

Commodity culture and commodity fetishism

A consumer culture is a commodity culture—that is, a culture in which commodities are central to cultural meaning. **Commodities** are things that are bought and sold in a social system of exchange. The concept of commodity culture is intricately allied with the idea that we construct our identities, **at least in part**, through the consumer products that inhabit our lives. This is what media scholar Stuart Ewen has termed the *commodity self*, the idea that our selves, indeed our *subjectivities*, are mediated and constructed in part through our consumption and use of commodities. Clothing, music, cosmetic products, and cars, among other things, are commodities which people use to present their identities to those around them. Advertising encourages consumers to think of commodities as central means through which to convey their personalities. For instance, for many years **Dewar's** Scotch Whisky had a well-known campaign, the "Dewar's Profile," in which various well-accomplished individuals are profiled according to their profession, interests, hobbies, favorite book, and, of course, their favorite drink. The campaign suggests that if one wants to acquire the qualities of creativity and achievement of these individuals, one should drink Dewar's. It speaks to the concept of a commodity self, making the assertion that this commodity will become a part, of one's **self-identity** and how one projects that self into **the** world.

This raises the very important question of what, precisely it is **that** ads **sell**. It is commonly believed that the function of advertisements is to sell products; the consumer sees an ad and is persuaded by it to purchase the product. However, many cultural theorists have argued that advertising is not nearly as successful in this intent as its critics and proponents would like us to believe, and that advertising functions in a much more indirect way to sell lifestyle and identification with brand names and corporate logos. Communication theorist Michael Schudson has argued that the ability of advertising to sell specific products is much overrated.¹ Advertisers are more often than not guessing rather than accurately assessing consumer desires and attitudes. In addition, Schudson states that advertising is only one part of a broader commercial environment, that includes direct marketing, different product placement and display, and complex distribution networks. Advertising is simply the most obvious element of these aspects of marketing.

Advertisers have viewed advertising as an art form since the 1960s, when

¹ 'The Manufacturing of Desire

the field underwent a creative revolution. Ads became more entertaining and intriguing as the rigid hard-sell conventions of the 1950s were relaxed. As cultural theorist Thomas Frank has argued, advertising began in the 1960s to appropriate the language of the counterculture, and to aim to attach to products the signification of being hip. This trend has only increased since that time, and today many products are sold through associations with youth culture and the idea of being cool.

It remains the case, however, that advertising is central to the way in which commodities are given particular qualities and values that they do not have innately. Analyses of commodities and how they function come to us primarily through Marxist theory. Marxist theory is both a general analysis of the role of economics in human history and an analysis of the ways that capitalism functions. A Marxist critique of capitalism understands advertising to be a means to create demand for products, which makes people buy more than they really need. Marxist theory has analyzed in particular the relationship between exchange value and use *value* in capitalism. Exchange value refers to what a particular product costs in a given system of exchange. Use value refers to its use within that society. Marxist theory critiques the emphasis in capitalism on exchange over use value, in which things are valued not for what they really do but for what, they're worth in abstract, monetary terms.

We will use perfume ads to illustrate exchange value and use value. One might argue that certain food products have a relatively equal exchange and use value. Rice, for instance, is a useful food staple which is relatively affordable, hence its use value is equal to, if not greater than, its exchange value, which is relatively cheap. Expensive perfume, however, is quite another story. A perfume that costs \$40 per ounce has a very high exchange value, yet does it have use value? Can a society function well without perfume? Certainly it cannot without food. One could argue, for instance, that a relatively inexpensive Honda car has the same use value as a very expensive Mercedes-Benz, although their exchange value is dramatically different. Yet, that exchange value carries with it a broad array of social meanings that each owner acquires with these cars. The idea of use value is tricky, since the concepts of what is and is not useful are highly ideological—one could argue endlessly about whether or not certain so-called leisure goods are "useful." In an elite culture, ownership of a Mercedes-Benz might, buy one a certain social status and respect that another car would

not. But it is difficult to assess the use value of qualities like pleasure and status.

One of the most important concepts in the Marxist analysis of advertising is the idea of *commodity fetishism*. This refers to the process by which mass-produced goods are emptied of the meaning of their production (the context in which they were produced and the labor that created them) and then filled with new meanings in ways that both mystify the product and turn it into a fetish object. For instance, a designer shirt does not contain within it the meaning of the context in which it is produced. The consumer is given no information about who sewed it, the factory where the material was produced, or the culture in which it was made. Rather, the product is affixed with logos and linked to advertising images that imbue it with cultural meanings quite apart from those of its specific production conditions and context. Products are most often marketed far from where they were produced. Handmade objects, such as objects made by particular craftspeople, more often retain *signifiers* of their production. Commodity fetishism can be seen as an inevitable outcome of mass production and distribution of goods to many different consumers. It demands, however, that labor and working conditions are made invisible to the consumer. This erasure of the labor process devalues the experience of work, and makes it harder for workers to take pride in what they have produced. Commodity fetishism can thus be seen as a system of mystification that empties objects of the meaning of their production and then fills them with commodity status.

It is often easy to understand commodity fetishism by looking at moments when it fails. For instance, in the early 1990s Nike shoes for women were promoted as signifiers of self-empowerment, athletic women, feminism, and hip social politics. Public outcry later in the decade about the dire working conditions in Nike's factories led to an ironic revelation. These symbols of female empowerment were produced by low-paid women who labored under terrible conditions in Indonesian factories. As these conditions were exposed, the process of commodity fetishism was momentarily ruptured. The shoes could no longer be stripped of the meaning of their conditions of production and "filled" with the signifiers of feminism. The company had to respond to this criticism and change some of its practices.

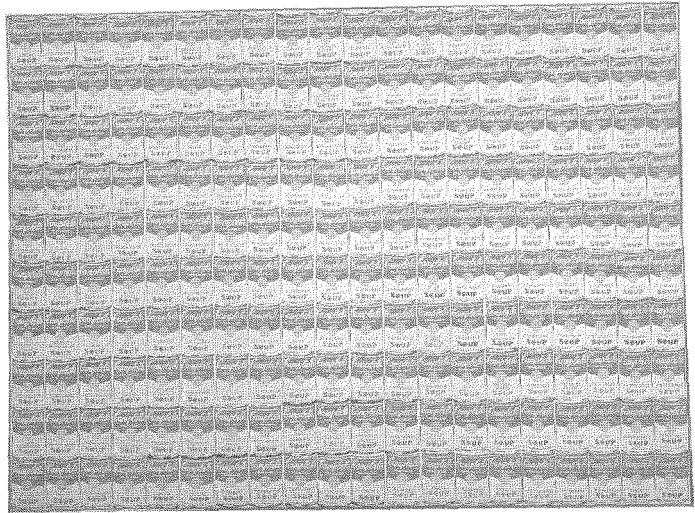
As the primary means of commodity fetishism, advertising functions to attach certain meanings to products that they would not necessarily have in themselves. In the process, it often awards them complex and emotional

attributes; in other words, it can give them an *aura*, to use a term that we discussed in Chapter 4. Commodity fetishism operates through *relocation*, a process by which abstract ideas are assumed to be real and concrete. In advertising this means that objects (commodities) acquire human qualities (are perceived as sexy, romantic, or cool, for instance), and human relations can become increasingly objectified and devoid of emotional meaning. This is most obvious in products that are so clearly initially devoid of meaning, such as perfume. We could ask, what is perfume but scented water? Yet, various perfumes are awarded heightened meanings that consumers then supposedly acquire when wearing them. A perfume like Chanel No. 5 carries *connotations* of wealth, class status, and tradition, whereas Calvin Klein's CK signifies not only hipness but androgynous sexual status. Ads for these products attach these specific qualities to them which consumers are then encouraged to feel that they can subsequently acquire through purchasing and using the product.

Condemnations of consumer society and commodity culture have proliferated throughout the twentieth century. The *Frankfurt School* theorists, who were discussed in Chapter 5, saw the role of commodities as a kind of death knell for meaningful social interaction. For these theorists, commodities were "hollowed out" objects which propagated a loss of identity and eroded our sense of history. For them, to think, for instance, that a specific consumer item might make one's life meaningful was to engage in a corruption of the really valuable aspects of existence. In the 1960s, the Frankfurt School ideas re-emerged in a political and social context in which commercialism was condemned as one of the symptoms of a society gone wrong. During this time, the newly emergent counterculture eschewed notions of material success and commodity culture. Yet, at the same time, in the art world, Pop Art in the late 1950s and 1960s engaged with mass culture in a way that did not condemn it. As such, Pop was an attack on distinctions between *high* and *low culture*. Pop art took what was considered to be low culture, such as television, the mass media, and popular culture like comic books, and declared it to be as socially significant as high art, in the realm of fine art, classical music, and other artistic products that are elitist and upper-class by association.

By incorporating television images, advertisements, and commercial products into their work, the artists who produced Pop Art were responding in a very different manner from the Frankfurt School to the pervasiveness of

Andy Warhol, *Two
Hundred Campbell's
Soup Cans*, 1962



Roy Lichtenstein, *Drowning Girl*, 1963



commodity culture. They were doing so not by condemning mass culture but by using it, demonstrating their love of and pleasure in popular culture. Andy Warhol painted and printed images of Campbell's soup cans to question the boundaries between art and product design, and celebrate the aesthetic repetition of mass culture. Warhol's painting has a flattening effect which seems to comment on the banality of popular culture and mass production. The multiplicity of the soup cans refers to the inundation and overproduction of goods in a commodity culture, where repetition prevails. Yet at the same time it is an affectionate homage to package design and consumer culture. Other artists turned to "low culture" forms like comic strips and television. In search of a means to paint an "ugly" picture, Roy Lichtenstein made comic strip paintings, which commented not only on the flat surface of the comic form but also the stories that they told. Lichtenstein's highly formal works were smooth and pristine, in contrast to the painterly brushstroke style of *Abstract Expressionist* painting. In their detail of the dotted surface of the screen-printed comics, these works are a tribute to this commercial form. Lichtenstein's work is a kind of large, oversized comic, blowing up the grain of the comic image so that the viewer can see its dot textures. In this image of a "drowning girl," the artist ambiguously plays off of the conventions and clichés of the self-sacrificing romantic, heroine.