

# UNWRAPPING USE VALUE

Everything is packaged. Late twentieth-century commodity production has generated a companion production of commodity packaging that is so much a part of the commodity form itself as to be one of the most unremarked features of daily life. Only when we have to drag all those 30 gallon black plastic trash bags out to the curb or haul them to the town dump are we likely to grasp the enormity of packaging. Otherwise, it goes unnoticed even in drug stores and discount department stores where fully 80 per cent of the merchandise is packaged. Whether items are individually boxed or mounted for display on strips of cardboard backing, most packaging today includes a plastic see-through window or bubble. Packaging catches the consumer's eye, even though as a phenomenon of daily life, it is all but invisible. The package is a device for hailing the consumer and cueing his or her attention, by the use of color and design, to a particular brand-name commodity. The plastic cover replicates the display case or store window and suggests that each and every item is worthy of display.

Packaging also enables the standardization of weights and measures. For today's consumer, the "net weight" label is the only guarantee that a box of laundry detergent indeed weighs 4 lb or that the peanut butter in a particular jar really does amount to 1 lb 2 oz. The standardization of weights and measures represents a rationalization of sales similar to the Taylorization of production. In the workplace, Taylorization increased efficiency and productivity because in breaking production down into rationalized units, it offered the owners of the means of production greater control over the production process and a more systematic exploitation of the workforce. Taylorization has its end in the consumption of rationalized commodity units. Many of the basic foodstuff items that fill our kitchen cupboards today, such as crackers, cereal, flour, and pickles,

were originally sold in bulk. Richard Ohmann describes the moment when Quaker Oats were first available as a packaged commodity, and develops the relationship between early instances of mass commodity packaging in the late nineteenth century and the expansion of the professional class, the first class in this country to function *en masse* as consumers (Ohmann, 1988). By comparison with commodities previously sold in bulk, mass-produced and packaged commodities, like Quaker Oats in the original 2lb package, were advertised as a more efficient means to buy and store basic household necessities. While it is true that increased urbanization from the 1890s on meant that more and more families did not have storage space for bulk merchandise, the underlying effect of mass commodity packaging is to break sales down into standardized units, thus enabling commodity producers to have greater control over consumption and a more systematic means of exploiting the consumer through advertising. Prior to the 1890s, there was no advertising for what would later become Quaker Oats, because, if such advertising had existed, it could only have promoted oats in general. The point of advertising is the designation of the commodity (and, by extension, the consumer) as a discrete unit.

The immensely popular advertising campaign devised for marketing California raisins suggests a new conceptualization of the commodity in keeping with postmodern capitalism. Where raisins from California were once marketed according to specific brand-name identities such as "Sun Maid," they are now promoted as the "California Raisins" and embodied in a band of wrinkly faced black "dudes" with skinny arms and legs, who chant "I Heard it Through the Grapevine" while soaking up the California sun. "California Raisins" do not represent a return to the pre-brand-name generic commodity, but rather the hyper-commodity whose connection to rock music and black culture heroes precipitates a vast array of spin-off products, from grotesque dolls to beach towels emblazoned with the "Raisins." If brand-name marketing represents the Taylorization of consumers, mass-marketing spin-off advertising is the postmodern form. Rather than fragmenting the broad mass of consumers into discrete and manageable units, postmodern advertising assumes a consuming subject capable of being interpolated from a number of angles at once. We will consume the "California Raisins" even if we never eat dried fruit.

Another significant function of packaging is to promote the notion of product purity. When Henry P. Crowell first packaged oats, he marketed them as "pure" by comparison with oats sold in bins and

exposed to the air as well as the hands and coughs of salespersons. In late twentieth-century consumer culture, hygiene has complex ideological associations, most of which derive from the notion of progress which makes a primary distinction between the developed societies of the First World and the underdeveloped societies of the Third World. Purity is synonymous with the modern First World supermarket, where items are discretely shelved; bruised fruit, greying meat, and milk past its freshness date are removed; and where everything is enveloped in air-conditioning – yet another form of packaging whose frigid, artificial air exudes the very notion of purity. After all, germs cannot survive freezing temperatures; and in the First World, purity means being germ-free, even if the elimination of microbes requires heavy doses of pesticides, chemical preservatives, fumigation, radiation, and other artificial stratagems. To the First World imagination, the open-air markets of the Third World are a riot of impurities. The aromas of ripe fruits, meats, and cheeses cannot be conceptualized without the consequent horror of bacteria. Foods brimming over in baskets or loosely arranged on counters, in bins, or on the pavement suggest an indiscrete mingling of merchandise – and worse yet, people. In the First World, the package is the fetishized sign of the desire for purity, which, in the fullest sense, is also a desire for security. The ultimate outrage in commodity capitalism is product adulteration. Haunting the desire for purity are the tales told of food-service workers who, when angry or bored, spit, even urinate, into the not yet frozen or sealed TV dinners. Similarly, the consumer's desire for security meets its most chilling nightmare in the case of the deranged product tamperer, for whom the security seal on a bottle of Tylenol is a challenge to cyanide.

These functions of packaging and their ideological implications demonstrate that the throwaways of commodity consumption may well offer the most fruitful way into the culture as a whole. While the foregoing themes may well be complex and interesting, none, however, really scrutinizes packaging as a dimension of the commodity form itself. Such an analysis would look at packaging as a metaphor for the formal economic contradiction of the commodity. In *Capital*, Marx initiated his analysis of the entire system of capitalist economic relationships with an account of the commodity form. This is the nexus of capitalism as well as the means of understanding contradiction. Where Marx began with the commodity, I would begin to understand the commodity as it is metaphorically reiterated in its packaging.



Of all the attributes of mass-produced commodity packaging today, the most important is the use of plastic. The plastic cover acts as a barrier between the consumer and the product, while at the same time it offers up a naked view of the commodity to the consumer's gaze. Sometimes the plastic covering is moulded to fit the contours of the commodity and acts like a transparent skin between the consumer's hand and the object. Shaped and naked, but veiled and withheld, the display of commodities is sexualized. Plastic packaging defines a game of *câche* – *câche* where sexual desire triggers both masculine and feminine fantasies. Strip-tease or veiled phallus – packaging conflates a want for a particular object with a sexualized form of desire.

Packaging prolongs the process of coming into possession of the commodity. A buyer selects a particular item, pays for it, but does not fully possess it until he or she pulls open its plastic case or cardboard box. Possession delivers a commodity's use value into the hands of the consumer. Packaging acts to separate the consumer from the realization of use value and heightens his or her anticipation of having and using a particular commodity. Packaging may stimulate associations with gift-wrapped Christmas and birthday presents. However, plastic commodity packaging reveals what gift-wrapping hides. The anticipation we associate with the gift-wrapped present is for the

unknown object. In anticipating a plastic-wrapped commodity, we imagine the experience of its use since its identity is already revealed. In all our experiences of consumption, we are little different from the child who convinces his mother to buy the latest Ghostbuster action figure. From the moment he picks the packaged toy off the shelf, to the moment he passes through the checkout, he will trace the contours of the package with his hands, attempt to scrutinize the toy's detail with his eyes, and lose himself in imagining how it will finally feel to push the lever that makes the Ghostbuster's hair stand on end and eyes pop out with fright at the delightfully cold and gelatinous slime – also included in the package, but not yet available to the touch.

Tania Modleski, in her analysis of soap operas (Modleski, 1982), makes a point about the genre's form that provides a clue to the deciphering of commodity packaging. Modleski identifies "waiting" as the most salient formal feature of soap operas. As we all know, nothing ever really happens nor is any problem ever fully resolved in a soap. The characters who open a particular episode may drop out of sight for a day or two, a character might announce a dramatic or scandalous event, but its culmination and consequences may drag on for weeks. Viewers learn to hold plots and people in suspension, waiting from daily episode to daily episode in unbelieving anticipation of *dénouement*. As Modleski puts it: "soap operas are important to their viewers in part because they never end . . . The narrative, by placing ever more complex obstacles between desire and fulfillment, makes anticipation an end in itself" (Modleski, 1982: 88). Modleski astutely compares waiting as a formal feature of soap operas with the lived experience of the housewife. Alone at home, her husband at work, some or all of her children at school, the housewife performs all the daily chores necessary to maintain house and family in an all-encompassing ambience of waiting:

Soap operas invest exquisite pleasure in the central condition of a woman's life: waiting – whether for her phone to ring, for the baby to take its nap, or for the family to be reunited shortly after the day's final soap opera has left its family still struggling against dissolution.

(Modleski, 1982: 88)

Modleski concludes that the appeal of soap operas resides in the way they make waiting enjoyable. The soap opera turns waiting into an aesthetic. This, then, lifts the housewife viewer out of her real

and frustrating experience of waiting, and allows her to apprehend waiting as pleasure.

I would extend Modleski's observations to the way we as consumers relate to the use value of commodities. Mass commodity packaging makes the anticipation of use value into an aesthetic in the same way that the soap opera transforms waiting from an experience into a form. Moreover, commodity packaging defines the anticipation of use value as the commodity's most gratifying characteristic. No commodity ever lives up to its buyer's expectations or desires. This is because in commodity capitalism, use value cannot be fully realized, but rather haunts its fetishized manifestations in the objects we consume. This is true regardless of our economic level of consumption. The shoddy purchase that does not fulfill its advertised promise promotes the pleasurable anticipation of the next (hopefully less shoddy) purchase. Similarly, the high-class piece of merchandise, for instance the sumptuous and expensive new fashion, that in itself seems to live up to all our expectations, also activates anticipation for the next purchase when we take our designer fashion home and hang it next to our now worn and boring collection of clothes. In defining the anticipation of use value as the site of pleasure in the commodity form, capitalism puts the consumer (whether woman, man, child, or adult) in a position analogous to Modleski's housewife. Waiting can only be rendered aesthetically pleasing to someone who is socially isolated and powerless. The housewife who comes to appreciate waiting as pleasure hardly has access to another, more active and affirming mode of getting through the day. Similarly, the consumer learns to associate pleasure with the anticipation of use value simply because commodity culture does not offer use value itself as appreciable or accessible.

Commodity capitalism fully develops the anticipation of use value while use value itself seems to serve no other purpose but to create the basis for its anticipation. Such a separation between anticipation and use value underlies Wolfgang Haug's *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*. Haug focuses on advertising in order to develop a definition of commodity fetishism in the context of late capitalism. He draws on Marx's definition of commodity fetishism, but translates the Marxian contradiction between exchange value and use value into the terms of the market economy where the primary contradiction is between buyer and seller. Where Marx saw the commodity form as the embodiment of human labor in the abstract and this as the basis for its creation of exchange value, Haug sees the commodity's use value

pressed into the service of sales. The buyer "values the commodity as a means for survival," whereas the seller "sees such necessities as a means for valorization" (Haug, 1986: 15). Haug concludes that commodities have a "double reality." First, they have a use value; "second, and more importantly, the *appearance* of use value" (Haug, 1986: 16). For Haug, the appearance of use value is essentially "detached" (Haug, 1986: 17) from the object itself. This is the aspect of the commodity form that advertising seizes upon and renders sensually perceptible in its words and images. The aspect of the commodity form that Haug defines as appearance would seem to correspond with the category of anticipation. Both suggest that the fetishization of the commodity is for the consumer the fetishization of use. Marx recognized this when he commented: "whenever, by an exchange we equate as values our different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them. We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it" (Tucker, 1978: 322). The abstraction of labor which is the real basis of the fetish quality of commodities, is not something we as consumers can directly grasp, rather it enters our daily life experience as the inability to apprehend fully or even imagine non-fetishized use values.

Haug's account of commodity aesthetics, particularly the way he sees human sensuality wholly inscribed in the appearance of use value, where it is abstracted and turned into market value, bears a strong resemblance to the way in which earlier Marxist intellectuals developed the notion of reification. The landmark text on reification is included in Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács begins with Marx's notion that "in the commodity the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour" (Lukács, 1971: 86), and develops the point that commodity fetishism is both an objective and a subjective phenomenon (Lukács, 1971: 87). Objectively, there is a world of commodities and a market economy, whose laws we might apprehend, but which nevertheless seems to obey "invisible forces that generate their own power" (Lukács, 1971: 87). Subjectively, people in commodity capitalism experience the estrangement of their activities as these, too, become commodities. Crucial to Lukács' definition of reification is the notion that once labor power comes into being as the abstraction of human activity, it extends its influence to human qualities and personality as well. Such objectification, coupled with the highly fragmented and rationalized process of capitalist production, produces "the atomization of the individual"



(Lukács, 1971:91) in consciousness as well as labor. Reification defines the translation of commodity fetishism into human experiential terms.

The transformation of the commodity relation into a thing of “ghostly objectivity” cannot therefore content itself with the reduction of all objects for the gratification of human needs to commodities. It stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can “own” or “dispose of” like the various objects of the external world. And there is no natural form in which human relations can be cast, no way in which man can bring his physical and psychic “qualities” into play without their being subjected increasingly to this reifying process.

(Lukács, 1971: 100)

Common to both Lukács’ and Haug’s analyses of the commodity form is the notion that under capitalism human qualities and the sensual dimension of experience are objectified and abstracted – or “detached” – from people and their activities so that they become commodities in their own right, “reified” or “aestheticized.” The problem is, then, how to reverse – or break through – the process so as to recover and affirm all the human qualities that the commodity form negates by abstraction. The most challenging thinking along these lines is Theodor Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*. Like Lukács, Adorno sees consciousness – our mode of conceptualizing self and world – inexorably shaped by capitalism. Adorno too draws directly on Marx’s theory of the commodity, particularly the phenomenon of equivalence. In order for exchange to take place, commodities, which would otherwise be distinct because of their vastly different properties, must achieve equivalence. As previously remarked, it is the abstraction of labor into labor power that produces equivalence. As Marx put it, “the equalization of the most different kinds of labour can be the result only of an abstraction from their inequalities, or of reducing them to their common denominator, viz. the expenditure of human labour-power as human labour in the abstract” (Tucker, 1978: 322). Where Marx uses the term “equivalence,” Adorno, whose argument is more properly philosophical, develops the notion of “identity” (Adorno, 1973: 146). The whole of *Negative Dialectics* is aimed at “breaking through the appearance of total identity,” in order to smash the “coercion” (Adorno, 1973: 146) of identification as

a form that has its roots in economics and dominates all human endeavor and thought.

The [exchange] principle, the reduction of human labour to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. [Economic exchange] is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no [exchange]; it is through [exchange] that nonidentical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical. The spread of the principle imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total.

(Adorno, 1973: 146)

Adorno sees the possibility of negative dialectics in the fact that capitalism as a system and as a form of consciousness is both total and not total. The abstraction of human labor that permits equivalence both denies and requires the existence of multiple and qualitatively different labors. This is capitalism’s contradiction. According to Adorno, contradiction “indicates the untruth of identity” (Adorno, 1973: 5) – not because it affirms some wholly other position outside of capitalism, but because it is “nonidentity under the aspect of identity” (Adorno, 1973: 5). *Negative Dialectics* holds tremendous possibilities for rethinking and reclaiming daily-life social practice under capitalism, because unlike the concept of reification, it apprehends fetishism as a tension between the abstracting forces of domination and their utopian antitheses. But how are we to apprehend contradiction? Adorno equates the possibility of contradiction in capitalism as an economic system with the possibility of realizing contradiction in thought. As he sees it, the translation of things into their conceptions leaves something out: a “remainder” which functions as the concept’s contradiction. The project of translating negative dialectics into daily life would, then, require ferreting out all the remainders – the resistant, and perhaps quirky, material of practice and relationships that cannot be assimilated in the process of coming to equivalence.

*Negative Dialectics* is written as an unrelenting exposé – of the overwhelming tendency toward identity and its manifestations in philosophical thought. In the more mundane world of daily life, negative dialectics opposes the homogenization of mass culture, where standardization is marketed as a sign of quality, and the great range of qualitatively different social and cultural forms is transformed into the design details of commodities. What is most

interesting about Adorno's writing is that while the notion of identity and all its ramifications are wholly revealed, the category of "non-identity" is never fully described, or analyzed. Adorno implies that to do so would dissolve the contradictory character of "nonidentity." The closest Adorno comes to specifying "non identity" in philosophical terms occurs in his introductory remarks, when he states that "what defies subsumption under identity [is] the 'use value' in Marxist terminology" (Adorno, 1973: 11).

This brings the discussion back to the initial problem of whether or not use value can be recognized and appreciated in commodity capitalism – or if, as Haug and Lukács affirm, the consumer is by definition embraced by abstraction and knows use value only as an "appearance" or "reification."

Contrary to this line of reasoning, there is another wholly different approach to Marxist popular culture criticism that abandons the possibility of redeeming concrete use values, and turns instead to the area of appearance as the only social reality in capitalism and, therefore, the only possible site for the transformation of social life. In this approach, appearance comes to mean something more than it does for Haug, as it takes on the complex proportions of the imaginary. Where Haug defined the appearance of use value as a wholly fetishized and manipulated concept, the imaginary is seen as a highly conflictual zone that brings together social and psychic life, needs and desires, and where the forces that seek to dominate, control, and recuperate social life are contested by desire, meaning-making, and a full array of practices that connote cultural resistance. This definition of the function of the imaginary in popular culture originates in Walter Benjamin's landmark essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction." This may well be the single most important essay in the development of Marxist popular culture criticism. It assesses the influence of mechanical reproduction in a bold and liberatory way. Yet many students today fail to grasp the revolutionary thrust of the essay, and apprehend it instead as a nostalgic complaint for the loss of "aura," the concept Benjamin uses to describe all the unique magical qualities of great traditional art. How is it possible to construct two very different readings: the one revolutionary, the other nostalgic? It may well be that Benjamin intended his reader to have to deal with nostalgia. After all, we are all products of the class history that privatized art, privileged its meanings, and thus endowed it with "aura." Furthermore, we have not attained the socialist transformation of society that would allow us fully to under-

stand the democratizing potential of mechanical reproduction. To this end, Benjamin uses phrases that inevitably elicit regret. He describes "aura" as "withering" (Benjamin, 1969: 221) and tells us that mechanical reproduction "depreciates" (Benjamin, 1969: 221) art. Even his use of "authenticity" (Benjamin, 1969: 220) to designate original works of art is apt to stir up a longing for something concrete – even if it is bought at the price of private ownership.

The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous *shattering* of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis [facism] and the renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements. Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the *liquidation* of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.

(Benjamin, 1969: 221)

Here Benjamin defines two points that have become fundamental to much recent work in Marxian popular culture criticism: (1) mechanical reproduction destroys traditional forms and their meanings; and (2) in "meet[ing] the beholder or listener in his own particular situation," the reproduction enables people actively to make their own cultural meanings. The elimination of "aura" is thus the basis for a radically optimistic definition of mass culture. Contemporary interpreters of Benjamin include Dick Hebdige, whose work on British youth subcultural groups demonstrates how such groups "shatter" traditional definitions of race and class and use music and dress to make new social meanings (Hebdige, 1979). Another contemporary exponent of Benjamin is John Fiske, who develops counter-cultural readings of shopping malls and supermarkets based on the notion of making meanings. Fiske sees all activities that run counter to the demands of production and consumption ("hanging-out in shopping malls") as instances where we as individuals control and define use. Fiske's point is that supermarket foods may be fetishized commodities, but when we take them home and work them into a meal – be it ordinary or special – we make daily-life cultural meanings (Fiske,

1989). The critic who best sums up this approach to mass culture, and who explicitly links his work to that of Benjamin, is Simon Frith, whose book on rock music, *Sound Effects*, portrays culture as a struggle over meanings. Paraphrasing Benjamin, Frith points out that once “the artistic authority of cultural goods had been broken, their significance had become a matter of dispute: the ideological meaning of mass culture was decided in the process of consumption, and the grasping of particular works by particular audiences was a political rather than a psychological event” (Frith, 1981: 57).

Some problems arise when Benjamin’s observations on the mechanical reproduction of art are brought forward into the present. Benjamin’s essay responds to a moment in the history of cultural production when film was still fairly new and the notion of a non-reproducible art had not as yet been eclipsed by the wholesale mass production of culture. By comparison with our own moment in history when the desire for music is met by radio, record, tape, or CD, and drama can mean up to two or three rental videos a night, Benjamin, in his *Moscow Diary* (1986), recounts a world where the theater was a regular component of the day’s activities and where shopping for a child’s gift meant purchasing a handcrafted toy. Do we as a culture have any sense of what a non-reproducible audio or visual work of art might be? When Benjamin says that film has the power to smash traditional art forms and their inscribed meanings, he documents a world that better remembers traditional forms and their traditional meanings.

By comparison, late twentieth-century capitalist culture is cluttered with an ever-expanding array of already reproduced works of art. In such a world, the struggle over meanings often defines cultural commodities in conflicting ways. A 1988 TV advertisement for the Las Vegas narcotics squad portrayed the “narks” in the dress and language of the youth gangs who are “traditionally” cast as dopers and dealers. The “narks” were shown to have a battering-ram equipped vehicle whose special audio system blasts rap music, also traditionally associated with street gangs, while it batters down people’s doors. Today, subcultural groups are indeed making meanings and smashing traditions, but so, too, are the forces of containment. Once meanings become detached from their inscription in traditionally defined class art, they, like the cultural objects themselves, can be used – defined and redefined in almost any way to serve almost any class interest. The critic engrossed in mass culture as a struggle over meanings runs the risk of being captured in a system of

ricocheting – sometimes revolutionary and sometimes recuperated meanings. Such a view of society and such an approach to culture may not be in a position fully to grasp contradiction. While it articulates the liberatory potential of cultural practice, it may stop short with a reading of culture that cannot escape its own description of resistance and recuperation. This is because the concept of making and struggling over meanings is not primarily based on an understanding of the commodity form. It assumes the commodity as an unavoidable fact of mass culture, but does not question the consequences of fetishism on the meanings made.

The Marxian account of commodity fetishism does not represent a negation of use value. Rather, it demonstrates that use value is dialectically referred to in our fetishized objects of consumption, just as all of mass culture is haunted by the desire for non-alienated social relations. This mass culture cannot fulfill, even while its utopian possibility sustains daily life. The essays in this book are aimed at revealing some of the ways we do indeed recover use value in daily-life social practice, use value that largely goes unrecognized because, living in a world that tends toward homogenization, we are ill-equipped to think dialectically and have very few models that exemplify contradiction of the sort Adorno defines. Nevertheless, the entire system of capitalism is predicated on the production of use values, just as it is motivated by exchange value. In Adorno’s terms, “the utopia [promised by the realization of use value] extends to the sworn enemies of its realization” (Adorno, 1973: 11). Use value exists in all of its negations. It is undeniable, even while it is denied realization. The great problem that occurs when we contemplate how use value might be made visible is that once we make it accessible to critical discourse we risk transforming it into another reified object for consumption. Adorno’s reluctance to flesh out the category of non-identity may well stem from his recognition that to do so he would either risk “relinquishing the otherness in dialectics” (Adorno, 1973: 375) or he would end up positing something so transcendent as to become solid and “arrest dialectics” (Adorno, 1973: 375) entirely.

Nevertheless, contemporary mass culture yearns for the recovery of use value. Nowhere is such yearning more explicit than in the historical theme park. Some, like Mystic Seaport in Connecticut or Calico Ghost Town in California, are more commercially oriented than others, such as Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts. All occupy authentic historical sites that have been refurbished and opened to the public as private or state-run tourist attractions. Historical theme

parks have aspects of the theater, the museum, and the amusement park without wholly replicating any of these. They put the late twentieth-century visitor into the re-created daily-life context of a 100-year-old town, a 200-year-old village, or a 300-year-old fort. Tourists wearing T-shirts and shorts, carrying cameras and pushing baby strollers, share a cobble-stone or packed-earth road with the park's costume-clad employee hosts, whose dress meticulously replicates all the social strata of the park's historical referent. In the historical theme park, "You are there," you are "in" history in a far more real and tangible way than was ever possible in the early 1960s TV dramatization that took this phrase for its title.

The visitor to a historical theme park is free to wander in and out of the site's various buildings with no more than a map or a schedule of events as a programmatic guide. Throughout the park – in its schoolhouse, forge, or ship's store – the material culture is rarely displayed as it would be in a museum; rather, it is performed. At Mystic Seaport, there are cooperers, smiths, caulkers – all of them plying their trades. While making their wares, the tradespeople explain the process and the use of their goods to the tourists. In this, the costumed role-players necessarily betray the authenticity of the historical experience as their pedagogical function requires them to explain rather than theatrically enact what might have been daily-life conversations.

The growing number and popularity of historical theme parks today testifies to a strong curiosity about and attraction to societies where the production and exchange of useful objects was the tangible basis for the way people defined themselves in community with others. In such a society, the objects of daily life were the bearers of a particular tradesman's care and craft. The same could be said of the implements and skills that defined women's domestic labor. The historical theme park allows the visitor fully to imagine what it might have been like to live in a culture where use values more directly shaped lives and relationships than they appear to do in late twentieth-century capitalism. This does not occur in a traditional museum, where the visitor might find all the same objects that exist in a particular historical theme park. Objects in a museum do not suggest use values even though they may readily be perceived as useful. Everything from Native American bone needles to colonial spinning wheels is defined, by the very nature of the museum, as an artifact: an object severed from its historical context, whose only current purpose is to be collected, studied, preserved, and displayed.

The artifact underscores the visitor's role as spectator rather than participant; someone wholly isolated from the social and historical context that produced the object and able to apprehend it only as a curiosity.

I would argue that this is not the case when, during the process of putting in a garden or rummaging through an abandoned shed, we turn up a horseshoe or some other piece of long disused farm machinery. The discovery of a historical object during the course of our own daily-life activities, defines us as something more than spectators. We might be tempted to compare our world and the sort of activities we perform with the imagined world of the object when it was in use. The question is whether such musing inevitably slides into nostalgia. Many of us will find Adorno's flat declaration that "The right to nostalgia cannot be validated" (Adorno, 1982: 109) much easier to affirm than it is to achieve. Nevertheless, those instances when we actively come upon the past are better able to produce critical rupture with the present than is possible when the past is merely displayed for us. The horseshoe that we turn up, that abruptly into the normalcy of digging in a garden, is very different from a horseshoe mounted on a wall and perceived as a decorative object. While every encounter with the past runs the risk of recuperation, those moments when we use the past to engage with the present have the power to escape nostalgia.

A trip to a historical theme park is never a wholly nostalgic experience. This is because the visitor is not only a spectator, but a participant in communication with the role-players and in the recreation of the world of the past. The historical theme park may be likened to a stage play where the audience joins the actors on the stage. Indeed, this is how Walt Disney first defined the relationship between the visitors to Disneyland and the costumed role-playing employees who do everything to maintain his "magic kingdom," from sweeping the streets to selling the tickets and parading about disguised as Mickey or Pluto. The extensive portfolio handed out to employees at the original Disneyland in California dispenses with the notion of work and employees by renaming all jobs according to the language of theater and film. Most workers are designated as players; managerial people are stage managers and set directors. The recent opening of the Disney-MGM Studios Theme Park in Florida climaxes the transformation of labor into a commodity by incorporating the visitor consumer more fully into the spectacle of production. Here, the visitors are costumed and made up in order to join the paid



employee role-players in the recreation of TV dramas such as *I Love Lucy*. The Disney people call it “interactive entertainment.” What is interesting is the way this theme park problematizes the function and relationship of actor and audience; and with it, worker (producer) and consumer. But the impulse to think through these relationships creatively is foreclosed by the way the amusement park is not conceived as a site of production, but is felt instead to be a commodity itself. The labor of the paid employees and the unpaid labor of the consumers is wholly devoted to producing and maintaining the park as a simulacrum of Hollywood in the 1940s, complete with palm trees, the Brown Derby Restaurant, and Chinese Theater.

What sets the historical theme park apart from Disneyland, even if the former includes rides on bygone buggies, boats, or railroads, is that the production of amusement is secondary to the production of the historical setting. In the historical theme park, work is a performance whose theatricality is obscured by the totality of the world being created. The only historical discrepancy is that the objects produced in the historical theme park will never be sold or used as they were originally intended. The candles may be hand-dipped to historical specification, but they will be sold in the park’s gift shop as Christmas presents for people who light their homes by other means.

Even if the image of historical totality disintegrates at the point of sales and use, the performance of work in historical theme parks may at times appear to transcend theatricality. A friend, Alexander Wilson, when researching a book on the construction of landscape in capitalism, told of a visit to Old Fort William in Thunder Bay, Canada. It was mid-December; a light snow was falling. Besides himself there was only one other visitor to the park. Nevertheless, there were some twenty costumed employees busily tarring canoes, repairing traps – doing all the things that the original residents of the fort did during the winter months to ensure production during the spring, summer, and fall. With only two paying visitors and twenty paid employees, the distinction between amusement park, theater, and the real production of eighteenth-century daily life is significantly blurred. In order for the historical theme park successfully to create history as “aura” – that is, imbued with time and place, as Benjamin defined it – it has to produce its use values all year round. A historical theme park that only functioned seasonally would not escape theatricality and amusement.

We need not go so far as Thunder Bay, or even Sturbridge Village, to witness the fully theatrical production of use value. Today’s

neighborhood supermarket is in many respects a mundane version of the historical theme park. Indeed, the supermarket is something of a postmodern museum of the third world, whose displays of exotic fruits and vegetables, such as breadfruit, cactus apples, passion fruit, star fruit, and horn melons often include museum-like inscriptions, such as this one from a San Diego supermarket: ‘Cherimoya, prized by the Incas, now grown in Santa Barbara.’ Where the supermarket most closely replicates the historical theme park is in its presentation of labor. The current practice in many supermarkets is to put a theatrical form of production on display, while the real work that goes into maintaining the store and serving the customers is either hidden from view or made to appear trivial because of deskilling. The work of pricing the merchandise, stocking the shelves, cleaning the store, and preparing the meat and produce for sale is accomplished by a largely invisible workforce, whose members labor behind the scene in a backroom warehouse, or at night after the store is closed. The work of managing, which includes decisions over purchases and personnel, is conducted by a number of upper-level employees whose photos sometimes decorate the store’s service counter, but who are seldom seen by shoppers. The work of checking, which in a bygone era would have anchored the customer’s apprehension of work in the supermarket, has today been greatly undermined by the installation of computerized scanners that weigh and price the commodities and often speak to the customer. The supermarket checker has been deskilled to the point of becoming a human robotoid extension of the checkout system.

As if to compensate for the marginalization and in some cases the erasure, of productive labor, the supermarket offers an array of theatrical labors, whose importance has more to do with the spectacle they create than the actual services they render. Most supermarkets today offer in-store bakeries, deli-counters, florist shops, and gourmet food sections. These are staffed by a corps of store personnel whose uniforms are more theatrical than practical. Often, the employees’ pert hats and aprons mimic the colors and patterns of the store’s interior decor, making the supermarket something of a stage for sales and the costumed employees the actors enacting service. If we take the supermarket as the place where we most commonly come into contact with the fetishized commodities of daily life, then all the strategies developed by the supermarket to render service personnel, to make it visible, redound in a theatricality whose effect is to create the appearance of use value in the commodities we buy. This is most



clearly the case when one of the costumed employees stands mid-aisle, blocking shopping cart traffic, and commences to operate one of the store's speciality machines. These include coffee grinders, orange and grapefruit juicers, peanut-butter mills, and pineapple corers. The employee who husks and cores pineapples to produce those Dole-like rings does so with a single thrust of a chrome-plated lever. The performance brings the image of work and a wholesome product into the shopping area.

This is an instance where labor is truly rendered as performance; and hence, a commodity – customers consume the spectacle of work whether or not they actually buy the pineapples. Such spectacle stands in the place of any reference to the hundreds of laborers who cultivated, harvested, packed, shipped, and marketed the pineapple. Their erasure from the commodity form is the basis of its fetishism. The impossibility of retrieving their labor in the supermarket setting condemns the attempt to create use values to spectacle.

There is one perspective on use value that I have not as yet brought into this discussion. It is by far the most radical, the most utopian, and the most difficult to imagine how it might be translated into daily-life social practice. I am referring to Jean Baudrillard's critique of political economy, and with it Marxian theory, which he sees as replicating the mode and logic of capitalism. According to Baudrillard, the construction of value under capitalism, which derives from the relationship of exchange value to use value, is homologous to the system of signification defined by Saussure, where meaning is born of the relationship of signifier to signified. This defines a more fundamental unity between consciousness and capitalism than obtains in Lukács' theory of reification. For Baudrillard, the logic of capitalism is the logic of meaning.

In such a system, there is no possibility of a redemptive notion of use value. Rather, it (like the concrete and the referent) is implicit in the structure of capitalist economics. For Baudrillard, use value cannot in any way oppose exchange value, undermine it, or offer an alternative to it; rather, use value ensures exchange value and underwrites its centrality. Hence, according to Baudrillard, any critique of consumer society that posits use value as its point of critical distanciation or its transcendent "other" (as my own efforts aim to do) is inevitably inscribed in the logic of capitalism. As Baudrillard flatly puts it, use value does not exist, except, perhaps, as capitalism's "alibi" (Baudrillard, 1988: 71).

In fact the use value of labor power does not exist any more than the use value of products or the autonomy of signified and referent. The same fiction reigns in the three orders of production, consumption, and signification. Exchange value is what makes the use value of products appear as its anthropological horizon. The exchange value of labor power is what makes its use value, the concrete origin and end of the act of labor, appear as its "generic" alibi. This is the logic of signifiers which produces the "evidence" of the "reality" of the signified and the referent. In every way, exchange value makes concrete production, concrete consumption, and concrete signification appear only in distorted, abstract forms. But it foment the concrete as its ideological ectoplasm, its phantasm of origin and transcendence [*dépassement*]. In this sense need, use value, and the referent "do not exist." They are only concepts produced and projected into a generic dimension by the development of the very system of exchange value.

(Baudrillard, 1975: 30)

Baudrillard challenges us to think outside of value altogether. How might we begin to imagine a society devoted to the elimination of value? Baudrillard appeals to the work of the anthropologist, Marcel Mauss, whose elaboration of the gift (*"le don"*) in primitive society offers an alternative to societies based, like our own, on accumulation rather than dispersal. Central to Mauss' description and to Baudrillard's analysis is the annual potlatch ceremony practiced by the Kwakiutl Indians where accumulated wealth and possessions were not just redistributed, but wholly used up. Baudrillard sees the potlatch as the basis for reciprocal social relations, based on a form of exchange that destroys value. Baudrillard's term for such a social dynamic is "symbolic exchange," which he alludes to as the anti-form of capitalism, whose cursory and subtle manifestations might be glimpsed at unexpected moments even in consumer society. Baudrillard cites play, the spontaneous gift, destruction as pure loss, and symbolic reciprocity as examples of symbolic acts (Baudrillard, 1988: 93). As social forms, these are hardly fully realized in our daily lives. Many readers come away from Baudrillard's illusive descriptions of the symbolic dissatisfied at not finding more fully fleshed out images of alternative practices. Indeed, all of Baudrillard's examples of symbolic exchange present themselves as somewhat inaccessible to discursive elaboration. As Baudrillard allows us to imagine it, the

symbolic might erupt out of the economic fabric of capitalism as it does when workers initiate a wildcat strike; or it might trick us, like a *trompe-l'œil*, seduce us unawares, causing received cultural meanings to disintegrate. The oblique references to the symbolic that emerge in Baudrillard's writing bear a striking resemblance to the way Adorno presents the negative dialectic. We can not imagine what the negative dialectic would really look like as a social reality, nor can we grasp what our daily lives might be like if we fully participated in symbolic exchange. This is because capitalism is a totality. Both the negative dialectic and symbolic exchange are "elsewheres" (Baudrillard, 1988: 71) that cannot possibly be fully realized or apprehended in capitalism. Then, too, any attempt to render the symbolic concrete risks reification and the cancellation of its alterity.

What is clear is that today's so-called aberrant forms of consumption, which we might be tempted to interpret as negations of value, are, instead, affirmations of value. For instance, imagine a society whose dominant social form is anorexia. Would a society that absolutely denies all forms of consumption abolish value? According to Baudrillard's account of use value as the alibi of exchange value, the renunciation of consumption in a highly commodified society such as our own merely affirms the fact of consumption, as well as the power of temptation and revulsion associated with commodities. Unlike the potlatch, an anorectic society would not destroy accumulated value, rather it stands as firm testament to the dead weight of value. Unlike the community of Kwakiutl, whose social relationships are the expression of reciprocity, a society of anorectics exemplifies the extreme isolation of the individual, whose only, and overwhelmingly obsessive, relationship is to the rejected world of commodities.

What about a bulimic society? Would a society that consumes "to the max" finally use everything up and therefore eliminate value? By comparison to Baudrillard's definition of the potlatch where a community's wealth is used up in order to prevent accumulation, the cycle of bulimic engorgement, evacuation, engorgement merely demonstrates that the supply of commodities is never-ending and cannot ever be used up. In consumer society, bulimia is the antithesis and the negation of potlatch. Where potlatch disperses desire and enables gratification, bulimia is burdened by desire and the impossibility of ever attaining satisfaction. Bulimia does not destroy value, rather it flattens the distinction between exchange value and use value, by rendering all value equal to consumption.

As social forms, anorexia and bulimia are not "other" to capital-

ism. They may be labelled "consumption disorders" but they express the formal logic of capitalism. A radical theory of use value would resist the desire to render it concrete, and therefore readily imaginable and easily instituted. A facile notion of use value as a whole term conditions the impulse to imagine that either a bulimic or an anorectic society represents an anti-capitalist definition of use. Gayatri Spivak warns against similarly simplistic conceptualizations of use value when she states that students who claim they "read literature for pleasure rather than interpretation" or academics who take pride in their hands-on word processor production techniques are merely fulfilling romantic notions about use value as having something to do with handicrafts and barter (Spivak, 1987: 162). Spivak argues for a "discontinuous" theory (Spivak, 1987) of use value in keeping with Adorno's notion of the negative dialectics, and I would say Baudrillard's sense of symbolic exchange. Spivak sees use value as a "classic example of a deconstructive lever" (Spivak, 1987: 162). This means that it has the potential to undermine and transform the logic of capitalism, because, according to Spivak, it "is both outside and inside the system of value-determination. It is outside because it cannot be measured by the labor theory of value" (Spivak, 1987: 162) and because we can conceive of things being use values without their being accessible to economic exchange. However, use value is inside the system of value because there would be no possibility of exchange value without it. This makes use value an unstable category. It is never whole, or concrete. In it, "there is something left untranslated (not included in the system of value determination), which is its contradiction". This is what Spivak means when she defines use value as "discontinuous" and therefore capable of putting "the entire textual chain of value into question" (Spivak, 1987: 162).

I challenge the reader to resist reading prescriptive models of use value into the following essays.

## BACKGROUND SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

### The dialectics of use value

In *Capital*, volume I, parts I and II, Karl Marx defines the commodity form, commodity fetishism, use value, exchange value, labor power, and the creation of surplus value. These concepts are essential to all considerations of value in capitalist society. Other examples of

dialectical criticism that bear on the question of value include the following.

Adorno, Theodor (1973) *Negative Dialectics*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Baudrillard, Jean (1975) *The Mirror of Production*, St Louis: Telos Press.

— (1981) *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, St Louis: Telos Press.

Goux, Jean-Joseph (1990) *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Spivak, Gayatri (1987) *In Other Worlds*, London: Methuen.

### Commodity fetishism

Studies in advertising lead the way in defining commodity fetishism in late twentieth-century capitalism.

Haug, Wolfgang (1986) *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Leiss, William, Kline, Stephen, and Jhally, Sut (1988) *Social Communication in Advertising*, London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall.

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Marchand, Roland (1985) *Advertising the American Dream*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Williamson, Judith (1978) *Decoding Advertisements*, London: Marion Boyars.