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Everybody's Happy Nowadays: A Depth Analysis of the Consumer Paradigm

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Introduction

"The relationship between the well and the TV monitor [in Ring 2] is that the monitor itself is the tube or connection to hell. In this sense there must also be another connection between the TV monitor and the unconscious to the well or the evil spirits."

 - Hideo Nakata , Director of *The Ring*[1]

    Modern consumption provides both a complex and worrying philosophical dilemma. Consumerism is defined diversely by a number of sources, but to save us time and a headache, I will broadly give my own. For the purposes of this paper consumerism represents the idea that the widespread production and use of goods is beneficial to both economy and culture. I know this seems a bit naive considering the multifaceted and complex dimensions consumerism seems to bear, but in order to fully understand the overall problem one must look at consumerism at its intent. Mass production combined with reciprocal consumption was a counter-irritant toward the unpredictability of the masses. The simple idea behind consumerism is that widespread product use and disuse could be in itself a form of population control. I argue that this has eventually led to ambiguous and discerning dynamics within contemporary culture. Like modern horror movies in which, cars (*Christine, Duel, Death Proof)*

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[1] Nakata, Hideo. Offscreen Interview with Hideo Nakata. Web, July 2000.

televisions (*Poltergeist, The Ring, Scary Movie)*, and other prevalent consumer goods become a conduit for sinister and demonic forces, I wish to similarly complicate the way we see the legacy of consumerism in general. Many would argue that they exhibit agency and autonomy within their consumptive habits, but a deeper look at the nature and perversity of these relationships shows a phenomena wholly troubling. I hope to prove that consumerism is an invasive and bizarre phenomena that inhabits primarily our unconscious or unwanted selves. Unlike the positivistic economic theory, as proposed by consumer advocates, I would like to argue that mass consumption describes a serious maladaptation of the way we think and behave. In this paper I wish to prove a number of things, but above all I would like to engender within the reader healthy degrees of dissatisfaction and unease with our current understanding of the consumer paradigm. Anti-consumer rhetoric targets corporate and political entities as responsible for consumerism's misuse. Conversely pro-consumer discourse holds mass consumption abstractly responsible for everything beneficial about modern society. Unlike these two claims I wish to look consumption purely symptomatically, seeing precisely the cultural pathologies at fault, and the eventual appearance of the illness in our lives and environment. The psychological impact of mass product proliferation, and the structural model of consumer outreach, fundamentally altered the way societies appeared. I mean this in a very literal sense, that our visual environments altered beneath the spectre of consumer dominance, and in a similar way so did our psyches; in other words a corresponsive dynamic between our complex desires and thoughts and the expression of those impulses in our culture. The United States represents something unique as an iconic consumer culture, a society built around the celebration and exaggeration of consumption. The questions I hope to address are, what happens

when we consume, what does it mean to be a consumer, and what is a consumer culture? I will look at these problematics from my own philosophical perspective, synthesizing notions from psychology, events from history, and several analytical affronts of consumerism in general.

In the first chapter I hope to create a general discomfort within the reader concerning the modern rhetoric around consumerism. I begin the chapter with a look at the unsatisfactory state of the pro/anti consumer camps. Ethical consumers make an interesting case because they seem thoroughly aware of the culpability that we ourselves have within mass consumption. Additionally, the "moral purchaser" brings forward the issue of mass consumption's highly destructive potential toward ecological security and human rights. The reason ethical consumers fall short of a true confrontation of modern consumption is due: firstly to a brilliant move by consumer advertising to imitate ethical products, and second to the sheer penetrative ability of consumer culture to subvert your awareness and mores. Ethical consumption mainly combats consumerism through the spread of information regarding which products are ethical or unethical, conversely consumer advertisement obscures their productive apparatus from the consumer whilst claiming that they too are ethical. Because of this imitation game many studies find people thinking they purchase ethically, whilst in fact not meeting the official Ethical consumption standard. In truth a paltry fraction of today's market is actually dedicated to ethically qualified products. Another important obstruction to ethical consumption is that categories of ecology or human rights do not sufficiently describe the total pervasion of consumerism. If we only reformed the ecological and political externalities of consumer culture we would be left with plenty of complications still innate in consumptive relationships. For one there is the spread of

media and informational technologies which are consumed at unprecedented rates from a variety of gadgets; within these we find that truth itself has been consumerized in the form of news-bites, digital "notifications", and the general irreference of government press releases. Like the consumer advocate, who sees all of modern technology as the progeny of consumerism, any critique of modern consumption must do the same, employ an "all-consuming" analytical scope per se. What we learn from popular voices, is simply that consumerism is ill-understood and powerfully adaptive. Combatting seems all the more impossible, and understanding it equally so. This is why the latter part of chapter 1 is dedicated to more nuanced scholarly approaches to the issue. This includes a derisive look at consumption by political theorist Benjamin Barber, and the anthropological work of Stephen H. Miles. Although far more conducive than much of popular rhetoric, I prove how these thinkers too only create more ambiguities than certainties concerning the study of consumption. In order to learn more about consumption a certain historical and psychological view is more in order. The overall point of this initial chapter is to show that there are powerful obscurative forces around the issue of consumption, making any simplistic curative or advocatory approach to the issue impossible. Whether we choose to utterly reject or celebrate modern consumption, we would be doing so with both incomplete and indecisive measures due to our basic lack of understanding concerning the phenomena at all.

In my second chapter, I begin to uncover my own understanding of modern consumption, its analytical roots, and initial ramifications. Several things are clear about the history of modern consumption. It was created in reaction to an economic crisis, and utilized very specific and subversive tennants to engender a solution to this crisis. In other words, theoretical discoveries coming out of psychoanalysis mainly in

Europe, were creating new ways of marketing here in the US. Several pioneers reinterpreted psychoanalytic theory into consumer research methods, understanding the true motives behind our purchasing behavior. I find this historical relationship to be highly significant in the understanding of consumer culture. Product proliferation relied on a particular methodological leaning, which was the preference toward dealing with the consumer's unconscious motives over their conscious ones. This ideological shift bore certain positive technological and economic results, but the cultural and psychological ramifications are somewhat harder to map. I would argue that our perceptive environment, as well as inner aspirational spaces, were manipulated and adapted under the spectre of mass consumption.

In chapter 3, I show how civilization itself conforms to consumptive tendencies. Borrowing the work of Leftist Philosopher Herbert Marcuse, I explore the idea of a consumer culture and the makeup of its citizenry. Marcuse's central idea is that society can be seen as varied mechanisms of population control, modeled primarily to meet and diffuse our unconscious impulses. To give a helpful example, schools are created to combat an inner propensity toward a comforting ignorance, education often being seen as a deterrent toward instinctual modes of behavior. Furthermore Marcuse conjectures specifically about a society modeled so perfectly after our desires so as to meet them overwhelmingly on a continuous basis. He believes that consumer culture is precisely such a phenomenal oversaturation, a society predicated on continuous use and waste. Following this societal framework I continue to try to unpack what the subject of such a society becomes and how consumerism adapts the experience of individuals through its mediation of the masses.

In my final chapter I wish to bring forth the most discerning element of modern consumption. This is to say, physical product consumption comes with coherently abstactive elements as well as unique behavioral externalities, but there is another mode of consumption that is both more streamlined and corruptive. I dedicate the last chapter to a study of media consumption, or the general mode of consuming information we often find ourselves in today. In this consumptive space we no longer need the physical product at all but are given the cathartic mechanisms directly via media. Here I argue the sinister elements of ordinary consumption are exacerbated dramatically, into wholly new terrors of manipulation and control. Media intersects the same vulnerabilities as consumer goods but with less friction and far greater potency. In order to make this clear I bring in the nuanced and irreverent thought of Media Scholar Marshall Mcluhan, and French Philosopher Jean Baudrillard. In conversation, their work allows for a nuanced understanding of the conceptual battlefield that modern consumption has erected around us.

If I were forced at this point in the introductions to outline my general import or intent within this paper I would do so thusly: Consumerism is hard to understand for very discerning reasons, and illuminating its elusive grasp on our lives has become analytically necessary. Mass consumption has invaded realms of internality, personality, and collectivity in ways that would only cause unease. To disregard such a potent and manifold corrosion is to allow its continued infestation of ourselves and mores. To put it bluntly, absent of any solution of reformative proposal, my aim is to diagnose, symptomatize and thoroughly incriminate the phenomena of consumption at large. The purpose of this is to engender a healthy curiosity and distrust of consumerism by the reader. One should leave this essay with few answers, infinitely

more questions, and a satisfying dose of directionless rage. Modern consumption represents a general affront and maladaptation to the structure of ourselves and society, thus a more nuanced depth analysis is needed to see the roots of the consumptive paradigm within the individual and across his environment.

Chapter 1: Heresiarchs Wanted

"As civilization has become more complex, and as the need for invisible government has been increasingly demonstrated, the technical means have been invented and developed by which opinion may be regimented." - Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*[2]

The reason we find discussions of consumerism today so dry, idiosyncratic, or easily misappropriated is because of the intangible and complex forces working within the phenomenon. Nevertheless, a look at some contemporary consumer rhetoric may aid in framing our own critique moving forward. I feel this will specifically help in two regards, first off it will base our analysis in some form of relevance, as it will show that there is actually a serious and widespread discussion currently going on concerning consumerism. Second, I think that a close look at much of contemporary consumer rhetoric allows for a healthy dissatisfaction with the discussion as a whole. Although prevalent opinions claim to assail or justify consumerism, more often than not, they further obscure or evade the more pressing issues. Before we get to more complex

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[2] Bernays, Edward. *Propaganda*. New York: Liveright, 1928.

forms of consumer culture, let us look simply at the way it is understood and affronted by individuals and affiliations today.

Ethical Consumerists serve brilliantly in highlighting modern consumption's ecological unsustainability, as well as casting the customer as a morally culpable agent in their purchasing habits. One Norwegian researcher, Diana Ivanova, found that household consumption is a massive contributor to global climate change. She explains in detail the difficulty she found incriminating just one specific contributant, claiming that consumption as a whole leads inevitably to the disrepair of the environment.[3] Within her acclaimed study, through exacting and illuminating statistics, Ivanova reveals precisely how much damage consumers contribute to ecological deterioration, ("more than 60% of global GHG emissions and between 50% and 80% of total resource use"). I find this to be very intriguing for a specific reason: Ivanova's curiosity is surrounding culpability of the individual/household, how we ourselves or as independent units contribute directly to the destruction of an immense and shared natural world. She of course admits that consumption is not as simple as people being careless or immoral in their everyday activities, and continues to describe the numerous and often deceptive mechanisms overarching personal consumption within her study. She highlights specifically the disparities between developed and developing nations as evidential of these hidden externalities within consumptive societies:

> [T]hrough their consumption, Dutch households use about 14 times more land than the area of their country. It is not just the Dutch … The displacement of impacts and differences in consumption standard between countries point to the question of social sustainability. It is rather clear that we do not share the

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[3] Environmental Impact Assessment of Household Consumption Diana Ivanova, Konstantin Stadler, Kjartan Steen-Olsen, Richard Wood, Gibran Vita, Arnold Tukker, and Edgar G. Hertwich

planet's resources equally. Developing countries are often burdened with the environmental consequences of demand from developed nations. And while we all deserve to live equally well, the consumption levels of the developed world are clearly unsustainable.[4]

Here we see that the mode of consumption one finds themselves in will be unique to their social status and economic surroundings. If one lives in an export economy, they may have wholly unique productive habits versus their consumptive ones, as their economy serves to satiate another economy's consumer base whilst providing separate domestic goods for their own. Often, developing nations that produce goods merely to export them, will have a substantially larger carbon footprint than their foreign patrons whilst producing, yet create little to no pollution in their own consumptive capacities. The issue is that in common between producer and consumer is the same structural apparatus, the multinational corporate entities that are in truth responsible for the greater part of the damage to the environment. Ivanova explains, "[g]lobal supply chains are rather complex and much of the environmental impacts of consumption is embodied in the production and distribution of products. Such impacts come with little visibility from the consumer side, while they certainly are significant. About four fifths of GHG emissions associated with household consumption occur in the supply chains of products globally."[5] In other words, most of the harm being done is being obscured from the consumer, allowing him to consume in peace. Meanwhile industrial corporate entities produce grotesquely large amounts of pollution under the guise of our needs. One has to wonder how Ivanova herself copes with her own ecological impact? Her answer is simply ethical consumption. She claims, "I am trying to walk the talk myself. I

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

bike to work and buy most of my clothes second-hand. I don't eat meat and eat little dairy and eggs."[6] So we see here that Ivanova has been able to reform her consumptive habits. After discovering the substantial damage being done by both household consumers and consumer supply chains alike, her answer was to withdraw herself from more popular modes of consumption, hoping that at least that she herself can be relieved of culpability. One begins to wonder if this indeed is all the ethical consumer achieves, a blinding and passable absolution of themselves whilst their opponent carries on the destruction of their surroundings. Nevertheless, Ivanova's study is important because it begins to unravel the deceptive superstructures enshrouding consumer habits.

What is interesting about ethical consumption is its structural similarity to the very corrupted forms of consumerism it opposes. So striking is this similarity, we often see arguments that corporations are misusing notions of ethical consumption in order to further the selfsame destructive market, but under a more palatable name. First let us look at The Guardian's eco-consumer manifesto, and see where it begins to blur in its likeness to other corporate simulacra. Their authorless declaration of moral purchasing, states quite clearly that "[b]eing an ethical consumer means buying products which were ethically produced and/or which are not harmful to the environment and society."[7] They make it even easier by telling you specifically, "[p]roducts which fall into the ethical category include organic produce, fair trade goods, energy-efficient light bulbs, electricity from renewable energy, recycled paper and wood products with Forest Stewardship Council approval."[8] And if new more complicated products are to arise,

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[6] Ibid.

[7] "Ethical Consumerism." *The Guardian*. February 21, 2001.

[8] Ibid.

"[p]ressure groups regularly flag up companies of concern and the Ethical Consumer Research Association publishes details in its magazine,"[9] Thus affiliations, publications, and associations are erected around the issue in order to ensure that the movement has proper support and structure within the minds of their members. The ironic part is that this very structure of public control is the same phenomenon that Ethical Consumption claims to confront, but on an unimaginably larger scale. This is why today we see a continuous battle with what is known as "greenwashing", or the branding strategy of making your products appear ethical. Examples include, Poland Spring®, who produced bottles several centimeters slimmer called the "eco-sense",[10] hoping it could obfuscate the fact that they are polluting the earth with unimaginable quantities of non-degradable plastics. (#) Another personal favorite of mine, is the ACCCE (The American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity), which is essentially a goliath corporate fuel conglomerate which threw "clean" in its name because its destroying the atmosphere (#). Nevertheless the phrase "clean coal" is a popular and utterly meaningless distinction often made amongst companies still using the wholly unsustainable fuel.[11] These examples are so pervasive that its oft hard to find a product without its necessary charadical display of ethics. This is why the Guardian must use referentially other publications and affiliations in their manifesto just because of the plethora of likenesses out there to deceive us. To help make this clear, consider the Guardian's final and morbid point in their Ethical Consumer manifesto: "[a] recent report from the Co-operative Bank showed a third of UK consumers claiming to be concerned about ethical consumption, while only 3% of the UK market is devoted to the

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Kenny Frankel. "'Eco-Friendly' Products: True Green or Simply Greenwashing?" *Green Blizzard* (blog), July 20, 2011. http://greenblizzard.com/2011/07/20/eco-friendly-products-greenwashing/.

[11] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/feb/26/greenwash-clean-coal

production of ethical goods."[12] So how do we understand this discrepancy, the idea that nearly half of the population may think they are behaving ethically when in truth the ability to do so is quite rare? My answer is that whilst much of ethical consumer groups try to promote awareness about purchasing morally and awarely, a far greater portion of discursive space is being used to subvert this awareness. Necessary in this subversion are certain elements of fantasy, delusion, and abstraction, explaining why so many believe themselves to be consuming ethically whilst they are not. Think back to Ivanova's claim that even though she is doing her best, her own efforts only makeup a minority of the actual mechanisms involved. In the same way, but ideologically, as much as we seem to try and think a certain way, our behavior is constricted beyond those wishes and often by untraceable mechanisms. This is why consumption seems to be such a complex and deceptive process for the person trying to withdraw themselves from unethical producers. Before explaining further about the obscurities within consumption that eco-consumers contend with, let us look at the advocates of modern consumption.

Advocates of consumerism see the situation quite differently. In the now notorious article by Mises Institute chairman and founder Llewelyn J. Rockwell, "In Defense of Consumerism", he says plainly how he sees the ethical dilemma. He states, "[p]eople claim that they are so inundated with techno-advances that they don't want anymore... we really don't mean it. No one wants to be denied web access, and we want it faster and better with more variety. We want to download songs, movies, and treatises on every subject. No amount of information is too much when it is something specific we seek."[13] What is interesting here is that he is not talking about, "organic produce, fair

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[12] "Ethical Consumerism." *The Guardian*. February 21, 2001.
[13] Rockwell, Llewellyin J. "In Defense of Consumerism." *Mises Daily*, May 18, 2006.

trade goods, energy-efficient light bulbs", for him the discursive war over consumerism spreads over informational as well as household objects. He does not stop there, he insists, "[w]e want better heating and cooling in our homes and businesses. We want more varieties of food, wine, cleaning products, toothpaste, and razors. We want access to a full range of styles in our home furnishing. If something is broken, we want the materials made available to repair it. We want fresh flowers, fresh fish, fresh bread, and new cars with more features. We want overnight delivery, good tech support, and the newest fashions from all over the world."[14] He thinks that these aspirational factors are universal and that any claim to decry them is delusional and degenerate. Rockwell's main point is that, "if by 'consume' we meant to purchase products and services with our own money in order to improve the human condition, who can't help but plead guilty?"[15] The obvious response is that it is wholly not the improvement of any human condition at all, it is in fact corroding our very notions of humanity and reality as a whole. Rockwell argues that nevertheless "who is to say for sure what is a need as versus a mere want? A dictator who knows all? How can we know that his desires will accord with my needs and yours?" For Rockwell it is not the "Ethical Consumer Research Association" that would tell him how to consume but only a tyrant. Here we see that ethical consumerism fails to reform those bent on free enterprise, individuals who value total consumptive liberty above even ecological security and notions of morality. We also see that Rockwell envisions a darker agenda in initiatives like ethical consumption, one of foolish anti-establishment retrogression. In other words, opponents of ethical consumers will assert that they are really looking out of ignorance or ill-will to turn back the clock on human advancement. In reality, the ethical

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

consumer, such as Ivanova and the reader's of the Guardian, confront consumer culture primarily through meticulous research, thoughtful self-discipline, and informational counter-tactics (identifying green-washers, publishing helpful guidelines). They do this in the hopes of swaying public opinion, eventually reforming both our consumptive habits as well as the global supply chains feeding them. Their opponents seem to be having an entirely different conversation, obscuring global supply chains and moral culpability alike, Rockwellians ask us to think of consumption in all of its miraculous tendrils, as an all-consuming positivistic phenomena. These consumer advocates merely need to point out the bewitching ambience of the modern consumptive pseudo-paradise manifest in first world countries to lull the reader into an uncritical defeatist gloom. The reason his argument feels in a certain sese stronger than the ethical consumer's is due to the simple fact that he is taking consumption in all of its menacing iridescent conformity. Whether reading the paper online, or eating a hot dog in the street, you are paying due to the gods of consumer culture, eating certain apples, or avoiding certain vacation spots won't change that.

The reason I find Rockwell's analysis more helpful than The Guardian's is that I believe he is having the discussion in a more suitable discursive space. He regards consumerism as an issue of autonomy, agency, and overall quality of life, The Guardian promotes the fantasy that one is helping when they are not. If one is to properly confront the Rockwellian approach, one would need to discuss consumerism on his terms, as the uplifting of the human condition, as a celebration of liberty and technology. As he concludes, "the beauty of the market economy is that it gives everyone a choice. For those people who prefer outhouses to indoor plumbing, pulling their teeth to dentistry, and eating nuts from trees rather than buying a can of Planters

at Wal-Mart, they too have the right to choose that way of life. But don't let them say that they are against 'consumerism.' To live at all requires that we buy and sell. To be against commerce is to attack life itself." One English Sociologist, Steven H. Miles, went as far as to argue this very assertion, that consumerism was becoming a way of living. Before we get to his work though, let us look at what I find to be the greatest flaw in Rockwell's argument. The very positivistic reduction of consumer culture as progressive, advancing, and libertory, is where I find his argument to become overwhelmingly weak. Consider the counter-argument for a moment, the notion that consumerism is in fact a direct undermining of what we feel is noble, progressive, and valuable in modern society. It will become clear quickly how much easier of an argument this critical approach is than Rockwell's positivistic one. What we can take away from his work is merely that where we left off with ethical consumption is inevitably too narrow an analytical scope, to truly unpack consumerism a broad and more multi-faceted effort is in order.

Whereas Rockwell likes to frame consumerism as responsible for everything good about modern society, political theorist Benjamin Barber sees it as exactly the opposite. In his work, *Con$umed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole,* he illustrates how he sees consumerism as corrosive toward historically celebrated human values. For the most part he finds that consumerism directly complicates the process of maturation, describing distinctly infantilization as central to consumer culture. Borrowing a psychological view of adulthood as being defined as the absence of childhood, he sets out a series of what he terms dyads to illustrate the difference between the two:

IMPULSE over DELIBERATION;

FEELING over REASON;

CERTAINTY over UNCERTAINTY;

DOGMATISM over DOUBT;

PLAY over WORK;

PICTURES over WORDS;

IMAGES over IDEAS;

PLEASURE over HAPPINESS;

INSTANT GRATIFICATION over LONG-TERM SATISFACTION;

EGOISM over ALTRUISM;

PRIVATE over PUBLIC;

NARCISSISM over SOCIABILITY;

ENTITLEMENT (RIGHT) over OBLIGATION (RESPONSIBILITY);

THE TIMELESS PRESENT OVER TEMPORALITY (NOW OVER PAST and FUTURE);

THE NEAR over THE REMOTE (INSTANTANEOUS OVER ENDURING);

PHYSICAL SEXUALITY over EROTIC LOVE;

INDIVIDUALISM OVER COMMUNITY;

IGNORANCE over KNOWLEDGE.[16]

These dyads are not only phenomena within contemporary culture, but according to Barber a set of specific tools for corporations in actually creating consumer demand. In other words, whereas these dyads seem wholly undesirable trends to most thinking individuals, ad campaigns use these as a guide in influencing and assailing unthinking masses. Barber is highlighting that today we not only find it appealing to engage with puerile products, but society itself becomes puerile in the product's image. His concern

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[16] Benjamin R. Barber. *Con$umed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.

is twofold, where did these dyadic preferences come from and how are we to cope with them? To him it seems quite clear that capitalism itself caters directly to the phenomena of consumerism, but is not so simply blamed. He states, "today the challenge is not capitalism per se but restoring the balance between capitalism and the many other independent life worlds it once helped establish but now, dependent on hyperconsumption, it threatens to destroy."[17] In other words, Barber argues that the phenomena has become so rapid and expansive so as to compose something wholly different than its earlier forms. In what he terms "hyperconsumption", what was once a phenomenally mappable movement has begun in a sense to consume its own referents and become confoundingly complex. Barber is alluding to the overwhelming structural pervasion and potency of consumer society today, and the power it has over our very forms of resistance to it. In response to the ethical consumerist he states, "in a cultural ethos as totalizing and insistent as that of push consumer capitalism today, true physical withdrawal is hardly an option."[18] Any withdrawal from consumption according to Barber will fail due to being too peripheral or small, often falling to corporations better at greenwashing their own products as mentioned before. To the advocate of consumerism as emblematic of human progress, he claims, "it may seem there is no alternative to rationalizing our new condition of consumer servitude as a gentler species of "private" freedom while democracy, commonwealth, and the liberty that is pluralism vanish over the receding historical horizon."[19] In other words, recalling Rockwell, it may very well seem that everything from the experiential to the collective domains are improving for humanity, but a closer look shows something quite

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

different. Pluralistic collective prosperity is something simply disallowed in the modern consumer paradigm. Barber's main overarching point is that the behavior and mentalities encouraged by consumption are simply too well catered to ignorance and oppression, all due to the boundless servility the phenomena has to our lesser selves. Those who choose to withdraw from consumerism aren't confronting anything, only enshrouding themselves in irrelevance; nevertheless, in the same way proponents of consumption silence themselves in the wholly anti-pluralistic and normalizing forces of consumer culture. In this way Barber problematizes the way in which we discuss consumption as a whole, begging for a new and more effective approach to the phenomena.

In his conclusion when finally prompted to explore solutions, Barber alludes to consumerism itself as being the only possible way out. Barber explains somewhat cryptically, "[t]he self-correcting dialectics of history, however, may offer ways to respond to infantilization, privatization, and civic schizophrenia—ways that arise out of the very contours that define their logic... Consumerism may have an autoimmune function that yields its own therapies."[20] Here is where I think Barber's analysis becomes most useful to our own within this paper. He fascinatingly alludes to the cure for consumerism most likely existing within the phenoma itself. Barber believes this because of the superior ability of those heavily intertwined within consumer culture to reverse engineer the very mechanisms in which they are enshrouded. He explains, "[t]his is to suggest that while a Jihadic martyr, even if he succeeds in blowing up a mall today, will probably fail to contain consumerism tomorrow, but his brand-addicted son, if he can figure out and come to terms with his addiction, may actually manage to do

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[20] Ibid.

so." This highlights another central argument to Barber's claim, one that we will very intentionally be leaving out of this paper. This is the defining of the phenomena of Islamic Extremism as a direct and opposing correlate to Western consumer culture. According to Barber the conspicuousness and decadence of the West has directly led to the erratic violence perpetrated by various Jihadist organizations. In reference to the anti-consumer aim of the Jihadist, he claims it is simply the wrong move to eliminate consumer establishments directly, as it will inevitably serve to reinforce consumer controls and further alienate anti-consumptive initiatives. Unlike the direct attack or withdrawal considered by Jihadists or Ethical consumers, Barber chooses to interact directly with the loyal consumer mass itself. He describes this process as somewhat of a therapy, one in which "[c}hanges will come from the inside out but also from the outside in." He sees a collaboration between internal change within the consumer and social movements propagated by corporate structures, both being necessary in order to bring about any noticeable change to the effects of consumption. He describes, "a civic therapy that restores the balance between private and public, giving our public civic selves renewed sovereignty over our private consumer selves and putting the fate of citizens ahead of the fate of markets." Although he admits that this positive change will inevitably need to be facilitated by those same said markets that propagated consumerism, he finds this to be the only way to reinvent such pervasive and powerful structures from the get go. I find that Barber's analysis ends only cryptically grasping at a solution, and mostly speaking more to the difficulty in overcoming consumerism in general. He states, "[t]he challenge is to demonstrate that as consumers we can know what we want and want only what we need; and that, with the rest of our lives we intend to live as lovers or artists or learners or citizens in a plethora of life worlds in which

consumption need play no role." Barber invisions a sort of consumer uprising, wherein reformists and advocates alike synthesize the impressively hypnotic power of consumption with our own more admirable personable aspirations. In other words if we want to consume in a more ethical and personable manner, we should be allowed to do so, what is in the way of achieving this is not our own unwillingness to withdraw from consumer habits, but the systematic propensity of consumer capitalism to undermine true desires in favor of false ones. By this I don't mean to establish a hierarchy of needs, but only wish to point out the character of more exaggerated and extraordinary needs in advanced consumer society. As Barber puts it, "consumer capitalism's paradox has been that those with real needs are without the means to enter the marketplace, leaving producers with no alternative to fabricating needs among those whose wants it has already oversupplied." In other words it can often seem that clean water for some people is far less attainable than specific film memorabilia is for others. Whether one, like Rockwell, would like to argue that this is merely part of something bigger and truly wonderful is not for me to say. The important thing is that Barber's solution struggles with just how impactful consumer culture is in just about every phase and area of the modern life. To this question I believe English Sociologist Steve H. Miles gives even more helpful elucidations.

In his fascinating modern study, *Consumerism: As a Way of Life,* Miles argues that a more critical and nuanced approach is needed for the study of consumption. He explains, "It is arguably the religion of the late twentieth century. It apparently pervades our everyday lives and structures our everyday experience... Our city centres are more remarkable as sites of consumption than they are as cultural centres; our

homes might be described as temples to the religion of consumerism…"[21] How do we react to this strong assertion? Miles claims we need a new way of approaching the study of consumerism in general. Whilst the difference between production and consumption seems pretty clear cut, consumerism must be treated as a process that is actually different. He explains, "I will suggest that a study of consumerism should actually attempt to come to terms with the complexities that lie behind the act of consumption. In effect, while consumption is an act, consumerism is a way of life."[22] Miles is borrowing this idea from a classical Marxist understanding. Marx recognizes, "the object of labour, that is the material artefact or product, as having a crucial role in the construction of people's lives, and, in turn, in their sense of personal well-being." Thus what one produces with their livelihood or labours plays a key role in how that life is understood and experienced. Marx explains that when labour is no longer done for yourself, the product no longer has "use-value", because you are not using it directly for your own purposes. Instead a product made to be sold at market, transforms from having "use-value" to having "exchange-value" because its value is then determined in its relation with other goods. This is when a product becomes a "commodity", something with value that is dependent on market forces not its innate qualities. For Marx this process vastly complicated the way an individual and his labour were treated, devaluing the worker and their products alike. Not to mention those who controlled that individual's labor had vastly greater rates of profits and social maneuverability, creating problematic and oppressional divisions within society.

Nevertheless, Miles explains we seem to exist in a realm wholly unprecedented to thinkers such as Marx. He explains, "the formative role of the commodity, are

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[21] Miles, Steven H. *Consumerism: As a Way of Life*. London: SAGE, 1998.
[22] Ibid.

apparently far more salient now than they were when he conducted his original work during the mid to late nineteenth century. Whereas Marx saw the worker's relationship to the means of production and thus to the commodity as a key influence on that person's life, the actual reception and consumption of that commodity has become proportionally more influential."[23] This is an extremely important idea moving forward, the notion that an answer to consumerism may lie in a deeper look at the role of the commodity within our experiences is.

Quoting a number of scholars of consumerism, some of whom we will look at later, Miles condenses their theoretical exploration as concerning one problem in particular. As he puts it: "do we as consumers design our own lifestyles or are those lifestyles designed for us?" He claims this issue of design becomes very prevalent in much of the discussions; the question of whether the consumer experience is truly creative or merely participatory. Unlike Barber who is concerned more with the actual state of global consumption and its social repercussions, Miles is moving toward the equally important ambiguities of consumer motives and their habitual tendencies. It will become more clear in the next two chapters why inner motives seem so directly intertwined with greater consumer and political structures. Miles offers a number of interesting example in his work, but does this in order simply to prove that consumerism has altered the way we live in a number of fascinating and unexpected ways. What he does not do to any consistent extent is explain precisely what commonalities and overarching themes appear present within mass consumption. The closest he does get to thematizing the phenomena as a whole, is in describing what he terms, "the consuming paradox". This paradox describes how, "consumerism appears to

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[23] Ibid.

offer us as individuals all sorts of opportunities and experiences, on the other hand, as consumers we appear to be directed down certain predetermined routes of consumption which ensure that consumerism is ultimately as constraining as it is enabling." Miles offers little in his own words on how precisely the descent into constraint occurs, but only moves on to describe different ways consumerism can be understood. To give him some credit he does highlight an issue oft overlooked by discussers of consumerism, which is "differential access." This issue refers to the proliferation of new technologies into more privileged populations, as well as the construction of these objects being undertaken with these select demographics in mind. In other words, accessibility, whether that refers to clean water or understanding an application interface is heavily privileged to those from certain areas of the world. Differential access has been primarily exacerbated by the prevalence of consumer culture, and has resulted in great difficulty in many developing communities.

Miles begins his conclusion with an ominous warning that consumerism can be understood as a potent historical and ideological force, whose repercussions we have only begun to understand. Soon after he makes a somewhat fascinating and yet familiar claim. He states, "[c]onsumerism has indeed tended to divert and actively dissuade people from opposition to dominant social orders, but it is not therefore in itself necessarily insubstantial or 'unauthentic'. People can invest their own personal meanings in what they consume, and consumption can be a significant source of creativity."[24] Thus we find that Miles has never been arguing about the existence of something irreparably wrong and detrimental, but something potentially constructive toward meaningful experiences. He says, "[r]egardless of how manufactured a

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[24] Ibid.

particular piece of music may be, there is always the possibility that an individual will find in that song particular lyrics that resonate with important aspects of his or her own individual life experience."[25] Miles claims this after dedicating an entire segment of his book to the alienating power of the walkman. What I am trying to make clear is that the identity and overall effect of consumerism seems all the more confounding and elusive at the conclusion of Miles's commentary. If anything his work only begins to draw attention to more ambiguity around the topic as a whole. Like Barber, Miles' work highlights a multitude of occasions that question the overall constructiveness of consumer culture, but prompted with creating a solution claims we can only utilize the very strengths of consumer culture in order to reverse its effects.

Still, if consumerism is so pervasive and significant why so much confusion in its definition? Consumerism is in one sense massively prevalent but in the other wholly obscured. We find that in one moment a mass released song could give us a personal and meaningful experience whilst the appliance we are using mires us in public alienation. This "double-edged sword" identity of consumer capitalism was already highlighted by Barber, but I want to direct attention more specifically to the paradoxical affinities consumerism has toward notions of desire and self. Found in consumerism is infantilization, primal desires, and rampant individualism; not found within consumer culture is the prevalence of sociability, civic duty, or laboriousness. I am trying to point out that although increasingly confounding, consumerism can evidently be highly thematic. I also would like to adopt Barber and Miles' inverted liberation of the consumer as a good model moving forward, the idea of reversing or celebrating consumption seems unconducive to a task of mapping the consumptive genome.

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[25] Ibid.

Rather, the reformation of consumerism is only achieved through and by the consumer, with appropriate action from corporate entities as well. This is not to say we need another critique or rejection of institutional capitalism, but rather as Barber explains, a cooperative effort in which both parties seek more genuine, altruistic, and personable consumer habits. The issue with this sort of view is that it omits, as Miles alludes to, those left behind by consumerism, those not developmentally flexible enough to partake in consumer culture at all. This issue I would argue is oft overlooked by consumer discourse, and seems to have great potential in studying those untainted or underprivileged by the existence of consumerism. Nevertheless, those who are affected by consumerism have a duty to themselves and society to become aware of its intricacies. Any reformist, advocatory, critical or analytic approach to the issue needs to understand the phenomena in all of its machinations.

Chapter 2: An Uncle's Gift

"The publicity that fills our public space the way ether was once thought to fill physical space is an homage to Edward Bernays. "[26]

- Stewart Justman, *Freud and his Nephew*

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[26] Justman, Stewart. "Freud and His Nephew." *Journal of Social Research* 61, no. 2 (1994).

As described in the previous chapter, there seems a great deal lacking in our understanding of such a manifest phenomena as mass consumption. The answer to this dilemma I think begins with a historical look at the specific ideas that shaped it. Personally, I find its root at Sigmund Freud, the man who helped lift the veil confounding the modern marketer. In 1921, Freud would send copies of his translated works to his nephew in New York in exchange for cuban cigars. Little did he know this would begin the ideological revolution that would in turn greatly influence people's consumptive habits.[27] Upstart PR man Edward Bernays, saw his uncles' ideas as an opportunity to create a new way of approaching the masses, a "depth approach" as many would call it thereafter. This technique prioritized the individuals inadvertent behavior over their conscious rational behavior. The core of Bernaysian ideas was not to meet the needs of his customers but to produce needs by appealing to the irrational instincts of the mass mind. The very structural technocratic government that so many fear today, was the project he had in mind; but rather than making us docile and subservient he merely wanted us to consume continuously. He strongly believed that in this world, minds are meant to be molded, and in many ways proved this with his incredible economic and political feats. Bernays would go on to work for several presidents, as well as a great deal of burgeoning billionaires, empowering many of the great corporate and political structures we see today. He changed the way industry thought, and did this by rethinking his uncle's work. Consumerism would certainly not exist in the form it does today were it not for the ideology purveyed by Bernay's and his cohorts. I propose a reading of those very works Freud sent his nephew in order to vicariously explore young Bernay's revolutionary epiphany.

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[27] Held, Lisa. "Psychoanalysis Shapes Consumer Culture." *Monitor on Psychology* 40, no. 11 (December 2009): 32–34.

We see a strong residue of Freud's *Group Psychology and The Analysis of The Ego,* in Bernays's influence. In the book, Freud outlines just how peculiar the psyche becomes when included as a member of a group. It seems that many features of the individual are altered or entirely obliterated when one begins to think with many. Bernays and his fellow PR men were dealing with a similar crisis at the turn of the century. Social critic, Vance Packard explains:

> One particularly disturbing difficulty was the apparent perversity and unpredictability of the prospective customers. Marketers repeatedly suffered grievous losses in campaigns that by all the rules of logic should have succeeded. The marketers felt increasing dissatisfaction with their conventional methods for sizing up a market. These methods were known in the trade most commonly as "nose-counting." Under nose-counting, statistic-minded interviewers would determine the percentage of married women, ages twenty-one to thirty-five, in Omaha, Nebraska, who said they wanted, and would buy, a three-legged stove if it cost no more than $249.[28]

The reason nose-counting didn't work was precisely because of what Freud was revealing in 1921. Nose-counting was based on the same idea as census or survey, perceiving the subject as both truthful and aware of their own motives. The truth was that as populations rose a new and more abstract way of understanding consumer's was necessary. Allow me to explain, today when we purchase a stove, we go to a local store and see a variety of options, making a decision based on abstract notions of pricing and product identity. At the turn of the century companies would send representatives to your door, asked precisely what you sought in a stove, and what sort of stove you

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[28] Packard, Vance. *The Hidden Persuaders*. Brooklyn, NY: IG Publishing, 1980.

currently had. With this information surveyors would return to their companies telling them precisely how many, and what variety the population would purchase. Leading up to the impending 1929 economic crash, producers were distraught with the failure of the simplistic nose-counting method of customer control. Products were produced en masse and simply left unpurchased. Something had to be done, whether it would be more extreme methods of understanding the consumer, or as Bernay's would discover, a means of manufacturing a new type of consumer. To better explain this transition let us look at Freud's identifications of the group psyche.

Freud's work begins with an outline of Gustave Le Bon's notion of the group mind. Le Bon's conception is that "[a] group is impulsive, changeable and irritable. It is led almost exclusively by the unconscious."[29] In other words nose-counting becomes utterly moot, because you are approaching the individual's conscious psyche with queries designed to map the behavior of a mass inherently driven by their unconscious. For some reason when we are purchasing items we do not think as the individual, we think as the horde, why we do so is rooted in our primal modes of thought. The reason new subsequent forms of advertisement, proliferated by Bernays's firms worked, was precisely because he understood that "[a] group is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence, it has no critical faculty, and the improbable does not exist for it. It thinks in images, which call one another up by association (just as they arise with individuals in states of free imagination), and whose agreement with reality is never checked by any reasonable function [Instanz]. The feelings of a group are always very simple and very exaggerated. So that a group knows neither doubt nor uncertainty."[30] Conversely

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[29] Freud, Sigmund. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. London: The International Psychoanalytical Press, 1922.
[30] Freud, Sigmund. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. London: The International Psychoanalytical Press, 1922.

the individual is imbued with self-preserving notions, a unique rationality, and even healthy degrees of egotism. What is precisely absent in unconscious modes of thought are the defensive roles of the ego in modifying our impulsive drives. When the door-to-door surveyor asks a customer why they get one product over another, that customer is using drastically different functions than when he is in the supermarket actually buying those products. Freud explains that unlike the individual, "[a] group... is subject to the truly magical power of words... They demand illusions, and cannot do without them. They constantly give what is unreal precedence over what is real; they are almost as strongly influenced by what is untrue as by what is true."[31] Marketing wasn't working because this was not the model with which industry marketed their products. Nose-counting was in fact logically grounded in the misconception of the customer mentality at its basis. Packard explains that this was due to three faulty assumptions:

1. you can't assume that people know what they want.

2. you can't assume people will tell you the truth about their wants and dislikes even if they know them.

3. It is dangerous to assume that people can be trusted to behave in a rational way.[32]

Thus we find that a marketing revolution was necessary, and a new "depth approach" was the obvious choice. One had to look at the group psyche as microcosmically descriptive of each individual's unconscious impulses, which Bernay's understood were the true drives behind consumptive habits. Bernay's explains. "In relation to industry, the ideal of the profession is to eliminate the waste and the friction that result when industry does things or makes things which its public does not want, or when the public

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31 Ibid.

32 Packard, Vance. *The Hidden Persuaders*. Brooklyn: IG Publishing, 1980.

does not understand what is being offered it."[33] This had to be something beyond simply utility or price, there had to be an intangible other factor within new products. He explained that they needed "to develop some sales appeal other than mere cheapness, to give the product, in the public mind, some other attraction, some idea that will modify the product slightly, some element of originality that will distinguish it from products in the same line. Thus, a manufacturer of typewriters paints his machines in cheerful hues."[34] A fellow "motivation analyst", Louis Chesnik, would open his Color Institute just on this premise. Using his psychoanalytic training, Chesnik would do countless studies just to see precisely how color affects the buyer's choice.[35] Bernays explained that marketers must use "principles familiar to the propagandist— the principles of gregariousness, obedience to authority, emulation, and the like."[36] In other words our horde instincts, vulnerability toward images, and the enigmatic phenomena that Le Bon called "contagion" or "emulation, and the like." Contagion represents the influence placed on each other in a group, the capability of an idea to spread and grow with great speed and power within large numbers of like-minded people. It is not to be mistaken with "suggestion" which Freud claims is the category within which contagion merely falls into. Bernays explains clearly the duty of the modern marketer:

> It is evident that the successful propagandist must understand the true motives and not be content to accept the reasons which men give for what they do. The new salesmanship has found it possible, by dealing with men in the mass

[33] Bernays, Edward. *Propaganda*. New York: Liveright, 1928.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Schwarzkopf, Stefan, and Rainer Gries. *Ernest Dichter and Motivation Research: New Perspectives on the Making of Post-War Consumer CUlture*. Hampshire: Palgrave & Macmillan, 2010.
[36] Freud, Sigmund. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. London: The International Psychoanalytical Press, 1922.

through their group formations, to set up psychological and emotional currents which will work for him. Instead of assaulting sales resistance by direct attack, he is interested in removing sales resistance. He creates circumstances which will swing emotional currents so as to make for purchaser demand. Mass production is only profitable if its rhythm can be maintained— that is, if it can continue to sell its product in steady or increasing quantity. The result is that while under the handicraft or small-unit system of production that was typical a century ago, demand created the supply; today supply must actively seek to create its corresponding demand. A single factory, potentially capable of supplying a whole continent with its particular product, cannot afford to wait until the public asks for its product; it must maintain constant touch, through advertising and propaganda, with the vast public in order to assure itself the continuous demand which alone will make its costly plant profitable. This entails a vastly more complex system of distribution than formerly. To make customers is the new problem. One must understand not only his own business—the manufacture of a particular product— but also the structure, the personality, the prejudices, of a potentially universal public.[37]

In other words, as a corporation you make your own products as well as you make your buyer base, these both go hand in hand. For Bernays' this was all an inevitable result of growing populations and advancing technology; now people had to be better understood so they could be controlled and led.

The large quote above is a portion in Bernays' infamous 1928 work, *Propaganda,* a book causing some to credit him as the "Father of PR (Public Relations." The book

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[37] Bernays, Edward. *Propaganda*. New York: Liveright, 1928.

outlines how the corresponding strength in institutional capabilities and mass unpredictability begs for a new discipline in understanding public opinion. He does not stop there though, for Bernays, "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society." For him the duty of Propaganda or PR is not just to study, but to sway the public. Here are some precise examples of how he did so: Bernays' *Lucky Strikes* campaigns were testament to just how powerful media and propaganda could be in the modern world. Bernays was asked by big tobacco to double its market by getting women to smoke. In the early 20th century, "[t]obacco, like alcohol, was associated with idleness, immorality, and sin."[38] It was dirty, rebellious, and individualistic, thus it was taboo for family men, women and young girls alike. Doctor Allan M. Brandt, explains, "[w]omen, widely viewed as the guardians of all things moral, played a central role in [the] early battle to extinguish the cigarette... a national movement was underway: some cities banned the sale of cigarettes, and many states considered restrictions on sales and advertising. The National Council for Women urged legislation banning sales to women."[39] The tobacco industry was facing a full on rebellion, and decided to bring in Bernays to "remove sales resistance." He was approached by George Washington Hill, president of the American Tobacco Company, in order to break the social division impeding the sale of cigarettes. Bernays decided to consult with A. A. Brill, celebrated Austrian-American Psychoanalyst based in New York. Brill told him simply, "that cigarettes were symbolic of male power."[40] Cigarettes represented the liberatory,

[38] Allan M. Brandt. 1996. Recruiting women smokers: the engineering of consent. Journal of the American Medical Women's Association 51(1-2): 63-66.
[39] Ibid
[40] Held, Lisa. "Psychonalaysis Shapes Consumer Culture." *Monitor on Psychology* 40, no. 11 (December 2009): 32–34.

individualistic, pleasure-seeking identity of the lone urban male. In this image was a certain transcendental spirit; something specific that Brill had said was that they were in a sense "torches of freedom." Bernays' then understood precisely wherein the leverage would be in his campaign, that cigarettes could be a symbol of liberation and social boundary transcendence. Brandt explains that even a decade before there had been certain confounding rises in the number of women smokers. Bernay's understood that, "the cigarette marked the erosion of certain expectations of strict boundaries between the worlds of men and women. The cigarette became a symbol of new roles and expectations of women's behavior."[41] His first move would be to change their slogan to "Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet,… [r]ecognizing that women's fashions were moving in the 1920s to a new emphasis on slimness, *Lucky Strike* ads now proclaimed their product as a tool for beauty and physical attraction."[42] The next move would be political, Psychoanalyst Lisa Held explains this event in detail,

> Equating smoking with challenging male power was the cornerstone of Lucky Strike's "Torches of Freedom" campaign, which debuted during New York's annual Easter Parade on April 1, 1929. Bernays had procured a list of debutantes from the editor of Vogue magazine and pitched the idea that they could contribute to the expansion of women's rights by lighting up cigarettes and smoking them in the most public of places—Fifth Avenue. The press was warned beforehand and couldn't resist the story. The "Torches of Freedom Parade" was covered not only by the local papers, but also by newspapers nationwide and internationally. Bernays was duly convinced that linking products to emotions

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[41] Allan M. Brandt. 1996. Recruiting women smokers: the engineering of consent. Journal of the American Medical Women's Association 51(1-2): 63-66.

[42] Ibid.

could cause people to behave irrationally. In reality, of course, women were no freer for having taken up smoking, but linking smoking to women's rights fostered a feeling of independence.[43]

Thus the market for cigarettes was broken open, and American Tobacco doubled its consumer base. In this event he had used the hypnotic power of celebrity and mass media to undermine a psychological resistance toward cigarettes. Smoking was no longer taboo but political, and its negative associations had been successfully subverted. Why does seeing such a public display influence so many? It seems to be the power of symbols that Freud mentioned earlier, the susceptibility of the group to spectacle and iconography. This nebulous shared experience altered not only the habits of millions, but also there very understanding of the culture they inhabited.

To understand his process in a more fundamental form let's look at how Bernays made eggs and bacon breakfast. He explained, "[s]uppose the old type of salesmanship, acting for a meat packer, was seeking to increase the sale of bacon. It would reiterate innumerable times in full-page advertisements: 'Eat more bacon. Eat bacon because it is cheap, because it is good, because it gives you reserve energy.'"[44] When Bernays was asked to do the same by the Beech Nut Company, he refused to stoop to such a simplistic level. He understood that people do not eat what the newspaper tells them to eat, people think they are better than that. Rather, "[t]he newer salesmanship, understanding the group structure of society and the principles of mass psychology, would first ask: 'Who is it that influences the eating habits of the public?.'"[45] This was the same question he asked when trying to understand precisely how to get women to smoke. Let us not think

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[43] Held, Lisa. "Psychonalaysis Shapes Consumer Culture." *Monitor on Psychology* 40, no. 11 (December 2009): 32–34.
[44] Bernays, Edward. *Propaganda*. New York: Liveright, 1928.
[45] Ibid.

what phrase, or image, or product will make people consume something, but rather ask what would indecisively remove the inner psychological resistance associated with consuming something. Bernays explains, "Beechnut Packing Company retained us to help them increase their bacon sales. The sales of Beechnut bacon were falling off because people had slimmed down their breakfast to a piece of toast, orange juice and a cup of coffee. Research showed that Beechnut bacon sales went up when people ate heavy breakfasts."[46] So what was Bernays, to do? He explains that "[t]he old propagandist based his work on the mechanistic reaction psychology then in vogue in our colleges. This assumed that the human mind was merely an individual machine, a system of nerves and nerve centers, reacting with mechanical regularity to stimuli, like a helpless, will-less automaton." Bernays thought differently, he imbued the consumer with a false rationality, one that was utterly human, and helplessly emotive. Bernays would enlist "Dr. A. L. Goldwater, to write to physicians throughout the country for their opinion on heavy versus light breakfast.... Six months after widespread publicity on the survey, Bartlett Arkell, president of Beechnut, announced that Beechnut sales of bacon had increased 'enormously in the past half year." The survey found that a hearty or heavy breakfast, what Beechnut quickly thereafter described as eggs and bacon, was the healthiest option after fasting through an entire night of sleep. The rest is history so to speak, and the only testament I find necessary is looking at the popularity of those two breakfast items today.

Looking back partially at Bernays' legacy we see smoking, bacon, and eggs, a trifecta of arterial clogging, diabetes, and carcinogen-heavy habits. Although these phenomena are precisely indicative of the relationship that our health and pleasure

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[46] Ibid.

take within the mode of consumption. To better explain this I will bring in another quite different example. Ernest Dichter, arguably Bernays' greatest successor, was asked to do precisely the opposite of what Bernays was tasked several decades earlier. A health-oriented organization hired him to stop people from smoking. The assignment seemed most confounding to the "motivation analyst," because it revealed to the consumer's pleasure driven inner desire's the unhealthy reality of their consumption. Psychically was a truly harrowing task, to subvert an unconscious drive for pleasure with the removal of an object so deeply associated with it. People wanted to do something that made them feel good, and weren't convinced, no matter the information provided, that doing so was in fact bad for them. Dichter had discovered amongst other things that, "holding a cigarette in your mouth is comparable to sucking at the nipples of a gigantic world breast and deriving from it the same type of satisfaction and tranquilizing effect that the baby does when being nursed."[47] The relationship that the person has with the cigarette is complex, the pleasures are hypnotic, Dichter remarks that if you gave a smoker a cigarette that produced no smoke he likely wouldn't smoke it. The effects of the deep breathing are relaxing as well, pacifying the smoker. The threat of the cigarette, its health risks, are unseen and unnoticed to most smokers, even feeding some of his more destructive inner drives. Dichter explains just how pivotal the consumption of the cigarette can be: "[a] cigarette permits you to close your lips around an object and thus in a way to batten down your hatches. When we are frightened, we usually have two types of possible reactions: either we let our mouth and everything else inside our body (including the production of diarrhea) hang loose, or we tighten

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[47] Schwarzkopf, Stefan, and Rainer Gries. *Ernest Dichter and Motivation Research: New Perspectives on the Making of Post-War Consumer CUlture*. Hampshire: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2010.

up— our mouth gets dry, we close all our openings. A cigarette permits us to do that in a socially acceptable form."[48] Thus we are concealing our fear, composing ourselves in a way that emulates a breast, deep breaths of air, and the instinctive tightening of the lips. Dichter explained to the health-oriented organizations that ads lambasting the smoker with life loss or horrible maladies only fail under the pressure of the consumers inner impulses. The sheer strength of the cigarettes' meanings and manifestations within the users mind make it a particularly stubborn habit to break. Dichter found success in a brilliantly subversive fashion, he simply replaced the negative ads with alternatively positive ones: "[t]he new ones show a smoker more realistically enjoying himself. The Cancer Society promises that if he wants to cut down on his smoking he could also enjoy the fresh, clean air if he can find it, and get more pleasure out of his food. etc." By placing the smoker in a relationship with his product that was realistic, and then showing him experiencing similar pleasures in his surroundings without the cigarette, the organization found unprecedented success. This showed precisely how the consumer mind functions, as one highly emotional, needy, and fickle. Rather than appealing to the rationality of the smoker, convincing him to stop, one must subvert one pleasure with others, finding alternative flows for the ceaseless compulsions.

It is important to note that "motivation analysts" believed that when we consumed we did not do so as our true selves. They relied on the notion that when one consumes, they do so as the person they esteem to be, or falsely ascribe themselves to be. For example, in 1960 Betty Crocker approached Ernest Dichter with a confounding problem. Consumers had surveyed that they would prefer quicker and easier recipes, but then when the new hyper-efficient cake mix came out people outright refused to

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[48] Ibid.

buy it.[49] Ernest Dichter responded to the problem with one of the new and more revolutionary techniques of the depth-marketing revolution, the "focus group." He discovered, through meticulous and highly-structured questioning, precisely why the customer said they desired easier recipes but in truth would not buy them, "It turned out female consumers wanted to retain a sense of direct experience, a sense of influence and individual skill, when preparing family food. Dichter therefore advised General Mills to allow housewives to add an egg – of course seen by Dichter as a symbol of a housewife's ability to be sexually active and to give birth to new life."[50] Once the egg had been added to the mixture, sales yet again kicked off, and even today we can see the redundant ingredient giving the baker a false sense of motherhood and fertility. Thus we find that our own self is abstracted in the consumptive relationship in a quite peculiar way. When consuming products we need them to evoke a personhood, and by adopting this personhood we consumer more willingly.

Economic historians, Stefan Schwarzkopf and Rainer Gries, remarked that it was Dichter who had discovered the dual ambiguities of the consumptive relationship, firstly as mentioned before, the bizarre relationship between self and consumer self, and secondly between the concrete product and its own interrelational and abstractified identity. They explain, "Dichter discovered the 'soul of the products', which was also structured as a space of complexes and taboos."[51] In other words it was Dichter who explained that individuals experienced products not in their concrete reality but as

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[49] Schwarzkopf, Stefan, and Rainer Gries. *Ernest Dichter and Motivation Research: New Perspectives on the Making of Post-War Consumer CUlture*. Hampshire: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2010.

[50] Edward Bernays. *Biography of an Idea: Founding Principles of Public Relations*. Open Road Media, 2015.

[51] Schwarzkopf, Stefan, and Rainer Gries. *Ernest Dichter and Motivation Research: New Perspectives on the Making of Post-War Consumer CUlture*. Hampshire: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2010.

entities with deep and often complex psychical meanings. His underlying point was that products existed in their concrete reality only partially, but mostly in complex psychical relationships that aren't often easy to unravel. For instance, he discovered that toothpaste in order to sell would need to be imbued with a certain "minty flavor" to promote the idea of "freshness", neither of which having any actual effect on dental hygiene. Similarly he concieved of adding more lather and lotion to soap in order to promote the tactile and erotic pleasures of bathing, again which is not in any way correlational to improved product functionality. What we can take away above all else from Dichter's legacy is that products are not very simple, they have complex inner dimensions, and even more complex external effects. In the world of advanced consumption, soap contains the soul of the succubus, toothpaste the essence of winter, and cigarettes the key to liberation, no product is simply its function.

In this point in history it is fair to say that consumerism enjoyed an explosive success ,especially within America. By 1978, "84 percent of all households in the US owned automobiles... ownership 97 percent [owned color TV], for refrigerators 98 percent and for washing machines 72 percent." A decade later, "87 percent of all urban American households owned automobiles... 98 percent owned color televisions (64 percent had two or more sets), 99 percent had refrigerators (15 percent had two or more), 94 percent had home audio systems, 76 percent had washing machines, 79 percent owned microwave ovens, and 77 percent had VCR decks."[52] As Baudrillard would come to explain, consumerism had won an uncanny victory over our very cultural terrain. Citizens of consumption lived in a wholly unprecedented environment, dictated by the engendering of unconscious flows, architected by the nebulous mindscape of the

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[52] Firat, A. Fuat. *Consuming People*. London: Routledge, 1998.

masses. I think it would be helpful here to take a moment and condense what we have learnt in this chapter.

Consumerism if viewed as a "way of living", is foundationally constructed on several simple understandings. For one we find that consumerism, although an economic theory, utilizes specific psychological understandings concerning groups and the individual in actual praxis. Whereas more abstract looks at the phenomena may result in it appearing as a simple and conducive free market policy, this merely obsuces the political and social mechanisms also at work. In making cigarettes slimmer or adding lather to soap we imbue products with complex identities and linkages correlating to hidden parts of ourselves. One can imagine a life structured around these notions, wherein the objects around you only serve as regulators of hidden compulsions. This would mean an existence more and more predicated on the use and waste of fleeting pleasures in place of more concrete and lengthy fulfillment. Contributing to this sort of existence is the way in which companies generally view their customers. The consumer is seen as: "bundles of daydreams, misty hidden yearnings, guilt complexes, irrational emotional blockages. We are image lovers given to impulsive and compulsive acts."[53] In other words we are psychologically vulnerable and erratic in the consumer paradigm, a mass unaware of its motives and highly vulnerable to obfuscating sway. The way we define desire and satisfaction is actively modified by the structures which externally regulate these impulses. In other words, a society structured on feeding compulsions will in turn modify the very structure of these compulsions. This will become clearer in the next chapter, as we begin to

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[53] Packard, Vance. *The Hidden Persuaders*. Brooklyn: IG Publishing, 1980.

speculate as to how a society built on the fragility of consumptive modes would in turn look.

Chapter 3: United States of Consumerism

"There is a very strong culture in America, and it is taking over Europe and the world. In material terms, three things define this culture: the television, the car, and the credit card. The television tells people what to buy and where to find it, the car gets them there, and the credit card allows them to buy it—even if they don't have the money now."

- A. Fuat Firat, Consuming People, 1979[54]

Consumption had won a clear war over our very cultural and experiential environment. So much so that people began asking if America's legacy would be as the world's first consumer culture. From here on I would like to look quite directly at the phenomena of consumerism itself, absent from any of its ideological roots or theoretical champions. Whereas incriminating firms or individuals for their crimes of consumer manipulation can be somewhat easy, consumerism's diverse and explosive development asks of us a far greater task. In other words from this point on it is the dis-embodied progeny of Bernays, Dichter and co. we will be affronting analytically. From the behavioral, to the cultural, and even the psychological level, consumerism has birthed unprecedented alterations to the very means by which we think and act. In

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[54] Firat, A. Fuat. *Consuming People*. London: Routledge, 1998.

order to make this sufficiently evident, let us first look at how French philosopher Herbert Marcuse describes culture as being born out of repressive functions. To put it differently, society generally restrains a primordial aspect of the populace, this sublimation is what producers the necessary labors that causes this society to function. My questions is simply what if this culture of necessary labors expired and in its place came one of frivolous consumption? Many features of such a culture would be dramatically altered and irreparaberalby adapted. Let us look simply at such a model of culture and society and see how the consumer paradigm begins to corrode its foundation.

In his captivating 1955 work, *Eros and Civilization,* Marcuse describes precisely how culture is a flexible and subversive mechanism of control in modern society. He states quite frankly, "[t]he methodical sacrifice of libido, its rigidly enforced deflection to socially useful activities and expressions, *is* culture."[55] In other words, "the history of man is the history of his repression. Culture constrains not only his societal but also his biological existence, not only parts of the human being but his instinctual structure itself."[56] In this way culture both replicates and produces the psychical controls in place over our inner desires. We can say prisons are structures born out of violent impulse and brothels the architecture of libidinal desire. In the same way we can see an iconic cultural item such as the Ten Commandments as merely replicated portrayals of our inner psychical controls. Those commandments, which tell not to steal, kill, or covet, can be seen as parallels to more pressing notions already present within our minds. Oppositional to what we might term a more traditional, historical, or "protestant", collective ethic, in which laboriousness, civic duty, and individual culpability reigned

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[55] Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.
[56] Ibid.

paramount, consumer culture was breeding a wholly new set of ideals merely feigning those self-same celebrated notions.

We can define the instinctual mode of man by the "pleasure principle", a theory first proposed by Freud in his 1921 essay, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In this work Freud claims that one's conception of reality is born out of the regulation of pleasure, and that one's notion of truth or reality continue to be modified by the management of unconscious pleasure drives throughout their life. In other words humans live in a continuous mode of coalescing impulsive pleasure drives, countering them with our notions of what is acceptable, mediating them with the demands of our conception of reality. Marcuse explains, "the reality principle enforces a change not only in the form and timing of pleasure but in its very substance. The adjustment of pleasure to the reality principle implies the subjugation and diversion of the destructive force of instinctual gratification, of its incompatibility with the established societal norms and relations, and, by that token, implies the transubstantiation of pleasure itself."[57] Marcuse is arguing that just as our propensity toward pleasure distinguishes the makeup of our reality, so does reality henceforth alter what we find pleasurable. Marcuse continues, "[w]ith the establishment of the reality principle, the human being which, under the pleasure principle, has been hardly more than a bundle of animal drives, has become an organized ego.... Under the reality principle, the human being develops the function of reason: it learns to "test" the reality, to distinguish between good and bad, true and false, useful and harmful." In this manner one's capabilities for pleasure are irrevocably altered and diversified almost endlessly. Gratification comes from the varied manipulation of your environment with an aim of prolonged,

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[57] Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.

permissible, and controlled doses of pleasure. Herein we find the prototype of modern society itself, a mechanism suited to producing the maximum allowed pleasure in accordance with the worlds necessary pains. The difference being that consumer culture obfuscates pain and discomfort continuously with its palatable artificial compliance, and produces a functioning society purely out of its necessitated industriousness . There is never a shortage of food, gadgets, or news, in a society bent on shoving these items down its peoples throats. By this I mean a society constructed on the purveyance and internalization of commodities, will modify in drastic and dramatic internal ways.

This is also where things get somewhat muddled; when mechanisms for sustainable gratification begin to dominate the minds of individuals en masse, they begin to morph our very notions of pleasure and reality that we began with. Marcuse highlights that when society is modeled so accurately to negotiate one's modes of pleasure and pain, it achieves a troubling and dysfunctional role in the life of the individual. He explains, "[i]n the affluent society, the authorities are hardly forced to justify their dominion. They deliver the goods; they satisfy the sexual and the aggressive energy of their subjects."[58] A society that no longer needs to cater to its citizens most basic needs, begins to involve itself with its populations more frivolous and complex needs, the type of needs we find in advanced consumption. In other words, "[a]s the affluence of society depends increasingly on the uninterrupted production and consumption of waste, gadgets, planned obsolescence, and means of destruction, the individuals have to be adapted to these requirements in more than the traditional ways." Society itself becomes a servo-mechanism for the frivolous whims of the mass

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[58] Ibid.

unconscious, in turn promoting absent-minded desire whilst adapting itself in its very image. This is somewhat like Barber's claim that consumer products are not only being sold on the basis of appealing to infantilism, but that the consumer base and society itself is becoming infantile in the image of those products. In an advanced consumer society the perpetual consumption and waste of goods represents something beyond more traditional modes of consumption. In modern consumption the act itself replaces more prevalent forms of self-control, but not just any self-disciplinary mechanisms, the very functions responsible for the organization of one's ego and rationality. Let me put this in other words, one would imagine that society is heavily reciprocal toward the people's desires. Marcuse asks, what occurs if this reciprocity is subjected to subliminal handling and general obscurification. In that sense a culture could be produced predicated on the processing of consumer goods, so long as these goods mediate our needs on some psychical level.

What Marcuse is making clear, is that we can no longer see consumerism as part of purely economic initiative. Instead we must consider the phenomena as something replicated on impulse control, and bent on maintaining these controls under any guise that is sufficient. If we are to view culture as the fluctuating structural replica of our psychical controls, we have to understand that something quite complex is underway. America in this sense achieved a sort of culture "that depends increasingly on the uninterrupted production and consumption of waste, gadgets, planned obsolescence, and means of destruction", a culture of consumption or consumer culture. For such a culture it is the consumptive mode itself that embodies cultural cathexis, or the pleasurable and liberatory release of the repressed. In our incessant purchasing and disposing we seem to negotiate and alleviate those primal drives, whose suppression

brought us this far in the first place. This is precisely the problem Marcuse leaves us with, the inevitable "return of the repressed" or the "symptom." In psychoanalysis this refers to the appearance of a repressed impulse in a remote and altered form, often a somatic symptom. For example, addiction can be a symptom of the repressed, as whatever emotional current brings about the need for the substance, can come from an inability to cope with the existence of certain mental content. In the same way consumer goods act as directly cathartic units able to dissipate these repressional knots into consolidated habits; liberating those uncomfortable notions within its obfuscation through consumption. Let me put this bluntly, have you ever "stress ate"? Or eaten something intentionally unhealthy in order to offset a completely unrelated mental discomfort? The consumer object is designed in order to function universally in this way, something sold as repressional cathexis. Here I find a proper symptomatology of consumer culture in order, and hope to do so by borrowing the work of marketing scholar A. Fuat Firat. He describes what he identifies as "patterns of consumption". These behavioral tendencies are directly indicted as results of consumer culture and aim to describe an overall malady attributed to product proliferation in general.

In his work *Consuming People,* Firat looks extensively at consumerism and the way it is understood specifically in our behavioral habits. Unlike Bernays or Rockwell, Firat isn't looking at the bright side of things, but rather the unprecedented and bizzare externalities embodied by modern life. He looks first at the "social relationship dimension... [which] defines a consumer's relationship with other consumers during the act of consumption and ranges from collective to individual consumption."[59] Then he explores, the "domain of availability dimension" which essentially entails a

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[59] Firat, A. Fuat. *Consuming People*. London: Routledge, 1998.

consumers access to a good, followed by the "human activity" and "level of participation" dimensions which concern the effort and involvement of the individual with his goods. He outlines these categories in order to reveal his theoretical framework concerning the greater ramifications of consumerism, what he calls the: "individual-private-alienated-passive pattern of consumption." Like Barber's dyads from chapter one, Firat is highlighting unique trends for which he holds America's consumer culture directly responsible.

Let us start by looking at the claim that consumption has made us individualistic. Firat claims, "[f]irst, families were drawn away from others, into their own homes, with the advent of radio, television, and air conditioning. Later, each family member largely withdrew from the rest of the family with multiple televisions, telephones, stereos, TV dinners, microwave ovens, which reinforce fast and individual cooking, and multiple cars that allowed each family member to commute separately to their jobs and workplaces."[60] Appliances replaced interpersonal relationships, they took one's attention away from others and into a realm of independence. Meals, for one, have become more and more of an independent act, with customs such as familial or communal meals becoming less and less of a norm. What has become far more popular are apps such as Grubhub or Ubereats, wherein most of the productive processes, and individuals involved, become obscured to the consumer.[61] One trend that is expected to start spreading is unmanned stores, wherein sensors merely charge the items you leave with directly to your bank account, without any human interaction.[62] I am not making any moral claims concerning these changes, I am just wholeheartedly agreeing that the

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[60] Ibid.
[61] http://www.businessinsider.com/dunkin-ceo-millennials-spark-rise-of-delivery-revolution-2017-9
[62] https://digiday.com/marketing/e-wallets-unmanned-stores-retailers-innovating-asia/

social dimension currently present in consumption can only result in more isolation and individualism.

Firat's second claim that consumption is becoming increasingly "private" is somewhat different than the individualism just described. He explains, "[t]he private extreme is reached when a single consumer owns or possesses a consumption item and allows no availability or access to anyone else. Consumption is public when the consumption item or process is available to all." In other words what of concern here is not how the product is used but how many individuals have access to it. He uses the example of a clothing item, lets say a pair of socks. Few would claim that they share a pair of socks with someone else, in most cases those socks would only be for their own use. If this is still unclear let me use a different example: consider a commute to work, one man takes the bus alone and the other drives his kids to school before heading to work in his car. Whilst one man is consuming as an individual publicly, the other consumes as a group privately. Trends in the US seem to be gearing toward a greater privacy in consumption, especially in a manner catered to the individual.

What of "alienation"? This refers to the "level of participation dimension" or in other words how much of an influence do you have in the process of consumption. Firat explains, "In the case where consumption revolves around a product, for example a television set, this dimension relates to how much a consumer has participated in the production and development of the features, programming, etc., of television. In the case where consumption revolves around an activity or a process, for example, visiting the Grand Canyon, this dimension relates to how much the consumer has directly determined the rules and procedures of the activity or process."[63] We can clearly see

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[63] Firat, A. Fuat. *Consuming People*. London: Routledge, 1998.

how this is similar yet different to the two former dimensions, this one refers specifically to the efforts of the individual within the process of consumption but also alludes to the isolation and privacy of the consumptive mode. Unlike the two former dimensions, this isolation occurs in a peculiar way, rather than a separation between two subjects, it's almost as if here the separation occurs between subject and self. Firat explains, "[t]he greater the direct contributions by consumers in the determination of products and activities consumed, the more participatory is their consumption. The less a consumer contributes to such determination the more alienated consumption becomes."[64] As you can probably guess by now, the trend today seems to be less and less participatory for the consumer. As Firat puts it, today for the most part the consumer is "largely a follower of instructions", and straying from these instructions can only result in disaster. For instance, try putting together IKEA furniture in your own way, creatively, and you will surely find that nothing will come of it but disarray. Almost every product these days comes with its manual, telling us precisely how it is used, and how it is not to be used, our input is simply unimportant in this regard. Thus we find that participation in the consumptive process can only be a frivolity, at its heart our creative input is utterly alienated in the age of mass consumerism.

The next, and eerily similar dimension is that of "human activity". Firat explains that this describes, "the level of combined human physical and mental activity during the act of consumption and ranges from passive to active consumption." He claims that passive consumption is typified by the "couch potato", he who is merely the receiver of information as a member of a greater audience, whilst remaining prone and distant. In the same way the process of making a meal has become more and more passive with

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[64] Firat, A. Fuat. *Consuming People*. London: Routledge, 1998.

profusion of microwaveable meals and delivery apps. Activities such as doing laundry or dishwashing now find themselves streamlined by appliances specific to that purpose. Passivity is not only a growing trend amongst consumers, but a tool used often by the advertiser, who remark how "easy" or "quick" to use their products are. Passivity though plays an interesting role with the other patterns, one can be passive yet quite public, say at a movie theater, or active and yet totally alienated say whilst following an aerobics video. As one can slowly come to see, Firat has thought out these categorizations quite specifically, and all combinatorially find their place within consumptive culture.

One has to ask, why these trends? Why not a collective-public-participatory-active consumptive trajectory in which we totally reverse these notions? Whether we agree with Firat's patterns or not, a deeper look at the consumptive relationship reveals the sort of idiosyncrasies that can be held responsible for unwanted behavior. Going back to the notion of the symptom, which Freud defines as, "a sign of, and a substitute for, an instinctual satisfaction which has remained in abeyance; it is a consequence of the process of repression," we see how Firat's patterns applies to this framework [65] In other words in stifling an inner desire, we are seeing this desires' appearance in an entirely different sphere of life, disguised as justifiable behavior, but in truth an externality of further repression. The difficulty here is that it is not abstractly an activity or experience being repressed, but the actual relationship with consumer products itself is highly symptomatic and repressional. What is it about our relationship with a product that facilitates such behaviors? In order to answer this question further, we need to understand further how the consumer conceives of his reality. If society is structured around our unconscious, facilitating

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[65] https://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/definitions/symptoms.html

behavioral models that satiate our desires whilst producing docile and functional populations, then a closer look at the relationship between consumers product is in order.

Contemporary French Philosopher Jean Baudrillard explains how a sort of perceptive suspension necessarily occurs in today's consumer reality. In order to describe the "consumer mentality", Baudrillard uses a fascinating case from social anthropology. When cargo planes started arriving at the polynesian islands, many natives who had never seen them before were truly bewildered. Some tribes had begun becoming obsessed with the idea of making one of these magical beasts land in their own village. This not only because of the plane's precious cargo but also the mystical element of the planes themselves, appearing along with equally confounding colonial forces. Many anthropologists observed their fascinating attempts to simulate the events of a plane landing; many Polynesians rigorously marked out landing strips, and spent sleepless nights keeping them illuminated. In their mind by recreating the events of the landing to best of their ability, the heavens would return the favor of a cargo plane. This particular mode of mythical or miraculous thought and behavior is iconic of consumer culture today. The beneficiary of the consumer miracle also "sets in place a whole array of sham objects, of characteristic signs of happiness, and then waits (waits desperately, a moralist would say) for happiness to alight."[66] In other words, like the natives erecting objects representing the occurrence of an event in hopes that it will actually occur, the consumer surrounds themselves with items representing the experience or emotion they desire. Baudrillard describes this as "a form of magical thinking; daily life is governed by a mentality based on miraculous thinking, a primitive mentality, in so far

[66] Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage, 1998.

as what has been defined as being based on a belief in the omnipotence of thoughts (though what we have in this case is a belief in the omnipotence of signs)." Here we see that our consumptive habits are ceremonial in nature, an attempted summoning of something inherently absent. Furthermore the consumptive mode employs a certain emphasis on the mind, and imbues it with a false ability to manipulate one's reality. Like the villagers hopelessly alighting their mock landings strips, we mythically alight our consumer objects with hopeless aspirations of our own.

We can go as far as to argue that when we consume we elicit a certain emotional or experiential phenomena that never arrives. Baudrillard explains how this is indeed different than the case of the polynesian native. With modern consumption there is some sort of arrival, a cargo plane does land, and in a sense is consumed. He states, "There is, admittedly, a difference between the Melanesian native and the viewer settling down in front of his TV set, turning the switch and waiting for images from the whole world to come down to him: the fact is that the images generally obey, whereas planes never condescend to land by magical command."[67] Here Baudrillard thinks consumerism finds a small victory. Just as much as its imaginary promises serve to entice the consumer, mass production does in fact deliver some sort of answer to those demands. Baudrillard explains, "once severed from its objective determinations, the profusion of goods is felt as a blessing of nature, as a manna, a gift from heaven." In this miraculous mode things become abstacted, products become divinations of false contentedness and shopping displays evoke mythical lands of plenty. Baudrillard is insistent that these are mentalities of consumption, one necessarily obscurative of the more concrete apparatus truly at work. So what do we receive with the product, if not a

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[67] Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage, 1998.

version of reality or an answer to our desires? Baudrillard answers this question somewhat obscuratively in his conclusion with his analysis of a 1930's film, *The Student of Prague.*

Lonely and impoverished in turn of the century Prague, a student becomes obsessed with the consumer phantasmagoria that surrounds him. His inability to partake becomes his reason for failures in love, work, and life at large. What is eerie about this student's experience is that being removed from consumer society allows him to perceive a certain abstract entity resembling the "motivation analysts" mentioned in the first chapter. He explains, that the student suddenly notices, that in this culture of public consumption "[s]omeone rules over that society and is pulling the strings. He can be seen manoeuvring the animals at will and regulating the movements of the hunters... He is the Devil." In this society the student feels there are merely those who feed and live like animals, and then those who live by hunting them. Baudrillard wishes to abstract these notions as indicative of consumer society. It is important to note the protagonist is consciously aware of societies imperfections, yet admonished by the fact that he cannot partake in their ignorance. Upon returning home, the student finds the Devil himself awaits him, and has a truly bizarre deal to offer him. Baudrillard explains that, "[i]n exchange for his image in the mirror, [the Devil] offers him a pile of gold. The deal is struck. The Devil peels the specular image from the mirror as though it were an etching or a sheet of carbon paper, rolls it up, puts it in his pocket, and leaves, in suitably obsequious and sardonic fashion." The student then goes on to be rich and consume blindly as he had always wanted. Meanwhile the Devil unleashes his own devious plan. He takes the student's mirror image and gives it life, it becomes three-dimensional, a perfect doppelganger to the student himself. Baudrillard explains,

as any mirror image would do, it began to follow the man ceaselessly. When the doppelganger was not harassing the man himself, he was being an embarrassment in the man's place in front of others. Faced now with this divine idiosyncrasy, the student was driven mad, and finally violently confronted his doppelganger. What follows is an incredibly melodramatic scene in which the man murders his mirror image, and thus himself, in a complex and inexplicable quarrel.

Baudrillard here begins to explain how this plot is indicative of the consumer paradigm today. He explains that, "The mirror image here symbolically represents the meaning of our acts... The transparency of our relation to the world is expressed rather well by the individual's unimpaired relation to his image in a mirror: the faithfulness of that reflection bears witness, to some degree, to a real reciprocity between the world and ourselves." Here Baudrillard is drawing attention to something elementary to consumption, the abstracted self. As mentioned in the last chapter many "motivation analysts" assumed that people shopped with an illusory notion of themselves. Baudrillard explains that in consumer proliferation a second sort of abstraction occurs, that in which one interposes that abstracted self into a greater symbolic order. Let me break this down further, when the student sells his image to the Devil, it is a metaphor for self-abstraction in modernity as a whole. Prior to him becoming wealthy and acquiring an erratic doppelganger, his mirror image was one in the same with himself, a perfect duality. In the same way pre-consumptive individuals can easily describe the relationship between their thoughts and behavior. When the student commodifies his own image, it becomes something shared, an object to be put into market. In other words the self is no longer your own, it is shared, in the sense that your own will and understanding are not the prime contributants to its makeup. As the student, how I

think of myself is now mediated by the devil and his pawn, as much as my own actions and intentions. Baudrillard explains that this is iconic of the way modern individuals relate to their products "from the moment they are produced, our works and our acts fall out of our grasp and are objectivized; they fall, literally, into the Devil's hands." He explains further, "[a]s soon as he has sold his image or, in other words, has sold a part of himself, the student is hounded to his death by it in real life. This translates the unvarnished truth of the process of alienation: nothing of what is alienated runs off into some neutral circuit, into an `external world' over against which we might be said to remain free" In other words when we commoditize highly fundamental notions such as pleasure, fulfillment, and self-awareness we are bound to see a backlash of some sort. Specifically to allow for these sort of self-abstractions is to be subservient to those abstractions from now on, as Baudrillard puts it, "[t]here is a part of us which gets away from us in this process, but we do not get away from it." Here Baudrillard returns to the symptom, as defined by the return of the repressed, but claims that consumerism works somewhat differently. Whereas repression stifles a desire in place of its satisfaction consumerism meets them with its own pseudo-satisfactions. As he puts it, "it is the body of Christ on the cross changing into a woman to obsess the monk who has taken a vow of chastity." Consumer products too have taken on the image of desire, but only in a testing falsehood. To sum up Baudrillard's point:

> We may, therefore, suggest that the age of consumption, being the historical culmination of the whole process of accelerated productivity under the sign of capital, is also the age of radical alienation. Commodity logic has become generalized and today governs not only labour processes and material products,

but the whole of culture, sexuality, and human relations, including even fantasies and individual drives. Everything is taken over by that logic, not only in the sense that all functions and needs are objectivized and manipulated in terms of profit, but in the deeper sense in which everything is spectacularized or, in other words, evoked, provoked and orchestrated into images, signs, consumable models.[68]

In other words the alienation here is different than the classical Marxist sense, it is not simply the separation of individual and their labours, but rather it is the general implant of fantasy between and throughout those processes. Whereas in the 19th century one's product could be commoditized at market rendering his labours alienating, today alienation occurs through the commoditization of meaning and concepts rather than physical products; our own image can be sold and transfigured according to the dominance of consumerism. This is to say even our own world view, knowledge, and beliefs are victim to consumptive sway, our false notion of self merely acts as the guide toward further more expansive delusions. The architects of these delusions are both one's own unconscious impulses and the greater cathectic structures built to mitigate and feed them. Here we see the necessary abstractive elements central to contemporary consumption. Nevertheless I feel one expositional step still necessary, a look specifically at media consumption and how it fascinatingly differs from the already confounding dynamic of consumer-product relations.

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[68] Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage, 1998.

Chapter 4: Uroboros Reality

"Through the use of media an image was projected in which people saw themselves held together, solving their life's problems through the benefit of commodities… These attempts to alter the popular idioms of communication and 'stimulate' behavior were clearly tied to a widespread program to shape a culture which responded to and communicated through advertising"

- Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness, 2005*[69]

As the previous chapter discussed, our very notions of reality are altered in the reformulation of what we find pleasurable, and in the efervescent modifications of consumer culture at large. In this chapter I want to make it clear that I see no consumptive exception for media technologies, there is no difference between reading the paper and buying a car. I would go as far as to argue that the dangers I allude to in this paper are best exemplified by the mode of media consumption. Today, the consumption of media is vastly more significant and concerning than any widespread physical product that's out. This is because media seems potently capable of altering our perceptions of reality, and shows incredible symbolic efficiency in penetrating the psyche. This will become clear later in the chapter, but first let us look somewhat broadly at the study of media in the 20th century. I first became enamored with the

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[69] Stewart Ewan. *Captains of Consciousness*. New York: Basic Books, 1976.

study of media and communications in my previous college, CUNY Brooklyn. There they have a celebrated Communications as well as TV and Radio program, in which I took several courses. Throughout my studies there was one thinker in particular who stood out as displaying powerful and clairvoyant literary finesse: Canadian philosopher and media studies pioneer Marshall Mcluhan. Born in Edmonton in 1911, Mcluhan is renowned for his fascinating and remarkably timely writings on modern media and its effect on society. Where his work helps us in our understanding of consumerism takes a bit of work, but will become clear quite quickly. Upon returning to Mcluhan's work after deciding on the topic of consumerism I saw the remarkable similarities between his rhetoric and that of Packard, Marcuse and Baudrillard. Mcluhan too claims that today the individual is in a constant battle to understand their surroundings. A process made all the more difficult by the proliferation of commercial interest and popular media within the public eye. For him, much of this has to do with the actual character of the media itself. Much like the consumer good, Mcluhan describes the media item in its correlation with our psychical depths, its propensity toward vulnerable emotions, and its greater infectious and subversive potential. I believe that Mcluhan's work in conversation with Baudrillard's specifically, provides a helpful description of media's role within consumerism.

Mcluhan's central idea was that the mediums themselves have a powerful impact on the information that they conveyed. He considers technological revolutions such as print photography, and wide-spread television ownership, as almost more significant than the supposed content they purvey. He begins his analysis specifically with news media in his fascinating early work, *The Mechanical Bride*, describing precisely how

advances in media make for unprecedented social events. His infamous example from a local newspaper:

> Chicago, April 21, 1950- (AP)- Two condemned - murderers saw themselves on television last night and a few hours later died in the electric chair... The doomed men... were filmed in death row yesterday afternoon. The film was then put on a 7 pm newsreel show and viewed by the men on a set loaned them by the warden.[70]

The complexity of this event is the dimensions in which it occurs. For Mcluhan he incorporates the mindless gaze of the reader and his paper as one dimension, the newsreel and the wardens viewing as another, and finally the prisoners and their dire reality as a third. Let us look first at the dimension of the reader. Mcluhan claims that, the front page of a newspaper perfectly describes "[the] common condition of industrial man..." one in which "... he lives amid a great flowering of technical and mechanical imagery of whose rich human symbolism he is mainly unconscious."[71] By these technical and mechanical imagery he means specifically the photo and text on the front page of your average newspaper. He claims that today even this simple arrangement serves to confound the conscious mind and interact primarily with one's hidden mind. In a somewhat bizarre metaphor Mcluhan claims, "[i]ndustrial man is not unlike the turtle that is quite blind to the beauty of the shell which it has grown on its back."[72] Here he means one of two things; he claims that it is our duty to study the peculiarities of our own shells as a metaphor for the modern condition and the individual within it; additionally he means us not to be "the man who would rather eat the turtle than admire the design on its back."[73] What is difficult about this metaphor is the premise

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[70] Mcluhan, Marshall. *The Mechanical Bride*. London: Duckworth Overlook, 2011.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.

that "industrial man" is both the turtle, and the man devouring a turtle, but the conclusion is simple: Mcluhan claims there are many individuals more intent on simply devouring the contents of mass media than admiring the intricacies of the phenomena aesthetically. This reminds us of the sort of mass infantilism we saw in the words of Bernay's, a man who worked closely with many major newspapers at the time Mcluhan was writing. Bernay's himself claimed already in 1921, that "it is only necessary to look under the surface of the newspaper for a hint as to propaganda's authority over public opinion."[74] He claimed that, "[p]age one of the New York Times on the day these paragraphs are written contains eight important news stories. Four of them, or one-half, are propaganda."[75] He was not just claiming this abstractly, Bernay's often worked closely with the New York Times, as we saw in the "Torches of Freedom" campaign. The truth was that we were being affronted unconsciously by these layouts, for the varied political and commercial interests of hidden parties.

What is fascinating about Mcluhan's analysis is he accepts wholly that a great portion of media may be used corruptly, and yet he still contests that our attention should be with the mediums themselves not the individuals curating and propagating them. Like so many dystopian sci-fi novels, Mcluhan believes that the very technical marvels that we are ensconcing ourselves within, bear their very own and often unpredictable will. In his 1964 breakthrough work, *Understanding Media*, he puts it quite plainly, "[a]fter three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding."[76] He explains, "we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of

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[74]Ibid.
[75] Mcluhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Boston: MIT Press, 1994.
[76] Ibid.

consciousness- when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media." Mcluhan is making the simple claim that there is a historical process which media is necessarily involving itself, one in which humankind slowly extends their consciousness into the realm of technology. For instance we can clearly see how our consciousness becomes extended when operating a vehicle. More often than being aware of one's presence within the vehicle, one simply concentrates on the movement of the vehicle as a whole, as if your physical awareness has extended to the frame of the car while your own body is absent. Alternatively in the interaction with media a wholly different extension occurs, one in which our knowledge or awareness extends into replicated modes of reality.

Mcluhan quotes one political speaker and military advocate to help justify his analytical fixation on the medium itself. The general famously argued, "[w]e are too prone to make technological instruments the scapegoats for the sins of those who wield them. The products of modern science are not in themselves good or bad; it is the way they are used that determines their value."[77] Mcluhan explains, "[m]any people would be disposed to say that it was not the machine, but what one did with the machine, that was its meaning or message." We hear the same argument often being made today in reference to gun control, where there are many who claim that stricter gun control is unnecessary because it is the wielder not the gun we should worry about. To this idea Mcluhan replied bluntly, "[this] is the voice of the current somnambulism. Suppose we were to say, 'Apple pie is in itself neither good nor bad; it is the way it is used that determines its value.' Or, 'The smallpox virus is in itself neither good nor bad; it is the

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[77] Ibid.

way it is used that determines its value.'" His point is that a piece of technology is never simply the embodiment of our intentions, a perfect extension of the individual, technological advancement incurs change by itself. He claims that those who still pretend that technology perfectly bends to our will are stuck "in the true Narcissus style of one hypnotized by the amputation and extension of his own being in a new technical form."[78] Mcluhan claims this sort of fallacy is born out of the spellbinding media itself, something able to project, amputate, and ampliphy an image into a living fantasy. This is why he popularized the phrase "narcissus as narcosis," or the phenomena of being inebriated by simulations of ourselves. Mcluhan explains, in the Myth of Narcissus, "[t]his extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image." Mcluhan uses the term servomechanism differently than most, rather than a machine part used to regulate the energy of a more powerful component, he uses it to describe the effects of an individual spellbound by his own extension to the degree where he serves its perpetuation. In other words, Narcissus would serve only to exist as a functional part within the process of his own symbolic abstraction. Although why does this moment incur numbness why not ecstatic self-recognition? Mcluhan explains, "[t]he young man's image is a self-amputation or extension induced by irritating pressures. As counter-irritant, the image produces a generalized numbness or shock that declines recognition. Self-amputation forbids self-recognition." We see here a strong claim, and one of great importance moving on. The simulatory abstraction of reality does not allow for greater understanding of the human condition but even "forbids" it. The claim Mcluhan is making is very reminiscent of Firat's patterns of alienation or passivity; in our

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[78] Ibid.

interaction with media we find the self lost in its own amputated state, and we are left in a state of illusory narcissistic numbness. The root of this numbness is our "central nervous system", Mcluhan claims. Using Freud's idea of repression as a parallel, he explains, "when we fail to translate some natural event or experience into conscious art we 'repress' it. It is this mechanism that also serves to numb us in the presence of those extensions of ourselves that are the media…" To complicate these said abstractions even further, and to allow a better understanding of why reality becomes so susceptible to illusion, let us look at Baudrillard's definition of the simulation.

In his 1983 work, *Simulations,* Baudrillard discusses the creation of simulacra, or products of simulation or reproduction. Much like the Chicago newsreel of the executed men, a simulation adapts and represents reality, or like the prisoner's case, sometimes even becomes reality. The blurring of these lines is precisely what Baudrillard would like to draw our attention to in this work. He believes that today with the sheer amount of simulacra before us, we seem to be left in a "desert of the real", wherein what was once the reference of our behavior and culture, appears only within mutated relics and adaptations. He uses the metaphor of a mythical kingdom wherein a king attempts to create a map so accurate that it would cover every inch of the actual territory. In the myth, the kingdom eventually comes to ruin from trying to build this map, expending all of its final resources into its completion. Baudrillard suggests that in today's society the myth would be inverted; the king would be trying to find the remnants of the territory beneath the overwhelming dominance of the already present map. In other words, wherein in prior worlds undiscovered lands represented what was unmapped, Baudrillard suggests in modernity the challenge is to see beyond the dense mapping surrounding our vicinity. His underlying point is essentially that today's society is so

well mapped out, pre-planned, and accounted for, that we interact far more with the representations of passed realities than with the referential content itself. Baudrillard explains that today:

> The real is produced from miniaturised units, from matrices, memory banks and command models-and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal, the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.[79]

This is why he names this chapter in *Simulation,* "The Precession of Simulacra." Baudrillard borrows mathematical terminology to highlight the orbital change meaning has taken in modern times. Precession describes the process of an object orbiting outside another, and in turn affecting the orbit of the inner object. Baurdillard would like to draw attention to the impact of simulation itself, and the production of replicas within society. He believes that in the everpresent calculation of society, in models, projections, etc. we in fact simulate reality for ourselves, creating something inherently separate from reality, a *Hyperreality.* This *Hyperreality* in turn begins to modify the way we interact with actual reality, because it seems no different. To better understand the *Hyperreality,* think back to Mcluhan's execution story, wherein the warden had the prisoners watch the announcement of their own death several hours prior to it happening. It is as if the newsreel was inscribing the event into *hyperreality,*

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[79] Jean Baudrillard. *Simulation*. Semiotext[e], 1983.

and the actual execution merely meeting its demand. To better understand this phenomena let us look at American Daniel J. Boorstin's definition of the "pseudo-event".

Writing in 1962 Boorstin saw clearly that the unreal was proliferating our experiences in bizarre and unprecedented ways. He explains, "[t]he new synthetic novelty which has flooded our experience I will call "pseudo-events." The common prefix 'pseudo' comes from the Greek word meaning false, or intended to deceive." These events have often been called publicity stunt or marketing ploys, but are far more pervasive than one may think. For example the Gulf War was primarily instigated by a "psuedo-event" orchestrated by Washington PR firms, wherein they created a false story of mass infanticide in order to sway congress.[80] Similarly the New York Times even published the fact the WMDs existed in Iraq without any substantial proof.[81] "Pseudo-events" are an easy example of *Hyperreality*, something producing and enforcing a reality without any actual connection to objective events. If this is still not clear let's look at Boorstin's definition of the "pseudo-event":

(1) "It is not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or inctied it, Typically, is not a train wreck or an earthquake, but an interview.

(2) It is planted primarily (not always exclusively) for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced. Therefore, its occurrence is arranged for the convenience of the reporting or reproducing media. Its success is measured by how widely it is reported. Time relations it are commonly fictitious; the announcement is given out in advance 'for future release'

[80] Stauber, John C., and Sheldon Rampton. *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You*. Maine: Common Courage Press, 1995.
[81] https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/26/world/from-the-editors-the-times-and-iraq.html

and written as if the event had occurred in the past. The question, "Is it real?: is less important than, 'is it newsworthy?"

(3) The relation to the underlying reality of the situation is ambiguous. Its interest arises largely from this very ambiguity. Concerning a pseudo-event the question, "What does it mean?" has a new dimension. While the news interest in a train wreck is in *what* happened and in the real consequences, the interest in an interview is always in a sense, in *whether* it really happened and in what might have been the motives. Did the statement really mean what it said? Without some of this ambiguity a pseudo-event cannot be very interesting."[82]

Using this definition we can see a clear example of *Hyperreality* being produced within the "pseudo-event." Wherein events are designed and distinguished from everyday life by their PR men, they begin to take on unique roles within our experiences. Boorstin explains that although originally a tool for publicity, "pseudo-events" are becoming more and more prevalent in our experiences. Public opinion polls, magazine prescriptions, revolutions in cosmetics, Boorstin incriminates all of these phenomena as producing uniquely dissociative tendencies within the population. By this I mean the "psuedo-event" began to mean more than a publicity stunt, and began to dictate the very aspirational structures people had. Such a proliferation of re-creation creates modern dissonances, ones difficult to pinpoint but irrevocably significant. Baudrillard explains, that in simulatory society, "curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials." He goes on to state that matters eventually become "worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, a

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[82] Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Image: A Guide to Psuedo-Events in America.* New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

more ductile material than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and all combinatory algebra." In other words we today live in the obscene reanimation of former "referentials" in the recapitulation of their former selves in "programmatic form." In place of infinitely complex reality we find "a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes." How did we get to this point? It is precisely in the process of mass production and media proliferation that simulation became omnipresent. To better understand this let us look deeper at the definition of simulation and how it interacts with reality.

Baudrillard explains in length that simulations are unlike any other phenomena in several regards. He states, "[t]o dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't. One implies a presence, the other an absence." We can take this claim to be quite uncontroversial and incredibly descriptive of a great deal of the phenomena studied in this paper. What is modern consumption if not the idea of selling simulations, the notion that toothpaste is not just toothpaste, its simulated "freshness." Baudrillard explains that things are indeed more complicated, quoting, "Someone who feigns an illness can simply go to bed and make believe he is ill. Some who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms."[83] Thus we find that our old definition is no longer quite suitable, because in the case of the somatic illness can't we say that the simulation incurs the very same experiential reality as its referential? In the same sense Baudrillard asks if simulations at large aren't beginning to behave quite like the somatic illness. Unlike mere trickery or delusion, "simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false', between 'real' and 'imaginary'." He

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[83] Jean Baudrillard. *Simulation*. Semiotext[e], 1983.

says we can see this for instance in earlier notions of God, a phenomena decried as being unrepresentable by earlier scholars, but often condensed into certain symbolic objects or acts. This leads Baudrillard to claim, "what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum" This is where he introduces the term of the simulacra, a simulation "never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference." Whereas representation "starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent…conversely, simulation starts from the utopia of this principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference." In other words, in a truly post-modern sense the reality becomes palpably creative in structure, but still reminiscent of some referential other. In the systematization of modern society we find inherent within this process the repeated translation and reformulation of certain objective realities; Baudrillard simply claims in the same sense the simulation is able to create from itself, looking inward and translating data already representative into wholly new representations. Within this infinitely duplicatory process we find the potential to stray irrevocably from the sources which we originally have simulated, what he terms the "death sentence of every reference."[84]

Returning to the ideas of media and consumption, let us look at how Baudrillard evaluates media within the consumptive paradigm, or in other words when we begin to consume simulacra in place of the referent. He explains, "[w]hat characterizes consumer society is the universality of the news item [le fait divers] in mass

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[84] Jean Baudrillard. *Simulation*. Semiotext[e], 1983.

communication. All political, historical and cultural information is received in the same -- at once anodyne and miraculous -- form of the news item. It is entirely actualized -- i.e. dramatized in the spectacular mode -- and entirely de-actualized -- i.e. distanced by the communication medium and reduced to signs. The news item is thus not one category among others, but the cardinal category of our magical thinking, of our mythology." Recalling Baudrillard's earlier conception of the consumptive relationship as necessarily a mode of miraculous thinking and a demand for content beyond the mere product itself, we see that in the same way the news bite exists as a simulacrum of a multitude of notions we consider to be pertaining to the reality of our world. We make a psychical demand from this short series of phrases and images to relate to us a specific totality. He explains, "we live, sheltered by signs, in the denial of the real. A miraculous security: when we look at the images of the world, who can distinguish this brief irruption of reality from the profound pleasure of not being there? The image, the sign, the message" In this necessitated distance between the subject of the news, its representation, and even furthermore the viewer themselves, one experiences increased degrees of pleasure and fantasy. In this sense we are embodying again the repressive mode of consumption as alluded to by Marcuse, as well as embarking into increasingly magical modes of thought. When watching the news, "all these things we `consume' -- represent our tranquillity consecrated by distance from the world, a distance more comforted by the allusion to the real (even where the allusion is violent) than compromised by it." Thus we find the consumptive mode in regard to media as highly illusory, unconscious, and impulsive, just like our relations with physical products, if not even moreso. Rather than a product imbued by the unconscious with a miraculous soul, media in its efervescent complexity does so without any physical

presence. In summation Baudrillard explains, "the dimension of consumption as we have defined it here is not one of knowledge of the world, nor is it one of total ignorance: it is the dimension of misrecognition. Curiosity and misrecognition denote one and the same form of overall behaviour towards the real, a form of behaviour generalized and systematized by the practice of mass communications and characteristic, therefore, of our `consumer society'. This is the denial of the real on the basis of an avid and repeated apprehending of its signs." Baudrillard's overarching warning is precisely the potency of the sign or simulation in place of an objective reality. Whereas a concrete reality holds meaning only in how it is experienced, recounted, or evidentially traced, the media item allows for a collapsing of referents into an eternal signification, an item distinct and evolved from its objective simplicity. When media is consumed we are allowed a unique tranquility, an allusory likeness to reality, yet far more palatable. Baudrillard explains that in this sort of culture:

> Everydayness as closure, as Verborgenheit, would be unbearable without the simulacrum of the world, without the alibi of participation in the world. It has to be fuelled by the images, the repeated signs of that transcendence. As we have seen, its tranquillity needs the vertiginous spin of reality and history. Its tranquillity requires perpetual consumed violence for its own exaltation.

In other words by applying a complex simulacrum to the wrongs of the world we absolve ourselves of dealing with them. The reason so many may in fact watch the news, read the paper, and attend town halls, yet find themselves not taking any actual political or civic actions in their own life can easily be explained by this model. Keeping yourself informed via media forbids a true recognition of the task at hand, and only facilitates an illusory self-absolution in the form of allusory acknowledgement and in

truth an achievement of tranquility through misrecognition. Here is where I find consumerism's most sinister potential, as a seamless mediatic mechanism of control. In the same way a physical product can contribute to certain behavioral models, the spread of media products changes certain models of thought or critique. I can put it differently, we consume media at unprecedented rates.[85] Furthermore, we often use media to inform both our world view, and political allegiances. Whereas we believe consuming certain new sources will enhance our view of an event or issue, in truth, it is a necessary distancing, and pleasurable self-absolution.

Conclusion

If I were to describe mass consumption's trajectory over the last century, I would argue it began as an economic crisis, developed into a psycho-economic solution, and eventually into a far more pervasive social and cultural crisis. My issue with product proliferation is not, per se, that we too often find consumer goods conspicuous and desirable, but more so the particular sort of knowledge that came with their proliferation from the start. In other words the revelation that masses were so malleable and the resolution then to manipulate them thusly, is where I find the greatest concern. Today I would argue that to unprecedented degrees lessons learnt from consumption, that the mass is unthinking, the self abstractable, and society repressive, are being abused to further modify the population for private interest. The reason I end with Baudrillard's example of news media is because it is testament to the products flexibility in the era of manifest consumerism. Whether advancing a political agenda,

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[85] Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage, 1998.

trying to increase product sales, or doing a publicity stunt, these efforts require proper branding, PR, and general consecration according to consumer custom. To make all my points in this essay a little bit more evident, let me bring in a man I think exemplifies the problematic I find most significant.

Vladislav Surkov is modernity's answer to Edward Bernays; in his own words, he is "'the author, or one of the authors, of the new Russian system.. [his]y portfolio at the Kremlin and in government has included ideology, media, political parties, religion, modernization, innovation, foreign relations, and . . . " here he pauses and smiles, 'modern art.'" Beginning his career in the niche Moscow Avant Garde art scene, Surkov eventually became one of Putin's closest political advisors. This evolution brought about a unique form of governance I think emblematic of the mode that consumer culture incurs. Russian-British Television Journalist , Peter Pomerantz, exposed precisely the sinister underhanded maneuverings of Surkov behind Russia's biggest television stations and their programmings.[86] He describes in length, in his book *Nothing is Real and Anything is Possible,* how Surkov toyed with public opinion in order to develop a new form of governance. This method of control was essentially a display of technoctatic artistry, through the direct control of news media, "reality television programming", and finally the secret funding of varied and opposing radical political groups, Surov had essentially reinvented governance. The doctrine was to obfuscate the reality, inebriate the populace through desire and consumption, all the whilst simulating the existence of a first-world pluralistic democracy through the media. As Pomerantz explains, "Surkov's genius has been to tear those associations apart, to marry authoritarianism and modern art, to use the language of rights and

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[86] Pomerantsev, Peter. *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2014.

representation to validate tyranny, to recut and paste democratic capitalism until it means the reverse of its original purpose."[87] Let me break this down: Surkovian government uses heavily scripted "reality television" in order to promote a society bent on conspicuous consumption, whilst maintaining the guise that Russia overall is reforming into a modern capitalist nation.[88] Second, Surkov manipulates news media purely to do two things, obfuscate a linear narrative, as well as promote Party interests. Surkov's work includes Ukraine: wherein he dressed soldiers in varied outfits, reported fake events, and created fictional factions on, all to obfuscate an actual clear course of events. To this day few know the concrete timeline of events that involve the annexation of crimea, this is inarguably testament to the work of Surkov and his mediatic masterpiece within the informational sphere as well as on the ground. His legacy continues in the upcoming elections, and the ongoing conflict in Syria, to degrees constantly being obfuscated by his own work.

Surkov's work is precisely where I find media and consumptive modes to be at most dangerous, wherein it is consumed in the distancing and cathectic mode that allows for the spread of certain ideas and habits. If I were to ask the reader to leave this essay with anything in particular it would be the knowledge that our relationship with what we consume needs to be looked at much closer. The problem is less so that people are "designing" our habits, but rather that these habits are designing our environment, knowledge and expectations. Surkov is only one example of how media and consumptive modes are used in order to produce a certain type of populace. Docility is engendered through confusion, and consumption is fueled through manipulation. I believe the first step in many way is developing a more nuanced study of consumptions

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[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

legacy, then steps may be taken to reversing what the phenomena has incurred. Otherwise counter-measures to me seem to weak to confront something as adaptive and potent than our tendency to consume. Furthermore the greater structures that facilitate consumption are equally misunderstood and relevant as our direct consumptive relationships. If this essay were to try to achieve anything it were to make this point clear: consumerism should cause unease, products aren't what they seem, and we do more when consume, and more often, than we think. At the heart of consumption is the manipulation of ambiguities in order to create artificial certainties. If I am to leave the reader with anything concrete, it is that we should esteem to return to these ambiguities in favor of widespread and paltry truths.