

CHAPTER 2

Consumer Cultures

Consumerism has attached itself to a novel identity politics in which business itself plays in forging identities conducive to buying and selling. Identity here becomes a reflection of “lifestyles” that are closely associated with commercial brands and the products they label, as well as with attitudes and behaviors linked to where we shop, how we buy, and what we eat, wear, and consume. These attributes are in turn associated with income, class, and other economic forces that may appear to permit choice but are in fact largely overdetermined by demographics and socioeconomics and are beyond the control of individual consumers. . . . Branded lifestyles are not merely superficial veneers on deeper identities but have to some degree become substitute identities—forms of acquired character that have the potential to go all the way down to the core. They displace traditional ethnic and cultural traits and overwhelm the voluntary aspects of identity we choose for ourselves.

Benjamin Barber, *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*

People need to eat, be clothed, and take care of other biological imperatives, so consumption is a part of everyone's life in every society. But in some societies, generally in isolated agrarian ones, people live in what is essentially a subsistence economy, and consumption of material goods is not a major part of their lives. At the other extreme we have consumer cultures in which buying new products and services plays a major role in most everyone's lives, often to the detriment of public spending for roads, schools, medical care, and other similar public needs. The simplest way to define consumer cultures is that they are societies in which spending for private "needs" and desires overwhelms spending on public ones.

Defining Consumer Cultures

Consumption is the flip side of production. In societies where you find mass production, you also find mass consumption, because somebody has to purchase the things that are made. In consumer cultures, people are taught, convinced—what you will—thanks to advertising and other cultural imperatives, to consume much more than they need, often going into debt to maintain their desired lifestyles.

A British social scientist, Mike Featherstone, wrote a book, *Consumer Cultures & Postmodernism*, in which he argues there are three components to consumer culture (1991:13):

First is the view that consumer culture is premised upon the expansion of capitalist commodity production which has given rise to a vast accumulation of material culture in the form of consumer goods and sites for purchase and consumption. This has resulted in the growing salience of leisure and consumption activities in contemporary Western societies which, although greeted as leading to a greater egalitarianism and individual freedom by some, is regarded by others as increasing the capacity for ideological manipulation and

"seductive" containment of the population from some alternative set of "better" social relations. Second, there is the more strictly sociological view that the satisfaction derived from goods relates to their socially structured access in a zero sum game in which satisfaction and status depend upon displaying and sustaining differences within conditions of inflation. The focus here is upon the different ways in which people use goods in order to create social bonds or distinctions. Third, there is the question of the emotional pleasures of consumption, the dreams and desires which become celebrated in consumer cultural imagery and particular sites of consumption, which variously generate direct bodily excitement and aesthetic pleasure.

I will be dealing with a number of these topics in this book as I explore, from a semiotic perspective, the social and cultural aspects of consumption. Our personal purchases may be, or may seem to be, individual actions that we take, but these purchases are connected to any number of things relating to our social identities and our cultures. Personal consumption is, I argue, just the tip of the consumer culture iceberg.

One thing that those who own the means of production in consumer cultures have to do is change people's attitudes from ideas that focus on thrift and saving to ideas that focus on consumption. Edward Bernays, a prominent public relations expert, explained how people's minds can be changed. He writes (quoted in Stuart Ewen's *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture*, 1976:83–84):

If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, it is not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it. . . .

Mass psychology is as yet far from being an exact science and the mysteries of human motivations are by no means all revealed. But at least theory and practice have combined with sufficient success to permit us to know that in certain

medical care, and not too many other things. Our desires, on the other hand, are limitless, infinite, and insatiable. It is the job of advertisers and marketers to find ways of manufacturing desire and of translating things we desire into things we feel we need. One way this is done is by fashion, by which I mean new products that are created to assuage our desire for differentiation and change. Fashion is, sociologically speaking, an institution, a structure found in society that continually introduces new products and changes the styling of products we already have.

Think, for example, of the evolution of MP3 players and of the spread of the iconic iPod and various competitors of the iPod. Every year new kinds of MP3 players are manufactured and new versions of previous MP3 players are created. Another good example would be software, new versions of which are being created all the time.

Fashion helps create a sense of dissatisfaction with what we already have and a desire for new products. Sometimes things wear out—like running shoes or articles of clothing. But generally we purchase new things because we've been led to feel that doing so will enhance our well-being. Most of us don't really need half the things we purchase, but we find ourselves wanting new products because we've been led to feel the things we already have are dull and no longer fashionable.

Thus, fashion as "constant change" is useful to manufacturers, who create new and revised versions of products and to individuals, for it enables them to purchase new products that enhances their sense of well-being and helps them differentiate themselves—through the sign value of the new purchases—from others. That is what Veblen dealt with in his theory of conspicuous consumption and what motivates our desire for "status symbols."

John Berger, a British Marxist, makes a point that is relevant here. In his book *Ways of Seeing*, he explains how advertising, which he calls publicity, works (1972:131, 132):

It purposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more.

This more, it proposes, will make us in some way richer—even though we will be poorer for having spent our money.

Publicity persuades us of such a transformation by showing us people who have apparently been transformed and are, as a result, enviable. The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour... Publicity is never a celebration of pleasure-in-itself. Publicity is always about the future buyer. It offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell. The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be. Yet what makes this self-which-he-might-be enviable? The envy of others. Publicity is about social relations, not objects.

We are back, then, where we started, when I discussed Joan Riviere's Freudian psychoanalytic approach toward consumption, which is based on envy. What John Berger does is show how we are taught to be envious of ourselves, as we might or will be if we buy certain products or services, and that in our future state, when we have made these purchases, we will be envied by others. And that is because of the sign value of products, not their intrinsic value or the needs or desires that they satisfy.

Robert Coen, the leading authority on advertising expenditures, estimates that in 2007 we spent around \$630 billion worldwide for advertising. In 2007 we spent about \$280 billion on advertising in the United States. If you take the \$630 billion spent worldwide for advertising and subtract the amount of money spent on advertising in the United States from that figure, you arrive at a figure for worldwide expenditures for advertising of about \$350 billion (figure 2.1).

There are approximately 6.6 billion people in the world. When you subtract the 300 million people in the United States from this figure, you get 6.3 billion people outside of the United States who are exposed to \$350 billion worth of advertising. These statistics can be somewhat misleading, for there are parts of the world where

	United States	Rest of World
Population	\$300 million	\$6.3 billion
Advertising	\$280 billion	\$350 billion

Figure 2.1 Global Advertising Expenditures

there is hardly any advertising and other parts, especially in first world countries, where there is a great deal—but most countries still have relatively little exposure compared to the United States.

These figures show people in the United States have to endure about twenty times as much advertising as people in other countries. A considerable percentage of our exposure to advertising takes the form of television commercials. A typical thirty-minute television show in the United States has seven minutes of commercials. Since we watch an average of four hours of television (per person) in the United States, we watch approximately an hour of commercials every day or around 365 hours of commercials a year.

To understand what this figure means, remember that a typical course in a university has forty classroom hours. This means that when Americans watch commercial television, their yearly “instruction” from television commercials is equivalent to about a year of college instruction—that is, taking nine university courses.

CHAPTER 3

Marketing Theory and Semiotics

Rather than unreflexively adopting a lifestyle, through tradition or habit, the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle. The modern individual within consumer culture is made conscious that he speaks not only with his clothes, but with his home, furnishings, decoration, car and other activities which are to be read and classified in terms of the presence and absence of taste.

Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture & Postmodernism*

Today's marketing isn't simply a business function. It's a philosophy, a way of thinking and a way of structuring your business and your mind. Marketing is more than a new ad campaign or this month's promotion. Marketing is part of everyone's job, from the receptionist to the board of directors. The task of marketing is never to fool the customer or endanger the company's image. Marketing's task is to design a product-service

cases we can effect some change in public opinion...by operating a certain mechanism.

The argument Bernays makes is worth considering. Does public relations (and advertising) have the ability to shape a society's collective consciousness without anyone in that society recognizing what has happened? The implications are scary, but there seems to be evidence that at least in certain areas, involving purchases of products and goods, something similar to what Bernays is writing about has taken place. But there's more to the development of consumer cultures than advertising and other ways of shaping public opinion and desire.

The Sacred Origin of Consumer Cultures

In order for consumer cultures to develop, people have to change their mindsets and the way they think about consumption. One of the main things consumer cultures need to do, in order to develop, is to encourage people to cast off medieval notions about asceticism and minimizing consumption. It was the theologian, John Calvin (1509–1564), who attacked asceticism, which at the time was associated with Catholic thought, in his writings. Calvin argued (quoted in Van Tassel and McAharen, 1969:11–12)

If we are only to pass through the earth, we ought undoubtedly to make such a use of its blessings as will rather assist than retard us in our journey. It is not without reason, therefore, that Paul advises us to use the world as though we used it not, and to buy with the same disposition with which we sell (I Cor. vii:30,31). But as this is a difficult subject, and there is danger of falling into one of two opposite errors, let us endeavor to proceed on safe ground, that we may avoid both extremes.

Calvin argued that we must avoid two extremes: first, extravagant excesses and intemperance, and second, life-denying austerity and asceticism.

Calvin adds that those who have wealth and material goods should be seen as fulfilling God's desires (Van Tassel and McAharen, 1969:12–13)

It must be laid down as a principle, that the use of the gifts of God is not erroneous when it is directed to the same end for which the Creator himself has created and appointed them for us; since he has created them for our benefit, not for our injury... Now, if we consider to what end he has created the various kinds of aliment, we shall find that he intended to provide not only for our necessity, but likewise for our pleasure and delight. So in clothing, he has had in view not mere necessity, but propriety and decency. In herbs, trees, and fruits, besides their various uses, his design has been to gratify us by graceful forms and pleasant odors.

Living an ascetic life, Calvin suggests, "malignantly deprives us of the lawful enjoyment of the Divine beneficence, but which cannot be embraced 'til it has despoiled man of all his senses, and reduced him to a senseless block" (Van Tassel and McAharen, 1969:13). Calvin adds that we must differentiate between an ascetic extreme and its opposite, a life of gluttony and excess. The ascetic extreme focuses on abstinence and is too reductionistic, reducing life to its necessities while its opposite, gluttonous eating and drinking, distracts people from their most important task—the need to focus upon their spiritual life. As Calvin explains, "fastidiousness in our furniture, our habitations, and our apparel" as well as similar kinds of behavior distracts people from their most important duty—the need to look after their souls.

Calvin's ideas were discussed in the work of the German sociologist, Max Weber, whose book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* offers a penetrating examination of the impact of the Protestant ethic on the development of capitalism in modern societies. Long before advertisers began trying to manipulate people,

Protestant theology, as espoused by Calvin, began to dissuade people from the value of asceticism and poverty and convince them that God wanted people to enjoy life and that consumption was divinely inspired.

Calvin espoused a different kind of asceticism from that promulgated by medieval Catholic theology. Calvin glorified hard work and using time profitably, so people could earn money and thus be able to consume as God wanted them to do. According to Weber, Calvinist theology led to providing a hardworking and diligent workforce, who believed that their place in society and in the scheme of things was determined by God and was a matter of divine providence. Weber described this thinking as follows (1958:177):

The power of religious asceticism provided him [the bourgeois business man] ... with sober, conscientious, and unusually industrious workmen, who clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God. Finally, it gave him the comforting assurance that the unequal distribution of the goods of this world was a special dispensation of Divine Providence, which in these differences, as in particular grace, and pursued secret ends unknown to men.

Calvin explained that the unequal distribution of wealth is a result of "Divine Providence," which provides great comfort to wealthy people since this view justifies their status. This theory argues that efforts to ameliorate the lives of the poor are fruitless, for they go against Divine Providence. This notion, that people who are wealthy "deserve" to be so because their wealth is divinely inspired, still has many adherents today.

Weber also discusses the ideas of a Puritan minister, Richard Baxter, who believed that (1958:177) "the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the 'saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.' But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage." What has happened, Weber suggests, is that our passion for material goods

now dominates us, and is reflected in our cultures and the development of our national character. He writes (1958:182):

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last state of this cultural development, it might be truly said: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved."

Weber's study of Calvin suggests is that there is an important, though generally unrecognized, religious or sacred dimension to our passion for consumption. He argues that the same passions and fervor that animate religious belief in people take on a secularized form and shape their behavior as consumers in contemporary societies. Adopting a religious perspective on things, we can say that shopping becomes, in an unconscious way and a disguised form, a sacred act. "Retail therapy" becomes not only something explained by Freud but also by religious thought. This passion we have for consumption, Calvin wrote, does not lie like a light cloak upon our shoulders but has wrapped itself around us, covering us completely—and taken control of us.

It was in the United States, Weber suggested, that the pursuit of wealth and the passion for consumption reached its zenith. The crash of American and worldwide consumer cultures that took place in the fall of 2008 suggests that consumer cultures, if they are not regulated and contained, have implicit self-destructive forces in them that eventually lead to terrible social and economic dislocations, trauma, and pain. This crash had a profound impact upon the way Americans related to consumer culture and felt about going into debt to buy things.

Psychological Imperatives in Consumer Cultures

We have seen how the Protestant ethic laid the theological roots that led to the development of contemporary consumer cultures. There is another aspect to the phenomenon that is worth considering: the psychological imperatives found in consumer cultures. In a classic work of psychoanalytic theory, Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere's *Love, Hate and Reparation*, Joan Riviere offers an overview of the mechanisms found in people. She writes, in a chapter titled "Hate, Greed and Aggression" (1937:4):

The fundamental aim in life is to live and to live pleurably. In order to achieve this, each of us tries to deal with and dispose of destructive forces in himself, venting, diverting and fusing them in such a way as to obtain the maximum *security* he can in life—and pleasures to boot—an aim which we achieve by infinitely various, subtle and complicated adaptations.

She adds that the outcomes in individuals are the result of two factors: the strength of the love and hate tendencies in each of us and the influence of our environments and society.

After making this point, Riviere considers various psychological phenomena such as aggression, projection, depreciation, envy, and greed. It is in her discussion of greed that she offers an explanation of the psychological impulses that lead to the desire for possessions and that collectively generate consumer cultures. She writes (1937:26–27):

Some measure of greed exists unconsciously in everyone. It represents an aspect of the desire to live, one which mingled and fused at the outset of life with the impulse to turn aggression and destructiveness outside ourselves against others... By its very nature it is endless and never assuaged; and being a form of the impulse to live, it ceases only with death. The longing or greed for good things can relate to any and every imaginable kind of good—material possessions, bodily or

mental gifts, advantages and privileges; but, beside the actual gratification they may bring, in the depths of our minds they all ultimately signify one thing. They stand as proofs to us, if we get them, that we are ourselves good, and full of good, and so are worthy of love, or respect and honour, in return. Thus they serve as proofs and insurances against our fears of the emptiness inside ourselves, or of our evil impulses which make us feel bad... One great reason why a *loss* of any kind can be so painful is that unconsciously it represents the converse idea, that we are being exposed as *unworthy* of good things, and so our deepest fears are realized.

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, then, each of us has an unconscious need for material things, and the financial and psychological benefits that lead to our getting and having things can never be satisfied. We are, so to speak, hardwired to want things endlessly, since having things is an instinctive need we have to feel alive and good.

Riviere's analysis reminds us of Calvin's notions about material wealth as being divinely inspired and predestined and thus not capable of being changed by human institutions. This need to have good things, to take good things "into" us, is similar, in nature, to the mental process known as introjection. It is the opposite of projection, which involves expelling feelings of anger and hate, whatever we feel as bad and harmful, onto others. The degree to which we feel the need to have more and more things is connected to the societies into which we are born and raised. Greed, as Riviere explains it, is exacerbated in consumer cultures; people are under constant pressure from the values permeating their societies and the institutions functioning in them, such as advertising.

On the personal front, during a recent visit, my six-year-old grandson described himself as "greedy" and said that he should be given every toy or anything else he wanted. This is connected with his growing up in a society in which many children are taught to feel entitled to everything. An article in the October 21, 2008 issue of the *Wall Street Journal*, "The 'Trophy Kids' Go

to Work” (based on Ron Alsup, *The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation is Shaking Up the Workplace*) is relevant here. Alsup deals with the so-called “Millennial Generation,” children born between 1980 and 2001, who have an inflated sense of entitlement, in part because of the way schools and parents have indulged them. They were babied and catered to, since parents and teachers feared injuring their “self-esteem.” As a result, these “trophy kids” have an inflated notion about their abilities, feel they are superior to others, and harbor outlandish expectations as far as what they expect when they go to work.

The irony, Alsup writes, is that the managers who have to deal with the “trophy kids” now are the ones who, as parents, helped create them. Whether Alsup is correct in his analysis of the development of the Millennials and their impact is debatable. He suggests that the Millennials “want to be CEO tomorrow” but a number of years ago, when I did research on department stores, the managers of the stores told me the same thing. “We can’t get secretaries,” one of them told me. “They all want to start with my job.” So although the Millennials probably do have an inflated sense of their superiority and their abilities, they don’t seem to be too much different from the way young people behaved in previous generations.

Marxist Theory and Consumer Cultures

If the psychoanalytic perspective on consumer culture locates the driving force behind our desire to acquire goods in the human psyche and our need to feel good about ourselves, the Marxist perspective takes a different approach. For Marx, it is not consciousness that determines society but society that determines consciousness. As he writes in his *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1964:51)

In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite

state of development of their material powers of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which legal and political superstructures arise and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness.

The economic relationships found in a society become the “determinant element” in our thoughts. Beneath the superficial randomness of things, then, we find a kind of inner logic at work. The economic system of a society, what Marx called the “base,” shapes the “superstructure,” the ideas people have, ideas that are instrumental in determining the kinds of social, political, and economic arrangements they will make with one another and the institutions they will establish.

If social being determines consciousness, then, Marxist theory suggests, the roots of our consumer lust lie in the societies in which we live. As Marx writes (quoted in Fromm, 1962:50):

Every man speculates upon creating a new *need* in another in order to force him to a new sacrifice, to place him in a new dependency, and to entice him into a new kind of pleasure and thereby into economic ruin. Everyone tries to establish over others an *alien* power in order to find there the satisfaction of his own egoistic need.

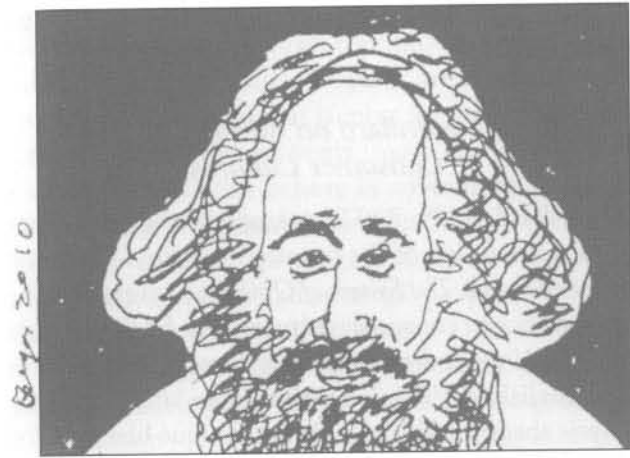
For Marx, then, those who are in the ruling class and who own the means of production strive to create new “needs” and alien needs in people so as to maintain the class divisions in society. For Marxists, consumer cultures are the way the ruling classes divert the proletariat (the masses) and prevent them from developing a class consciousness and from thinking about political change and revolution.

There is, for Marxists, a connection between alienation and consumer culture. The term “alienation” means, literally, no ties and no connections, and for Marx it was one of the main problems found in capitalist societies. In these societies, workers are estranged and separated from their true interests and work only to earn money, which will then enable them to participate in consumption. As Marx explains (1964:169–170):

The worker... feels himself at home only during his leisure, whereas at work he feels homeless. His work is not voluntary but imposed, *forced labour*. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a *means* for satisfying other needs. Its alien character is clearly shown by the fact that as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion it is avoided like the plague... The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, takes on its own existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, and alien to him, and that it stands opposed to him as an autonomous power. The life which he has given to the objects sets itself against him as an alien and hostile force.

What happens, then, is that people become estranged, not only from their work, but also from their friends, from themselves, and from their lives. People become more and more alienated, becoming, finally, prisoners of their alienated needs and, Marx writes, “*self-conscious* and *self-acting*” commodities. But it isn’t only the workers who are alienated in capitalist societies. For Marx, everyone in capitalist societies is alienated, for those who are members of the ruling classes are also alienated and always worried about political changes that might impinge on their domination.

It is alienation, Marxists argue, that leads people into consumer culture, for it is only when they purchase things that they find momentary gratification and escape from the alienation that plagues them. There is a vicious cycle at work here. Workers



Karl Marx

in capitalist countries feel alienated, and the more they work the more alienated they feel. They escape from this feeling of alienation by buying things and participating in consumer culture; but this costs money, so ironically they are forced to work harder and harder to escape from the effects of their work.

Advertising is the lubricant that helps the consumer society run, so for Marxists advertising is an institution of major importance. Advertising may sell products, but at the same time it sells the capitalist social order that makes it possible for workers to participate in consumer cultures. Advertising works by generating dissatisfactions and anxieties in people and feeds on the alienation that pervades capitalist societies. It assuages these feelings by focusing attention on private consumption. Thus people are led away from paying attention to the way the ruling classes dominate capitalist societies and the grossly unequal distribution of wealth found in them. Another thing advertising does is promote narcissism; it leads people to focus on their own personal wants or desires and to neglect social and political matters and the needs of others. In consumer societies it is private

consumption that dominates, not expenditures for the good of the community.

Jean Baudrillard on Advertising and Consumer Cultures

Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) was one of the most important French social scientists of the twentieth century. He devotes the last part of his book *The System of Objects* to advertising, because of its importance in consumer cultures. The book was published in French in 1968 and translated by James Benedict and published in English in 1996. It combines semiotics, Freudian psychoanalytic theory, and Marxism in a unique blend.

As Baudrillard explains (1996:164):

Any analysis of the system of objects must ultimately imply an analysis of discourse *about* objects—that is to say, an analysis of promotional “messages” (comprising image and discourse). For advertising is not simply an adjunct to the system of objects; it cannot be detached therefrom, nor can it be restricted to its “proper” function (there is no such thing as advertising strictly confined to the supplying of information). This lack of proportion is the “functional” apotheosis of the system. Advertising in its entirety contributes a useless and unnecessary universe. It is pure connotation. It contributes nothing to production or to the direct practical application of things, yet it plays an integral part in the system of objects not merely because it relates to consumption but also because it itself becomes an object to be consumed.

Thus advertising sells consumption and is itself an object of consumption. His notion that advertising is pure connotation is a bit exaggerated, for some advertising is factual and functions as denotation, but mostly advertising is connotation. He adds that advertising faces a dilemma: There is so much advertising that the messages tend to cancel out each other, and claims by advertisers

give way to counterclaims, leading to the problem of clutter—a problem that advertising agencies continually have to face.

But these claims, Baudrillard argues, are not what is crucial. We must understand that what is most important is that advertising offers a “leitmotiv” of needs (more precisely, wants) and gratifications. People don’t believe in advertising, he argues, in the same way that they don’t believe in Santa Claus, but they are affected by advertising’s general thrust toward regression and infantilization and its ability to tell people of their hidden desires and finding ways to satisfy them.

Greg Rowland, in a personal communication, points out that more advanced advertising cultures have “developed connotative differentiation—emotional cues dominating messages in a way that would only have been seen in fine fragrance advertising... This is particularly true in soft-selling Britain where a near absence of rational claim is often a norm, even in laundry powder or automotive categories.” This insight might explain why we are beginning to see advertising in the United States that doesn’t seem to be pitching the product. The aim of this advertising, it would seem, is to plant emotional cues in us that can eventually be utilized to sell a product.

David F. Walsh, a sociologist at Goldsmiths, University of London, offers an overview of Baudrillard’s theories. He discusses Baudrillard’s combination of postmodern theory as it relates to consumer cultures and writes (in Chris Jenks, Ed., *Core Sociological Dichotomies*, 1998:30):

For Baudrillard, contemporary society is a postmodern society which is no longer structured by production in which the individual conforms to its needs but by symbolic exchange. It is a heterogeneous society of different groups with their own codes and practices of everyday life at the level of discourse, lifestyles, bodies, sexuality, communication, etc. and it involves the rejection of the logic of production and its instrumental rationality that dominated the modernist society of

capitalism. Capitalism now has been replaced by a consumer society which is characterized by a proliferation of signs, the media and messages, environmental design, cybernetic steering systems, contemporary art and a sign culture. It is a society of simulations based on the new forms of technology and culture. Signs now take on a life of their own and come to be the primary determinants of social experience. Signs and codes replace reality and the world is experienced through images (simulation) to the point where the real as something different from the image disappears. A world of hyper-reality is created in which everything in the world is simulated in the sense that models created by images replace the real.

For Baudrillard, it is the cultural shock generated by postmodernism that explains the way contemporary societies function. Postmodernist theorists argue that around the 1960s, there was a fundamental rupture in our thinking, a major change in the

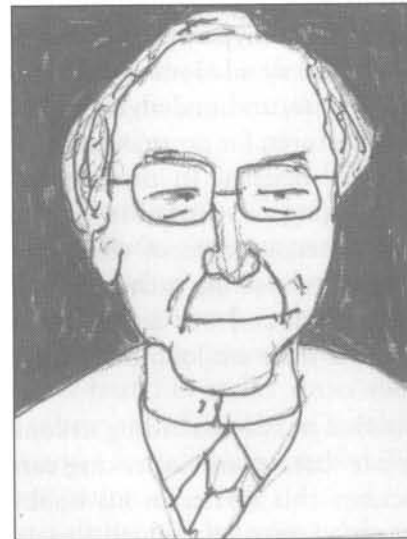


Jean Baudrillard

way people saw the world, and the old systems of thought that guided people, based on metanarratives (large, all-encompassing systems of thought found in religions, philosophy, and social theory) were abandoned.

One of the most celebrated explanations of postmodernism comes from the French scholar Jean-François Lyotard. In his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, he writes (1984:xxiv):

Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal.



J-F Lyotard

This statement, in which Lyotard explains that postmodernism involves “incredulity toward metanarratives,” is quite likely one of the most widely quoted definitions of the term ever written. Lyotard explains that we no longer have faith in wide-ranging, metanarratives (i.e., supernarratives)—the systems of belief and thought (as expounded in religions, political ideologies, and philosophy)—that we used in the past.

Now, in a postmodern world, we have a number of smaller and different narratives vying for our attention, leading to a crisis of legitimation. We don't know who has the right answers about important social and political questions, whose beliefs are correct, and what the difference is between right and wrong. In a postmodern world these questions are the subject of disputes. Is postmodernism relativistic? This is a debatable matter, one that is part of the controversy about postmodernism. Although postmodernists don't believe in any metanarratives, it doesn't mean they don't believe in any narratives. But how do we decide which narratives are correct?

In postmodernist societies, signs are all-important, and for Baudrillard they create a “hyper-reality” that seems more real than actual reality. The simulations now seem more real than the things they simulate, and underlying it all is the development of consumer cultures; for postmodern societies are, above all, consumer-crazed societies. In these societies, the things we purchase are no longer evaluated in terms of their use or functionality but rather in terms of what they signify about us—what they reveal about us, such as our taste, our style, our socioeconomic level, and our attitudes toward authority. This means that it is their semiotic meaning that is now all-important.

Ultimately, we find ourselves needing to consume endlessly; if we don't, we fear that we are not taking care of our needs. Baudrillard discusses this matter in his book *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, which originally appeared in 1970 in French and 1998 in an English translation. His

analysis indicates the pressures people feel in consumer societies (1998:80):

Modern man spends less and less of his life in production within work and more and more of it in the *production* and continual innovation of his own needs and well-being. He must constantly see to it that all his potentialities, all his consumer capacities are mobilized. If he forgets to do so, he will be gently and insistently reminded that he has no right not to be happy. It is not, then, true that he is passive. He is engaged in—has to engage in—continual activity. If not, he would run the risk of being content with what he has and becoming asocial.

Hence the revival of a *universal curiosity*... in respect to cookery, culture, science, religion, sexuality, etc. “Try Jesus” runs an American slogan. You have to try *everything*, for consumerist man is haunted by the fear of “missing” something, some form of enjoyment or other... It is no longer desire, or even “taste,” or a specific inclination that are at stake, but a generalized curiosity, driven by a vague sense of unease—it is the “fun morality” or the imperative to enjoy yourself, to exploit to the full one's potential for thrills, pleasure or gratification.

The picture Baudrillard paints of people driven by hidden imperatives to enjoy themselves suggests that there is something destructive operating in consumer cultures and that people find themselves stressed and pressed to experience everything and miss nothing that will create pleasure. It is the same kind of fervor found in earlier times about religion and salvation that has been transformed and secularized into a passion for pleasure and a fear of not having the “right” things and missing any gratifications.

We can make a distinction between needs and desires. Our needs are relatively limited: We need food, housing, clothing,