

18 Compr(om)ising commodities in consumer culture

Fetishism, aesthetics, and authenticity

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Situating the commentary

The three preceding chapters that sketch the dark side (neglected and nefarious) of branding for us in such evocative fashion present a formidable challenge to the marketing imagination. They reveal the tension inherent in the brand and its relationship with stakeholders, in a way that invites introspection, not simply recognition, in the reader. Collectively, they remind me of Robert Frost's estimation of the value of poetry (Kilcup 1998: 50): "Nothing is quite honest that is not commercial. Mind you I don't put it that everything commercial is honest."

There is something both contradictory and righteous about the commingling of realms of value. The pecuniary and the profound, the fungible and the beautiful, and the populist and the professional seem at once independent and contingent. All may be "seared with trade," but Hopkins (1953) reminds us that still "[t]here lives the dearest freshness deep down things." One of our tasks as researchers is to understand this interpenetration of art and asset, and the animism that binds them.

Before parsing the chapters, let me position my essay in the following way. I have dropped parentheses into my title to underline the ambivalence I feel about our relationship to the world of goods that is made palpable in my reading of these provocative chapters, and use this partitioned word as both an adjective and a verb to capture my understanding of the stuff of life the authors have worried so tenaciously.

Back in the day, we made a covenant with the material world to repress our animistic tendencies (Sherry 2013) and to treat "goods" as simple utilitarian solutions to our problems, delivered to us by marketers who labored to understand our needs. The arc of this covenant has changed dramatically over time. Today, we expect to be co-creators of a transformative experience that marketers facilitate in large measure by inviting the return of the repressed in the realization of our wants (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Gilmore and Pine 2007; Pine and Gilmore 1999; Vargo and Lusch 2004). We are purveyors and consumers not merely of used goods, but of used *goods*. As the numinous

manifests in the material world, fetish, art, and authenticity interact in fascinating fashion. The quest for authenticity appears to have become a principal preoccupation in our – and here I mean researcher, consumer, and practitioner – negotiation of consumer culture.

The mystic syllable I have lodged amidword hints at the play of meaning in which marketers and consumers are engaged, in their joint creation of our experience of culture. The mantric word "*om*," voiced in three sounds and clipped in resonant silence, transports its chanter from the material world through the spiritual world to fulfillment, embodying and unifying the essence of the universe in the breath. As life is breathed into commodities, they comprise a host of cognitive, emotional, and visceral meanings, even as they comprise our world (Appadurai 1986; Douglas and Isherwood 1979). With this same breath that transmogrifies them from *materia* to *prima materia*, commodities are compromised, even as they compromise our world. "Goods" become "bads" more often than we care to admit, as the unanticipated and unintended consequences of their deployment rack our existence. I hope your interrupted reading of my title trips a meditative pause of the kind our three authors conjured in me, and that your subsequent musing goes similarly a-gley.

Most of us adopt a curious posture toward this profane trinity of fetishism, aesthetics, and authenticity (which I abbreviate hereafter as FAA, in recognition of the flight of fancy that is my essay) that mediates our transactions with stuff. As consumers, we are often embarrassed to admit that we animate the material world, but as marketers, we treat goods animistically, as a palimpsest, overwriting origin myths and user projections with managerial narratives of image and essence, bodying forth the brand for further quickening (Holt and Cameron 2010; Levy 1978). As consumers, we often under-appreciate design and the embodied resonance that allows us to delight in our accomplishment of mundane tasks, but as marketers we use art strategically, to seduce and persuade (Simonson and Schmitt 2009). As consumers, we do not risk looking too closely at the commercial roots of authenticity, but as marketers we have no doubt that authenticity can be created through commercial means (Beverland 2009; Beverland and Ferrelly 2010), and artfully deployed to assist people in their quest to experience immanence and transcendence.

We – researchers and consumers – often behave in "as if" fashion with FAA (Cluley and Dunne 2012), deceiving ourselves about the nature of our comprehension, skimming the semiotic surface of the complex, rather than diving deeply into its meanings and consequences. Such skating allows us to preserve illusions and prevent disruptions, keeping consideration of the extent and implication of extra-economic dimensions of our marketplace behavior at arm's length. I resume this critique later in my essay.

The commentary

Chapter 15 entitled "Aesthetics awry," in which Jonathan Schroeder writes about brand Kinkade, is offered as a cautionary tale, a morality play of sorts,

of the abduction and corruption of aesthetic value by commerce, and of the artistic perils of abdication to management theory. My own dim understanding of this latter vibrant area is informed only by a cursory immersion in the impressive collection of Minahan and Cox (2007), whose volume I commend to CCT (Consumer Culture Theory) researchers of managerial inclination.

The translation of vision across media or genres, a daunting challenge even for a versatile artist, seems destined to be garbled when delegated to a brand extension team bent on sacralizing commodities with no intrinsic (and often little extrinsic) resonance with the original vision. Schroeder presents a negative case of the potential for synergy between aesthetics and management, while still recognizing the historical interdependence of art and commerce. It is one thing to imagine the Painter of Light (Kinkade) in an unholy alliance with the Bringer of Light (Lucifer) to degrade art, but quite another to condemn the dalliance of aesthetics with the market; where the former may simply be a reflection of personal taste and prejudice, the latter is an exercise in misplaced cultural criticism.

If we accept the author's conclusion that there is a wrong way, can we imagine a proper way (or ways) to harness art to commerce, beyond the simple expedient of enlightened patronage? Must the artist succumb to the clutter-busting call of novelty, arrest consumers adrift in a sea of distraction, go big or go home? Does the market encourage the artist to forswear the seasoning, annealing and cultural immersion essential to "authentic" creation and criticism? Can cross-training in management and venturing with qualified (and cultivated) partners ensure affective implementation of uncorrupted vision? Can aesthetics and marketing strategy be synergists, rather than antagonists?

My colleagues and I (Joy et al. 2014) have described a phenomenon we call "M(Art)Worlds," reflecting a trend of luxury brand stores becoming hybrid venues that incorporate both art gallery and museum orientations into a retail ideology. Companies such as Louis Vuitton use architecture, interior design, lighting, curatorial merchandising, artisanal products, and collaboration with artists to embody aesthetics into their brand's commercial essence, such that consumers come to regard the brand's offerings as *objets d'art* in their own right. This fusion of aesthetics with marketing strategy constructs the product as a cultural artifact meriting appreciation, ensuring an ongoing relationship of co-creation between managers, consumers, and artists.

While this M(Art)World phenomenon (Joy et al. 2014) might seem to be peculiar to luxury brands, there is no reason to assume that other forms of art could not be drawn into the orbit of more mundane brands. In the Kinkade case, the democratization of luxury – in the form of the accessible sophistication afforded by folk art or kitsch, depending upon the critic's disposition – and the reassurance of the familiar (Marling 1988) might readily be translated into alliances with artists, designers, and planners, such that the vernacular architecture of communities might embody the values of the brand and be perceived by consumers as authentic. The extension and the core must reinforce one another's value. I resume this theme later in connection with Starbucks.

In Chapter 16 entitled "Consuming the 'World'," Rika Houston and Laurie Meamber don their critical marketing goggles and take us on an academic walkabout through the Disneytopia of EPCOT Center, ostensibly in search of ways in which aesthetics creates and validates authenticity. The tour is set against the historic backdrop of the rise of all things retro stemming from the postmodern condition (Reynolds 2011). The theming of built environments is itself in part a reaction to consumers' need to escape the experience of inauthenticity supposedly characterizing said condition (Brown and Sherry 2003). The authors paint a top-down picture of cultural production, and "[a]s American consumer researchers," their discomfort and discomfiture are on display throughout their tour of the sanitized semiotics of placemaking.

The ethos of CMC (and of the Heretical Consumer Research project that birthed this investigation) is critical, and incites my inner exegete to rail against the chapter's positioning. The study is neither an analysis of aesthetic experience nor a reflexive account of the research enterprise. Where it could be auto-ethnographic, it is simply impressionistic – which is still an accepted, if less satisfying, genre of tale telling – and, occasionally, reflective. Brief disclosures hint at the preconditioning (infrastructural analysis and critical reading) the authors experienced prior to what seems to have been a short exposure to the venue, in contrast to the immersive strategy of prolonged contact that characterizes most CCT work on servicescapes, and assertions about others' experience are offered in lieu of phenomenological interview verbatim. Finally, their account is rendered in a single voice, effacing distinctive insight into research subject, object and process, a particular pity given the visceral and perhaps aesthetic response the site and their fellow travelers (in each case, revulsion is not too strong a characterization) seem to have elicited. The better positioning, it seems to me, lies in the authors' impassioned plea for reflexivity in research, and their recommendation that "we should always do it [fieldwork] with our eyes *and* minds open."

What appeals to me most about this chapter is its provocation to explore the bracketing process to which CCT researchers routinely profess to subscribe, but which they (and I mean we) honor more often in the breach, much as our experimental brethren fail to exploit the debriefing process to maximum effect. In particular, this chapter is an open invitation to meditate upon the nature of authenticity, and its relationship to aesthetics. The pornographic criterion ("I know it when I see it") is not an effective touchstone for cultural analysis when it comes to a construct as crucial as authenticity. We need a precise calibration of its nuances, and their reverberation in our principal social scientific instrument – our self – if we are to understand consumers' lived experience of authenticity. As I have maintained elsewhere (Sherry 2003), one man's anthropological recrudescence (McMurtry 2001) is another's architecture of reassurance (Marling 1988). I pursue this argument a bit later in my essay.

The cultural shift in the image of women betokened by the recent huge success of Disney's animated blockbuster film *Frozen* – featuring a princess

named Anna who embodies the traits of a much more realistic, empowered, and self-reliant female than the brand's traditional depiction of femininity – suggests that an evolving conception of authenticity is being embraced by some of the marketing imagineers. Perhaps this conception might be generalizable in some measure to themed environments. Disney's Celebration experiment in planned community may have been too ambitious an undertaking, or "city" too large and enduring a unit of implementation (unlike the ephemeral Black Rock City of the Burning Man Project), for the effective transfer of core brand values from center to periphery. Or, our academic concept of "authenticity" may require significant rethinking.

Chapter 17, "Consuming caffeine: the discourse of Starbucks and coffee" by Charlene Elliott, is an early contribution to a CCT coffee literature that has since burgeoned (Holt and Cameron 2010; Kjeldgaard and Östberg 2007; Sherry 1995; Simon 2011; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006; Venkatraman and Nelson 2008). There is perhaps no sturdier platform for staging an exploration of commodity fetishism than coffee, nor a more notorious poster firm than Starbucks for attracting an application of that same theory. The consumption of the drink is so ubiquitous, the masking of its myriad meanings so pervasive, and the marketing of its branded formulations so compelling that category dynamics virtually cry out for analysis. The author tracks the material flow of the commodity from South to North, and its subsequent infusion of branded meaning from North *through* South, charting a "cartography of coffee" that results in the drinker's consumption of "tastepprints" that evoke exotic (and ersatz) images of ostensible origins. While actual origins and conditions of production may be masked, the semiotic appeal of the "foreign" and the "ethical" are promoted to enhance consumers' enjoyment. Starbucks' Orientalist discourse suffuses coffee drinking with an adventurousness unavailable elsewhere in the category. The lived experience of coffeeworld – and the bowdlerized version of globalization therein comprised – encouraged by the brand is its competitive advantage. Starbucks is authentic insofar as consumers are eager to pay a remarkable premium for a semiotic surplus, the privilege of intertwining an aesthetic of moral cosmopolitanism with their own life narratives in a way that apotheosizes brand and self.

Starbucks acts as both a fetish and a totem for the legion of the devoted (Sherry 2005), providing consumers an experience both of personal transcendence and tribal merger. Holt and Cameron (2010: 91–105) have demonstrated the ways in which Starbucks has been able to massify its niche position by migrating subcultural values to the mainstream market. Employing a "trickle-down" approach to cultural capital, the brand has "democratized elite sensibility" by creating a myth of "accessible sophistication" that taps into the trending cultural ideology of "artisanal-cosmopolitan" foods. Aesthetics has played a pivotal role in the servicescape redesign – to "sanitized bohemian" (Holt and Cameron 2010: 176–179) – that has driven consumer engagement with the brand. Visual, aural, olfactory, and gustatory props animate the retail theatrics that have made the venue a compelling site of ritual socialization,

the third place to which we gain admission through our facile manipulation of symbols.

A striking display of authenticity dynamics occurred at the Sochi Winter Olympic Games in 2014. NBC funded a private commissary-style Starbucks café where employees received beverages at no charge (Sonne and Troianovski 2014a). Soon, these employees were supplying off-site friends with gifts of the precious substance – serving as "mules" for "addicts" in one account (Sonne and Troianovski 2014b) – and bearing their branded cups as status symbols on journeys throughout Sochi; the nearest Starbucks franchise was over 350 miles away. Since Starbucks was not an official Olympic sponsor, these public displays of affection and conspicuous consumption constituted a serious breach of protocol, infringing, for example, on the aura of McDonald's legitimate (i.e., sponsored) coffee. To combat this gift economy and brand flaunting, NBC instituted a policy requiring employees to consume beverages in branded cups on-site only, barring the visible circulation of the brand beyond the café. To-go beverages were served in plain cups, no siren logo certifying to the world the authenticity of the contents (Sonne and Troianovski 2014b). One can imagine a brisk trade emerging in smuggled used branded cups as vessels of counterfeit Starbucks coffee, and in that same fake brand coffee hawked in plain cups as the real deal. Authenticity is as fluid as the contents of the cup to which the siren's song summons us.

The authenticating power of brand narrative can erode over time, especially if motivated consumerists perceive a gap between talk and walk and start to circulate disauthenticating meanings, as Starbucks has experienced in the past decade (Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). The "authenticity dilemma" that Starbucks faces in the disaffection of Bobo loyalists may require a revised mythical charter, or perhaps a new brand extension, to pacify critical consumers and prevent them from moving to a perceptually more authentic brand. Ironically, the financial success of Starbucks has antagonized its original base of cosmic capitalists (Brooks 2001), rendering them dispensable to the brand's future. The relative influence of commerce (corrupting for the Bobos, corroborating for the mainstream, confounding for consumer researchers) on authenticity remains problematic.

Corollary of the commentary

For the sake of argument, I assert that the FAA complex depicted by our authors seems to revolve around the construction of authenticity, with fetishism and aesthetics becoming primary inputs into and shapers of this complex construct. I spend the balance of this essay seeking to unpack this relationship.

As an anthropologist myself, I am captivated by Lindholm's (2008: 141–145) anthropological apologia for authenticity. Riven by our conflicting roles as observers and participants, somewhat estranged from our home values but unable to go native in host cultures, my tribe is ultra-sensitive to the context-dependence of identity in a way that makes authenticity a kind of spiritual

anchor in what Bauman (2000) has described as a liquid world, a source of transcendence that energizes culture (Lindholm 2002). Mid-career, a study of retro branding (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003) caused me regretfully to conclude that we are not searching for authenticity in an inauthentic world, but rather that there is no such thing as authenticity, only varying degrees of inauthenticity.

And yet, sophisticated interpreters of consumer experience such as Gilmore and Pine (2007) maintain that there is no such thing as an inauthentic experience, and that marketers are in the paradoxical business of rendering inauthentic offerings authentic. In fact, Beverland (2009) has provided us a narrative template – couched in a delicate dance of avowal of tradition and disavowal of industrial modernity – for accomplishing just such an authentication program. So have Holt and Cameron (2010), as I have already indicated. From these polar perspectives, authenticity's anthropological appeal is the *belief* that it exists. From that belief, a host of other interesting features of authenticity cascades. The contestation of its essence, its animating tensions, its plasticity, its evolution, and the interplay of internal discovery and external validation all excite the anthropological imagination, and, by extension for me, the marketing imagination.

Broadly sketched, the trajectory of authenticity is widely recognized. Arising from the dislocations of modernism, fueled by the re-enchantment agenda of romanticism, buffeted by the forces of state and market co-optation, subjected to the abasement of inexorable commodification, and gradually refined as a politico-aesthetic enterprise, authenticity is often regarded as the re-emergence of the sacred in our contemporary world (Lindholm 2002, 2008; Potter 2010). The dynamics of the authentic can be summarily detailed. There is an intrinsic component, internal or integral to the offering. There is an extrinsic component, a socially constructed aspect of the offering, which emplaces both the ideology of the dominant interest and the imagination of the stakeholder. Finally, there is a transactional component, wherein the intrinsic and extrinsic interact to motivate the processes of quest (internal and external), meaning investiture and recovery. Recent work on the nature of vibrant matter (Bennett 2010) and object-oriented ontology (Bogost 2012; Harmon 2011; Morton 2013) promises to help us better understand these dynamics, especially as actor network theory in its various forms diffuses into consumer research.

In critical and popular discussions of authenticity, it seems as if the aesthetic and sacred dimensions of the condition are celebrated, and that the political and commercial dimensions are derogated. In managerial and governance circles, these tensions are less acutely felt, and are more a matter of reconciliation. In the former case, if a traditional aesthetic (and its implied system of values) is discernible in an offering, that offering is readily sacralized; the offering may be *in* the market (or polity), but it is not *of* the market (or polity). The offering transcends these mundane realms to become sublime. In the latter case, the issue is how best to aestheticize the offering so that its commercial or political origins do not interfere with the desired consumer experience, which may incidentally include sacralization.

Potter (2010: 4, 13) has boldly proclaimed that authenticity is a hoax, and has become a status game driven by invidious comparison. The quest for authenticity needs to be redirected, he maintains, in a way that recognizes the reality of the material world and the vibrancy of the market as a source of human value. He asks us to imagine how we might take the concept of authenticity more seriously. One answer might lie in a hybrid approach to understanding that Outka (2009: 4–5) has called the “commoditized authentic.” Such an approach requires that we view our penchant for unmasking inauthenticity as a roadblock to our comprehension of authenticity, and consider the consequences of the long historical co-construction of authenticity by art and commerce.

The concept of the commoditized authentic *preserves*, rather than *resolves*, contradiction; it delivers tension in a way that allows us to appreciate both noncommercial aura and commercial availability. Thus, we are able, in a completely modern fashion, to tap into values we associate with authenticity. As an “antidote” to the anxiety it generates, the commoditized authentic summons forth its own critique, revealing itself to be at once a “marketing technique” and a “cultural strategy” (Outka 2009: 4, 16, 21). In this light, marketing and authenticity may sometimes actually comprise a holy alliance (Beverland 2009; Holt 2004).

How might we guide new research into authenticity? Beverland and Farrelly (2010) suggest two directions: comprehensive investigation of the infrastructure of different interpretations of authenticity, and exploration beyond dichotomous categorization to such dimensions as reconciliation of alternative interpretations of authenticity. Outka's (2009) work suggests that we suspend inquiry into resolution, and focus on understanding the lived experience of paradox, and possibly encourage marketers to call more attention to the tension between aura and accessibility, provoking intensified introspection among consumers. Potter's (2010) work suggests that to take authenticity seriously, we will need to understand the commingling of the spiritual and the commercial in a way that is not unreflexively critical, suspending our disbelief and bracketing our intellectual prejudices until we better understand consumers' lived experience of the marketplace.

My own favorite starting point for rethinking conventional wisdom is to map the central construct into Greimas' (1990) semiotic square, and, in this case, explore the multiplex relationships between the authentic and inauthentic, the not inauthentic and the not authentic, the authentic and the not authentic, and the inauthentic and the not inauthentic. I defer this exercise to another essay and to a classroom workshop with my MBA students.

Conclusion

I hope my colleagues will forgive my misprisions in using their work inspirationally to riff on the themes their ideas touched off in me. Deep thinkers all, my margin notes have flattened their perspectives to a narrow focus, but

I hope my comments will provoke another round of conversation as we all nudge the field toward extended exploration of these powerful cultural forces.

Read together, the preceding chapters are an inspirational work of speculative fiction, insofar as they invite us to consider the multifaceted ways in which marketers make culture, and how, in essence, marketing becomes culture (Sherry 2014). Branding is the principal tool of this becoming. It is this making that affords us so many practical and interpretive possibilities. We began by ruminating on the use and abuse of aesthetics in marketing. We moved to a mulling of the very possibility of authenticity in the tug of war between aesthetics and commerce. We concluded by exploring how the fetishization of commodities can be redirected by aesthetics to engender a sense of authentic experience. What economists efface, marketers rejuvenate; while each mystifies and conceals, marketing seeks also to reveal, whether through aesthetic artifice, careful consumer research, or both. Our authors peel this ontological onion in several interesting ways.

For all practical purposes, Kinkadee™, Disney®, and Starbucks® stand for everybrand in summing up the learning from our authors' treatises. Thrown into a post-Enlightenment world and condemned to roam its brandscapes for eternity, haunted by the false memory of an authentic life conditioned by aesthetics and not commerce, we either struggle futilely to resolve our cultural contradictions or embrace the paradox of irreducibly ambivalent standards and get on with our plumbing of consumers' lived experience, as theoreticians and practitioners. We live in an era of great brandwith and much branditry. We need to be relentlessly critical of our critical frameworks, even as we hold the market and the state accountable for their shortfalls. But most of all, we need an accurate and empathic understanding of our subjects.

In seeking to account for willful consumer misbehavior, Cluley and Dunne (2012: 253) describe the "as if" moment of commodity consumption – "at the very moment at which consumers consume, they often act *as if* they did not know what they know only all too well" – not as a contradiction of the nature of the consuming subject, but as constitutive of that subject. Consumption takes place not in spite of, but because of, moral contradictions. They extend theorizing beyond commodity fetishism to what they call commodity "narcissism," proposing that consumption be understood less as an "other-denying act of self-interest," and more of an "other-abasing self-love."

The self-deception Marx identifies is tougher to maintain in our critical era of information ubiquity, but we cling to disavowal in order to continue to enjoy the benefits we demand that producers deliver, choosing to believe we are "beyond the grasp" of commodity fetishism (Cluley and Dunne 2012: 255). In Freudian perspective, Cluley and Dunne (2012) assert that desire, rather than knowledge or experience, drives our engagement with the world, that narcissistic desires routinely inhibited because of their unacceptability are allowed expression through consumption, and that consumption allows us to realize sadistic pleasure, such that our "knowledge of other people's suffering" affords us satisfaction of being able to think ourselves "better than others."

We fetishize the narcissism, repressing the notion that we consume, at least in part, to injure others (Cluley and Dunne 2012: 258–260).

The thought that our next order of non-fat half-caff-triple-grande quarter-sweet sugar-free vanilla non-fat-lactaid extra-hot extra-foamy caramel macchiato is placed with intent to harm is even more sobering than our complicity in the exotic tasteprints Elliot tracks (Sherry 2014). If so, for simple coffee, how much more so for the myriad consumption choices we make within our un-reflexive bubble? To the extent that we are all painters of life and set designers of others' private Idaho, the quality of our scholarship, indeed of our life, remains imperiled.

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Brands

Interdisciplinary perspectives

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