



*Collected Essays*  
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# POPULAR CULTURE

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## The Taste Hierarchy

Although postmodernist theory argues that the distinction between popular and high culture is diminishing and thus the boundaries between classes have blurred, social stratification still subsist due to the social hierarchy of taste that relies on capital rather than accessibility. This argument is reinforced by the case study of Dutch television conducted by Kuiper. The stratified audience revealed by the ethnographic research unveils that, despite its' accessibility and ties to popular culture, "television has not led to homogenization, democratization or fragmentation of taste" (371, Kuiper, Television and Taste hierarchy). These findings signify that a specific sort of knowledge, or what Bourdieu has coined as capital, is required.

The taste hierarchy is dictated by the economic, cultural and symbolic (etc.) capital of a demographic, thus social class and education often determines an individual's interests. However, many other factors can contribute such as age, religion, ethnicity and gender - further complicating the notion of cultural liberalism. Yet regardless of the accessibility rendered by technological developments and glocalization or the social fragmentation brought on by subcultures, the "taste public" will always remain socially stratified. As Kuiper illustrates from her survey: "people

look at the same thing, to which they have equal access, but they don't have the skills to decode it meaningfully" (371, Kuiper, Television and Taste Hierarchy).

Though popular culture has debatably blurred the boundaries between class and taste in that an individual of high culture may be partial to something of low culture, this appreciation is unilateral. The average 'joe' will never to fully comprehend the works of high culture due to the absence of some form of capital. Despite the fact that the conceptual demarcation between high and low culture have slowly deteriorated in the wake of popular culture, there still remains a political and economic dimension that fortifies this distinction. This liberal pluralist view accounts for televisions stratified audience in the context of today's contemporary popular culture.

## Popular Culture & High Culture

The American sociologist Herbert Gans analyzes in his work, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, whether the distinction differentiating popular culture from high culture remains relevant in the contemporary society we live in today. With the borders of imagined communities incessantly shifting, commercial culture, due to the multi-linguistic nature of the media, breaches the subdivisions of pride regardless of religious, political, societal, or language barriers. This transgression of borders not only metastasizes the mass circulation of products, but also facilitates the spread of hegemonic ideologies that appropriate cultural codes. The recent debate arguing that it is no longer pertinent to distinguish between high and popular culture may be true, however high culture has not ceased to exist but rather it's been, on the contrary, redefined. To consider the repercussions of the aforementioned it is important to first reconsider the relevance of the past distinction between high and popular culture.

Popular culture, although a vexed and indisputably polemical term, can be loosely defined as everything outside the particular interests of the elite class whose allegedly refined taste falls under the category of high culture. However with

museums, orchestras, ballets and higher education open to the general public, the territory formally occupied by the educated and privileged is now becoming a cultural arena open to the masses. The boundaries marking the disparity have blurred.

As the separation between popular culture and high culture slowly diminishes, the argument for distinction becomes frail. As my Professor Nico Vink wrote in his book *Dealing with Differences*, “the traditional opposition between elite and popular culture has almost disappeared. In modern times, they were each other’s opposites, yet now they are mix.”<sup>1</sup> (13) To further support his point, Vink refers to Andy Warhols’ lithographs rendering the repetition of icons quintessential of American pop culture, such as Marilyn Monroe. These works of art not only serve as a social critique mirroring America’s inclination towards mass production and ceaseless consumption, but furthermore blur the lines dividing high culture from pop. Yet, I suggest that this bleeding together of cultures is not unilateral in the sense that the mainstream is inundating a space formally occupied by the upper class, but rather the elite have also recognized the economic and political potential lacing the mass media.

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<sup>1</sup> *Vink, Nico, Dealing with Differences (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2005) 12-13.*

The global onslaught of the multinational conglomerates owned and controlled by the elite must not be overlooked, as their role in the production of television, music, advertisement, films, brand names, commercials, magazine and fashion is indisputable. The pervasive and transitory nature of pop culture is not only subject to change but also an initiator of it. Infused with political propaganda that fuels the naturalization of stereotypes and globalization of capitalism, the hegemonic agenda mediated by the mass media is veiled by ideological innocence. Due to popular cultures faculty to sway the minds of the masses, it harbors a political dimension in its ability to manipulate the public via infiltrating the media with hegemonic ideologies that support the socioeconomic interests of the power that be. Popular culture in its multitude of forms engenders the possibility to be lived vicariously through, thus influencing not only the way people think but also live. In short, although the distinction between popular culture and high culture has become increasingly irrelevant, it is important to acknowledge that high culture has not disappeared but rather redefined and disguised itself within the realm of popular culture.

## “Thoughts on Audiences”

Martha Rosler’s article, “Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Markets: Thoughts on Audience,” positions the photographic medium within the art world, while deconstructing notions of the spectator and high culture. Rosler’s discursive argument is concerned with when and how photography penetrated high culture, which she claims occurred in a “moment of hesitation” (Rosler 37) in the art world. Furthermore, Rosler begs the question of how the ownership of culture is determined and who defines the dichotomy of taste.

The art world is constituted of a set of relations. The cultural capital of great works of art translates into economic capital. Thus, art can be understood as a form of currency. When uncertainty is lacing economic conditions, as now, many investors look to buy art. The commodity fetishism of art is unique in that its use and exchange value is hinged on taste and is thus ambiguous. As it were, there are works of art out there that the hegemonic order has deemed priceless. These masterpieces are in the possession of a select few individuals of the elite. In short, those who can afford high art, define it. This just goes to show “how closely art is tied to commodity production” (Rosler 32).

High culture may be owned by the elite, however, “the widest audience is made up of onlookers- people outside the group generally meant by the term ‘audience’” (Rosler 14). This article is in many ways temporally tied to the time in which it was written, as the distinction today differentiating low culture from high is in a state of decay due to pervasive nature of popular culture. I dare not be so bold to suggest that high culture cease to exist, but rather I’d argue it has been redefined. After all, popular culture, although a vexed and indisputably polemical term, pertains to everything outside the particular interests of the elite class whose allegedly refined taste falls under the category of high culture. However with museums, orchestras, ballets and higher education open to the general public, the territory formally occupied by the educated and privileged is now becoming a cultural arena open to the masses. The boundaries marking the disparity have blurred, and the argument for distinction becomes frail.

This bleeding together of cultures is not unilateral in the sense that the mainstream is inundating a space formally occupied by the upper class, but rather the elite have also recognized the economic and political potential lacing the mass media. The pervasive and transitory nature of pop culture is not only subject to change but also an initiator of it. Due to popular cultures faculty to sway the minds of the masses,

it harbors a political dimension in its ability to manipulate the public via infiltrating the media with hegemonic ideologies that support the socioeconomic interests of the power that be. Photography's role in the aforementioned is unparalleled given that it is a medium that has the propensity to manipulate images of the world. It's relationship with truth, reality and representation positions photography in a category of its own. However, like other art forms photography had to "reconfigure its own high culture/low culture split: a central matter for photography, which has penetrated daily life and informed our sense of culture as no form of visual representation has before" (Rosler 35).

In short, although the distinction between popular culture and high culture has become increasingly irrelevant, it is important to acknowledge that high culture has not disappeared but rather redefined itself. The photographic medium's transgression into the realm of fine art necessitated a re-conceptualization of high and low culture. The fragility of a dichotomy hinged on the taste of the wealthy is a phenomenon innate to the age of post-modernity. Artists such as Andy Warhol exemplified the intercourse of art and popular culture, as did many of his contemporaries. Yet, despite the increasingly blurred distinction between high culture

and popular culture, the question of audience still remains ✱

## A Response to Haacke Hans's "Museum, Managers of Consciousness"

The dichotomy of taste dictating the direction of the art industry is established and reinforced through museums. The prolific German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberge once proclaimed that the economy of the art world belonged to the "consciousness industry"<sup>2</sup>. Artist and art patron alike tend to shy away from the industrial undercurrent that runs beneath the romanticized illusion of the art world. The notion of art as currency is a concept that cannibalizes itself, in that the aura of art diminishes with the realization that the industry is unlike any other- merely a compilation of financial transactions. In short, if art is perceived as a product its marketability is compromised. Thus, the operative and distributive modes of the industry must be veiled. The role of museums are crucial insofar as they mediate worth and construct value. Behind the scenes, these institutions are run more and more by business men rather than those knowledgeable about art. For instance, at the

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Haacke, untitled state, in German Celany, *Art Povera*, (New York: Praeger, 1969), 179.

Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the current director has a background in management and finance- need I say more.<sup>3</sup>

The business of art is an illusive one, as it deals namely with the intangible aura attached to a work of art. Ultimately, the value of a piece is contingent on its' relation to the collective consciousness of society at large. For instance, the Mona Lisa is deemed priceless due to its mass circulation amongst the social arena. Yet, the dichotomy of taste belongs to the hegemonic order. Whereas certain artists are framed, celebrated and discussed, others with a more subversive aim know only neglect and marginalization. Art is laced with ideological repercussions that indoctrinate and sway the social consciousness. Given that a majority of the museums in the United States receive their funding from corporate donors, the policies and decisions of the institution have been hijacked and manipulated by their private investor. "Museums works in the vineyards of consciousness...And such an institution should be challenged if it refuses to acknowledge that it operates under constraints

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<sup>3</sup> Haacke, Hans. "Museum, Managers of Consciousness" (1986) reprinted in Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings. Eds. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz. Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996, pp. 875

deriving from its sources of funding and from the authority to which it reports”<sup>4</sup>. With that said, the implications of corporate financing result in an artistic censorship.

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<sup>4</sup> Haacke, Hans. “Museum, Managers of Consciousness” (1986) reprinted in Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings. Eds. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz. Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996, pp. 876

## Popular Culture and Neo-Tribes

Scholars of the 1950s viewed popular culture as a threat to society and the working class. The view on popular culture nowadays has changed dramatically. Contemporary popular culture is seen as taste culture in which youngsters engage in consumer practices by their own choice. Furthermore popular culture is seen as a key to the construction of social identity. Over the past several decades' society has undergone structural and cultural changes that have deteriorated past views concerning popular culture and its societal influence. First off, postmodern sociologists argue that the disparity between popular and high culture has faded. The absence of this distinction can be extrapolated to the social fragmentation that has resulted from neo-tribes, subcultures, appropriation and the role of agency.

Another societal shift that has attributed to a redefinition of popular culture is the concept that cultural consumption has evolved into a social practice. Urbanization has rendered cities into sites of consumptions rather than production (825, Zukin, *Urban Lifestyle*). Branding, merchandizing, advertisement, dedifferentiation of consumption, and the media have all contributed to this cultural transition. Consumption is now employed as a means of constructing one's identity. The pretext

that identities are fixed has been abandoned; instead identities are incessantly evolving entities defined by fluidity.

Globalization emerges as the third notable factor that has influenced not only our perception of contemporary popular culture but also our everyday life. The time/space compression eloquently articulated by the sociologist David Harvey signifies the collapse of time. In other words, past/present/future have emerged as different temporalities available in different locations. Due to the unpredictable transnational flow of media text, a phenomenon coined by Arjun Appadurai as mediascapes, the past is present in different localities (i.e.: the dated pop culture of the West is regarded as 'hip' in less developed nations). Furthermore, agency has forged a pluralized relationship with time. The television and Internet afford a sense of electronic proximity with the world at large, and furthermore render accessibility to different avenues of self-expression, information, interest and entertainment.

The social fragmentation fueled by tribal formation, consumption's evolution into a social practice and globalization has all influence the direction and perception of popular culture. The communitarian and societal implications of popular culture prove as unpredictable as postmodernism itself. Yet this much is sure, popular culture has evolved into an international arena wherein identities are constructed and the

distinction between the producer and consumer, high culture and low has become increasingly blurred.

The French Sociologist, Michel Maffesoli, coined the term tribe or neo-tribe with the aspiration to define the inexplicable societal inclination, particularly amongst the youth culture, to return to a tribal-like society. This concept “provides a much more accurate framework as it allows for the shifting nature of the youth’s musical and stylistic preferences” (614, Bennet, Subcultures or Neotribes?). According to Maffesoli, the youth culture of contemporary society is incessantly in transit, their social intercourse fluid and interactions fleeting. These tribal formations account for the social fragmentation exhibited within the youth demographic. Another applicable theory within this discourse is the notion of lifestyle, which is the idea that identities are self-constructed and that consumerism has evolved into a social practice yielding new avenues for negotiating one’s sense of individuality. Ayhan Kaya’s work, Aesthetics of Diaspora: Contemporary Minstrel in Turkish Berlin, unveils the struggles the Turkish youth of Berlin face in constructing their identity. Their appropriation of hip-hop and formation of a *double diasporic identity* can be best understood within the framework of the aforementioned theories.

Diasporas represent an experience of displacement and alienation wherein foreigners are obliged to construct their home and reconstruct their identity in a country where they are marginalized and oftentimes discriminated against. Their lingering diasporic consciousness renders a “constant negotiation between past and future, roots and routes, local and global, home and diasporas” (43, Kaya). The concept of *roots* and *routes* brings to light the complexities of an identity formation constructed from both authentic and transcultural capital (43, Kaya). From these decentered lateral connections, hybrid identities emerge which can be best understood via the notion of lifestyle, as hybridity is a process of accumulation wherein differences are held together. In other words, the Turkish youth of Berlin “construct and reconstruct their cultural identity in a process whereby the conjunctions of ‘either’ (Turkish) ‘or’ (German) have been consciously rejected” (58, Kaya).

Maffesoli’s theory of ‘tribes’ can be extrapolated to the subculture of Turkish migrants in Berlin, whose collective identity is shaped by social isolation, hip-hop music, “diasporic consciousness and transculturalism” (45, Kaya). Their cultural positioning renders a reflection process, which makes Turks conscious of the constructed nature of their identity. It is this “transient”, “rhizomatic” or what Homi Bhabha refers to as “third” space that enables Turks to think between localities and

construct a “syncretism cultural identity” (59, Kaya). The appropriation of hip-hop emerges as a tribal formation with symbolic and cultural capital that gives the Turkish youth of Germany a sense of community amid the onslaught of racism and pressures of assimilation. The Turkish rap group *Cartel* exercises a lyric structure similar to that of Turkish minstrels and in doing so “contextualize themselves both in their involvement in the mainstream and attachment to the roots” (48, Kaya), in other words, they “transculturize rap music” (52, Kaya) by incorporating *arabesk* in with pop music. The hybrid beat engendered from their appropriation of hip-hop serves as an expression of their “double diasporic identity”.

# CONSUMPTION

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## The Crisis of Over-Accumulation

The age of post-modernity marks a transition best articulated as a cultural expression of the structural reconfiguration of the socio-economic system. This era is dominated by the “logic of prosthesis” wherein labor translates as the act of consumption rather than that of production. This transference triggered by the technological innovations in the sphere of mechanical labor gave way to the ethos of mass consumption. In Post-Fordism, we witness “a shift to new ‘information technologies’: more flexible forms of labor process...decline of the manufacturing base...a greater emphasis on the ‘targeting of consumers by lifestyle, taste and culture...globalization” (Latham 9). Gramsci’s *‘regulation theory’* gave rise to a *‘regime of accumulation’* engendering the growth of a middle class disillusioned by various media apparatus’ propagating agency as consumption, commodity fetishism and the production of artificial needs.

In the decade to follow 1970, the “crisis of over-accumulation” began exhausting the perpetual rhythm of the capitalist system. It was Marx who first recognized that “capitalism is pregnant with contradictions.” The undeniable structural flaws of the system rendered the relationship between the socio-economic and the cultural sphere

riddled with the potentiality to one-day collapse. This inevitability manifested itself in the era of Post-Fordism. Over the past thirty years, we have witness the relationship between capital and labor growing estranged as well as living standards falling in tandem to deindustrialization and the outsourcing of labor to less developed nations. This structural shift in the mode of regulation can be attributed to “the powerful tension in postwar capitalism between an ascetic ethos of production and a hedonistic ethos of consumption- between the competing demands of work and of leisure” (Latham 7) which manifested itself namely in the youth culture. In the decades to follow 1970, which marked a perverse reconfiguration of the mechanism in which the socio-political apparatus exercised it power over society at large, the notion of youth remained central as did the question of the cyborg.

The fetishism of the youth has always been a central element of the systemic structure of the capitalist apparatus. Even at the peak of Fordism, the youth was conceived “not merely as an empirical category but as an ideological abstraction, in a way that erased distinction between youthful bodies and mechanic processes” (Latham 8). The hybrid form of manufacturing innate to the Fordism rendered the human and machine as interconnected entities in the productive process. Thus, one could wage the argument that it was this techno-economic paradigm signified the birth of the

cyborg. Whereas, “prewar high technology had centered on industrial production, the postwar period has seen the rise of so-called postindustrial technologies of information that have further collapsed distinctions between human and machine” (9). It goes without saying, that more and more with the evolution of technological innovation do we witness the blurring of boundaries between corporal and the mechanic entities.

In relation to the youth culture and the notion of the cyborg, “Marx’s dialectical image continues to grasp the basic logic of capitalist automation, whether industrial or cybernetic in form” (25). Whereas in Fordism the fetishism of youth was rooted in the productive power tied to the able bodied demographic, in post modernity the youth is perceived as a “consumable substance”. In other words, perpetual youth has become a commodity that can be obtained through the act of consumption. The cyborg manifests itself in commodification of the biocybernetic, cosmetic and medical possibilities laced with the promise of evading age. The mechanism of mass media is designed to solicit the seductive possibility of perpetual youth packaged as something that can be obtained at a cost. In advertisements, among many other forms of media text, Marx’s theory of ‘use-value’ is replaced by what Haug coins as the ‘promise of use-value’. This shift sheds light in the perverse direction the system has headed in one

last desperate attempt at structural sustainability. The glut of commodities has necessitated the production of sign value and the use of media text to instill lack where there is none.

## The Aura in the Age of Post Modernity

Walter Benjamin's discourse predicting that the death of the aura will be at the hands of mechanical reproduction needs to be revisited in the age of post-modernity. The aura, I'd argue, was not lost, but rather reconceptualized. Although mass production did, to a certain extent, rape art and commodities of their authentic nature, an illusion of scarcity was fabricated so as to sustain the aura in the commodity system. For instance, sign value is a mechanism used by multinational conglomerates as a catalyst to create an aura around a brand name. The absence of scarcity has resulted in a society wherein commodities and even celebrities are branded. The thread of this discourse runs through the body of Andy Warhol's work. Among the first to shed light on this socioeconomic phenomenon, Warhol visually reinforces the repercussions of mass production unveiling how the rebirth of the aura is rooted in fabricated scarcity and brand names. He extrapolates this notion to the sphere of celebrities, representing them as commodified icons that derive their alleged auratic value from the reproduction of their images and the inimitability of their existence. Point is: Walter Benjamin failed to foresee how the social

implications of mechanical reproduction would be manipulated in the age of post modernity to revive the aura.

In 1936, Walter Benjamin wrote the essay “Works of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” to survey the social ramifications stemming from the economic development of technological reproduction. Arguing that technology has changed the architecture of society, he believes the onslaught of mechanical reproducibility will result in the loss of what he describes as the ‘aura’ lacing culture and art. *Aura* is a term Benjamin coined to describe how an object’s worth is hinged on the perceived authenticity and limited accessibility to it. Oftentimes the societal perception, historical significance and cultural recognition functions as a testimony to a work’s auratic value. Benjamin predicts that there are three domains of transformation that will manifest in tandem with the age of mechanical reproducibility. First off, the technological evolution of mass production will inevitably eliminate the scarcity of images and objects rendering in turn the death of the aura. For Benjamin, however, this loss of aura is good in the sense that it overthrows traditions premised on privilege. Thus, the technological development serves as a catalyst to the absolution of ritual. This shift, he argues, will engender a secularized society and a democratization of the new media.

Given that the accessibility of films, television and photographs is not tied to privilege or ritual, Benjamin's prediction was correct. Yet, collectively these conditions are said to lead to the disenchantment of the image. I would argue, however, that the aura has been sustained in the age of post-modernity by the proliferation of brand names and the fabrication of artificial scarcity. Commodities are deemed authentic due to their sign value, films are judged often by their prestigious director and/or the branded celebrities involved. The aura has been transformed in order to adapt to the residual effects of the age of mechanical reproduction through the construction of artificial scarcity in the absence of rarity.

Whereas Benjamin argues that the aura subsists outside of commodity system, Jonathan Beller, in his work 'Cinema, Capital of the Twentieth Century', contradicts this point claiming that the aura is, in point of fact, *specific* to the commodity system. Furthermore, the dematerialization of artwork renders its authenticity reliant on the experience of the creator and the social recognition of the piece of art. Thus, in short, value is a question that is no longer tied to the issue of labor, but rather an assumption that is positioned in a realm of varied perspectives. This commodity fetishism renders its spectators incapable of seeing beyond the perceived value of the object. In other words, we look at images with the preconceived notion of what it must mean within

the economy of spectatorship and from this gauge its worth. The object is thus seen solely through the filter of the commodity system. It is from this that the concept of *sign value* arose, countering mass production's threat to the aura.

Emerging as a consequence of technological developments, the birth of this *sign value* manifested in tandem to the industrial revolution, which facilitated the mass production of identical objects fabricated for mass distribution. Although this means of manufacturing proved far more economical and efficient than its predecessor, from this economic development stemmed a paradox: "although capitalist technique of mass-production were very good at making identical product in great volume, economies of scale were less efficient at producing unique and therefore *desirable* goods"(Parker 361). Thus, with aspirations to surmount the complexities of this predicament, multinational corporations "exploited forms of advertising to construct symbolic virtues for their products"(Parker 361). Thus, in sum, sign value was conceived as a distinctive mechanism of capitalism to compensate for the mass production of identical objects facilitated by the industrial revolution. The same concept of authenticity that Walter Benjamin rooted the aura in can be extrapolated to the constructed scarcity and artificial value that corporations attach to commodities in excess.

The *sign value* of an object is designated through the aura attached to it by a certain corporate label and is exemplified best by the commercial proliferation of brand names. Brands are, in short, logos, slogans or particular designs that render a product distinctive, and as a result, *desirable*- the aura of which is oftentimes fueled by its representation in the media through commercials and advertisements. Whereas, Benjamin foresaw the onslaught of mass production as a threat to the aura, his assumption was flawed insofar as the socioeconomic condition actually served as a catalyst to the construction and proliferation of sign value and false commodity fetishism fueled by the illusion of auratic value. Given that America's obsession with branding is a relatively new revelation in postmodern society, Andy Warhol's art emerged as a novel critique on consumerism, art and the aura. He believed that, yes, in copying an image something is lost, but in turn something new of value emerges. Question is, although the aura alters once mechanically reproduced, does that necessarily suggest that it vanishes into thin air or could its reproducibility render an offspring that perhaps reinforces its value as a trademark image?

“Andy Warhol had an extraordinary awareness of what it means to be an artist in the age of mechanical reproduction” (Du Duve 308). Blurring the distinction between fine and commercial art and commercial art and commerce, Andy Warhol's

fixation with popular culture situated his work in the mainstream and rendered him, in retrospect, pop art's seminal icon. He was the first to commercialize on commercialization, commodify on commodification and shed light on the perverse proliferation of brand names and the aura corporate conglomerates attach to them. The versatile technique of photographic silk-screens allowed Warhol to manipulate and replicate images, enabling him to construct a social critique by visually reproducing products quintessential of popular culture. Even the images he duplicated were often already mass produced pictures found in magazine or off a tin can in the third aisle of the grocery store. He conceptualized auratic commodification through artistic reproduction and appropriation of iconic images.

With mediums ranging from photography to film, printmaking to painting, Warhol contextualizes Benjamin's discourse on the aura shedding light on the shift in the societal trends of consumption patterns and its relationship with media culture. The transformation of the aura predicted by Benjamin is revisited in Warhol's work. He believed that the aura had not diminished but rather had been redefined, inverted and corporately manufactured. Appropriating commodities of mass culture, he exploited the fetishism of the aura that fueled blind consumption. For Warhol, the aura of an object is rooted in the authentic appeal of an icon, its mass production and

circulation bears no consequences other than perhaps reinforcing its socially perceived status. Amid the glut of commodities presented by the industrial revolution, Warhol artistically delineates that the auratic value of an object is hinged on the illusion of fabricated scarcity and deceptive uniqueness tied to a brand name.

Conceptually taking it a step further, Warhol's ironic visual proliferation of celebrities such as the silver-screen goddess and sex-icon Marilyn Monroe unveils the perverse paradox that the constructed aura of brand names can be extrapolated to famous icons- who have been commodified and consumed as products. For Warhol, Marilyn Monroe was a glamorously packaged product mass distributed to the public. The multiplication of her flawless image suggested that she, like *Campbell Soup*, was perceived as a mass-produced commodity, her aura drawing from the fact that there was one and only Marilyn Monroe. This body of work sheds light on the mechanisms of the Hollywood culture industry and how its production of icons fueled the exploitation of individuals simultaneously shackled and socially elevated by the limelight.

In the age of post-modernity, the proliferation of brand names, the emergence of sign value and the commodification of celebrity icons unveil a societal attempt to shield the aura from the residual effects of mechanical reproduction. With the

fetishism of the image resulting in the public cannibalizing coveted celebrities and the aura lacing trademarks triggering a societal shift in consumption patterns, it can be concluded that the aura subsist. However, as illustrated by *Andy Warhol*, what determines a commodity, celebrity or artwork's auratic value has altered since Benjamin's time. In response to the glut of commodities, scarcity is constructed and the aura is tied to authenticity of a trademark image or inimitability of a celebrity's branded flesh.

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## Branding Flesh

Mainstream America's obsession with sign value can be extrapolated to celebrities, who have in a sense become catalysis for consumption and paradigms for identity construction. The onslaught of branding seduces the public to adopt the "lifestyle of a brand over their own, merging individual identity with logo" (Whitbeck 23). In tandem to this conspicuous consumption, the deification of celebrities has converted icons into products of mass distribution and consumption. Is this obsession with brand names a desperate attempt at authenticity in the age of postmodernism or a perverse reflection of the American psyche? Dissecting the complexities of sign value, the social evolution of consumption practices can be traced via a temporal juxtaposition of the postmodernist work of Jean Baudrillard and the socioeconomic theories of Karl Marx. Yet this societal shift towards branding flesh takes roots deeper. Swaying between being both a critic and product of popular culture, Andy Warhol and his (in)famous reproduction of *Marilyn Monroe* unveils the perverse phenomenon of the mass distribution and objectification of celebrities. Icons such as Paris Hilton further reinforce the entangled proliferation of both brand names and pop idols,

demonstrating how this sign consumption and the dedifferentiation of consumption has imperialized American taste culture.

Convinced that capitalism was driven by production, Karl Marx once said, “sell a man a fish, he eats for a day, teach a man how to fish, you ruin a wonderful business opportunity.” (Karl Marx). “Preeminently a theorist of capitalism” (Martin 115), Karl Marx was a prolific political activist, economist and social philosopher gracing the nineteenth century. His socioeconomic theories were revolutionarily deconstructed the capitalist system, which he viewed as “as a contradictory set of production relations that conditioned the entire realm of human association” (Martin 115). Despite his cynicism, he conceded that the progressive economic structure did indisputably harbor the inherent ability to incessantly modernize its means of production. However, it is *this* mechanism of mass production that fuels the conspicuous consumption intrinsic to the Western world. He believed that “the production of too many useful things results in too many useless people” (Karl Marx). According to Marx, the value of an object should be derived from its use and exchange value. Over a century later, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, on the pretext that the consumption patterns have evolved since Marx’s time, altered the aforementioned theory in adaptation to the socioeconomic conditions of contemporary society. A

predominant theorist of the postmodern era, Jean Baudrillard was heavily influenced by Marxism, which is perhaps why many twenty-first century critics sweep his views under the discourse of poststructuralists and situationist. During his lifetime, he composed several books aimed at the reinterpretation of Marx's work, most notably: *The System of Objects*, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, and *The Consumer Society*. Lacing the pages of these sociological critiques, Jean Baudrillard formulates a superlative slant on the nature of consumerism. Extrapolating the first two concepts from Marx, Baudrillard theoretically extends the discourse, subdividing the worth of an object into four frames of assessment: the functional value of an object, the exchange value, the symbolic value and lastly the sign value.

The *functional value* of an object refers to the case wherein a product is appraised according to its functional use. Mirroring Marx's theory of use-value, this view deems that the worth of a manufactured good stems from utility. For instance, the practical purpose of a pocketbook is to carry one's personal belonging, its worth is thus determined by its ability to carry out this role. For Marx, "as a general rule, articles of utility become commodities"(Marx 3). However, Baudrillard critiques Marx's concept of *use-value* on the pretext that it is naïve to assume that the public consumes solely out of sheer necessity. Dissecting the paradigm of capitalism, Baudrillard claims that

the economy, contrary to the Marxist belief, is driven by *consumption*, rather than production. This intrinsic relationship unveils the ugly truths that needs are manufactured by the capitalist system to fuel manufacturing. In other words, "the masses consume because they have been infected with artificial wants dreamed up by the international league of producers" (Appleby 247). Informed by structuralism, this view presents the paradox that "consumption is a mere shadow of production; that audience negotiations are fictions, merely illusory moves in a game of economic power" (Storey 132)

*Exchange value* is another theory of Marx appropriated by Baudrillard to shed light on the societal shift in consumption patterns elicited by the socioeconomic circumstances of postmodernity. In short, this term purports that a product's worth is ultimately determined by its monetary or economic value in the world market. For instance, the aforementioned pocketbook can be a pricy purchase due to the nature of its fabrication. In other words, the red leather jacketing its exterior may come from Argentina and its inner lining may be Venetian silk. These aesthetic details justify why it may cost the earnings of countless hours of work. Ultimately, one *exchanges* their time for its purchase. However, one must also be wary that the value of an object

is by no means fixed insofar as the price of a particular product can and often is manipulated by economic agents to serve in their own self-interest.

The *symbolic value* of an object is a relational or subjective value assigned to a certain product by an individual. Oftentimes there is an ideological signification lacing the object. In other words, the worth of a product is *symbolically* conferred. The red leather pocketbook may be a vintage bag handed down to you by your grandmother and thus may be a symbol of family heritage, or for lack of a better example, a diamond ring symbolizes the marital union of two individuals in love. In short, it is the pretext that goods are “not consumed because of their value as utilities but because of their desirable symbolic attributes” (Parker 361) and thus it is the “symbolic qualities of an object that determined the worth of a commodity”(Parker 361).

The *sign value* of an object is rendered through the aura assigned to it by a certain corporate label and is exemplified best by the proliferation of brand name. Let's say that the red leather pocketbook is a vintage Louis Vuitton clutch, tiny and quite impractical to say the least, yet nonetheless it's worth more than, say, a canvas backpack because the item itself signifies wealth, expensive taste and social status. Marx argued that beneath of surface of "commodity fetishism" there are legitimate needs met that justified the objects consumption. Baudrillard, on the other hand,

contradicts this assumption, claiming that fetishism and fashioning of the self have emerged as the principal objectives behind postmodern consumption practices. Hence, in the context of a consumer society, the importance of a products utility dissipates; rather it is the symbolic and sign value of an object that determines its worth (or exchange value) on the market.

The birth of sign value transpired in tandem to the industrial revolution, which facilitated the mass production of identical objects fabricated for mass distribution. However from this economic development stemmed a paradox: “although capitalist technique of mass-production were very good at making identical product in great volume, economies of scale were less efficient at producing unique and therefore *desirable* goods”(Parker 361). Thus, with aspirations to surmount the complexities of this predicament, multinational corporations “exploited forms of advertising to construct symbolic virtues for their products”(Parker 361). In sum, sign value emerges as a distinctive mechanism of capitalism stemming from industrial culture and mass production.

From sign value came a proliferation of corporate branding. Brands are logos, slogans or particular designs that renders a product distinctive and thus desirable, its aura is oftentimes fueled by its representation in the media via advertisements. The

symbolic meaning attached to a brand name lends a commodity a particular image and furthermore instills a certain expectation in the client. “Certain brands of athletic shoes (Nike) and trekking gear (Timberland shoes) are identified with ‘urban’ i.e. ‘ghetto’-cultural styles”(Zukin 834). As follows, the fashioning of the self has developed an intrinsic relationship with brand names. The perverse irony is, however, that a consumer after having been influenced through ads to purchase a certain product later becomes a “walking advertisement” (Bryman 38) for the brand. A perfect example of this is the (in)famous GAP sweatshirt, which for several years was a staple American wardrobe accessory. Furthermore, in the past several decades “merchandising and licensing have proliferated” (Bryman 36) concurrently to the emergence of sign value and advertisement. Now even restaurants, such as the *Hard Rock Café*, market themselves through “the promotion of goods...bearing copyright images and logos, including such products made under license” (Bryman 36).

The relationship a consumers merges with a brand is rooted in how the sign value of an object functions as “social markers to indicate taste, status and style”(Parker 367). The stigma lacing certain brand names unveils the mechanism in which commodities are consumed as signs of symbolic wealth denoting an individual’s social status and taste. However, more often than not, the sign value of an object is

manipulated through advertisement. After all, America is an “image saturated society where advertising, entertainment, television, and other culture industries increasingly define and shape urban life” (Gotham 227). Entranced by the hypnotic nature of the media, the masses devolve into passive spectators blindly embracing ideologically infiltrated images fabricated with ulterior motives (Gotham 227). Laced with the agenda of multinational conglomerates, the media broadens the manufacture of “fictitious, artificial, and imaginary needs”(Lefebvre 161). The culture industries bred by capitalism infect the American social psyche with hegemonic ideologies that not only cement the social hierarchy, but also construct “powerful images, descriptions, definitions and frames of reference for understanding the world” (Storey 132).

Even more alarming, Americans seem oblivious to the destructive implications of their consumption. They drink Starbucks because it’s convenient, and go Wal-Mart because it’s cheap. It is not that they don’t care about the countless sweatshops in China manufacturing their clothes or the cultural imperialism rendered by Starbucks. Rather, “they haven’t been taught to think of consumerism as something that extends beyond their own enjoyable trip to the mall, just as they haven’t been taught that their personal consumer decisions are political” (Rockler-Gladen 12). Yet where can one place blame on this proliferation of brand names: on the consumer or the

multinational conglomerates? Arguably both parties are at fault. Yet in the words of Andy Warhol, “what's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest.” His insight on American popular culture stripped away its guise of glamour and unveiled an even uglier truth: the perverse paradox that this mass distribution and consumption of brand names can be extrapolated to celebrities who have been commodified and consumed as products.

Obsessed with fame, wealth and superficiality, Andy Warhol is, in retrospect, pop arts seminal icon. His fixation on popular culture situated his art in the mainstream. Warhol's prolific body of work was predominately inspired by the artificiality of mass consumerism, mechanical reproduction and the media. "When you think about it, department stores are kind of like museums", he once exclaimed. He was the first to commercialize on commercialization, commodify on commodification and profit off a hypocritical critique of mass consumption. Furthermore, “his acute awareness of the intersection of the body and culture; the way in which the body produces culture at the same time as culture produces the body...prefigured the way American film and media today exult the media fabrication of selfhood”(Suarez 38). With mediums ranging from photography to film, printmaking to painting, his artistic motivation was

to delineate an insight into the perverse complexities of consumer society.

Appropriating commodities of mass culture, he exploited the fetishism that fueled blind consumption. In sum, Warhol's art mimicked the media. Fueling the discourse that the taste hierarchy has been overcome by popular culture, his work blurred the distinction between fine and commercial art and commercial art and commerce. He once said, "making money is art, and working is art and good business is the best art" (Andy Warhol).

The versatile technique of photographic silk-screens allowed Warhol to manipulate and duplicate images, enabling him to construct a social critique by visually reproducing products quintessential of popular culture. He conceptualized commodification through the artistic reproduction and appropriation of iconic images. The ironic visual proliferation of the *Campbell Soup* brand as well as the silver-screen goddess and sex icon Marilyn Monroe constructed a perversely enlightening social critique. For Warhol, Marilyn Monroe was a glamorously packaged commodity mass distributed to the public. The multiplication of her flawless image presented the perverse paradox that she, like *Brillo Boxes*, was not a human being of flesh and blood but rather a product. Warhol's work unveiled the mechanisms of the Hollywood culture industry and how its production of icons fueled the exploitation of individuals

simultaneously shackled and socially elevated by the limelight. Ironically, after dedicating half his life to artistically rendering American icons, Warhol himself became one. “Once you 'got' Pop, you could never see a sign again the same way again. And once you thought Pop, you could never see America the same way again.” (Andy Warhol)

The international exportation of celebrities further strengthens the argument that stars can be understood as commodities of mass distribution and consumption. The global recognition of certain celebrities unveils the facility in which their fame can breach cultural and even linguistic boundaries. The term *mediascapes* is a word coined by Arjun Appadurai to describe not only the distribution of images around the world via the media, but also the “images of the world created by the media” (Appadurai 34). This idea serves to explicate the unpredictable transnational flow of media text across the borders of countless countries via newspapers, magazines, television and films. The pervasive presence of media icons on the global stage sheds light on the fact that even outside the context of American popular culture their flawless image and seductive nature lures an international audience. The recognition of celebrities is due in part to multinational media conglomerates and their facility to transgress cultural boundaries.

This commodification and mass distribution of stars become even more alarming with the realization that many of these media icons are famous for absolutely nothing. It seems as if nowadays, “one can become a public person just by being a person, in public.” (Greene 13). This superficial stardom has emerged in tandem with society’s perverse tabloid obsession. The incessant exploitation of celebrities’ private lives fuels an unending *love/hate* relationship, wherein stars are worshipped one day and stripped of their accolades the next. The repercussions of a celebrity’s entanglement in a scandalous affair unveil the fragility of fame. The pages of tabloids, often laced with images of stars pumping gas or jogging, serve as a bizarre reflection of the public’s perverse curiosity. Yet what fuels this ceaseless gossip about famous strangers? Is it that the public vicariously lives through stars like Paris Hilton, thus signifying that contemporary identity construction is built on the act of mimesis? Or has mass society grown so big and so foreign so suddenly that this obsession stems from the desire to create a smaller community within? The complicated nature of these questions promise a splintered explanation. Instead, I propose to focus on a single media icon in hopes of better understanding the obsession and commodification of celebrities of contemporary pop culture.

Voted the "*Most Overrated Celebrity*" Paris Hilton is said to be "famous for being famous." Spending her entire life in the public eye, the socialite, heiress, "actress," and "musician" earned \$7 million dollars last year alone just for being who she is. She has had minor roles in several films, most notably *Zoolander* (2001), *Wonderland* (2003) and *The Cat In The Hat* (2003) as well as the Fox reality series *The Simple Life*. Despite her age, she has already released an autobiographical book *Confessions of an Heiress: A Tongue-in-Chic Peek Behind the Pose* which ended up becoming a *New York Times* bestseller. She also established the record company *Heiress Records* in tandem to the release of her first album entitled *Paris*. She has fabricated four fragrances: *Can Can*, *Paris Hilton*, *Just Me*, and *Heiress* and has designed a line of expensive purses for the Samantha Thavasa- a brand out of Japan. The list goes on and on, getting increasingly ridiculous. Paris has branded *DreamCatchers* hair extensions, a line of footwear (*Paris Hilton Footwear*) and of course has a nightclub named after her (*Club Paris*). So, what are the implications of these celebrity-branded products?

Alan Bryman defines *dedifferentiation of consumption* as the instance when different forms of consumption become intertwined. I would like to extrapolate this cultural phenomenon from the spatial sense to one which refers to individuals in spotlight. It has become increasingly common that celebrities are not only mass distributed

commodities but also exist as intersecting spheres of consumption. Contemporary musicians now work also as models and actresses, fashioning their own self-branded perfume, magazines, toiletries, clothing and jewelry lines. For instance, Jennifer Lopez is not only a musician, but also a model for Louis Vuitton, an actress, has her own branded fragrance and of course a line of apparel. Other examples of this dedifferentiation of consumption can be extrapolated to Kate Moss, George Clooney and Uma Thurman. Like Marilyn Monroe, these celebrities have been branded and commodified through several means of consumption. In sum, celebrities are recognized in contemporary society not as people but as a breathing manifestation of a brand name.

The “post-war western world has grown up with the association between happiness and consumption” (Rockler-Gladen 12). In the throwaway culture of America, the evolution of consumption patterns has perversely progressed to the point where self-identity is fashioned through corporate branding and the branding of flesh.

“Consumption has been the primary means through which individuals have participated in culture and transformed it” (Birmingham 14). Even Jean Baudrillard’s reinterpretation of Marx’s theory of use-exchange value fails to fully deracinate the roots of the problem. Even more alarming is this obsession with sign value infecting

the mainstream can be extrapolated to celebrities, who have evolved into catalysis for consumption and paradigms for identity construction. The conspicuous consumption and deification of celebrities has resulted in the mass production and distribution of icons as if, as Andy Warhol beautifully illustrated, they are products. Dedifferentiation of consumption and mass distribution associated with celebrity icons such as Paris Hilton unveil how the proliferation of sign consumption has imperialized American taste culture “The proliferation of signs, dedifferentiation of institutional spheres, depthlessness, cultivated nostalgia, and the problematization of authenticity and reality” (Bryman 43) are all intrinsic aspects of post-modernity. Thus, identity construction is influenced from a two-tire paradigm of sign value obsession: the brand-product and the brand-name. “Fiske describes shopping centers as ‘cathedrals of consumption’” (Storey 150)

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# TECHNOLOGY

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## The Cooking Pot Market

In this world, desire is infinite and the means to satisfy desire is finite. As we watch socioeconomic circumstances change with the global market, an efficient and just mechanism for allocating goods is increasingly difficult to devise. Cultural divides and social stratification bear down on attempts to level out the playing field in an international economy. The information economy, however, blurs class distinction and has served as a catalyst for globalization. The concept of the *Cooking Pot Market* could be conceived as the buttress of this emerging economy, in that the interchange of ideas and information within the context of the Internet, for instance, is fueled not by monetary motives but rather communal interests and the reputation economy. The discourse fashioned by Rishab Aiyer Ghosh in *Cooking pot markets: an economic model for the trade in free goods and services on the Internet* dissects the possibilities of building an economy within the conceptual framework of the trade model which was revived in tandem to the growth of the Internet. However, when this paradigm is shifted from the technological sphere to that of the socioeconomic, its flawed and idealistic nature is revealed. The surplus of information does not equate to the issues encountered in

the case of surplus goods. With this said, the aspiration underpinning this dialogue is to construct a micro foundation for the emerging market that will iron out the creases that will inevitably arise.

The failure of the *Cooking pot Market* can be extrapolated to what Rishab Aiyer Ghosh terms as “the tragedy of the commons”<sup>5</sup>. The shortcomings of this socioeconomic structure mirror those that arise when a common reserve is depleted as in the case of a field over-grazed by chattel. In a similar vein, raking the ocean of fish may benefit some but proves ultimately detrimental to the world at large. The laws aimed at regulating the expenditure of natural resources are relatively ambiguous. For instance, the Japanese alone harvest from the Indian Ocean twenty one percent of the yellow fish tuna<sup>6</sup>. Yet, as this fish slowly slips into extinction, what incentive does a fisherman have not to catch the endangered species as much as possible- especially considering its status as a culinary rarity? The two aforementioned instances delineate why the aspiration to erect an international distribution model that facilitates the communal allotment of goods ultimately fails due to the absence of an overarching community. Human nature behaves in a manner where entitlement undermines

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<sup>5</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.iotc.org/files/proceedings/1999/wpdc/IOTC-1999-WPDCS-10.pdf>

reciprocity. The diminishing global fish stock and uneven consumption of natural resources attest to the reasons why the paradigm of the *Cooking Pot Market* is complicated by the subdivisions of pride and undercurrent of greed that fuels the market economy.

So the question is, can the *Cooking Pot Economy* transcend the unequal distribution of goods and depletion of common resources? Perhaps. Let's consider that the Internet renders a socioeconomic condition split between two systems. With economists and the public alike struggling to reconcile the market with the non-market sphere, the relationship between the two remain polar. For instance, giving music out for free creates a market of demand in the non-market realm, while at the same time a fan base is cultivated this way and monetary return ensues. However, the intercourse between these differing economic models is complicated by the disparity in the motivation fueling the public's participation. For instance, the incentive behind involvement in the non-market domain is hinged on the concept of the reputation economy, wherein financial compensation comes secondary and value is tied to social position within a niche community. This reputation economy monitors a market that resides outside of the monetary sphere, wherein communal sharing, social organizations, authority ranking (based on reputation) and reciprocity thrive. All of

the above are not only fundamental characteristic of the Internet, but are also essential attributes of the *Cooking Pot* paradigm<sup>7</sup>.

Although one cannot attach a concrete value to reputations, it can be argued that “like money, they represent things of value, as proxies”<sup>8</sup> (Ghosh). Just as money is a vital element in regulating the contemporary market economy, reputation plays a role in sustaining the *Cooking Pot Market*. The assumption is that the reputation economy motivates the masses to work without solely a monetary incentive. The growth of the information economy, which over the past several years has built tremendous momentum thanks to the Internet, is rooted in the exchange of ideas. Technological advancements have meant that information is not only free, but also that it is accessible to many more people than ever before. The Internet can almost be described as a postmodern barter market wherein the transactions between two parties has been usurped by a shared bounty of information and ideas that are asymmetrically contributed and reciprocated by the masses. This mechanism mirrors the *Cooking Pot Market*, which like the Information economy is fueled by neither altruistic nor monetary motives. It is this asymmetrical exchange that is intrinsic to

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<sup>7</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

<sup>8</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

“the infinitely reproducing Internet that makes the cooking-pot a viable economic model.”<sup>9</sup>

The revival of this economy of free exchange is a postmodern phenomenon that has become a focal point of scrutiny and discussion. Rishab Aiyer Ghosh’s discourse is taken further in Michael Bauwen’s essay, *P2P and Human Evolution*<sup>10</sup>. Delving into the complexities of the *Cooking Pot Market*, Michael Bauwen develops a detailed outline of what he terms as ‘inter-subjective relational dynamics’ that he reckons to be necessary if the paradigm of “peer to peer production” is to succeed<sup>11</sup>. Swaying in between the gift and market economy, *Peer to Peer* is ultimately a social formation that initially stemmed from the futile terrain of the technological field. Along the same lines as Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, Michael Bauwen conceptualizes a network of social interactions wherein financial gain does not serve as the catalyst behind human relations<sup>12</sup>. The article develops the theoretical framework of an economy formulated

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<sup>9</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

<sup>10</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

<sup>11</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

<sup>12</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

on an open source model. The shift from the market economy to a domain of decentralized social intercourse will lead to what Bauwen describes as the “third mode of production”<sup>13</sup>.

This “third mode of production” is defined by the accessibility of information, the absence of a hierarchy within the system and the fact that worth is not determined by its exchange value in the monetary market but rather by its use-value in the information economy<sup>14</sup>. The proliferation of goods whose worth is hinged on its use-value rather than its monetary value in the market sphere has evolved in tandem to the emergence of the technological developments. ‘Peer to Peer’, abbreviated by Bauwen as P2P, can be understood as the relationship between a widely distributed network that is decentralized and interconnected. In *“The Political Economy of Peer Production”*, Bauwen argues that “peer production is highly dependent on the market that produces use-value through mostly immaterial production, without directly providing an income for its producers<sup>15</sup>.” With the proliferation of blogs, file sharing

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<sup>13</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

<sup>14</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

<sup>15</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

and online chat communities emerging, the technological field has become a space of nonhierarchical relations established on like interest. The agency of those who participate is an underlining aspect of the widespread process. Characteristic of this network is the concept of “prosumer”- meaning that the interchange of capital relies on the mutual cooperation of the community of participants. Examples of these emerging social network of prosumers are, as mentioned before: blog sites, global communities like ‘facebook’ and wikipedia.

P2P production relies on an interdependent system that is fueled by reciprocity and egalitarian participation. This societal shift towards networked relationships harbors unpredictable, yet exciting, implications for the years to come. The concept of Peer-to-Peer Production has shed light on the possibility of a new social order that transcends the “tragedy of the commons”<sup>16</sup>. Outside of the hegemonic order of the private sphere, “the new forms of universal common property transcend the limitations of both private and public property models and are reconstituting a dynamic field of the Commons<sup>17</sup>”. The entangled web of relationships forged

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

<sup>17</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

between individual computers is a fundamental aspect of the system's infrastructure. This technological domain relies on the incessant intercourse of ideas donated and distributed across the constellation of participants. In observation of the global flows of information and media, the technological developments have facilitated communication on a transnational scale. However, as humanity shifts into a new age, a dialogue regarding the structural constraints and potential consequences must be hatched.

Due to the absence of monetary exchange, P2P can be conceived as a market only insofar as it lends a terrain wherein individual collectively contribute and take information. Whereas markets are driven by the exchange value of a good, the P2P production operates on the use-value of information. Furthermore there is a disparity in the dynamic of reciprocity within the two spheres of exchange. Yet, with this said, there is an interdependent relationship between P2P production and capitalism in that peer production has been "created through the interstices of the market"<sup>18</sup> not to mention that fact that "there is a very tangible market dynamics to the free economy of the Internet, and rational economic decisions are at work. This is the "cooking-pot"

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<sup>18</sup> Michel Bauwens, 'The Political Economy of Peer Production'  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

market: an implicit barter economy with asymmetric transactions.”<sup>19</sup> In response to Michael Bauwens essay, Chris Stewart of the Integral Foresight Institute writes, "what Michael Bauwens has achieved in a very short space fulfills the same function as the Communist Manifesto once did: a call for a worldwide movement for social and political change, firmly rooted in the objective and subjective changes of contemporary society, and articulated as a practical and insightful model of human value and power relations that is ahead of its time."<sup>20</sup> The inter-subjective dynamics that buttress the ethos of this process “molds reciprocity modes, market modes and hierarchy modes”<sup>21</sup> yet the question remains, “can peer to peer be expanded beyond the immaterial sphere in which it was born?”<sup>22</sup>

Conceptualizing the idea of “Inter-subjective Dynamics”, contemporary anthropologist Alan Page Fiske constructs a relational model theory in his work, *Structures of Social Life* that ultimately illustrates how "people use four fundamental models for organizing most aspects of sociality most of the time in all cultures. These

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<sup>19</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

<sup>20</sup> Amsterdam Media Research Center ‘Institute of Network Cultures’ [http://www.networkcultures.org/weblog/archives/2005/03/michael\\_bauwens.html](http://www.networkcultures.org/weblog/archives/2005/03/michael_bauwens.html)

<sup>21</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

<sup>22</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

models are Communal Sharing, Authority Ranking, Equality Matching and Market Pricing”<sup>23</sup>. Building his argument on a synthesis of studies stemming from a range of fields, Alan Page Fiske unveils what lies fundamentally behind social interaction<sup>24</sup>.

Alan Page Fiske believes that the greatest catalyst to human evolution and adaptation is social interaction. An individual’s position within a community, social organization or network has powerful implications on one’s speech, behavior, and one’s inter-subjective dynamics.<sup>25</sup> Although his discourse provides a broader framework with which to conceptualize human interaction, it feeds into what underpins P2P production and what lies behind the failure of the *Cooking Pot Market*. Within the framework of Fiske’s relational model, the repercussions recent technological developments have had on the concept of community and shifting understanding of social interaction can be explored.

Alan Page Fiske first introduces in his article the concept of communal sharing, which refers namely to the relationships that tie people together due to a domain of

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<sup>23</sup> Structures of Social Life, Alan Page Fiske <http://www.simonsays.com/content/book.cfm?sid=33&pid=405681>

<sup>24</sup> Human Sociality, Alan Page Fiske <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/anthro/faculty/fiske/reimodov.htm>

<sup>25</sup> The Evolution of Culturally Diverse Social Psychologies, Alan Page Fiske <http://www.anth.ucsb.edu/projects/esm/AlanFiske.html>

resources that are held in commonality. In this case, there is a communal consumption of a certain resource. There is a shifting of the unit of identity from the individual to the community at large. In short, it can be understood as an individual who builds his identity as an extension of a whole, forging a relationship with society that is undifferentiated. En suite, Alan Page Fiske proposes the importance of preserving a social hierarchy of power, as the relationship between superior and inferior ensures order within the system. “In Authority Ranking (AR) people have asymmetric positions in a linear hierarchy in which subordinates defer, respect, and (perhaps) obey, while superiors take precedence and take pastoral responsibility for subordinates.”<sup>26</sup> This authoritative model is present in both the socioeconomic and political domain as well as the technological field, however in the latter is rooted solely in an individual status in the reputation economy.

In “Equality Matching” which Fiske goes on to suggest in tandem, “people keep track of the balance or difference among participants and know what would be required to restore balance”.<sup>27</sup> It is ultimately referring to a relationship defined by

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<sup>26</sup> Human Sociality, Alan Page Fiske  
<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/anthro/faculty/fiske/reimodov.htm>

<sup>27</sup> A. P. Fiske. *Structures of Social Life: The Four Elementary Forms of Human Relations*. New York: Free Press (Macmillan), 1991.

reciprocity and equal share distribution. The idea of reciprocity is a splintered concept, as it can be extrapolated to the idea of the gift economy, to the market economy and also the information economy wherein the exchange is asymmetrical. For instance, as in the case of the Internet, the contributor “receives not one thing of value in exchange - indeed there is no explicit act of exchange at all - but millions of unique goods made by others.”<sup>28</sup> The last component of the relational model that Fiske formulates is ‘Market Pricing’ which is the monetary exchange of goods and services. “Market Pricing relationships are oriented to socially meaningful ratios or rates such as prices, wages, interest, rents, lites, or cost-benefit analyses,”<sup>29</sup> however, in not all cases is money monitoring this system of relations. According to Fiske, all four of these characteristics of the relational model are present to varying extents within the postmodern socioeconomic structure, they dictate how we interact with one another as well as how society functions as a whole.

A good example of how the aforementioned dynamics interrelate can be extrapolated to the domain of a domestically owned bodega, wherein the intercourse

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<sup>28</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

<sup>29</sup> Human Sociality, Alan Page Fiske  
<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/anthro/faculty/fiske/re/modov.htm>

of communal sharing, authority ranking, market pricing and equality matching are all present to varying degrees. Yet, the interdependent relationship that structures a family owned business relies on a model built on trust and communal interest that is far too ambitious to implement on a global scale. However, Alan Page Fiske argues that although market pricing and authoritative ranking may seem far more visible within the contemporary socioeconomic landscape<sup>30</sup>, the onslaught of technological developments has unveiled the presence of the other dynamics of which one could argue the *Cooking Pot* market is hinged on. Furthermore, the paradigm of peer-to-peer production thrives in the sphere of the Internet due to the fact that the information and reputation economy rely primarily on the first three dynamics rather than the market economy. However as the technological domain becomes increasingly important in the socioeconomic sphere, the possibility of a *Cooking Pot Market* emerges, especially if P2P production proves able to transcend the intangible sphere from which it came from. Yet, this postmodern aspiration to redefine to structural design of the market is complicated when confronted with the issue of surplus. To elaborate: the surplus of information in the technological sphere has no harmful implications, whereas the surplus of goods or money is laced with complexities.

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<sup>30</sup> A. P. Fiske. Relativity within Moose ("Mossi") culture: Four incommensurable models for social relationships. *Ethos* 18:180-204, 1990.

Relying on the intercourse of reciprocity, communal sharing, authority and the market, the stability of *Cooking Pot* paradigm is threatened by the variable of surplus, which is an interesting counterintuitive shift when the issue of satisfying needs is replaced with the crisis of excess. George Bataille criticizes Western nations for handling the predicament with a methodology that is arguably backwards. In capitalism, surplus is oftentimes reinvested, which consequentially generates a larger surplus - merely postponing the problem. For Bataille, the Western world has forgotten how to sacrifice surplus in constructive and useful ways<sup>31</sup>. Once again we are back to where we started- struggling to formulate an ideal mechanism for the allocation of goods and natural resources, which even (or perhaps especially) in the case of surplus proves to be a trying feat. The profane nature of excess is the catalyst behind why the *Cooking Pot* paradigm falters when extended into the socioeconomic sphere. The bottom line is that the problems shadowing a glut of goods far exceed those encountered in the circumstance of having excessive information at one's disposal. Furthermore, human nature lacks selflessness. The fetishism of market pricing and the hegemonic hierarchy outweighs the aspiration of reciprocity and communal sharing-- especially in the context of capitalism. Entitlement extinguishes

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.generation-online.org/p/pbataille.htm>

the possibility of a market where a somewhat balanced equilibrium could be met among the four inter-subjective dynamics.

There is a thread of hope, however, in the discourse that *sacrifice* in the context of the reputation economy is beneficial to both parties in that it eradicates the crisis of surplus while also serving as a catalyst to elevate an individual socially within the reputation economy. This factor could sustain the stability of the *Cooking Pot* market. Sacrifice, in whatever form, is ultimately a false gesture of selflessness and kindness disguised and acted out for ulterior motives. Hear me out: a philanthropist donates to a museum or hospital usually to have his/her name inscribed on the wall, just as people of religious conviction give to the poor hoping to escape the possibility of ramifications in the afterlife. The same can be said about the growth of the Internet insofar as those participating in the global community are ultimately capitalizing on the reputation economy. Given that “a crucial component of the cooking-pot market model is reputation,”<sup>32</sup> it’s evident why the paradigm thrives within the technological sphere. Although self-interested sacrifice undermines the concept of selfless giving, it

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<sup>32</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

diffuses the issue of surplus and breathes life into the possibility of a *Cooking Pot* market transcending its present domain.

Aside from coveting eminence within the reputation economy, the primary motivation fueling the public's participation in the technological realm of the Internet is still laced with ambiguity, as it appears that neither altruism nor hope of financial gain serve as a catalyst behind involvement. The asymmetrical dynamic of the Net renders the framework of a free market economy that mirrors the *Cooking Pot Market* paradigm. The *Cooking Pot* model exhibits the potential of generating immeasurable "value through the continuous interaction of people at a numbing speed" in fact, "the cooking-pot market already exists, it is an image of what the Internet has already evolved into, calmly and almost surreptitiously, over the past couple of decades."<sup>33</sup>

However, the aspiration to apply this structure to the socioeconomic sphere may be in vain. The disparity between a surplus of goods and a surplus of information is great, thus the only possibility in sight would be if the reputation economy underpinned the systems stability.

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<sup>33</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, 'Cooking Pot Markets'  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

## Technology's Intervention and Implications

The Internet and television, among many other technological developments, have been catalyst to the way popular culture is consumed and perceived by society at large. Over the past several decades, great advancements have been made in the field of technology facilitating popular culture's accessibility to the masses. Email, business, pornography, dating, virtual communities, web-logs, blogging, information such as the weather or traffic and entertainment such as gaming or films are but only a few of the myriad means in which the internet can be employed. Concurrently, the media has, since its birth, served as a cultural apparatus that educates as well as entertains. In short, the Internet and television have shaped in tandem popular culture and the manner in which it is consumed.

The invention of the World Wide Web has marked a societal shift wherein face-to-face communication has become increasingly supplanted with electronically mediated interaction. The communitarian implications of the Internet are immense insofar as one can keep in touch with loved ones just as easily as merge new friendships with strangers across the world. The cyberspace culture has rendered an electronic proximity that facilitates the transnational flow of media text and information. "The Internet has connected up different parts of the world in a powerful

new way: images, words, and so forth can flow across borderlines in more directions and faster than ever before" (230, Rubin & Melnick, Cyberspace). The rapid growth the World Wide Web is experiencing has resulted in the mass distribution of ideas, this facilitates elements of popular culture- such as music, films, styles (etc.), to effortlessly breach cultural boundaries. With the exception of citizens of Cuba, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia and North Korea- where complete access to every domain is restricted, the Internet is accessible to all and thus anyone in theory can participate regardless of age, sexuality, gender, race or nationality. Veiling the true identity of an individual, the Internet shatters the socially constructed barriers of class and reinforces the discourse that popular culture is deteriorating social and taste hierarchies.

Television is yet another tool that has fueled the accessibility and transformation of popular culture in contemporary society. First off, there is an incredibly broad range of programs available at one's fingertips, from Soup Operas to Reality Television shows, to news and sports, from comedy to MTV. The mass media is very much informed by popular culture, offering diverse programs catering to all taste. Yet agency within this context is limited, as consumer choice resides within the programs offered by the multinational media conglomerates. This drawback fuels the debate concerning structuralism, culturalism and consumer choice. Yet, it must be

noted that consumption patterns have undergone severe transformations as a result of the Internet and mass media. For one, shopping online has redefined consumption in that it is slowly evolving from a social practice into a private one. The relentless advertisements lacing television programs, on the other hand, have the propensity to subliminally implant artificial desires in the minds of the audience who subconsciously succumb to its veiled hegemonic agenda. The manipulative mechanisms of the mainstream media mustn't be underestimated.

Within the discourse of popular culture, a disparity must be drawn between the two electronic mediums. In the case of television, an individual merely consumes the ideals visually manufactured by multinational media conglomerates, whereas the Internet is interactive. This aspect unleashes possibilities never before considered. For instance, the facile reproduction and distribution of music has led to the accessibility of foreign tunes previously unattainable within one's habitus. Recording technology, in addition, has yielded the formation of hybrid sounds. Furthermore, because just about anyone can self publish or produce their own work via blogs, weblogs, website (etc.), the lines between production and consumption have become blurred. Online publications, such as e-zines, have proliferated in the past several years. This is a godsend for low budget movements, as the financial expenses of ink

and paper are no longer of concern and local projects can have a global reach. The point is that popular culture in the context of the Internet is both collective and interactive. Its democratic nature provides an arena of social mobility and freedom of speech wherein people of similar interest can meet and build virtual subcultures and communities. There is no telling what the years ahead will bring, but this much is sure: within the domains of the technological landscape popular culture has a fertile terrain to thrive.

## Vannevar Bush's "As We May Think"

This article, written in July of 1945, "calls for a new relationship between the thinking man and the sum of our knowledge"(1). In the late 1940's, physicists whose prior objectives were rooted in World War II had to viciously veer focus once peace settlements were reached. With their hands suddenly free, their efforts could now be aimed towards the betterment of human life, rather than the destruction. This article reflects on the benefits scientific development has had on the humanity. These advancements have, in a respect, released man "from the bondage of bare existence" (2), as they have improved mental and physical health and facilitated communication amongst the masses. However, the old methods of consolidating research have become inadequate due to the proliferation of knowledge. In response, Bush calls upon a means to store results so that the "truly significant attainments" (2) stemming from years of study won't get "lost in the mass of the inconsequential" (2). If to solve the problems plaguing the present, one must look to the past. Man has constructed "a civilization so complex that he needs to mechanize his records" (13). There are countless disconnected conclusions that, if organized, great progress could result. This is not to say, that progress hasn't already been made, however. Bush

examines the inventions of the past, noting that we are already capable of things once thought impossible. In the first half of the twentieth century, scientist had already produced “cheap complex devices of great reliability” (3), with regard to the advancements in photography and microfilm. However, this only the beginning, he predicts. The machines yet to come will be far more versatile. Prolific scientists thread together a tapestry of possibilities, marking a new event in human history. In spite of this, Bush illustrates where he feels further progress can be made. With developments in microfilm, he believes “the Encyclopedia Britannica could be reduced to the volume of a matchbox” (5). However, compression, although economical, is useless if the information is not consulted. Once again, Bush stresses the significance of specialization and consolidation, as “man profits by his inheritance of acquired knowledge” (8). The results of research must be available for distribution, as the mass production and reproduction of information fuels further development in the scientific field. Thus, “specialization becomes increasingly necessary for progress and the effort to bridge between disciplines” (2). In response to this need, Bush presents his design for the *Memex*, which appears to be early blueprints of a computer. It is a device, he explains, wherein one can “store all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding

speed and flexibility” (10). It will be far more reliable than “any human operator and a thousand times faster” (2). Furthermore, the *Memex* will be capable of associative reasoning, something innate to the human mind. As scientists have adapted a logical process in which to examine the world, these machines will also be able to “manipulate the premises in accordance with formal logic” (7). As he delves into greater detail about the intricacies of this machine, it grows increasingly difficult to discern whether he regards such a device as a tool, or as a being. Despite the fact that he refers to the design as an instrument and “mechanical aid” (2), he has the tendency to personify it. For instance, he states that the “machines will have enormous appetites” (6). Moreover, the “adoption” (9) of this “human mechanism” (12) will facilitate life, as it will have the faculty of *logical* reasoning. This sets the stage for the development of an unhealthy dependency between mankind and the machine, perhaps one, which at the turn of the century, society gradually begins to exhibit.

# BIOPOLITICS

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## “The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction”

In order to understand the implications of biocybernetics reproduction in the “post human age,” Mitchell revisits Walter Benjamin’s classic essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility”. Positing the basis of his argument on inquiry, he poses the following pivotal questions: “what is biocybernetics reproduction? What is being done with it by way of critical and artistic practice, and what could be done?” (483). Thereby, Mitchell aims to not only to articulate this postmodern phenomenon, but he also considers the socioeconomic and technological consequences in its wake. He boldly proposes “that biocybernetics reproduction has replaced Walter Benjamin’s mechanical reproduction as the fundamental technical determinant of our age” (486). If modernity was shaped by the socioeconomic impact of mechanical reproducibility than, Mitchell argues, postmodernity has and will be defined by the rise of biocybernetics reproduction.

The term ‘biocybernetics’ translates literally from Greek as life (bio)/controlling-governing (cybernetics), or control over life. Yet to avoid the pitfalls of such linguistic simplifications, it is better to define biocybernetics as the trajectory the

field of genetic engineering has taken as a result of the synthesis of computer science and biology. Based on the principle of systemic, the discipline stems from the application of theoretical biology to the terrain of cybernetics, which is closely tied to control and system theory. This bio-technical amalgamation has bred digital imaging, global communicability, virtual worlds, the Internet, and the “industrialization of genetic engineering” (483). Many of these technological innovations have without question improved the quality of human life, however his concerns lies in the absence of speculation and blurring of boundaries.

Apropos to this apprehension, Mitchell argues that there is an increasing dedifferentiation of the human and the machine. A good case in point would be the frail distinction between a smart bomb and a suicide bomber in that the later reveals the reduction of a living being into a machine, whereas the former represents a machine that exhibits intellect. He goes on to note, “that machines more than ever behave now like living things” (484). In this respect, there is a shift in the site of what Walter Benjamin coins as the ‘aura’. No longer does an image record an entity, but rather an entity is constructed from a blueprint. This postmodern mechanism of reproduction destabilizes our notion of the aura in that an image is actually the precursor to its production, rather than the antithesis. Thus, there is a reversal in the

relationship between image and copy, DNA scroll and technological entity that essentially inverts Benjamin's hypothesis of the aura. In other words, unlike mechanical reproduction, biocybernetics manifests the aura in the copy rather than the original. Through virtue of this discourse, one can contextualize the historical specificity of a smart bomb, which functions as a paradigm for this postmodern phenomena.

With this said, how can we then situate the suicide bomber in relation to the smart bomb, as both emerge as manifestations of biocybernetics technology? Needless to say, it is difficult to reconcile the relationship between low-tech and high-tech in this 'post-human' age. While a suicide bomber may seem archaic in some respects, the act itself responds faithfully to the biocybernetics paradigm. One of the most striking characteristics of the way biocybernetics reproduction metastasizes itself is through fear. As Foucault brilliantly articulates in "The History of Sexuality," death is the barrier of the sovereign structure. Suicide bombers hijack control from the system in the violent act of voluntary suicide. The threat tied to the absence of this fear translates as the greatest form of political dissidence. How can we afford, with this said, to neglect the dangerous implications that have and will come in tandem to this emerging form of technology that is increasingly shaping the world we live in?

## “The Politics of Life Itself”

There has been a paradigmatic shift from the biopolitics definitive of the early twentieth century to that of the present. With this shift came a transformation in the relationship between the government and the populace regarding the health of the nation. Whereas once the strength of a nation state was hinged on the fitness and health of the population, the socioeconomic gravitation towards individualism has led political apparatus' astray from the collectivist approach towards national health, which in its past formed alliance with eugenics and racial purification.

The ideological framework of eugenics was inspired by the archetype of Darwin's theory of evolution. The idea of 'natural selection' transmuted into domestic breeding and ethnic cleansing. 'Population', 'race', 'quality' and 'territory' determined the strength of a nation and justified genocide through the logic of eugenics in the first half of the twentieth century. However, "Darwin's Theory of Evolution is a theory in crisis in light of the tremendous advances we've made in molecular biology, biochemistry and genetics over the past fifty years."<sup>34</sup> This has had tremendous

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Denton, "Evolution: A Theory in Crisis," 1986, p. 250.

implications not only in the medical sphere, but in the molecularization of biopolitics as well.

Ensuing World War II, the negative associations eugenics held due to the monstrosities of the Nazi Regime triggered a shift in the biopolitical rationalities of democratic societies. The optimization of public health was achieved through a ‘non-directive’ approach hinged on preventative measures. The responsibility of the overall health of a populace fell no longer within the territory of politics, but on the individual. Over the past thirty years, however, the tenets of individual optimization gave rise to a social neurosis consumed by the premeditation of genetic risk.

In tandem to the biomedical advancements made in the field of genetics came the rise of a corporate model of healthcare that hinged profit on the deployment of risk. Genetic dispositions are now determined by speculation, rather than actualization. Furthermore, with the obligations of the state free from the responsibilities of the national population’s health, natural selection becomes hinged on class. Drug consumption relies on premeditated risk. Pharmaceutical company’s profit margin soar, as the working class invest every dime of their income in the plausible prevention of a disease they don’t yet have. We have become a risk society that has found refuge in the promise of a pill.

Of course, one can argue that the molecularization of biopolitics and its aforementioned implications can be perceived in a positive light when paralleled to its eugenic predecessor. Yet, I would argue that this movement away from a social healthcare system does not imply the banishment of eugenic ideology- with sterilization and reproductive laws still very much present. Furthermore, the modern nation-state and capitalist medical apparatus' regulate the cost of health care so that one's financial state and thus social status dictates coverage. With two million people dying a year from preventable diseases, this mutation is best articulated by the term: "letting die". This paradigmatic shift is seen in other realms of the power apparatus such as the socioeconomic doctrine of "lassiez faire"- an intrinsic methodology of neoliberalism.

I think now more than ever before, this form of biopolitics needs to be addressed. With the rising cost of health care, we witness conglomerates capitalizing on the sickness of others. Profits soar with the manipulated consumption of drugs by pharmaceutical companies and an inclination towards self diagnosis in quick fix prescription nations like America. Life insurance is being sliced up into bonds whose value is hinged on the untimely death of another. In short, capitalism guns down

democracy when profit is contingent on the exploitation, pain and death of an individual.

# (POST)STRUCTURALISM

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## Foucault's 'Repressive Hypothesis'

It is a fallacy to believe that the Victorian era marked the beginning of sexual repression. Counter intuitively deconstructing the 'repressive hypothesis', Foucault claims that sex and sexuality was not conceived in the vein of a discourse until the 17th century. Before this point in history, sex was largely ignored by state powers. However, I would argue that despite this, it was central in how the Church managed and controlled the masses. With that said, I propose that what we really witness is a shift in power from Church to State as well as a shift in the social psyche and the mechanism in which power was implemented.

In tandem to the growth of the industrial era came the birth of subjectivity- a sociocultural phenomenon that had inexplicable implications. Although there is no subject only subjectification, the pretext of selfhood led to a reconfiguration in the architecture of power and its manipulation of the masses. The human subject is said to be an invention of the seventeenth century. In part, subjectivity came as a result of the mass production and thus accessibility of mirrors to the bourgeoisie. Prior to 1630, mirrors were rare and seen only in the homes of the wealthy- thus selfhood and class were strongly intertwined. Before, "the rich and powerful had a great deal of control

over their self images, unlike historical selves who left ‘only’ their actions behind, or the millions of whom we knew nothing personal whatsoever”<sup>35</sup>

Ultimately, it is a question of what came first: the chicken or the egg. The mechanisms in which power was exercised mutated in accordance to this widespread notion of individuality, or perhaps people adjusted to this economic structure evolving later into neoliberalism. Control was no longer reinforced through means of deduction but rather through optimizing the productive power of the populace. The mutation in the mechanism in which power was exercised followed in tandem the paradigmatic shift from Church to State. Historically speaking, in a monarchy a serf was granted a plot of land in exchange for his labor, a portion of the crops he harvested and his willingness to fight in the name of his king. Fear that his land, crops or life could be taken away secured his compliance as did the fear implanted by the Church of God. Yet, with the rise of industrial power and the birth of subjectivity came a paradigmatic shift away from deduction as a means of control to the sphere of production.

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<sup>35</sup> Painting women : cosmetics, canvases, and early modern culture. Patricia Phillippy. 2006.

Internalizing a sense of selfhood, an individual's labor was translated as personal gain. A digression from work meant a crippling of one's own prosperity. Time translated as money, so sex for purposes outside of reproduction was perceived as unproductive. In the Victorian era, sex became central in how medical, state and industrial apparatus's of power functioned in relation to the public. The repressive hypothesis was rooted in the bourgeoisie mentality that saw sex for pleasure as frivolous, social norms were cemented as were gender roles. This perception fueled the proliferation of discourses like psychoanalysis that sought to articulate sexual taboo's and perversions. With the longevity of life being in the best interests of the power apparatus, population control became paramount and sex for the sake of sex for thus reason as well was shamed.

## Foucault's "History of Sexuality"

In the "History of Sexuality", Foucault positions the discourse of sexuality within what he claims to be a history of repression. He extrapolates this sexual suppression, which renders sex outside of reproduction taboo, to the technology of power and the hegemonic order. Foucault begs the question as to why the western world has always approached sex as either scientific or perverse- two polarities difficult to reconcile. He goes further to divulge the social inclination to believe that there is a finite truth connected with sex which is rooted in the discourse's relationship with knowledge and power.

Foucault traces the birth of sexual repression back to the seventeenth century, at which point he argues the discourse's disposition manifested in tandem to the rise of the bourgeoisie, who regarded sex for pleasure unproductive. From here, Foucault goes further to claim that power is harnessed through the act of repression. He juxtaposes traditional forms of sociopolitical control with that of the present. Three centuries ago, the sovereign had the "right of death" over his subjects. The threat of deduction, in other words the power to take another's life, property or freedom was used as a form of dominance over the populace. In modern times, the "right of death"

has been replaced by the “power over life”. This transformation in the mechanisms in which power is exercised over the people marks a paradigm shift. In contemporary time, political interests lie in the practice of preserving life as opposed to threatening death.

Modernity and the rise of capitalism regarded the human body as a productive unit that’s part of a larger machine. The economic growth of a nation is hinged on the efficiency of its populace. Through social conditioning, certain taboos are internalized and expectations are put in place. This vein of control is diffused through the military apparatus, the education system and the media. Social stratification is secured by the allotment of certain tasks to different demographics. Foucault argues that the power structure has to be “capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them [the people] more difficult to govern” (141). Foucault coins the term “bio-power” to explain the political mechanisms employed to harness control of the populace. He goes on to argue that biopower is responsible for the rise of capitalism and the modern day nation-state.

Biopower and the “power over life” takes another form in the case of population control, demographics and resource analysis. This is where the discourse of sexuality is invited in. With human life under the jurisdiction of politics, the reproductive

practices of the people become political. This is evident in cases like the population control policy put in effect by the Republic of China, which restricts the number of children urban couples may have. Foucault's interest lies in the obscured and discursive tie sex has with language, knowledge and power. He unveils the means in which culture bans the politics of sexuality outside the confines of certain social norms such as the institution of marriage. Pajczkowska writes in 'Issues in Feminist Visual Culture' that "as a concept, sex is particularly anxiogenic in our culture and tends therefore to be idealized in romantic, divine and sublime love or to be debased as carnal, instinctive or perverse, as dirt" (9). This rigid dichotomy creates a schism in the discourse of sexuality. Perhaps through debasing sexual liberation, the governing forces are able to maintain control through repression.

## Structuralism vs. Culturalism

Structuralism and culturalism are two distinctive theories within the discourse of popular culture that serve to conceptualize the complexities of its relationship with society. Structuralism, a concept formulated at the *Frankfurter Schule*, views popular culture as a site where veiled hegemonic ideologies are imposed from above by the multinational corporations bred by capitalism. The theory is best exemplified via a *top-down* model, as this paradigm illustrates the public as victims held hostage to the commercialization and the manipulative mechanism of mainstream films and television. In short, the view is that the masses have been blindly coerced to embrace the ideals of consumerism constructed by the culture industry. Power lies in the state, and agency is “is overwhelmed by structure” (132, Storey, *Consumption in Everyday Life*) and thus absent within the framework of the capitalist system.

Culturalism, on the other hand, rejects the consensus that popular culture is imposed from above and views it as an authentic expression of mass society. Social structures, in this view, are shaped by human agency and thus the collective force of ‘bottom-up’ movements mustn’t be underestimated. Culturalism contradicts the structuralist conception that consumption yields one “a hopeless victim of 'false

consciousnesses'" (132, Storey, *Consumption and Everyday Life*). Rather, culturalism emphasizes how subcultures, underground music scenes, grassroots, and the appropriation of apparel unveil the complexities of consumption and role of human agency. Although both paradigms broaden the discourse on popular culture, offering very interesting perspectives indeed, the truth lies somewhere in between the two. It is best articulated, in my opinion, by the concept of a '*compromise equilibrium*', which regards popular culture as, " an arena of struggle and negotiation between the interest of dominant groups and the interest of subordinate groups" (4, Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*).

The crucial difference between the structural and cultural view lies namely in the fact that the former regards consumption as a passive act whereas the latter argues that it is an active practice wherein identities are constructed via consumer choice. The structuralist approach claims that consumers are "infected with artificial wants dreamed up by the international league of producers" (247, Appleby) and that consumption "is a mere shadow of production" (132, Storey, *Consumption in Everyday Life*). Naively embracing the ideals and values engendered and exported by the multinational conglomerates, consumer choice exist to certain extent however it's heavily dictated by advertisements, branding, merchandizing and the hegemonic agenda

mediated by the mass media.

Culturalist, on the contrary, rejects the claim that consumers are manipulated by commercialization and views consumption as a highly active act and social practice that offers “avenues for individual expression through a range of commodities” (608, Bennet, *Subcultures or Neo-tribes?*). Consumption does not follow at the heels of production, but rather it is a means of expressing individuality and constructing social identities. My personal take on the matter is that individuals are simultaneously *consumers* and *producers* of popular culture, and thus the two paradigms offer concurrently accurate and flawed concepts concerning the issue at hand.

# MULTICULTURALISM

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## Subdivisions of Pride: Multiculturalism in the Metropolis

The mosaic multiculturalism rendered by the ethnic enclaves subdividing Manhattan undermines the pretext that a cosmopolitan city is a transnational space of social intercourse, intercultural integration and communication. Dissecting the complexities of multiculturalism, the relationship between cosmopolitanism and globalization become increasingly perplexing. New York City is the “most tangled site of socio-cultural hybridity in North America” (Stroller 82), wherein the flow of commodities, currencies and people create a transnational landscape. In this sense, the transglobal city serves as a paradigm for the multicultural possibilities of a metropolis. Yet with the pressures of economic and political assimilation, immigrants are torn between salvaging remnants of their cultural inheritance and integrating into the “American way of life”. The hybrid identities constructed within the context of New York City’s diasporic communities presents a paradox that fuels the discourse that multiculturalism is inimical to a national identity. In tandem to this argument is the notion that the mosaic multiculturalism created by ethnic enclaves renders subdivisions of pride that undermines the aspirations of ethnic integration within a cosmopolitan society. Two traits of ethnic enclaves pose a threat to the discourse of

integral multiculturalism. First off, as stated before, the segregated boroughs unveil a separatist impulse on the part of ethnic minorities. Secondly, the urban gentrification of ethnic enclaves engenders disneyfied representations of multiculturalism, which exploits the cultural capital of the multiethnic metropolis deteriorating the district's authenticity and driving the original inhabitant out. This marketing of ethnic enclaves such as New York City's "Chinatown" and "Little Italy" commodifies on the "cultural features of a particular community" (Ram 41) as a ploy to seduce tourists.

Laced with possibilities, the era of reflexive modernity is concurrently pregnant with unpredictability. Yet the intercourse of the aforementioned has given birth to the transnational terrain of the contemporary cosmopolitan city. For Beck, to be cosmopolitan is to have a splintered identity, it is to be "a citizen of two worlds" (Beck 18). This "internal globalization" (Beck 17) merges the global with the local resulting in an "intensification of worldwide social relations" that "link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens 64). Yet any attempt to define the implication of such can be like "trying to nail a pudding to the wall" (Beck 17) as globalization carries the connotations of internationalization, liberalization, universalization, westernization or modernization. Regardless of the complexities inherent to this term, the

deterritorialization that has resulted from the transnational flow of people and information has indisputably fueled the formation of the multicultural metropolis. It was Friedrich Nietzsche who was among the first to foresee the inevitability of cultures existing “side by side, in combination, comparison, contradiction and competition in every place and all the time” (Beck 18). In theory, it is this *pluralization* of social demarcations that deteriorates borders. Embracing the otherness of the other, “cosmopolitanism lacks orientation, perhaps because it is so much bigger and includes so many different kinds of people with conflicting customs, assorted hopes and shames, so many sheer technological and scientific possibilities and risk, posing issues people never faced before” (Beck 20). Yet, with this said, does globalization and the emergence of the multicultural city undermine the ideologies of the nation state?

American society is united under a constitution of shared moral precepts, norms and values, which has evaded the divisiveness of multiethnic society through purporting the ideology of the “American Way of Life”. The politic of assimilation in America mirrors the *laissez faire* approach, wherein an immigrant either adopts the “American way of life” and is thus absorbed into the established culture or is left behind to make ends meet in the ghetto. Those who fail to be Americanized can be understood as the “residue of the melting pot” (Schlesinger 67). It is for this reason

that multiculturalism poses an indisputable threat to the national unity of the United States, as it is an ideal laced with a “separatist impulse” that renders “multi-nationalism”(Schlesinger 43). Furthermore, it undermines the assimilation aspirations of America and threatens the shared ideological beliefs that the coherent national identity of the States relies on. In sum, a nation-state is built on the hope of homogeneity, whereas multiculturalism is hinged on the embrace of diversity (Grossberg 54). Nationalism and cultural homogeneity are fundamental ideologies of the modern nation state. In other words, “American” identity is constructed through political or national affiliation rather than ethnic or cultural ties. The coupling of identities, such as African-American or Asian- American, proves that race emerges as supplement to American identity with the undisputed hegemonic center being Caucasian males. In short, multiculturalism’s promotion of cultural diversity is ideologically contradictory with the ideals and national identity of America.

The concept of the melting pot materialized as a response to the influx of foreigners from around the world into cities across the country. Hinged on the economic interests of the United States, the hospitality granted to these immigrants stemmed from the selfish ulterior motives that they are affordable assets to the labor force. The metaphor of hospitality thus blurs the line between the discourse of

generosity and the discourse of fundamental human rights. Forced to construct homes in countries where they are marginalized and rejected, foreigners are oftentimes alienated from society at large. Diasporic communities represent the collective experience of displacement. After having been induced to leave their homelands behind, immigrants are communally drawn together in a collective struggle to acclimate. This alienation engenders a splintered response on the part of the marginalized immigrant in their approach to assimilation. On one hand, foreigners construct a transnational identity exemplified by the paradigm of “*roots*” and “*routes*”. This “double diasporic identity” (Kaya 52) formation can be best understood through the term *intersectionality*, which signifies that identities are constructed at the intersection of shifting elements such as race, class, gender and nationality. The diasporic “subject crosses over the cultural borders and constructs a syncretic cultural identity, or a rhizomatic space” (Kaya 59). Acquiring traits from another cultural identity while still clinging to past understandings of selfhood, co-optation signifies the coexistence of contradictory cultural forms within an individual. Furthermore, the decentered lateral connections experienced by a Puerto Rican living in an Italian neighborhood in Lower Manhattan also contributes to the proliferation of schizophrenic identities. In an effort to evade this violent transition and process of

identity construction, some immigrants, drawn together through a common thread of nationality and/or ethnicity, decide to inhabit ethnic enclaves wherein their traditions, customs, language and cultural practices remain intact. This separatist impulse undermines the politic of assimilation and integral aspirations of cosmopolitanism.

Distinguished from the city at large by its cultural inheritance, an ethnic enclave is a cluster of immigrants with shared roots. Ethnic enclaves “consist of immigrant groups who concentrate in a specific spatial location and organize a variety of enterprises serving their own ethnic market and/or the general population. The basic characteristic is that a significant proportion of immigrant labor force works in enterprises owned by other immigrants” (Portes 290). Ethnic neighborhoods, although not always the most desirable places to live, provide a safe haven for foreigner where they can engage in common social practices with others of the same ethnicity, language and/or nationality. The “commercial thoroughfares of migrant enclaves in large cities have functioned as retail centers, catering to the requirements of ethnic minorities” (Shaw 1996). Seduced by the infinite possibilities lacing the great “American Dream”, many foreigners migrate to the United States without knowing a word of English and with only the clothes on their back. Ethnic enclaves facilitate a foreigner’s adaptation to the “American way of life”.

These ethnic enclaves geographically engender mosaic multiculturalism in the metropolis. This social reductionist view delineates the cultural differences of a people as demarcated entities that co-exist with one another like pieces of a mosaic. In other words, it is an essentialist perspective that organizes population groups according to ethnicity, nationality and/or race (etcetera). Ironically, these subdivisions of pride often start as slums, yet as a result of their 'exotic' cultural capital become sites of urban gentrification that render disneyfied shadows of the original. Driven by economic interest, the instant city officials recognize the cultural capital of an ethnic enclave, they begin heavily investing in its gentrification, ultimately rendering it a tourist attraction. The term *monopoly rent* implies that "culture has become a commodity" (Harvey 1) that can be profited from. The transformation of ethnic enclaves into tourist destination is determined by its geographic location and/or symbolic capital (Harvey 3). David Harvey employs the term *monopoly rent* to explain why areas in close proximity to a city's center or of historic significance often fall victim to heavy commercialization (Harvey 2).

A haven of cultural consumption, Manhattan Island has, over the years, disneyfied every ethnic enclave subdividing its urban landscape in a campaign promoting the city's diverse multiculturalism. New York City's "Little Italy", an ethnic

enclave formerly populated with people of Italian decent, is an ideal example of the process in which a districts cultural inheritance deteriorates at the hands of gentrification. In effect, “Little Italy” is no longer a neighborhood of Italian immigrants, but rather a themed street constituted of Italian restaurants catering to tourist from abroad. Most local New Yorkers would not be caught dead cutting through the sea of sightseers. “The original inhabitants of ‘Little Italy’ have long moved away from this particular district” (Shaw 1988), and the authentic nature of the borough has dissipated, as “commercial gentrification is likely to drive out small businesses” (Shaw 1997). Italian style cafes, restaurants and hotels lace the main street, commodifying on the enclave’s “cultural inheritance” through offering traditional food and musical entertainment to tourist eager to consume.

Only a few blocks south, New York City’s notorious ‘Chinatown’ sprawls, An assault on the senses, the district geographically imperializes the lower east side. In the past, ‘Chinatown’ was perceived as an overcrowded haven of cultural insularity. The chain migration fueling the influx of foreigners deteriorated the ailing economy of the ethnic ghetto. The civic government neglected the poor economic state of the district until deciding to gentrify the district and commodify on its potential cultural capital. With the living expenses skyrocketing, the streets are now infested with tourist from

abroad rather than the borough's original inhabitants. Shops, markets and restaurants that once catered to the Chinese populace, have now been appropriated to appease the Western palette. The disneyfied version of "Chinatown" has been in effect stripped of its authenticity. The influx of Chinese immigrants has shifted to Flushing Queens, a district on the periphery of New York City. This urban migration is rooted in either economic reasons or the fact that "Asians tend to live separately from others" (Zukin 836). The transformation of an ethnic enclave into a gentrified site of commercialization, cultural consumption and tourism has alarming implications. Although at its surface the urban revitalization of ethnic ghetto proves positive, the true character of the boroughs is lost and the original inhabitants driven out.

The use of theming, branding, merchandizing and dedifferentiation of consumption render these fading enclaves havens of consumption commercializing on the alleged "cultural capital" which underpin their appeal. This mechanism of "district branding" is an "essentially an American invention" (Ward 234) that transform authentic ethnic enclave into "islands of pure consumption" for visitors who are wealthier than the local population" (Shaw 1986). However, in the end the original residents can no longer afford to subsist in their own neighborhood after having transformed into a perversely disneyfied destination. Ultimately, "the place is

conceptualized as the ‘product’ to be repositioned. Differentiation from competing place-brands- in this case, through distinctive ethnic or cultural associations- must be highlighted and promoted to target audiences, following advocacy of strategic image management to reposition destinations that may include small areas, such as districts within cities” (Shaw 1997) The branding of this romantic “Otherness” explains the process “through which multicultural districts are selected and redefined as destinations for leisure” (Shaw 1996). However, unfortunately “tourist bubbles are more likely to contribute to racial, ethnic and class tensions than to an impulse towards local community” (Judd 53).

As the Americanization of global culture metastasize, the threat of *disneyfication* grows under the frail guise of multiculturalism. Stripping a locality of its cultural inheritance, this term refers to the process in which a place undergoes urban transformation according to Disney standards, ultimately rendering it a diluted version of its original. The theme park has, in some respect, become a model for both urban and commercial development and within no time cities will mirror the Disney’s Epoch Center. Shopping malls, food chains and reconstructed city centers are all evidence of this societal impulse towards escapism and consumerism. Yet from this “relentless commercialization of culture connected with the Disney Empire” (Huysen 2) a

contradiction emerges, as the democratic aspirations of a society along with its cultural inheritance are lost to corporate globalization. The more districts of a metropolis surrender to *disneyfication*, “the less unique and special they become. The bland homogeneity that goes with pure commodification erases monopoly advantages” (Harvey 4). Thus, the symbolic capital of an ethnic enclave is self-destructive, as it engenders the economic development that inevitably homogenizes and commodifies it. This unfortunate paradox is evident in ethnic enclaves such as ‘Chinatown’ and ‘Little Italy’, wherein its cultural capital is both responsible and threatened by its urban redevelopment. The generic homogeneity plaguing these districts is ironic in that it was the initial inimitability of the enclave that rendered it a tourist attraction and led to its corporate gentrification. Uprooting its past and exploiting its historical significance and cultural capital, city officials and corporations have commodified and commercialized the very thing that rendered the neighborhoods so unique and, in doing so, destroys it.

The notion that multiculturalism is incompatible with the nation-state is wounded by the pretext that cosmopolitanism is a “dialectic process in which the global and the local do not exist as cultural polarities but as combined and mutually implicating principles” (Beck 17). Yet despite the contention that cosmopolitanism is a

catalyst to integral multiculturalism, the complexities presented by ethnic enclaves undermine the fundamental aspirations of the transnational metropolis. Fostering a separatist impulse, ethnic enclaves are culturally homogenous groups inclined to sequester themselves from the city at large. Furthermore, districts such as 'Chinatown' and 'Little Italy' illustrate how the gentrification of enclaves renders the "commodification of culture" (Wasko 271). The façade constructed by the disneyfication of multicultural districts strips them of authenticity. New York City's subdivision of pride illustrates how multiculturalism can be mosaic and in some instances contrived, diluting intercultural implications of cosmopolitanism.

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## Pide Salonu

Out east on the outskirts of Amsterdam, a Turkish population of immigrants swells. Chain migration, low-income housing and cultural familiarity fuel the growth of this neighborhood situated on the periphery of the city center. In many senses, it is an ethnic enclave insofar as this specific immigrant group concentrates “in a specific spatial location” constituted of “a variety of enterprises serving their own ethnic market” (290 Portes). Many perceive this district as testament to the Turkish community’s unwillingness to integrate, feeding into the discourse that a multicultural society is inimical to a coherent national identity. Regardless, as a communications student I was graced with the experience to live on the fringe of this borough, straddling the intangible walls of this ethnic enclave.

Often frequenting the Turkish market, or Dappermarkt, I found the people incredibly open and kind. An assault on the senses, the market with its bouquet of sights and smells vends practically everything from spices to bike locks. In fact, although I now reside in the West, I still ride all the way across town just to have some of the best Turkish pizza under the sun. You can’t miss the humble *pide salonu* located at the mouth of the market. Selling simply *lahmacun* and *pide*<sup>36</sup>, this small little stand sits at the corner of Dapperstraat. For those unfamiliar the cuisine, *Pide* is a canoe-shaped flatbread topped with anything from Turkish sausage to mushrooms or eggs. *Lahmacun*, on the other hand, is made with ground beef, onions, peppers and parsley

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<sup>36</sup> “The term *pide* denotes a large boat-shaped pizza, though these establishments also sell a smaller round type pizza known as *lahmacun*” (330 Kesteloot)

on top of a thin crust. I have eaten it in several places around the world, and often times the dish will shift according to locality.

Merely a modest tent lacing the sidewalk, the place couldn't be more authentic—however I'm hesitant to call it a “take-out restaurant”. Held up by rusty metal rods with a tarp overhead, the makeshift joint looks like it could collapse with a strong wind. The *pide salonu* is run by a Turkish family of immigrants: “wives, sisters and others' help in food preparation” (Ram 50) while the father and son sell the *pide* and *lahmacun* up front. Three women in headscarves crossing three generations crowd behind a wood stove hastily working. It is no wonder why “enclave type approaches tend to stress the importance of family and co-ethnic labor as a means of coping in a competitive market context” (Ram 43), as training is not necessary, trust is inherent and good business is in everyone's best interest. The *pide* is piled up behind a glass counter on top of which crusty condiments rest. I wouldn't go as far to say that the place is dirty, but it could defiantly be cleaner. Yet, despite this, the savory smell will stop you in your tracks and help you turn a blind eye to its questionable sanitation.

Ethnic food vendors such as this one oftentimes “occur in areas of ethnic minority concentrations” in order to “satisfy some need of the immigrant community” (326 Kesteloot). The *pide salonu's* clientele is primarily Turkish, providing the locals with “both a direct link with the eating habits of their country of origin and a social center for people living in relative isolation” (329 Kesteloot). Yet given the “cheap and appetizing fare of the snack bar”, the place is also frequented by non-Turkish customers such as myself as *pide* is “not only exotic: it is also a satisfying and very economical meal” (332 Kesteloot). However, unlike other places vending ethnic cuisine, the food has not been appropriated to satisfy the Western palette. I know this

only through inquiring about its authenticity to an older Turkish woman at the market the other day. She looked up at me, the lines under her eyes revealing her age, and replied, “this is true Turkish, no deceit” in a thick accent while clinging to the *pide* waving it wildly. She spoke very little Dutch and practically no English, but her granddaughter, who stood beside her, explained that she has just arrived to Amsterdam from a village on the outskirts of Istanbul. With that said, I discarded my skepticism and stepped in line behind her.

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## An Intercultural Meal

Living in a city is an inexplicably unique experience, as the global and local dualism of cosmopolitanism renders a safe haven to the transient and intercultural intercourse that takes place everyday. Having been a city dweller since birth, I am no longer fazed by the multicultural nature of my friends, neighbors and fellow strangers. However of all the experiences that sleep in the folds of my memory, one in particular refuses to be forgotten as it was an evening marked by a particularly intriguing clash of cultures. Not too long ago, I threw a potluck and invited a few people from my building. Living in a housing facility catering primarily to international students, I was interested to see what strange and foreign foods the occasion would rake in. Katrina, from upstairs, was barely an acquaintance at the time. I knew little about her, other than the fact that she occasionally vacuumed at 4 o'clock in the morning. Her origins were Lithuanian, and having been to Vilnius several times myself I was anxious to speak to her about it (and maybe also mention the untimely vacuuming). She was the first to arrive bringing along with her a traditional Lithuanian dish called "kucia", which is best described as a kind of oatmeal pudding with sweetened water- absolutely fabulous if ever you are graced with the chance to try it. My neighbor from Poland,

Brozena, brought with her Golabki, which despite meaning “pigeon” in polish, is really just stuffed cabbage. She also brought smoked cheese from her family’s farm. In all honesty, I’ve never tasted anything better, but after having eaten almost half of it I felt a sting of guilt when learning just how long it took her family to produce. My downstairs neighbor Tom, from China, didn’t bring anything at all- I don’t think he understood the nature of the occasion and thus I suppressed the inclination to regard his actions as impolite. Barbara, from Venezuela, came late with a bottle of wine and after one too many glasses starting spouting off about the evils of Chavez: *He may have called Bush a donkey on national television, but his ego does not compensate for his hypocrisy.* Cigarette smoke and languages from all corners of the world filled the room baptized in fluorescent light. Perhaps the most interesting aspect was observing the interaction between a few of my American acquaintances and the other company. Among the first to arrive, they came with potato chips and beer (talk about perpetuating a stereotype, huh!) As the night unfolded and new foreign cuisines graced the table, I noticed they were more hesitant than others to try the exotic dishes and within no time broke off from the party and formed their own click in the corner. When a friend of mine from North African brought with her a traditional Ethiopian dish that she learned as a child from her mother, one of the Americans made the sly remark: *how can Ethiopia have*

*there own food traditions, aren't they all starving over there?* There was an uneasy silence, broken only by the cork popping off a bottle of cheap champagne. Standing as a wall flower in a room crowded with people of countless ethnic and cultural backgrounds, I found myself observing from afar the interaction which was taking place while meanwhile trying to reconcile conflicting concepts of identity within myself. Experiences such as these I must say are few and far between; and for a fleeting moment in the late hours of the night I was struck with the impression that the intercultural gathering almost served as a microcosm of the world at large.

# THE METROPOLIS

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## “New York is Not a Completed City”

As skyscrapers spring up at an alarming rate, the tremendous rapidity of New York City's incessant construction render it an unfinished breeding ground of possibilities. In his work, Le Corbusier unveils the reasons for which he prefers New York to most European cities- particularly Paris. His rationale is rooted in an appreciation for the architecture, infrastructure and cleanliness of New York, not to mention the metropolis' unpredictability. New York, pregnant with prospect, is unique in that it is “a city in the process of becoming. Today it belongs to the world.” (98)

Personified as Janus, the Roman god of beginning, past and future, New York emerges as an epicenter in a crowd of international cities. Yet, “at present, it is like a house-moving, all the furniture in confusion scattered about, unkempt.” (99) It is for this reason that Le Corbusier claims the city has yet to be completed. This volatility, however, leaves the question as to whether it will evolve to be “an ass or a king”(99) unanswered. Perhaps it is this blind anticipation that fuels Le Corbusier's predilection for New York. Paralleling it with Paris, he dissects the disparity between the two and aspires to distinguish what exactly it is about New York that makes it unlike any other city. First off, he comments on its immaculate conditions, asserting that “cleanliness is

a national virtue in America” (99). Moreover, there is a unique *style* to New York’s cleanliness, which baptizes the city with a revived vibe. European cities, he argues, embrace the faithful abrasion of time as if “to prove that they possess an age-old culture” (100). Yet the dust gathered from several centuries, he finds, elicit the impression of negligence. The dilapidated, old buildings lining the streets of European cities are not only waging war against steady decay but are also inefficient in that they fail to fully utilize space. In short, the cities of Europe sprawl out rather than up. The skyscrapers of New York mark a “new event in human history” (99). Salvaging each inch of land, such edifices prove to be a genius means of concentrating the masses. The Soviets pawn off the structures as “capitalist” and in a sense they are.

The architectural movement is incredibly economical, as is the infrastructure of the city. Le Corbusier argues that the labyrinth of tiny cobblestone streets in Paris is backwards and confusing rendering the composition of the city complicated, rather than charming. The avenues ending with magnificent edifices are superfluous and stem from an age-old traditions rooted in the prior appeasement of royalty. The anatomical simplicity of New York, on the other hand, yields a “Euclidean clearness.” (101) Constructed in the vein of a grid, the metropolis is divided by twelve parallel avenues intersected by several hundred streets, all of which at right angles to

one another and numerically named. With such order your “mind is free instead of being given over every minute to the complicated game imposed on it by the puzzle of our European cities.” (100) However, interestingly enough, Le Corbusier refers to this layout as something of the “American way” yet the Romans, Greeks, Egyptians and even the French built many of their cities in a like fashion. The quotation marks perhaps are meant to undermine the statement, as the “American way” is in truth just a cornucopia of countless cultures ☒

## “In a Forest of Symbols”

Marshall Berman feels as if the onslaught of modernity is deracinating the roots of the past, whereas Le Corbusier believes that the aforementioned is indispensable if humanity aspires to progress. To fully understand the reasoning behind each conflicting argument, one must consider the disparity in experiences from which each perspective stems. Marshall Berman's<sup>37</sup> birth in the early 1950's unveils his life laced the dawn and progression of modernity, which perhaps triggered his inclination towards Marxism. Le Corbusier<sup>38</sup>, on the other hand, was an architect born in the late nineteenth century. The repercussions of modernism were unknown to him, as he lived to see only the birth of the movement.

In his article, Marshall Berman illustrates growing up in the Bronx as his neighborhood deteriorated at the hands of Robert Moses. An architectural giant, Moses' was responsible for the construction of the West Side Highway, Grand Central Parkway, the Triborough Bridge and, most notably, the Cross-Bronx Expressway. In response to the implications of such grand endeavors, Berman cites Moses', effectively

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<sup>37</sup> Berman, Marshall, *Adventures in Marxism*, London; New York : Verso, c1999.

<sup>38</sup> Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning*, London, J. Rodker, 1929

exemplifying his cruelty: “there are more houses in the way...more people in the way...when you operate in an over built metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax.” (Robert Moses, Berman 134) Coined as progress, the Cross-Bronx Expressway cut through the neighborhood of Berman’s childhood, shattering the economy and littering the streets with abandoned buildings. Even today the scars have yet to mend, as “rage, despair and violence spread like plagues” (Berman 153) through the decaying district. For Berman, this is not progress. He believes that the paradox of modernity is such that the movement towards ‘urban renewal’ has savagely devastated “the only kind of environment in which modern values can be realized” (Berman 150) and that its very development “has made the modern city itself old-fashioned, obsolete.” (Berman 143)

Le Corbusier, on the other hand, embraces the architectural vision of Moses, which sought “to overawe and overwhelm.” (Berman 142) For him, these “monoliths of steel and cement, devoid of vision or nuance or play” define progress. (Berman 142) He praises, in his text, the architects who “rush in with their heads down; after having worked over the ‘*styles*’ firmly and worthily” (Le Corbusier 99) for they pave the “paths of the modern spirit.” (Le Corbusier 99) Berman, too, admitted at first to having a shred of faith in the modernist movement, as in the late 1930’s, Moses’, at the height of

his career, established parks and edifices which esteemed the masses. He concedes that “the uptown Hudson riverfront, one of Moses’ finest urban landscape, is especially striking when we realize that it was a wasteland of hoboes’ shacks and garbage dumps before he got there.” (Berman 138) Furthermore, neither one can deny “Moses’ projects marked not only a new phase in the modernization of urban space, but a new breakthrough in modernist vision and thought.” (Berman 139) Yet, unfortunately, as the saying goes, *power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely*. After the onslaught of World War II, Moses’ vision was perverted as “ the ‘modern movement’ in architecture and urbanism turned radically against modern romance: they marched to Le Corbusier’s battle cry, ‘we must kill the street.’” (Berman 149) Like a Venus Fly Trap, the perpetual reformation of New York City, to this day, attracts countless. Le Corbusier embraces this incessant progression and curses the ‘urban romance’ that Berman nostalgically reflects upon. In the end, Berman surrenders to the diluted American dream. Helpless, he acknowledges the tragedy of modernity, as progress paves over the past.

## “The Metropolis and Mental Life”

In his essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Georg Simmel dissects the onslaught of metropolitan life and the struggle to preserve one’s individuality. The aforementioned has laced the evolution of man for several centuries. At first distinguished as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the ability to extricate oneself from the oppressive bonds that once plagued civilizations of the past, the shift of collective mindset in the nineteenth century bred the necessity to render oneself indispensable by means of specialization in the economy and society alike. However, in this day and age, Simmel illustrates individuality as one’s facility to sustain their subjective self in the face of life in the metropolis. Such is not an easy feat, as the pressures and sway of society can undoubtedly manipulate one’s character. Georg Simmel aspires to explicate how we as humans have adapted to the incessant stimulus of the metropolitan life.

The pulse of the city compels the masses to build a resistance, or rather an indifference, to the sensory overload of the streets flooded with unpredictability. The sense of urgency roused by the complexities of urban existence triggers an overstimulation of the nervous system. Moreover, the city gives refuge to an economy

driven by mass-production, consumerism and, of course, money, all of which rely heavily on the “matter-of-fact attitude” (4) stemming from this conditioned indifference. However, this is but a thread in a tapestry of characteristic one must harbor if to live and work within the organized chaos of a metropolis. The stability of a city depends almost entirely on the “punctuality, calculability and exactness” (6) of those who fuel it. Our innate impulsive, irrational nature is thus suppressed out of necessity.

In short, the metropolises have assaulted the senses to the point where the modern man has become unresponsive and reserved in the vain hope of self-preservation, which in turn renders what Simmel refers to as the “blasé attitude” (6). This concentration of calculating minds defined by utter indifference facilitates the effectively and fuels the productivity of the “money economy” (7). In truth, we blindly subsist as pawns in an inter-reliant economic pyramid. Be that as it may, within this immense network of dependencies there is freedom, Simmel asserts, explaining that “social development proceeds at once in two different, yet corresponding directions” (10), as it branches out those in positions of power loose complete control of those who constitute the anatomy of the structure. Unfortunately, despite the brilliance of harboring such freedom in a crowd of possibilities, the reserved nature so

heavily relied upon in the metropolis for self-preservation elicits a lonesome isolation amid a sea of strangers. Without emerging as indispensable, one drowns. Simmel concludes his argument stating that it is not for us to pass judgment, but rather to solely acknowledge this undercurrent of truth that runs beneath the glut of asphalt.

## Eye Contact with Strangers

Georg Zimmel's belief that the "blasé attitude" is a symptom of self-preservation subsist even a hundred years after having made the claim, however due to gender disparities this mentality has evolved in separate yet similar directions. First off, one must acknowledge that Georg Zimmel's argument stems from the perspective of a man at the turn of the twentieth century. Interestingly enough, his perception of the implications a city has on the subjective self sustain, despite the onslaught of modernity. Undeniably, there is a conditioned indifference many adopt in a city which triggers the tunnel vision so heavily relied upon to navigate the streets.

Zimmel justifies in his work, "The Metropolis and the Mental Life," how this mindset is a repercussion of incessant stimulus, what he fails to shed light on, however, is how the experience may differ according to gender. Men are more apt to rely on what Zimmel refers to as the "matter of fact" (4) attitude which fuels the "money economy" with its impersonal embrace towards "social intercourse" (4). This mindset proves indispensable in the financial world, where money "reduces all quality and individuality to the question: how much?" (4) Furthermore the crowd of competition feeds the stipulation for specialization, as it is crucial to seem

indispensable in the economic “arena of struggle.” (17) Women exhibit similar behavioral tendencies, however the reasoning behind their self-preservation is rooted in a skepticism stemming from socialization. The burden of uterus and fragility of femininity necessitates a reserved nature often times disguised as distrust. Unfortunately, such a demeanor elicits an isolation that renders one susceptible to loneliness. This claim comes from personal experiences I myself have had in New York.

As I cut through the streets littered with strangers, I’ve learned to avert my eyes. However, last week I made accidental eye contact with a man standing outside a dry cleaner. I thought little of it, and continued on my way. Four blocks later, he came up behind me, panting, asking where I was going and if he could follow. It took me three more blocks to impress upon him my disinterest. The man’s behavior was inappropriate, but would have been alarming if it were to have happened during the night. This experience unveiled the irony of the human condition. Women, by and large, invest hours into their appearance in hopes of grabbing the interest of others. The unfortunate reality is that females are inclined to view themselves through the eyes of others. Amid a sea of faces, a woman’s desire to draw attention to herself

constructs an interesting paradox. This species of specialization is perhaps rooted in our evolutionary impulse to procreate.

## Potsdamer Platz

Berlin's Potsdamer Platz serves as an example for how the cultural identity of a place can fall victim to the homogeny engendered by multinational corporations. One of the most historically charged places in Berlin, Potsdamer Platz serves not only as a symbol of the city's turbulent past, but also as an emblem of the victory of capitalism's consumer culture. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Platz was an urban wasteland torn between the East and the West. The collapse of the Soviet Union reunited Berlin at this square, in fact the first portion of the wall to go was the section which divided Potsdamer Platz. Seduced by the historic symbolism that was sure to attract tourists, conglomerates such as Sony launched rapid commercial development starting in the early 1990's. As a result, Potsdamer Platz has evolved into a haven of multinational corporations, baptized in fluorescent light and reeking of Western consumerism.

The cultural capital that initially rendered the Platz so priceless is paradoxically responsible for diluting its authenticity. Stripped of its character, this urban transformation denotes *disneyfication*, a word employed to denigrate a society that has succumb to the generic and dull uniformity inspired by corporate globalization. A widespread nostalgia for the former East Berlin, coined by the term *ostalgie*, unveils an

unspoken rejection of the capitalist culture that was embraced seventeen years prior. Disguised as the “American Dream”, conglomerates such as McDonalds, Nike and Coca Cola have homogenized and commodified the cultural identity of the Platz and the city it unites.

## HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF POTSDAMER PLATZ

Taking its name from the Potsdamer Tor, Potsdamer Platz became the center of Berlin in 1838 with the construction of the Potsdamer Bahnhof railway station. (1997: 26). In the first half of the twentieth century, explains Alan Scott, author of *The Limits of Globalization*, civic life flourished in the district. Geographically the center of the city, the Platz was initially intersected by five of Berlin’s busiest avenues (Scott 1997:27). Flooded with people coming from all walks of life, the square came to symbolize the vivacity of the city. However, as a result of allied bombing raids and heavy artillery bombardment in World War II, nearly all the streets and buildings of Potsdamer Platz were left in ruins. The Platz became an urban wasteland subdivided by American, British and Soviet sectors. The Berlin Wall, laced with barbed wire, anti-tank obstacles and watchtowers, cut through its center, making a no man’s land of

what was once the city's center.

In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. Amid the rubble and ruins left behind from the decades of dispute, the end of the Cold War was laced with hope. In the years to follow Berlin's reunification, Potsdamer Platz became Europe's biggest urban development project. The district was divided up into four parts and sold to commercial investors (Scott 1997: 26). It wasn't long before the weeds and debris that accumulated after years of neglect were paved over and great monoliths of glass and steel were erected. Freed from the constraints of the communist regime, many embraced the urban reconstruction generated by capitalism without reservations, believing that better days were to come. Commercialized and replanned, the urban transformation of the Platz was regarded by many as a testament of their independence and a symbol of their reunification. With this rapid redevelopment, Columbia professor Andreas Huyssen argues that "the Germans, like everyone else in the Europe of the Cold War, got Disney" (1998: 1) which at first was "a blast of fresh air from a window opened onto the world" (Huyssen 1998: 1). However, decades later, these American imports were to be viewed by many as cultural imperialism. Yet, the commercial development ensuing the fall of the Wall came about so suddenly that the citizens of Berlin didn't heed notice to the city's cultural decay until the effects of Americanization were unmistakable. The

corporate culture that resulted from this gentrification steamrolled the remnants of the old city center and serve as an example of how quickly multinational corporations colonize places that could yield potential profit.

## MONOPOLY RENT

The *monopoly rent* of Potsdamer Platz is rendered by the symbolic and geographic significance fueling its tourist industry, but it is also culpable in part for Berlin's cultural corrosion in that it triggered the onslaught of the conglomerates. Driven by economic interest, they recognized the district's cultural capital and began heavily investing in its gentrification realizing that its historical importance to Berlin would ultimately manifest as a tourist attraction. The term *monopoly rent* implies that "culture has become a commodity" (Harvey 2002: 1) that can be profited from. David Harvey employs this term to explain why areas in close proximity to a city's center or of historic significance often fall victim to heavy commercialization (Harvey 2002: 2). Sony, the former Daimler-Benz, Asea Brown Boveri, Deutsche Bahn and other companies made a rush to build their headquarters on what they regarded as prime real estate. In the year 2000, the Sony Center opened its international headquarters in

Potsdamer Platz, erecting seven buildings and a light-flooded arena. (Scott 1997: 26)

The Arkaden, American socio-economist Alan Scott asserts, was the next to come (1997:26). Between 1993 and 1998, a completely new quarter arose on the land owned by DaimlerChrysler composed of office buildings, stores, hotels, apartments and restaurants. The shopping and entertainment mecca covers 40,000 square yards and houses over 140 shops and restaurants. (Scott 1997: 27) Where there was once nothing, now lays the Grand Hyatt Berlin, Cinemax, a musical theater, a casino and a sea of tourist.

In less than two decades, Potsdamer Platz has evolved into a haven of consumption. The question of whether this should really to be perceived as progress needs to be addressed. Although for over fifty years the area subsisted as a wasteland, such rapid redevelopment renders an almost opposite extreme, as “the famous hub between East and West Berlin is in great danger of becoming a high-tech mall” (Huysen 1998: 3). McDonalds, Levi, Reebok, KFC and Coke all serve as corporate cohorts spreading the influence of the American “way of life,” which is rooted namely in consumerism. Before long, Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz will lose its architectural, historical and cultural distinctiveness to this excessive development, as it will become yet another victim of Americanization. Amid the clutter of corporate

giants, it will grow increasingly difficult for the Platz to evade the homogenizing implications of this urban transformation.

## OSTALGIA

The widespread *ostalgia* plaguing Berlin unveils an unspoken social grievance for the loss of the city's cultural identity to the gluttony of consumerism and the homogeneity of commercialization. Disappointed with the present circumstances, *ostalgia* afflicts the many who knew the East Berlin of the past. This nostalgic impulse serves as a reminder that the social and political differences dividing Europe prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union still exist. After the fall of the wall, Berlin struggled to reconcile the economic disproportion between the East and West, as the East proved unprepared for the abrupt transition from dictatorship to democracy, command to market economy. Over a decade later, the city has yet to mend its differences in the face of overwhelming commercial development, a fluctuating economy and a society torn apart by conflicting mentalities. Many Berlin citizens consider the commercialization bred by capitalism to be cultural imperialism. The onslaught of American products has penetrated Berlin's society to the point where

German citizens are faced with an identity crisis. In a sense, the panic cultivated by the Western world concerning the Domino Effect ironically proved true, however the dominos fell in the opposite direction- towards capitalism, rather than communism- the consequences of which, some would argue, are no better.

## DISNEYFICATION

As the Americanization of global culture metastasize, the threat of *disneyfication* grows. Stripping a country of its cultural inheritance, this term refers to the process in which a place undergoes urban transformation according to Disney standards, ultimately rendering it a diluted version of its original. The theme park has, in some respect, become a model for both urban and commercial development. Shopping malls, food chains and reconstructed city centers are all evidence of this societal impulse towards escapism and consumerism. Yet from this “relentless commercialization of culture connected with the Disney Empire” (Huysen 1998: 2) a contradiction emerges, as the democratic aspirations of a society along with its cultural inheritance are lost to corporate globalization. The more Europe surrenders to *disneyfication*, David Harvey explains, “the less unique and special it becomes. The

bland homogeneity that goes with pure commodification erases monopoly advantages” (2002:4). Thus, the symbolic capital of a city is self-destructive, as it engenders the economic development that inevitably homogenizes it. The cities of the Western World have, in consequence, become dreadfully generic. This unfortunate paradox is evident in Potsdamer Platz, where its cultural capital of is both responsible and threatened by its urban redevelopment. The generic homogeny plaguing the Platz is ironic in that it was the initial inimitability of the district that rendered it a tourist attraction and led to its corporate gentrification. Uprooting its past and exploiting its historical significance, these companies have commodified and commercialized the very thing that rendered the Platz so unique and, in doing so, destroyed it.

## CULTURAL HOMOGENY

The broader social implications of this cultural homogeny suggest that corporations are culpable in part for the loss of non-replicable cultures. The uniqueness, originality and authenticity of innumerable cities have been lost to strip malls littered with fast food eateries and trademark brands. Baseball caps, blue jeans and Nikes sneakers have now become the uniform for teenagers around the world,

from Krakow to Santiago. What's worst, political journalist Ciochetto exclaims, is that many companies consciously use their "products to change the cultural values of consumers" (2006) employing the *American Dream* as a marketing strategy. Thinly veiled by this disguise, McDonalds, Coca Cola, Starbucks and Levi along with a string of other corporate giants have successfully infiltrated countless countries around the world. Spawned by capitalism, these conglomerates have proven to have the faculty to dilute the cultural inheritance of a place. The Western myths of "affluence, strength, freedom, individualism and opportunity have been some of the most seductive ideas of the twentieth century, and these ideas have been transposed onto these all-American products" (Ciochetto 2006: 31). Blindly, we consume unaware of the role we play in feeding these massive corporations.

## MULTI-NATIONAL CORPORATIONS

The plethora of food and clothing chains lacing our malls and crowding our cities are, despite the multiplicity of trademarks, owned and operated by just a few corporate giants. The implications of this shed light on the unsettling possibility that this economic globalization and cultural homogeny has been executed by only a

handful of powerful companies. The strength and wealth of these mega-corporations is evident upon acknowledging some of the sale statistics compiled by socio-economist Norena Hertz for her work, *The Silent Takeover*. Together, General Motors and Ford turn a profit “greater than the gross domestic profit of the whole of sub-Saharan Africa” (2001: 304). Even more alarming, “Wal-Mart now has a turnover higher than the revenues of most of the states of Eastern Europe” (Hertz 2001: 304). It is nearly incomprehensible to grasp how so money and power has fallen into the hands of so few.

These multinational corporations are a product of American capitalism, as the United States fosters the only economic system conducive enough to spawn companies of such enormous wealth and unbalanced power. In part, their growth is a result of the competition innate to capitalism, as it triggers oftentimes the centralization of companies. Microsoft, Murdoch and Virgin all serve as examples for how companies over the course of the past several decades have evolved into inexorable economic powers. In fact, “of the world's 100 largest economies, 51 are now corporations, only 49 are nation-states” (Hertz 2001: 304). Even more unsettling, seventy percent of the world trade is controlled by less than hundred large companies- a majority of which is rooted in North America (Ciochetto 2006: 32). In an age when

corporations have so much control on the global field, power is kept in the few.

Disguising itself behind a sea of trademarks, these corporate giants mislead you to believe that their product is a manifestation of the American dream, while profiting off your needless and blind consumption.

## CONCLUSION

The cultural homogeny and disneyfication plaguing Potsdamer Platz unveils the implications of corporate globalization. The historical significance of Potsdamer Platz after the fall of a Berlin Wall lent it an unparalleled cultural capital that in turn rendered it an indisputable tourist attraction. Given that culture is commodity in an age of global homogeny, the *monopoly rent* of the district caught the eye of countless corporations whose aspirations to turn a profit inspired their investment in its gentification. After more than a decade of urban transformation, Potsdamer Platz has become a haven of consumption. The *disneyfication* of the district renders an unfortunate paradox, as multinational corporations have diluted the authenticity of the historic site. The widespread sentiment of *ostalgie* serves as testament of the people of Berlin's discontent with the homogenous repercussions capitalism has had on their

culture. This dull homogeny rendered by the corporate gentrification and *disneyfication* of Potsdamer Platz is just one example of how the Americanization of global culture has infiltrated city after city by means of multinational corporations.

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## Love Match

Rambo proved to be widely successful in Asia. Throughout the continent, people flooded into the theaters night after night, some paying the “equivalent of two month salary for their seat” (3). Pico Iyer, author of the essay “Love Match”, justifies this cinematic victory as a retaliation for America’s military defeat out East. In other words, the film succeeded where the Army failed. Yet, one could argue that this sneaky mechanism of cultural imperialism at the hands of the United States has social implications far more devastating. Arthur Koestler, a writer referred to by Iyer, perceives this Americanizing mass culture as “a form of mass suicide”. As the transnational flow of mainstream media and technological advancements facilitate the exportation of American hegemonic ideologies disguised as the “American Dream”, the threat of ‘generica’ becomes increasingly real. Pico Iyer presents an interesting point when he admitted that in going to Asia he “hoped to discover which America got through to the other side of the world, and which got lost in translation” (5). Furthermore, with Hollywood films laced with sex and violence, how was the West perceived in the East? Is it possible to define what exactly was so seductive about

Western media? Questions with splintered answers that merely reinforce the complexities of the initial inquiry.

In tandem to the cultural transgression of mass media images, the onslaught of Western tourist into the East fueled the steady encroachment of cultural imperialism. The repercussions of this growing tourist trend mustn't be overlooked. "In 1985, many Asians considered the single great import from the West, after Rambo, to be AIDS" (6). Despite this, the ideals lacking what it meant to be an American ("wealthy and free") was and still is to a certain extent coveted. However, considering the fact that Japan, India and China are among some of the oldest civilizations gracing our planet at present, it seems paradoxical that they would look to the West in an act of cultural mimesis. The facility at which the media transgresses cultural borders results in having the ideals of the Western world exposed to a once isolated small rural village in the foothills of Nepal- rendering arguably discontent where there was once none. However, Pico Iyer brings up an interesting point in contrary, claiming "an imperial arrogance underlines the very assumption that of the developing world should be happier without the TVs and motorbikes that we find so indispensable ourselves" (14). From a post-structuralist point of view, it is the power structure that determines what is best for the indigenous, poor and under-privileged- yet the media corrupts

ignorance bliss and implants materialistic aspirations in the heads of the have-nots. Needless to say, the complexities of globalization at the hands of mass media are as culturally deep as they are spatially vast.

On a personal level, I was able to connect with Pico Iyer's narrative of his experiences abroad as an American. I've bargained for saffron in the spice market of Budapest, trekked through the Himalayas, stood at the edge of the world in Patagonia and watched the sunset bleed into the horizon as bodies burned on the ghats of Varanasi. Traveling renders an unparalleled education. Beautiful and grotesque, this world has revealed both sides to me. Over the course of the past decade however, America has lost much of its respect as a nation on the global stage. This unfortunate turn of events was triggered namely by poor political decisions laced with ulterior motives by that power that be. But as the saying goes, *power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely*. Once again, one observes from afar, from the images on the media and headlines in the newspaper, America's bombs prove far less effective than our popular culture. Coveting the status of a world citizen, I strive to construct my identity not by the nation from which I came but from my collective experiences abroad. Yet, more often than not, it's easier to say I'm from Canada. However, I must admit I always find it amusing to observe how effortlessly many will criticize America all the

while sporting Nike shoes, smoking a Marlboro cig, drinking Coke Cola, listening to Bob Dylan, wearing the Gap and standing on line at a McDonalds. I suppose cultural imperialism behaves in a sneakier <sup>39</sup>fashion.

## Arjun Appadurai's "Archive and Aspiration"

In his article "Archive and Aspiration", sociologist Arjun Appadurai argues that in the age of post-modernity a "Cartesian gap" marks the disparity between desire, memory, the "locus of memory and its social location" (14). The act of archiving is a result of the societal impulse to preserve the residue of the past left inadvertently behind by those lacing mankind's history. Furthermore, there seems to be a desire to cement a coherent collective memory amongst the masses that fuels the tradition of archiving and reinforces an overarching sense of identity. UNESCO's incessant attempt to preserve historical monuments testifies to mankind's need to remember and desire to recognize the roots from which a civilization grew. However, Foucault's post-structural approach undermines the aforementioned assumption and presented the argument that the memories and archives that have overcome the test of time survived not by chance but rather as a result of the power structure. This shift suggests that archives emerge from a collective "aspiration rather than memory" (16). In accord with Arjun Appadurai's argument, I perceive the truth to be somewhere in between and that in today's world archives are constructed on the amalgamation of desire and memory.

This sociological shift was namely triggered by, in my opinion, the technological evolution that has brought contemporary communication to the advance state it's at presently. The onslaught of technological developments has led the twenty-first century into an age of infinite possibilities that shape and redefine McLuhan ever growing 'global village' in inexplicable and unpredictable ways. Over the course of a decade, there has been a sudden and profound proliferation in virtual communities and online chat rooms. All over the world, from Bangkok to the flatland, from the hilltops of the Himalayas to the sleazy strip of Sunset Boulevard, people are increasingly interconnected on a global scale via virtual means. Communities are no longer hinged on locality, but rather collective interests or/and ones sense of identity. This socio-technological phenomenon complicates that notion of collective memory. Whereas "natural social collectivities build collectivities out of memory, these virtual communities build memories out of collectivity" (17). Thus, their collective sense of identity is derived from a constructed memory of a past built on desire and imagination.

The transnational flow of media in tandem to the proliferation of technological advancements such as the Internet and interactive cyber communities has created a space wherein a mass of people construct fabricated realities rooted in collective

desire. The flow of migrants, which Arjun Appadurai coins as *ethnoscapes* in his work “Modernity at Large,” has rendered an even more perplexing social phenomenon. The intercourse of *mediascapes* and *ethnoscapes* has led to what Benedict Anderson famously termed as “imagined communities”. The mass media has not only served as a catalyst to the exportation of the false realities that those in developing country covet to have, but also has the facility to rewrite memories and history. Globalization has rendered the past present in different localities. With no memory or archive to draw upon, migrant communities- informed by the media- construct the social narratives of their past. These diasporic, refugee and migrant communities share collective stories of loss. Their notion of identity is split between routes and roots, so in the aspiration to fill the void, migrants will rely on the media to make sense of their disjunctive narrative.

## Cinematic Essentialism, Social Hegemony & Walt Disney's 'Aladdin'

Walt Disney Picture's naturalization of stereotypes cements a hegemonic hierarchy that fuels the globalization of capitalism and projects political propaganda. Although quintessential of American popular culture, Disney's transgression of borders is facilitated and metastasized by the multi-linguistic nature of animation. Focusing primarily on Walt Disney's *Aladdin*, I intend to dissect the manner in which visual metaphors and anthropomorphism are employed to appropriate cultural codes and perpetuate stereotypes. The animation's reproduction of "harmless" yet distorted ethnic representations is disguised behind a veil of ideological innocence. *Aladdin's* cinematic essentialism not only denigrates democratic solidarity, but supports the socioeconomic interests of the power that be. As the world at large wholeheartedly and naively embraces the ideals and values engendered and exported by the multi-national media conglomerate, the spectators subconsciously succumb to the overt racism, political propaganda and cloaked dogmas of capitalism that permeates the beloved pictures, rendering its audiences hostage to the hegemonic influence of the West.

The threat of Walt Disney's *Aladdin* lies in the facility with which the multinational corporation transgresses cultural boundaries. The term *mediascapes* is a word coined by Arjun Appadurai to describe not only the distribution of information around the world via the media, but also the "images of the world created by the media" (Appadurai 34). This idea serves to explicate the unpredictable transnational flow of media text across the borders of countless countries albeit their cultural diversity. The fabricated narratives and visual repertoires of foreign films provide "strips of reality" (Appadurai 35) out of which a sea of disillusioned spectators can shape "imagined lives". This transgression of borders and cinematic construction of fantastical realities is definitive of Disney animations, as Mickey Mouse proves as iconic an image as Jesus. The multi-national corporation's pervasive presence on the global stage sheds light on the fact that even outside the context of American popular culture the seductive nature of its films lures an international audience. Disney's ability to cross cultural boundaries with a greater facility than other forms of communication can be attributed to the multi-linguistic nature of animation, which maintains its meaning regardless of whether having been dubbed or fitted with subtitles. Walt Disney himself admitted that "of all of our inventions for mass communication, pictures still speak the most universally understood language."

The global onslaught of the multinational Disney Corporation threatens however to render Western cultural imperialism, as films such as *Aladdin* are infused with hegemonic views concerning capitalism and the racial superiority of the Protestant elite. Furthermore, “the farther the audience is away from the direct experience...the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds” (Appadurai 35), blurring the “lines between the realistic and fictional landscapes” (Appadurai 35). Through its mediation of images, Disney constructs a skewed social hierarchy rooted in racial superiority wherein its spectators subconsciously come to understand their place in relation to the “Other”. Hence, the “images involve many complicated inflections, depending on...their *audience* (local, national, or transnational), and the *interest* of those who own and control them” (Appadurai 35). In the case of Walt Disney, its audience is both national *and* transnational, while its prerogative stems from its own self-interest to promote corporate culture, a hegemonic hierarchy and political propaganda.

Another term that can be employed to better understand the threat of Disney is *Ideoscapes*, which Arjun Appadurai defines as the political “concatenation of images” (Appadurai 36). These visual representations relate to the ideologies of the state, serving in the interest of the predominant political and economic power. In

Palestine, a clone of the iconic Mickey Mouse preaches Islamic fundamentalism on *Hamas TV*, urging the Palestinian youth to take up arms against the Israelis.

Subliminally conditioning the general public, this form of media is infused with propaganda and hegemonic views. Disney animations in the West, disguised by their innocuous nature, promote a doctrine supportive of consumerism, capitalism and racial superiority. Failing to address the importance of social responsibility, equality and social justice, Disney's feature films defend an anti-social hyper-individualism that is at odds with democratic theory. Furthermore, the animation's ethnic essentialism constructs a reality wherein human rights and equality prove incapable of transcending the segregating legacies of race.

One of the few American films to feature an Arab protagonist, Walt Disney's *Aladdin* advocates a doctrine supportive of capitalism, egocentricity and consumerism. Below the surface of this seemingly charming animation runs an ideology void of democratic benevolence. At the start of the film, Aladdin is portrayed as a poor street urchin, however he lives above the streets of Agrabah where from his window he is level with the sultan's palace. This seemingly inconsequential detail constructs a visual metaphor that suggests Aladdin's social equality with the elite. Upon unearthing the magic lamp and genie within, Aladdin doesn't hesitate to use the three wishes in

his own self-interest. Rather than feed the starving children wasting away on the streets of Agrabah or help the poor and dying, Aladdin wishes for expensive garments and material goods to impress Princess Jasmine with. Thus, Aladdin's social mobility relies essentially on greed, materialism and selfishly catering to his own needs: a mentality indicative of the avaricious appetite unleashed by the market economy.

Walt Disney's hyper mobility consequently facilitates the widespread transmission of capitalistic views infusing films like *Aladdin*. However, what proves even more harmful is the animated picture's cinematic essentialism. Depicting the Arab world as backwards and irrational, the film's distorted ethnic representations fuel the western world's fear of alterity and perpetuates dangerous stereotypes. Defined as the act of imposing assumed characteristics on an individual based on their race, gender or class (etc.), stereotypes are sweeping generalizations that "contain an evaluation that justifies ethnic differences" (Seiter 16). These simplifications and absurd exaggerations are culpable for breeding blind hatred. Upon dissecting several of the animations produced by Disney in the past few decades, it becomes evident that films like *Aladdin* indisputably "reproduce ethnic stereotypes" (McMichael 67). The danger of these racial representations lies in the threat of essentialism, which "reduces a complex variety of portrayals to a limited set of reified formulae" (Shohat & Stam 199).

In its wake, essentialism engenders an ahistoric perception that is “static” and thus neglects the “instability of the stereotypes” (Shohat & Stam 199). Therefore behind these racial representations “lies a history that relates both to commonsense understandings of society and to economic determinants” (Seiter 24). By and large, the stereotypes delineated by Walt Disney are swayed by the contemporary socioeconomic circumstances plaguing the country. By lending human characteristics to nonhuman beings via anthropomorphism, Disney can attach certain attributes to animals in order to safely render ethnic stereotypes. For example, to momentarily stray from the analysis of *Aladdin*, in *The Lion King*, the noble King Mufasa has a British accent, whereas the malicious hyenas speak with strong Spanish accents. This anthropomorphic ethnic essentialism conditions its audience to subconsciously equate the Spanish tongue with devious behavior, perpetuating a menacing stereotype of Mexicans whose presence in the States was and still is perceived as a strain on the economy. Thus it is important to scrutinize Disney animations through a lens that puts into consideration the hegemonic motivations and political interest behind its illustrations.

The use of ethnic stereotypes as a “strategy for constructing a mythic other to be relied on for purposes of war, imperialism, national defense and protectionism” (Chow

59) is intrinsic to the operative tactics of political regimes. The pervasive influence of these economically and politically prescribed stereotypes not only proves that they are “cliché, unchanging forms but also- and much more importantly- that stereotypes are capable of engendering realities that don’t exist” (Chow 59). These distorted representations of race, gender and class are constructed and transmitted by a powerful minority in order to protect the status quo. Thus it is imprudent to overlook the “relationship of stereotypes to the legitimate social power” (Seiter 24). The social functionality of the aforementioned demonstrates “that they are not an error of perception but rather a form of social control” (Shohat & Stam 199). Therefore, in considering the nature and origin of an ethnic stereotype, it is crucial to question, “who controls and defines them,” (Dyer in Chow 60) and whose interests are served by their perpetuation.

A pervasive theme frequenting Disney films is the Manichean allegory of good against evil, which is oftentimes employed to cast certain ethnicities in a negative light in order to back a hegemonic agenda. During the Bush and Reagan regimes, the “portrayals of its enemies drew on the ‘Manichean allegories’ of colonization” rendering Saddam Hussein as an instable lunatic through “the intertextual memory of Muslim fanatics and Arab assassins” (Shohat & Stam 201). First released shortly after

the Gulf War in 1992, *Aladdin* assumes the age-old narrative construction of good and evil drawing on ethnic essentialism to underpin the political propaganda of the Bush administration. Although the film is set in the Middle East, only the villainous characters speak Arabic, whereas Aladdin and Princess Jasmine, despite their alleged Arab ethnicity, assume American identities. Portraying the populace of the Middle East as violent and deceitful people, the Arabic women are depicted as veiled objects of oppression while the men are delineated as bearded barbarians. Cultural familiarity with such stereotypes leads one to perceive political issues in a vein that could be traced to individual ethics, unleashing the inclination to judge a person based on their race, religion or nationality.

*Aladdin's* cinematic essentialism elicits disturbing renderings that essentialize, appropriate, objectify and construct the exotic "Other". This discursive construction laces countless Disney animations, particularly *Aladdin*. Edward Said states that all "too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent; it has regularly seemed otherwise to me, and certainly my study of *Orientalism* has convinced me ... that society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together" (Said 27). Said's discourse on *Orientalism* argues that the Western notion of the East as a despotic haven of eunuchs in turbans stems

from the Occidental's desire to control and manipulate the unknown. Convinced that the Orient is incapable of defining itself, the Occident regards the East as a locale clearly in need of Western subjectivity. The United States thus posit itself in opposition to the Middle East, rendering the Orient as a negative inversion of the Occident and thus justifying the necessity of Western emancipation and reconstruction.

The discourse on *Orientalism* unveils how Western society's slanted perception of the East is fueled by a hegemonic agenda mediated by the mass media. Bringing "democracy" to the Middle East serves in Disney's interest as consumerism, capitalism and multinational corporations trail at the heels of "freedom". Recognizing the profitable possibilities in the Mid East, Disney CEO Michael Eisner, like the Bush administration, juxtaposes the West with the despotic Orient to promote egalitarian ideals of freedom and autonomy. In fact, the original version of Aladdin was initially set in the "fictitious" city of Baghdad (Giroux 29). However as the dust of Gulf War had yet to settle, the name was changed to Aghrabah, which in Arabic translates as "most strange." In spite of this revision, the political motivation fueling this film's production is but thinly veiled. The animation's prejudicial portrayal of the Arab world serves as nationalistic propaganda to justify a war needlessly waged by the

United States, disguising the imperialistic encroachment as a holy war as “religion sounds so absolute, it can be used as a translation for other, more relative, forms of conflict” (Baumann 23).

Visually manipulated to empower hegemonic views, *Aladdin's* construction of the Orient not only depicts the Arabs as a backwards people, but also represents the Middle East as an anarchistic civilization where cobras are lured from baskets and law has no place other than to keep women in theirs. For instance, Princess Jasmine, whose attire resembles that of a belly dancer's, is required by law to marry a man selected by her father, the Sultan of Agrabah. Her objection is silenced by his harsh reply: “you are not free to make your own choices”. The film also sheds light on the injustice of the Quranic laws that threaten to cut off Aladdin's hand for stealing a piece of bread to survive. Even the opening song cast the Arab world as a locality of barbarianism: “*Oh, I come from a land, From a faraway place, Where the caravan camels roam, Where they cut off your ear If they don't like your face, It's Barbaric, but hey, it's home.*” Furthermore, the animation's geographic depiction of the region is far from accurate as it essentializes the Middle East as a vast desert, audaciously neglecting to recognize the diverse topography of the expansive territory.

The danger of *Aladdin* lays not only in the political propaganda and ethnic essentialism it projects, but more so in the misconception that the animated picture is socially harmless. As an audience, we are readily “inclined to view a cartoon film as an uncomplicated representation of human ideas” (Moellenhoff 116). Instead of stereotypes, the skewed representations of the Arabic populace are pawned off as caricatures. The threat of Disney is rooted in this distinction. Rey Chow illustrates the disparity, stating that “caricatures, by virtue of being understood definitively as a distorted grotesque imitation, can be safely relegated to the category of the unrealistic and be dismissed as a mere representation,” whereas stereotypes carry the “unavoidable implications of realpolitik” (Chow 72). It is within the safe haven of animation that Disney aggressively employs the “visually and epistemologically pronounced effect of transgression whose power is, significantly, nonverbal” (Chow 81).

Walt Disney films are even more disturbingly aimed towards an audience constituted primarily of children. Thus, at an early age certain preconceived notions regarding race and class are subliminally planted via “harmless” animations into the heads of the generations to come. Disney’s distorted ethnic renderings reinforce the naturalization of specified stereotypes backed by ulterior hegemonic motives and rooted in political interest. For instance, the hero of the animation, *Aladdin*, is drawn

with light skin and anglicized facial features. Although the audience is led to believe Aladdin is Arab, he speaks with an American accent. The archenemy Jafar, portrayed as having dark skin and exaggerated Arab features, serves as a stark contrast with a large pointed nose, long beard and sunken eyes. More interesting is the fact that unlike the protagonist of the visual narrative, Jafar speaks with a thick Arab accent. The benevolent Sultan of Agrabah, on the other hand, is illustrated with a white beard, rosy rounded cheeks, kind eyes and big belly. In truth, the king would practically personify Saint Nick if it weren't for the British accent with which he speaks despite his alleged Arab roots. His beloved daughter, Princess Jasmine, the heroine of the story, is also depicted without the "characteristic" Arab nose and, like Aladdin, inhabits an American identity.

Upon closer scrutiny of the Manichean allegory and ethnic essentialism that thread through the visual narrative of Walt Disney's *Aladdin*, it's difficult to deny the hegemonic ideologies and political propaganda that run below the surface of its storyline, especially given that its release paralleled the geopolitical war waged in the Middle East. To take a step back and put on a wider lens, the writing on the wall is explicit. The Americanized Aladdin along with the British Sultan of Agrabah must save Princess Jasmine, who as a female symbolizes the nation. Ironically, the threat

stems from the vizier Jafar whose nefarious conspiracy to bring the world to its knees is advised by an idiotic parrot. Furthermore, the vizier's visual delineation renders a shameful stereotype which is propped up as an archetype of the Arab world. As the film unfolds it becomes evident that the city of Agrabah can only return to the order in which it belongs once the threat of Jafar is extinguished.

Infused with hegemonic views, the Disney animation *Aladdin* plays a prominent role in the naturalization of stereotypes, globalization of capitalism and promotion of political propaganda. Due to the multi-linguistic nature of animation, Disney films effortlessly breach cultural boundaries facilitating the export of perverse values veiled by ideological innocence. At odds with democratic theory, Disney's transnational media flow threatens to spread the Western hegemonic views projected by films such as *Aladdin*. Furthermore, the animation's cinematic essentialism is not only ahistoric and moralistic, but supports a social hierarchy rooted in racial superiority. Employing the age-old Manichean allegory, *Aladdin's* objectification and appropriation of the Arab world is indisputably fueled by the political agenda of the powers that be. But perhaps the greatest danger of this animation lies namely in the perception that it is socially harmless: as we have seen however, this could not be farther from the truth.

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# PSYCHOANALYSIS

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## The Oedipus Complex

My argument aims to unveil how Jacque Lacan's re-interpretation of Sigmund Freud's (in)famous Oedipus Complex strips it of its sexist implication and repositioned the theory as a cornerstone of contemporary feminist theory. Chastised for his allegedly chauvinistic views, Freud once said, "throughout history, people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity" and although men will never escape contemplating this "problem" for "those of you who are women this will not apply - you are yourselves the problem" (Sigmund Freud). Accusations of Freud's sexist slant can be traced to this statement's misogynous implications. Justifying women's inferiority through the biological absence of the male sex organ, Sigmund Freud employs the Oedipus Complex to underpin his hypothesis. For Freud, the psychological development of young girls heavily relies on the alleged "penis envy" she exhibits as a child, explicating her unconscious consent later in life to the male-dominated social system. Within the discourse of psychoanalysis sexual difference is not innate, and thus sexuality and gender roles are acquired through socialization. The theories Sigmund Freud and Jacque Lacan overlap concerning the fear of castration and penis envy, both intrinsic elements to the Oedipal period.

However, their explanations of how a child determines its sexual position in relation to the 'other' differ quite a bit. Freud claims that a young boy realizes his sexual position through successful passage through the Oedipal period, which happens only once his lust for his mother is extinguished by a fear of castration and identification with his father- this paradigm is inversely applicable to the experience of a female. However, Lacan regards this identification as Symbolic and thus a child's sexual position is actually rendered by its relationship with what Lacan has coined as the "phallus", an unattainable ideal manifested in the Symbolic Other.

The Oedipus Complex retrieves its name from the ancient Greek legend of the notorious King Oedipus, who kills his father and marries his mother- an act of incestuous violence that an oracle early in his life predicted he would commit. Terrified, he does everything in his power to escape his destiny, yet inevitably fails and in response tears his eyes out, blinding himself the horrid deeds he had carried out. Freud appropriates the Greek Legend of King Oedipus to explicate the perverse bond parents and children of the opposite sex participate in. Lacing the early developmental years of children, successful passage through the "Oedipal period" is determined by whether the threat of castration triggers the formation of a child's super-ego and thus entrance into the ensuing "latency period". These developmental

stages all have inexplicable and varying impacts on the psychological growth of an individual. Lacan's "point of view consists simply in seeing the Oedipus Complex as the pivot of humanization, as a transition from the natural register of life to a cultural register of group exchange and therefore of laws, symbols and organizations" (Lemaire 92). However, Sigmund Freud presents the paradox that due to the absence of a penis, the threat of castration does not traumatize a young girl to the same extent as her counterpart and thus the formation of the super-ego is frail. Regarding women in the vein of a mutilated male, Freud claims that this "deformity" or "lack" of a penis serves as "scientific" justification of women's inferiority to men. This 'penis envy', as Freud called it, has a crucial impact on a woman's psychological development and furthermore has fueled the debate on gender inequality. It is this distinction that fuels the sexist discourse against psychoanalysis.

According to Freud, the Oedipus Complex for a boy ensues his infantile sexuality wherein he experiences omnipotent fantasies of his penis. Furthermore, this fantasy emerges in tandem to the narcissist illusion that he is the only object of his mother's love. He "regards his mother as his own property." (Freud 1) This delusion is manifested in an active desire to be possessed and filled by the body of the Other. This incestuous desire can be translated as a fantasy of what Freud coins as *Das Ding*.

However, the sight of a naked woman shatters this blissful naivety. In effect, the child who was “so proud of his possession of a penis, has a view of the genital region of a little girl, and cannot help being convinced of the absence of a penis in a creature who is so like himself. With this, the loss of his own penis becomes imaginable, and the threat of castration takes its deferred effect.” (Freud 2). The female genitalia thus triggers a deep fear that, at the hands of the father (or the Other), he will be “castrated”. In summation, the “destruction of the Oedipus Complex is brought about by the threat of castration” rendered by “the authority of the father”, which is internalized by the ego, thus forming the nucleus of the super-ego and reinforcing “his prohibition against incest, and so secures the ego from the return of the libidinal object-cathexis.” (Freud 3). This internal trepidation instills a morality that forbids the sexualization of his parents and results in the boy’s abandonment of his infantile sexuality. With his incestuous lust suppressed through socialization, the boy submits to the place of his father and internalizes what Freud refers to as the ‘super-ego’, or in other words, the boy’s conscience. In turn, the child learns to live within the moral confines of society and furthermore the incident reinforces a sexuality that is socially acceptable. According to Freud, the failure to successfully pass through the Oedipal period may result in an inappropriate attachment to the mother later in life and/or

homosexuality.

Young girls also pass through the Oedipal period, yet not to the same traumatic degree as boys. For Freud, “things happen in just the same way with little girls, with the necessary changes: an affectionate attachment to her father, a need to get rid of her mother as superfluous and to take her place” (Freud 24). Although a young girl’s passage through the Oedipus Complex is also laced with the fear of castration, it does not have the same harrowing effect on girls as it does with a boy. At first, a young lady regards her clitoris in the same manner that a young boy perceives his penis. It is only when exposed to the genitals of the opposite sex that she becomes aware of her “deformity”. Freud constructs a paradigm wherein the absence of a penis and the realization of this truth plagues a young girl in her youth, who perceives this void as an inferiority to the opposite sex. In an attempt to justify this lack, a young girl “explains it by assuming that at some earlier date she had possessed an equally large organ and had then lost it by castration” (Freud 3) or that when she grows older, she will acquire just as big an appendage as the boy’s. Ultimately she adopts attributes of the mother and culminates a strong desire for her father, expecting to one day bare his child as compensation for her lack. However, according to Freud, a young girl is spared of the brutal awakening, as it is not a social taboo for a lady to carry on a flirtatious yet

harmless relationship with her father. In other words being “daddy’s girl” can be a life long affair because it isn’t necessarily perceived as inappropriate. Freud claims that due to the benign nature of this experience starves her of reconciling with the social taboo and thus renders a woman morally inferior insofar as her ‘super-ego’ will never be as developed as that of a man.

In the infamous words of Freud: “here the feminist demand for equal rights for the sexes does not take us far, for the morphological distinction is bound to find expression in differences of psychical development. ‘Anatomy is Destiny’, to vary a saying of Napoleon’s” (Freud 3). Many feminists, such as Juliet Mitchell, Nancy Chodorow and Jane Gallop, blame Freud for fueling gender inequality by justifying women’s moral and social inferiority through evidence based on observation rather than scientific fact. The Oedipal vision “exhibits a distinct patriarchal bias: it reduces politics to an activity of fathers and sons while relegating women to the role of passive objects of male desire” (Brunner 1998). Most postmodern feminists perceive Sigmund Freud’s theories as detrimental to socially assumed gender roles. Deconstructing the thesis that a woman’s sexuality is solely rooted in the desire to procreate, feminist Irigaray criticizes Freud for fueling gender inequality in contemporary society. Irigaray asks, “how can we accept that the entire female sexuality is being controlled

by the lack and envy of the penis?" (Irigaray 58) Author of the book "Freudianism: The Misguided Feminism", Shulamith Firestone concedes that Freud's psychoanalytical theories are justified, yet only under the condition that every time Freud employed the word 'penis' the word 'power' should replace it. This is what Jacques Lacan did, using the word 'phallus' to signify authority.

Jacques Lacan reinterprets Freud's view of the Oedipus Complex from a structuralist slant. Conceptually revisiting Freudian theory within a postmodernist framework, Lacan refines psychoanalytical discourse from a linguistic angle. The infuriatingly dense language of Lacan ironically draws from the work of linguist Ferdinand Saussure. Arguing that a subject's only instrument of expression is language, Lacan believes that the unconscious is structured as such. However, the meaning one attaches to their words is in the domain of the 'Other' and cannot be controlled by the subject. Language is thus laced with a certain objectivity and intersubjectivity. In the words of Lacan, "the meaning of a return to Freud is a return to the meaning of Freud" (Lacan 177). However, from Plato we know "sometimes you have to kill your father to preserve your heritage. Sometimes you have to throw away the doctrine to find its 'meaning'" (Borch-Jacobsen 267). Contrary to the beliefs of Freud, Lacan asserts that there is no developmental stages- that the 'Symbolic Order'

is always present and signifiers are moments wherein a child must learn to cope with the 'Other'. For Lacan, "the Oedipus Complex is not a stage like any other in genetic psychology, it is the moment in which the child humanizes itself by becoming aware of the self, the world and the others" (Lemaire 90). Employing Saussurean linguistics to elucidate the complexities of psychological development, Lacan regards the Oedipal paradigm as a 'linguistic transaction'. His reinterpretation of Freud's allegedly phallogocentric theories are applauded by many feminists who claim his work offers a less gender bias framework wherein gender inequality can be dissected and analyzed through a nonsexist lens.

Lacan describes the Oedipus Complex as "the transition from a dual, immediate or mirror relationship proper to the Symbolic, as opposed to the Imaginary" (Lemaire 78). The first reversal takes place during the 'mirror stage', in which the child experiences the alienating identification of seeing its own reflection in the mirror. Blissfully perceiving the outside world through the lens of the 'Imaginary Order', this "self-recognition in the mirror takes place somewhere between the ages of six to eight months" (Lemaire 79). The mirror stage "is the advent of co-anesthetic subjectivity preceded by the feeling that one's own body is in pieces" (Lemaire 81). Crucial to the

formation of the alienated ego, it is in this moment of recognition that the child obtains his first insight of the self. Before the traumatic awakening rendered by the mirror stage, a child imagines that he once had the Phallus, or in other words, had an inseparable union with his mother. For a boy, the mother represents desire. This desire evolves throughout the developmental stages of a child, reaching its peak during the Oedipus Complex. However, for Lacan, it is the Symbolic Order, rather than the Imaginary, that paves the way into the next stage: the Oedipal period.

Jacque Lacan argues the Oedipus period marks a child's introduction into the Symbolic Order. He constructs a paradigm wherein a young boy's passage through the Oedipus Complex can be articulated by three distinct stages. The "first coincides with the mother-child relationship," at which point he wishes to be "the desire of his mother's desire" (Lemaire 82). Yet the child's entrance into the Symbolic Order relies on the second reversal: a repressive break with transcendental idealism. Lacan asserts that the Oedipus Complex needs to be understood as a metaphorical operation that is triggered by the child's realization that the (m)Other's lack of the phallus is a need that he's unable to satisfy. This incestuous lust for his mother is shattered by the realization that the (m)Other's desire gravitates towards the father figure, an attraction he understands as an aspiration to atone for the absence of the phallus. The father

“renders the mother-child fusion impossible by his interdiction and marks the child with a fundamental lack of being” (Lemaire 87). Ensuing this brutal awakening, the child is inflicted with the fantasy of the phallus, the missing signifier that manifests as a desire that cannot be met. Lacan erects a paradigm wherein the phallus (manifested in the paternal metaphor of the father) emerges as unattainable ideals that exist outside the system of signification and language, structuring it accordingly. A child identifies “with the father as he who ‘has’ the phallus” and thus “a child’s identification with the father announces the passing of the Oedipus Complex by way of ‘having’ (and no longer ‘being’)” (Lemaire 83). Lacan coins the word “phallus” as an abstract signifier to symbolize authority, and furthermore “gives the ratio of desire” (Lacan 24), rather than a physical penis. In the dictionary, the phallus has been defined as: the sexually undifferentiated tissue in an embryo that becomes the penis or the clitoris. The Symbolic phallus is the signifier of the signifier that cannot be pronounced but is at the root of our desire. Given that satisfaction is the death of desire, the phallus is repressed on the pretext that it is a signifier that cannot be pronounced and is thus unattainable. However, it is the process of incessantly desiring the phallus that laces our existence.

According to Lacan, when a young boy recognizes that his aspirations to usurp

the place of his father are in vain, he reconciles with this ‘Symbolic castration’ by surrendering to the mastery of his father and begins to emulate him instead. The child then shifts into the third and final stage: “identification with the father and registration of the self through relativation” (Lemaire 83). This idealization and fear of what Lacan defines as the ‘Name of the Father’ is a paternal metaphor Lacan employs to designate not necessarily the father, but rather the signifier, which resides outside the Symbolic Order and serves to stabilize it. “It is the name of the Father that we must recognize as the Symbolic function which identifies his person with the figure of the Law” (Lacan 16). The name of the Father is “a protagonist in the subject’s entry into the order of culture, civilization and language” (Lemaire 85). The child begins to rely on language in order to express its sexual position in relation to the Other. The father is “present only through his law, which is speech, and only insofar as his speech is recognized by the mother does it take on the value of the Law” (Lacan 35). For Lacan, a child only recognizes itself as a subject once it has entered into the ‘Symbolic Order of language’. In effect, the child “follows a dialectic of identifications in which his Ego constitutes itself and in which the ideal of the self takes shape” (Lemaire 87). Ultimately the “Father and son reached an agreement that if the son submitted to castration (the Law of the Father) the Name of the Father will recompense him by

allowing him to adopt the Father's name and marry another woman. The son would then be recognized as a speaking subject, a member of the Symbolic community, and thereby regain his wholeness" (Schroeder 83). It is at this moment in psychological development that the boy enters into the Symbolic Order.

In regards to the opposite sex, Lacan adapts an infantile interpretation of femininity. The difference between the male and female experience during their passage through the Oedipal period is rooted in the distinction that a boy desires to possess, whereas a girl desires to be possessed. Furthermore, the androgynous nature of the term 'phallus' erects a two-fold understanding for the word: in one sense it represents the presence of a penis and in the other, as in the case of a woman, it signifies its absence. Thus, the phallus is not only the object of desire but also the subject. Within Lacan's linguistic framework, the Oedipus Complex unveils why a woman's words don't carry the same weight as that of their male counterpart. Lacan's rereading of Freudian theory doesn't justify, but rather elucidates the process in which gender roles are assumed and acted out. For a girl, the Oedipus Complex is a capricious moment wherein lies a dual desire and disappointment. Lacan's account of a young girl's experience is in accord with that of Freud, yet deviates slightly. At first, a young girl fantasizes of the omnipotence of a phallus. She desires to possess the body

of the (m)Other. However, upon the brutal awakening brought on by the sight of a boy's naked body, she is overwhelmed by both loss and envy. She imagines that she has been deprived of a pleasure she once thought she had. This envy causes her to distance herself from her mother out of disappointment, and in tandem fuels the desire to be possessed by her father. The inevitable rejection by her father renders the girl's loss of infantile sexuality and results in both a young girl's morality and femininity learned by example from her mother. Ultimately she learns to identify with both her mother and her father, as she does in the paradigm constructed by Freud.

Lacan believes that a young girl, upon recognizing the innate absence of a phallus, "comes to accept, not without resistance, her socially designated role as subordinate to the possessor of the phallus, and through her acceptance, she comes to occupy the passive, dependent position expected of women in patriarchy" (Grosz 69). According to Lacan, women perceive themselves not only as objects of exchange, but also as objects of desire. This objectification, Lacan explains, starves women of equal rights, rendering her subordinate to the position of men, who through the possession of the phallus take on the role of the "speaking subject". In accordance with Freud, he claims that only young boys, due to their possession of a penis, are actually capable of entering into the Symbolic Order, whereas girls are stranded in the Imaginary Order.

The possession of a phallus lends a Symbolic capital to men and explicates gender inequality in society. Often a boy, due to his conflation of his penis with the phallus, elevates himself to a position of power and authority. Lacan describes gender inequality through these terms. His conceptualization of sexuality, psychological development and the Oedipus Complex offer a futile terrain wherein the Complexities of gender relations can be explored.

Lacan's work can be extrapolated to the contemporary discourse on feminism. In fact, many feminists claim that "Lacan was not Freudian; that, under cover of Freudianism, he constructed a completely original theory" (Borch-Jacobsen 267). Lacan's rereading of the Freudian discourse appropriates his sexist slant to explicate rather than justify gender roles in postmodern society. Inspired by Lacan's theory of 'gender' being a fictional construction, feminist Judith Butler conceptualizes that a person is innately ungendered yet through social conditioning and social recognition (Hegel) it becomes a property. This non-metaphysical slant serves as a cornerstone in feminist theory in that it constructs a relational understanding of gender as "the point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations." (Butler). Informed by Lacan, the discourse avers that gender "operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon

that it anticipates” (Butler 94). In other words, sex is an effect of the discourse on the body, gender is an effect of the discourse on sex and lastly sexuality is an effect of a gendered discourse on sex. “Neo-Freudianism is especially relevant because it evolved from the first conflict between feminist principles and Freudian tenets” (Buhle 10).

Judith Butler, among many other postmodernist feminists, extrapolates Lacan’s reinterpretation of Freud to illustrate the mechanisms in which the internalization of social norms fabricates one’s gender. The concept of the ‘self’ as a fictional construction is employed by feminist as a catalysis to their struggle for equal rights. Providing explanation rather than justification, Jacques Lacan’s reinterpretation of Sigmund Freud’s Oedipus Complex has repositioned psychoanalysis within the feminist discourse, however despite this, gender equality is far from achieved.

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## Gendered Restrooms

It has become such an architectural norm that bathrooms are gendered that the very inquiry undermining their necessity fails to ever arise. What's interesting is that the fifth floor bathroom at Parsons is coed. With its many stalls, men and women pass through all the time. Washing my hands alongside another gentleman afterwards feels, to be completely honest, a little uncomfortable. Agreed this uneasiness is a product of socialization reinforced through repetition. Pardon my crudeness, but it is strange how the act of defecating in a space that isn't gendered invites the possibility of sexual tension or shame.

To frame it within a psychoanalytical discourse, Sigmund Freud extrapolated an individual's psychosexual development to a passage in one's youth from the "oral stage" to that of the anal. He argues that the release of lets say urination is akin to an orgasm. Given the historical specificity of Freud's research and it's role in the proliferation of sex taboos that reinforced sexual repression, it interesting to speculate what part he played in the normativization of gendered bathrooms.

# GENDER & SEXUALITY

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# Lead Laced Lipstick

## I: INTRODUCTION

There is a lie in li(f)e and a deceitfulness in the vein the media reflects it. The pulse of our nation beats to the rhythm of a hegemonic doctrine. Societies consume “necessary” fictions so to protect the fragility of the fabricated reality within which they live. Gender norms are understood to be innate, justifying the economic inequality that is dictated by sex. An attempt to determine the origins behind women’s social subordination can be as difficult as trying to nail blood pudding to the wall. The splintered feminist discourse suggests the role of patriarchic politics and the mainstream media as promeinate players, however I would argue that it goes deeper. Hidden beneath the flesh of the problem is the psychological self-imprisonment of the ‘beauty myth’. Stripping women of their power, the societal pressure to meet aesthetic expectations in America deteriorates sentiments of self worth and robs many of their sense of control.

The mass neurosis of women starving themselves skinny while struggling to remain youthful fuels the economy, not through participation but through the

excessive consumption of insecure females. Yet this perverse phenomenon is a fairly recent one that was only truly recognized over a decade ago by feminist Naomi Wolf. Due to the novel nature of the discourse, a theoretical framework must continue to be constructed in order to position the historical evolution of the ‘beauty myth’ within the context of the contemporary capitalist system. The socioeconomic pressure to be beautiful has been a catalyst to the growth of the cosmetic and diet industries as well as consumption practices rooted in fetishism rather than necessity. Using the tabloidization of the media as postmodern paradigm for the ‘beauty myth’, I aim to recontextualize the discourse originally formulated by Naomi Wolf’s so to better suit the present.

## II. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

In order to understand the present one must look towards the past. World War II triggered the transition of women’s experience from the domestic sphere to that of the work. However, as the horrific war came to a close in August of 1945, the men whose absence facilitated women’s presence in the industrial field returned home to reclaim their jobs. The country faced an economic and social predicament. As the

backbone of the wartime economy, women had more freedom than they ever had before and sure enough 75% of women opted to continue working after the war. It was as if '*Pandora's Box*' had been opened. The patriarchic system, realizing the implausibility of female re-domestication, reluctantly allowed many women to keep their jobs in the post-war economy.

Statistically earning more money prostituting their bodies rather than using their minds, women have been an underpaid and undervalued part of the work force from the onset. Ensuing World War II, women's new visibility in the economic sphere complicated the notion of gender roles. Questions of equality rose in response to the disparity in wages earned for parallel tasks. An effort, perhaps in vein, was made to create a new space for the female labor pool that would keep women in subordinate positions where no justification was needed for their lower salary. The "qualities that best serve employers in such a labor pool's workers are: low self esteem, a tolerance for dull repetitive tasks, lack of ambition, high conformity, more respect for men (who manage them) than women (who work beside them), and little sense of control over their lives" (26 Wolf 1991). Yet this was just the beginning.

'The Beauty Myth' by Naomi Wolf was a national best seller back in 1991. The underlining concept of the novel is that in the postmodern world a women's worth is

hinged on their looks. Wolf argues that this social phenomenon came to fruition in tandem to the second wave of feminism. She goes further to claim that the beauty myth "is not about women at all...it is about men's institutions and institutional power" (Wolf 5 1991). No longer shackled to the societal expectations of fulfilling their role as wife and mother, women's newfound freedom was perceived as a threat. Thus, the beauty myth emerged as a means of keeping women in their place. Rooted in the debatable argument that beauty and futility are intertwined, the beauty myth rapes women of their ability to be conformable in their own skin and extrapolates how reproductively fit they are on their beauty.

### III. THE BIRTH OF THE BEAUTY MYTH

Like "adults, play-wrestling a child, enjoy letting the child feel it has won" (46 Wolf 1991), the independence given to women of modernity carried with it the expectations tied to the 'beauty myth'. According to Wolf, this 'cultural conspiracy' is not only the "last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact," but also the last of the "old feminine ideologies that still has the power to control those women" (Wolf 3 1991). This psychological prison bred rotten self-esteem, voluntary

subordination and the emotional distress that was fueled by the sentiment of never being “good enough”. This amalgamation of anxieties shadowed women’s perceived economic feat. Although women were welcomed into the labor force, it was under ‘controlled conditions’ that tainted women’s newfound liberty with “self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control” (Wolf 3 1991).

The residual undercurrent of legal and social discrimination leaves women second-class citizens even in today’s evolved socioeconomic environment. “According to the culturally imposed physical standard” of beauty, women are perceived as objects rather than individuals. In response to social pressure, many put their ambition on the backburner and focus their energy instead on cultivating their physical appearance. Weight fixation, cosmetics products and extrapolating self-worth to beauty came practically in tandem to women’s visibility outside the domestic sphere. The culturally constructed paradigm for the desirable physique was and still is disseminated by means of cinematic production and advertisements. In fact, the “cosmetic industry did not become a fully recognizable, commercialized, mass industry” (31 Black 2004) until the second half of the twentieth century brought on the proliferation of product placement. This fabrication of need poisoned the American

women's psyche provoking them to inadvertently consume out of aesthetic concern and insecurity.

In 1948, 90% of women began wearing lipstick (5 Black 2004). Underpinned by media text, the aesthetic symbolized "female empowerment". Alarmingly, it was only recently that the 'Campaign for Safe Cosmetics' found that thirty-three brand name lipsticks tested positive for lead at levels exceeding that of the FDA's regulation of 0.1 parts per million (41 Houton 2004). The release of these statistics is enough to wipe the red glossy grin off any women's face. Ironically once a marker of self-righteousness, red lipstick adopted over time the stigma of sexual deviance. This semiotic shift is suiting as it laces the slow subconscious surrender of the woman of modernity, as they forfeited their ambition in the career sphere and embraced the never-ending pursuit of beauty. The fact that there is lead in lipstick translates nicely as a metaphor for how this marker of beauty weighs women down.

#### **IV. A BACKLASH TO THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT**

Women's battle for gender equality has been undermined by the beauty myth. It seems as if "the more legal and material hindrances women have broken

through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us” (3 Wolf 1991). There is a cultural belief deeply engrained in our society that beauty is a standard against which all women are measured. Wolf argues that in the past a women’s worth was hinged on her virginity whereas in the present it is determined by her physical appearance and sexual lure. This paradox can be extrapolated to the mother/whore dichotomy. Furthermore, popular culture purports that women can be either beautiful or smart, yet never embody both. Society rarely praises or acknowledges the former. Mainstream media juxtaposes the studious brunette co-star with the beautiful yet not so bright blonde- two common archetypes for female identity formation. It goes without saying that the catch-22 is absurd, as although attractive women are said to have a leg up in society, they are often stereotyped as being as dumb as doorknobs.

The “maturing of feminism was crudely but effectively distorted in the lens of the myth” (69 Wolf 1991). Women’s growing obsession with beauty inflicted self-hatred and incessant struggle. The feminist movement for economic equality weakened as the influence of the media at large began reinforcing a beauty ideology that weighed a women’s worth on her waistline and cheekbones. With women working longer and harder for less money, the societal pressure to be beautiful brings on a

burden almost unbearable. Furthermore, the ever-present effort to meet impossible beauty norms creates an undercurrent of competition that divides women. The every-woman-for-themselves mentality that arises as a result of the beauty myth counteracts the intrinsic aspirations of the feminist movement.

Entangled in a women's psyche, the anxiety to be attractive is a repercussion of social conditioning at the hands of the hegemonic order infiltrating the masses through media images. One can trace the escalation of societal pressure as Hollywood extrapolated beauty to America's national identity (32 Black 2004). The beauty "myth is political and not sexual. Money does the work of history more efficiently than sex" (49 Wolf 1991). As the insidious media fed women's beauty obsession, there was a proliferation of industries catering to fabricated needs. From modernity emerged a new social identity of idleness and excessive consumption that spread like an infection among middle and upper class women.

## V. CAPITALISM ARTICULATES WOMENS ROLE IN MODERNITY

Beauty "was no longer just a symbolic form of currency; it literally became money. The informal currency system of the marriage market" (21 Wolf 1991) enticed

women into roles of dependency and apathy. Politically complacent and unemployed, these middle class women began having plenty of excess time as domestic labors grew less intensive thanks to the aid of inventions in home appliances. Thus, in order to “counteract middle-class women’s dangerous new leisure, literary” (15 Wolf 1991), capitalism wrote women into the modern market as consumers.

The disposable incomes of these women situated them in the social position of dependency “crucial to recreating and maintaining a productive cycle that functions to support the capitalist economy” (99 Lewis 1990). The slant that money can buy beauty served as a catalyst behind the rapid growth of the cosmetic, fashion and diet industry. “Modes of consumption thus became marks of social and cultural difference” (39 McRobbie 1999). Beauty presented itself as something that could be attained by anyone who was willing to invest the energy and money into acquiring it.

## VI. SPACES OF CONSUMPTION AND PERCIEVED INDEPENDENCE

Within no time, department stores became public spaces for women who embraced this alleged freedom as an escape from the recluse of domesticity. Prior to this, women were confined to the chores and maintenance of the house and home.

Even today, “females are expected to use streets as a route between two interior spaces, be they places of employment or consumption activity. The social consequence of street loitering or strolling is the label, ‘prostitute’” (92 Lewis 1990). Loitering within a department store was and is perceived as socially acceptable however.

Broadening the geographical constraints determined by gender, the novel intercourse between leisure and consumption afforded women the possibility to inhabit a social space outside their home. Furthermore, an element of escapism ran below the chance handed to women to try on new social identities. The fashioning of the self was advertised as a vehicle of expression, rendering the “regimen of dress codes” that laced confirmation, prom night and weddings (90 Lewis 1990) less rigid. Women realized that they could convey their social status and distinguished taste through the diversity of their wardrobe and brand names of their clothes, paving way for the emergence of the commodity system of sign value.

In tandem to the proliferation of malls and department stores came another social space inhabited namely by women- the beauty salon. It is here where the ‘hidden labor of beauty’ (19 Black 2004) temporarily relieved the emotional stress of societal pressure. Yet despite the illusion of beauty salons serving as grounds for communal interactions, the social exchanges that take place were and arguably still are

oftentimes shallow. “Women can tend to resent each other if they look too ‘good’ and dismiss one another if they look too ‘bad’. So women too rarely benefit from the experience that makes men’s clubs and organizations hold together.” (75 Wolf 1991).

The tendency to view the 'Other Woman' as the enemy can be tied to the mass neurosis of the beauty myth, which keeps woman incessantly competing with one another- denying the possibility of female bonding.

## VII. FROM CONSUMPTION TO STARVATION

The absence of community in beauty salons and the apathetic distractions provided by department stores were merely the beginning. As “the weight of fashion models plummeted to 23 percent below that of ordinary women, eating disorders rose exponentially” (11 Wolf 1991). Beauty products and expensive attire were no longer enough, as magazines like *Vogue* portrayed slick thin models in the nude- their visible ribs reflecting the culture industry’s redefinition of “beauty”. These images “used food and weight to strip women of their sense of control” (11 Wolf 1991). Hostage to societal expectations, women have never before in history found themselves entangled in such a mass phobia that is so psychologically imprisoning.

Seventy-five percent of women have bodies that fall outside that the media propagates as beautiful. As “women breached the power structure...eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing specialty” (3 Wolf 1991). The unprecedented boom of the diet and cosmetic surgery industry came about in tandem to the growth of the telecommunication and commercial industries. Threatening a woman’s sanity, societal expectations manipulate women to willingly starve herself- some consuming fewer calories a day than those in third world countries. This obsession with weight translates in to severe eating disorders such as bulimia, anorexia and compulsive binge eating.

An alarming statistic provided by the *American Anorexia and Bulimia Association* unveils the fact that millions of women nation-wide suffer from eating disorders. Each year a hundred and fifty thousand women die of anorexia. With one in five students suffering from the disease education, or lack there of, does not seem to be a factor. As women disparately struggle to obtain the correct height to weight ratio, the body suffers. The internal wounds of eating disorders and the corporeal scars of plastic surgery all trace back to the anxiety bred by the media’s reinforcement of the beauty myth.

## VIII. MEDIA, MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS AND ARTIFICIAL NEEDS

Over the past several decades, America has become an “image saturated society where advertising, entertainment, television, and other culture industries increasingly define and shape everyday life” (227 Gotham). The onslaught of commercialization came about as a mechanism to promote consumption in the age of mechanical reproduction. To drive the economy, artificial needs were and are still to this day fashioned. As a result, mass society has devolved into passive spectators and consumers entranced by the hypnotic nature of the media- blindly embracing ideologically infiltrated images fabricated with ulterior motives (227 Gotham). Wolf claims that the beauty myth "is not about women at all." She explains, "it is about men's institutions and institutional power" (5 Wolf 1991).

Furnished with the agenda of multinational conglomerates, the media manufactures “fictitious, artificial, and imaginary needs” (161 Lefebvre). The culture industries bred by capitalism infect the American social psyche with hegemonic ideologies that not only cement the current social hierarchy, but also construct “powerful images, descriptions, definitions and frames of reference for understanding the world” (132 Storey). The media’s role in consumption patterns is predominately

overlooked by society at large, thus more often than not people purchase without hesitation or reservation as to what motives lie behind their choices. Corporations like IBM, News Corporation, AOL Time Warner, General Electric and Microsoft dominate the communication industry (98 Fairclough 2006). This in turn facilitates the dissemination of a hegemonic discourse of cultural values. The cultural codes and conventions projected by the cinema and television alike are thus internationally acknowledged. Consumption patterns can be traced to a corporation's annual expenditure in the advertisement of their products. Susceptible to the subliminal, the masses spend without sense or practicality.

## IX. ADVERTISEMENTS BREEDING INADEQUACIES

In many respects, advertisements are a reflection of capitalist culture. There has been an onslaught of ads flooding the urban scape, lacing the highways of America, cluttering magazines and cutting up programs on TV. These glossy depictions “convince readers of their own inadequacies while drawing them into the consumer culture with the promise that they could buy their way out of bodily dissatisfactions and low self-esteem.” (46 McRobbie 1999). Advertisements project the unattainable in

order to sell products laced with faulty guarantee. “They need, consciously or not, to promote women’s hating their bodies enough to go profitably hungry, since the advertising budget for one third of the nation’s food bill depends on their doing so by dieting” (84 Wolf 1991).

The pervasiveness of this subliminal propaganda is enormous. Brilliant marketing tactics tie wealth, sex, romance, joy and appreciation to images of youth and beauty. Thus, hostage to these beauty ideals, women kill themselves in this never-ending battle. The effectiveness of these advertisements is rooted in the repetition of these images. From this array of media text, gender roles are realized, social norms are cemented and beauty standards are established. Silicone breast, tummy tucks, acid skin peels, vacuumed out thighs and stitched tighter vagina’s all serve as a testament to the perversity of this phenomenon.

## X. THROUGH A SEMOTIC LENS

Although the aforementioned is as common as it is shocking, oftentimes we as humans have a tendency to build immunities to the unthinkable. As society at large becomes jaded, the media reinforces perverse social norms subliminally. It is for this

reason that one must take a step back and analyze the “gender encoded in media text” (73 Van Zoonon 1994) through a semiotic lens. De Saussure, the father of this discourse, argues that the connotative power of signs is unparalleled and that subconsciously humans are susceptible to social conditioning without being aware of it. He employs the ratio *Sign= signifier/signified* as a framework through which one can examine the extent the mainstream media is saturated with semiotic codes cementing a hegemonic doctrine.

Transmission models of communication, such as television and tabloids, use signs to “represent” or rather reconstruct our perception of reality and understanding of social norms. Through the transmission of semiotic codes, the media subjugates the American psyche with three distinct role for a woman: “(1) wife, mother and housekeeper for men, (2) a sex object used to sell products to men, (3) a person trying to be beautiful for men” (Hole and Levine, 1971: 241). This three-pier paradigm for female identity is perpetuated in advertisements where women are consuming either cosmetics or a product related to the domestic sphere (74 Van Zoonon 1994). Thus, women have the alleged “agency” to choose whether to be an object of male desire or an object of domesticity.

The media engrains in the women's psyche "how to be a 'perfect mother, lover, wife, homemaker, glamorous, accessory, secretary whatever best suits the needs of the system'" (Davies et al.: 1987:4) (66 Van Zoonon 1994). Regardless of the role a woman plays out, their worth is still hinged on their beauty. Even the advertisements of the supposedly self-empowering program *Oprah* "show women in traditional roles, worrying about their weight and their children" (101 Sage 1994). Furthermore, Oprah Winfrey has celebrity icons like Brittany Spear on her show who nonchalantly admit to doing anywhere between seven hundred to one thousand crutches on a daily basis. The prospect that an average woman with a fulltime job and family would have the time and energy to commit to this sort of exercise routine is ludicrous. But the mainstream media normalizes outrageous expectation.

Makeover shows like "*What Not to Wear* and *The Biggest Loser* even *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* show beauty as something created, a condition to which anyone can have access to with the right education and effort" (2 Sullentrop 2006). Cosmetic companies and plastic surgeons are having a field day as women anxiously pay a pretty penny to go under the knife- exhibiting complete disregard for the potential health risks that may be involved. Perversely, one can argue that women perpetuate the need for this sort of self-afflicted torture through their participation in it. The myth is kept

alive by those who prop themselves up in six-inch stilettos that physically destroy their feet and by those who spend the night suffocating in corsets that crush their ribs. It is fueled by the mantra ‘beauty knows no pain’- an all too common yet ironic adage that has the split connotation that a woman must subject herself to pain for beauty but also beautiful women know no pain.

## XI. **TABLOIDS: A PARADIGM FOR THE BEAUTY MYTH IN POSTMODERNITY**

The ironic fact of the matter is that the definition of beauty is not fixed. Glossy magazines are paradigms of this schizophrenia as they construct and redefine beauty with each issue. With the pages laced with airbrushed, emaciated models in the teens, it is no wonder that women are starving themselves to attain the unattainable.

Furthermore, this medium has the faculty to influence society at large. Wolf writes that “ it was through these glossies that issues from the women’s movement swept out from the barricades and down from the academic ivory towers to blow into the lives of working-class women, rural women, women without higher education.” Thus the ever shifting and increasingly implausible standard of beauty breaches the invisible

borders of class stratification and race through the glossy visual media's accessibility and popularity.

Perhaps even more popular than fashion magazines, tabloids emerge as a reflection of the public's problematic relationship with reality. Contemporary society seems to be plagued with an obsession for certain celebrity icons that emerge as incessant subjects of scrutiny. A perverse phenomenon particular to the postmodern era is the tabloidization of culture. In many respects, tabloid magazine are microcosms of the societal pressures women in American society endure. While standing in the check out line or waiting in the hair salon, one is bombarded with headlines surveying the physical shape and aesthetic appeal of these branded celebrities.

Magazine such as *InTouch*, *Star* and *Life&Style* target the female demographic. Women across the country indulge in hating and envying the media figures that grace the inky pages of the tabloids. These celebrities are praised one day and chastised the next. One must not forget that the beauty myth is not hinged on any biological or historical justification. "Beauty" is not universal or changeless, though the West pretends that all ideals of female beauty stem from one Platonic Ideal Woman [...]. Nor is "beauty" a function of evolution: Its ideals change at a pace far more rapid than that of the evolution of species" (12 Wolf 1991). In short, beauty standards shift according

to the mood of the market and the taste of the media. The limelight has sour appeal in a culture where perfection is never quite attainable, yet always expected.

## XII: STAR MAGAZINE: “55 OF THE BEST AND WORST BEACH BODIES”

The headline of *Star* magazine’s August 2008 issue was “55 of the Best and Worst Beach Bodies,” a spread littered with paparazzi shots of celeb icons clad in bikinis. Cellulite and ribs are magnified to show why she could either shed a few pounds or be a contender for hospitalization. Kate Hudson was awarded the worst



“secret sagginess”, claiming “Kate, 28, looks so perfect when she’s wearing clothing!

But the actress and single mom’s plunging blue bikini revealed a *surprisingly* saggy

tummy during a Hawaiian vacation” (Star Magazine, 10/08). This harsh critique

referring to the photograph on the right is a fine example of how a mother of two, who

still at the age of thirty has maintained a six-pack, can be nonetheless a subject to

harsh scrutiny. “Actress Kate Hudson told one interviewer that, to lose post-pregnancy

“baby weight,” she worked out three hours a day until she lost her 70 pounds: It was so

hard that she used to sit on the exercise cycle and cry.” Shortly after this issue was published, Kate Hudson began suffering from an eating disorder, which once again landed her on the front page of *Star* in “The 20 Skinniest Celebrities”. This issue accused Hudson of suffering from anorexia nervosa and described her as a “walking skeleton”. This just goes to show that the ideal of “beauty” is incessantly in a state of flux and thus doesn’t truly exist.

### XIII. MONEY CAN BUY BEAUTY

Although tabloids reinforce the notion that there seems to be no fixed standard of beauty, one thing is for sure: money can buy beauty. While half of *Star* magazine is dedicated to dissecting every flaw of a celebrity or praising a pair of Prada shoes sported by another, the other half is committed to commercializing fancy beauty products, designer dresses and of course expensive weight loss pills. Wolf argues that “the formula must also include an element that contradicts and then undermines the overall pro-woman fare: in diet, skin care, and surgery features, it sells women the deadliest version of the beauty myth money can buy”. Again, beauty translates as currency. The fetishism of the image results in the public cannibalizing coveted

celebrities. Just as fairy tales purport that the princess must be beautiful, tabloid preach that woman of beauty are worth photographing, worth stalking and most importantly they are worth acknowledging.

#### XIV. CONCLUSION

As the differentiation between capitalism and culture become increasingly blurred, re-contextualizing the discourse of the ‘beauty myth’ is necessary so to better understand it in relation to the age of post-modernity. The deep anxieties of women across the country translate into a 33-billion dollar a year diet industry and the 300 million dollar a year cosmetic industry. You see, “ beauty lives so deep in the psyche, where sexuality mingles with self-esteem” (36 Wolf 1991) that self worth is hinged on one’s body image. Women voluntarily and deliberately partake in this struggle to be beautiful believing that their happiness is hinged on it. Furthermore, a disgusting double standard emerges when one realizes that women appreciate men for who they are, albeit if they have gray hair, a fat gut and wrinkles- thus proving that the beauty rituals have been indoctrinate into namely the female psyche.

The historical evolution of the beauty myth was a slow than sudden transformation in the American psyche, accelerated by the proliferation of advertisement and growth of the telecommunication industry. Through the means of mass media cultural beliefs were cemented. Reinforced in fairy tales, Hollywood pictures, advertisements, conversations and commercials, the unattainable ideals of beauty infiltrate every aspect of western culture. The “violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement” (10 Wolf 1991) keeps females psychologically poor (52 Wolf 1991). Now women face a twofold burden to uphold not only their traditional role as wife and mother, but also to meet the ever-unattainable expectations of socially constructed beauty norms.

“More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our un-liberated grandmothers” (3 Wolf 1991). Looking at mannequins as models, paradigms of femininity that one should strive to emulate, women of today are imprisoned in the iron maiden. Instead of lying here awaiting a fate to come at the hands of metal spikes or starvation, I think it is time women take a stand. Women voluntarily and deliberately partake in this struggle to be

beautiful believing that their happiness is hinged on it. Dissatisfaction and low self esteem drives women to go under the knife and choose carcinogenics over calories in a disparate attempt to achieve the socially constructed image of beauty. Human value should not rely on the aesthetic or appeal of youth. As women, we need to shed this burden of unrealistic expectations and decide for ourselves what is true and in doing so we will dismantle our disillusionment.

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# LITERARY CRITIQUES

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## Response to Terry Barrett's

### "Teaching About Photography: Photographs and Context"

The disparity between reality and representation needs to be distinguished in order to understand the nature of the photographic image. A photograph's meaning is rooted in its context. Terry Barrett begs the question of how the context of an image determines its signification. In an effort to deconstruct the complicity of the discourse, Barrett makes the claim that there are three contexts in which a photograph can fall: the "internal," the "original," and the "external."

The "internal" context refers to the intercourse of the descriptive and informative elements of a work. To illustrate, Barrett draws upon Roland Barthes' critique of a Panzani ad, wherein signification and semiotics saturate fresh vegetables to deliver a convincing advertisement. Another example provided was that of the Pulitzer Prize winner Bill Seaman whose photograph of a boy run over conveys a narrative without the aid of text. One can extrapolate the aforementioned to the question of selectivity. Ultimately it is the photographer who dictates what remains within the frame and what is to be left out- rendering a bias representation of reality.

On the other end of the spectrum lie photographs that are taken within an “original” context. Work of this nature necessitates outside knowledge. Oftentimes, these photographs serve as symbolic critiques, visual metaphors or forms of social satire. Appreciation of the image is thus reliant on the intellect of the onlooker. As an example, Barrett uses Sherrie Levine’s exposition “After Walker Evans,” a series wherein the artist appropriates Evans body of work. If the interpreter is unfamiliar with the role Walker Evans played in art history, the meaning of Levine’s work is lost.

The last form of contextualization is that of the “external” wherein the photographs meaning is derived from its environment. The question of where and why arise in tandem to how it’s received and where does it stand in relation to history? To exemplify the complicity of this discourse, lets look at Gisele Freund study of Doisneau’s photograph depicting a man and woman sharing a drink at a Parisian Café. When first taken, it appeared as a promotional image in La Point, yet its meaning shifted when used in a brochure shunning alcohol abuse and then again when found in a newspaper reporting on prostitution. As one can see, an image out of context becomes a chameleon that can take on any given meaning.

## “Air Guitar”

Dave Hicky’s essay entitled “Air Guitar” traces his experiences working as an art dealer after graduate school, dissecting the complicities of the art world and the currency of cultural capital. His gallery “A Clean Well-Lighted Place” sheds light on his academic background, as it is a reference to Ernest Hemingway’s book. The article aspires to clarify certain aspects of the art world that are under the eye of scrutiny.

To begin, he contradicts the pretext that selling art to those who know nothing about the field is a degenerate act. As an art dealer, which he differentiates immediately from the work of a curator and a picture merchant, Hickey feels as if art can be appreciated regardless of one’s intellect or class. The deeply embedded myth that the art world caters solely to those of the upper class has been cannibalized by the onslaught of popular culture and artists like Andy Warhol.

In short, neither money nor power nor social status is necessary in order to understand art. Although, one can argue that the art world is often times shaped by the taste of the elite as it they are of the few who can afford to participate in the high-end art market. Yet, nevertheless, the transnational flow of media blurs cultural

borders and social stratification rendering a democratization of art in the age of post modernity.

The second point Hicky touches upon complicates the notion of the alleged worth given to great works of art. Negating the assumption that the commodification of art feeds into a hedonistic practice of consumption, he argues point blank that art is not a commodity. The value of art is hinged on an abstract cultural worth. However, he brings up an interesting point claiming, “when you trade a piece of green paper with a picture on it, signed by a bureaucrat, for a piece of white paper with a picture on it, signed by an artist, you haven’t bought anything since neither piece of paper is worth anything” (109).

Thus, investing in works of art can be simplified as a mere translation of capital from the economic sphere to that of the cultural. Moreover the arguable absence of concrete value extrapolated to art mimics the implicit worth currency’s carry.

Although Marx’s use and exchange value is not applicable, Hicky argues that “art is cheap and priceless” and even more intriguing it is a risk rooted in taste.

## “In Plato’s Cave”

Susan Sontag’s work dissects the photographic medium, begging the question of what is worth photographing and what fails to merit this vein of technological recognition. Photography has, since its conception, had a problematic relation with truth, as does it carry out an ambiguous role in society and the art world alike. Beginning with the kalotype, which sought to redefine artistic delineation, to Baudrillard critique degrading the medium’s aspiration to be considered an art form—photography has evolved, changed and shaped the way the world is framed. Oftentimes, what is left out of the image is just as important as that which is captured by the lens. Susan Sontag’s discursive critique of the photographic medium sheds light on the complexities of what it means to hijack fragments of time. Furthermore, the politics of meaning and the consequences of representation are juxtaposed with the argument that photographs are merely pieces of life not vying to make a statement but merely expressing a point in time. Yet photography as a medium, as an art form, as an inherent aspect of our everyday life has an indisputable schizophrenic character that transforms according to its context.

Photography, unlike other art forms, is hinged on the dilapidated pretext that its relationship with reality, with truth, is innocent, pure, unadulterated. Susan Sontag supports this discourse to a certain extent, however I would be very interested to hear what she would have to say thirty years later in the age of Photoshop and digital retouching. Despite the fragile argument that photography is a tool of mimesis, the gaze must not be forgotten. Be that as it may, photography is a democratizing art form that transcends social stratification and is arguably accessible to society at large with obvious exceptions of course. These exceptions are oftentimes targets for the photojournalist abroad, who in desperation to expose to the indigenous, the unknown, the ‘other’ shoot down those who still subsist in conditions we fail to understand and in our incomprehension look down upon.

What I found particularly interesting about Sontag’s essay was her attention to the parallel growth of tourism and the proliferation of the public’s use of photography. Born in 1986, traveling has been tightly woven into my upbringing- I know nothing else. I grew up amid the onslaught of globalization, the conception of the Internet and the implications of the transnational flow of media. Yet, in the very year I was born I am told the two greatest imports into China were ‘Rambo’ and Aids- something to think about. The construction of artificial realities and the public

fetishism of the image have consequences, as do the ethnoflow of people on the world stage. In short, we are living in the most exciting and unpredictable time- there is a sense of agency coupled with a loss of control.

As a photographer, I often forget what role I play as I cautiously work my way through shanty towns in India, where women invite me into their homes and nod their heads *back and forth, back and forth*- no words exchanged but enough said. I've seen the world from many angles and Susan Sontag's article reminded me about how seemingly innocent yet dangerous it can be to see life through a lens. This work acknowledged the inexplicable possibilities tied to the medium, but also begged the question of what unanticipated repercussions have yet to manifest. Just as painting has evolved (or devolved?) from the work of Di Vinci to that of Picasso, photography has traveled along a similar trajectory. Even with the aid of hindsight, it is difficult to define the role of the photographic medium- is it to be art, a means of stealing fleeting moments, a democratization of representation or is its ability to distort reality rendering consequences that cannot be ignored? Trying to define the incessantly oscillating medium proves to be as difficult as nailing pudding to the wall. With this said, there are some indisputable truths that cannot be denied. Like Walter Benjamin's article written now over eighty years ago, I would argue the Susan Sontag's

speculation, doubts, concerns and understanding of photography proves to as true today as it was the day she wrote it.

## Jeff Wall's "Frames of Reference"

The peak of Jeff Wall's career as an artist graced the late seventies into the eighties. His photographic practice began in 1977 at a time when traditional ideas of fine art photography began to clash with contemporary. This confrontation in aesthetics and approach led the medium in a fresh direction. For Wall, the photographic process had been perfected to a point where it'd be superfluous to improve that which was already refined. Wall quotes Sherrie Levine, who says: "study the masters; do not presume to reinvent photography; photography is bigger and richer than you think it is, in your youthful pride and conceit." However, the first time Wall saw Levine's work he reacted with complete ambivalence. In hindsight, he writes, "looking back on it now, I think my ambivalence in studying the masters was one of the most important things that happened to me or that I imposed on myself" (Wall 2).

Jeff Wall believed that to study the 'masters' one must not be confined strictly to the realm of photography, but to all art forms. Cinematographers, cineast as well as painters ultimately proved to be of great influence in Wall's later work. He believes that the photographic medium should pull from different mediums. However,

“combining it with other things resulted in nothing new, as photography but only the reduction of photographs to elements in a collage aesthetic that was not subject to judgment in photographic terms, and maybe not subject to any aesthetic judgment at all” (Wall 5). Furthermore, Jeff Wall held a strong belief in the preservation of literalism in the composition of an image. His work has to this day left a great impression on the art world.

## A Response to “Building Dissections”

As a result of the postmodern contributions of Matta Clark and his contemporaries, architecture is beginning to follow in the expressive and subversive vein of other art forms. For the majority of twentieth century, architecture was absent from the interweaving discourses of the art world. It was absent from ideological disputes sparked by the painters and sculptured that shaped modern art. Architecture “was not integral to that lexicon” (40). The primary reason for this is rooted in the perceived role of art to push boundaries and break down conventions. The artist possibilities of architecture’s is compromised by its need to also be pragmatic and confined by the fundamentals of functionality. The interview with Matta-Clark discusses how his approach towards the art form differs from others in his field.

Straying from the traditions of Bauhaus and Corborisier, Matta Clark defies convention and offers new avenues to conceptualize the possibilities of the art form. For Matta-Clark, the only thing that differentiates architecture from sculpture is plumbing. Finding the architectural approach of his contemporaries imprisoning, his work aims to subvert normative understandings of housing structures. He sees no difference between the “self containerization” of suburbia and the sprawling projects of the

ghetto. What he sees is the ‘deformation of values (ethics) in the disguise of modernity, renewal, urban planning’ (47).

With this said, Matta-Clark’s approach is conceptually rooted in undermining the architectural conventions that have dehumanized the domestic and institutional condition. What Matta Clark is known for is splitting houses quite literally down its center. Obviously, the act has no intention of improving the living conditions of those inhabiting it- in fact often the houses are abandoned at the time. Yet, it feels counter-intuitive for an architect to ‘destroy’ a dilapidated building, rather than attempt to renovate it. Yet this is not how Matta-Clark perceives it. For him, his aspiration stems from the hope that his structural intervention will translate as a semiotic mode of communication. Social stratification, competing historical narratives, subdivisions of space and pride all serves as interweaving discourses that inform his work. When questioned about his profession and his failure to solve ‘humanity’s problems’, Matta-Clark replies “I don’t think most practitioners are solving anything except how to make a living.” (46)

## Interview with Linda Montano & Tehching Hsieh

Inspired by the aspiration to tie art and life together, Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh engaged in a year long performance piece where they were literally tied together. Prior projects executed by Tehching focused on the notion of struggle, for instance in “the Cage” his struggle manifested in isolation, with “Punch Time Clock” it was repetition. Their three hundred and sixty five day collaboration for this piece dealt with the struggle stemming from codependent relationships. “We cannot go in life alone,” (779) Tehching says, yet the compromise and sacrifice that comes with sharing one’s life with another is not easy. The reason the project went on for the duration of a year secured that it took on the shape of a human experience rather than a performance. Their interest as artists was to blur the boundaries between art and life. Art is ultimately the physical manifestation of lived experiences.

Being tied to each other forced both artists to pay greater attention to the pathological details of their existence. Furthermore, it complicated the notion of gender roles, individualism and the ego. The work was rooted in sacrifice and to understand the suffering that inevitably stemmed from psychological, emotional or

physical ties to another. Stripped naked, the experiment unveiled to them their weaknesses, desires and shortcomings. As their time together progress so did their form of communication- evolving from verbal to physical to gestural and in its last phase non-verbal. As the year came to an end, they came away from the experience with the realization of life's ephermal nature and a sense of being pyscholoigically tied to one another until death.

## A Response to Allan Kaprow's "Untitled Guidelines for Happenings"

This article tackles the concept of a 'happening' which blurs the distinction between life and art. A 'happening' is an experience, pathological rather than constructed that mirrors the analogy of ready-made versus man-made. A happening can involve a spectrum of materials, people and actions. It's locality is not contingent on a specific place, its mobility is intrinsic to its conception. Kaprow explains it can move from the smoggy sideline of a congested avenue to the intimate surroundings of a motel bedroom. Its unpredictability sets it apart from other art movements. Time, like space, is disjointed and varied. The collective experience the constitutes the happening must be orchestrated like an irrational melody. The nature of time is manipulated by its utilization- if you're busy, it accelerates- if you're bored, it drags. With that said, a happening can only occur once, as it is meaningless if the act is repeated. Furthermore, an audience must be obsolete, as such would render it a performance. A happening is an experience that is engaged in by participants in as well as onlookers. It's artistic merit is tied to its unpredictability.

## Barbara Probst

During her lecture at the Aperture Gallery in Chelsea, Barbara Probst discussed the origin, conception and evolution of her work over the last two decades. Starting as a sculpture major in Munich, her initial involvement with the medium stemmed from incorporating photographs into her structures. Later, her interest in the idea of the simulacrum inspired the realization that her sculptures weren't as interesting as their photographs, so after taking their picture she would destroy the physical piece. This ideological shift in perception marks a departure point in her career as an artist. Drawn to the duality of photography, Probst was mystified by the medium's deceptive relationship with reality and truth.

On January 7, 2000, at 10:37 PM, she embarked on a project entitled 'Exposures' that has been her focus ever since. Arranging twelve synchronized cameras in different positions on the roof of her midtown apartment, she captured herself leaping into the air using a radio wave transmitter and receiver. This experiment unveiled the complexities facing the conditions of perception. Although the twelve resulting images shared the same exposure, they all told very different stories. The complicity of contradictory narratives stemmed from the disparate camera angle, which determines



how one read the photo. The field of viewpoints rendered an irrational melody of confounding stories and the illusion of different genres. Whereas one image had the aesthetic of a fashion shoot, the other

felt like a film still and the other

voyeuristic. Probst was intrigued by the simultaneous, yet contradictory representations of the same subject at the same moment. From this point on, the question of perception, representation and photography's dialectic between the real and subjective became central to her work.

For Probst, there are endless representations of a single moment which complicate the veracity of a single photograph. Our view of the world is unique and cannot be shared. A photograph simulates the act of seeing, it is physical product of perception. In truth, a photo can tell more about photographer than what is being told in the photograph itself. Probst interests lie in the enigmatic nature of the subject and how photography translates an image into a narrative. In Exposure #37, she has two subjects photographing each other- rendering the photographer and

model one in the same- the observer becomes the person observed, having power yet surrendering it simultaneously.



Not all of her work is completely staged, for instance exposure #9 is shot in public space, showing the six possible views one can have of a subject on the street. The conflicting accounts of a pathological moment is unsettling and furthermore unveils the spectrum of points of view. In her recent work, she has taken on an installation approach photographing a moment with a number of people involved. The viewer is able to move around the space and interact differently with the images, which Probst hopes gives it a sculptural aspect. The multiplicity of perspective undermines the notion of the 'decisive moment'. The divergent narratives that

manifests due to the fragmentation of the moment undermine the pretext of a single gaze.



# EXHIBITION REVIEWS

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## David Wojnarowicz

Economically in shambles, New York City's impoverished state in the nineteen-seventies and eighties gave way for the growth of progressive thought. An amalgamation of artists, photographers, dancers and activists rendered downtown Manhattan a refuge for countercultural and artistic movements. David Wojnarowicz was a prominent presence in the avant-garde scene of this time. An activist, writer, visionary and visual artist, Wojnarowicz diverse form of artistic expression was borne of his experience. As a homosexual amidst the panic of the AIDS crisis, he used art as a polemical weapon against the fierce prejudice and pervasive injustice afflicting the gay community. His photographs transformed the once pathological experience of his friends and lovers into a historical archive of a revolutionary time. The provocative and confrontational nature of his work invites one to engage in a dialogue that strays outside normative narratives of the past. According to Wojnarowicz, he sought to preserve "an authentic version of history in the form of images/writings/objects that would contest state-supported forms of 'history'"<sup>40</sup>. Rejecting the hegemonic American dream, materialism and ideological conformity, he subverted notions of

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<sup>40</sup> Giancarlo Ambrosino, David Wojnarowicz : A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side, (New York: Semiotext, 2006) 24.

sexuality, gender, race and representation to create an archive divulging his own marginalized experience. Yet, for Wojnarowicz, his work was more concerned about the act of recording what he witnessed, rather than the practice of documentation<sup>41</sup>.

Growing up in New York with his mother, David Wojnarowicz's upbringing was dysfunctional and abusive. At sixteen, he dropped out of high school and left home to live on the streets<sup>42</sup>. Hitchhiking across the country, he traveled on an aimless trajectory- hustling to make ends meet . In the late seventies, Wojnarowicz abandoned his transient existence to settle down in New York City's East Village<sup>43</sup>. This marks the beginning of his prolific career as an artist. Grounded on a multimedia platform, Wojnarowicz's artistic approach relied on a spectrum of mediums, such as collage, painting, film, text and installation. Below the surface of each image, a complex narrative of his personal experience as a homosexual was inscribed. As an fervent activist for gay rights, Wojnarowicz's images blurred the boundaries between public and private- using the body as a political weapon. According to Wojnarowicz, "to make

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<sup>41</sup> David Wojnarowicz, In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz, (Amy Scholder, editor). (New York: Grove, 2000) 38.

<sup>42</sup> History Keeps Me Awake at Night," PPOW : The Village Voice Review, R.C. Baker, 17 Aug. 2008 <[http://www.ppowgallery.com/selected\\_work.php?artist=14](http://www.ppowgallery.com/selected_work.php?artist=14)>

<sup>43</sup> David Wojnarowicz, In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz, (Amy Scholder, editor). (New York: Grove, 2000) 38.

the *private* into something *public* is an action that has terrific repercussions in the reinvented world.<sup>44</sup> His own struggle manifested as a microcosm for the collective persecution of the gay and marginalized.

David Wojnarowicz subsisted during a time when politicians, religious leaders and health care officials sat back while hundred of thousands of men died of AIDS. His world was one where social intolerance for homosexuality bred tolerance for brutal hate crimes. David Wojnarowicz writes, "I wake up every morning in this killing machine called America, and I'm carrying this rage like a blood-filled egg<sup>45</sup>". His work inspired by AIDS victims is as haunting as it is captivating. Of all the poignant images in his collection, I was particularly moved by his diptych of Peter Hujar on his death bed, a piece he left 'Untitled' that captured Peter's final exhale and lifeless hand.

Like Wojnarowicz, Peter was an gay American photographer from New Jersey who was very much apart of the East Village avant-garde scene. Although the nature of their relationship to this day remains ambiguous, the intimacy they shared is reflected in this unconventional portrait. The two artists first met in a bar in the 1980,

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<sup>44</sup> David Wojnarowicz, Brush Fires in the Social Landscape (New York: Aperture 1995) 48.

<sup>45</sup> David Wojnarowicz, In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz, (Amy Scholder, editor). (New York: Grove, 2000) 38.

Peter was fifty and David was in his mid-twenties<sup>46</sup>. Although they reportedly had a fling for the months following their first encounter, their relationship ultimately resided in a life-long friendship. “Peter’s achievement gave David’s talent direction and definition. David’s promise gave Peter’s achievement rejuvenation and vindication.<sup>47</sup>” For David, Peter was like a surrogate father and a mentor - someone he relied on for support, direction, discipline and love. Knowing the nature of their relationship makes this image even more engaging.

Taken just moments after AIDS took Hugar’s life on the eve of November 26, 1987, these two photographs bear witness to the surge of pain and ensuing rage following the loss of his dear friend. Despite the overwhelming grief Wojnarowicz must of felt, he documents a moment that would have been otherwise been shattered by anguish, lost to despair. There’s a haunting intercourse between dismay and fury, a violent undertone diluted by sorrow. As always, this image makes the private public. It allows access into the tragically intimate moment, transforming a personal loss into a social protest. Furthermore, the photograph was taken with a large format camera, as a homage to Hugar who worked with four by five. Below the photograph, a white

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<sup>46</sup> David Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

<sup>47</sup> “History Keeps Me Awake at Night,” PPOW : The Village Voice Review, R.C. Baker, 17 Aug. 2008 <[http://www.ppowgallery.com/selected\\_work.php?artist=14](http://www.ppowgallery.com/selected_work.php?artist=14)>

space occupies the lower half of the framed canvas. This suggest the notion of censorship, of presence and absence. With that said, it is interesting to observe the compositional choices he made at that devastating and decisive moment.

A dialectic between the real and the subjective, a photograph often unveils more about the photographer than the subject photographed. In other words, what is left out of the image is just as important as what is kept within the frame. He choose not to show Peters lifeless body. Instead, he captures solely his final exhale and lifeless hand. Slightly gripping the folds of the sheets with his hand, two fingers are gently extended while the others curl into his palm. The lines on his face and worn hands tell a story. The pillow he rests on sinks below the weight of his head which is tilted slightly upward. His mouth is slightly ajar, as if he truly was exhaling his last breath. One gathers from his sunken face and overgrown beard that he had been ill for some time. His collar bone juts out from under his spotted hospital gown. His cracked eyelids reveal eyes that do not appear completely lifeless, suggesting that death had yet



to completely take him. Could David have captured a moment straddling two worlds? It's impossible to say, yet there is something inexplicably captivating about this image.

Art critics have throughout the decades compared Wojnarowicz's photograph to Hans Holbein's painting, *The Body of the Dead Christ Laid Out in His Tomb*, completed in 1521. As in Holbein's depiction of Christ, Wojnarowicz captures Peter in a raw, painfully honest moment where he appears neither alive nor truly dead. This hijacked moment gives a fleeting glimpse of the transference that follows the last heart beat, the final exhale. Peter's harrowed lifeless face looks pained, yet paradoxically peaceful. Although it is said this picture was taken after he passed away, there is still life in his

face. Wojnarowicz's portrait of Peter has also been paralleled with Jacques-Louis David's painting entitled Death of Marat portraying the French Revolution martyr Marat.<sup>48</sup> Paradoxically, above the painting is a white void occupying the upper half of the framed canvas- a reversal of the negative space seen in Hujar's Portrait. Furthermore, like Wojnarowicz's work, it was meant to be viewed as a diptych along with his painting The Death of Lepeletier, which has disappeared<sup>49</sup>.



The fact that this photograph of Peter is repeatedly paralleled with images of martyrs says something. A

martyr is one who suffers and dies for a greater cause, a person who is persecuted because of what they represent. One could view Peter's death as a form of sectarian persecution that came at the hands of discrimination and hatred surrounding the gay

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<sup>48</sup> Helen Weston, Jacques-Louis David's 'Marat' (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 16-17.

<sup>49</sup> Helen Weston, Jacques-Louis David's 'Marat' (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 16-17.

population. Watching his “friends and neighbors dying slow and vicious and unnecessary deaths because fags and dykes and junkies are expendable in this country<sup>50</sup>” fueled his fury. The subdivisions of pride that arose in tandem to the AIDS crisis alienated and dehumanized homosexuals. Wojnarowicz’s ‘visual poetry’ speaks of conflicting discourses of gender and sexuality and the experience of marginalization. This portrait of Peter can be read as a social protest that depicts the devastating and unjust circumstances of his time. When diagnosed with AIDS, his work evolved at a tremendous momentum. Of this experience, he wrote: “realizing that I have nothing left to lose in my actions I let my hands become weapons, my teeth become weapons, every bone & muscle & fiber & ounce of blood become weapons, & I feel prepared for the rest of my life<sup>51</sup>”. In 1992, David Wojnarowicz died of AID at the age of thirty-seven, the collection of images left behind after his death speaks of a generation lost in time.

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<sup>50</sup> David Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

<sup>51</sup> David Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

## A Response to The New Museum's Exhibition: UnMonumental

### *A Closer Look at Martha Rosler*

*"Unmonumental: The Object in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century"* is the first exposition of the New Museum. Redefining preconceived notions about modern art, the thirty artists who participated in the collaborative show collectively reinforced an artistic statement that defies the constraints of contemporary expectations. Despite all coming from different backgrounds, there is a conceptual thread that could be drawn through the body of the varied artist's work. Fabricating sculptures, collages and multi-media art through the means of namely "les objets trouve", the artists unveil an inclination to further delve into the controversial proposition put forth by artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol regarding the nature of art.

Despite the multitude of talented artists lacing the walls of the exposition, the work of Martha Rosler caught my eye.

In the series *"Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful"*, Martha Rosler appropriates photographs found in magazine from the 1960's aimed at shedding awareness on the atrocities of the Vietnam War and coupling them with images from

*Life* magazine<sup>52</sup>. Dissecting the complexities of how the media transforms the domestic domain, Rosler's layered images renders collaged compositions that serve as a social critique of the geopolitical war waged overseas. In my opinion, her art unveils how the ramifications of war creep into our living rooms by way of the media- who present it as if it were a form of perverse entertainment. Like the anti-Nazi posters produced by John Heartfield (whose art was conceptualized in a similar vein)<sup>53</sup>, Rosler's work is an expression of her fury and sociopolitical stance. She is explicit about using a critique as the framework of her art. Appropriating scaring images of current social issues, Rosler constructs a powerful juxtaposition via placing these violent depictions in various unlikely contexts- such as the pristine kitchen of a middle class family. Through the multi-media collages, Rosler advocates the public's need to react rather than ignore the socioeconomic decay and the political distress plaguing the United States at this point and time. She illustrates that society at large has grown immune and indifferent to the incomprehensible brutality that is incessantly taking

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<sup>53</sup> "Martha Rosler: Red Stripe Kitchen (2002.393)". In *Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. (October 2006)

[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cncp/ho\\_2002.393.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cncp/ho_2002.393.htm)

place around the world. For Rosler, those who keep silent all have blood on their hands.

Rosler's prolific body of work can be characterized by its diversity in mediums. Although this series was fabricated through the compilation of collaged images, Rosler also employs films, photo text, projects, literary critiques and installations to delineate her message<sup>54</sup>. The methodology with which she executes her controversial images is well calculated and aesthetically successful. Although namely featured in exhibits in New York City, her work successfully breaches the transnational borders that divide one country from another. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that images have the facility to break down cultural and linguistic walls. A retrospective of her art career has graced galleries and museums throughout Europe.<sup>55</sup> Despite working part time as a professor at the Stadelshule in Frankfurt, Germany, Rosler's primary residence is in Brooklyn, where she was born and raised<sup>56</sup>. The city inspires the conceptual framework she erects that informs the methodology she employs. In her words, "the subject is the commonplace I am trying to use video to question the mythical explanations of everyday life. We accept the clash of public and private as

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<sup>54</sup> <http://home.earthlink.net/~navva/about/index.html>

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.fehe.org/index>

<sup>56</sup> <http://home.earthlink.net/~navva/about/index.html>

natural, yet their separation is historical. The antagonism of the two spheres, which have in fact developed in tandem, is an ideological fiction – a potent one. I want to explore the relationships between individual consciousness, family life, and culture under capitalism.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> <http://www.fche.org/index>

## Max Beckmann

Last Friday, I was graced with the opportunity to see the recent Max Beckmann exhibition at the *Van Gogh Museum*. In all honesty, prior to this experience, I had never set eyes on Beckmann's work first hand. Not knowing what to expect, I went without expectations. My first impression was that of awe. The vibrant colors of the compositions lacing the walls were indisputably stunning. The frantic and free fluidity of his brush strokes lend an impression of raw emotion rather than visual abstraction. Despite the relatively small collection of work on exhibit at the *Van Gogh*, it is not difficult to find yourself lost in the lofty museum halls for hours at end- examining with great scrutiny each minute detail. After roaming aimlessly around, I returned home hell-bent on learning more about the life lead by this unique artist, as I was quite perplexed as to why I knew so little about an individual who's influence on the art world seemed profound. Although it was his paintings that initially elicited my interest, upon learning about the circumstances that delineated his existence and the philosophy behind his artistic approach, I was able to fully appreciate the distinctive nature of his work and stylistic vision.

Born in Germany, the prolific painter Max Beckmann can perhaps be best defined as an artist that swayed between realism and expression. Subsisting during the first half of the twentieth century, he was recognized during his lifetime as one of Germany's greatest painters amid the onslaught of the modernist movement. Straying from the stylistic constraints identification with a particular school or art movement can often render, Beckmann was influenced by the classics and the traditional forms of art that circumscribed his predecessors. Although it would seem as if portraits constitute a vast majority of his work, he also generated several still lives during his artistic career. Furthermore, his metaphysical perception of reality inspired a few paintings that can best be recognized by their allegorical imagery. His outlook on life was indisputably unparalleled, yet through contact with his paintings one is able to harness an insight into his artistic psyche. His ability to elegantly illustrate strips of his own reality on canvas leaves one with a fleeting impression of how the world must have been perceived through the eyes of a man void of aspirations outside of unbridled inspiration.

## Richard Avedon “The Madonna of the Future”

Despite his recognition in the world of fine art, Richard Avedon will go down in history namely for his work in fashion photography. His name alone connotes the glamour lacing labels like Dior, Channel and Givenchy. At first, his career in fashion denied him entrance into the cultural sphere of fine art. Yet, Richard Avedon’s solo exhibition in the Whitney Museum sent ripples throughout the art world, as it complicated the notion that there is a disparity between high and popular culture. The prospect that the mainstream even had a place in the art world is a phenomenon that emerged in tandem to the age of post- modernity.

In the article, “Madonna of the Future,” it is argued that there is a predictable and almost generic property too much of Richard Avedon’s fashion photography. Ironically, it was one of the first images that earned him recognition, “Dovima With Elephants, Cirque d’Hiver, Paris”. This early work remains an unparalleled paradigm for his artistic endeavors. This particular piece has an inexplicable element that renders a surreal affect similar to that of a dream. There are only a few photographs within Avedon’s career that lend the impression that he transcends himself.

One could argue that his 1981 portrait of the beekeeper, Ronald Fischer, also embodies the same captivating quality. Although this photograph was one of many in a series Avedon did, it is unlike the others. Yet it is difficult to articulate why exactly this is, as all the formal elements of the image did not differ from those of the others. In many ways, Avedon became a hostage to his signature work- the black and white portraits pressed up against a bleached white background. Aside from the aforementioned images, there is uniformity to Avedon's eye that translates as generic. In short, Richard Avedon was simultaneously shackled and celebrated for his stylistic approach towards the medium.

## A Response to Barbara Kruger's Interviews

Described as the “poet laureate” in the era of the spectacle, Barbara Kruger has been a prominent presence in the art world since the late seventies. Her subversive body of work explicitly conveys cultural critiques on the ethos of mass consumption and the politics of pop culture. Born and raised in Newark, New Jersey, Kruger grew up in a blue collared family with little options. She studied under Diane Arbus at Parsons, but later dropped out for a job at Conde Nast. Very much informed with the socioeconomic conditions defining our time, Barbara Kruger's work unveils the of the pluralities of experience, the complexities of shifting subjectivities and the absence of authenticity intrinsic to the age of post-modernity.

In her interview with Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve, Kruger expresses her artistic aspirations to provoke the public to *question*, rather than accept. In her own words: “I'm living my life, not buying a lifestyle”<sup>58</sup>. Yet Kruger, being well aware of the consequences of categories, is hesitate to label her work as political. For Kruger, her primary concern is to permeate the collective social consciousness. Although she's aware of how an audience's perception is contingent on the environment work is

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<sup>58</sup> The Art of Public Address, Thyrsa Nichol Goodeve, Art in America. New York: Nov 1997. Vol. 85, Iss. 11; pg 92, 8 pgs.

viewed, her art is not confined to the cultural terrain of museums. As in the case of the shrink plastic wrapped bus, she is able not only to reach a broader audiences through this act of decontextualization, but also subvert traditions of pop culture.

In this respect, her ironic approach mirrors that of Andy Warhol- who she admits greatly admiring. Like Warhol, Kruger dissects the perversity of popular culture- shedding light on how identities are constructed through the mimesis of media images. Her interest lies in how “all the gossip and craziness becomes a kind of sustained narrative, which, in turn can become history”<sup>59</sup>. She compares the media to pornography, in that it fetishizes fame and tragedy like a modern day colosseum -a morbid and lewd delirium of debauchery. The threat lies in the semiotic messages lacing the programs that seduce the masses into the realm of fantastic escapism and desensitization. Using a theoretical framework best described as post-structuralist, Kruger’s work divulges the mechanisms in which society is structure through language. Her messages are explicit, rather than subliminal. Humorously, she attributes the brevity of her text to her short attention span. With a background in graphic design, Kruger communicates her message through combining a string of words with a seemingly unrelated image- meaning is manifested through this

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<sup>59</sup> <sup>59</sup> The Art of Public Address, Thyrsa Nichol Goodeve, *Art in America*. New York: Nov 1997. Vol. 85, Iss. 11; pg 92, 8 pgs.

amalgamation. Yet, Kruger writes: “although my work was heavily informed by my design work on a formal and visual level, as regards meaning and content the two practices parted ways.”<sup>60</sup>

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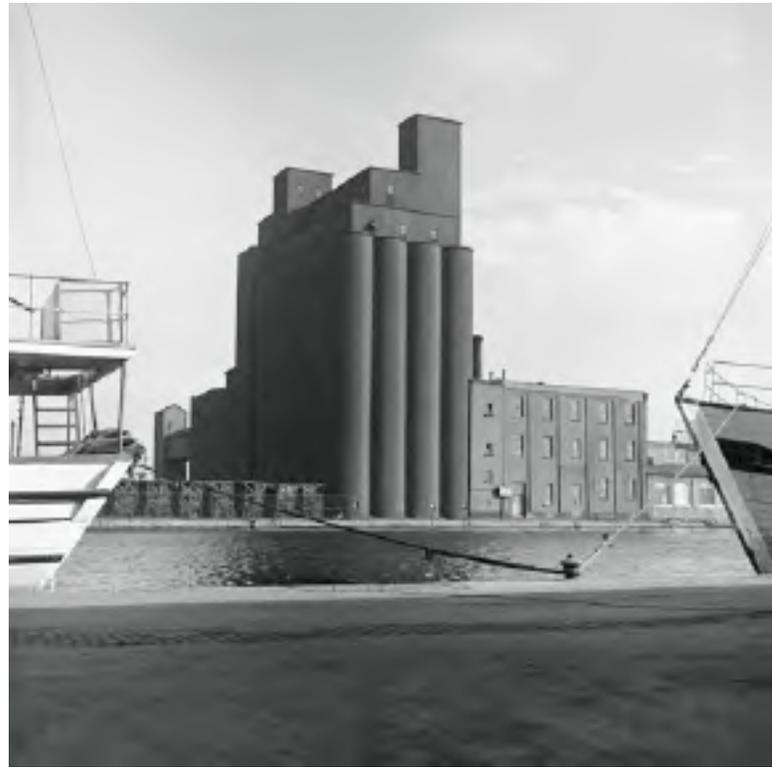
<sup>60</sup> <sup>60</sup> The Art of Public Address, Thyrza Nichol Goodeve, *Art in America*. New York: Nov 1997. Vol. 85, Iss. 11; pg 92, 8 pgs.

## A Reflection on Alan B. Stone's Exhibit

The poverty of experience intrinsic to the accelerated age of modernity brings into question the politics of memory. Alan B. Stone's exposition at ICP Museum, *Senses of Place*, deracinates the notions of past, the fragility of memory and the conflicting narratives of history that inevitably come to define the present. How is it that a mere material manifestation of a light refractory so painfully and intimately captures a fleeting glimpse of time lost? Alan Stone's work illustrates how photographs can so subtly yet profoundly illicit a sea of feelings- uprooting thoughts consumed by the unconscious. Comprising of seventy-five black & white photographs, this collection reflects the realm of the imagination and memory as it is hijacked by the fallacy of a shared history. It is the pathology of everyday that serves as his inspiration. Serving as a blueprint of his experience coming of age in Montreal, Stone's retrospective unveils through the mundane the tangled dialogue of modernity, sexuality and its social consequences. His vacant shots of empty streets in Montreal beg the question of what is lost amid the onslaught of modernity and what is gained. As a homosexual, Stone's life was one of persecution. His subversive images of the male psychic, considered pornographic at the time, emerged as a silent protest of his

own marginalization. Stone's entire body of work ultimately conveys the beautiful and grotesque narrative of his own experience.

What I find most interesting about Stone's work is the struggle and passion invested in his articulation of defining home. Torn by linguistic and racial barriers, the schizophrenic nature of Montreal's urban identity served as his initial inspiration.



Loosing his father at fifteen, he grew up with his mother and sister in a predominately Anglo-dominated barrio in Montreal<sup>61</sup>. The countless sub-divisions of pride served as the catalyst for social upheaval and hate. The geopolitical circumstances fueled by class and ethnic disparities emerged were meticulously documented by Stone in his early years. The image above, entitled "Lachine Canal, grain silos", taken in 1953, depicts an edifice for grain storage along the Lachine Canal, which cut through the

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<sup>61</sup> David Deitcher. "Alan B. Stone and the Senses of Place." Undated in "Alan B. Stone: A Sense of Place." International Center of Photography, New York, New York (January 29, 2010—May 9, 2010) [http://www.icp.org/atf/ct/%7Ba0b4ee7b-5a90-46ab-af37-7115a2d48f94%7D/alanbstone\\_david\\_deitcher.PDF](http://www.icp.org/atf/ct/%7Ba0b4ee7b-5a90-46ab-af37-7115a2d48f94%7D/alanbstone_david_deitcher.PDF) (accessed February 9, 2010).

Old Port of Montreal to Lake Saint-Louis<sup>62</sup>. Although arguably a prosaic depiction of an industrial monolith, there is something haunting and inexplicably vacant cannibalizing its candid nature. Despite its commonplace content, the enigmatic compositional approach of Stone is voyeuristic, oblique and obsessive. These images of empty streets, a port in the dead of winter, a boy watching hockey alone speak of something far more significant. His photographs document Montreal before the city was usurped by pillars of steel and glass- rendering an illusory connection to the past and an uncanny recognition for what neglected. In this respect this series bemoans what was lost in the triumphed march towards industrialization and modernity.

Yet this candid and strangely haunting documentation of Montreal is far from a complete representation of Stone's life work. After setting up a professional studio in his mid-twenties, he was hired to photograph knots for a Boy Scouts manual. A relationship forged on set with Billy Hill, known formerly as "Mr. Canada", led to later commercial success when the body builder requested photographs of his physique<sup>63</sup>. The success of this spread subsequently situated Stone in a lucrative niche of sensually capturing the male form- Hill emerged as one of his chief models. Thus in

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<sup>62</sup> "Lachine, Quebec". 2006. February 22 2010. <[http://www.bookrags.com/wiki/Lachine,\\_Quebec](http://www.bookrags.com/wiki/Lachine,_Quebec)>.

<sup>63</sup> <sup>63</sup> David Deitcher. "Alan B. Stone and the Senses of Place." Undated in "Alan B. Stone: A Sense of Place." International Center of Photography, New York, New York (January 29, 2010—May 9, 2010) [http://www.icp.org/atf/cf/%7Ba0b4ee7b-5a90-46ab-af37-7115a2d48f94%7D/alanbstone\\_david\\_deitcher.PDF](http://www.icp.org/atf/cf/%7Ba0b4ee7b-5a90-46ab-af37-7115a2d48f94%7D/alanbstone_david_deitcher.PDF) (accessed February 9, 2010)

the 1950's and 1960's, his focused as artist on generating countless images of scantily clad, strapping young men. This series, as controversial as it was at the time, emerged as his 'claim to fame'<sup>64</sup>. Male body builders would actively seek him out- willing pay top dollar to have him photograph them<sup>65</sup>. He continued this body of work, later known as 'beefcake', until his death at the age of sixty-five in 1992. Due to the highly controversial genre, Stone created it behind the alias title, Mark One Studio. This anonymity proved necessary, as years later once the nature of his work was exposed, his studio in Montreal was raided under the pretext that he was generating highly obscene 'pornographic' images.

Stone's sexuality plays a great role in the construction of these images- more accurately described as male pin-ups rather than porn. As a homosexual, Stone experienced great difficulty coming out. To be a homosexual at this time harbored scandalous social consequences riddled with shame and the potential even of criminal charges. The hyper- conservative mentality plaguing Montreal denied the possibility of being open about one's sexuality- especially if it deviated from the heterosexual

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<sup>64</sup> David Deitcher. "Alan B. Stone and the Senses of Place." Undated in "Alan B. Stone: A Sense of Place." International Center of Photography, New York, New York (January 29, 2010— May 9, 2010) [http://www.icp.org/atf/cf/%7Ba0b4ee7b-5a90-46ab-af37-7115a2d48f94%7D/alanbstone\\_david\\_deitcher.PDF](http://www.icp.org/atf/cf/%7Ba0b4ee7b-5a90-46ab-af37-7115a2d48f94%7D/alanbstone_david_deitcher.PDF) (accessed February 9, 2010)

<sup>65</sup> On the sexism and homophobia that are endemic to the prejudice against the sentimental, which dates back to the dawn of modernist culture, see: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1990), esp. pp. 91-130.

‘norm’. Stone’s inclusion of newspaper article’s in his exposition shed light on the struggle and percussions endured by those of the gay community. They serve as a testament of the pervasive persecution and harassment endured by the gay community. Through decontextualizing these articles, Stone deracinates the deep roots of this collective prejudice. “As such, this exhibition underscores the extent to which photographic point-of-view is socially determined”<sup>66</sup>. His photographs, along with the articles he gathered in tandem, emerge as a blueprint of the pain integral of his past as well as a historical document of sub-divisions of pride that tore his city apart. As a marginalized citizen, Stone portrayed a view of the city that teetered outside the experience of the norm. His perspective is unparalleled, though the story he tells through these images is not solely his own but one that speaks to a larger human experience. It unveils the schizophrenic notion of identity and place- our connection to it and history’s role in redefining it. Photographs emerge as the sole relics of what was and constructs, like memories, what is.

The fundamental truth lacing each photograph is such: the past is present in different localities, even if these localities are abstract fragments of the past. The politics of memory grow increasingly complicated when one admits the tendency of

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<sup>66</sup>David Deitcher. “Alan B. Stone and the Senses of Place.” Undated in “Alan B. Stone: A Sense of Place.” International Center of Photography, New York, New York (January 29, 2010— May 9, 2010) [http://www.icp.org/atf/cf/%7Ba0b4ee7b-5a90-46ab-af37-7115a2d48f94%7D/alanbstone\\_david\\_deitcher.PDF](http://www.icp.org/atf/cf/%7Ba0b4ee7b-5a90-46ab-af37-7115a2d48f94%7D/alanbstone_david_deitcher.PDF) (accessed February 9, 2010)

history's re-writing. The photographic medium harbors the ability to force one to remember what has long been forgotten. Alan Stone's body of work acknowledges, with regret, our neglect for the mundane moments now lost to time. It subverts notions of sexuality in the vein of a monocacy, teasing the intolerant with a parody of their blind insecurity. What Stone's work offers is a narrative of loss, of history, of persecution, of what could have been and what was. Photography is a medium that harbors a narrative regardless of the intent of the artist<sup>67</sup>. These photographs speak of the vacant moments loss, sexual oppression expressed. "The absence at the heart of every photograph has a generative effect, one that recalls the theory of narrative according to which a secret of an absence (of narrative information) enables a story to continue to unfold. Once that secret is divulged, once that absence is filled, narrative ceases<sup>68</sup>" His images solicit a recognition of the collective experience of varying degrees of alienation.

Images, particularly photographs, have the facility to transport the mind to a place lost in the folds of one's memory, long forgotten yet nonetheless a part of the present. In the words of Susan Sontag, photography emerges as an "inexhaustible

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<sup>67</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, Basic Books, 2001).

<sup>68</sup> David Deitcher. "Alan B. Stone and the Senses of Place." Undated in "Alan B. Stone: A Sense of Place." International Center of Photography, New York, New York (January 29, 2010—May 9, 2010) [http://www.icp.org/atf/ct/%7Ba0b4ee7b-5a90-46ab-af37-7115a2d48f94%7D/alanbstone\\_david\\_deitcher.PDF](http://www.icp.org/atf/ct/%7Ba0b4ee7b-5a90-46ab-af37-7115a2d48f94%7D/alanbstone_david_deitcher.PDF) (accessed February 9, 2010).

invention to deduction, speculation and fantasy”<sup>69</sup>. In delineating the lived experience of one, Stone unveils the collective memory of many- a testimony to the indisputable shared struggles, losses and joys of humanity. This body of work articulates how photography complicates how we internalize our past and understand ourselves in relation to others. It speaks not to an isolated experience but rather a larger human pathology. In his images, we are not only confronted with the impulse to cling nostalgically to past moments, but we are struck with the realization that we have blindly allowed these moments to pass by unacknowledged. Whereas, his work with the male form forces us to acknowledge, through subversive means, the struggle many face due their alleged deviations from the hegemonic social ‘norm’.

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<sup>69</sup> Susan Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave,” *On Photography* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 23.

## A Response to the Exposition at The International Center for Photography

How will history judge us? Over the past several centuries, humanity has raked the land of its resources, threatening the balance of the natural world. The diversified body of work constituting the ICP Triennial, *Ecotopia*, renders an array of unique perspectives and different approaches to the repercussions of the aforementioned. It's interesting to observe how each artist responded differently to the concept of devastation, the environment, and their intrinsic relationship. Mankind faces a time of impending consequence stemming from decades of disregard for the world in which we live. The exposition at the ICP harbors a range of artistic solutions and reactions to this global crisis.

Interestingly enough, I was struck immediately by the disparity dividing those whose images triggered an immediate message and those who fabricated work that could only be appreciated once its meaning, explicated aside, was taken into account. For instance, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's "Forest" series are, in my opinion, not compelling photographs. However, upon realizing that the thousands of pine trees in the picture had been planted over a depopulated Palestinian village, I

regarded the work in a much different light. The image, seemingly serene, unveils the bloodshed stemming from the shifting borders of Israel. The photo perverts our predisposed conceptions of the forest, which we are apt to equate with the idea of growth and peacefulness.

Yannick Demmerle's series, on the other hand, appropriately named "Les Nuits Étranges", portrays several skeletal trees enveloped with darkness. The image itself expresses his intent without necessitating an explanation. His work stands on its' own and can be appreciated without a justification of the work's meaning or purpose. I find that there is a sense of urgency and morbid lost conveyed by his photography, yet his implications are ultimately up for interpretation. The fact that he fails to articulate his artistic aim renders a sea possible rationalization free from constraints.

I'm torn in between the methodology of the two artistic approaches. Visually, I was initially drawn to "Les Nuit Etranges," however, aside from the composition, it proved to be far less powerful then that of the photograph presented by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin. Although not as aesthetically procatative, the story behind the work sent chills down my spine and moreover usurped my initial reaction.

## A Response to Richard Renaldi

I was very much inspired by Richard Renaldi's prolific body of work. The range of portraits stemming from cities throughout the country renders a diversified perspective of American culture. In my opinion, his photography is very much in the vein of August Sandler, a German portrait photographer of the early twenty-first century. However, unlike Sandler who aimed at portraying each facet of the populace, Richard documents those subsisting on the fringes of society. I believe his success as a photographer is ultimately rooted in his ability strip his subjects down to their natural state, lending an inexplicable honesty to his work.

Graduating in 1990 from New York University, he started his career, like many other photographers, developing and printing the photographs of others. However, while toiling the line, he was able to afford the time to continue with his own work. The Christopher street pier, a haven of homeless and drunks ten years back, was his first inspiration. For five years he documented the lives of those who frequented the dock. With his 35 mm, Richard accumulated several hundred portraits, which unfortunately went unnoticed by publishers and art critics alike. Although this

rejection was discouraging, he believes that the project reinforced a sense of discipline in his photography.

Renaldi then shifted focus towards the wealthier end of society lining Madison Avenue. These photographs complemented those taken on the pier, and moreover triggered his transition to an eight by ten camera. I noticed an evident progression in the manner in which he structured the composition and also in the sincerity projected by his subjects. It seems as if working with large format redefined his approach towards portraiture, rendering it a more thoughtful process. The production of taking an 8 by 10 photograph is fairly time consuming and not of the same frivolous nature of digital or even 35 mm. His decision to begin shooting with larger format is impart responsible for the evident intimacy between him and his subject. The work stemming from the Upper East Side series landed him a place in the ICP triennial, which in a way dignified his work and fueled his artistic ambition.

From Newark, New Jersey, to Fresno, California, his focused veered towards documenting the individual in the context of the rustic urban environment, unveiling how this intrinsic relationship divulges the circumstances, and even the personality, of the subject. The photographs generated from this series engender a sense of nostalgia and moreover challenges our preconceived perception of beauty by demonstrating its

presence in the grotesque. Although his art has elegantly evolved over the course of time, the repetition in his photographic approach distinguishes his work stylistically. His photographs are unmistakable even from the Fall River series, wherein he in theory strayed from his style, shifting to black and white and shooting abandoned building rather than strictly portraits. Given that the camera is an extension of the eye, his photography is ultimately a reaction, or rather a reflection, of life. Richard Renaldi perceives the world around him in a manner unlike any other and it is for this reason that his photography is so unique.

## Ed Kashi

Contemporary photographer Ed Kashi distinguished himself from other photojournalist by embracing the onslaught of technological advancements in the field of digital while still maintains the spirit of a print photographer. As accomplish photojournalist for National Geographic, he relies on both digital and analogue in his work. Shooting in the RAW format with a 5D Canon, Ed Kashi covets the serendipitous freedom of digital so much that he has not shot with film in over three years despite its being his primary medium since the onset of his career in 1979.

Dedicated to exposing the social and political turmoil that defines the conflicts of our time, Ed Kashi work deals primarily with the complexities of poverty and deracinate that which many prefer to ignore. A graduate of Syracuse University in 1979, Kashi work has appeared in *National Geographic*, *The Times*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *Newsweek*. In the past couple years, Kashi has been manipulating the digital medium in order to test its limitations. His last project could be defined as a visual story communicated through the multimedia composite of photographs.

Whereas many photographers in this day and age feel threatened by the emergence of the new digital imaging technology, Ed Kashi has cultivated a style that harvests a sense of authenticity regardless of the complexities of the medium. For Kashi, he believes that “despite all of the complaints that photographers offer about the new tools and technology, that they fear they’re being taken over by it or losing something in fact, their control or authorship is far greater now.”

Branching out to new medias, Ed Kashi employs his digital acquisition to redefine the potentials of the medium within a contemporary social landscape. The possibilities of web is rooted in the its ability to mass distribute information.

Ed Kashi exclaims, “with *National Geographic*, I can reach 40 million people around the world. That’s quite a potent audience.’ But there’s something different about how I can reach people on the Web that in a way is almost more intimate and potentially could be even bigger.” Kashi admits that there is still a part of him that harken back to the time of still photography. However, his decision to make the digital switch stemmed from the acknowledgement that he would have the facility to globally reach the masses through the world wide web.

Coupling advocacy journalism with the exploitation of digital possibilities, Ed Kashi voice is heard. He admits that there is little objectivity to his

work, but rather his politics bleed through the images of his portfolio. Ed Kashi is more interested in creating photographs that influence people, that trigger a reaction, rather than focusing on the aesthetic fine art end of the medium. The intercourse of photographic techniques and digital imaging gives birth to an innovative and flawless art form.

As a photographer, I agree with Ed Kashi approach to the recent technological developments in the medium- one has no choice but to adapt, especially in the field of photojournalism, commercial and fashion photography. He asserts, “I can’t escape the fact that the new digital tools along with the Internet as a distribution system for images, video and multimedia stories has the potential to overshadow traditional print media because of its potential to reach more people and have a more powerfully engaging message.” I agree that it is imprudent to turn a blind eye to the fact that we are currently in the midst of a digital revolution that is accelerating at such fast and unpredictable rate that the future is laced with incertitude. The technological movement toward digital has served as a catalyst to the way photography is perceived and distributed.

In his closing remarks, Ed Kashi admits that “technology will change and I’ll once again have to change with it.” The accelerating rate at which technological

advancements are being made are so unpredictable that a blank canvas suits best the years to come.

Deborah Bright's "Of Mother Nature and the Marlboro Men:  
An Inquiry into Cultural Meanings of  
Landscape Photography"

The revival of landscape photography in the contemporary art world begs the question of how such subject matter remains timelessly alluring yet inextricably socially harmful. Understandably, the vast and mysterious representations of nature trigger awe. The aesthetic tradition traces back to the seventeenth century wherein the act of painting the natural world became a practice adapted by the aristocratic elite. Over the centuries, the delineation of picturesque scapes has continued to evolve and shape the socially constructed vision of the world. What is important to realize is what is left out a frame has the same degree of significance as what is captured within. Bright uses Norman Rockwell's mainstream image of "Small Town America" as an example of this. Ideologically infused, this painting reinforces a hegemonic slant that neglects to represent the marginalized and ethnic minorities. Hence, a landscape is never an unbiased documentation of a locality, but rather an image shaped by sociopolitical, cultural and racial predispositions- "there is no Form outside representation" (Bright 10) or misrepresentation. In short, capturing a landscape,

whether it be urban or rural, reflect the “vision or a feeling of the artist rather than a transcriptive record of the subject” (Bright 7).

Bright contends that in the tradition of landscape photography the masculine gaze has always been omnipresent. For instance, of the forty photographers honored in Szarkowski’s publication, *American Landscape*, only two were women. Bright justifies this disparity as so: “men choose to interact with nature and bend it to their will, while women simply are nature and cannot define themselves in opposition to it” (Bright 14). For instance, in the late nineteenth century the topography of America’s wild west was documented namely by male photographers. “No less than Marlboro Country, American landscape photography remained a reified masculine outpost- a wilderness of the mind” (Bright 14). Despite this masculine gaze, photography played a tremendous role in luring the populace out West through the visual marketing of geographic possibilities. Landscapes became commodified and packaged as consumable experiences. From this tradition came in tandem the construction of mythical places as havens of escapism- Disney World serving as perhaps the most explicit and concrete example. “Beauty, preservation, development, exploitation, regulation: these are historical matters in flux, not essential conditions of landscape” (Bright 6). Our vision of the world is thus constructed and distorted by

these images that seep into our unconscious. Furthermore, the postmodern inclination towards fabricated localities is a residual from these landscape images their and fictitious renderings.

## Photography in the Service of Surrealism

Photography's relationship with reality renders it difficult to extrapolate the medium to Surrealist art, which relies on the unconscious for artistic inspiration. Andre Breton, the poet who conceptualized and led the movement, believed that true creativity was handicapped by the limitation of the real. "Photography is an imprint of transfer of the real: it is a photochemically processed trace causally connected to the thing in the world...Technically and semiologically speaking, drawing and paintings are icons, while photographs are indexes" (Krauss 2). However, Man Ray's influence as a photographer undermines the notion that a photograph is merely a record that falls short of an art form. Through the manipulation of the medium, Man Ray generated some of the greatest work of the Surrealist period. Thus, one cannot dismiss the artistic agency that goes along with the process. The paradoxical nature of surrealist photography is rooted in the paradigm of reality as representation. At this point in history, Saussure's discourse on semiotics bled into the intellect of the art world. Reality was to be understood as a composite of semiotic signs that can be read. In fact, 'surreality' is defined as a 'kind of writing'. Photographs, in capturing 'reality',

reveals itself as a 'signifier of signification', evidence of the semiotic experience innate to life.

## A Response to Mercer's Article

### "Imaging Black Male Sex"

As a photographer, Mapplethorpe first gained recognition for his work documenting New York City in the late 1970s. Later in his career, his focus shifted to the black male nude. His approach towards framing the Afro-American male proved overtly sexual and uncharacteristic of the tradition of fine art nudes. Mapplethorpe's released "The Black Book" (1986) in tandem to "Black Males" (1983). Lacing the pages of the aforementioned are explicit photographs exuding an unparalleled eroticism. The Afro-American men, stripped of their clothing, are perversely objectified in an lewd and arousing manner. The images compiling Mapplethorpe's body of work stray from the conventional aesthetic of nude portraiture in Western fine art, which traditionally captured the white female body.

The palimpsestic female body is a site where cultural phenomenology and social perversions have historically been inscribed. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger famously articulates the disparity: "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at"<sup>70</sup> (Berger 45). Thus, women come to define

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<sup>70</sup> Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972. Print.

themselves according to how they feel they are perceived. The “relation of the spectator to spectacle is an intricately gendered system<sup>71</sup>” (Pajaczkowska 12). The gaze outside the individual plays a prominent role in the construction of a female’s subjectivity and its objectification. “The image of the female nude can thus be understood not so much as a representation of (hetero)sexual desire, but as a form of objectification which articulates masculine hegemony and dominance over the very apparatus of representation itself” (Mercer 437). However, in the case Mapplethorpe’s nudes, the notion of the gaze is complicated by the fact that both the object and the subject are male. Having the male assume a passive position as object of the gaze destabilizes the hegemonic gender dichotomy.

Mapplethorpe, in evoking this racial fetishism, reinforces deeply engrained cultural stereotypes of the black male as a sexual object. This sexual idealization of the male nude strengthens the discourse of the ‘Other’, a reassurance that alleviate the threat this sexuality poses to the white male ego. Yet, despite the absence of passivity on the part of the black male, there remains an objectification of the subject. A return of the gaze is crippled by the fact that the nameless model is oftentimes decapitated. The fetishized nude is rarely framed as a whole, instead the physique is cropped so to

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<sup>71</sup> Pajaczkowska, C. *Feminist visual culture*. New York: Penguin, 2001. Print.

unveil only parts- the chiseled abs, the sweat on his thigh, his broad chest). This further exacerbates the unabashed anonymity of the male models whose void expression when captured still fails to render a sense of subjectivity. Fetishized and commodified, the worth of these photographs are hinged on the use and exchange value of their signification. “ As Victor Burgin has remarked, sexual fetishism dovetails with commodity fetishism to inflate the economic value of the print in art photography” (Mercer 444). Mapplethorpe’s two catalogues of images unveil post-colonial anxiety coupled with suppressed fetishism, fear and desire for the black male body.

## Response to Giuseppe Penone's

### *To Unroll One's Skin*

Deviating from conventional practice, Giuseppe Penone's series *To Unroll One's Skin* (1970-1971) re-conceptualizes the tradition of self-portraiture. Superimposing a small glass slide against the flesh of his body, Penone's maps his entire anatomy exhaustively inch-by-inch to produce a portrait that mimics a cylindrical projection. The unique aesthetic of this Italian artist was greatly shaped by the *Arte Povera* movement in Italy circa the nineteen-seventies. Radically challenging cultural convention, the artistic approach of those in the *Arte Povera* movement mark a critical shift towards postmodern discourse. Their subversive avenues of artistic expression sought to unveil how consumer culture and the glut of commodities rendered life void of meaning. Awareness usurps illusions; Penone's work doesn't pretend to offer a window on the world which ultimately renders it more honest. The image's fragmentation elicits a newfound understanding of portraiture that is stylistically hybrid- perhaps it could be coined as postmodern cubism. The absence of spatial depth exhibited in his series obscures the established artistic aspiration to create a sense of space within the confines of a two-dimensional framework.

The politics of meaning and the consequences of representation are juxtaposed with the traditional argument that photographs are merely pieces of life not vying to make a statement but merely expressing a point in time. Photography, unlike other art forms, is hinged on the dilapidated pretext that it is honest and true ‘window on the world’. Penone’s manipulation of the medium not only complicates the notions of spatial dynamics and the anatomical structure, but the image is also laced with an awareness that cripples its relationship to reality while remaining honest. As post-modernity cannibalizes authenticity, contemporary photography oscillates from being an “archival medium” to a self-aware one. Whereas both forms lend a version of the truth- the disparity between them posits with the notion of “representation”. This begs the question of what is signification when laced with semiotics, how can awareness impoverish the notion of truth? Ultimately, these binaries confirm the complicities of the medium and dismiss the fragile argument that photography is merely a tool of mimesis. Giuseppe Penone’s work speaks to this discourse in every respect.

## Tentative Exhibition

My inspiration for this exhibition is rooted in the aspiration to present a body of work constituted of artists I consider indispensable in determining the evolution of art in the twentieth century. My hopes are to illustrate how these individuals dismantled society's perception of art through their transgression of stylistic boundaries.

Furthermore, I intend to trace the progression and direction the art world has taken as a result of their contribution. Amid the onslaught of modernity, the work generated in the past century has rebelled against the pillars of tradition it preceded. The artists lacing the walls of this exhibit, despite the disparity in their technique and methodology, have defied the artistic limitations of the past through the manipulation of their medium and thus have influenced the manner in which we regard contemporary art. I am anxious to observe how the reaction of the public today will compare to that of the past and, moreover, survey how one's appreciation for a painting can shift when it is put in relation to the work of another artist.

Given that art is a representation of reality, I believe that it is crucial when considering a composition to place it not only in its proper temporal context but also to take into account the life led by the artist. Gracing different points in history, many

of the artists on exhibit today were subject to criticism while others were highly acclaimed. The contrasting circumstances experienced by each of the artists are reflected in their work. In my opinion, a composition not only unveils how the artist perceived the world around them, but also renders an insight into the social turmoil plaguing the time through which they subsisted. To neglect the socioeconomic circumstances paralleling the life of the artist denies one the possibility of devising an accurate analysis of their work. Thus, before I delve into great detail about the piece of work itself, I will provide some preliminary information regarding the artist's life, the historical state of affairs and lastly how the public reacted at the time being. Furthermore, I believe it is best if the artists are presented in a loosely chronological fashion so to illustrate the manner in which these artists potentially influenced one another.

I will begin with the Austrian artist Egon Schiele, whose figurative paintings were unfortunately dismissed as inconsequential during his lifetime. A protégé of the great Gustav Klimt, Schiele's prolific body of work has in retrospect left a great impression on the art world. However, due to his premature death at the age of twenty-eight, he never lived to receive proper recognition. His subsistence as a social outcast stemmed from the vulgar nature of his sketches, which oftentimes rendered prostitutes and

under-aged girls undressed and erotically positioned. At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, German society proved incapable of tolerating his raw figurative representations. However, Schiele's racy work can be regarded controversial regardless of its temporal context, as even today several of his sketches are considered revolting. You see, Egon Schiele fails to delineate the women's body in an unadulterated light, but rather he strives to reveal the beauty beneath the grotesque.

When presented with the predicament of which sketch of Schiele's to exhibit, "Girl with Black Hair" emerged as the most formidable illustration of his style, technique and vision. This particular sketch depicts a young woman reclining gracefully backwards with her legs spread and her genitalia shamefully exposed. Her eyes are darkly outlined and stare crookedly out from behind her open thighs. Dark shades of cobalt blue and maroon are worked into the black of the woman's hair and dress. Schiele neglects to draw the figure with arms and legs, yet the image fares fine without them. The expression she wears teeters between seduction and unbearable boredom. This provocative and expressively erotic depiction of the woman's body is quintessential of Schiele's work.

The delicate lines and lush brush strokes delineating the "Girl with Black Hair" are fluid and free. The subject is not drawn in meticulous detail, yet Schiele seems to

harbor the innate ability to communicate what is absent via the manipulation of negative space. The perspective of the painting is taken from above- a typical vantage point of Schiele's work underpinning his unique artistic approach. However, the "Girl with Black Hair", like much of his work, fell through the cracks of the social norm, starving him of the recognition he rightfully deserved. It is for this reason that I have chosen to exhibit his work in this show, as I am anxious to observe how the public's perception of him has altered accordingly with time.

Unlike Egon Scheile, who never lived to see the influence of his artistic contribution, Tamara DeLempicka took the art world by storm. Perhaps one of the most renowned and prolific artists of the art deco period, her work was as innovative as it was expressive. Heavily influenced by cubism, her massive geometric paintings were oftentimes portraits commissioned by the elite. In Russia during the revolution and Paris during the roaring twenties, her experiences bled onto canvas, rendering a unique insight into the social circumstances plaguing the global stage during her lifetime. Best described as a glamorous bohemian, she was famous for her beauty and scandalous demeanor. Aside from her artistically gifted eye, her socialite status and facility to network also played a crucial role in DeLimpicka's success as a painter. In

retrospect, she is not incredibly well recognized in relation to the other great artists of the time. Her fame graced the years of her life and extinguished with her death.

For this exhibition, I was initially inclined to incorporate one of Tamara DeLempicka's countless portraits of the bourgeoisie, as it is quintessential of her style and subject matter. However, after careful consideration I've resolved to put on display one of the few paintings of hers that was composed without a commission. It is not as if her commissioned work was void of any inspiration outside of financial gain, however the portrait on exhibit today had been painted on her own accord and thus offers a greater insight into her artistic intellect. Entitled "L'incatenate", or "The Slave in Chains," Tamara completed this work in 1929.

The composition depicts a woman stripped of her clothing and chained at the wrist. Her eyes look upwards towards the heavens. Geometric in shape and form, the influence of cubism is evident in DeLempicka's methodology of breaking up space. The colors consist of muted flesh tones and a shallow range of grays. There is a strong contrast between the bare female and the crude city that serves as the backdrop. The sensual shape of the model's curved figure is juxtaposed with the harsh, jagged profile of the skyline. The chains that bind her wrist symbolize her imprisonment in a world overwhelmed by inequality, needless brutality and intolerance. Her nudity expresses

her vulnerability and her red lipstick connotes femininity. In a sense, this painting unveils DeLempicka's aspirations to illustrate the emotional turmoil she herself experienced subsisting in an age laced with uncertainty and hatred.

In contrast to Tamara DeLempicka, the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo is an artist of an entirely different breed. Although never starved of recognition, her experience as a painter differed greatly from that of DeLempicka's. Kahlo "pretended not to consider her work important, she preferred to be seen as a beguiling personality rather than as a painter." (Herrera 52). For Kahlo, her paintings were merely an expression of her inner self. She once wrote, "I paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to" (Herrera 60). Her body of work, which mainly consists of self-portraits, expresses the pain and anguish that plagued her existence.

Gracing the first half of the twentieth century, Kahlo is described by most art historians as a painter that teetered between the realms of Surrealism and Realism. Yet, in retrospect, Frida's work is not so much a product of a movement but rather an earnest expression of her torn self. In all honesty, I have always questioned whether she was even aware of her role in the Surrealist movement prior to meeting Andre Breton. Her stylistic vision had no precedent and few have successfully ensued in a similar vein of illustration. Infused with symbolic expressions, her self-portraits depict

the alienation of suffering she grew to despise. After having endured a serious bus accident, countless surgeries and a miscarriage, her body became a physical manifestation of her mental state. For Kahlo, painting was a means of channeling the misery she grew weary of harboring.

For this exhibition, I have chosen the painting entitled, “The Broken Column,” as I believe it eloquently illustrates Frida’s ability to render the insufferable burden of suffering. This painting is, like much of her work, a self-portrait. In the center of the canvas she sits: spine straight, eyes staring fiercely out. Nails are driven into the torso of her stripped body that is split at its center. The fission that tears her apart is held open by a column riddled with cracks. This detail renders the visual metaphor that she, like the column, is broken. Her nudity suggests vulnerability and the innumerable nails piercing her prove to do so in vain. Although tears blotch her sunken face, her eyes do not cry. There is a sense of dignity in her expression that veils her overwhelming agony and excruciating physical pain. In the background lies a barren and endless field, which illustrates further her emotional and physical isolation. Her paintings evoke the realization that she was alone in her suffering. Exalting a “feminine quality of truth, reality, cruelty and suffering” (Herrera 59), Frida’s paintings express the inexplicable. Her husband, Mexican muralist Diego Rivera,

perhaps articulated it best when recognizing Frida's ability to put "agonized poetry on canvas" (Herrera 23).

Similar to Frida Kahlo, the Spanish artist Salvador Dali worked also within the realms of Surrealism. However, unlike Frida, who was oblivious to her place in the artistic movement, Dali knowingly stood at the forefront despite Andre Breton's skepticism. A legend in his own mind and, in retrospect, an icon of Surrealism, Dali's beautiful and bizarre depictions can be best described as vivid manifestations of his perverse imagination. Inspired by the fantastical images that sprang from his subconscious, the obscure nature of Dali's paintings stemmed from Freud's theories regarding the complexities of the mind. Furthermore, Dali harbored an incredible propensity for Realism within the sphere of Surrealism. He arrived at his artistic ability after years of laboring over the technical aspects of traditional art. Dali's outlandish attire and flamboyant mannerisms secured his place in the limelight and, unlike most artists, he was highly acclaimed during his life for the great painter that he was.

Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory" emerges as one of his most recognized works of art. Also referred to as "Melting Clocks", this painting denotes the ephemeral nature of time. The depiction of concrete objects melting alone in a

barren plain with a horizon laced with cliffs renders the nonsensical illusion Surrealist strove to achieve. Dali's "imperialist fury of precision," (Montagu 42) and "paralyzing tricks of eye-fooling," (Montagu 42) afford absolute and utter "confusion and thus help discredit completely the world of reality" (Montagu 43). In this piece, ants serve to symbolize the concept of decay, as they incessantly eat away at the gold watch that rest on the edge of a ledge. The three limp clocks that are strung around the canvas contradict any inclination towards the assumption that time is laced with a degree of permanence. The androgynous profile of perhaps Salvador himself sits in the center of the canvas. His presence in the painting proves that he too cannot escape the inevitability of death. Ultimately, this depiction grotesquely yet skillfully illustrates the corrosion of time, proving that the only unchanging truth in life is that life is always changing.

To move on to another great painter, Henri Matisse lived during the same point in history as Salvador Dali and Frida Kahlo, however, his artwork cannot come close to comparing due to the disparity in his style. Henri Matisse is regarded as one of the most important French painters of the twentieth century. Although a prolific printmaker and sculptor, he is best known as a painter. His work is recognized for its vivid use of color and the fluidity of his brushstrokes. Early in his career, he led the

Fauvist movement. Inspired by Expressionism, the paintings generated during this period are best characterized by their use of bright and exuberant colors. Yet Matisse's contribution to Fauvism marked only the start of his career. Over the years, his style evolved tremendously. Most critics would agree that Matisse harbored an inexplicable and intrinsic understanding of color and composition. He achieved international recognition during his life and is arguably one of the most famous painters lacing the walls of this exhibition today.

It was incredibly tasking to discern which painting would best exemplify Matisse's style and vision due to the enormity of his portfolio. Yet the agony of this indecisiveness subsided upon reaching the resolution that Henri Matisse's *Still-life with Blue Tablecloth* serves as, if not the best, at least a viable testament of his talent.

Although the still life is, in theory, a mere representation of a few items resting on a table, I've chosen this painting because upon closer examination the technical skill required to render this seemingly simplistic portrayal is unveiled. The complicity of this composition primarily lies in the ambiguous nature of its backdrop, which is blanketed by a blue and white sheet. In the foreground sits three still life studies an olive green flask, a coffee pot and a bowl of fruit. Although, in theory, the image should appear flat due to the two-dimensional disposition one would imagine a printed fabric

would inevitably render, Matisse skillfully communicates depth without relying on traditional methods of representation. The three still life objects do not appear to sit atop a table, but rather float within the space of the sheet while simultaneously remaining grounded.

Matisse's inventive manipulation of space advocates that his inspiration stemmed from his unusual perception of reality. Matisse's visual deception presents a paradoxical representation of the objects that despite their tangibility defy not only the laws of gravity, but also rational reasoning. His brush strokes are fierce and fluid. Using various shades of cobalt blue in his depiction of the backdrop, the still life is painted in bright complementary colors of tangerine orange, pea green and bright yellow. The bowl of fruit sits slightly behind the green flask, breaking down the dynamics of the space and further reinforcing the perception of depth. Matisse's genius lies perhaps in his ability to disguise the complicity of a composition by delineating it as a simplistic portrayal, the fluidity in his brushstrokes rendering the illusion that the depiction was effortlessly composed.

Although Matisse's influence on the art world is indisputable, it would be imprudent to define art solely within the confines of visual representation. Thus, I've decided to incorporate several musicians into the exposition, as I feel their sway in

society should not be overlooked. So I've resolved to exhibit the work of Nina Simone, as she is a woman I have always harbored profound respect and admiration for. Known to many as the "High Priestess of Soul", it would be thoughtless to classify her as solely a Jazz musician since she was not the type to be pigeonholed to one identity. Singer, songwriter, pianist, actress and activist, Nina Simone was a woman who couldn't be confined to one career or stifled by the social implications of her race. Her vocal versatility is evident through her embrace of genres ranging from blues to gospel, jazz and folk.

Although I find much of Nina Simone's music incredibly inspiring, I have chosen to include the song *Ain't Got No* as part of this exhibition as I believe it conveys best Nina Simone's lyrical creativity. Illustrating the necessity to transcend the difficulties of life, the song is ultimately about appreciating what it is that you already have, rather than focusing on what it is that you don't. Her appreciation for what many take for granted is as uplifting as it is inspiring. The song expresses her overwhelming gratitude just to be alive, to have fingers and toes and legs that move. The simplicity of her appreciation is perhaps what I love most about the song. It is nearly impossible not to smile while listening to her vocalizes the joy of having a liver and boobies.

In order to fully appreciate the beauty of this song's lyrics, one must be conscious of the circumstances binding the individual who wrote them. Nina Simone was not only a woman, but a *black* woman, living in an era when neither were easy identities to inhabit. However, amid the turmoil of the civil rights and feminist movement, Nina Simone defied the odds and became an almost iconic figure in the jazz world. In the wake of great social and racial injustice, she neglected the limitations stemming from the color of her skin and sang fearlessly about the inequality plaguing the nation. Although her song, *Ain't Got No* is not of the many in her repertoire that express her anger towards the intolerant nation, it does illustrate her ability to transcend the racial injustice afflicting her generation via focusing solely on the good in life. *Ain't Got No* conveys the notion that we don't even have enough fingers to count all of our blessings. The seemingly simplistic form of gratitude is ultimately bliss in its purest form. Nina Simone proves to have the ability to see beauty where others see pain, see hope where others see misery- despite the troubles that plagued her existence.

Unlike Nina Simone, artist David Hockney met little to no resistance as an artist. His career as a painter and photographer has been blessed with incessant success. Born in Britain, Hockney has had a strong presence in the art world for the

past forty years. Nonetheless, it is difficult to place his art in the context of modernity, as despite his style and the public's perception of his being a Pop artist, he like Nina refuses to be pigeonholed to one movement. Openly homosexual, his promiscuous relationships are no secret. In this respect, Nina Simone and David Hockney share the experience of being marginalized, she by her color and he by his sexual preference, and both have similarly responded to this discrimination by embracing their minority status.

Although Hockney's paintings have been regarded at times as somewhat unconventional, they are by and large well received by the public and critics alike. Typified by their vivid colors and simplistic settings, Hockney's work can be best recognized by the unique and geometric style he employs. Heavily influenced by cubism and the Los Angeles landscape, his artistic approach flourished when he moved to the States in the early 1960's. Unlike many of the artists lining the walls of this exhibition, Hockney's paintings are far from a testament of displaced pain, but rather an unparalleled depiction of the monotony of everyday life.

I have decided to exhibit the painting entitled "A Bigger Splash" as I believe it epitomizes Hockney's stylistic aim. Painted in the late 1960s, the work depicts a tranquil summer afternoon in California. Judging by the shadows, or rather lack

thereof, it appears to be midday. The sun hangs high in the cloudless pale blue sky lending an impression of unbearable heat. Hockney's ability to artistically articulate a sweltering summer day and the exacerbation of tedium is perhaps where his talent lies.

A cabana and two solitary palm trees break the continuity of the empty sky of "A Bigger Splash". In the foreground a yellow diving board juts out and slices into a swimming pool. A splash in the water interrupts the pool's otherwise placid surface and serves as the only evidence of life. The skeletal lines of the splatter break the balance of the geometric composition. Aside from the splash of water, the image is flat, not necessarily in that it lacks depth but in its two dimensional deconstruction of space. The angular abstraction of the composition is threatened by the splash by the unseen subject. The mundane depiction translates as a distorted view of the world at large. However, like much of the work generated by David Hockney, there is something inexplicably discomfoting about the simplistic scene.

To move on, at the same time David Hockney was painting by his poolside in Los Angeles, Cindy Sherman photographs were beginning to catch the eye of the New York art scene. Known for her conceptual self-portraits, the American artist has been regarded by countless critics as one of the most influential female photographers of

the late twentieth century. Initially finding the technical aspect of photography far too complex, Sherman started off her career as an oil painter. However, inevitably she came to embrace the medium in her mid-twenties and has been an innovative presence in the photography world ever since. So attracted she was to the immediate gratification rendered from taking of picture that she disregarded the necessity of instruction and began just offhandedly snapping photographs. The experience of arresting and collecting fragments of time unleashed in Sherman a fierce creativity that separates her from other artists.

Sherman's body of work is primarily constituted of self-portraits. However, one must discard any prior preconception of what a "self-portrait" actually entails in order to comprehend what is meant by the aforementioned avowal, as each of her portraits portrays her in a different fashion. It is in this sense that her work brings into question the politics of identity. Outfitted in an array of attire from pornographic movie star to war veteran, the assorted characters that thread through her body of work render a range of portrayals representing her with countless personalities.

While in one series she might adorn herself as a film noir actress, in another she has herself ridiculously decked out as a clown. The disparity of identities she chooses to

inhabit really has no end. She is known for generating work that, through the instrument of disguise, can project both political outrage as well social critique.

Cindy Sherman's self portraits have been regarded as a representation of gender stereotypes. Her photographs challenge the viewer to question the way in which a woman's role in society is manipulated by the mass media. By the act of mimesis, she unveils the perverse and eclectic manner in which a woman's body is framed in the context of the patriarchal hierarchy. However, when confronted about the nature of her work, she states, "the work is what it is and hopefully it's seen as feminist work, or feminist-advised work, but I'm not going to go around espousing theoretical bullshit about feminist stuff" (Bronfen 83). Although present in each and every one of her photographs, she strives as an artist to separate her politics from her work, thus rendering it open to interpretation and free from the constraints of preconceived notions regarding its signification.

When faced with the decision to select a photograph to place on exhibition for the opening, I found myself torn. The diversity in Cindy Sherman's stylistic aim is so immense that it is difficult to discern which portrait serves as the best representation of her work. The photograph I have chosen perhaps does not do her justice, yet it at the very least lends an insight into her artistic vision. The portrait is untitled and

portrays Sherman curled up in a fetus-like position. The photograph projects a clash of vulnerability, anticipation and victimization. One hand rest just below her breasts, the other gently supports her slightly tilted head. The expression on her face is inscrutable. Her glazed over eyes and deflected gaze divulge little of what passes through her mind. One is unable to decipher whether she is on the verge of hysteria or lingering in a state of mindless detachment. Even more bewildering is the fact that she is soaking wet; her hair and white t-shirt cling to her contorted body. A harsh blinding light bleeds into the frame from the right hand side of the picture throwing shadows across her figure. A stark contrast is rendered and darkness consumes her bent body. Although Sherman's feminist politics subsist below the surface, this compelling composition constructs an opened ended narrative free from constraints and up to interpretation.

Another great feminist to grace the latter half the twentieth century is the singer, songwriter Ani DiFranco. The outspoken and prolific artist has been generating music for the over twenty years now, starting her career off at the ripe age of eighteen. Her music fails to fall under any fixed musical genre, but can be perhaps best described as an innovative form of folk with a focus on contemporary social issues such as sexism and homophobia. Her lyrics are poetic and personal and there is a violent yet

unparalleled manner at which she slashes at her classical guitar. As a political and woman's rights activist, her music strays from the lyrical expectations lacing the mainstream. However, the formation of her own record label liberated her from the constraints of popular culture and secures her the freedom to speak her mind regardless of the consequences.

Her songs, fleshed out with a sense of urgency and defiance, are rooted predominately in social critique and political outrage. Incredibly prolific, DiFranco has generated over twenty albums in the past decade alone. Over the throbbing pulse of her acoustic guitar, her elegant language affords her the recognition of being an exquisite poet. She is perhaps best described in her own words, "I speak without reservation from what I know and who I am. I do so with the understanding that all people should have the right to offer their voice to the chorus whether the result is harmony or dissonance, the world song is a colorless dirge without the differences that distinguish us, and it is that difference, which should be celebrated, not condemned."

Ani DiFranco's fourteenth album, "To the Teeth", intertwines her melodic vignettes and beautiful acoustic sound with edgy lyrics that deride the political corruption plaguing America at the turn of the century. Released in 1999, the CD's experimental and atypical sound amalgamates genres of jazz, folk and funk. Shedding light on

issues such as racial inequality, abortion and rape, the album serves as an ideal illustration of her style, sound and aim. The CD opens with the track for which it was named, "To the Teeth". As a response to the Columbine School shootings, this song serves as a critique on the gun culture of America and disparages the National Rifle Association for lobbying against gun control. "Hello Birmingham" ensues this song as an accolade to Barnett Slepian, an abortion doctor murdered in Alabama. Track four follows with the electronically distinctive sound of "Freakshow", which unveils Ani DiFranco stylistic diversity and experimental manipulation of melody. The lyrical protests and vicious acoustic harmony renders an edginess difficult to define. The album "To the Teeth" sheds light on DiFranco's incredible propensity to eloquently articulate fury. In a time when pop culture is overrun by brainless blonds exploiting their sexuality in return for fame, Ani DiFranco's music serve as a refuge.

Moving on from one feminist to another, American poet Sylvia Plath subsisted several decades prior to Ani DiFranco, her poetry serving as an inspiration to DiFranco and countless other contemporary female writers. Plath is perhaps best known for her ability to articulate the unbearable agony of depression and the social constraints of sexism. By and large, her body of work was not highly esteemed during her lifetime. Straying from convention, her poetry was oftentimes regarded as a morbid

manifestation of her misery. She has been criticized for her allusions to self-mutilation and insinuation towards a sexually charged relationship with her father. Veiling her verbal intentions with obscure yet masterly constructed metaphors, Plath defied the social norms of her era. Although her first book “The Colossus” was well received by critics, the compilation of poems to follow in “Ariel” proved to be incredibly controversial. However in spite of the public’s reaction, I believe “Ariel” serves as a better illustration of her work as it bares the scars of her descent into mental illness and is stripped of the conventional techniques she employed prior.

Unlike its precedent, “Ariel” eloquently demonstrates the facility with which Sylvia Plath strung together words. The poems constituting this book are far more confessional than that of her earlier work, marking a significant turning point in her career as a poet. The maudlin I do not consider her maudlin! What do you mean here? portrayal of mental illness and inclination towards suicide offer an alarming autobiographical depiction that ensuing her unexpected death triggered social outrage. Sam This confuses me a lot WrittenSubsisting during an era where gender inequality was rampant, this book serves as a testament of her outspoken opposition to the prescribed place of women in society. The collection of poems was first published in 1965, two years *after* her suicide. Sylvia Plath had left the completed manuscript in

a licked envelope hidden in the folds of her mattress. It was her husband, poet Ted Hughes, who edited and later published it. Whether Sylvia Plath initially intended her work to be released to the general public and read by the eyes of strangers remains unknown. Nonetheless, the work renders an insight into the dangerous neighborhoods of Plath's mind that she so frequently wandered through, unveiling the mental torment that laced her lifetime up until the morning of her suicide.

Although I hate to end on such a sudden and somber note, Sylvia Plath is my final addition to this exhibition. As a poet, her contribution to the world at large has, like each of the individuals on exhibit today, left a lingering and indisputable impression on contemporary society. I hope in observing the works gracing the walls of this collection, it becomes evident how these artists have influenced one another over the course of time. The range of representations unveils how each composition reflects a differing socioeconomic reality plaguing the time through which the artist worked. In passing through the halls of this exhibition, strive to regard the works of art individually as well as in relation to one another, as I believe this approach renders an unparalleled insight. The past hundred years has served as a haven to creative innovation fueled by prolific artists such as these. Despite the disparity in style,

circumstance and recognition, the artists on exhibit today should be appreciated in the context of the artistic evolution that defined the twentieth century.

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# ARTIST STATEMENT

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## (Post)Memory: Proposal

### I. CONCEPT

This body of work is concerned with how subjectivity is shaped by memory and how the act of remembering is manipulated by the mnemonic medium of photography. Identity formation is hinged on one's narrative of the past just as memory is inseparable from our perception of the present. A fugitive testimony to a moment lost, a photograph has the visceral and haunting ability to resurrect the past into the present. Although no object is counted on more for its mnemonic technology, a photograph is not inhabited by memory, but rather produces it. The image painted by light counterfeits an instance, it constructs a narrative of the past. The mutability of memories unveil the role the imagination plays in remembering. Thus, the capacity to reframe the past is precarious insofar as one's identities become a construct of the memories you've chosen to keep and those you've chosen to forget. Enveloped with nostalgia, this imagery is done in mimesis of memories, deteriorating the positivist discourse of photography's relationship with truth. Captivated by the rituals of remembrance, these (post)memories aim to undermine and visually articulate the mnemonic mechanism of the mind and medium.

The emotive technology of photography is triggered by the realization: “that-has been”, even when one’s recollection reconstructs the experience. Resurrecting the forgotten from temporal decay, photographs are “modern relics of nostalgia”<sup>72</sup>. Memories of the past are dictated by the present. Sally Mann’s black & white depictions of the American South taps into this discourse. Exhibited now at the Guggenheim’s Group show “Haunted”, three photographs taken from Sally Mann’s ‘MOTHER LAND’ are on display. For all intents and purposes, I will focus solely on the image “Untitled” (Virginia #6, Nuclear Tree), 1993- a gelatin silver print measuring 32.5 x 40.5 inches. Although the photograph was taken a little over a decade ago, the image has a timelessness about it. The constructed nostalgia of this image served as my inspiration for a body of work that I have entitled: (Post)Memory.

## II. CONTEXT

Sally Mann’s initial inspiration for the series stemmed from a bizarre discovery she had while rummaging through dusty boxes in her attic. Although her search through the cobwebbed storage was geared towards something completely different, her accidental finding proved far more valuable. A cache of thousands of negatives

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<sup>72</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jahcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1979). On Benjamin’s writings on memory objects, see Esther Leslie, “Souvenirs and Forgetting: Walter Benjamin’s Memory-work,” in *Material Memories*, ed. Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward, and Jeremy Aynsley (Oxford: Berg, 1999), pp. 107–123.

taken by a Civil War veteran was stored away beneath piles of other things left to be forgotten. After dusting off the negatives, Mann was astounded by how little her native town in Lexington, Virginia had changed since the photo was taken. Yet, despite being geographically the same, the socio-cultural shift of the present was unparalleled to the past. Mann's inspiration drew from the fact that so much had changed since the Civil War, yet the landscape had remained untouched.

With that said, Mann's body of work is concerned with the notion of resurrecting the past and exploring how the act of remembering shapes the present. Sally Mann's exposures hijack moments that unveil the inscription of human experience and history on the landscape. The faculty of the mind is such that the act of remembering is hinged on the need to forget. History is a fabricated narrative- it is a construct of the collective consciousness. Photographs are relics of the past, a frail testimony of fleeting moments lost in the folds of time. Yet, photography's problematic relation with truth renders its portrayal riddled with the potentiality to distort our perception.

### III. MEIDUM AND APPROACH

In a multitude of ways, Sally Mann's approach rifts on the "Re-photographic Survey Project" in the nineteen-seventies. Headed by Mark Klett, this series was

concerned with revisiting the great landscapes of the American West captured a century before by the masters in the medium like Ansel Adams and Muybridge. In a similar vein, the medium Sally Mann shot this body of work in has a unique relationship with the subject matter. In the same tradition of Nadar, Mann shot with a glass-plated large format camera and a diverse selection of antique lenses. The aged aesthetic of this approach renders a grainy quality that imparts the sensibility of faded memories. Halos of light bleed in from the border, the stark scapes are consumed with air of uneasiness, alienation and nostalgia. These images of the South transform the terrain into portraits of another time and place.

#### IV. INTERPRETATION

I'm drawn to the notion that the past can be reconfigured, especially in light of the photographic medium's intervention. Ultimately, what a photograph offers is a departure point from which on can construct a narrative around. How I've decided to interpret Sally Mann's series is through a conceptual framework executed through the use of a pin-hole camera. The antique photographic method captures remnants of a moment in a lightless box. This parallels the soft imprint on the emulsion with the impression an experience leaves in the folds of one's memory. The vague trace of light

cast onto the interior gives an abstract sense of an instance, it's multiplicity of semiotic meaning can be read in countless way- just as the past can be.

History is told by the victor, our narratives are conflicting. Although the conceptual framework of my project is largely abstract, the content is tied close to home. Given that our memories and imagination determine our identities, the imagery I've produced employing pin hole cameras mirrors the mechanisms of the mind to forget. As in the case of the Rorschach cards, each photograph provides the room for interpretation, offering contradictory and complicit narratives stemming from the same image.

## V. PROCESS

Constructed with household paraphernalia, the pin hole camera's nothing more than a mere light-proof can pierced with a pin prick in lieu of a lens. The technology is simplistic insofar as the shutter is manual, the exposure is lengthy and the size of the aperture determines the image's sharpness. I experimented with exposures on black & white photographic paper. Furthermore, I built the pin hole with a coffee tin so the images I captured would have a cylindrical perspective. Despite its technological simplicity, (the pin hole has been around since the tenth

century), I encountered great difficulty and many weeks of trial and error before finally perfecting the process.

My greatest challenge was determining the f-stop ratio in relation to the exposure time to avoid reciprocity failure. The concept underpinning my decision to work with this practically obsolete technique is rooted in how the process emerges as a praxis of memory function. When light flows through the tiny hole and falls onto the paper within a vague impression of the moment is left. The images that emerge are remnants of an instance lost. The complete story of the moment is absent, so one must build a narrative around it.

## VI. DESCRIPTION OF ELEMENTS

The lighting, casting, location and palette differed greatly according to the photographic process utilized. With the pin-hole series, I was temporally and spatially confined to spending evenings in my apartment downtown. Covering all the windows of my tiny bathroom with duck-taped vinyl records, I converted the space into a lightless hole where I could handle the photographic paper. I experimented with different exposures, as well as the intensity of light. The palette varies with black & white to gray-tones. I tried to work with objects rather than people as the lengthy exposures necessitated a motionless subject.

## Still Life: Proposal

My intent for the final project is to revisit the contemporary notion of a 'still life'. In French, the practice is called '*la nature morte*'- dead nature. Employing this idiosyncratic translation as a departure point, I will take a literal approach to the tradition of still lives- reconceptualizing it in the process. To achieve this, I plan to photograph animals in a decontextualized state of limbo- post pulse, yet not plated as meat. My aspiration is to generate a body of work that serves as a conceptual protest against a socially acceptable and normative practice of animal brutality and consumption patterns. Very rarely do we reflect on the repercussions of our diet. The schism between the slaughter house and *the Big Mac* creates a rift of dangerous ignorance. Nearly fifteen billion animals are killed for food in the United States each year. They are shackled, paralyzed and dragged over throat-cutting blades...all the while conscious. Our cultural norms of consumption have become the catalyst to the inhumane slaughter of animals executed on a mass scale.

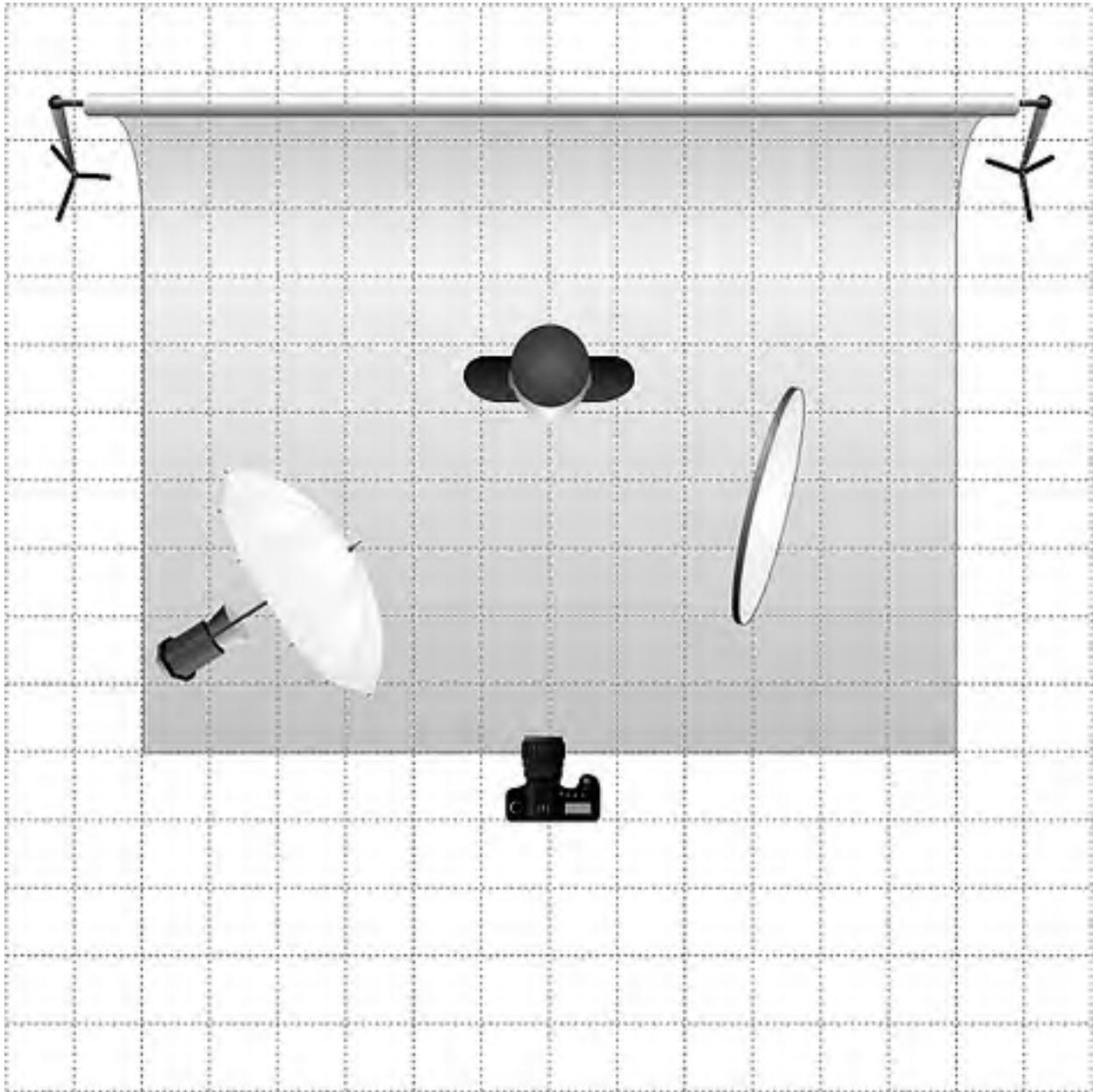
My aesthetic approach will be similar to that of Irving Penn's 'Still Life' series. With a focus on color and form, the photographs should be clean and graphic. Although the technicalities have yet to be completely resolved, I believe I will be using

my hasselblad with color 220 medium format film. On page ten, I have included a tentative lighting diagram. The subject matter will be placed on a semi-opaque slab of plexiglass and lit from below with a strobe, as well as from above with a beauty dish reflected off an umbrella. This model is, of course, subject to change. As I begin working in the studio and experimenting, other possible approaches may arise. My chief concern is that these images are executed in the most simplistic vein possible, avoiding the banality of a one-liner, yet not allowing ambiguity to hijack the concepts intent. The goal is to generate strong, graphic images that are successful aesthetically, as well as conceptually. In the end, I envision having content that triggers disgust as a reaction, yet at the same time plants a seed of reflection.

FIRST IMAGE OF SERIES



## TECHNIQUE



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# PROSE

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## Politics of Memory

The one unchanging truth in life is that life is always changing. I've come to perceive this world through a splintered frame of reference- a shattered lens. Cutting the umbilical cord with home at a young age, I moved to India at seventeen after having been expelled from boarding school. In hindsight, this was a blessing in disguise, as India spawned my passion for photography. My first camera was a cheap afterthought I picked up en route to the airport. Incessantly attached at my hip, the 35 mm evolved as a means of salvaging memories of places and acquaintances lacing my travels. India insisted on being documented. Lying just outside modern civilization, it was a country where men lured cobras from baskets and rats traveled in herds. Wandering into slums many would avoid or not think to transgress, I felt as if I was bestowed with a right of entry when armed with my camera. Guided and at times misguided by curiosity, there would be instances where I'd end up in small shacks drinking tea with old ladies who would nod their heads *back and forth, back and forth* at me and smile. My first tryst with the medium was compulsive, almost obsessive. Trivial observations were often the catalyst behind the click of the shutter. There was a narrative I was weaving, a tapestry of experiences and acquaintances that years later I

would salvage from temporal decay. I captured these fleeting moments namely because I was afraid that these memories would slip away over time.

Two weeks ago and seven years later, I find myself back home. Clumsily searching for a red suitcase in the basement, I stumbled upon a box of photographs from the aforementioned experience. Six years in my parent's basement left the stack stale, reeking of mildew, color faded and corners curled. In the dimly lit basement, I began leafing through them. I came across an old photograph of myself. With fierce eyes and dirty fingernail, I stood on the ghats in Varanasi where the dead is ritualistically cremated. The smell of burning flesh overpowered the musty stench of the basement. Alone in the darkness, forgotten moments that had been sleeping in the folds of my memory flooded in- unadulterated by the passing of time. A heavy calm fell over me as a remembered fields of mustard flowers and the magnolia trees that laced the road to Dharmasala. Faded recollections resurfaced of insomnia married with late night Bollywood films, the smell of post-rain shower during the monsoon, the children at the orphanage. I remember the fluorescent glow of Commercial Street at dusk, the rickshaw walla without a thumb, the Jesus Christ nailed to the cross that swung side to side on the rear view mirror.

The poverty of experience at the hands of our hyper-accelerated society brings into question the politics of memory. Recollections of the past inform who one is in the present, in that identity is constructed through the dynamic accumulation of the memories that come later to define us. The resurfacing of forgotten moments feels like the embrace of an old lover. There is something inexplicable about how photographs can so suddenly elicit a sea of feelings. Yet, trying to articulate the profound subtlety at which an image deracinates thoughts long lost in the unconscious can be as difficult as attempting to nail pudding to the wall. As the years sneak by and time slips away, I find myself photographing even the most banal moments believing I guess that one day it will reveal itself as significant. But there is an honesty lacing these images, because they are not trying to be anything outside of what they are. I always thought it was those in-between days and un-monumental moments that harbor a truth that is beauty.

## Heading Home

Drifting through the backwaters of Kerala, my thoughts surface. Our time away from Bangalore has left room for reflection. The nature of time has altered with the perpetual pulse of the current beating gently on the hull of the boat. The weeks have slipped by unnoticed yet each day has passed as if procrastinating the fate of dusk. With the end in sight now, I grope for the words to describe my experience here, but find I am lost for them. Hindsight, as it were, hesitates lending its sense of closure. Yet, how can one be expected to express, to articulate, to describe all that has come to pass? India is beautiful, chaotic and inscrutable. In my incessant struggle to draw conclusions about this country, I have finally surrendered to the fact that I will always remain a wide-eyed tourist speeding via rickshaw through the streets while the city washes over me.

I'm no stranger to the cultural polarities and social idiosyncrasies of India, as this is not my first time here nor will it be my last. There is something inexplicable about this country that lures me back time and time again. Perhaps the absence of closure is the catalyst behind my need to return. The difficulty to reconcile with what I've seen and how such has subtly impressed itself on my heart and mind can be

extrapolated to a tapestry unraveling at its end. The residue of abandoned streets traversed and fleeting eye contact with strangers linger in my mind- the baggage of memories I carry cause I can't afford to forget. Yet, the pull of the present denies a wider lens through which to perceive the experience at large and I find myself unable to differentiate between the blur of yesterday from immediacy of today. Thus, despite my efforts to define the ways in which I feel I have grown, I fear that solely the superficial changes have surfaced-the mind refusing to unveil the rest.

This experience has, first and foremost, taught me to compromise in ways I hadn't had to in the past. This sensibility was rooted in the realization that, like India, people have many layers and thus one must take the good and leave the bad. Aside from this, I've finally developed a palette for Indian food, discovered that elephants seem much bigger when on top of one and that coconut milk is tepid and a bit bitter. I figured out the hard way never to enter a rickshaw unless a consensus has been met regarding the meter. In addition, I overcame a deeply engrained fear of commuting through embracing the organized chaos of traffic in Bangalore- even with the anxiety of driving on the opposite (not wrong) side of the road. I came to realize that a car's horn serves an entirely different function here and undermined the natural instinct not to walk out into oncoming traffic - crossing the street trusting I'll make it to the other

side alive. Not to mention, I drove a moped for the first time in Goa - a feat that I'm quite proud of. I learned that Indian wine is never a good idea and almost always a headache. And finally, I thought I'd never see that day that I successfully bathed myself out of a bucket or began taking Bollywood films seriously.

Below the surface, I feel as if I've grown to appreciate rather than averse the unpredictability lacing each day. Over the past few weeks, there is no doubt in my mind that I've cultivated a stronger sense of self in the context of the world at large. Furthermore, I leave India with a sense of gratitude - not because I've been the company of those who have not, but rather I've become aware of all that I have to be grateful for-this experience included. The impulse to count one's blessings is met with the realization that never would I have enough fingers to do so. However, I didn't expect to find that the South is a world apart from the North, a realization that divulges further the nation's polarities. Surrendering to how overwhelmingly intricate India is at heart, I've forfeited the vain expectation to somehow untangle the deep-rooted cultural complexities of the country and instead embrace them.



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# POPULAR CULTURE

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## The Taste Hierarchy

Although postmodernist theory argues that the distinction between popular and high culture is diminishing and thus the boundaries between classes have blurred, social stratification still subsist due to the social hierarchy of taste that relies on capital rather than accessibility. This argument is reinforced by the case study of Dutch television conducted by Kuiper. The stratified audience revealed by the ethnographic research unveils that, despite its' accessibility and ties to popular culture, "television has not led to homogenization, democratization or fragmentation of taste" (371, Kuiper, Television and Taste hierarchy). These findings signify that a specific sort of knowledge, or what Bourdieu has coined as capital, is required.

The taste hierarchy is dictated by the economic, cultural and symbolic (etc.) capital of a demographic, thus social class and education often determines an individual's interests. However, many other factors can contribute such as age, religion, ethnicity and gender - further complicating the notion of cultural liberalism. Yet regardless of the accessibility rendered by technological developments and glocalization or the social fragmentation brought on by subcultures, the "taste public" will always remain socially stratified. As Kuiper illustrates from her survey: "people

look at the same thing, to which they have equal access, but they don't have the skills to decode it meaningfully" (371, Kuiper, Television and Taste Hierarchy).

Though popular culture has debatably blurred the boundaries between class and taste in that an individual of high culture may be partial to something of low culture, this appreciation is unilateral. The average 'joe' will never to fully comprehend the works of high culture due to the absence of some form of capital. Despite the fact that the conceptual demarcation between high and low culture have slowly deteriorated in the wake of popular culture, there still remains a political and economic dimension that fortifies this distinction. This liberal pluralist view accounts for televisions stratified audience in the context of today's contemporary popular culture.

## Popular Culture & High Culture

The American sociologist Herbert Gans analyzes in his work, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, whether the distinction differentiating popular culture from high culture remains relevant in the contemporary society we live in today. With the borders of imagined communities incessantly shifting, commercial culture, due to the multi-linguistic nature of the media, breaches the subdivisions of pride regardless of religious, political, societal, or language barriers. This transgression of borders not only metastasizes the mass circulation of products, but also facilitates the spread of hegemonic ideologies that appropriate cultural codes. The recent debate arguing that it is no longer pertinent to distinguish between high and popular culture may be true, however high culture has not ceased to exist but rather it's been, on the contrary, redefined. To consider the repercussions of the aforementioned it is important to first reconsider the relevance of the past distinction between high and popular culture.

Popular culture, although a vexed and indisputably polemical term, can be loosely defined as everything outside the particular interests of the elite class whose allegedly refined taste falls under the category of high culture. However with

museums, orchestras, ballets and higher education open to the general public, the territory formally occupied by the educated and privileged is now becoming a cultural arena open to the masses. The boundaries marking the disparity have blurred.

As the separation between popular culture and high culture slowly diminishes, the argument for distinction becomes frail. As my Professor Nico Vink wrote in his book *Dealing with Differences*, “the traditional opposition between elite and popular culture has almost disappeared. In modern times, they were each other’s opposites, yet now they are mix.”<sup>1</sup> (13) To further support his point, Vink refers to Andy Warhols’ lithographs rendering the repetition of icons quintessential of American pop culture, such as Marilyn Monroe. These works of art not only serve as a social critique mirroring America’s inclination towards mass production and ceaseless consumption, but furthermore blur the lines dividing high culture from pop. Yet, I suggest that this bleeding together of cultures is not unilateral in the sense that the mainstream is inundating a space formally occupied by the upper class, but rather the elite have also recognized the economic and political potential lacing the mass media.

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<sup>1</sup> *Vink, Nico, Dealing with Differences (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2005) 12-13.*

The global onslaught of the multinational conglomerates owned and controlled by the elite must not be overlooked, as their role in the production of television, music, advertisement, films, brand names, commercials, magazine and fashion is indisputable. The pervasive and transitory nature of pop culture is not only subject to change but also an initiator of it. Infused with political propaganda that fuels the naturalization of stereotypes and globalization of capitalism, the hegemonic agenda mediated by the mass media is veiled by ideological innocence. Due to popular cultures faculty to sway the minds of the masses, it harbors a political dimension in its ability to manipulate the public via infiltrating the media with hegemonic ideologies that support the socioeconomic interests of the power that be. Popular culture in its multitude of forms engenders the possibility to be lived vicariously through, thus influencing not only the way people think but also live. In short, although the distinction between popular culture and high culture has become increasingly irrelevant, it is important to acknowledge that high culture has not disappeared but rather redefined and disguised itself within the realm of popular culture.

## “Thoughts on Audiences”

Martha Rosler’s article, “Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Markets: Thoughts on Audience,” positions the photographic medium within the art world, while deconstructing notions of the spectator and high culture. Rosler’s discursive argument is concerned with when and how photography penetrated high culture, which she claims occurred in a “moment of hesitation” (Rosler 37) in the art world. Furthermore, Rosler begs the question of how the ownership of culture is determined and who defines the dichotomy of taste.

The art world is constituted of a set of relations. The cultural capital of great works of art translates into economic capital. Thus, art can be understood as a form of currency. When uncertainty is lacing economic conditions, as now, many investors look to buy art. The commodity fetishism of art is unique in that its use and exchange value is hinged on taste and is thus ambiguous. As it were, there are works of art out there that the hegemonic order has deemed priceless. These masterpieces are in the possession of a select few individuals of the elite. In short, those who can afford high art, define it. This just goes to show “how closely art is tied to commodity production” (Rosler 32).

High culture may be owned by the elite, however, “the widest audience is made up of onlookers- people outside the group generally meant by the term ‘audience’” (Rosler 14). This article is in many ways temporally tied to the time in which it was written, as the distinction today differentiating low culture from high is in a state of decay due to pervasive nature of popular culture. I dare not be so bold to suggest that high culture cease to exist, but rather I’d argue it has been redefined. After all, popular culture, although a vexed and indisputably polemical term, pertains to everything outside the particular interests of the elite class whose allegedly refined taste falls under the category of high culture. However with museums, orchestras, ballets and higher education open to the general public, the territory formally occupied by the educated and privileged is now becoming a cultural arena open to the masses. The boundaries marking the disparity have blurred, and the argument for distinction becomes frail.

This bleeding together of cultures is not unilateral in the sense that the mainstream is inundating a space formally occupied by the upper class, but rather the elite have also recognized the economic and political potential lacing the mass media. The pervasive and transitory nature of pop culture is not only subject to change but also an initiator of it. Due to popular cultures faculty to sway the minds of the masses,

it harbors a political dimension in its ability to manipulate the public via infiltrating the media with hegemonic ideologies that support the socioeconomic interests of the power that be. Photography's role in the aforementioned is unparalleled given that it is a medium that has the propensity to manipulate images of the world. It's relationship with truth, reality and representation positions photography in a category of its own. However, like other art forms photography had to "reconfigure its own high culture/low culture split: a central matter for photography, which has penetrated daily life and informed our sense of culture as no form of visual representation has before" (Rosler 35).

In short, although the distinction between popular culture and high culture has become increasingly irrelevant, it is important to acknowledge that high culture has not disappeared but rather redefined itself. The photographic medium's transgression into the realm of fine art necessitated a re-conceptualization of high and low culture. The fragility of a dichotomy hinged on the taste of the wealthy is a phenomenon innate to the age of post-modernity. Artists such as Andy Warhol exemplified the intercourse of art and popular culture, as did many of his contemporaries. Yet, despite the increasingly blurred distinction between high culture

and popular culture, the question of audience still remains ✱

## A Response to Haacke Hans's “Museum, Managers of Consciousness”

The dichotomy of taste dictating the direction of the art industry is established and reinforced through museums. The prolific German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberge once proclaimed that the economy of the art world belonged to the “consciousness industry”<sup>2</sup>. Artist and art patron alike tend to shy away from the industrial undercurrent that runs beneath the romanticized illusion of the art world. The notion of art as currency is a concept that cannibalizes itself, in that the aura of art diminishes with the realization that the industry is unlike any other- merely a compilation of financial transactions. In short, if art is perceived as a product its marketability is compromised. Thus, the operative and distributive modes of the industry must be veiled. The role of museums are crucial insofar as they mediate worth and construct value. Behind the scenes, these institutions are run more and more by business men rather than those knowledgeable about art. For instance, at the

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Haacke, untitled state, in German Celany, *Art Povera*, (New York: Praeger, 1969), 179.

Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the current director has a background in management and finance- need I say more.<sup>3</sup>

The business of art is an illusive one, as it deals namely with the intangible aura attached to a work of art. Ultimately, the value of a piece is contingent on its' relation to the collective consciousness of society at large. For instance, the Mona Lisa is deemed priceless due to its mass circulation amongst the social arena. Yet, the dichotomy of taste belongs to the hegemonic order. Whereas certain artists are framed, celebrated and discussed, others with a more subversive aim know only neglect and marginalization. Art is laced with ideological repercussions that indoctrinate and sway the social consciousness. Given that a majority of the museums in the United States receive their funding from corporate donors, the policies and decisions of the institution have been hijacked and manipulated by their private investor. "Museums works in the vineyards of consciousness...And such an institution should be challenged if it refuses to acknowledge that it operates under constraints

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<sup>3</sup> Haacke, Hans. "Museum, Managers of Consciousness" (1986) reprinted in Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings. Eds. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz. Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996, pp. 875

deriving from its sources of funding and from the authority to which it reports”<sup>4</sup>. With that said, the implications of corporate financing result in an artistic censorship.

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<sup>4</sup> Haacke, Hans. “Museum, Managers of Consciousness” (1986) reprinted in Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings. Eds. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz. Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996, pp. 876

## Popular Culture and Neo-Tribes

Scholars of the 1950s viewed popular culture as a threat to society and the working class. The view on popular culture nowadays has changed dramatically. Contemporary popular culture is seen as taste culture in which youngsters engage in consumer practices by their own choice. Furthermore popular culture is seen as a key to the construction of social identity. Over the past several decades' society has undergone structural and cultural changes that have deteriorated past views concerning popular culture and its societal influence. First off, postmodern sociologists argue that the disparity between popular and high culture has faded. The absence of this distinction can be extrapolated to the social fragmentation that has resulted from neo-tribes, subcultures, appropriation and the role of agency.

Another societal shift that has attributed to a redefinition of popular culture is the concept that cultural consumption has evolved into a social practice. Urbanization has rendered cities into sites of consumptions rather than production (825, Zukin, *Urban Lifestyle*). Branding, merchandizing, advertisement, dedifferentiation of consumption, and the media have all contributed to this cultural transition. Consumption is now employed as a means of constructing one's identity. The pretext

that identities are fixed has been abandoned; instead identities are incessantly evolving entities defined by fluidity.

Globalization emerges as the third notable factor that has influenced not only our perception of contemporary popular culture but also our everyday life. The time/space compression eloquently articulated by the sociologist David Harvey signifies the collapse of time. In other words, past/present/future have emerged as different temporalities available in different locations. Due to the unpredictable transnational flow of media text, a phenomenon coined by Arjun Appadurai as mediascapes, the past is present in different localities (i.e.: the dated pop culture of the West is regarded as 'hip' in less developed nations). Furthermore, agency has forged a pluralized relationship with time. The television and Internet afford a sense of electronic proximity with the world at large, and furthermore render accessibility to different avenues of self-expression, information, interest and entertainment.

The social fragmentation fueled by tribal formation, consumption's evolution into a social practice and globalization has all influence the direction and perception of popular culture. The communitarian and societal implications of popular culture prove as unpredictable as postmodernism itself. Yet this much is sure, popular culture has evolved into an international arena wherein identities are constructed and the

distinction between the producer and consumer, high culture and low has become increasingly blurred.

The French Sociologist, Michel Maffesoli, coined the term tribe or neo-tribe with the aspiration to define the inexplicable societal inclination, particularly amongst the youth culture, to return to a tribal-like society. This concept “provides a much more accurate framework as it allows for the shifting nature of the youth’s musical and stylistic preferences” (614, Bennet, Subcultures or Neotribes?). According to Maffesoli, the youth culture of contemporary society is incessantly in transit, their social intercourse fluid and interactions fleeting. These tribal formations account for the social fragmentation exhibited within the youth demographic. Another applicable theory within this discourse is the notion of lifestyle, which is the idea that identities are self-constructed and that consumerism has evolved into a social practice yielding new avenues for negotiating one’s sense of individuality. Ayhan Kaya’s work, *Aesthetics of Diaspora: Contemporary Minstrel in Turkish Berlin*, unveils the struggles the Turkish youth of Berlin face in constructing their identity. Their appropriation of hip-hop and formation of a *double diasporic identity* can be best understood within the framework of the aforementioned theories.

Diasporas represent an experience of displacement and alienation wherein foreigners are obliged to construct their home and reconstruct their identity in a country where they are marginalized and oftentimes discriminated against. Their lingering diasporic consciousness renders a “constant negotiation between past and future, roots and routes, local and global, home and diasporas” (43, Kaya). The concept of *roots* and *routes* brings to light the complexities of an identity formation constructed from both authentic and transcultural capital (43, Kaya). From these decentered lateral connections, hybrid identities emerge which can be best understood via the notion of lifestyle, as hybridity is a process of accumulation wherein differences are held together. In other words, the Turkish youth of Berlin “construct and reconstruct their cultural identity in a process whereby the conjunctions of ‘either’ (Turkish) ‘or’ (German) have been consciously rejected” (58, Kaya).

Maffesoli’s theory of ‘tribes’ can be extrapolated to the subculture of Turkish migrants in Berlin, whose collective identity is shaped by social isolation, hip-hop music, “diasporic consciousness and transculturalism” (45, Kaya). Their cultural positioning renders a reflection process, which makes Turks conscious of the constructed nature of their identity. It is this “transient”, “rhizomatic” or what Homi Bhabha refers to as “third” space that enables Turks to think between localities and

construct a “syncretism cultural identity” (59, Kaya). The appropriation of hip-hop emerges as a tribal formation with symbolic and cultural capital that gives the Turkish youth of Germany a sense of community amid the onslaught of racism and pressures of assimilation. The Turkish rap group *Cartel* exercises a lyric structure similar to that of Turkish minstrels and in doing so “contextualize themselves both in their involvement in the mainstream and attachment to the roots” (48, Kaya), in other words, they “transculturize rap music” (52, Kaya) by incorporating *arabesk* in with pop music. The hybrid beat engendered from their appropriation of hip-hop serves as an expression of their “double diasporic identity”.

# CONSUMPTION

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## The Crisis of Over-Accumulation

The age of post-modernity marks a transition best articulated as a cultural expression of the structural reconfiguration of the socio-economic system. This era is dominated by the “logic of prosthesis” wherein labor translates as the act of consumption rather than that of production. This transference triggered by the technological innovations in the sphere of mechanical labor gave way to the ethos of mass consumption. In Post-Fordism, we witness “a shift to new ‘information technologies’: more flexible forms of labor process...decline of the manufacturing base...a greater emphasis on the ‘targeting of consumers by lifestyle, taste and culture...globalization” (Latham 9). Gramsci’s *‘regulation theory’* gave rise to a *‘regime of accumulation’* engendering the growth of a middle class disillusioned by various media apparatus’ propagating agency as consumption, commodity fetishism and the production of artificial needs.

In the decade to follow 1970, the “crisis of over-accumulation” began exhausting the perpetual rhythm of the capitalist system. It was Marx who first recognized that “capitalism is pregnant with contradictions.” The undeniable structural flaws of the system rendered the relationship between the socio-economic and the cultural sphere

riddled with the potentiality to one-day collapse. This inevitability manifested itself in the era of Post-Fordism. Over the past thirty years, we have witness the relationship between capital and labor growing estranged as well as living standards falling in tandem to deindustrialization and the outsourcing of labor to less developed nations. This structural shift in the mode of regulation can be attributed to “the powerful tension in postwar capitalism between an ascetic ethos of production and a hedonistic ethos of consumption- between the competing demands of work and of leisure” (Latham 7) which manifested itself namely in the youth culture. In the decades to follow 1970, which marked a perverse reconfiguration of the mechanism in which the socio-political apparatus exercised it power over society at large, the notion of youth remained central as did the question of the cyborg.

The fetishism of the youth has always been a central element of the systemic structure of the capitalist apparatus. Even at the peak of Fordism, the youth was conceived “not merely as an empirical category but as an ideological abstraction, in a way that erased distinction between youthful bodies and mechanic processes” (Latham 8). The hybrid form of manufacturing innate to the Fordism rendered the human and machine as interconnected entities in the productive process. Thus, one could wage the argument that it was this techno-economic paradigm signified the birth of the

cyborg. Whereas, “prewar high technology had centered on industrial production, the postwar period has seen the rise of so-called postindustrial technologies of information that have further collapsed distinctions between human and machine” (9). It goes without saying, that more and more with the evolution of technological innovation do we witness the blurring of boundaries between corporal and the mechanic entities.

In relation to the youth culture and the notion of the cyborg, “Marx’s dialectical image continues to grasp the basic logic of capitalist automation, whether industrial or cybernetic in form” (25). Whereas in Fordism the fetishism of youth was rooted in the productive power tied to the able bodied demographic, in post modernity the youth is perceived as a “consumable substance”. In other words, perpetual youth has become a commodity that can be obtained through the act of consumption. The cyborg manifests itself in commodification of the biocybernetic, cosmetic and medical possibilities laced with the promise of evading age. The mechanism of mass media is designed to solicit the seductive possibility of perpetual youth packaged as something that can be obtained at a cost. In advertisements, among many other forms of media text, Marx’s theory of ‘use-value’ is replaced by what Haug coins as the ‘promise of use-value’. This shift sheds light in the perverse direction the system has headed in one

last desperate attempt at structural sustainability. The glut of commodities has necessitated the production of sign value and the use of media text to instill lack where there is none.

## The Aura in the Age of Post Modernity

Walter Benjamin's discourse predicting that the death of the aura will be at the hands of mechanical reproduction needs to be revisited in the age of post-modernity. The aura, I'd argue, was not lost, but rather reconceptualized. Although mass production did, to a certain extent, rape art and commodities of their authentic nature, an illusion of scarcity was fabricated so as to sustain the aura in the commodity system. For instance, sign value is a mechanism used by multinational conglomerates as a catalyst to create an aura around a brand name. The absence of scarcity has resulted in a society wherein commodities and even celebrities are branded. The thread of this discourse runs through the body of Andy Warhol's work. Among the first to shed light on this socioeconomic phenomenon, Warhol visually reinforces the repercussions of mass production unveiling how the rebirth of the aura is rooted in fabricated scarcity and brand names. He extrapolates this notion to the sphere of celebrities, representing them as commodified icons that derive their alleged auratic value from the reproduction of their images and the inimitability of their existence. Point is: Walter Benjamin failed to foresee how the social

implications of mechanical reproduction would be manipulated in the age of post modernity to revive the aura.

In 1936, Walter Benjamin wrote the essay “Works of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” to survey the social ramifications stemming from the economic development of technological reproduction. Arguing that technology has changed the architecture of society, he believes the onslaught of mechanical reproducibility will result in the loss of what he describes as the ‘aura’ lacing culture and art. *Aura* is a term Benjamin coined to describe how an object’s worth is hinged on the perceived authenticity and limited accessibility to it. Oftentimes the societal perception, historical significance and cultural recognition functions as a testimony to a work’s auratic value. Benjamin predicts that there are three domains of transformation that will manifest in tandem with the age of mechanical reproducibility. First off, the technological evolution of mass production will inevitably eliminate the scarcity of images and objects rendering in turn the death of the aura. For Benjamin, however, this loss of aura is good in the sense that it overthrows traditions premised on privilege. Thus, the technological development serves as a catalyst to the absolution of ritual. This shift, he argues, will engender a secularized society and a democratization of the new media.

Given that the accessibility of films, television and photographs is not tied to privilege or ritual, Benjamin's prediction was correct. Yet, collectively these conditions are said to lead to the disenchantment of the image. I would argue, however, that the aura has been sustained in the age of post-modernity by the proliferation of brand names and the fabrication of artificial scarcity. Commodities are deemed authentic due to their sign value, films are judged often by their prestigious director and/or the branded celebrities involved. The aura has been transformed in order to adapt to the residual effects of the age of mechanical reproduction through the construction of artificial scarcity in the absence of rarity.

Whereas Benjamin argues that the aura subsists outside of commodity system, Jonathan Beller, in his work 'Cinema, Capital of the Twentieth Century', contradicts this point claiming that the aura is, in point of fact, *specific* to the commodity system. Furthermore, the dematerialization of artwork renders its authenticity reliant on the experience of the creator and the social recognition of the piece of art. Thus, in short, value is a question that is no longer tied to the issue of labor, but rather an assumption that is positioned in a realm of varied perspectives. This commodity fetishism renders its spectators incapable of seeing beyond the perceived value of the object. In other words, we look at images with the preconceived notion of what it must mean within

the economy of spectatorship and from this gauge its worth. The object is thus seen solely through the filter of the commodity system. It is from this that the concept of *sign value* arose, countering mass production's threat to the aura.

Emerging as a consequence of technological developments, the birth of this *sign value* manifested in tandem to the industrial revolution, which facilitated the mass production of identical objects fabricated for mass distribution. Although this means of manufacturing proved far more economical and efficient than its predecessor, from this economic development stemmed a paradox: "although capitalist technique of mass-production were very good at making identical product in great volume, economies of scale were less efficient at producing unique and therefore *desirable* goods"(Parker 361). Thus, with aspirations to surmount the complexities of this predicament, multinational corporations "exploited forms of advertising to construct symbolic virtues for their products"(Parker 361). Thus, in sum, sign value was conceived as a distinctive mechanism of capitalism to compensate for the mass production of identical objects facilitated by the industrial revolution. The same concept of authenticity that Walter Benjamin rooted the aura in can be extrapolated to the constructed scarcity and artificial value that corporations attach to commodities in excess.

The *sign value* of an object is designated through the aura attached to it by a certain corporate label and is exemplified best by the commercial proliferation of brand names. Brands are, in short, logos, slogans or particular designs that render a product distinctive, and as a result, *desirable*- the aura of which is oftentimes fueled by its representation in the media through commercials and advertisements. Whereas, Benjamin foresaw the onslaught of mass production as a threat to the aura, his assumption was flawed insofar as the socioeconomic condition actually served as a catalyst to the construction and proliferation of sign value and false commodity fetishism fueled by the illusion of auratic value. Given that America's obsession with branding is a relatively new revelation in postmodern society, Andy Warhol's art emerged as a novel critique on consumerism, art and the aura. He believed that, yes, in copying an image something is lost, but in turn something new of value emerges. Question is, although the aura alters once mechanically reproduced, does that necessarily suggest that it vanishes into thin air or could its reproducibility render an offspring that perhaps reinforces its value as a trademark image?

“Andy Warhol had an extraordinary awareness of what it means to be an artist in the age of mechanical reproduction” (Du Duve 308). Blurring the distinction between fine and commercial art and commercial art and commerce, Andy Warhol's

fixation with popular culture situated his work in the mainstream and rendered him, in retrospect, pop art's seminal icon. He was the first to commercialize on commercialization, commodify on commodification and shed light on the perverse proliferation of brand names and the aura corporate conglomerates attach to them. The versatile technique of photographic silk-screens allowed Warhol to manipulate and replicate images, enabling him to construct a social critique by visually reproducing products quintessential of popular culture. Even the images he duplicated were often already mass produced pictures found in magazine or off a tin can in the third aisle of the grocery store. He conceptualized auratic commodification through artistic reproduction and appropriation of iconic images.

With mediums ranging from photography to film, printmaking to painting, Warhol contextualizes Benjamin's discourse on the aura shedding light on the shift in the societal trends of consumption patterns and its relationship with media culture. The transformation of the aura predicted by Benjamin is revisited in Warhol's work. He believed that the aura had not diminished but rather had been redefined, inverted and corporately manufactured. Appropriating commodities of mass culture, he exploited the fetishism of the aura that fueled blind consumption. For Warhol, the aura of an object is rooted in the authentic appeal of an icon, its mass production and

circulation bears no consequences other than perhaps reinforcing its socially perceived status. Amid the glut of commodities presented by the industrial revolution, Warhol artistically delineates that the auratic value of an object is hinged on the illusion of fabricated scarcity and deceptive uniqueness tied to a brand name.

Conceptually taking it a step further, Warhol's ironic visual proliferation of celebrities such as the silver-screen goddess and sex-icon Marilyn Monroe unveils the perverse paradox that the constructed aura of brand names can be extrapolated to famous icons- who have been commodified and consumed as products. For Warhol, Marilyn Monroe was a glamorously packaged product mass distributed to the public. The multiplication of her flawless image suggested that she, like *Campbell Soup*, was perceived as a mass-produced commodity, her aura drawing from the fact that there was one and only Marilyn Monroe. This body of work sheds light on the mechanisms of the Hollywood culture industry and how its production of icons fueled the exploitation of individuals simultaneously shackled and socially elevated by the limelight.

In the age of post-modernity, the proliferation of brand names, the emergence of sign value and the commodification of celebrity icons unveil a societal attempt to shield the aura from the residual effects of mechanical reproduction. With the

fetishism of the image resulting in the public cannibalizing coveted celebrities and the aura lacing trademarks triggering a societal shift in consumption patterns, it can be concluded that the aura subsist. However, as illustrated by Andy Warhol, what determines a commodity, celebrity or artwork's auratic value has altered since Benjamin's time. In response to the glut of commodities, scarcity is constructed and the aura is tied to authenticity of a trademark image or inimitability of a celebrity's branded flesh.

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## Branding Flesh

Mainstream America's obsession with sign value can be extrapolated to celebrities, who have in a sense become catalysis for consumption and paradigms for identity construction. The onslaught of branding seduces the public to adopt the "lifestyle of a brand over their own, merging individual identity with logo" (Whitbeck 23). In tandem to this conspicuous consumption, the deification of celebrities has converted icons into products of mass distribution and consumption. Is this obsession with brand names a desperate attempt at authenticity in the age of postmodernism or a perverse reflection of the American psyche? Dissecting the complexities of sign value, the social evolution of consumption practices can be traced via a temporal juxtaposition of the postmodernist work of Jean Baudrillard and the socioeconomic theories of Karl Marx. Yet this societal shift towards branding flesh takes roots deeper. Swaying between being both a critic and product of popular culture, Andy Warhol and his (in)famous reproduction of *Marilyn Monroe* unveils the perverse phenomenon of the mass distribution and objectification of celebrities. Icons such as Paris Hilton further reinforce the entangled proliferation of both brand names and pop idols,

demonstrating how this sign consumption and the dedifferentiation of consumption has imperialized American taste culture.

Convinced that capitalism was driven by production, Karl Marx once said, “sell a man a fish, he eats for a day, teach a man how to fish, you ruin a wonderful business opportunity.” (Karl Marx). “Preeminently a theorist of capitalism” (Martin 115), Karl Marx was a prolific political activist, economist and social philosopher gracing the nineteenth century. His socioeconomic theories were revolutionarily deconstructed the capitalist system, which he viewed as “as a contradictory set of production relations that conditioned the entire realm of human association” (Martin 115). Despite his cynicism, he conceded that the progressive economic structure did indisputably harbor the inherent ability to incessantly modernize its means of production. However, it is *this* mechanism of mass production that fuels the conspicuous consumption intrinsic to the Western world. He believed that “the production of too many useful things results in too many useless people” (Karl Marx). According to Marx, the value of an object should be derived from its use and exchange value. Over a century later, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, on the pretext that the consumption patterns have evolved since Marx’s time, altered the aforementioned theory in adaptation to the socioeconomic conditions of contemporary society. A

predominant theorist of the postmodern era, Jean Baudrillard was heavily influenced by Marxism, which is perhaps why many twenty-first century critics sweep his views under the discourse of poststructuralists and situationist. During his lifetime, he composed several books aimed at the reinterpretation of Marx's work, most notably: *The System of Objects*, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, and *The Consumer Society*. Lacing the pages of these sociological critiques, Jean Baudrillard formulates a superlative slant on the nature of consumerism. Extrapolating the first two concepts from Marx, Baudrillard theoretically extends the discourse, subdividing the worth of an object into four frames of assessment: the functional value of an object, the exchange value, the symbolic value and lastly the sign value.

The *functional value* of an object refers to the case wherein a product is appraised according to its functional use. Mirroring Marx's theory of use-value, this view deems that the worth of a manufactured good stems from utility. For instance, the practical purpose of a pocketbook is to carry one's personal belonging, its worth is thus determined by its ability to carry out this role. For Marx, "as a general rule, articles of utility become commodities"(Marx 3). However, Baudrillard critiques Marx's concept of *use-value* on the pretext that it is naïve to assume that the public consumes solely out of sheer necessity. Dissecting the paradigm of capitalism, Baudrillard claims that

the economy, contrary to the Marxist belief, is driven by *consumption*, rather than production. This intrinsic relationship unveils the ugly truths that needs are manufactured by the capitalist system to fuel manufacturing. In other words, "the masses consume because they have been infected with artificial wants dreamed up by the international league of producers" (Appleby 247). Informed by structuralism, this view presents the paradox that "consumption is a mere shadow of production; that audience negotiations are fictions, merely illusory moves in a game of economic power" (Storey 132)

*Exchange value* is another theory of Marx appropriated by Baudrillard to shed light on the societal shift in consumption patterns elicited by the socioeconomic circumstances of postmodernity. In short, this term purports that a product's worth is ultimately determined by its monetary or economic value in the world market. For instance, the aforementioned pocketbook can be a pricy purchase due to the nature of its fabrication. In other words, the red leather jacketing its exterior may come from Argentina and its inner lining may be Venetian silk. These aesthetic details justify why it may cost the earnings of countless hours of work. Ultimately, one *exchanges* their time for its purchase. However, one must also be wary that the value of an object

is by no means fixed insofar as the price of a particular product can and often is manipulated by economic agents to serve in their own self-interest.

The *symbolic value* of an object is a relational or subjective value assigned to a certain product by an individual. Oftentimes there is an ideological signification lacing the object. In other words, the worth of a product is *symbolically* conferred. The red leather pocketbook may be a vintage bag handed down to you by your grandmother and thus may be a symbol of family heritage, or for lack of a better example, a diamond ring symbolizes the marital union of two individuals in love. In short, it is the pretext that goods are “not consumed because of their value as utilities but because of their desirable symbolic attributes” (Parker 361) and thus it is the “symbolic qualities of an object that determined the worth of a commodity”(Parker 361).

The *sign value* of an object is rendered through the aura assigned to it by a certain corporate label and is exemplified best by the proliferation of brand name. Let's say that the red leather pocketbook is a vintage Louis Vuitton clutch, tiny and quite impractical to say the least, yet nonetheless it's worth more than, say, a canvas backpack because the item itself signifies wealth, expensive taste and social status. Marx argued that beneath of surface of "commodity fetishism" there are legitimate needs met that justified the objects consumption. Baudrillard, on the other hand,

contradicts this assumption, claiming that fetishism and fashioning of the self have emerged as the principal objectives behind postmodern consumption practices. Hence, in the context of a consumer society, the importance of a products utility dissipates; rather it is the symbolic and sign value of an object that determines its worth (or exchange value) on the market.

The birth of sign value transpired in tandem to the industrial revolution, which facilitated the mass production of identical objects fabricated for mass distribution. However from this economic development stemmed a paradox: “although capitalist technique of mass-production were very good at making identical product in great volume, economies of scale were less efficient at producing unique and therefore *desirable* goods”(Parker 361). Thus, with aspirations to surmount the complexities of this predicament, multinational corporations “exploited forms of advertising to construct symbolic virtues for their products”(Parker 361). In sum, sign value emerges as a distinctive mechanism of capitalism stemming from industrial culture and mass production.

From sign value came a proliferation of corporate branding. Brands are logos, slogans or particular designs that renders a product distinctive and thus desirable, its aura is oftentimes fueled by its representation in the media via advertisements. The

symbolic meaning attached to a brand name lends a commodity a particular image and furthermore instills a certain expectation in the client. “Certain brands of athletic shoes (Nike) and trekking gear (Timberland shoes) are identified with ‘urban’ i.e. ‘ghetto’-cultural styles”(Zukin 834). As follows, the fashioning of the self has developed an intrinsic relationship with brand names. The perverse irony is, however, that a consumer after having been influenced through ads to purchase a certain product later becomes a “walking advertisement” (Bryman 38) for the brand. A perfect example of this is the (in)famous GAP sweatshirt, which for several years was a staple American wardrobe accessory. Furthermore, in the past several decades “merchandising and licensing have proliferated” (Bryman 36) concurrently to the emergence of sign value and advertisement. Now even restaurants, such as the *Hard Rock Café*, market themselves through “the promotion of goods...bearing copyright images and logos, including such products made under license” (Bryman 36).

The relationship a consumers merges with a brand is rooted in how the sign value of an object functions as “social markers to indicate taste, status and style”(Parker 367). The stigma lacing certain brand names unveils the mechanism in which commodities are consumed as signs of symbolic wealth denoting an individual’s social status and taste. However, more often than not, the sign value of an object is

manipulated through advertisement. After all, America is an “image saturated society where advertising, entertainment, television, and other culture industries increasingly define and shape urban life” (Gotham 227). Entranced by the hypnotic nature of the media, the masses devolve into passive spectators blindly embracing ideologically infiltrated images fabricated with ulterior motives (Gotham 227). Laced with the agenda of multinational conglomerates, the media broadens the manufacture of “fictitious, artificial, and imaginary needs”(Lefebvre 161). The culture industries bred by capitalism infect the American social psyche with hegemonic ideologies that not only cement the social hierarchy, but also construct “powerful images, descriptions, definitions and frames of reference for understanding the world” (Storey 132).

Even more alarming, Americans seem oblivious to the destructive implications of their consumption. They drink Starbucks because it’s convenient, and go Wal-Mart because it’s cheap. It is not that they don’t care about the countless sweatshops in China manufacturing their clothes or the cultural imperialism rendered by Starbucks. Rather, “they haven’t been taught to think of consumerism as something that extends beyond their own enjoyable trip to the mall, just as they haven’t been taught that their personal consumer decisions are political” (Rockler-Gladen 12). Yet where can one place blame on this proliferation of brand names: on the consumer or the

multinational conglomerates? Arguably both parties are at fault. Yet in the words of Andy Warhol, “what's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest.” His insight on American popular culture stripped away its guise of glamour and unveiled an even uglier truth: the perverse paradox that this mass distribution and consumption of brand names can be extrapolated to celebrities who have been commodified and consumed as products.

Obsessed with fame, wealth and superficiality, Andy Warhol is, in retrospect, pop arts seminal icon. His fixation on popular culture situated his art in the mainstream. Warhol's prolific body of work was predominately inspired by the artificiality of mass consumerism, mechanical reproduction and the media. "When you think about it, department stores are kind of like museums", he once exclaimed. He was the first to commercialize on commercialization, commodify on commodification and profit off a hypocritical critique of mass consumption. Furthermore, “his acute awareness of the intersection of the body and culture; the way in which the body produces culture at the same time as culture produces the body...prefigured the way American film and media today exult the media fabrication of selfhood”(Suarez 38). With mediums ranging from photography to film, printmaking to painting, his artistic motivation was

to delineate an insight into the perverse complexities of consumer society.

Appropriating commodities of mass culture, he exploited the fetishism that fueled blind consumption. In sum, Warhol's art mimicked the media. Fueling the discourse that the taste hierarchy has been overcome by popular culture, his work blurred the distinction between fine and commercial art and commercial art and commerce. He once said, "making money is art, and working is art and good business is the best art" (Andy Warhol).

The versatile technique of photographic silk-screens allowed Warhol to manipulate and duplicate images, enabling him to construct a social critique by visually reproducing products quintessential of popular culture. He conceptualized commodification through the artistic reproduction and appropriation of iconic images. The ironic visual proliferation of the *Campbell Soup* brand as well as the silver-screen goddess and sex icon Marilyn Monroe constructed a perversely enlightening social critique. For Warhol, Marilyn Monroe was a glamorously packaged commodity mass distributed to the public. The multiplication of her flawless image presented the perverse paradox that she, like *Brillo Boxes*, was not a human being of flesh and blood but rather a product. Warhol's work unveiled the mechanisms of the Hollywood culture industry and how its production of icons fueled the exploitation of individuals

simultaneously shackled and socially elevated by the limelight. Ironically, after dedicating half his life to artistically rendering American icons, Warhol himself became one. “Once you 'got' Pop, you could never see a sign again the same way again. And once you thought Pop, you could never see America the same way again.” (Andy Warhol)

The international exportation of celebrities further strengthens the argument that stars can be understood as commodities of mass distribution and consumption. The global recognition of certain celebrities unveils the facility in which their fame can breach cultural and even linguistic boundaries. The term *mediascapes* is a word coined by Arjun Appadurai to describe not only the distribution of images around the world via the media, but also the “images of the world created by the media” (Appadurai 34). This idea serves to explicate the unpredictable transnational flow of media text across the borders of countless countries via newspapers, magazines, television and films. The pervasive presence of media icons on the global stage sheds light on the fact that even outside the context of American popular culture their flawless image and seductive nature lures an international audience. The recognition of celebrities is due in part to multinational media conglomerates and their facility to transgress cultural boundaries.

This commodification and mass distribution of stars become even more alarming with the realization that many of these media icons are famous for absolutely nothing. It seems as if nowadays, “one can become a public person just by being a person, in public.” (Greene 13). This superficial stardom has emerged in tandem with society’s perverse tabloid obsession. The incessant exploitation of celebrities’ private lives fuels an unending *love/hate* relationship, wherein stars are worshipped one day and stripped of their accolades the next. The repercussions of a celebrity’s entanglement in a scandalous affair unveil the fragility of fame. The pages of tabloids, often laced with images of stars pumping gas or jogging, serve as a bizarre reflection of the public’s perverse curiosity. Yet what fuels this ceaseless gossip about famous strangers? Is it that the public vicariously lives through stars like Paris Hilton, thus signifying that contemporary identity construction is built on the act of mimesis? Or has mass society grown so big and so foreign so suddenly that this obsession stems from the desire to create a smaller community within? The complicated nature of these questions promise a splintered explanation. Instead, I propose to focus on a single media icon in hopes of better understanding the obsession and commodification of celebrities of contemporary pop culture.

Voted the "*Most Overrated Celebrity*" Paris Hilton is said to be "famous for being famous." Spending her entire life in the public eye, the socialite, heiress, "actress," and "musician" earned \$7 million dollars last year alone just for being who she is. She has had minor roles in several films, most notably *Zoolander* (2001), *Wonderland* (2003) and *The Cat In The Hat* (2003) as well as the Fox reality series *The Simple Life*. Despite her age, she has already released an autobiographical book *Confessions of an Heiress: A Tongue-in-Chic Peek Behind the Pose* which ended up becoming a *New York Times* bestseller. She also established the record company *Heiress Records* in tandem to the release of her first album entitled *Paris*. She has fabricated four fragrances: *Can Can*, *Paris Hilton*, *Just Me*, and *Heiress* and has designed a line of expensive purses for the Samantha Thavasa- a brand out of Japan. The list goes on and on, getting increasingly ridiculous. Paris has branded *DreamCatcher's* hair extensions, a line of footwear (*Paris Hilton Footwear*) and of course has a nightclub named after her (*Club Paris*). So, what are the implications of these celebrity-branded products?

Alan Bryman defines *dedifferentiation of consumption* as the instance when different forms of consumption become intertwined. I would like to extrapolate this cultural phenomenon from the spatial sense to one which refers to individuals in spotlight. It has become increasingly common that celebrities are not only mass distributed

commodities but also exist as intersecting spheres of consumption. Contemporary musicians now work also as models and actresses, fashioning their own self-branded perfume, magazines, toiletries, clothing and jewelry lines. For instance, Jennifer Lopez is not only a musician, but also a model for Louis Vuitton, an actress, has her own branded fragrance and of course a line of apparel. Other examples of this dedifferentiation of consumption can be extrapolated to Kate Moss, George Clooney and Uma Thurman. Like Marilyn Monroe, these celebrities have been branded and commodified through several means of consumption. In sum, celebrities are recognized in contemporary society not as people but as a breathing manifestation of a brand name.

The “post-war western world has grown up with the association between happiness and consumption” (Rockler-Gladen 12). In the throwaway culture of America, the evolution of consumption patterns has perversely progressed to the point where self-identity is fashioned through corporate branding and the branding of flesh.

“Consumption has been the primary means through which individuals have participated in culture and transformed it” (Birmingham 14). Even Jean Baudrillard’s reinterpretation of Marx’s theory of use-exchange value fails to fully deracinate the roots of the problem. Even more alarming is this obsession with sign value infecting

the mainstream can be extrapolated to celebrities, who have evolved into catalysis for consumption and paradigms for identity construction. The conspicuous consumption and deification of celebrities has resulted in the mass production and distribution of icons as if, as Andy Warhol beautifully illustrated, they are products. Dedifferentiation of consumption and mass distribution associated with celebrity icons such as Paris Hilton unveil how the proliferation of sign consumption has imperialized American taste culture “The proliferation of signs, dedifferentiation of institutional spheres, depthlessness, cultivated nostalgia, and the problematization of authenticity and reality” (Bryman 43) are all intrinsic aspects of post-modernity. Thus, identity construction is influenced from a two-tier paradigm of sign value obsession: the brand-product and the brand-name. “Fiske describes shopping centers as ‘cathedrals of consumption’” (Storey 150)

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# TECHNOLOGY

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## The Cooking Pot Market

In this world, desire is infinite and the means to satisfy desire is finite. As we watch socioeconomic circumstances change with the global market, an efficient and just mechanism for allocating goods is increasingly difficult to devise. Cultural divides and social stratification bear down on attempts to level out the playing field in an international economy. The information economy, however, blurs class distinction and has served as a catalyst for globalization. The concept of the *Cooking Pot Market* could be conceived as the buttress of this emerging economy, in that the interchange of ideas and information within the context of the Internet, for instance, is fueled not by monetary motives but rather communal interests and the reputation economy. The discourse fashioned by Rishab Aiyer Ghosh in *Cooking pot markets: an economic model for the trade in free goods and services on the Internet* dissects the possibilities of building an economy within the conceptual framework of the trade model which was revived in tandem to the growth of the Internet. However, when this paradigm is shifted from the technological sphere to that of the socioeconomic, its flawed and idealistic nature is revealed. The surplus of information does not equate to the issues encountered in

the case of surplus goods. With this said, the aspiration underpinning this dialogue is to construct a micro foundation for the emerging market that will iron out the creases that will inevitably arise.

The failure of the *Cooking pot Market* can be extrapolated to what Rishab Aiyer Ghosh terms as “the tragedy of the commons”<sup>5</sup>. The shortcomings of this socioeconomic structure mirror those that arise when a common reserve is depleted as in the case of a field over-grazed by chattel. In a similar vein, raking the ocean of fish may benefit some but proves ultimately detrimental to the world at large. The laws aimed at regulating the expenditure of natural resources are relatively ambiguous. For instance, the Japanese alone harvest from the Indian Ocean twenty one percent of the yellow fish tuna<sup>6</sup>. Yet, as this fish slowly slips into extinction, what incentive does a fisherman have not to catch the endangered species as much as possible- especially considering its status as a culinary rarity? The two aforementioned instances delineate why the aspiration to erect an international distribution model that facilitates the communal allotment of goods ultimately fails due to the absence of an overarching community. Human nature behaves in a manner where entitlement undermines

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<sup>5</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.iotc.org/files/proceedings/1999/wpdc/IOTC-1999-WPDCS-10.pdf>

reciprocity. The diminishing global fish stock and uneven consumption of natural resources attest to the reasons why the paradigm of the *Cooking Pot Market* is complicated by the subdivisions of pride and undercurrent of greed that fuels the market economy.

So the question is, can the *Cooking Pot Economy* transcend the unequal distribution of goods and depletion of common resources? Perhaps. Let's consider that the Internet renders a socioeconomic condition split between two systems. With economists and the public alike struggling to reconcile the market with the non-market sphere, the relationship between the two remain polar. For instance, giving music out for free creates a market of demand in the non-market realm, while at the same time a fan base is cultivated this way and monetary return ensues. However, the intercourse between these differing economic models is complicated by the disparity in the motivation fueling the public's participation. For instance, the incentive behind involvement in the non-market domain is hinged on the concept of the reputation economy, wherein financial compensation comes secondary and value is tied to social position within a niche community. This reputation economy monitors a market that resides outside of the monetary sphere, wherein communal sharing, social organizations, authority ranking (based on reputation) and reciprocity thrive. All of

the above are not only fundamental characteristic of the Internet, but are also essential attributes of the *Cooking Pot* paradigm<sup>7</sup>.

Although one cannot attach a concrete value to reputations, it can be argued that “like money, they represent things of value, as proxies”<sup>8</sup> (Ghosh). Just as money is a vital element in regulating the contemporary market economy, reputation plays a role in sustaining the *Cooking Pot Market*. The assumption is that the reputation economy motivates the masses to work without solely a monetary incentive. The growth of the information economy, which over the past several years has built tremendous momentum thanks to the Internet, is rooted in the exchange of ideas. Technological advancements have meant that information is not only free, but also that it is accessible to many more people than ever before. The Internet can almost be described as a postmodern barter market wherein the transactions between two parties has been usurped by a shared bounty of information and ideas that are asymmetrically contributed and reciprocated by the masses. This mechanism mirrors the *Cooking Pot Market*, which like the Information economy is fueled by neither altruistic nor monetary motives. It is this asymmetrical exchange that is intrinsic to

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<sup>7</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

<sup>8</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

“the infinitely reproducing Internet that makes the cooking-pot a viable economic model.”<sup>9</sup>

The revival of this economy of free exchange is a postmodern phenomenon that has become a focal point of scrutiny and discussion. Rishab Aiyer Ghosh’s discourse is taken further in Michael Bauwen’s essay, *P2P and Human Evolution*<sup>10</sup>. Delving into the complexities of the *Cooking Pot Market*, Michael Bauwen develops a detailed outline of what he terms as ‘inter-subjective relational dynamics’ that he reckons to be necessary if the paradigm of “peer to peer production” is to succeed<sup>11</sup>. Swaying in between the gift and market economy, *Peer to Peer* is ultimately a social formation that initially stemmed from the futile terrain of the technological field. Along the same lines as Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, Michael Bauwen conceptualizes a network of social interactions wherein financial gain does not serve as the catalyst behind human relations<sup>12</sup>. The article develops the theoretical framework of an economy formulated

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<sup>9</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

<sup>10</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

<sup>11</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

<sup>12</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

on an open source model. The shift from the market economy to a domain of decentralized social intercourse will lead to what Bauwen describes as the “third mode of production”<sup>13</sup>.

This “third mode of production” is defined by the accessibility of information, the absence of a hierarchy within the system and the fact that worth is not determined by its exchange value in the monetary market but rather by its use-value in the information economy<sup>14</sup>. The proliferation of goods whose worth is hinged on its use-value rather than its monetary value in the market sphere has evolved in tandem to the emergence of the technological developments. ‘Peer to Peer’, abbreviated by Bauwen as P2P, can be understood as the relationship between a widely distributed network that is decentralized and interconnected. In *“The Political Economy of Peer Production”*, Bauwen argues that “peer production is highly dependent on the market that produces use-value through mostly immaterial production, without directly providing an income for its producers<sup>15</sup>.” With the proliferation of blogs, file sharing

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<sup>13</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

<sup>14</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

<sup>15</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

and online chat communities emerging, the technological field has become a space of nonhierarchical relations established on like interest. The agency of those who participate is an underlining aspect of the widespread process. Characteristic of this network is the concept of “prosumer”- meaning that the interchange of capital relies on the mutual cooperation of the community of participants. Examples of these emerging social network of prosumers are, as mentioned before: blog sites, global communities like ‘facebook’ and wikipedia.

P2P production relies on an interdependent system that is fueled by reciprocity and egalitarian participation. This societal shift towards networked relationships harbors unpredictable, yet exciting, implications for the years to come. The concept of Peer-to-Peer Production has shed light on the possibility of a new social order that transcends the “tragedy of the commons”<sup>16</sup>. Outside of the hegemonic order of the private sphere, “the new forms of universal common property transcend the limitations of both private and public property models and are reconstituting a dynamic field of the Commons<sup>17</sup>”. The entangled web of relationships forged

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

<sup>17</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

between individual computers is a fundamental aspect of the system's infrastructure. This technological domain relies on the incessant intercourse of ideas donated and distributed across the constellation of participants. In observation of the global flows of information and media, the technological developments have facilitated communication on a transnational scale. However, as humanity shifts into a new age, a dialogue regarding the structural constraints and potential consequences must be hatched.

Due to the absence of monetary exchange, P2P can be conceived as a market only insofar as it lends a terrain wherein individual collectively contribute and take information. Whereas markets are driven by the exchange value of a good, the P2P production operates on the use-value of information. Furthermore there is a disparity in the dynamic of reciprocity within the two spheres of exchange. Yet, with this said, there is an interdependent relationship between P2P production and capitalism in that peer production has been "created through the interstices of the market"<sup>18</sup> not to mention that fact that "there is a very tangible market dynamics to the free economy of the Internet, and rational economic decisions are at work. This is the "cooking-pot"

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<sup>18</sup> Michel Bauwens, 'The Political Economy of Peer Production'  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

market: an implicit barter economy with asymmetric transactions.”<sup>19</sup> In response to Michael Bauwens essay, Chris Stewart of the Integral Foresight Institute writes, "what Michael Bauwens has achieved in a very short space fulfills the same function as the Communist Manifesto once did: a call for a worldwide movement for social and political change, firmly rooted in the objective and subjective changes of contemporary society, and articulated as a practical and insightful model of human value and power relations that is ahead of its time."<sup>20</sup> The inter-subjective dynamics that buttress the ethos of this process “molds reciprocity modes, market modes and hierarchy modes”<sup>21</sup> yet the question remains, “can peer to peer be expanded beyond the immaterial sphere in which it was born?”<sup>22</sup>

Conceptualizing the idea of “Inter-subjective Dynamics”, contemporary anthropologist Alan Page Fiske constructs a relational model theory in his work, *Structures of Social Life* that ultimately illustrates how "people use four fundamental models for organizing most aspects of sociality most of the time in all cultures. These

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<sup>19</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

<sup>20</sup> Amsterdam Media Research Center ‘Institute of Network Cultures’ [http://www.networkcultures.org/weblog/archives/2005/03/michael\\_bauwens.html](http://www.networkcultures.org/weblog/archives/2005/03/michael_bauwens.html)

<sup>21</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

<sup>22</sup> Michel Bauwens, ‘The Political Economy of Peer Production’  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=502>

models are Communal Sharing, Authority Ranking, Equality Matching and Market Pricing”<sup>23</sup>. Building his argument on a synthesis of studies stemming from a range of fields, Alan Page Fiske unveils what lies fundamentally behind social interaction<sup>24</sup>.

Alan Page Fiske believes that the greatest catalyst to human evolution and adaptation is social interaction. An individual’s position within a community, social organization or network has powerful implications on one’s speech, behavior, and one’s inter-subjective dynamics.<sup>25</sup> Although his discourse provides a broader framework with which to conceptualize human interaction, it feeds into what underpins P2P production and what lies behind the failure of the *Cooking Pot Market*. Within the framework of Fiske’s relational model, the repercussions recent technological developments have had on the concept of community and shifting understanding of social interaction can be explored.

Alan Page Fiske first introduces in his article the concept of communal sharing, which refers namely to the relationships that tie people together due to a domain of

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<sup>23</sup> Structures of Social Life, Alan Page Fiske <http://www.simonsays.com/content/book.cfm?sid=33&pid=405681>

<sup>24</sup> Human Sociality, Alan Page Fiske <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/anthro/faculty/fiske/reimodov.htm>

<sup>25</sup> The Evolution of Culturally Diverse Social Psychologies, Alan Page Fiske <http://www.anth.ucsb.edu/projects/esm/AlanFiske.html>

resources that are held in commonality. In this case, there is a communal consumption of a certain resource. There is a shifting of the unit of identity from the individual to the community at large. In short, it can be understood as an individual who builds his identity as an extension of a whole, forging a relationship with society that is undifferentiated. En suite, Alan Page Fiske proposes the importance of preserving a social hierarchy of power, as the relationship between superior and inferior ensures order within the system. “In Authority Ranking (AR) people have asymmetric positions in a linear hierarchy in which subordinates defer, respect, and (perhaps) obey, while superiors take precedence and take pastoral responsibility for subordinates.”<sup>26</sup> This authoritative model is present in both the socioeconomic and political domain as well as the technological field, however in the latter is rooted solely in an individual status in the reputation economy.

In “Equality Matching” which Fiske goes on to suggest in tandem, “people keep track of the balance or difference among participants and know what would be required to restore balance”.<sup>27</sup> It is ultimately referring to a relationship defined by

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<sup>26</sup> Human Sociality, Alan Page Fiske  
<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/anthro/faculty/fiske/reimodov.htm>

<sup>27</sup> A. P. Fiske. *Structures of Social Life: The Four Elementary Forms of Human Relations*. New York: Free Press (Macmillan), 1991.

reciprocity and equal share distribution. The idea of reciprocity is a splintered concept, as it can be extrapolated to the idea of the gift economy, to the market economy and also the information economy wherein the exchange is asymmetrical. For instance, as in the case of the Internet, the contributor “receives not one thing of value in exchange - indeed there is no explicit act of exchange at all - but millions of unique goods made by others.”<sup>28</sup> The last component of the relational model that Fiske formulates is ‘Market Pricing’ which is the monetary exchange of goods and services. “Market Pricing relationships are oriented to socially meaningful ratios or rates such as prices, wages, interest, rents, lites, or cost-benefit analyses,”<sup>29</sup> however, in not all cases is money monitoring this system of relations. According to Fiske, all four of these characteristics of the relational model are present to varying extents within the postmodern socioeconomic structure, they dictate how we interact with one another as well as how society functions as a whole.

A good example of how the aforementioned dynamics interrelate can be extrapolated to the domain of a domestically owned bodega, wherein the intercourse

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<sup>28</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

<sup>29</sup> Human Sociality, Alan Page Fiske  
<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/anthro/faculty/fiske/reimodov.htm>

of communal sharing, authority ranking, market pricing and equality matching are all present to varying degrees. Yet, the interdependent relationship that structures a family owned business relies on a model built on trust and communal interest that is far too ambitious to implement on a global scale. However, Alan Page Fiske argues that although market pricing and authoritative ranking may seem far more visible within the contemporary socioeconomic landscape<sup>30</sup>, the onslaught of technological developments has unveiled the presence of the other dynamics of which one could argue the *Cooking Pot* market is hinged on. Furthermore, the paradigm of peer-to-peer production thrives in the sphere of the Internet due to the fact that the information and reputation economy rely primarily on the first three dynamics rather than the market economy. However as the technological domain becomes increasingly important in the socioeconomic sphere, the possibility of a *Cooking Pot Market* emerges, especially if P2P production proves able to transcend the intangible sphere from which it came from. Yet, this postmodern aspiration to redefine to structural design of the market is complicated when confronted with the issue of surplus. To elaborate: the surplus of information in the technological sphere has no harmful implications, whereas the surplus of goods or money is laced with complexities.

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<sup>30</sup> A. P. Fiske. Relativity within Moose ("Mossi") culture: Four incommensurable models for social relationships. *Ethos* 18:180-204, 1990.

Relying on the intercourse of reciprocity, communal sharing, authority and the market, the stability of *Cooking Pot* paradigm is threatened by the variable of surplus, which is an interesting counterintuitive shift when the issue of satisfying needs is replaced with the crisis of excess. George Bataille criticizes Western nations for handling the predicament with a methodology that is arguably backwards. In capitalism, surplus is oftentimes reinvested, which consequentially generates a larger surplus - merely postponing the problem. For Bataille, the Western world has forgotten how to sacrifice surplus in constructive and useful ways<sup>31</sup>. Once again we are back to where we started- struggling to formulate an ideal mechanism for the allocation of goods and natural resources, which even (or perhaps especially) in the case of surplus proves to be a trying feat. The profane nature of excess is the catalyst behind why the *Cooking Pot* paradigm falters when extended into the socioeconomic sphere. The bottom line is that the problems shadowing a glut of goods far exceed those encountered in the circumstance of having excessive information at one's disposal. Furthermore, human nature lacks selflessness. The fetishism of market pricing and the hegemonic hierarchy outweighs the aspiration of reciprocity and communal sharing-- especially in the context of capitalism. Entitlement extinguishes

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.generation-online.org/p/pbataille.htm>

the possibility of a market where a somewhat balanced equilibrium could be met among the four inter-subjective dynamics.

There is a thread of hope, however, in the discourse that *sacrifice* in the context of the reputation economy is beneficial to both parties in that it eradicates the crisis of surplus while also serving as a catalyst to elevate an individual socially within the reputation economy. This factor could sustain the stability of the *Cooking Pot* market. Sacrifice, in whatever form, is ultimately a false gesture of selflessness and kindness disguised and acted out for ulterior motives. Hear me out: a philanthropist donates to a museum or hospital usually to have his/her name inscribed on the wall, just as people of religious conviction give to the poor hoping to escape the possibility of ramifications in the afterlife. The same can be said about the growth of the Internet insofar as those participating in the global community are ultimately capitalizing on the reputation economy. Given that “a crucial component of the cooking-pot market model is reputation,”<sup>32</sup> it’s evident why the paradigm thrives within the technological sphere. Although self-interested sacrifice undermines the concept of selfless giving, it

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<sup>32</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, ‘Cooking Pot Markets’  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

diffuses the issue of surplus and breathes life into the possibility of a *Cooking Pot* market transcending its present domain.

Aside from coveting eminence within the reputation economy, the primary motivation fueling the public's participation in the technological realm of the Internet is still laced with ambiguity, as it appears that neither altruism nor hope of financial gain serve as a catalyst behind involvement. The asymmetrical dynamic of the Net renders the framework of a free market economy that mirrors the *Cooking Pot Market* paradigm. The *Cooking Pot* model exhibits the potential of generating immeasurable "value through the continuous interaction of people at a numbing speed" in fact, "the cooking-pot market already exists, it is an image of what the Internet has already evolved into, calmly and almost surreptitiously, over the past couple of decades."<sup>33</sup>

However, the aspiration to apply this structure to the socioeconomic sphere may be in vain. The disparity between a surplus of goods and a surplus of information is great, thus the only possibility in sight would be if the reputation economy underpinned the systems stability.

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<sup>33</sup> Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, 'Cooking Pot Markets'  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3\\_3/ghosh/#SEC1](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_3/ghosh/#SEC1)

## Technology's Intervention and Implications

The Internet and television, among many other technological developments, have been catalyst to the way popular culture is consumed and perceived by society at large. Over the past several decades, great advancements have been made in the field of technology facilitating popular culture's accessibility to the masses. Email, business, pornography, dating, virtual communities, web-logs, blogging, information such as the weather or traffic and entertainment such as gaming or films are but only a few of the myriad means in which the internet can be employed. Concurrently, the media has, since its birth, served as a cultural apparatus that educates as well as entertains. In short, the Internet and television have shaped in tandem popular culture and the manner in which it is consumed.

The invention of the World Wide Web has marked a societal shift wherein face-to-face communication has become increasingly supplanted with electronically mediated interaction. The communitarian implications of the Internet are immense insofar as one can keep in touch with loved ones just as easily as merge new friendships with strangers across the world. The cyberspace culture has rendered an electronic proximity that facilitates the transnational flow of media text and information. "The Internet has connected up different parts of the world in a powerful

new way: images, words, and so forth can flow across borderlines in more directions and faster than ever before" (230, Rubin & Melnick, Cyberspace). The rapid growth the World Wide Web is experiencing has resulted in the mass distribution of ideas, this facilitates elements of popular culture- such as music, films, styles (etc.), to effortlessly breach cultural boundaries. With the exception of citizens of Cuba, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia and North Korea- where complete access to every domain is restricted, the Internet is accessible to all and thus anyone in theory can participate regardless of age, sexuality, gender, race or nationality. Veiling the true identity of an individual, the Internet shatters the socially constructed barriers of class and reinforces the discourse that popular culture is deteriorating social and taste hierarchies.

Television is yet another tool that has fueled the accessibility and transformation of popular culture in contemporary society. First off, there is an incredibly broad range of programs available at one's fingertips, from Soup Operas to Reality Television shows, to news and sports, from comedy to MTV. The mass media is very much informed by popular culture, offering diverse programs catering to all taste. Yet agency within this context is limited, as consumer choice resides within the programs offered by the multinational media conglomerates. This drawback fuels the debate concerning structuralism, culturalism and consumer choice. Yet, it must be

noted that consumption patterns have undergone severe transformations as a result of the Internet and mass media. For one, shopping online has redefined consumption in that it is slowly evolving from a social practice into a private one. The relentless advertisements lacing television programs, on the other hand, have the propensity to subliminally implant artificial desires in the minds of the audience who subconsciously succumb to its veiled hegemonic agenda. The manipulative mechanisms of the mainstream media mustn't be underestimated.

Within the discourse of popular culture, a disparity must be drawn between the two electronic mediums. In the case of television, an individual merely consumes the ideals visually manufactured by multinational media conglomerates, whereas the Internet is interactive. This aspect unleashes possibilities never before considered. For instance, the facile reproduction and distribution of music has led to the accessibility of foreign tunes previously unattainable within one's habitus. Recording technology, in addition, has yielded the formation of hybrid sounds. Furthermore, because just about anyone can self publish or produce their own work via blogs, weblogs, website (etc.), the lines between production and consumption have become blurred. Online publications, such as e-zines, have proliferated in the past several years. This is a godsend for low budget movements, as the financial expenses of ink

and paper are no longer of concern and local projects can have a global reach. The point is that popular culture in the context of the Internet is both collective and interactive. Its democratic nature provides an arena of social mobility and freedom of speech wherein people of similar interest can meet and build virtual subcultures and communities. There is no telling what the years ahead will bring, but this much is sure: within the domains of the technological landscape popular culture has a fertile terrain to thrive.

## Vannevar Bush's "As We May Think"

This article, written in July of 1945, "calls for a new relationship between the thinking man and the sum of our knowledge"(1). In the late 1940's, physicists whose prior objectives were rooted in World War II had to viciously veer focus once peace settlements were reached. With their hands suddenly free, their efforts could now be aimed towards the betterment of human life, rather than the destruction. This article reflects on the benefits scientific development has had on the humanity. These advancements have, in a respect, released man "from the bondage of bare existence" (2), as they have improved mental and physical health and facilitated communication amongst the masses. However, the old methods of consolidating research have become inadequate due to the proliferation of knowledge. In response, Bush calls upon a means to store results so that the "truly significant attainments" (2) stemming from years of study won't get "lost in the mass of the inconsequential" (2). If to solve the problems plaguing the present, one must look to the past. Man has constructed "a civilization so complex that he needs to mechanize his records" (13). There are countless disconnected conclusions that, if organized, great progress could result. This is not to say, that progress hasn't already been made, however. Bush

examines the inventions of the past, noting that we are already capable of things once thought impossible. In the first half of the twentieth century, scientist had already produced “cheap complex devices of great reliability” (3), with regard to the advancements in photography and microfilm. However, this only the beginning, he predicts. The machines yet to come will be far more versatile. Prolific scientists thread together a tapestry of possibilities, marking a new event in human history. In spite of this, Bush illustrates where he feels further progress can be made. With developments in microfilm, he believes “the Encyclopedia Britannica could be reduced to the volume of a matchbox” (5). However, compression, although economical, is useless if the information is not consulted. Once again, Bush stresses the significance of specialization and consolidation, as “man profits by his inheritance of acquired knowledge” (8). The results of research must be available for distribution, as the mass production and reproduction of information fuels further development in the scientific field. Thus, “specialization becomes increasingly necessary for progress and the effort to bridge between disciplines” (2). In response to this need, Bush presents his design for the *Memex*, which appears to be early blueprints of a computer. It is a device, he explains, wherein one can “store all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding

speed and flexibility” (10). It will be far more reliable than “any human operator and a thousand times faster” (2). Furthermore, the *Memex* will be capable of associative reasoning, something innate to the human mind. As scientists have adapted a logical process in which to examine the world, these machines will also be able to “manipulate the premises in accordance with formal logic” (7). As he delves into greater detail about the intricacies of this machine, it grows increasingly difficult to discern whether he regards such a device as a tool, or as a being. Despite the fact that he refers to the design as an instrument and “mechanical aid” (2), he has the tendency to personify it. For instance, he states that the “machines will have enormous appetites” (6). Moreover, the “adoption” (9) of this “human mechanism” (12) will facilitate life, as it will have the faculty of *logical* reasoning. This sets the stage for the development of an unhealthy dependency between mankind and the machine, perhaps one, which at the turn of the century, society gradually begins to exhibit.

# BIOPOLITICS

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## “The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction”

In order to understand the implications of biocybernetics reproduction in the “post human age,” Mitchell revisits Walter Benjamin’s classic essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility”. Positioning the basis of his argument on inquiry, he poses the following pivotal questions: “what is biocybernetics reproduction? What is being done with it by way of critical and artistic practice, and what could be done?” (483). Thereby, Mitchell aims to not only to articulate this postmodern phenomenon, but he also considers the socioeconomic and technological consequences in its wake. He boldly proposes “that biocybernetics reproduction has replaced Walter Benjamin’s mechanical reproduction as the fundamental technical determinant of our age” (486). If modernity was shaped by the socioeconomic impact of mechanical reproducibility than, Mitchell argues, postmodernity has and will be defined by the rise of biocybernetics reproduction.

The term ‘biocybernetics’ translates literally from Greek as life (bio)/controlling-governing (cybernetics), or control over life. Yet to avoid the pitfalls of such linguistic simplifications, it is better to define biocybernetics as the trajectory the

field of genetic engineering has taken as a result of the synthesis of computer science and biology. Based on the principle of systemic, the discipline stems from the application of theoretical biology to the terrain of cybernetics, which is closely tied to control and system theory. This bio-technical amalgamation has bred digital imaging, global communicability, virtual worlds, the Internet, and the “industrialization of genetic engineering” (483). Many of these technological innovations have without question improved the quality of human life, however his concerns lies in the absence of speculation and blurring of boundaries.

Apropos to this apprehension, Mitchell argues that there is an increasing dedifferentiation of the human and the machine. A good case in point would be the frail distinction between a smart bomb and a suicide bomber in that the later reveals the reduction of a living being into a machine, whereas the former represents a machine that exhibits intellect. He goes on to note, “that machines more than ever behave now like living things” (484). In this respect, there is a shift in the site of what Walter Benjamin coins as the ‘aura’. No longer does an image record an entity, but rather an entity is constructed from a blueprint. This postmodern mechanism of reproduction destabilizes our notion of the aura in that an image is actually the precursor to its production, rather than the antithesis. Thus, there is a reversal in the

relationship between image and copy, DNA scroll and technological entity that essentially inverts Benjamin's hypothesis of the aura. In other words, unlike mechanical reproduction, biocybernetics manifests the aura in the copy rather than the original. Through virtue of this discourse, one can contextualize the historical specificity of a smart bomb, which functions as a paradigm for this postmodern phenomena.

With this said, how can we then situate the suicide bomber in relation to the smart bomb, as both emerge as manifestations of biocybernetics technology? Needless to say, it is difficult to reconcile the relationship between low-tech and high-tech in this 'post-human' age. While a suicide bomber may seem archaic in some respects, the act itself responds faithfully to the biocybernetics paradigm. One of the most striking characteristics of the way biocybernetics reproduction metastasizes itself is through fear. As Foucault brilliantly articulates in "The History of Sexuality," death is the barrier of the sovereign structure. Suicide bombers hijack control from the system in the violent act of voluntary suicide. The threat tied to the absence of this fear translates as the greatest form of political dissidence. How can we afford, with this said, to neglect the dangerous implications that have and will come in tandem to this emerging form of technology that is increasingly shaping the world we live in?

## “The Politics of Life Itself”

There has been a paradigmatic shift from the biopolitics definitive of the early twentieth century to that of the present. With this shift came a transformation in the relationship between the government and the populace regarding the health of the nation. Whereas once the strength of a nation state was hinged on the fitness and health of the population, the socioeconomic gravitation towards individualism has led political apparatus' astray from the collectivist approach towards national health, which in its past formed alliance with eugenics and racial purification.

The ideological framework of eugenics was inspired by the archetype of Darwin's theory of evolution. The idea of 'natural selection' transmuted into domestic breeding and ethnic cleansing. 'Population', 'race', 'quality' and 'territory' determined the strength of a nation and justified genocide through the logic of eugenics in the first half of the twentieth century. However, "Darwin's Theory of Evolution is a theory in crisis in light of the tremendous advances we've made in molecular biology, biochemistry and genetics over the past fifty years."<sup>34</sup> This has had tremendous

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Denton, "Evolution: A Theory in Crisis," 1986, p. 250.

implications not only in the medical sphere, but in the molecularization of biopolitics as well.

Ensuing World War II, the negative associations eugenics held due to the monstrosities of the Nazi Regime triggered a shift in the biopolitical rationalities of democratic societies. The optimization of public health was achieved through a ‘non-directive’ approach hinged on preventative measures. The responsibility of the overall health of a populace fell no longer within the territory of politics, but on the individual. Over the past thirty years, however, the tenets of individual optimization gave rise to a social neurosis consumed by the premeditation of genetic risk.

In tandem to the biomedical advancements made in the field of genetics came the rise of a corporate model of healthcare that hinged profit on the deployment of risk. Genetic dispositions are now determined by speculation, rather than actualization. Furthermore, with the obligations of the state free from the responsibilities of the national population’s health, natural selection becomes hinged on class. Drug consumption relies on premeditated risk. Pharmaceutical company’s profit margin soar, as the working class invest every dime of their income in the plausible prevention of a disease they don’t yet have. We have become a risk society that has found refuge in the promise of a pill.

Of course, one can argue that the molecularization of biopolitics and its aforementioned implications can be perceived in a positive light when paralleled to its eugenic predecessor. Yet, I would argue that this movement away from a social healthcare system does not imply the banishment of eugenic ideology- with sterilization and reproductive laws still very much present. Furthermore, the modern nation-state and capitalist medical apparatus' regulate the cost of health care so that one's financial state and thus social status dictates coverage. With two million people dying a year from preventable diseases, this mutation is best articulated by the term: "letting die". This paradigmatic shift is seen in other realms of the power apparatus such as the socioeconomic doctrine of "lassiez faire"- an intrinsic methodology of neoliberalism.

I think now more than ever before, this form of biopolitics needs to be addressed. With the rising cost of health care, we witness conglomerates capitalizing on the sickness of others. Profits soar with the manipulated consumption of drugs by pharmaceutical companies and an inclination towards self diagnosis in quick fix prescription nations like America. Life insurance is being sliced up into bonds whose value is hinged on the untimely death of another. In short, capitalism guns down

democracy when profit is contingent on the exploitation, pain and death of an individual.

# (POST)STRUCTURALISM

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## Foucault's 'Repressive Hypothesis'

It is a fallacy to believe that the Victorian era marked the beginning of sexual repression. Counter intuitively deconstructing the 'repressive hypothesis', Foucault claims that sex and sexuality was not conceived in the vein of a discourse until the 17th century. Before this point in history, sex was largely ignored by state powers. However, I would argue that despite this, it was central in how the Church managed and controlled the masses. With that said, I propose that what we really witness is a shift in power from Church to State as well as a shift in the social psyche and the mechanism in which power was implemented.

In tandem to the growth of the industrial era came the birth of subjectivity- a sociocultural phenomenon that had inexplicable implications. Although there is no subject only subjectification, the pretext of selfhood led to a reconfiguration in the architecture of power and its manipulation of the masses. The human subject is said to be an invention of the seventeenth century. In part, subjectivity came as a result of the mass production and thus accessibility of mirrors to the bourgeoisie. Prior to 1630, mirrors were rare and seen only in the homes of the wealthy- thus selfhood and class were strongly intertwined. Before, "the rich and powerful had a great deal of control

over their self images, unlike historical selves who left ‘only’ their actions behind, or the millions of whom we knew nothing personal whatsoever”<sup>35</sup>

Ultimately, it is a question of what came first: the chicken or the egg. The mechanisms in which power was exercised mutated in accordance to this widespread notion of individuality, or perhaps people adjusted to this economic structure evolving later into neoliberalism. Control was no longer reinforced through means of deduction but rather through optimizing the productive power of the populace. The mutation in the mechanism in which power was exercised followed in tandem the paradigmatic shift from Church to State. Historically speaking, in a monarchy a serf was granted a plot of land in exchange for his labor, a portion of the crops he harvested and his willingness to fight in the name of his king. Fear that his land, crops or life could be taken away secured his compliance as did the fear implanted by the Church of God. Yet, with the rise of industrial power and the birth of subjectivity came a paradigmatic shift away from deduction as a means of control to the sphere of production.

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<sup>35</sup> Painting women : cosmetics, canvases, and early modern culture. Patricia Phillippy. 2006.

Internalizing a sense of selfhood, an individual's labor was translated as personal gain. A digression from work meant a crippling of one's own prosperity. Time translated as money, so sex for purposes outside of reproduction was perceived as unproductive. In the Victorian era, sex became central in how medical, state and industrial apparatus's of power functioned in relation to the public. The repressive hypothesis was rooted in the bourgeoisie mentality that saw sex for pleasure as frivolous, social norms were cemented as were gender roles. This perception fueled the proliferation of discourses like psychoanalysis that sought to articulate sexual taboo's and perversions. With the longevity of life being in the best interests of the power apparatus, population control became paramount and sex for the sake of sex for thus reason as well was shamed.

## Foucault's "History of Sexuality"

In the "History of Sexuality", Foucault positions the discourse of sexuality within what he claims to be a history of repression. He extrapolates this sexual suppression, which renders sex outside of reproduction taboo, to the technology of power and the hegemonic order. Foucault begs the question as to why the western world has always approached sex as either scientific or perverse- two polarities difficult to reconcile. He goes further to divulge the social inclination to believe that there is a finite truth connected with sex which is rooted in the discourse's relationship with knowledge and power.

Foucault traces the birth of sexual repression back to the seventeenth century, at which point he argues the discourse's disposition manifested in tandem to the rise of the bourgeoisie, who regarded sex for pleasure unproductive. From here, Foucault goes further to claim that power is harnessed through the act of repression. He juxtaposes traditional forms of sociopolitical control with that of the present. Three centuries ago, the sovereign had the "right of death" over his subjects. The threat of deduction, in other words the power to take another's life, property or freedom was used as a form of dominance over the populace. In modern times, the "right of death"

has been replaced by the “power over life”. This transformation in the mechanisms in which power is exercised over the people marks a paradigm shift. In contemporary time, political interests lie in the practice of preserving life as opposed to threatening death.

Modernity and the rise of capitalism regarded the human body as a productive unit that’s part of a larger machine. The economic growth of a nation is hinged on the efficiency of its populace. Through social conditioning, certain taboos are internalized and expectations are put in place. This vein of control is diffused through the military apparatus, the education system and the media. Social stratification is secured by the allotment of certain tasks to different demographics. Foucault argues that the power structure has to be “capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them [the people] more difficult to govern” (141). Foucault coins the term “bio-power” to explain the political mechanisms employed to harness control of the populace. He goes on to argue that biopower is responsible for the rise of capitalism and the modern day nation-state.

Biopower and the “power over life” takes another form in the case of population control, demographics and resource analysis. This is where the discourse of sexuality is invited in. With human life under the jurisdiction of politics, the reproductive

practices of the people become political. This is evident in cases like the population control policy put in effect by the Republic of China, which restricts the number of children urban couples may have. Foucault's interest lies in the obscured and discursive tie sex has with language, knowledge and power. He unveils the means in which culture bans the politics of sexuality outside the confines of certain social norms such as the institution of marriage. Pajczkowska writes in 'Issues in Feminist Visual Culture' that "as a concept, sex is particularly anxiogenic in our culture and tends therefore to be idealized in romantic, divine and sublime love or to be debased as carnal, instinctive or perverse, as dirt" (9). This rigid dichotomy creates a schism in the discourse of sexuality. Perhaps through debasing sexual liberation, the governing forces are able to maintain control through repression.

## Structuralism vs. Culturalism

Structuralism and culturalism are two distinctive theories within the discourse of popular culture that serve to conceptualize the complexities of its relationship with society. Structuralism, a concept formulated at the *Frankfurter Schule*, views popular culture as a site where veiled hegemonic ideologies are imposed from above by the multinational corporations bred by capitalism. The theory is best exemplified via a *top-down* model, as this paradigm illustrates the public as victims held hostage to the commercialization and the manipulative mechanism of mainstream films and television. In short, the view is that the masses have been blindly coerced to embrace the ideals of consumerism constructed by the culture industry. Power lies in the state, and agency is “is overwhelmed by structure” (132, Storey, *Consumption in Everyday Life*) and thus absent within the framework of the capitalist system.

Culturalism, on the other hand, rejects the consensus that popular culture is imposed from above and views it as an authentic expression of mass society. Social structures, in this view, are shaped by human agency and thus the collective force of ‘bottom-up’ movements mustn’t be underestimated. Culturalism contradicts the structuralist conception that consumption yields one “a hopeless victim of 'false

consciousnesses'" (132, Storey, *Consumption and Everyday Life*). Rather, culturalism emphasizes how subcultures, underground music scenes, grassroots, and the appropriation of apparel unveil the complexities of consumption and role of human agency. Although both paradigms broaden the discourse on popular culture, offering very interesting perspectives indeed, the truth lies somewhere in between the two. It is best articulated, in my opinion, by the concept of a '*compromise equilibrium*', which regards popular culture as, " an arena of struggle and negotiation between the interest of dominant groups and the interest of subordinate groups" (4, Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*).

The crucial difference between the structural and cultural view lies namely in the fact that the former regards consumption as a passive act whereas the latter argues that it is an active practice wherein identities are constructed via consumer choice. The structuralist approach claims that consumers are "infected with artificial wants dreamed up by the international league of producers" (247, Appleby) and that consumption "is a mere shadow of production" (132, Storey, *Consumption in Everyday Life*). Naively embracing the ideals and values engendered and exported by the multinational conglomerates, consumer choice exist to certain extent however it's heavily dictated by advertisements, branding, merchandizing and the hegemonic agenda

mediated by the mass media.

Culturalist, on the contrary, rejects the claim that consumers are manipulated by commercialization and views consumption as a highly active act and social practice that offers “avenues for individual expression through a range of commodities” (608, Bennet, *Subcultures or Neo-tribes?*). Consumption does not follow at the heels of production, but rather it is a means of expressing individuality and constructing social identities. My personal take on the matter is that individuals are simultaneously *consumers* and *producers* of popular culture, and thus the two paradigms offer concurrently accurate and flawed concepts concerning the issue at hand.

# MULTICULTURALISM

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## Subdivisions of Pride: Multiculturalism in the Metropolis

The mosaic multiculturalism rendered by the ethnic enclaves subdividing Manhattan undermines the pretext that a cosmopolitan city is a transnational space of social intercourse, intercultural integration and communication. Dissecting the complexities of multiculturalism, the relationship between cosmopolitanism and globalization become increasingly perplexing. New York City is the “most tangled site of socio-cultural hybridity in North America” (Stroller 82), wherein the flow of commodities, currencies and people create a transnational landscape. In this sense, the transglobal city serves as a paradigm for the multicultural possibilities of a metropolis. Yet with the pressures of economic and political assimilation, immigrants are torn between salvaging remnants of their cultural inheritance and integrating into the “American way of life”. The hybrid identities constructed within the context of New York City’s diasporic communities presents a paradox that fuels the discourse that multiculturalism is inimical to a national identity. In tandem to this argument is the notion that the mosaic multiculturalism created by ethnic enclaves renders subdivisions of pride that undermines the aspirations of ethnic integration within a cosmopolitan society. Two traits of ethnic enclaves pose a threat to the discourse of

integral multiculturalism. First off, as stated before, the segregated boroughs unveil a separatist impulse on the part of ethnic minorities. Secondly, the urban gentrification of ethnic enclaves engenders disneyfied representations of multiculturalism, which exploits the cultural capital of the multiethnic metropolis deteriorating the district's authenticity and driving the original inhabitant out. This marketing of ethnic enclaves such as New York City's "Chinatown" and "Little Italy" commodifies on the "cultural features of a particular community" (Ram 41) as a ploy to seduce tourists.

Laced with possibilities, the era of reflexive modernity is concurrently pregnant with unpredictability. Yet the intercourse of the aforementioned has given birth to the transnational terrain of the contemporary cosmopolitan city. For Beck, to be cosmopolitan is to have a splintered identity, it is to be "a citizen of two worlds" (Beck 18). This "internal globalization" (Beck 17) merges the global with the local resulting in an "intensification of worldwide social relations" that "link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens 64). Yet any attempt to define the implication of such can be like "trying to nail a pudding to the wall" (Beck 17) as globalization carries the connotations of internationalization, liberalization, universalization, westernization or modernization. Regardless of the complexities inherent to this term, the

deterritorialization that has resulted from the transnational flow of people and information has indisputably fueled the formation of the multicultural metropolis. It was Friedrich Nietzsche who was among the first to foresee the inevitability of cultures existing “side by side, in combination, comparison, contradiction and competition in every place and all the time” (Beck 18). In theory, it is this *pluralization* of social demarcations that deteriorates borders. Embracing the otherness of the other, “cosmopolitanism lacks orientation, perhaps because it is so much bigger and includes so many different kinds of people with conflicting customs, assorted hopes and shames, so many sheer technological and scientific possibilities and risk, posing issues people never faced before” (Beck 20). Yet, with this said, does globalization and the emergence of the multicultural city undermine the ideologies of the nation state?

American society is united under a constitution of shared moral precepts, norms and values, which has evaded the divisiveness of multiethnic society through purporting the ideology of the “American Way of Life”. The politic of assimilation in America mirrors the *laissez faire* approach, wherein an immigrant either adopts the “American way of life” and is thus absorbed into the established culture or is left behind to make ends meet in the ghetto. Those who fail to be Americanized can be understood as the “residue of the melting pot” (Schlesinger 67). It is for this reason

that multiculturalism poses an indisputable threat to the national unity of the United States, as it is an ideal laced with a “separatist impulse” that renders “multi-nationalism”(Schlesinger 43). Furthermore, it undermines the assimilation aspirations of America and threatens the shared ideological beliefs that the coherent national identity of the States relies on. In sum, a nation-state is built on the hope of homogeneity, whereas multiculturalism is hinged on the embrace of diversity (Grossberg 54). Nationalism and cultural homogeneity are fundamental ideologies of the modern nation state. In other words, “American” identity is constructed through political or national affiliation rather than ethnic or cultural ties. The coupling of identities, such as African-American or Asian- American, proves that race emerges as supplement to American identity with the undisputed hegemonic center being Caucasian males. In short, multiculturalism’s promotion of cultural diversity is ideologically contradictory with the ideals and national identity of America.

The concept of the melting pot materialized as a response to the influx of foreigners from around the world into cities across the country. Hinged on the economic interests of the United States, the hospitality granted to these immigrants stemmed from the selfish ulterior motives that they are affordable assets to the labor force. The metaphor of hospitality thus blurs the line between the discourse of

generosity and the discourse of fundamental human rights. Forced to construct homes in countries where they are marginalized and rejected, foreigners are oftentimes alienated from society at large. Diasporic communities represent the collective experience of displacement. After having been induced to leave their homelands behind, immigrants are communally drawn together in a collective struggle to acclimate. This alienation engenders a splintered response on the part of the marginalized immigrant in their approach to assimilation. On one hand, foreigners construct a transnational identity exemplified by the paradigm of “*roots*” and “*routes*”. This “double diasporic identity” (Kaya 52) formation can be best understood through the term *intersectionality*, which signifies that identities are constructed at the intersection of shifting elements such as race, class, gender and nationality. The diasporic “subject crosses over the cultural borders and constructs a syncretic cultural identity, or a rhizomatic space” (Kaya 59). Acquiring traits from another cultural identity while still clinging to past understandings of selfhood, co-optation signifies the coexistence of contradictory cultural forms within an individual. Furthermore, the decentered lateral connections experienced by a Puerto Rican living in an Italian neighborhood in Lower Manhattan also contributes to the proliferation of schizophrenic identities. In an effort to evade this violent transition and process of

identity construction, some immigrants, drawn together through a common thread of nationality and/or ethnicity, decide to inhabit ethnic enclaves wherein their traditions, customs, language and cultural practices remain intact. This separatist impulse undermines the politic of assimilation and integral aspirations of cosmopolitanism.

Distinguished from the city at large by its cultural inheritance, an ethnic enclave is a cluster of immigrants with shared roots. Ethnic enclaves “consist of immigrant groups who concentrate in a specific spatial location and organize a variety of enterprises serving their own ethnic market and/or the general population. The basic characteristic is that a significant proportion of immigrant labor force works in enterprises owned by other immigrants” (Portes 290). Ethnic neighborhoods, although not always the most desirable places to live, provide a safe haven for foreigner where they can engage in common social practices with others of the same ethnicity, language and/or nationality. The “commercial thoroughfares of migrant enclaves in large cities have functioned as retail centers, catering to the requirements of ethnic minorities” (Shaw 1996). Seduced by the infinite possibilities lacing the great “American Dream”, many foreigners migrate to the United States without knowing a word of English and with only the clothes on their back. Ethnic enclaves facilitate a foreigner’s adaptation to the “American way of life”.

These ethnic enclaves geographically engender mosaic multiculturalism in the metropolis. This social reductionist view delineates the cultural differences of a people as demarcated entities that co-exist with one another like pieces of a mosaic. In other words, it is an essentialist perspective that organizes population groups according to ethnicity, nationality and/or race (etcetera). Ironically, these subdivisions of pride often start as slums, yet as a result of their ‘exotic’ cultural capital become sites of urban gentrification that render disneyfied shadows of the original. Driven by economic interest, the instant city officials recognize the cultural capital of an ethnic enclave, they begin heavily investing in its gentrification, ultimately rendering it a tourist attraction. The term *monopoly rent* implies that “culture has become a commodity” (Harvey 1) that can be profited from. The transformation of ethnic enclaves into tourist destination is determined by its geographic location and/or symbolic capital (Harvey 3). David Harvey employs the term *monopoly rent* to explain why areas in close proximity to a city’s center or of historic significance often fall victim to heavy commercialization (Harvey 2).

A haven of cultural consumption, Manhattan Island has, over the years, disneyfied every ethnic enclave subdividing its urban landscape in a campaign promoting the city’s diverse multiculturalism. New York City’s “Little Italy”, an ethnic

enclave formerly populated with people of Italian decent, is an ideal example of the process in which a districts cultural inheritance deteriorates at the hands of gentrification. In effect, “Little Italy” is no longer a neighborhood of Italian immigrants, but rather a themed street constituted of Italian restaurants catering to tourist from abroad. Most local New Yorkers would not be caught dead cutting through the sea of sightseers. “The original inhabitants of ‘Little Italy’ have long moved away from this particular district” (Shaw 1988), and the authentic nature of the borough has dissipated, as “commercial gentrification is likely to drive out small businesses” (Shaw 1997). Italian style cafes, restaurants and hotels lace the main street, commodifying on the enclave’s “cultural inheritance” through offering traditional food and musical entertainment to tourist eager to consume.

Only a few blocks south, New York City’s notorious ‘Chinatown’ sprawls, An assault on the senses, the district geographically imperializes the lower east side. In the past, ‘Chinatown’ was perceived as an overcrowded haven of cultural insularity. The chain migration fueling the influx of foreigners deteriorated the ailing economy of the ethnic ghetto. The civic government neglected the poor economic state of the district until deciding to gentrify the district and commodify on its potential cultural capital. With the living expenses skyrocketing, the streets are now infested with tourist from

abroad rather than the borough's original inhabitants. Shops, markets and restaurants that once catered to the Chinese populace, have now been appropriated to appease the Western palette. The disneyfied version of "Chinatown" has been in effect stripped of its authenticity. The influx of Chinese immigrants has shifted to Flushing Queens, a district on the periphery of New York City. This urban migration is rooted in either economic reasons or the fact that "Asians tend to live separately from others" (Zukin 836). The transformation of an ethnic enclave into a gentrified site of commercialization, cultural consumption and tourism has alarming implications. Although at its surface the urban revitalization of ethnic ghetto proves positive, the true character of the boroughs is lost and the original inhabitants driven out.

The use of theming, branding, merchandizing and dedifferentiation of consumption render these fading enclaves havens of consumption commercializing on the alleged "cultural capital" which underpin their appeal. This mechanism of "district branding" is an "essentially an American invention" (Ward 234) that transform authentic ethnic enclave into "islands of pure consumption" for visitors who are wealthier than the local population" (Shaw 1986). However, in the end the original residents can no longer afford to subsist in their own neighborhood after having transformed into a perversely disneyfied destination. Ultimately, "the place is

conceptualized as the ‘product’ to be repositioned. Differentiation from competing place-brands- in this case, through distinctive ethnic or cultural associations- must be highlighted and promoted to target audiences, following advocacy of strategic image management to reposition destinations that may include small areas, such as districts within cities” (Shaw 1997) The branding of this romantic “Otherness” explains the process “through which multicultural districts are selected and redefined as destinations for leisure” (Shaw 1996). However, unfortunately “tourist bubbles are more likely to contribute to racial, ethnic and class tensions than to an impulse towards local community” (Judd 53).

As the Americanization of global culture metastasize, the threat of *disneyfication* grows under the frail guise of multiculturalism. Stripping a locality of its cultural inheritance, this term refers to the process in which a place undergoes urban transformation according to Disney standards, ultimately rendering it a diluted version of its original. The theme park has, in some respect, become a model for both urban and commercial development and within no time cities will mirror the Disney’s Epoch Center. Shopping malls, food chains and reconstructed city centers are all evidence of this societal impulse towards escapism and consumerism. Yet from this “relentless commercialization of culture connected with the Disney Empire” (Huysen 2) a

contradiction emerges, as the democratic aspirations of a society along with its cultural inheritance are lost to corporate globalization. The more districts of a metropolis surrender to *disneyfication*, “the less unique and special they become. The bland homogeneity that goes with pure commodification erases monopoly advantages” (Harvey 4). Thus, the symbolic capital of an ethnic enclave is self-destructive, as it engenders the economic development that inevitably homogenizes and commodifies it. This unfortunate paradox is evident in ethnic enclaves such as ‘Chinatown’ and ‘Little Italy’, wherein its cultural capital is both responsible and threatened by its urban redevelopment. The generic homogeneity plaguing these districts is ironic in that it was the initial inimitability of the enclave that rendered it a tourist attraction and led to its corporate gentrification. Uprooting its past and exploiting its historical significance and cultural capital, city officials and corporations have commodified and commercialized the very thing that rendered the neighborhoods so unique and, in doing so, destroys it.

The notion that multiculturalism is incompatible with the nation-state is wounded by the pretext that cosmopolitanism is a “dialectic process in which the global and the local do not exist as cultural polarities but as combined and mutually implicating principles” (Beck 17). Yet despite the contention that cosmopolitanism is a

catalyst to integral multiculturalism, the complexities presented by ethnic enclaves undermine the fundamental aspirations of the transnational metropolis. Fostering a separatist impulse, ethnic enclaves are culturally homogenous groups inclined to sequester themselves from the city at large. Furthermore, districts such as 'Chinatown' and 'Little Italy' illustrate how the gentrification of enclaves renders the "commodification of culture" (Wasko 271). The façade constructed by the disneyfication of multicultural districts strips them of authenticity. New York City's subdivision of pride illustrates how multiculturalism can be mosaic and in some instances contrived, diluting intercultural implications of cosmopolitanism.

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## Pide Salonu

Out east on the outskirts of Amsterdam, a Turkish population of immigrants swells. Chain migration, low-income housing and cultural familiarity fuel the growth of this neighborhood situated on the periphery of the city center. In many senses, it is an ethnic enclave insofar as this specific immigrant group concentrates “in a specific spatial location” constituted of “a variety of enterprises serving their own ethnic market” (290 Portes). Many perceive this district as testament to the Turkish community’s unwillingness to integrate, feeding into the discourse that a multicultural society is inimical to a coherent national identity. Regardless, as a communications student I was graced with the experience to live on the fringe of this borough, straddling the intangible walls of this ethnic enclave.

Often frequenting the Turkish market, or Dappermarkt, I found the people incredibly open and kind. An assault on the senses, the market with its bouquet of sights and smells vends practically everything from spices to bike locks. In fact, although I now reside in the West, I still ride all the way across town just to have some of the best Turkish pizza under the sun. You can’t miss the humble *pide salonu* located at the mouth of the market. Selling simply *lahmacun* and *pide*<sup>36</sup>, this small little stand sits at the corner of Dapperstraat. For those unfamiliar the cuisine, *Pide* is a canoe shaped flatbread topped with anything from Turkish sausage to mushrooms or eggs. *Lahmacun*, on the other hand, is made with ground beef, onions, peppers and parsley

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<sup>36</sup> “The term *pide* denotes a large boat-shaped pizza, though these establishments also sell a smaller round type pizza known as *lahmacun*” (330 Kesteloot)

on top of a thin crust. I have eaten it in several places around the world, and often times the dish will shift according to locality.

Merely a modest tent lacing the sidewalk, the place couldn't be more authentic—however I'm hesitant to call it a “take-out restaurant”. Held up by rusty metal rods with a tarp overhead, the makeshift joint looks like it could collapse with a strong wind. The *pide salonu* is run by a Turkish family of immigrants: “wives, sisters and others' help in food preparation” (Ram 50) while the father and son sell the *pide* and *lahmacun* up front. Three women in headscarves crossing three generations crowd behind a wood stove hastily working. It is no wonder why “enclave type approaches tend to stress the importance of family and co-ethnic labor as a means of coping in a competitive market context” (Ram 43), as training is not necessary, trust is inherent and good business is in everyone's best interest. The *pide* is piled up behind a glass counter on top of which crusty condiments rest. I wouldn't go as far to say that the place is dirty, but it could defiantly be cleaner. Yet, despite this, the savory smell will stop you in your tracks and help you turn a blind eye to its questionable sanitation.

Ethnic food vendors such as this one oftentimes “occur in areas of ethnic minority concentrations” in order to “satisfy some need of the immigrant community” (326 Kesteloot). The *pide salonu's* clientele is primarily Turkish, providing the locals with “both a direct link with the eating habits of their country of origin and a social center for people living in relative isolation” (329 Kesteloot). Yet given the “cheap and appetizing fare of the snack bar”, the place is also frequented by non-Turkish customers such as myself as *pide* is “not only exotic: it is also a satisfying and very economical meal” (332 Kesteloot). However, unlike other places vending ethnic cuisine, the food has not been appropriated to satisfy the Western palette. I know this

only through inquiring about its authenticity to an older Turkish woman at the market the other day. She looked up at me, the lines under her eyes revealing her age, and replied, “this is true Turkish, no deceit” in a thick accent while clinging to the *pide* waving it wildly. She spoke very little Dutch and practically no English, but her granddaughter, who stood beside her, explained that she has just arrived to Amsterdam from a village on the outskirts of Istanbul. With that said, I discarded my skepticism and stepped in line behind her.

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## An Intercultural Meal

Living in a city is an inexplicably unique experience, as the global and local dualism of cosmopolitanism renders a safe haven to the transient and intercultural intercourse that takes place everyday. Having been a city dweller since birth, I am no longer fazed by the multicultural nature of my friends, neighbors and fellow strangers. However of all the experiences that sleep in the folds of my memory, one in particular refuses to be forgotten as it was an evening marked by a particularly intriguing clash of cultures. Not too long ago, I threw a potluck and invited a few people from my building. Living in a housing facility catering primarily to international students, I was interested to see what strange and foreign foods the occasion would rake in. Katrina, from upstairs, was barely an acquaintance at the time. I knew little about her, other than the fact that she occasionally vacuumed at 4 o'clock in the morning. Her origins were Lithuanian, and having been to Vilnius several times myself I was anxious to speak to her about it (and maybe also mention the untimely vacuuming). She was the first to arrive bringing along with her a traditional Lithuanian dish called "kucia", which is best described as a kind of oatmeal pudding with sweetened water- absolutely fabulous if ever you are graced with the chance to try it. My neighbor from Poland,

Brozena, brought with her Golabki, which despite meaning “pigeon” in polish, is really just stuffed cabbage. She also brought smoked cheese from her family’s farm. In all honesty, I’ve never tasted anything better, but after having eaten almost half of it I felt a sting of guilt when learning just how long it took her family to produce. My downstairs neighbor Tom, from China, didn’t bring anything at all- I don’t think he understood the nature of the occasion and thus I suppressed the inclination to regard his actions as impolite. Barbara, from Venezuela, came late with a bottle of wine and after one too many glasses starting spouting off about the evils of Chavez: *He may have called Bush a donkey on national television, but his ego does not compensate for his hypocrisy.* Cigarette smoke and languages from all corners of the world filled the room baptized in fluorescent light. Perhaps the most interesting aspect was observing the interaction between a few of my American acquaintances and the other company. Among the first to arrive, they came with potato chips and beer (talk about perpetuating a stereotype, huh!) As the night unfolded and new foreign cuisines graced the table, I noticed they were more hesitant than others to try the exotic dishes and within no time broke off from the party and formed their own click in the corner. When a friend of mine from North African brought with her a traditional Ethiopian dish that she learned as a child from her mother, one of the Americans made the sly remark: *how can Ethiopia have*

*there own food traditions, aren't they all starving over there?* There was an uneasy silence, broken only by the cork popping off a bottle of cheap champagne. Standing as a wall flower in a room crowded with people of countless ethnic and cultural backgrounds, I found myself observing from afar the interaction which was taking place while meanwhile trying to reconcile conflicting concepts of identity within myself. Experiences such as these I must say are few and far between; and for a fleeting moment in the late hours of the night I was struck with the impression that the intercultural gathering almost served as a microcosm of the world at large.

# THE METROPOLIS

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## “New York is Not a Completed City”

As skyscrapers spring up at an alarming rate, the tremendous rapidity of New York City's incessant construction render it an unfinished breeding ground of possibilities. In his work, Le Corbusier unveils the reasons for which he prefers New York to most European cities- particularly Paris. His rationale is rooted in an appreciation for the architecture, infrastructure and cleanliness of New York, not to mention the metropolis' unpredictability. New York, pregnant with prospect, is unique in that it is “a city in the process of becoming. Today it belongs to the world.” (98)

Personified as Janus, the Roman god of beginning, past and future, New York emerges as an epicenter in a crowd of international cities. Yet, “at present, it is like a house-moving, all the furniture in confusion scattered about, unkempt.” (99) It is for this reason that Le Corbusier claims the city has yet to be completed. This volatility, however, leaves the question as to whether it will evolve to be “an ass or a king”(99) unanswered. Perhaps it is this blind anticipation that fuels Le Corbusier's predilection for New York. Paralleling it with Paris, he dissects the disparity between the two and aspires to distinguish what exactly it is about New York that makes it unlike any other city. First off, he comments on its immaculate conditions, asserting that “cleanliness is

a national virtue in America” (99). Moreover, there is a unique *style* to New York’s cleanliness, which baptizes the city with a revived vibe. European cities, he argues, embrace the faithful abrasion of time as if “to prove that they possess an age-old culture” (100). Yet the dust gathered from several centuries, he finds, elicit the impression of negligence. The dilapidated, old buildings lining the streets of European cities are not only waging war against steady decay but are also inefficient in that they fail to fully utilize space. In short, the cities of Europe sprawl out rather than up. The skyscrapers of New York mark a “new event in human history” (99). Salvaging each inch of land, such edifices prove to be a genius means of concentrating the masses. The Soviets pawn off the structures as “capitalist” and in a sense they are.

The architectural movement is incredibly economical, as is the infrastructure of the city. Le Corbusier argues that the labyrinth of tiny cobblestone streets in Paris is backwards and confusing rendering the composition of the city complicated, rather than charming. The avenues ending with magnificent edifices are superfluous and stem from an age-old traditions rooted in the prior appeasement of royalty. The anatomical simplicity of New York, on the other hand, yields a “Euclidean clearness.” (101) Constructed in the vein of a grid, the metropolis is divided by twelve parallel avenues intersected by several hundred streets, all of which at right angles to

one another and numerically named. With such order your “mind is free instead of being given over every minute to the complicated game imposed on it by the puzzle of our European cities.” (100) However, interestingly enough, Le Corbusier refers to this layout as something of the “American way” yet the Romans, Greeks, Egyptians and even the French built many of their cities in a like fashion. The quotation marks perhaps are meant to undermine the statement, as the “American way” is in truth just a cornucopia of countless cultures ☒

## “In a Forest of Symbols”

Marshall Berman feels as if the onslaught of modernity is deracinating the roots of the past, whereas Le Corbusier believes that the aforementioned is indispensable if humanity aspires to progress. To fully understand the reasoning behind each conflicting argument, one must consider the disparity in experiences from which each perspective stems. Marshall Berman's<sup>37</sup> birth in the early 1950's unveils his life laced the dawn and progression of modernity, which perhaps triggered his inclination towards Marxism. Le Corbusier<sup>38</sup>, on the other hand, was an architect born in the late nineteenth century. The repercussions of modernism were unknown to him, as he lived to see only the birth of the movement.

In his article, Marshall Berman illustrates growing up in the Bronx as his neighborhood deteriorated at the hands of Robert Moses. An architectural giant, Moses' was responsible for the construction of the West Side Highway, Grand Central Parkway, the Triborough Bridge and, most notably, the Cross-Bronx Expressway. In response to the implications of such grand endeavors, Berman cites Moses', effectively

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<sup>37</sup> Berman, Marshall, *Adventures in Marxism*, London; New York : Verso, c1999.

<sup>38</sup> Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning*, London, J. Rodker, 1929

exemplifying his cruelty: “there are more houses in the way...more people in the way...when you operate in an over built metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax.” (Robert Moses, Berman 134) Coined as progress, the Cross-Bronx Expressway cut through the neighborhood of Berman’s childhood, shattering the economy and littering the streets with abandoned buildings. Even today the scars have yet to mend, as “rage, despair and violence spread like plagues” (Berman 153) through the decaying district. For Berman, this is not progress. He believes that the paradox of modernity is such that the movement towards ‘urban renewal’ has savagely devastated “the only kind of environment in which modern values can be realized” (Berman 150) and that its very development “has made the modern city itself old-fashioned, obsolete.” (Berman 143)

Le Corbusier, on the other hand, embraces the architectural vision of Moses, which sought “to overawe and overwhelm.” (Berman 142) For him, these “monoliths of steel and cement, devoid of vision or nuance or play” define progress. (Berman 142) He praises, in his text, the architects who “rush in with their heads down; after having worked over the ‘*styles*’ firmly and worthily” (Le Corbusier 99) for they pave the “paths of the modern spirit.” (Le Corbusier 99) Berman, too, admitted at first to having a shred of faith in the modernist movement, as in the late 1930’s, Moses’, at the height of

his career, established parks and edifices which esteemed the masses. He concedes that “the uptown Hudson riverfront, one of Moses’ finest urban landscape, is especially striking when we realize that it was a wasteland of hoboes’ shacks and garbage dumps before he got there.” (Berman 138) Furthermore, neither one can deny “Moses’ projects marked not only a new phase in the modernization of urban space, but a new breakthrough in modernist vision and thought.” (Berman 139) Yet, unfortunately, as the saying goes, *power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely*. After the onslaught of World War II, Moses’ vision was perverted as “ the ‘modern movement’ in architecture and urbanism turned radically against modern romance: they marched to Le Corbusier’s battle cry, ‘we must kill the street.’” (Berman 149) Like a Venus Fly Trap, the perpetual reformation of New York City, to this day, attracts countless. Le Corbusier embraces this incessant progression and curses the ‘urban romance’ that Berman nostalgically reflects upon. In the end, Berman surrenders to the diluted American dream. Helpless, he acknowledges the tragedy of modernity, as progress paves over the past.

## “The Metropolis and Mental Life”

In his essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Georg Simmel dissects the onslaught of metropolitan life and the struggle to preserve one’s individuality. The aforementioned has laced the evolution of man for several centuries. At first distinguished as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the ability to extricate oneself from the oppressive bonds that once plagued civilizations of the past, the shift of collective mindset in the nineteenth century bred the necessity to render oneself indispensable by means of specialization in the economy and society alike. However, in this day and age, Simmel illustrates individuality as one’s facility to sustain their subjective self in the face of life in the metropolis. Such is not an easy feat, as the pressures and sway of society can undoubtedly manipulate one’s character. Georg Simmel aspires to explicate how we as humans have adapted to the incessant stimulus of the metropolitan life.

The pulse of the city compels the masses to build a resistance, or rather an indifference, to the sensory overload of the streets flooded with unpredictability. The sense of urgency roused by the complexities of urban existence triggers an over-stimulation of the nervous system. Moreover, the city gives refuge to an economy

driven by mass-production, consumerism and, of course, money, all of which rely heavily on the “matter-of-fact attitude” (4) stemming from this conditioned indifference. However, this is but a thread in a tapestry of characteristic one must harbor if to live and work within the organized chaos of a metropolis. The stability of a city depends almost entirely on the “punctuality, calculability and exactness” (6) of those who fuel it. Our innate impulsive, irrational nature is thus suppressed out of necessity.

In short, the metropolises have assaulted the senses to the point where the modern man has become unresponsive and reserved in the vain hope of self-preservation, which in turn renders what Simmel refers to as the “blasé attitude” (6). This concentration of calculating minds defined by utter indifference facilitates the effectively and fuels the productivity of the “money economy” (7). In truth, we blindly subsist as pawns in an inter-reliant economic pyramid. Be that as it may, within this immense network of dependencies there is freedom, Simmel asserts, explaining that “social development proceeds at once in two different, yet corresponding directions” (10), as it branches out those in positions of power loose complete control of those who constitute the anatomy of the structure. Unfortunately, despite the brilliance of harboring such freedom in a crowd of possibilities, the reserved nature so

heavily relied upon in the metropolis for self-preservation elicits a lonesome isolation amid a sea of strangers. Without emerging as indispensable, one drowns. Simmel concludes his argument stating that it is not for us to pass judgment, but rather to solely acknowledge this undercurrent of truth that runs beneath the glut of asphalt.

## Eye Contact with Strangers

Georg Zimmel's belief that the "blasé attitude" is a symptom of self-preservation subsist even a hundred years after having made the claim, however due to gender disparities this mentality has evolved in separate yet similar directions. First off, one must acknowledge that Georg Zimmel's argument stems from the perspective of a man at the turn of the twentieth century. Interestingly enough, his perception of the implications a city has on the subjective self sustain, despite the onslaught of modernity. Undeniably, there is a conditioned indifference many adopt in a city which triggers the tunnel vision so heavily relied upon to navigate the streets.

Zimmel justifies in his work, "The Metropolis and the Mental Life," how this mindset is a repercussion of incessant stimulus, what he fails to shed light on, however, is how the experience may differ according to gender. Men are more apt to rely on what Zimmel refers to as the "matter of fact" (4) attitude which fuels the "money economy" with its impersonal embrace towards "social intercourse" (4). This mindset proves indispensable in the financial world, where money "reduces all quality and individuality to the question: how much?" (4) Furthermore the crowd of competition feeds the stipulation for specialization, as it is crucial to seem

indispensable in the economic “arena of struggle.” (17) Women exhibit similar behavioral tendencies, however the reasoning behind their self-preservation is rooted in a skepticism stemming from socialization. The burden of uterus and fragility of femininity necessitates a reserved nature often times disguised as distrust. Unfortunately, such a demeanor elicits an isolation that renders one susceptible to loneliness. This claim comes from personal experiences I myself have had in New York.

As I cut through the streets littered with strangers, I’ve learned to avert my eyes. However, last week I made accidental eye contact with a man standing outside a dry cleaner. I thought little of it, and continued on my way. Four blocks later, he came up behind me, panting, asking where I was going and if he could follow. It took me three more blocks to impress upon him my disinterest. The man’s behavior was inappropriate, but would have been alarming if it were to have happened during the night. This experience unveiled the irony of the human condition. Women, by and large, invest hours into their appearance in hopes of grabbing the interest of others. The unfortunate reality is that females are inclined to view themselves through the eyes of others. Amid a sea of faces, a woman’s desire to draw attention to herself

constructs an interesting paradox. This species of specialization is perhaps rooted in our evolutionary impulse to procreate.

## Potsdamer Platz

Berlin's Potsdamer Platz serves as an example for how the cultural identity of a place can fall victim to the homogeny engendered by multinational corporations. One of the most historically charged places in Berlin, Potsdamer Platz serves not only as a symbol of the city's turbulent past, but also as an emblem of the victory of capitalism's consumer culture. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Platz was an urban wasteland torn between the East and the West. The collapse of the Soviet Union reunited Berlin at this square, in fact the first portion of the wall to go was the section which divided Potsdamer Platz. Seduced by the historic symbolism that was sure to attract tourists, conglomerates such as Sony launched rapid commercial development starting in the early 1990's. As a result, Potsdamer Platz has evolved into a haven of multinational corporations, baptized in fluorescent light and reeking of Western consumerism.

The cultural capital that initially rendered the Platz so priceless is paradoxically responsible for diluting its authenticity. Stripped of its character, this urban transformation denotes *disneyfication*, a word employed to denigrate a society that has succumb to the generic and dull uniformity inspired by corporate globalization. A widespread nostalgia for the former East Berlin, coined by the term *ostalgie*, unveils an

unspoken rejection of the capitalist culture that was embraced seventeen years prior. Disguised as the “American Dream”, conglomerates such as McDonalds, Nike and Coca Cola have homogenized and commodified the cultural identity of the Platz and the city it unites.

## HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF POTSDAMER PLATZ

Taking its name from the Potsdamer Tor, Potsdamer Platz became the center of Berlin in 1838 with the construction of the Potsdamer Bahnhof railway station. (1997: 26). In the first half of the twentieth century, explains Alan Scott, author of *The Limits of Globalization*, civic life flourished in the district. Geographically the center of the city, the Platz was initially intersected by five of Berlin’s busiest avenues (Scott 1997:27). Flooded with people coming from all walks of life, the square came to symbolize the vivacity of the city. However, as a result of allied bombing raids and heavy artillery bombardment in World War II, nearly all the streets and buildings of Potsdamer Platz were left in ruins. The Platz became an urban wasteland subdivided by American, British and Soviet sectors. The Berlin Wall, laced with barbed wire, anti-tank obstacles and watchtowers, cut through its center, making a no man’s land of

what was once the city's center.

In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. Amid the rubble and ruins left behind from the decades of dispute, the end of the Cold War was laced with hope. In the years to follow Berlin's reunification, Potsdamer Platz became Europe's biggest urban development project. The district was divided up into four parts and sold to commercial investors (Scott 1997: 26). It wasn't long before the weeds and debris that accumulated after years of neglect were paved over and great monoliths of glass and steel were erected. Freed from the constraints of the communist regime, many embraced the urban reconstruction generated by capitalism without reservations, believing that better days were to come. Commercialized and replanned, the urban transformation of the Platz was regarded by many as a testament of their independence and a symbol of their reunification. With this rapid redevelopment, Columbia professor Andreas Huyssen argues that "the Germans, like everyone else in the Europe of the Cold War, got Disney" (1998: 1) which at first was "a blast of fresh air from a window opened onto the world" (Huyssen 1998: 1). However, decades later, these American imports were to be viewed by many as cultural imperialism. Yet, the commercial development ensuing the fall of the Wall came about so suddenly that the citizens of Berlin didn't heed notice to the city's cultural decay until the effects of Americanization were unmistakable. The

corporate culture that resulted from this gentrification steamrolled the remnants of the old city center and serve as an example of how quickly multinational corporations colonize places that could yield potential profit.

## MONOPOLY RENT

The *monopoly rent* of Potsdamer Platz is rendered by the symbolic and geographic significance fueling its tourist industry, but it is also culpable in part for Berlin's cultural corrosion in that it triggered the onslaught of the conglomerates. Driven by economic interest, they recognized the district's cultural capital and began heavily investing in its gentrification realizing that its historical importance to Berlin would ultimately manifest as a tourist attraction. The term *monopoly rent* implies that "culture has become a commodity" (Harvey 2002: 1) that can be profited from. David Harvey employs this term to explain why areas in close proximity to a city's center or of historic significance often fall victim to heavy commercialization (Harvey 2002: 2). Sony, the former Daimler-Benz, Asea Brown Boveri, Deutsche Bahn and other companies made a rush to build their headquarters on what they regarded as prime real estate. In the year 2000, the Sony Center opened its international headquarters in

Potsdamer Platz, erecting seven buildings and a light-flooded arena. (Scott 1997: 26)

The Arkaden, American socio-economist Alan Scott asserts, was the next to come (1997:26). Between 1993 and 1998, a completely new quarter arose on the land owned by DaimlerChrysler composed of office buildings, stores, hotels, apartments and restaurants. The shopping and entertainment mecca covers 40,000 square yards and houses over 140 shops and restaurants. (Scott 1997: 27) Where there was once nothing, now lays the Grand Hyatt Berlin, Cinemax, a musical theater, a casino and a sea of tourist.

In less than two decades, Potsdamer Platz has evolved into a haven of consumption. The question of whether this should really to be perceived as progress needs to be addressed. Although for over fifty years the area subsisted as a wasteland, such rapid redevelopment renders an almost opposite extreme, as “the famous hub between East and West Berlin is in great danger of becoming a high-tech mall” (Huysen 1998: 3). McDonalds, Levi, Reebok, KFC and Coke all serve as corporate cohorts spreading the influence of the American “way of life,” which is rooted namely in consumerism. Before long, Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz will lose its architectural, historical and cultural distinctiveness to this excessive development, as it will become yet another victim of Americanization. Amid the clutter of corporate

giants, it will grow increasingly difficult for the Platz to evade the homogenizing implications of this urban transformation.

## OSTALGIA

The widespread *ostalgia* plaguing Berlin unveils an unspoken social grievance for the loss of the city's cultural identity to the gluttony of consumerism and the homogeneity of commercialization. Disappointed with the present circumstances, *ostalgia* afflicts the many who knew the East Berlin of the past. This nostalgic impulse serves as a reminder that the social and political differences dividing Europe prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union still exist. After the fall of the wall, Berlin struggled to reconcile the economic disproportion between the East and West, as the East proved unprepared for the abrupt transition from dictatorship to democracy, command to market economy. Over a decade later, the city has yet to mend its differences in the face of overwhelming commercial development, a fluctuating economy and a society torn apart by conflicting mentalities. Many Berlin citizens consider the commercialization bred by capitalism to be cultural imperialism. The onslaught of American products has penetrated Berlin's society to the point where

German citizens are faced with an identity crisis. In a sense, the panic cultivated by the Western world concerning the Domino Effect ironically proved true, however the dominos fell in the opposite direction- towards capitalism, rather than communism- the consequences of which, some would argue, are no better.

## DISNEYFICATION

As the Americanization of global culture metastasize, the threat of *disneyfication* grows. Stripping a country of its cultural inheritance, this term refers to the process in which a place undergoes urban transformation according to Disney standards, ultimately rendering it a diluted version of its original. The theme park has, in some respect, become a model for both urban and commercial development. Shopping malls, food chains and reconstructed city centers are all evidence of this societal impulse towards escapism and consumerism. Yet from this “relentless commercialization of culture connected with the Disney Empire” (Huysen 1998: 2) a contradiction emerges, as the democratic aspirations of a society along with its cultural inheritance are lost to corporate globalization. The more Europe surrenders to *disneyfication*, David Harvey explains, “the less unique and special it becomes. The

bland homogeneity that goes with pure commodification erases monopoly advantages” (2002:4). Thus, the symbolic capital of a city is self-destructive, as it engenders the economic development that inevitably homogenizes it. The cities of the Western World have, in consequence, become dreadfully generic. This unfortunate paradox is evident in Potsdamer Platz, where its cultural capital of is both responsible and threatened by its urban redevelopment. The generic homogeny plaguing the Platz is ironic in that it was the initial inimitability of the district that rendered it a tourist attraction and led to its corporate gentrification. Uprooting its past and exploiting its historical significance, these companies have commodified and commercialized the very thing that rendered the Platz so unique and, in doing so, destroyed it.

## CULTURAL HOMOGENY

The broader social implications of this cultural homogeny suggest that corporations are culpable in part for the loss of non-replicable cultures. The uniqueness, originality and authenticity of innumerable cities have been lost to strip malls littered with fast food eateries and trademark brands. Baseball caps, blue jeans and Nikes sneakers have now become the uniform for teenagers around the world,

from Krakow to Santiago. What's worst, political journalist Ciochetto exclaims, is that many companies consciously use their "products to change the cultural values of consumers" (2006) employing the *American Dream* as a marketing strategy. Thinly veiled by this disguise, McDonalds, Coca Cola, Starbucks and Levi along with a string of other corporate giants have successfully infiltrated countless countries around the world. Spawned by capitalism, these conglomerates have proven to have the faculty to dilute the cultural inheritance of a place. The Western myths of "affluence, strength, freedom, individualism and opportunity have been some of the most seductive ideas of the twentieth century, and these ideas have been transposed onto these all-American products" (Ciochetto 2006: 31). Blindly, we consume unaware of the role we play in feeding these massive corporations.

## MULTI-NATIONAL CORPORATIONS

The plethora of food and clothing chains lacing our malls and crowding our cities are, despite the multiplicity of trademarks, owned and operated by just a few corporate giants. The implications of this shed light on the unsettling possibility that this economic globalization and cultural homogeny has been executed by only a

handful of powerful companies. The strength and wealth of these mega-corporations is evident upon acknowledging some of the sale statistics compiled by socio-economist Norena Hertz for her work, *The Silent Takeover*. Together, General Motors and Ford turn a profit “greater than the gross domestic profit of the whole of sub-Saharan Africa” (2001: 304). Even more alarming, “Wal-Mart now has a turnover higher than the revenues of most of the states of Eastern Europe” (Hertz 2001: 304). It is nearly incomprehensible to grasp how so money and power has fallen into the hands of so few.

These multinational corporations are a product of American capitalism, as the United States fosters the only economic system conducive enough to spawn companies of such enormous wealth and unbalanced power. In part, their growth is a result of the competition innate to capitalism, as it triggers oftentimes the centralization of companies. Microsoft, Murdoch and Virgin all serve as examples for how companies over the course of the past several decades have evolved into inexorable economic powers. In fact, “of the world's 100 largest economies, 51 are now corporations, only 49 are nation-states” (Hertz 2001: 304). Even more unsettling, seventy percent of the world trade is controlled by less than hundred large companies- a majority of which is rooted in North America (Ciochetto 2006: 32). In an age when

corporations have so much control on the global field, power is kept in the few.

Disguising itself behind a sea of trademarks, these corporate giants mislead you to believe that their product is a manifestation of the American dream, while profiting off your needless and blind consumption.

## CONCLUSION

The cultural homogeny and disneyfication plaguing Potsdamer Platz unveils the implications of corporate globalization. The historical significance of Potsdamer Platz after the fall of a Berlin Wall lent it an unparalleled cultural capital that in turn rendered it an indisputable tourist attraction. Given that culture is commodity in an age of global homogeny, the *monopoly rent* of the district caught the eye of countless corporations whose aspirations to turn a profit inspired their investment in its gentification. After more than a decade of urban transformation, Potsdamer Platz has become a haven of consumption. The *disneyfication* of the district renders an unfortunate paradox, as multinational corporations have diluted the authenticity of the historic site. The widespread sentiment of *ostalgie* serves as testament of the people of Berlin's discontent with the homogenous repercussions capitalism has had on their

culture. This dull homogeny rendered by the corporate gentrification and *disneyfication* of Potsdamer Platz is just one example of how the Americanization of global culture has infiltrated city after city by means of multinational corporations.

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## Love Match

Rambo proved to be widely successful in Asia. Throughout the continent, people flooded into the theaters night after night, some paying the “equivalent of two month salary for their seat” (3). Pico Iyer, author of the essay “Love Match”, justifies this cinematic victory as a retaliation for America’s military defeat out East. In other words, the film succeeded where the Army failed. Yet, one could argue that this sneaky mechanism of cultural imperialism at the hands of the United States has social implications far more devastating. Arthur Koestler, a writer referred to by Iyer, perceives this Americanizing mass culture as “a form of mass suicide”. As the transnational flow of mainstream media and technological advancements facilitate the exportation of American hegemonic ideologies disguised as the “American Dream”, the threat of ‘generica’ becomes increasingly real. Pico Iyer presents an interesting point when he admitted that in going to Asia he “hoped to discover which America got through to the other side of the world, and which got lost in translation” (5). Furthermore, with Hollywood films laced with sex and violence, how was the West perceived in the East? Is it possible to define what exactly was so seductive about

Western media? Questions with splintered answers that merely reinforce the complexities of the initial inquiry.

In tandem to the cultural transgression of mass media images, the onslaught of Western tourist into the East fueled the steady encroachment of cultural imperialism. The repercussions of this growing tourist trend mustn't be overlooked. "In 1985, many Asians considered the single great import from the West, after Rambo, to be AIDS" (6). Despite this, the ideals lacking what it meant to be an American ("wealthy and free") was and still is to a certain extent coveted. However, considering the fact that Japan, India and China are among some of the oldest civilizations gracing our planet at present, it seems paradoxical that they would look to the West in an act of cultural mimesis. The facility at which the media transgresses cultural borders results in having the ideals of the Western world exposed to a once isolated small rural village in the foothills of Nepal- rendering arguably discontent where there was once none. However, Pico Iyer brings up an interesting point in contrary, claiming "an imperial arrogance underlines the very assumption that of the developing world should be happier without the TVs and motorbikes that we find so indispensable ourselves" (14). From a post-structuralist point of view, it is the power structure that determines what is best for the indigenous, poor and under-privileged- yet the media corrupts

ignorance bliss and implants materialistic aspirations in the heads of the have-nots. Needless to say, the complexities of globalization at the hands of mass media are as culturally deep as they are spatially vast.

On a personal level, I was able to connect with Pico Iyer's narrative of his experiences abroad as an American. I've bargained for saffron in the spice market of Budapest, trekked through the Himalayas, stood at the edge of the world in Patagonia and watched the sunset bleed into the horizon as bodies burned on the ghats of Varanasi. Traveling renders an unparalleled education. Beautiful and grotesque, this world has revealed both sides to me. Over the course of the past decade however, America has lost much of its respect as a nation on the global stage. This unfortunate turn of events was triggered namely by poor political decisions laced with ulterior motives by that power that be. But as the saying goes, *power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely*. Once again, one observes from afar, from the images on the media and headlines in the newspaper, America's bombs prove far less effective than our popular culture. Coveting the status of a world citizen, I strive to construct my identity not by the nation from which I came but from my collective experiences abroad. Yet, more often than not, it's easier to say I'm from Canada. However, I must admit I always find it amusing to observe how effortlessly many will criticize America all the

while sporting Nike shoes, smoking a Marlboro cig, drinking Coke Cola, listening to Bob Dylan, wearing the Gap and standing on line at a McDonalds. I suppose cultural imperialism behaves in a sneakier <sup>39</sup>fashion.

## Arjun Appadurai's "Archive and Aspiration"

In his article "Archive and Aspiration", sociologist Arjun Appadurai argues that in the age of post-modernity a "Cartesian gap" marks the disparity between desire, memory, the "locus of memory and its social location" (14). The act of archiving is a result of the societal impulse to preserve the residue of the past left inadvertently behind by those lacing mankind's history. Furthermore, there seems to be a desire to cement a coherent collective memory amongst the masses that fuels the tradition of archiving and reinforces an overarching sense of identity. UNESCO's incessant attempt to preserve historical monuments testifies to mankind's need to remember and desire to recognize the roots from which a civilization grew. However, Foucault's post-structural approach undermines the aforementioned assumption and presented the argument that the memories and archives that have overcome the test of time survived not by chance but rather as a result of the power structure. This shift suggests that archives emerge from a collective "aspiration rather than memory" (16). In accord with Arjun Appadurai's argument, I perceive the truth to be somewhere in between and that in today's world archives are constructed on the amalgamation of desire and memory.

This sociological shift was namely triggered by, in my opinion, the technological evolution that has brought contemporary communication to the advance state it's at presently. The onslaught of technological developments has led the twenty-first century into an age of infinite possibilities that shape and redefine McLuhan ever growing 'global village' in inexplicable and unpredictable ways. Over the course of a decade, there has been a sudden and profound proliferation in virtual communities and online chat rooms. All over the world, from Bangkok to the flatland, from the hilltops of the Himalayas to the sleazy strip of Sunset Boulevard, people are increasingly interconnected on a global scale via virtual means. Communities are no longer hinged on locality, but rather collective interests or/and ones sense of identity. This socio-technological phenomenon complicates that notion of collective memory. Whereas "natural social collectivities build collectivities out of memory, these virtual communities build memories out of collectivity" (17). Thus, their collective sense of identity is derived from a constructed memory of a past built on desire and imagination.

The transnational flow of media in tandem to the proliferation of technological advancements such as the Internet and interactive cyber communities has created a space wherein a mass of people construct fabricated realities rooted in collective

desire. The flow of migrants, which Arjun Appadurai coins as *ethnoscapes* in his work “Modernity at Large,” has rendered an even more perplexing social phenomenon. The intercourse of *mediascapes* and *ethnoscapes* has led to what Benedict Anderson famously termed as “imagined communities”. The mass media has not only served as a catalyst to the exportation of the false realities that those in developing country covet to have, but also has the facility to rewrite memories and history. Globalization has rendered the past present in different localities. With no memory or archive to draw upon, migrant communities- informed by the media- construct the social narratives of their past. These diasporic, refugee and migrant communities share collective stories of loss. Their notion of identity is split between routes and roots, so in the aspiration to fill the void, migrants will rely on the media to make sense of their disjunctive narrative.

## Cinematic Essentialism, Social Hegemony & Walt Disney's 'Aladdin'

Walt Disney Picture's naturalization of stereotypes cements a hegemonic hierarchy that fuels the globalization of capitalism and projects political propaganda. Although quintessential of American popular culture, Disney's transgression of borders is facilitated and metastasized by the multi-linguistic nature of animation. Focusing primarily on Walt Disney's *Aladdin*, I intend to dissect the manner in which visual metaphors and anthropomorphism are employed to appropriate cultural codes and perpetuate stereotypes. The animation's reproduction of "harmless" yet distorted ethnic representations is disguised behind a veil of ideological innocence. *Aladdin's* cinematic essentialism not only denigrates democratic solidarity, but supports the socioeconomic interests of the power that be. As the world at large wholeheartedly and naively embraces the ideals and values engendered and exported by the multi-national media conglomerate, the spectators subconsciously succumb to the overt racism, political propaganda and cloaked dogmas of capitalism that permeates the beloved pictures, rendering its audiences hostage to the hegemonic influence of the West.

The threat of Walt Disney's *Aladdin* lies in the facility with which the multinational corporation transgresses cultural boundaries. The term *mediascapes* is a word coined by Arjun Appadurai to describe not only the distribution of information around the world via the media, but also the "images of the world created by the media" (Appadurai 34). This idea serves to explicate the unpredictable transnational flow of media text across the borders of countless countries albeit their cultural diversity. The fabricated narratives and visual repertoires of foreign films provide "strips of reality" (Appadurai 35) out of which a sea of disillusioned spectators can shape "imagined lives". This transgression of borders and cinematic construction of fantastical realities is definitive of Disney animations, as Mickey Mouse proves as iconic an image as Jesus. The multi-national corporation's pervasive presence on the global stage sheds light on the fact that even outside the context of American popular culture the seductive nature of its films lures an international audience. Disney's ability to cross cultural boundaries with a greater facility than other forms of communication can be attributed to the multi-linguistic nature of animation, which maintains its meaning regardless of whether having been dubbed or fitted with subtitles. Walt Disney himself admitted that "of all of our inventions for mass communication, pictures still speak the most universally understood language."

The global onslaught of the multinational Disney Corporation threatens however to render Western cultural imperialism, as films such as *Aladdin* are infused with hegemonic views concerning capitalism and the racial superiority of the Protestant elite. Furthermore, “the farther the audience is away from the direct experience...the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds” (Appadurai 35), blurring the “lines between the realistic and fictional landscapes” (Appadurai 35). Through its mediation of images, Disney constructs a skewed social hierarchy rooted in racial superiority wherein its spectators subconsciously come to understand their place in relation to the “Other”. Hence, the “images involve many complicated inflections, depending on...their *audience* (local, national, or transnational), and the *interest* of those who own and control them” (Appadurai 35). In the case of Walt Disney, its audience is both national *and* transnational, while its prerogative stems from its own self-interest to promote corporate culture, a hegemonic hierarchy and political propaganda.

Another term that can be employed to better understand the threat of Disney is *Ideoscapes*, which Arjun Appadurai defines as the political “concatenation of images” (Appadurai 36). These visual representations relate to the ideologies of the state, serving in the interest of the predominant political and economic power. In

Palestine, a clone of the iconic Mickey Mouse preaches Islamic fundamentalism on *Hamas TV*, urging the Palestinian youth to take up arms against the Israelis.

Subliminally conditioning the general public, this form of media is infused with propaganda and hegemonic views. Disney animations in the West, disguised by their innocuous nature, promote a doctrine supportive of consumerism, capitalism and racial superiority. Failing to address the importance of social responsibility, equality and social justice, Disney's feature films defend an anti-social hyper-individualism that is at odds with democratic theory. Furthermore, the animation's ethnic essentialism constructs a reality wherein human rights and equality prove incapable of transcending the segregating legacies of race.

One of the few American films to feature an Arab protagonist, Walt Disney's *Aladdin* advocates a doctrine supportive of capitalism, egocentricity and consumerism. Below the surface of this seemingly charming animation runs an ideology void of democratic benevolence. At the start of the film, Aladdin is portrayed as a poor street urchin, however he lives above the streets of Agrabah where from his window he is level with the sultan's palace. This seemingly inconsequential detail constructs a visual metaphor that suggests Aladdin's social equality with the elite. Upon unearthing the magic lamp and genie within, Aladdin doesn't hesitate to use the three wishes in

his own self-interest. Rather than feed the starving children wasting away on the streets of Agrabah or help the poor and dying, Aladdin wishes for expensive garments and material goods to impress Princess Jasmine with. Thus, Aladdin's social mobility relies essentially on greed, materialism and selfishly catering to his own needs: a mentality indicative of the avaricious appetite unleashed by the market economy.

Walt Disney's hyper mobility consequently facilitates the widespread transmission of capitalistic views infusing films like *Aladdin*. However, what proves even more harmful is the animated picture's cinematic essentialism. Depicting the Arab world as backwards and irrational, the film's distorted ethnic representations fuel the western world's fear of alterity and perpetuates dangerous stereotypes. Defined as the act of imposing assumed characteristics on an individual based on their race, gender or class (etc.), stereotypes are sweeping generalizations that "contain an evaluation that justifies ethnic differences" (Seiter 16). These simplifications and absurd exaggerations are culpable for breeding blind hatred. Upon dissecting several of the animations produced by Disney in the past few decades, it becomes evident that films like *Aladdin* indisputably "reproduce ethnic stereotypes" (McMichael 67). The danger of these racial representations lies in the threat of essentialism, which "reduces a complex variety of portrayals to a limited set of reified formulae" (Shohat & Stam 199).

In its wake, essentialism engenders an ahistoric perception that is “static” and thus neglects the “instability of the stereotypes” (Shohat & Stam 199). Therefore behind these racial representations “lies a history that relates both to commonsense understandings of society and to economic determinants” (Seiter 24). By and large, the stereotypes delineated by Walt Disney are swayed by the contemporary socioeconomic circumstances plaguing the country. By lending human characteristics to nonhuman beings via anthropomorphism, Disney can attach certain attributes to animals in order to safely render ethnic stereotypes. For example, to momentarily stray from the analysis of *Aladdin*, in *The Lion King*, the noble King Mufasa has a British accent, whereas the malicious hyenas speak with strong Spanish accents. This anthropomorphic ethnic essentialism conditions its audience to subconsciously equate the Spanish tongue with devious behavior, perpetuating a menacing stereotype of Mexicans whose presence in the States was and still is perceived as a strain on the economy. Thus it is important to scrutinize Disney animations through a lens that puts into consideration the hegemonic motivations and political interest behind its illustrations.

The use of ethnic stereotypes as a “strategy for constructing a mythic other to be relied on for purposes of war, imperialism, national defense and protectionism” (Chow

59) is intrinsic to the operative tactics of political regimes. The pervasive influence of these economically and politically prescribed stereotypes not only proves that they are “cliché, unchanging forms but also- and much more importantly- that stereotypes are capable of engendering realities that don’t exist” (Chow 59). These distorted representations of race, gender and class are constructed and transmitted by a powerful minority in order to protect the status quo. Thus it is imprudent to overlook the “relationship of stereotypes to the legitimate social power” (Seiter 24). The social functionality of the aforementioned demonstrates “that they are not an error of perception but rather a form of social control” (Shohat & Stam 199). Therefore, in considering the nature and origin of an ethnic stereotype, it is crucial to question, “who controls and defines them,” (Dyer in Chow 60) and whose interests are served by their perpetuation.

A pervasive theme frequenting Disney films is the Manichean allegory of good against evil, which is oftentimes employed to cast certain ethnicities in a negative light in order to back a hegemonic agenda. During the Bush and Reagan regimes, the “portrayals of its enemies drew on the ‘Manichean allegories’ of colonization” rendering Saddam Hussein as an instable lunatic through “the intertextual memory of Muslim fanatics and Arab assassins” (Shohat & Stam 201). First released shortly after

the Gulf War in 1992, *Aladdin* assumes the age-old narrative construction of good and evil drawing on ethnic essentialism to underpin the political propaganda of the Bush administration. Although the film is set in the Middle East, only the villainous characters speak Arabic, whereas Aladdin and Princess Jasmine, despite their alleged Arab ethnicity, assume American identities. Portraying the populace of the Middle East as violent and deceitful people, the Arabic women are depicted as veiled objects of oppression while the men are delineated as bearded barbarians. Cultural familiarity with such stereotypes leads one to perceive political issues in a vein that could be traced to individual ethics, unleashing the inclination to judge a person based on their race, religion or nationality.

*Aladdin's* cinematic essentialism elicits disturbing renderings that essentialize, appropriate, objectify and construct the exotic "Other". This discursive construction laces countless Disney animations, particularly *Aladdin*. Edward Said states that all "too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent; it has regularly seemed otherwise to me, and certainly my study of *Orientalism* has convinced me ... that society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together" (Said 27). Said's discourse on *Orientalism* argues that the Western notion of the East as a despotic haven of eunuchs in turbans stems

from the Occidental's desire to control and manipulate the unknown. Convinced that the Orient is incapable of defining itself, the Occident regards the East as a locale clearly in need of Western subjectivity. The United States thus posit itself in opposition to the Middle East, rendering the Orient as a negative inversion of the Occident and thus justifying the necessity of Western emancipation and reconstruction.

The discourse on *Orientalism* unveils how Western society's slanted perception of the East is fueled by a hegemonic agenda mediated by the mass media. Bringing "democracy" to the Middle East serves in Disney's interest as consumerism, capitalism and multinational corporations trail at the heels of "freedom". Recognizing the profitable possibilities in the Mid East, Disney CEO Michael Eisner, like the Bush administration, juxtaposes the West with the despotic Orient to promote egalitarian ideals of freedom and autonomy. In fact, the original version of Aladdin was initially set in the "fictitious" city of Baghdad (Giroux 29). However as the dust of Gulf War had yet to settle, the name was changed to Aghrabah, which in Arabic translates as "most strange." In spite of this revision, the political motivation fueling this film's production is but thinly veiled. The animation's prejudicial portrayal of the Arab world serves as nationalistic propaganda to justify a war needlessly waged by the

United States, disguising the imperialistic encroachment as a holy war as “religion sounds so absolute, it can be used as a translation for other, more relative, forms of conflict” (Baumann 23).

Visually manipulated to empower hegemonic views, *Aladdin's* construction of the Orient not only depicts the Arabs as a backwards people, but also represents the Middle East as an anarchistic civilization where cobras are lured from baskets and law has no place other than to keep women in theirs. For instance, Princess Jasmine, whose attire resembles that of a belly dancer's, is required by law to marry a man selected by her father, the Sultan of Agrabah. Her objection is silenced by his harsh reply: “you are not free to make your own choices”. The film also sheds light on the injustice of the Quranic laws that threaten to cut off Aladdin's hand for stealing a piece of bread to survive. Even the opening song cast the Arab world as a locality of barbarianism: “*Oh, I come from a land, From a faraway place, Where the caravan camels roam, Where they cut off your ear If they don't like your face, It's Barbaric, but hey, it's home.*” Furthermore, the animation's geographic depiction of the region is far from accurate as it essentializes the Middle East as a vast desert, audaciously neglecting to recognize the diverse topography of the expansive territory.

The danger of *Aladdin* lays not only in the political propaganda and ethnic essentialism it projects, but more so in the misconception that the animated picture is socially harmless. As an audience, we are readily “inclined to view a cartoon film as an uncomplicated representation of human ideas” (Moellenhoff 116). Instead of stereotypes, the skewed representations of the Arabic populace are pawned off as caricatures. The threat of Disney is rooted in this distinction. Rey Chow illustrates the disparity, stating that “caricatures, by virtue of being understood definitively as a distorted grotesque imitation, can be safely relegated to the category of the unrealistic and be dismissed as a mere representation,” whereas stereotypes carry the “unavoidable implications of realpolitik” (Chow 72). It is within the safe haven of animation that Disney aggressively employs the “visually and epistemologically pronounced effect of transgression whose power is, significantly, nonverbal” (Chow 81).

Walt Disney films are even more disturbingly aimed towards an audience constituted primarily of children. Thus, at an early age certain preconceived notions regarding race and class are subliminally planted via “harmless” animations into the heads of the generations to come. Disney’s distorted ethnic renderings reinforce the naturalization of specified stereotypes backed by ulterior hegemonic motives and rooted in political interest. For instance, the hero of the animation, *Aladdin*, is drawn

with light skin and anglicized facial features. Although the audience is led to believe Aladdin is Arab, he speaks with an American accent. The archenemy Jafar, portrayed as having dark skin and exaggerated Arab features, serves as a stark contrast with a large pointed nose, long beard and sunken eyes. More interesting is the fact that unlike the protagonist of the visual narrative, Jafar speaks with a thick Arab accent. The benevolent Sultan of Agrabah, on the other hand, is illustrated with a white beard, rosy rounded cheeks, kind eyes and big belly. In truth, the king would practically personify Saint Nick if it weren't for the British accent with which he speaks despite his alleged Arab roots. His beloved daughter, Princess Jasmine, the heroine of the story, is also depicted without the "characteristic" Arab nose and, like Aladdin, inhabits an American identity.

Upon closer scrutiny of the Manichean allegory and ethnic essentialism that thread through the visual narrative of Walt Disney's *Aladdin*, it's difficult to deny the hegemonic ideologies and political propaganda that run below the surface of its storyline, especially given that its release paralleled the geopolitical war waged in the Middle East. To take a step back and put on a wider lens, the writing on the wall is explicit. The Americanized Aladdin along with the British Sultan of Agrabah must save Princess Jasmine, who as a female symbolizes the nation. Ironically, the threat

stems from the vizier Jafar whose nefarious conspiracy to bring the world to its knees is advised by an idiotic parrot. Furthermore, the vizier's visual delineation renders a shameful stereotype which is propped up as an archetype of the Arab world. As the film unfolds it becomes evident that the city of Agrabah can only return to the order in which it belongs once the threat of Jafar is extinguished.

Infused with hegemonic views, the Disney animation *Aladdin* plays a prominent role in the naturalization of stereotypes, globalization of capitalism and promotion of political propaganda. Due to the multi-linguistic nature of animation, Disney films effortlessly breach cultural boundaries facilitating the export of perverse values veiled by ideological innocence. At odds with democratic theory, Disney's transnational media flow threatens to spread the Western hegemonic views projected by films such as *Aladdin*. Furthermore, the animation's cinematic essentialism is not only ahistoric and moralistic, but supports a social hierarchy rooted in racial superiority. Employing the age-old Manichean allegory, *Aladdin's* objectification and appropriation of the Arab world is indisputably fueled by the political agenda of the powers that be. But perhaps the greatest danger of this animation lies namely in the perception that it is socially harmless: as we have seen however, this could not be farther from the truth.

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# PSYCHOANALYSIS

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## The Oedipus Complex

My argument aims to unveil how Jacque Lacan's re-interpretation of Sigmund Freud's (in)famous Oedipus Complex strips it of its sexist implication and repositioned the theory as a cornerstone of contemporary feminist theory. Chastised for his allegedly chauvinistic views, Freud once said, "throughout history, people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity" and although men will never escape contemplating this "problem" for "those of you who are women this will not apply - you are yourselves the problem" (Sigmund Freud). Accusations of Freud's sexist slant can be traced to this statement's misogynous implications. Justifying women's inferiority through the biological absence of the male sex organ, Sigmund Freud employs the Oedipus Complex to underpin his hypothesis. For Freud, the psychological development of young girls heavily relies on the alleged "penis envy" she exhibits as a child, explicating her unconscious consent later in life to the male-dominated social system. Within the discourse of psychoanalysis sexual difference is not innate, and thus sexuality and gender roles are acquired through socialization. The theories Sigmund Freud and Jacque Lacan overlap concerning the fear of castration and penis envy, both intrinsic elements to the Oedipal period.

However, their explanations of how a child determines its sexual position in relation to the 'other' differ quite a bit. Freud claims that a young boy realizes his sexual position through successful passage through the Oedipal period, which happens only once his lust for his mother is extinguished by a fear of castration and identification with his father- this paradigm is inversely applicable to the experience of a female. However, Lacan regards this identification as Symbolic and thus a child's sexual position is actually rendered by its relationship with what Lacan has coined as the "phallus", an unattainable ideal manifested in the Symbolic Other.

The Oedipus Complex retrieves its name from the ancient Greek legend of the notorious King Oedipus, who kills his father and marries his mother- an act of incestuous violence that an oracle early in his life predicted he would commit. Terrified, he does everything in his power to escape his destiny, yet inevitably fails and in response tears his eyes out, blinding himself the horrid deeds he had carried out. Freud appropriates the Greek Legend of King Oedipus to explicate the perverse bond parents and children of the opposite sex participate in. Lacing the early developmental years of children, successful passage through the "Oedipal period" is determined by whether the threat of castration triggers the formation of a child's super-ego and thus entrance into the ensuing "latency period". These developmental

stages all have inexplicable and varying impacts on the psychological growth of an individual. Lacan's "point of view consists simply in seeing the Oedipus Complex as the pivot of humanization, as a transition from the natural register of life to a cultural register of group exchange and therefore of laws, symbols and organizations" (Lemaire 92). However, Sigmund Freud presents the paradox that due to the absence of a penis, the threat of castration does not traumatize a young girl to the same extent as her counterpart and thus the formation of the super-ego is frail. Regarding women in the vein of a mutilated male, Freud claims that this "deformity" or "lack" of a penis serves as "scientific" justification of women's inferiority to men. This 'penis envy', as Freud called it, has a crucial impact on a woman's psychological development and furthermore has fueled the debate on gender inequality. It is this distinction that fuels the sexist discourse against psychoanalysis.

According to Freud, the Oedipus Complex for a boy ensues his infantile sexuality wherein he experiences omnipotent fantasies of his penis. Furthermore, this fantasy emerges in tandem to the narcissist illusion that he is the only object of his mother's love. He "regards his mother as his own property." (Freud 1) This delusion is manifested in an active desire to be possessed and filled by the body of the Other. This incestuous desire can be translated as a fantasy of what Freud coins as *Das Ding*.

However, the sight of a naked woman shatters this blissful naivety. In effect, the child who was “so proud of his possession of a penis, has a view of the genital region of a little girl, and cannot help being convinced of the absence of a penis in a creature who is so like himself. With this, the loss of his own penis becomes imaginable, and the threat of castration takes its deferred effect.” (Freud 2). The female genitalia thus triggers a deep fear that, at the hands of the father (or the Other), he will be “castrated”. In summation, the “destruction of the Oedipus Complex is brought about by the threat of castration” rendered by “the authority of the father”, which is internalized by the ego, thus forming the nucleus of the super-ego and reinforcing “his prohibition against incest, and so secures the ego from the return of the libidinal object-cathexis.” (Freud 3). This internal trepidation instills a morality that forbids the sexualization of his parents and results in the boy’s abandonment of his infantile sexuality. With his incestuous lust suppressed through socialization, the boy submits to the place of his father and internalizes what Freud refers to as the ‘super-ego’, or in other words, the boy’s conscience. In turn, the child learns to live within the moral confines of society and furthermore the incident reinforces a sexuality that is socially acceptable. According to Freud, the failure to successfully pass through the Oedipal period may result in an inappropriate attachment to the mother later in life and/or

homosexuality.

Young girls also pass through the Oedipal period, yet not to the same traumatic degree as boys. For Freud, “things happen in just the same way with little girls, with the necessary changes: an affectionate attachment to her father, a need to get rid of her mother as superfluous and to take her place” (Freud 24). Although a young girl’s passage through the Oedipus Complex is also laced with the fear of castration, it does not have the same harrowing effect on girls as it does with a boy. At first, a young lady regards her clitoris in the same manner that a young boy perceives his penis. It is only when exposed to the genitals of the opposite sex that she becomes aware of her “deformity”. Freud constructs a paradigm wherein the absence of a penis and the realization of this truth plagues a young girl in her youth, who perceives this void as an inferiority to the opposite sex. In an attempt to justify this lack, a young girl “explains it by assuming that at some earlier date she had possessed an equally large organ and had then lost it by castration” (Freud 3) or that when she grows older, she will acquire just as big an appendage as the boy’s. Ultimately she adopts attributes of the mother and culminates a strong desire for her father, expecting to one day bare his child as compensation for her lack. However, according to Freud, a young girl is spared of the brutal awakening, as it is not a social taboo for a lady to carry on a flirtatious yet

harmless relationship with her father. In other words being “daddy’s girl” can be a life long affair because it isn’t necessarily perceived as inappropriate. Freud claims that due to the benign nature of this experience starves her of reconciling with the social taboo and thus renders a woman morally inferior insofar as her ‘super-ego’ will never be as developed as that of a man.

In the infamous words of Freud: “here the feminist demand for equal rights for the sexes does not take us far, for the morphological distinction is bound to find expression in differences of psychical development. ‘Anatomy is Destiny’, to vary a saying of Napoleon’s” (Freud 3). Many feminists, such as Juliet Mitchell, Nancy Chodorow and Jane Gallop, blame Freud for fueling gender inequality by justifying women’s moral and social inferiority through evidence based on observation rather than scientific fact. The Oedipal vision “exhibits a distinct patriarchal bias: it reduces politics to an activity of fathers and sons while relegating women to the role of passive objects of male desire” (Brunner 1998). Most postmodern feminists perceive Sigmund Freud’s theories as detrimental to socially assumed gender roles. Deconstructing the thesis that a woman’s sexuality is solely rooted in the desire to procreate, feminist Irigaray criticizes Freud for fueling gender inequality in contemporary society. Irigaray asks, “how can we accept that the entire female sexuality is being controlled

by the lack and envy of the penis?" (Irigaray 58) Author of the book "Freudianism: The Misguided Feminism", Shulamith Firestone concedes that Freud's psychoanalytical theories are justified, yet only under the condition that every time Freud employed the word 'penis' the word 'power' should replace it. This is what Jacques Lacan did, using the word 'phallus' to signify authority.

Jacques Lacan reinterprets Freud's view of the Oedipus Complex from a structuralist slant. Conceptually revisiting Freudian theory within a postmodernist framework, Lacan refines psychoanalytical discourse from a linguistic angle. The infuriatingly dense language of Lacan ironically draws from the work of linguist Ferdinand Saussure. Arguing that a subject's only instrument of expression is language, Lacan believes that the unconscious is structured as such. However, the meaning one attaches to their words is in the domain of the 'Other' and cannot be controlled by the subject. Language is thus laced with a certain objectivity and intersubjectivity. In the words of Lacan, "the meaning of a return to Freud is a return to the meaning of Freud" (Lacan 177). However, from Plato we know "sometimes you have to kill your father to preserve your heritage. Sometimes you have to throw away the doctrine to find its 'meaning'" (Borch-Jacobsen 267). Contrary to the beliefs of Freud, Lacan asserts that there is no developmental stages- that the 'Symbolic Order'

is always present and signifiers are moments wherein a child must learn to cope with the 'Other'. For Lacan, "the Oedipus Complex is not a stage like any other in genetic psychology, it is the moment in which the child humanizes itself by becoming aware of the self, the world and the others" (Lemaire 90). Employing Saussurean linguistics to elucidate the complexities of psychological development, Lacan regards the Oedipal paradigm as a 'linguistic transaction'. His reinterpretation of Freud's allegedly phallogocentric theories are applauded by many feminists who claim his work offers a less gender bias framework wherein gender inequality can be dissected and analyzed through a nonsexist lens.

Lacan describes the Oedipus Complex as "the transition from a dual, immediate or mirror relationship proper to the Symbolic, as opposed to the Imaginary" (Lemaire 78). The first reversal takes place during the 'mirror stage', in which the child experiences the alienating identification of seeing its own reflection in the mirror. Blissfully perceiving the outside world through the lens of the 'Imaginary Order', this "self-recognition in the mirror takes place somewhere between the ages of six to eight months" (Lemaire 79). The mirror stage "is the advent of co-anesthetic subjectivity preceded by the feeling that one's own body is in pieces" (Lemaire 81). Crucial to the

formation of the alienated ego, it is in this moment of recognition that the child obtains his first insight of the self. Before the traumatic awakening rendered by the mirror stage, a child imagines that he once had the Phallus, or in other words, had an inseparable union with his mother. For a boy, the mother represents desire. This desire evolves throughout the developmental stages of a child, reaching its peak during the Oedipus Complex. However, for Lacan, it is the Symbolic Order, rather than the Imaginary, that paves the way into the next stage: the Oedipal period.

Jacque Lacan argues the Oedipus period marks a child's introduction into the Symbolic Order. He constructs a paradigm wherein a young boy's passage through the Oedipus Complex can be articulated by three distinct stages. The "first coincides with the mother-child relationship," at which point he wishes to be "the desire of his mother's desire" (Lemaire 82). Yet the child's entrance into the Symbolic Order relies on the second reversal: a repressive break with transcendental idealism. Lacan asserts that the Oedipus Complex needs to be understood as a metaphorical operation that is triggered by the child's realization that the (m)Other's lack of the phallus is a need that he's unable to satisfy. This incestuous lust for his mother is shattered by the realization that the (m)Other's desire gravitates towards the father figure, an attraction he understands as an aspiration to atone for the absence of the phallus. The father

“renders the mother-child fusion impossible by his interdiction and marks the child with a fundamental lack of being” (Lemaire 87). Ensuing this brutal awakening, the child is inflicted with the fantasy of the phallus, the missing signifier that manifests as a desire that cannot be met. Lacan erects a paradigm wherein the phallus (manifested in the paternal metaphor of the father) emerges as unattainable ideals that exist outside the system of signification and language, structuring it accordingly. A child identifies “with the father as he who ‘has’ the phallus” and thus “a child’s identification with the father announces the passing of the Oedipus Complex by way of ‘having’ (and no longer ‘being’)” (Lemaire 83). Lacan coins the word “phallus” as an abstract signifier to symbolize authority, and furthermore “gives the ratio of desire” (Lacan 24), rather than a physical penis. In the dictionary, the phallus has been defined as: the sexually undifferentiated tissue in an embryo that becomes the penis or the clitoris. The Symbolic phallus is the signifier of the signifier that cannot be pronounced but is at the root of our desire. Given that satisfaction is the death of desire, the phallus is repressed on the pretext that it is a signifier that cannot be pronounced and is thus unattainable. However, it is the process of incessantly desiring the phallus that laces our existence.

According to Lacan, when a young boy recognizes that his aspirations to usurp

the place of his father are in vain, he reconciles with this ‘Symbolic castration’ by surrendering to the mastery of his father and begins to emulate him instead. The child then shifts into the third and final stage: “identification with the father and registration of the self through relativation” (Lemaire 83). This idealization and fear of what Lacan defines as the ‘Name of the Father’ is a paternal metaphor Lacan employs to designate not necessarily the father, but rather the signifier, which resides outside the Symbolic Order and serves to stabilize it. “It is the name of the Father that we must recognize as the Symbolic function which identifies his person with the figure of the Law” (Lacan 16). The name of the Father is “a protagonist in the subject’s entry into the order of culture, civilization and language” (Lemaire 85). The child begins to rely on language in order to express its sexual position in relation to the Other. The father is “present only through his law, which is speech, and only insofar as his speech is recognized by the mother does it take on the value of the Law” (Lacan 35). For Lacan, a child only recognizes itself as a subject once it has entered into the ‘Symbolic Order of language’. In effect, the child “follows a dialectic of identifications in which his Ego constitutes itself and in which the ideal of the self takes shape” (Lemaire 87). Ultimately the “Father and son reached an agreement that if the son submitted to castration (the Law of the Father) the Name of the Father will recompense him by

allowing him to adopt the Father's name and marry another woman. The son would then be recognized as a speaking subject, a member of the Symbolic community, and thereby regain his wholeness" (Schroeder 83). It is at this moment in psychological development that the boy enters into the Symbolic Order.

In regards to the opposite sex, Lacan adapts an infantile interpretation of femininity. The difference between the male and female experience during their passage through the Oedipal period is rooted in the distinction that a boy desires to possess, whereas a girl desires to be possessed. Furthermore, the androgynous nature of the term 'phallus' erects a two-fold understanding for the word: in one sense it represents the presence of a penis and in the other, as in the case of a woman, it signifies its absence. Thus, the phallus is not only the object of desire but also the subject. Within Lacan's linguistic framework, the Oedipus Complex unveils why a woman's words don't carry the same weight as that of their male counterpart. Lacan's rereading of Freudian theory doesn't justify, but rather elucidates the process in which gender roles are assumed and acted out. For a girl, the Oedipus Complex is a capricious moment wherein lies a dual desire and disappointment. Lacan's account of a young girl's experience is in accord with that of Freud, yet deviates slightly. At first, a young girl fantasizes of the omnipotence of a phallus. She desires to possess the body

of the (m)Other. However, upon the brutal awakening brought on by the sight of a boy's naked body, she is overwhelmed by both loss and envy. She imagines that she has been deprived of a pleasure she once thought she had. This envy causes her to distance herself from her mother out of disappointment, and in tandem fuels the desire to be possessed by her father. The inevitable rejection by her father renders the girl's loss of infantile sexuality and results in both a young girl's morality and femininity learned by example from her mother. Ultimately she learns to identify with both her mother and her father, as she does in the paradigm constructed by Freud.

Lacan believes that a young girl, upon recognizing the innate absence of a phallus, "comes to accept, not without resistance, her socially designated role as subordinate to the possessor of the phallus, and through her acceptance, she comes to occupy the passive, dependent position expected of women in patriarchy" (Grosz 69). According to Lacan, women perceive themselves not only as objects of exchange, but also as objects of desire. This objectification, Lacan explains, starves women of equal rights, rendering her subordinate to the position of men, who through the possession of the phallus take on the role of the "speaking subject". In accordance with Freud, he claims that only young boys, due to their possession of a penis, are actually capable of entering into the Symbolic Order, whereas girls are stranded in the Imaginary Order.

The possession of a phallus lends a Symbolic capital to men and explicates gender inequality in society. Often a boy, due to his conflation of his penis with the phallus, elevates himself to a position of power and authority. Lacan describes gender inequality through these terms. His conceptualization of sexuality, psychological development and the Oedipus Complex offer a futile terrain wherein the Complexities of gender relations can be explored.

Lacan's work can be extrapolated to the contemporary discourse on feminism. In fact, many feminists claim that "Lacan was not Freudian; that, under cover of Freudianism, he constructed a completely original theory" (Borch-Jacobsen 267). Lacan's rereading of the Freudian discourse appropriates his sexist slant to explicate rather than justify gender roles in postmodern society. Inspired by Lacan's theory of 'gender' being a fictional construction, feminist Judith Butler conceptualizes that a person is innately ungendered yet through social conditioning and social recognition (Hegel) it becomes a property. This non-metaphysical slant serves as a cornerstone in feminist theory in that it constructs a relational understanding of gender as "the point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations." (Butler). Informed by Lacan, the discourse avers that gender "operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon

that it anticipates” (Butler 94). In other words, sex is an effect of the discourse on the body, gender is an effect of the discourse on sex and lastly sexuality is an effect of a gendered discourse on sex. “Neo-Freudianism is especially relevant because it evolved from the first conflict between feminist principles and Freudian tenets” (Buhle 10).

Judith Butler, among many other postmodernist feminists, extrapolates Lacan’s reinterpretation of Freud to illustrate the mechanisms in which the internalization of social norms fabricates one’s gender. The concept of the ‘self’ as a fictional construction is employed by feminist as a catalysis to their struggle for equal rights. Providing explanation rather than justification, Jacques Lacan’s reinterpretation of Sigmund Freud’s Oedipus Complex has repositioned psychoanalysis within the feminist discourse, however despite this, gender equality is far from achieved.

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## Gendered Restrooms

It has become such an architectural norm that bathrooms are gendered that the very inquiry undermining their necessity fails to ever arise. What's interesting is that the fifth floor bathroom at Parsons is coed. With its many stalls, men and women pass through all the time. Washing my hands alongside another gentleman afterwards feels, to be completely honest, a little uncomfortable. Agreed this uneasiness is a product of socialization reinforced through repetition. Pardon my crudeness, but it is strange how the act of defecating in a space that isn't gendered invites the possibility of sexual tension or shame.

To frame it within a psychoanalytical discourse, Sigmund Freud extrapolated an individual's psychosexual development to a passage in one's youth from the "oral stage" to that of the anal. He argues that the release of lets say urination is akin to an orgasm. Given the historical specificity of Freud's research and it's role in the proliferation of sex taboos that reinforced sexual repression, it interesting to speculate what part he played in the normativization of gendered bathrooms.