

A THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO CONSUMER CULTURE

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Abstract

There are three main perspectives on consumer culture. The first view is that consumer culture is premised upon the expansion of capitalist commodity production. The second view is strictly sociological, based on the satisfaction derived from goods, while the third view raises the question of the emotional pleasures of consumption. The paper revises some of the theories of Baudrillard, Bourdieu and Jameson on the subject.

Key words: consumer culture, capitalist commodity, consumption

This paper intends to revisit the three main perspectives on consumer culture. The first view is 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. The result was a growing salience of leisure and consumption activities in Western societies which were either greeted as leading to greater egalitarianism and individual freedom as well as empowerment of the individual, or regarded by others as increasing the capacity for ideological manipulation and seductive containment of the population.

The second view is strictly sociological, based on the satisfaction derived from goods related to their socially structured access in a 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.

The third view raises 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 pleasures.

Mike Featherstone argues that it is important to focus on the question of the growing prominence of the *culture of consumption* and not merely regard consumption as derived unproblematically from production (Featherstone, 1991: 13). The current phase of over-supply of symbolic goods in contemporary societies and the tendencies towards cultural disorder and de-classification is therefore bringing cultural questions in the foreground and has wider implications for our conceptualization of the relationship between culture, economy and society. This has also led to an increasing interest in conceptualizing questions of desire and pleasure, the emotional and aesthetic satisfactions derived from consumer experiences, not merely in terms of some logic of psychological manipulation.

If from the perspective of classical economics the object of all production is consumption, with individuals maximizing their satisfactions through purchasing from an ever-expanding range of goods, then from the perspective of some twentieth-century neo-Marxists this development is regarded as producing greater opportunities for controlled and manipulated consumption. The expansion of capitalist production, especially after the boost received from scientific management and 'Fordism' around the turn of the century, necessitated the construction of new markets and the education of publics to become consumers through advertising and other media (Featherstone, 1991, 14). This approach, that goes back to Lukács Marx- Weber synthesis with his theory of reification, has been developed more prominently in the writings of Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse and Lefebvre. Horkheimer and Adorno, for example, argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1979) that the same commodity logic and instrumental rationality manifest in the sphere of production is noticeable in the sphere of consumption.

A similar emphasis upon the logic of the commodity is to be found in the work of Jean **Baudrillard** who relies on semiology to argue that consumption entails the active manipulation of signs. In late capitalist society sign and commodity have come together to produce the 'commodity-sign'. The autonomy of the signifier, through, for instance, the manipulation of signs in the media and advertising, means that signs are able to float free from objects and are available for use in a multiplicity of associative relations. Baudrillard says that:

‘in the logic of signs, as in that of symbols, objects are no longer linked in any sense to a definite function or need. Precisely because they are responding quite differently, this is either the social logic or the logic of desire, for which they function as a shifting and unconscious field of signification.’ (Baudrillard, 1998: 77).

The over- production of signs and reproduction of images and simulations leads to a loss of stable meaning, and an aestheticization of reality in which the masses become fascinated by the endless flow of bizarre juxtapositions which takes the viewer beyond stable sense.

The examples of cultural disorder, the overwhelming flood of signs and images which Baudrillard argues is pushing us beyond the social, are usually taken from the media with television, rock videos and MTV cited as examples of pastiche, eclectic mixing of codes, bizarre juxtaposition and unchained signifiers which defy meaning and readability.

Baudrillard, referring to the social logic of consumption, argues that it is by no means that of the ‘individual appropriation of the use-value of goods and services’, it is not a logic of satisfaction, but of the production and manipulation of social signifiers. The idea is that you never consume the object in itself (in its use-value). You are always manipulating objects, in the broadest sense, as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by reference to a group of a higher status. The consumer experiences his distinctive behaviour as freedom, as aspiration, as choice. His experience is not one of being forced to be different, of obeying a code (Baudrillard, 1998: 58-61).

Another important contribution to the theories of consumer culture is made by **Bourdieu** in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984), for who ‘taste classifies and classifies the classifier’. Consumption and lifestyles preferences involve discriminatory judgements which at the same time identify and render classifiable our own particular judgement of taste to others. Particular constellations of taste, consumption preferences and lifestyles practices are associated with specific occupation and class fractions, making it possible to map out the universe of taste and lifestyle with its structured oppositions and finely graded distinctions which operate within a particular society at a particular point in history.

The constant supply of new, fashionably desirable goods or the usurpation of existing marker goods by lower groups produces a paper chase effect in which those above will have

to invest in new goods in order to re-establish the original social distance (Featherstone, 1991: 17-19). Consumer aspirations are thought to compensate for the serious underachievement of certain classes in terms of social mobility. The compulsion to consume might be said to compensate for failure to rise up the vertical social ladder. At the same time as expressing a status demand, the aspirations to 'over-consume' (particularly on the part of the lower classes) might be seen as expressing the felt failure of that demand.

In this context knowledge becomes important: knowledge of new goods, their social and cultural value, and how to use them appropriately. This is particularly the case with aspiring groups who adopt a learning mode towards consumption and the cultivation of a lifestyle. It is for groups such as the middle class, the new working class and the new rich and upper class, that the consumer-culture magazines, newspapers, books, television and radio programmes which stress self-improvement, self-development, personal transformation, how to manage property, and relationships, how to construct a fulfilling lifestyle, are more relevant (Bourdieu, 1986: 354-360). This may be particularly the case with the group Bourdieu refers to as 'the new cultural intermediaries', those in media, design, fashion, advertising and 'para' intellectual information occupations, whose job entail performing services and the production, marketing and dissemination of symbolic goods.

The *new petite bourgeoisie*, these new intellectuals who adopt a learning mode toward life, are fascinated by identity, presentation, appearance, and lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1986: 370). Indeed their veneration of the artistic and intellectual lifestyle is such that they consciously invent an art of living in which their body, home and car are regarded as an extension of their persona which must be stylised to express the individuality of the bearer. Bourdieu laconically tells us that this quest for distinction via lifestyle cultivation 'makes available to almost anyone the distinctive poses, the distinctive games, and other external signs of inner riches previously reserved for intellectuals' (Bourdieu, 1986: 371). The new cultural intermediaries therefore help in transmitting both intellectual cultural goods and the intellectual lifestyle to a wider audience.

Yet as Bourdieu reminds us with his concept of symbolic capital, the signs of the dispositions and classificatory schemes which betray one's origins and trajectory through life are also manifest in body shape, size, weight, stance, walk, tone of voice, style of speaking, etc. Hence, culture is incorporated and is not just a question of what clothes are worn, but how they are worn. In this sense, the newly arrived, the autodidact, will unavoidably give away

signs of the burden of attainment and incompleteness of his/ her cultural competence. Therefore, the new rich who may adopt conspicuous consumption strategies are recognizable and assigned their place in the social space. Their cultural practices are always in danger of being dismissed as vulgar and tasteless by the established upper class, aristocracy and those 'rich in cultural capital' (Featherstone, 1991:19-20).

Jameson persistently refers to postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism and analyses the ways in which cultural changes such as postmodernism 'express the deeper logic' of the 'late consumer, or the multinational' capitalist social system (Jameson, 1984: 125). But if we look at other writers such as Baudrillard, who have explored the logic of the commodity form and investigated the profusion of images and the growth of a simulational society which is similar to the postmodern culture Jameson talks of, we note some very different conclusions. In *The Mirror of Production* (1975) and the *Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981), Baudrillard theorized the logic of the commodity sign to point to the way in which under capitalism the commodity has become a sign in the Saussurean sense with its meaning arbitrarily determined by its position in a self-referential system of signifiers. We can therefore talk about commodity-signs, and the consumption of signs, and in an earlier piece, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture' (1979) - Jameson followed Baudrillard thus far and would agree with his description that consumer culture and television have produced a surfeit of images and signs which have given rise to a simulation world which has effaced the distinction between real and the imaginary (Featherstone, 1991: 54).

Jameson clearly follows Baudrillard in his depiction of the consumer society as saturated with signs, messages and images and adds that 'the priorities of the real become reversed, and everything is mediated by culture to the point where even the political and ideological levels have initially to be disentangled from their primary mode of representation which is cultural' (Jameson, 1979: 139).

Jameson identifies two features of postmodernism: the transformation of reality into images, and the transformation of time into a series of perpetual presents. With regard to the first, in a similar way to **Baudrillard's** discussion of postmodern imagistic culture, Jameson refers to pastiche and simulations, the stylistic diversity and heterogeneity which leads to the loss of the referent, the 'death of the subject', and the end of individualism. With regard to the second feature, the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents, Jameson's paradigm is schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is regarded as the breakdown of the relationship

between signifiers, the breakdown of temporality, memory, a sense of history. The schizophrenic's experience is of 'isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence' (Jameson, 1984: 119). Although he/ she therefore does not know personal identity, and has no projects, the immediate undifferentiated experience of the presentness of the world, leads to a sense of intensities: vivid, powerful experiences which bear 'a mysterious and oppressive charge of affect' (Jameson, 1984: 120). This loss of a sense of narrative to the individual's life, and the disconnectedness of experience thus links well with Jameson's first factor: the transformation of reality into images.

The problem with Jameson's approach is that he moves from the economics to the cultural and misses out the mediating effect of the social, understood here as the social relationships. That is, to understand postmodern culture, we need not just to read the signs but look at how the signs are used by figurations of people in their day-to-day practices.

Baudrillard and Jameson emphasize the new and central role which images play in the consumer society which gives culture an unprecedented importance. In his more recent writings, Baudrillard has drawn the attention to the overload of information provided by the media which now confront us with an endless flow of fascinating images and simulations, so that 'TV is the world'. In *Simulations* Baudrillard states that in this hyper-reality the real and the imaginary are confused and aesthetic fascination is everywhere, so that 'a kind of non-intentional parody hovers over everything, of technical simulating, of indefinable fame to which is attached an aesthetic pleasure' (Baudrillard 68).

For Baudrillard art is no longer a separate reality, it enters into production and reproduction so that everything, 'even if it be the everyday and banal reality, falls by this token under the sign of art, and becomes aesthetic'. The end of the real and the end of art moves us into a hyperreality in which the secret discovered by Surrealism becomes more widespread and generalised. As Baudrillard remarks 'we live everywhere already in an "aesthetic" hallucination of reality' (Baudrillard, 1983: 69).

In this stage of simulational culture, one of the forms often used as an illustration is MTV. According to Kaplan, MTV seems to exist in a timeless present with video artists ransacking film genres and art movements from different historical periods to blur boundaries and the sense of history. History becomes specialised out, aesthetic hierarchies are collapsed with the mixing of genres and high art, popular and commercial forms. It is argued that the

continuous flow of diverse images make it difficult to chain them together into a meaningful message; the intensity and degree of saturation of signifiers defy systematization and narrativity (Kaplan, 1986: 69) . Yet, there remains the question of how these images work: has the MTV moved beyond a sign system which forms a structured language in the Saussurean sense?

To take another example, Disneyworld is often taken as the prototype for postmodern simulational experiences, and it is interesting to see that the format of moving between spectacular experiences (white – knuckle rides, hologram illusions, etc) and the simulation of historical national- founder or childhood worlds (the Magic Kingdom). If postmodern cities have become centres of consumption, play and entertainment, saturated with signs and images to the extent that anything can become represented, thematized and made an object of interest to the ‘tourist gaze’, then it is to be expected that leisure activities such as visiting theme parks, shopping centres, malls, museums, and galleries should show some convergence here.

There has been a fundamental shift in modern life in terms of production and consumption, and this has changed everything. Today, there is an increasing realization that the key domain is neither production nor distribution, but consumption because there is the one area where most of us feel we have some power left to influence whom we might become. The consumer society, as a distinctive form of advanced capitalism, relies to an unprecedented degree for its perpetuation upon the media, advertising spectacle, fashion and the image. Consumption pledges to fill the void in people’s lives, hence the attempt to surround commodities with an aura of romance, with allusions to exotic places and vivid experiences.

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