (2001), *An Anthropology of the Subject*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wolf, Michael (1999), *The Entertainment Economy*, New York: Random House.