

We Might Never Be Post-Sacred:¹ A Tribute to Russell Belk on the Occasion of His Acceptance of the Converse Award

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I am a part of all I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades
For ever and ever when I move.

—*Ulysses*
(Alfred Lord Tennyson 1884)

With trenchant Gallic wit, Andre Malraux once famously observed that our current century would be a spiritual one or it would not be. Recent world events suggest he might have gotten his conjunction wrong. It seems as accurate to contend that the new century has begun on a spiritual note, *and* that it will not be. To be or not to be—now that is a question worthy of material philosophy in the era of late capitalism. What happens when, rather than merely exalting or condemning materialism as a metaphysical enterprise, we coax the genie of materiality from the vessels of our materiel? What are the consequences of giving voice to stuff? I find this line of inquiry to be the most generative part of the rich legacy Russ Belk has given the field of consumer research. His sweep is broad, beginning with the revelation of the numinous in everyday life and extending to the global confrontation of cultural ideologies that valorize and demonize being in the idiom of stuff.

That we always have lived in an experience economy, and that the self always has been cybernetic, are the eternal truths that undergird Russ's empirical enterprise. It has required a type of nomadic scholarship to bring this gift to the field—a visionary, willing to trek the trackless expanses of exotic literatures and roam the badlands of interdisciplinary inquiry in the service of humane understanding of consumer behavior, a traveler, committed to following his wandering mind over land- and cyber-scape, immersing himself in the data quite literally, but most of all, a storyteller, a griot, a seanchai, a tra-

¹My title is a riff off of Bruno Latour's (1993) belief that we have never been modern, let alone postmodern. It is a paradoxical trope full of optimism and pessimism.

ditor, translating his understanding through media most appropriate to the message.

Russ Belk is a storied individual in our field. All of his friends and most of his acquaintances have a favorite Russ Belk story among their repertoire. The Belk apocrypha is even larger (and stoked, I suspect by Russ himself). Let me pluck the mystic chords of memory and tell an old story of my own, now dimly discerned through the mid-1980s mists that enfold my remembrances of the Consumer Behavior Odyssey. I call it "Belk Among the Winnebago,"² although "Driving Missed Daisies" is probably more accurate. As I recall, the event took place a day or two after Russ and I inadvertently sacrificed a (then) trendy West Coast French press coffeemaker on the altar of Dennis Rook's kitchen stove, in a fiery conflagration of Midwestern neoluddite ineptitude.³ The crew was aboard the "mother ship," the no-name RV I imagined to be the pencil-headed counterpart to the Magic Bus of Merry Prankster fame, and Russ was at the helm.

Wracked with sleep deprivation, hunger, early stage withdrawal symptoms, and escalating competitive workaholic syndrome (each essential to the vision quest), all hands on board—Russ, Melanie, Tom O'Guinn, and myself—had just completed an intensive day of data collection, and three of us were settling into that altered state that field note jotting and the random firing of insight centers conspire to produce.⁴ I assumed Russ was preoccupied with navigating Leviathan (in whose belly we were nestled safely) through the warp-speed parking lot of LA's Freeway Nation. I was wrong. Russ was merely preoccupied. I looked up from my scribbling, midway back in the cabin, to see Russ step away from the driver's seat and begin walking down the aisle. He announced, "I'm tired of driving," and I vaguely recall him justifying his abdication with some muttered reference to "autopilot," a feature our vehicle most surely did not possess.

Watching him glide down the aisle, I remember wondering if Hemingway was right, that every true story had to end in death. I also flashed on the fate that had befallen Odysseus's fellow travelers, knowing in my heart that only Russ would walk away intact, with a story he could dine out on for years. Thumbing your nose at hegemonic positivist cant is one thing, but flouting the laws of physics (without pharmaceutical assistance) is another entirely. Melanie and I experienced a moment of awe (reverence and terror) as we beheld the apparition. I am not sure Tom thought anything was out of order.⁵

²With apologies both to Paul Radin and John Schouten.

³Consumer miscomprehension? Consumer creativity? You be the judge.

⁴To say we were plumb tuckered is a righteous characterization of a group contemplating an homage to our elders with the working title "Juan Navarro Buys an About Half Shitfaced Parrot," a satiric tutorial we thought might help us read through *Foundations for a Theory of Consumer Behavior* (Tucker 1967) to interpret an artifact in Dennis Rook's living room. I've often wondered whether the script writers for *Speed* had gotten a hold of *Highways and Buyways*, sensed that the van would explode if its passengers did not generate 50 ideas per hour, and translated the concept into a profitable film.

⁵That Tom was the only casualty of the Consumer Behavior Odyssey, and that he lived not to tell about it, is a tribute to his Celtic stoicism.

The two of us pushed past Russ to commandeer the van, which was behaving for all the world as if it were on autopilot. Modesty, repression, and incipient old-timers' disease⁶ prevent me from disclosing just which of us jumped first into the driver's seat. I'm sure Melanie will correct this lapse now that this story is fixed in print. Once again firmly in control of our destiny, we resumed following our bliss.

The irreality or surreality of Russ's walkabout was not wasted on the RV's occupants. The liminoid space of the van became an incubator for what Arnould and Thompson (2005) have branded Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), a memetic experiment gone horribly right. Russ was reinforcing the nomadic template of scholarship among his countercultural crew. He had pointed the bus in the right direction and trusted his teammates both to anticipate his abdication and improvise a new course, knowing, as any ordeal master (whether Ndembu elder or Zen roshi) must, that danger always accompanies enlightenment. Crisis management had helped forge a cybernetic self, and we all got out alive. This proved to be an effective allegory, one that neither Melanie nor I has ever felt compelled to reenact. I will not speak for Tom.

A Festal Premise

There are many venues we might wander in celebration of Russ's contributions to our field. He has foundational interests. He has a legendary work ethic. He is a veritable Energizer Bunny of Pythonesque proportions. The contextualizing scope of his research surpasses meticulous, as the signature ratio of 2/3 text to 1/3 citations of his present address attests.⁷ His countercultural attitude is infectious and always grounded in data. His scholarly generosity knows no bounds, as I first learned when I entered the field in 1982. Joel Cohen thought gift giving was something an anthropologist might illuminate for consumer researchers and suggested I write Russ for guidance. As a stranger in a strange land, I could have had no better (nor as it turned out, stranger) guide. The tour of the badlands of interdisciplinary inquiry that Russ provided is still a decent roadmap 20 years later, and I continue to consult it in my own rambling. My experience in this regard is typical.

As my tribute to Russ's achievements, I would like to zero in on the celebratory aspect of this celebration. For the balance of this presentation, in keeping with odyssey tradition, I adopt a festal focus. Russ's concluding comments on the extension of the sacred and profane construct into new venues, and the exploration both of its dark side and its management implications, constitute a treasure trove of research leads, another gift to the field. Many of the Odysseans, Russ foremost among them, have long roamed the festival, the spectacle, the carnivalesque, as a preeminent site of the numinous in post-

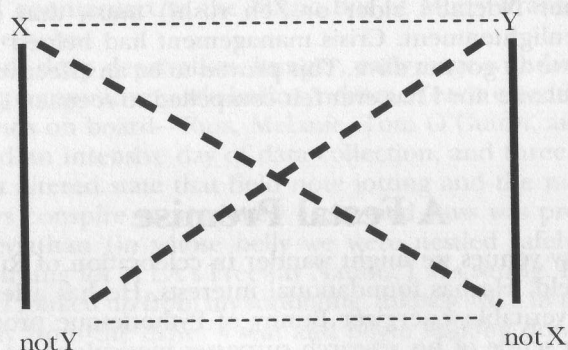
⁶As my girlfriend's 90-year-old grandmother describes the increasingly frequent episodes of senior moments I am experiencing.

⁷This ratio holds for his manuscript reviews, not just his articles. A favorite conversation starter I find also works well with Grant McCracken begins, "So, what are you reading lately?" From there, we're off to the races.

sacred consumer culture. It is this positing of the post-sacred that I intend to dispute and the contemporary channeling of the festal impulse that I intend to explore.

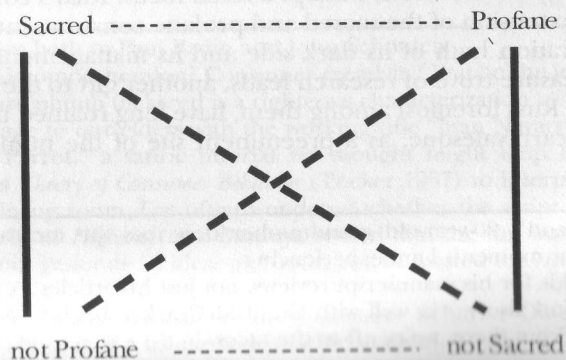
A Semiotic Frame

The semiotic square (Floch 2001; Greimas 1970; Mick 1991) is an appropriately Converse framework for unpacking the notions I have in mind. Briefly explained, the semiotic square helps an analyst think comprehensively about a category by examining the relationships it has with other distinctive features of which its meaning system is constituted. The network of relationships can be represented in a diagram (Figure 1):

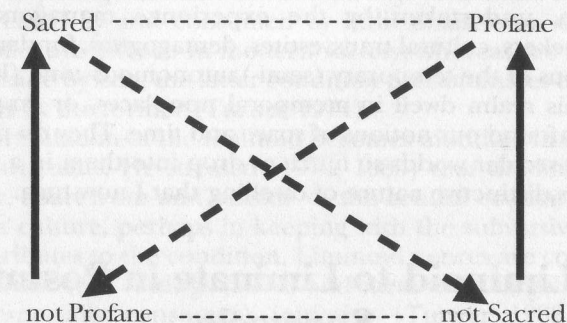


X and Y (and not Y and not X) are in a relationship of contrariety. These terms presuppose each other. X and not Y (and Y and not X) are in a relationship of complementarity. These terms are characterized by the presence or absence of a distinctive feature; they negate each other. X and not X (and Y and not Y) are in a relationship of contradiction. These terms implicate one another (such that not Y implies its potential X-ness). In negotiating the square, we “organize a conceptual universe coherently,” anticipate the “ways in which meaning may unfold,” and identify meanings that may be “logically present but not yet in force” (Floch 2001, p. 195).

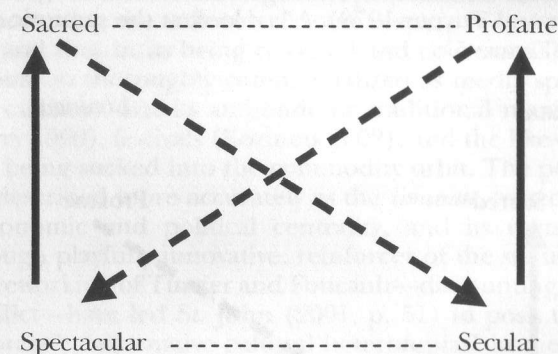
Let us map the category of the sacred onto the semiotic square (Figure 2):



Now let us map the relationships between terms in the square (Figure 3):



Contrariety is indicated by a dotted line, contradiction by a broken arrow, and complementarity by a solid arrow. Finally, let us relabel the square with the following terms (Figure 4):



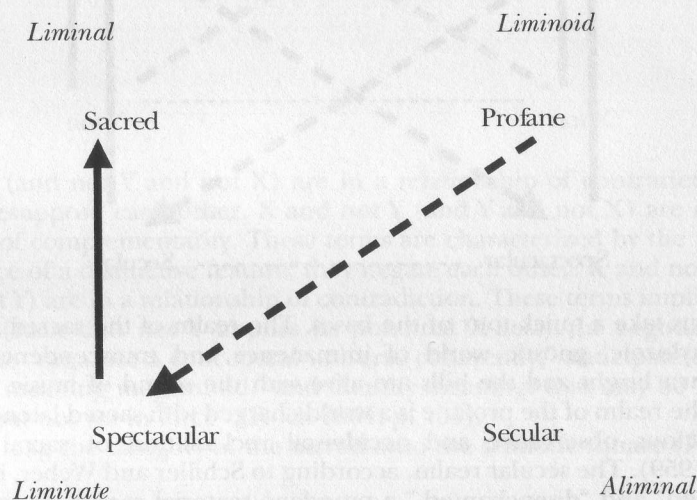
Now let us take a quick tour of the bases. The realm of the sacred is an animistic, hylozoic, gnostic world of immanence and transcendence, where tygres burn bright and the hills are alive with the sound of music (Berman 2000). The realm of the profane is a world charged with sacred latency, full of nonconscious observance and accidental reclamation of sacral essence (Eliade 1959). The secular realm, according to Schiller and Weber, is a world “disgoddied” and “disenchanted,” a mundane material region of pure irreliability. I would argue that it appears as if the trajectory of Western culture—Western civilization, consumer culture, hegemonic capitalism or any other totalizingly stereotypical straw man will do—has followed an arc from sacred through profane to secular, but that this arc is as tendentious as the savagery-barbarism-civilization scale that continues to rear its ugly head in current discussions of cultural relativism. I have a sense that the world contains isolated pockets of sacred and secular enclaves, but in the main, most of us seem to be leading a principally profane existence of the kind we documented in the original article (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

Until we reach third base. I have labeled this realm “the spectacular,” a curious world that is at once marketing Mecca and activist Valhalla. It is the con-

temporary seat of antistructural production and countercultural consumption. It is the site of the conscious observance and calculated reclamation of sacral essence, undertaken by the experience managers, imagineers, unchurched seekers, cultural transvestites, demagogues, fundamentalists, and other champions of the temporary (semi-)autonomous zone (Bey 1994). The denizens of this realm dwell in atemporal nonplaces, or emplaced heterotopias, that confound our notions of space and time. They do not drop out of the profane or secular worlds so much as drop into them in a very particular way. It is to this distinctive nature of dwelling that I now turn.

From Liminoid to Limate in Postmodern Spectacle

In theorizing the relevance of spectacle for consumer research, I revise and extend some of Victor Turner's celebrated work on liminality. To understand postmodern liminality, it is helpful to revisit Turner's notion of the "liminoid," that "quasi-liminal" characteristic of the "leisure genres" of modern society (Turner and Turner 1978). A last look at the semiotic square will situate this recap (Figure 5):



In tribal society, the ludic is evoked in liminal settings to advance the ultimate aim of rites of passage, which is affirmation of the structural status quo. In modern society, the ludic arises in liminoid settings, where it serves as an independent source of innovation, whether ideational or technological. The liminoid originates in the modern space of "free time" and unfolds in "neutral" spaces that actually could be permanent settings. Because play is disengaged or disentangled from the other activities of everyday life in modern society, its liminoid manifestation can be subversive (not merely inversive) of the social order (Turner 1974). There is a voluntary, optional, individual cast to liminoid activity; it is as if the liminal has been dismembered into separate,

specialized genres (Turner and Turner 1978). Since the liminoid is removed from the rite of passage context the liminal enjoys in tribal society, it is individualized, created by and consumed by individuals, even though it might have some collective effects. In modern society, whereas the liminal and the liminoid exist side by side, the latter condition predominates even as it is occasionally tinged by the former (Turner 1974).

Turner's formulation of the liminoid becomes muddled in some of its most interesting particulars. He stressed (1974, 1985) that the liminoid arises on the periphery, apart from and outside of the central economic and political processes of a culture, perhaps in keeping with the subversive result that he frequently attributes to the condition. Liminoid genres are continuously generated apart from work settings (1974) and seem to be largely the product of individual (especially consumer) initiative (Turner 1982). And yet he observes that the liminoid is often a commodity and that it is alternately "idiosyncratic," "quirky," or associated with "schools" or "circles" (Turner 1974). He somehow fails to make the connection between the liminoid and the brand. He fails to recognize the dynamics of brand relations, which seem so clearly inherent in his discussion. Arguably, postmodern liminality consists in the liminoid becoming the culture's absolute center of economic and political processes, and thus in its being co-opted and converted. In fact, the liminoid has become so thoroughly commercialized as media spectacle (and its retail theatre variants) that its authentic or traditional manifestations—flea markets (Sherry 1990), festivals (Kozinets 2002), and the like—are in increasing danger of being sucked into the commodity orbit. The postmodern liminal might be described more accurately as the *liminate*, to account for its collapse into economic and political centrality, and its reemergence as an uncritical, though playfully innovative, reinforcer of the status quo.

Revisionist reworking of Turner and Foucault—discounting *communitas* and elevating conflict—have led St. John (2001, p. 51) to posit the existence of ("often temporary") "alternative cultural heterotopias" in the space in which liminal-trending liminoid leisure genres once were theorized to flourish. In my present formulation, the thoroughly marketized liminate media spectacle produces heterotopias of a singularly qualified nature. For example, in the mediatized spectacle that is ESPN Zone Chicago (Kozinets et al. 2004), conflict in the form of contest (*agon*), that is, the ludic engagement in struggle, is the manifest organizing principle to which consumers submit. An individual, often internal space is created—an "idiotopia," or "you-topia" (Kozinets 2002) that is as much mindscape as market-scape (Sherry 1998)—by the consumer with the physical and virtual building blocks provided by the marketer. In terms of the evolutionary trend I have observed in spectacle wrighting, what is emerging on the stage of retail theatre is an accelerated dialectic.⁸ Mixing metaphors, a syncopation has occurred in the choreography of marketer/consumer pacing. The marketer provides the playground upon which con-

⁸Can we conceive of a non-Euclidian trialectic in which the synthesis either does not exist so much as a resolution as it does an almost unlimited set of emergent possibilities inherent in the other two terms, or exists solely as a small-bang pixilation of almost-grasped image worlds?

sumers construct idiotopias (and, only occasionally, heterotopias marked by spontaneous *communitas*) beyond the marketer's anticipation on imagination. Play involves ceding great latitude of freedom to consumers, who use their freedom not only to construct their own personal idiotopias but also to become props for other consumers engaged in their own construction projects. Consumers become performers who are watched by other consumers who are watched in turn by others, such that spectatorship is co-opted into an active process of mindscaping. The *mise-en-scène* is as conducive of or congenial to improvisational or guerilla theatre as it is to conventional drama. The marketer enables a kind of DIY spectacle to emerge, and this emergence is eminently compatible with the nomadic and telenomadic transience that characterizes postmodern consumption experience.

The shift from a dichotomous passive immersion notion of spectacle (characterized by merchandising, promotion, "brandscaping," and emplacement) to a view of spectacle as holistic engagement (characterized by a reality TV-conditioned view of surveillance and exhibition) is pronounced. It is also risky in terms of the meaning management of brands. Where Nike Town-ness helps the brand grow rich and resonant, ESPN Zone-ness seems more a portal to worlds beyond the brand. Being in the zone seems inescapably liminate, suspending consumers between worlds the brand has colonized—that is, of course, unless we understand sport as coterminous with culture, a deep metaphor from which we cannot escape.

Liminate to Liminal: Back to the Source

What happens when consumers yearn for a taste of you-topia, a touch of heterotopia, outside the constraints and beyond the voraciously appropriative, resistance-incorporating reach of the liminate genres of postmodern life (Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002)? What happens when hierophany, kratophany, mystery, and all their sisters manifest on the marketer's stage before they are sucked back into the commodity orbit? What happens at the moment of insight when the consumer dances along the edge of immanence and transcendence and realizes she need no longer be part of merchandising's *mise-en-scène*, that she can breach the fourth wall, at least momentarily, and be transfigured? Through some combination of embarrassment, anger, hope commitment, entrepreneurial zeal, and relentless cultural culling, some consumers jump-start the festal impulse to create antistructural oases to which their fellow nomads—participants and observers alike—transmigrate.

In the flight from Disneyworld to Black Rock City or Confest (St. John 2001), from Heritage Village (Belk and O'Guinn 1989) to Lothlorien or Circle Sanctuary (Pike 2001), from American Girl Place (Diamond et al. 2004; Sherry et al. 2003) to a mountain man rendezvous (Belk and Costa 1998) or a Rainbow Gathering (Niman 1997), from ACR to HCR, some consumers are sublimating their marketized egos to consummated alters. Such a hejira is custom-made for the kind of broad-based, comprehensive holistic study of consumer behavior that Russ long has advocated (Belk 1987) and practiced. Such study demands nomadic scholarship, with a multisite agenda that can keep pace with the myriad journeys of consumers bent upon their own odysseys. Russ has identified two neglected intellectual sources in particular in

his address that will advance post-Odyssey study of sacred consumption: Bataille and Girard. These theorists suggest how we might round the third base of the semiotic square and head for home, as the liminate reveals its potential for the liminal and as spectacle portends a return to the sacred.

For Bataille (1989), sacrifice releases its object from the world of things into immanence, in an act of consumptive immediacy. The sacred is constrained by structure to the point of violent outburst, posing a danger to humans to which the festival offers a partial solution. Sacrifice sets loose in spectacular fashion the effusive plenitude of festival (Bataille 1989), allowing participants (who are reveling in the consumption of the arts) to harness the violence of regulated destruction in the service of immanence. This is an apt characterization of Burning Man (Sherry and Kozinets 2004). The internal violence of sacrifice and spectacle is antithetical to the external violence of war (Bataille 1989).

Now, merge these notions with those of Girard. Girard (1977, 1987a, b) described the source of violence as mimetic desire or mimetic rivalry (what Russ might call envy), which threatens to consume society. Endemic violence is held in check through a scapegoating ritual that involves killing a surrogate victim. Sacrifice is generative violence of the internal type described by Bataille. External violence follows in the wake of sacrificial crisis, which is itself the result of the breakdown of traditional ritual systems (Girard 1987b; Mack 1987).

Let us return to the conceit of my title and to my introductory emendation of Malraux. Festivals remind us that we have never truly left the realm of the sacred. Escalating violence in our world (MAD now maddeningly protracted and diffused), which increasingly has sacred roots, reminds us that planetary death is not merely a viable option but might be inevitable. We can envision a scenario clearly in which terrorist (processual or structural) fanaticism (of religious or mercantile fundamentalist nature, waged by clergy and clerisy) poses such a perceived threat to a culture that violence seems inevitable. We can reinterpret such fanaticism (literally, the devotion to the temple, which our profane world literally claims to check at the door) as sacrifice, the ritual killing of the scapegoat (sentience and materiel, and often the offerer as well) to release the world from the orbit of things (or to return it thence from the bondage of uncongenial ideology). Consumer researchers must imagine how we might resolve the sacrificial crisis. Can we envision a ritual that might help neutralize or blunt that threat? Potlatch-type orgiastic redistribution on a spectacular scale? Global festivals stripped of competitive ethos that celebrate the ineluctably cybernetic self⁹ and remind us that materiality always has and always will enchant the earth¹⁰?

I think it is time to put Russ back on the bus. He has pointed it in the right direction for us again, but it will require a nomad's tenacity and feral ferocity to take it off road. Russ, you're the man.

⁹Not the Borg-like total assimilation that threatens to define the Millennial self, but a Boomer-friendly variety that asserts that resistance is fertile. As Whitman observed, "I contain multitudes." Or, as Russ might prefer, "My name is Legion."

¹⁰Earth Day desperately requires infusion of sacred significance, which, ironically marketers are best qualified to perform (Sherry 2000).

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