

THE POLITICS OF CONSUMERISM:
**Understanding the Role of
Consumption in the Political Economy**

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**Submitted in Accordance with the Requirements for the Degree
of Master Of Arts in Literary Studies (50%) in the English
Department at the University of Cape Town.**

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November 1998

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this work, or conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not to be attributed to the Centre for Science Development.

I also gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance provided by the Andrew Mellon Foundation.

I also wish to thank my supervisor, Prof. John Noyes, for his academic assistance.

ABSTRACT

Were the social activity that most defines late capitalism to be named, consumption would be nominated as the predominant leisure pastime of the current period. Since the well-being of a society is measured along material co-ordinates, high rates of consumption are taken as signs of an overall prosperity wherein individuals are not only economically empowered, but also endowed with the putative right to express their multifarious subjectivities. Yet the reality of consumption, despite consolidated efforts to assert the contrary, effects a far more degraded picture than the phantasmagorical one that is widely propagated. Often treated as a neutral sphere isolated from a productionist context, consumption is a spectacle which is reflective of, but hides, a subterranean structure of capital accumulation. This dissertation will consequently address the manner in which capitalism has shaped the arena of consumption, exemplified through the changes undergone by the commodity, and argue that consumption is best understood within a framework of the political economy.

The theoretical position adopted in this thesis stands in contradistinction to subjectivist interpretations of consumption which emphasize and celebrate the autonomy of acts of consumption while insubstantially contextualizing them. Existing as the obverse end of the production complex, consumption cannot be considered removed from the violations wreaked by capital in the realm of labour. Because its supporting discourse, that of consumerism, works so effectively at constructing an idealized picture of consumption, it is necessary to uncover its origins in the sphere of production. And although consumption underpins globalist ideology, it is the dispersal of capital's productive

INTRODUCTION

Before its formal theoretical existence had become known to me, the term 'commodity fetishism' seemed an apt means of describing the developing mode of consumer relations in which the cult of the commodity had arisen as its dominant behavioural code. Objects had become the central totems in obsessional acts of consumption, being invested with a value that unduly exceeded their apparent worth. What differentiated these commodities from their counterparts was that the prices they commanded and the desire they inspired in consumers did not appear to be commensurate with their generic forms and functions. Their *raison d'être* was however to be found in the extraneous properties of signification that they had been enriched with, that transformed a pair of sunglasses from being just a protective sheath for the eyes to being *Ray Bans*, a very desirable accessory bearing a name that rings with a definite cachet. That objects were not bought and sold for their functional purpose conflicted with my fundamentalist vision of the commodity, the uses for which were supposed to have been clear and definable. In addition to my conviction that the commodity should fulfill primary needs and not secondary desires, it did not seem to be a worthy enough focus for fetishistic energies. Subsequent philosophical investigations into its evolution have nonetheless shown the issue to be less simple than I had initially thought. Through having had its constitutional aspects examined, the commodity became cast in a somewhat ambiguous light, revealing the contingent nature of use-value and need, concepts which cannot be theorized in isolation from the structure of the political economy.

But the recognition that need is not always fixed and 'pure', that it is a mediated function of a fluctuating *system* of needs, does not really resolve the critique of consumption conspicuously characterised by the compulsive pursuit of status enhancing objects. The growing consumer trend of fixating

on goods with 'hip' labels, in spite of their excessive price-tags and their arguable aesthetic mediocrity, helped to animate my indignation towards the phenomenon, as well as to galvanise an academic inquiry into its dynamics. Yet, for all my critical resistance to buying, and to 'buying into' the elaborate system of needs, I succumbed to the ploys of seduction staged by marketers and advertisers. I had become attuned to the compelling language of consumption, desiring its wares and perceiving its arbitrarily constructed distinctions, like those between non-branded or 'fake' objects, and 'real' ones, the procurement of which left me with a profound, if inexplicable, feeling of satisfaction. Though it was easier to bestow condescension upon other consumers who reflexively followed the logic of fashion, it was more difficult to accommodate my own capitulation to popular habits of consumption, leaving me with the realization that an intellectual awareness of the specious foundations of the order of consumption does not necessarily guarantee one a means of escaping it.

My experience with the designer object is not the sole reason for its exemplary position within this discussion on consumption. The labelled product serves as the ideal metonym for contemporary consumption as it conveys its potentially infinite nature. where the creation of a need can be achieved through the simple ascription of a word and image to an ordinary product. As this happens, levels of consumption rise continuously since new needs are constantly invented. As Lowe (1995:67) says,

late capitalist consumption is the consumption of product characteristics designed to stimulate sales, though claiming to satisfy new needs. Changing product characteristics redefine needs.

Social
+
→ Constructiveness

recovered → These product characteristics are manifested as social and cultural ...
significations, the usage of which designer commodities are almost entirely
dependent upon. Because of their affixed values, labelled products assist in
the development of an understanding of the culture of consumption. Often
employed as insignias of selfhood, the signifying names of 'lifestyle' objects
can be seen to play a role in the modern process of identity formation. As a
result, the ethic of consumption undergoes a simultaneous fortification
because of its embroilment in the sphere of culture.

With reference to the available theory on consumption, Baudrillard's
simulacrum appropriately expresses the boundless proliferation of self-
referential commodities that are disconnected from the concept of need.
Suitably capturing the spectacle of manic production and of consumption in
The Mirror of Production (1975), For a Critique of the Political Economy of
the Sign (1981) and Symbolic Exchange and Death (1993), his writing is
indispensable to any treatment of consumption. Nevertheless, he provides a
naggingly insubstantial framework to the phenomenon, omitting to
contextualize those developments that would explain the precise
metamorphosis of the commodity under capitalism, which Marxian theory
attempts to do. As well as Marx's originating oeuvre, David Harvey's The
Condition of Postmodernity (1989), Neil Smith's Uneven Development (1984)
and Fredric Jameson's Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late
Capitalism (1996) are useful chronicles of capitalist change. For broad
overviews on the different perspectives on consumption, Martyn Lee's
Consumer Culture Reborn (1993), Scott Lash and John Urry's Economies of
Sign and Space (1994), Celia Lury's Consumer Culture (1996) and Donald
Lowe's The Body in Late Capitalist U.S.A. (1995) offer neat profiles of its
variant formulations. Since these texts situate consumption within the context

Sic role

of capitalism, they also appear to offer insights into the phenomenon of globalization. For further reading on this subject, writing by Mike Featherstone, Arif Dirlik, Masao Miyoshi, Mitsihiro Yoshimoto and Immanuel Wallerstein, in different volumes on globalization, can be consulted.

This dissertation is an attempt to develop an understanding of everyday mall scenes -- composed of teenagers wearing *Calvin Klein* T-shirts, *Levi's* jeans and *Nike* shoes -- that does not devolve into a denunciation of localized consumer proclivities. While, to some extent, consumer actions are volitionally executed, they are unquestionably manipulated by the mechanisms of capital which extend beyond the material confines of production. Studies on consumption that stress the creativity and uniqueness of each act of textual reception have tended to ignore the connection between relations of capitalist exchange and consumption in an effort to sidestep the deterministic conclusions that may be derived therefrom. Consumption may be a place saturated with a cornucopia of objects servicing every imaginable need, but it is firmly under the helm of capitalist forces pre-packaging all options that consumers are granted. Chapter One thus argues that consumption is best interpreted as a mimetically representative outcome of capitalist innovation. In this section, the evolution of the commodity will be delineated and followed by a discussion on how capitalism structures the discourse of consumerism to naturalize and maintain the longevity of consumption practices.

The advertisements for designer commodities, the focus of Chapter Two, are used to demonstrate the functioning of this discourse. Vital intermediaries between the modes of production and consumption, adverts signal the availability of commodities to consumers whose vulnerabilities they are

- Consumption
is defined by
desire & needs

always appealing to. Advertisements offer a glimpse into the manner in which the arena of consumption with its defining needs and desires, is constituted. By operating in the realm of culture, but still performing an economic function, advertising disguises the presence of capital in everyday life. Disinclined to reveal themselves as such, the producers of commodities are keener to act as voices for a particular definition of cultural norms (Giroux, 1994:5). Although syncretically borrowing their references from disparate discourses of enfranchisement, the adverts under analysis invariably exhibit a depoliticized version of culture that is more compatible with the needs of capital.

Since the impetus of this debate was provided by the observable changes in South African modes of consumption which have begun to match global consumption trends, it is necessary to speculate upon the role that consumption plays in the globalization of the world economy and specifically, in incorporating South Africa into this arrangement. The frequency with which the terminology of globalism is bandied about in South African economic and cultural circles in the post-1994 period has made it a pertinent topic. However, this mostly superficial handling of the subject of globalization precludes a really critical assessment of its implications for South Africa. In conclusion, it will be argued that it is consumption that is instrumental to the success of the ideology of globalization, even in areas like South Africa that are marginalized from the global economy. It is the globalization of consumption rather than of production -- which is errant yet confined predominantly to a limited number of pliable regions -- that helps to foment the impression that globalization is truly a global phenomenon.

how global is global?

Chapter 1

THE REIFIED COMMODITY IN CONSUMPTION

open to chapter 1

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing, and easily understood. But its analysis brings out that it is, in reality, a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.

(Marx, 1976:163)

The capitalist system of relations, as Marx shows in his writings, is reducible to a basic unit, the commodity. When decomposed into its constitutive elements, which are metonymic innovations of the system itself, the functional dynamics of capitalism are illuminated. Since latter-day capitalism is characterised principally by the phenomenon of consumption, the critique that evolves from the gradual demystification of its workings can be translated into an apposite critique of consumption. As an order that is naturalized and strengthened by the everyday practices of its participants, consumption is rarely subjected to popular interrogation. In a society where high levels of production and consumption are uncritically upheld as reliable indicators of its overall healthiness, the spectacle of consumption is literally accepted at face value, "at first sight".

There is however, a sharp disjunction between the appearance of the commodity and its reality. The utilitarian ethic that defines the relationship between the consumer and the object as one of need-satisfaction and sensory-gratification, obscures the complexity of the commodity's role. In Marx's (1976:163) teleological analysis, the transcending of the commodity's sensuousness, or its use-value, uncovers its social form, and its additional dimensions of use-value and sign-value which incorporate it into the system of exchange. The value that an object possesses, he avers, "does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic" (Marx, 1976:167). Exposing the commodity to scrutiny deciphers this

hieroglyphic to reveal a more significant aspect of its condition -- its masking of social relations. In a culture unduly fixated upon the accumulation of objects, the relations that characterise their production are deemed comparatively insignificant and invisible. This concealment, whereby objects throw a veil over the social relationships between things and obliterate all traces of exploitation that may have been present in their production, is termed 'commodity fetishism' (Harvey, 1989:101). Yet, as the concrete and opaque end-product of production, the form of the commodity itself can be seen as being an indivisible part of the problem of reification. Thus commodity fetishism relates not only to the commodity's structure, but also to its prominent status in modern 'consumer society'.

The effects of this iconoclastic de-masking of the commodity extend beyond the mere disclosing of the inequitable practices that characterise the manufacturing process: Marx's study of capitalism is a meta-analysis that reveals the cohesive logic of the entire system, of which production is a single aspect. In his evaluation (in Harvey, 1989:102), capitalism produces a "sophistication of needs and of their means", intimating a more widespread and powerful manipulation of all those who inhabit its sphere of influence. It is an idea that aptly contextualizes the position of the consumer within its structure. A much-vaunted and unquestioned maxim of the capitalist system is that it offers its denizens an unprecedented range of numerically infinite freedoms: the freedom of what, of where, and of how to consume. Having been bestowed with these apparent liberties, consumers are upheld as the loci of power through their capacity to commit the final, sanctioning acts of purchase. Where the power to buy is economic, in the view of cultural theorists like Coombe (1992:100), consumption endows individuals with a power to create their own cultural meanings through their engagement with commodified texts. But because the empowering

possibilities of consumption is an unquestioned truism voiced chiefly by the beneficiaries of capital, it helps to legitimate capitalist doctrine, leaving the essentially provisory nature of these freedoms undiscussed.

The imperative of capital towards self-regeneration through growth and expansion can be isolated as the provenance of these "freedoms", which are as multiplicitous as the commodities available. However, the reigning in of the afore-mentioned freedoms occurs when, to make mass production a viable enterprise, the predictability of consumption practices has to be ensured. Through the mediation of advertising, which acts directly upon the consumer, objects are cloaked in halos of meaning that serve to enhance their desirability. Although mistakenly conceived of as a simple stimulus-and-response Pavlovian mechanism,

advertising, though still qualifying as a capitalist realist mode of expression,

employs complex cultural cues through which to appeal to consumers and to

induce consumption. Consumption thus becomes a ritualized practice that is

crucially implicated in the construction of identity around the signifying

meanings that commodities are encrusted with. Seemingly voluntary, consuming

becomes compulsory -- consumers cannot avoid the obligation to consume as

consuming conforms to socially normative behaviour, being the primary mode of

social integration (Kellner, 1989:16). In this confluence of the cultural and the

economic, consumption has ostensibly blurred the modernist separation of the two distinct realms (Shields, 1992:2), ultimately working to ensure the perpetuity of the economic order.

Consumption and Consumerism Briefly Defined

Before a detailed discussion of 'consumption' can ensue, it is necessary to elucidate the meaning of the term, and to differentiate it from its frequently used

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counterpart. 'consumerism'. Used interchangeably because of their their presumed synonymy, their meanings are theoretically divergent. Bertelsen (1996:92) offers an abbreviated explanation, writing that 'consumption' designates a

process, a set of social, cultural and economic practices, with consumerism as its associated ideology, which serves to legitimate capitalism in the eyes of ordinary people.

Jameson (in Dodd, 1995:17) provides the derivation of this formulation by stating that

consumerism is driven by the consumption of the very process of consumption itself, above and beyond its content and the immediate commercial products.

The perceptual differences of the terms appear to hinge upon the conception of consumption as being a practical condition, and of consumerism as being its ideational foundation. Baudrillard's (in Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus, 1997:91) positing of consumption as a

system of meaning like a language... (with) commodities and objects like words... (that) constitute a global, arbitrary and coherent system of signs, a cultural system

and Bourdieu's (in Du Gay et al. 1997:97) that it is a material and symbolic activity, may be used to describe consumerism itself. The subtlety of their distinctions that causes the conflation of consumption and consumerism can partly be attributed to the confusion over the definition of ideology itself. Sometimes visualized as a passively imbibed doctrinal system, it has conversely been cast as a set of beliefs that is actively shaped by its participants. In support of the idea

of ideology as praxis. Williamson (in Lee, 1993:40) claims that "we are active in it, we do not receive it from above. It works through us, not at us". As the complexities of ideology, which will be revived in the latter part of this essay, cannot be adequately dealt with presently, the difference between consumption and consumerism will be maintained through the forthcoming argument.

The Phases of the Commodity

For the sake of initiating a more comprehensive understanding of consumption, the constitution of the commodity -- the basic unit of consumption considered to be the objectification of social consciousness (Lury, 1996: 40) -- will be made the focus of analysis. Central to Marx's discussion of the commodity is its bifurcated structure, represented by two regimes of value: the qualitative, which is manifested through its use-value, and the quantitative, which takes its form through the commodity's exchange-value. Use-value, an intrinsic attribute, refers to the materiality of the commodity and is "only realized in use or in consumption... a usefulness of a thing makes it a use-value" (Marx, 1976:126). As use-value is postulated as being inherent to an object, it is considered distanced and autonomous from exchange-value, the dimension that integrates the commodity into the system of supply and demand. These qualities that it accrues through the course of exchange are seen to bear no relation to the commodity's use-value: the (mis)apprehension that the commodity is appraised according to its essentially held properties is an illusion that disguises its 'real' nature and is one that lies at the heart of capitalist production (Marx in Lee, 1993:9). While an object is promoted for its capacity to satisfy a need, its worth in the marketplace is not determined by this function -- it is the value that it acquires through the circuit of exchange that influences its worth, or its price.

As the differences between the "geometric, physical, chemical or other natural property of commodities" (Marx, 1976:127) tend to preclude their material standardization, no pre-existent currency of exchange between objects exists. Supplying this currency is the commodity's exchange-value, which is controlled by the social relations of the commodity's production: the cumulative amount of labour and time that is invested in its manufacture. While time is easily quantifiable¹, labour, in its varied and protean form, can only be equalized by the system of wages, which is considered, in Marx's perception, an essential violation of its substance-form. As well as imposing arbitrarily derived values on real human work, the system of wages denigrates labour, repressing its creative independence and freedom. This perceived injustice is compounded by the concrete gap that is forged between "what labour gets and what it creates" (Harvey, 1989:180). To ensure that surplus-value or profit is generated on a continual basis, wage-levels are always exceeded by exchange-value.

The hierarchy of worth that is established whereby the needs of labour are subordinated to the need of capital to reproduce itself, introduces the concept of commodity fetishism into the production process. Labour has to undergo the necessary commodification to make itself more amenable to the requirements of capital, becoming transformed into a depersonified and alienated instrument of production. Under capitalism, writes Lee (1993:10), workers are denied the right to control the potential that is embodied in their labour:

Labour-power has thus become a commodity, its usefulness no longer to be found in its ability to produce objects for the satisfaction and development of the worker's needs, but in its capacity to function as a token of exchange for wages. The diminution of labour-power to the status of an article of exchange effectively means that the worker has simultaneously

traded away the positive potential for self-realization that is inherent within his or her labour-power.

This transformation of labour, he continues, signals a rupture between labour and needs where labour is not engaged in the production of an object for the worker's own consumption; it is not an *act* of need satisfaction, but has to be utilized as a *means* to need satisfaction. Having the satisfaction of their needs deferred, workers are only able to satisfy them circuitously through wages earned producing commodities for the consumption of others. The worker is thus estranged from the product, as well as from his or her labour; the labour is not "voluntary but forced, it is forced labour" (Marx, 1975:326). Decrying it as the equivalent of an ontological alienation, Marx (1975:329) says that, in wrenching "the object of his production from man, estranged labour therefore tears away from him his species-life".

Through the downgrading of labour to the status of a commodity, each aspect of commodity relations manifests itself in reified form, as a complex of object relations (Lee, 1993:14). The process of commodification is replayed at every point along the production and consumption continuum, starting from when capital allocates the object a value disconnected from its use-value. This value is reified further when the commodity is exchanged for another via the mediating form of money. Intensifying value abstraction, money "provides a standardized criterion against which all commodities may be assessed 'objectively' and from which every commodity may have its price" (Lee, 1993:14). With the aid of twentieth century technological and financial developments however, money has become abstracted and displaced by other symbols of itself, the more obvious of which are cheques and credit cards. Value therefore assumes an auto-referential disposition, detracting attention from the relations of production, the vestiges of

which are erased entirely in the climactic act of consumption. In consumption, the fetishization of the object assumes a more explicit form as the objects themselves are desired and consumed, rather than exchanged for capital.

Marx's constructed binary between use-value and exchange-value, and his exhaustive, inquisitorial analysis of the latter term, has prompted the accusation that he naturalizes use-value by presuming the existence of essential, pure needs from which humans have been separated by the capitalist mechanism. But, while it can be agreed upon that capitalism does entrench a heightened materialist ethic in society, 'true' needs are nonetheless difficult to ascertain. Once the concept of need is problematized, then use-value itself, as a clear and stable referent, undergoes an upheaval. Yet Marx does appear to recognize that needs and use-values are the products of social mediation. For commodities to be produced, he claims, the worker must not only "produce use-values, but use-values for others, social use-values" (Marx, 1976:131). The mediation of the social thus signals the adulteration of use-value, which ceases to be 'pure' or representative of a one-two-one relationship between an object and its user. Instead, the form of use-value is that of a relation *between people*. Contending that Marx had posited it as a relation rather than as a straightforward given, Smith (1984:81-83) states that use-value consists of spatial properties to which the different operative strands of the object's manufacture have contributed. The commodity, as a use-value, can hence be considered the nexus of the interactions of the various constituents of the production process.

That use-value cannot be theorized as a simple value correlative with objective human needs is corroborated by Baudrillard's (1981:66) attempts at explaining what he terms the "functional logic of use-value". Beginning from the premise that subjects and objects are separate, distinct entities, Baudrillard (1981:70-75)

deduces that need, in the form of use-value, is the expedient through which their interconnectedness can be established: beyond the threshold of survival, need cannot be gauged because a "vital anthropological minimum" does not exist. Obligatory consumption can be set above what is necessary, and is the function of the production of surplus-value, or of what is required

for the reproduction of the labour force. In a growth phase it is what is necessary to maintain the rate of growth and surplus value.

(Baudrillard, 1981:82)

Individual need can be established by measuring the level of the system's requirements for self-sustenance. In a capitalist society, need levels will rise in accordance with the intricacies of the system's expansion. Therefore, a critique of consumption based on a theory of false needs is rendered less valid since the nature of needs cannot be determined with any conclusiveness. But, by being a function of the system which frames it, need unavoidably assumes an ideological dimension. As it is defined by the structure of the political economy, the satisfaction of need is unwittingly implicated in the reproduction of that system, meaning that any gesture of consumption can be seen as conducing to its continued survival.

Nevertheless, Baudrillard's repudiation of the existence of a base level of need does not negate the concept of use-value or more logically, the utilitarian function of an object, which cannot be theorized away. To conceive of use-value as a wholly mythological formation betrays an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon of consumption, included in which is the actual, sensory moment of need-satisfaction. Baudrillard only grasps use-value prior to the moment of consumption: selectively omitting the physical act allows it to be rationalized so

that it abides more easily by the logic of a comparatively abstract system of needs. In his summation, the mobilization of needs by the political economy determines that "use-value no longer appears anywhere in the system" (Baudrillard, 1981:87). Use-value does not automatically evanesce once the ersatz nature of need has been proven, and its inherent complexity unearthed. In postulating need deterministically, Baudrillard's theoretical interventions appear to impose an absolutist macroeconomic rationale on the act of consumption. Though being shaped and manipulated by the overarching forces of capital, consumption still represents a concrete relation between the individual and the object. Despite being dependent on a broader system of relations, this relation whereby an object is seen, eaten, held or worn by a consumer, indicates that some semblance of a use-value, however contrived, is contained within the object.

Where the invalidation of the concept of need constitutes an extraneous attack on use-value, its purported supersession by the commodity's sign-value is an attempt at effecting a complete reconfiguration of the structure of the object of consumption. Announcing the absence of use-value, Baudrillard holds that the auxiliary features that the commodity acquires in the realm of promotion -- its sign-values -- are those that are pursued and consumed, in lieu of the more mundane objects themselves. In modern relations of consumption, wherein a baroque promotional culture has developed around commodities, their signifying qualities have come to achieve a pre-eminence over the objects they point towards. As a consequence, use-value is subject to a double displacement: initially by the object's exchange-value, and subsequently by its sign-value. This dislodging of use-value by sign-value is effected by the system of exchange, however.² On its own, an object's appeal is somewhat recessive, especially when it is presented against commodities of identical form. It can only begin to assume a unique flavour once it has been supplemented with additional qualities that have

an alluring function.³

The conspicuousness of the sign, as it has already been said, can be attributed to the relations of exchange -- and more specifically, to the industries of marketing and advertising -- that have accreted around the commodity. To bridge the fissure between levels of supply and demand, advertising performs the necessary task of priming a 'market' for the mass consumption of mass-produced goods. In its unembellished state, an object is a mere embodiment of its specific use-value. With the profusion of available commodities whose uses are seldom differentiated, signs act as extra-dimensional cultural markers of distinction, aimed at engendering desire for them in the hearts and minds of consumers. In Raymond Williams's (1996:462) portrayal thereof, advertising is a magical system that alchemizes commodities from being prosaic entities to being enchanted objects that are capable of satisfying the deepest human urges.⁴ Accounting for this ability of signifying commodities to affect the recesses of the human psyche, Lukacs (1971:93) writes:

Just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man.

Of the overall effect of signification, Lee (1993:23) declares that the logic of sign-value represents the triumph of capitalism in its attempts to foster a cultural order -- composed of a collective assemblage of signs -- that is compatible with the demands of large-scale commodity production. In its co-opting of cultural referents, commodification subjects even the inviolable spheres of culture, and of human consciousness, to the reifying process.

Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum -- which can be read in combination with Jameson's calibration of the evolution of capitalism -- is an attempt to explain the sign's dominance in the present phase of capitalism. The simulacrum is, in Jameson's (1996:18) definition, an image or a semblance, an

identical copy for which no original has ever existed... the culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange-value has been generalized to a point at which the very memory of use-value has been effaced.

The simulacrum is the object that has been relinquished of its utilitarian function, thereby severing its connection with the concept of need. But if it is something for which "no original has ever existed", then its use-value can be seen, from its inception, as a simulation. Yet it only reveals itself as such in the contemporary phase of the simulacrum. Baudrillard (1993:31) divides the order of the simulacra into three levels. The first is one of imitation, where the commodity, as a simulacrum, is endowed with a 'natural' (or an unquestioned) use-value. On the second level of (re)production, which coincides with the Industrial Revolution, the commodity functions as an exchange-value to disguise the fact that it circulates like a sign reproducing the mode of production. In its final stage, the simulacrum is pure simulation -- the sign is governed by the structural law of value, which has no relation to the values of use (or exchange, according to Baudrillard).⁵ The simulacrum, in this phase, ironically reveals its 'authentic' simulated nature by no longer holding up the pretence that it is related to functional need, the concept which validates its being. As a pure sign, it

puts an end to the myth of its origins and thereby puts an end to its internal contradictions (there is no longer a real or a

referential to which to oppose them).

(Baudrillard, 1993:63)

Having no grounding in the 'real' or the tangible, the simulacral object is manufactured, advertised, desired and consumed for its signifying potential, and not for its alleged use-value. By putting an "end to the myth of its origins", the simulacrum denies the prior existence of a referential object, one that had been allied with need. Whereas the system of exchange ascribed the commodity with a paradoxical function that conflicted with its utilitarian application, its present form as a sign supposedly resolves the debate over its function. Treated as a sign only, traditional notions of value and need appear to lose their meaning. According to Kellner (1994:15), the stability of the dialectic between the signified of need and the signifier of the commodity permitted an accumulation of meaning that is now absent -- or more appropriately, less identifiable -- in the system of commodity relations.

The explosion of signifiers characterizing the stage of simulation appear to attain a weightlessness through the loss of the anchorage resulting from the abandonment of the notion of need. They are therefore seen as "floating signifiers" (Porter, 1993:2) which are then, under the structural law of value, able to perform a potentially infinite symbolic interplay. To concretely demonstrate the 'autonomous' and self-referential functioning of the sign, the example of the 'designer' commodity -- the advertisements for which are to be discussed in the following chapter -- will be used. During the process of marketing, a pair of jeans is transformed into a seductive commodity through its attached label, hence being made a repository of meaning. The label, and all the qualities it is impregnated with, is the sign that creates desire for the item of clothing. And as it is the label that is pursued, it is able to detach itself from its

'original' context to re-attach itself to another commodified form, whether it be sunglasses, perfume, or any other (seemingly) arbitrarily chosen object. Though possessing a contrasting form, that object will consequently embody the same significations as the pair of jeans. Following the generative success of this label, other labels for other clothing -- that are supposedly different but essentially, the same⁶ -- arise to challenge the 'pioneering' label. This whirling movement is then repeated and replicated in an endless fashion, and the commodities that are the accompaniments to the signs are consumed in accordance with their availability.

However, in what may be perceived, by Baudrillard at least, as an atavistic reclaiming of the concept of use-value, the label's attachment to the *commodity* needs to be emphasized, while the macroeconomic grounding of the sign and of consumption, both compulsively metaphorized, needs to be asserted. Adorno (in Featherstone, 1991:14) proffers the view that the object's sign-value is a fake or ancillary value, the product of social mediation or exchange. Similarly, Debord (in Best, 1994:51) sees the commodity as an "image-object", a perception which restores its material aspect to it, as well as helping to disinter its use-value. Yet, while the inflated portrayals of the sign's kinetic abilities should not be interpreted literally, they do serve to illustrate the dynamics of contemporary consumption and the reification undergone by the commodity, via its sublimated sign form. The sign acts as the supreme representation of the fetishization of the commodity, which has itself become abstracted, ostensibly reconstructing the material basis of consumption by obscuring the evidence of its production.

As signs circulate, a condition of "de-differentiation", a state in which consumers come to identify with a collection of marketing induced signifiers, develops (Dodd, 1995:4). These signifiers are seen as surrogates for the traditional social identifications based on the divisions of class, race and gender. Of the de-

differentiating effects of commodities. Baudrillard (in Lee, 1993:24) declares that they

quite tyrannically induce categories of persons. They undertake the policing of social meanings, and the significations they engender are controlled. Their proliferation, simultaneously arbitrary and coherent, is the best vehicle of a social order, equally arbitrary and coherent, to materialize effectively under the sign of affluence.

In marketing spheres, the displaced categories, reminiscent of social and political inequalities, are preferably ignored. Because of their incongruity within the buoyant fantasy worlds constructed by advertisers of products, they are perceived negatively and are instead absorbed under the modified and depoliticized rubric of 'lifestyle' differentiations. Nevertheless, this regrouping does not necessarily entail the real erosion of race, class or gender differences, but signals the emergence of new identifications that are modelled on those offered by advertisers. A belief in the omnipotence of these commercialized signs, a magical thought process reigning over consumption (Kellner, 1989:13), works to fashion a new mentality -- a *consumer* mentality. But these fabricated identifications are indicative of a different kind of fragmentation where traditional subjectivities, or personal values and attachments and "received ways of doing and being" (Dodd, 1995:4), are upset and reconfigured, belying the apparent seamlessness of the process of de-differentiation. Whatever its ontological ramifications, de-differentiation is symbolic of the final stage of reification, wherein the objects of production and consumption have found their expression in the hallowed space of individual subjectivity.

The commodity has been the primary analytical focus of the discussion thus far.

While the object provides the most germane means of accessing the topics of consumption and capitalism, it is possible, when mapping the trajectory of the commodity, to lose sight of those phenomena that are responsible for its current form. Baudrillard's exclusively objectivist focus serves as a potent example of the alluring or reifying potential of the object: he falters in his conceptualization of its anatomical and functional dimensions by neglecting to view its evolution dialectically. The discarded Marxist framework of his earlier writing has given way to a vision of the commodity as a disembodied entity that circulates in a virtual realm with its own self-regulating logic.

Considered independently, the commodity only partially reveals the dynamics of consumer relations. It can be understood in "its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole" (Lukacs in Best, 1994:46), an interpretation that can be achieved if the crucial interconnectedness between the character of the political economy and the sign is acknowledged. As Best (1994:57) adamantly states, the

radical rejection of referentiality is premised upon a one-dimensional, No-Exit world of self-referring simulacra. But however reified and self-referential postmodern semiotics is, *signs do not simply move in their own signifying orbit*. They are historically produced and circulated and while they may not translucently refer to some originating world, they none the less can be socio-historically contextualized, interpreted and critiqued... Signs, images and objects are not inscrutable and hermetic simply because they no longer stand within a classical space of representation. (my italics)

Therefore, the tendency of signs to refer to and to borrow from their own meanings does not, by inference, extricate them from the relations of production.

which provides the basis of all commodified sign-play. The circular proliferation of image-objects -- or signs in motion -- should instead be envisioned as the mimetic result of the capitalistic profit-motive. According to its Marxist explanations, the restless pursuit of profit effects a continuous movement called 'value in motion' whereby capital, enacting its built-in imperative towards growth, perpetually seeks new ways through which to secure profits (Harvey, 1989:107). Value in motion represents the impulsion of capital, the "objective form taken by self-expanding or self-creating value" (Lee, 1993:60), towards self-generation. For the maintenance of the system's longevity, a steady rate of growth needs to be ensured, since it is through expansion that capital can proceed in its accumulative mission. As a consequence of the struggle to improve levels of profitability, new avenues of profit aggregation have to be explored: production then increases as new products are introduced into a consumer market.⁸

The Culture of Consumption

Emerging concurrently with the rise of mass production is the lived context of the consumer society, the precise genealogy of which is the centre of some debate.⁹ Of its contemporary incarnation, it is agreed that the template is to be found in the inter-war period of the twentieth century, when the "source of social relations, culture and ideology" was shifted from a "class culture of work to a mass culture of consumption" (Alt in Fine and Leopold, 1993:65). Ownership and consumption of commodities became the defining features of social relations whereas prior to that, the demarcations of class, arranged around the relation to the means of production, significantly shaped social roles. Made accessible due to the general affordability of mass produced goods, consumption was promoted as a 'democratic' realm of activity in which consumers could actively participate. Through an engagement with commodified forms, they were provided with the opportunity for

self-gratification, as well as with the hypothetical ability to modify social meaning since, attached to the commodities, were significations that allowed consumers to broaden the confines of delimited social roles. New identifications could thus be adopted vicariously through acquired objects.

Popularized as a leisure activity -- hence its absorption into the sphere of culture -- consumption can nonetheless be construed as active symbolic labour. The inherited practices of which any culture is comprised necessitates a shared involvement in its rituals to ensure its vitality as a culture. Likewise, consumption can be thought to constitute an act of production¹⁰ (Baudrillard, 1981:33) since consumers are expected to adhere to its norms to be considered functional members of (consumer) society. Horkheimer and Adorno (in Featherstone, 1995:18) write that "amusement under late capitalism is a prolongation of work": whilst it may be tacitly endorsed, the ethos of consumption is obligatory, forcing a collective participation in its symbolic rites. These acts of symbolic work occur as a function of the sign itself: signs, including those purportedly of individuality, are inherently social (Voloshinov in Maxwell, 1996:118). Since commodities are invested with the accents of signs, the consumption thereof becomes the means to social integration. But although consumption is the literal embodiment of the interaction between a consumer and an object, the signifying element of each commodity turns the act into a perverse form of social communion, thereby displaying another dimension of the reification phenomenon. Under consumption, the social is a realm mediated by inert objects: consuming may be socially resonant, but it is invariably lonely as the commodity becomes the focus of the enterprise. In consumer society, writes Langman (1992:66), a gradual withdrawal of subjective life from public to private spheres occurs. Because it takes place between consumers and products, consumption tends to have an unavoidably atomistic effect on social life.

The nomenclature of 'consumer society' does, in fact, attest to the influential power of capital to mould the process of cultural formation around its specific requirements. When a society makes the transition to a consumer society in which consuming is the dominant cultural activity, its inhabitants are no longer just citizens: they are consumers. In the appellation of 'consumer', the index of the level of economic penetration of culture, where everyday life has become defined by self-validating acts of consumption, is revealed. Whether the previous separation of the economic and the cultural realms was constructed or real, the intensified encroachment of the economic into the supposedly autonomous area of culture is a perceptible development. The culture of consumption has succeeded in usurping the place of more traditional and unifying cultural practices, working to de-differentiate and homogenize cultural activity. This depthlessness, based on a rootless system of object and sign consumption rather than on the variables of place and history, infuses consumption with the potential to extend its spatial limits beyond boundaries, cultural or national. The spread of consumption practices, while being facilitated by their disengagement from the specificities of place, are however still the ordained result of capital's expansionism over the global terrain. Consumption may have become a global cultural feature, but it remains the overt representation of capital's globalist aims.

Consumer society revises the perception of how culture and society is constituted, having now been defined around a mode of economically oriented behaviour. By working through both the economic and the cultural zones of action, consumption appears to reinforce the capitalist system of relations. It is this intertwining of the economy and culture that introduces the subject of consumerism, the ideology with which consumption is associated. Jameson has already been quoted as saying that consumerism is driven by the consumption of the process of consumption

itself: without a belief in its rationale, the continued viability of the activity of consumption cannot be assured. The current magnitude of the phenomenon is primarily attributable to propagandistic efforts to sell consumption as a site of empowerment, as a space that permits opportunities for self-fulfilment and for the imaginative construction of novel and distinct subjectivities. But, because it is in the ideological interests of capital to cast it as a salubrious force, it is axiomatic that consumption will be portrayed positively. Consumers are thence readily proselytized into the order of consumption while remaining unaware of their 'real' standing within it. Though this formulation may resemble traditional but disputed notions of ideology as the wholesale generation of 'false consciousness' -- in Žižek's view (1994:3), the sketching of a relationship of representation between thought or consciousness and reality has "outdated epistemological implications" -- there exists a disparity between the reality of consumer relations and the prevailing perception thereof that appears to serve the position of capital, supporting the view of ideology as an illusionary system of beliefs designed to conserve an existing system of conditions.

In keeping with the thesis that the sphere of consumption is not autonomously constituted, that it is the outward manifestation of a macroeconomic imperative, the ideology of consumerism will be conceived of as a belief system geared towards ensuring the stability of the economic system which is erroneously viewed as being legitimate. Capitalism, in its reification of social relations, reduces all its subjects to the status of commodities, yet consumers are seen to lack the "self-consciousness of the commodity" (Lukacs, 1971:168), staying oblivious to their commodified status within the relations of production and consumption. In this regime, the subjectivist perception of consumption as a liberatory sphere dominates, concealing the dynamics of capitalism operating below its surface. As Marx (in Larrain, 1979:57) explains,

the final pattern of economic relations as seen on the surface, *in their real existence* and consequently in the conceptions by which the bearers and agents of these relations seek to understand them, is very much different from, and indeed quite the reverse of, the inner but concealed pattern and the conception corresponding to it.

Notwithstanding the apparent irreconcilability of the real and the imaginary poles, the two are bound in a dialectical interplay that forms the basis of the ideological structure. Having been based on existing conditions, the supposedly 'false' perception of capitalist reality is not altogether fraudulent, hence Althusser's (in Lee, 1993:43) conception of ideology as a

system of relations about the real conditions under which people live. But this system of representations is not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relations in which they live.

Patterns of belief are not straightforwardly fictitious but are rather, rationalized understandings of real conditions to which ideological subjects have accommodated themselves. Consciousness is not independent of material conditions, as Marx (in Larrain, 1979:39) crucially acknowledges: it is, "from the very beginning a social product" reflecting an external reality. Because the survival of this reality depends on the system of imaginary relations, ideology can be thought to function reciprocally through its recipients who are then engaged in perpetuating the system of real relations.

Despite the dialectical enactment of ideology, there is, as in the relations of production and consumption, an originating point: that of capital. Lest it may be

forgotten. ideology is a distinctly hegemonic force that helps to sustain and reproduce the system producing it. While it may be, according to Williamson's definition invoked earlier, received and shaped by its participants, a power differential is evident in the interchange occurring between the (capitalist) system of relations and its subjects, who are under compulsion to heed its logic. Ideology serves to create *necessary* illusions in its participants since its ultimate function is to preserve the status of capital through the maintenance of the political and economic status quo. Inhabitants of a consumer society are led to believe that consumption grants them the power of free will, which is really vastly insignificant against the power of capital to determine the nature of production and consumption relations. In Marx's view (in Larrain, 1979:43), consumers have won these freedoms to the extent that productive forces have so permitted. Freedom under capital is a freedom that needs to be lubricated by the form of money as it has been promoted in terms of consumption, of the gratification of the senses by way of commodities. Without the intervention of economics, freedom is a potentiality that can paradoxically, only become real through its reification under the order of consumption.

An ideological system generates a broad range of meanings that are appropriate to its structural context, reconfiguring even sanctified ontological constructs like that of freedom. The intermingling of the cultural and the economic under consumption tends to naturalize economic logic in the cultural sphere, achieved through the discourse of consumerism. Consumerist ideology disseminates a notion of freedom that is not only compatible with the needs of capital but also acts as a signifier for the purportedly democratic arrangement of consumer capitalism, or the *market* of production and consumption relations. Proponents of the market are wont to explain, as a salutatory endorsement of consumption, that the market is where consumers vote with their money: it is the place where they

are able to exercise their freedom of choice (Scitovsky in Jhally, 1987:14). Appropriated from its political context to service an economic aim, this discourse of democracy is antithetical to unconditionally democratic ideals. Whereas the condition of citizenship is sufficient a prerequisite for participation in a political democracy, a market democracy attaches an economic proviso to its membership stipulations, creating constitutional shortcomings that are camouflaged by the enfranchising discourse of democracy.

The universality of the democratic model allows the market to validate itself and its defining relations, and to gain access to those markets previously excluded from the global system of exchange. In the example of the Eastern Bloc countries¹¹, the unavailability of the full spectrum of consumer goods was publicized as a deprivation reflective of their political disempowerment. Expectedly, their ensuing capitulation to capitalism and their incorporation into its network became heralded as a triumph for democracy. This propagation of an economic model of democracy thus permits the ideology of consumerism to embed its ideas in heretofore inaccessible and politically unpropitious areas. The opportunistic use of democratic rhetoric with which to effect an homology between the market and democracy highlights the intensely ideological nature of the allegedly objective capitalist market. According to Jameson (1996:260),

the ideology of the market is unfortunately not some supplementary ideational or representational luxury or embellishment that can be removed from the economic problem and then sent over to some cultural or superstructural morgue, to be dissected by specialists over there. It is somehow generated by the thing itself, as its objectively necessary afterimage.

The market, termed an "ideologeme" by Jameson (1996:264), can never be

liberated from its ideological underpinnings because of its representative relation with capital, the interests of which it privileges over those of non-capitalist forces. A feature of ideology is that it offers its subjects no points of exit from its doctrinal system: when the idea of the market as the apotheosis of human economic and social endeavour, as the realization of human nature, is forwarded, no contesting response to its essentialist assumptions can be posed since it appears to have uttered the final word on the theme. Functioning as an ideological construct, the market successfully stifles the debate into the legitimacy of the system of production and consumption relations.

The construction of the market as an enabling yet paradoxically proscriptive mechanism relates back to the double-edged character of consumption. Consumption is a site composed of a multitude of options for action but the activities it sanctions revolve solely within its circumscribed orbit. While the expressive, interactive and playful complexities of consumption are acknowledged, it is necessary to register the role that capital plays in its manufacture. Though a seemingly multifaceted and fragmentary system, consumption does not emanate from nowhere. The pattern for its structure can be found in the foundation of capital, the logic of which is acts as the logic of consumption. To view consumption and its associated discourse of consumerism as a capitalist expression does not however betray a totalitarian perspective. As Best (1989:343) states, there is a fundamental difference between the perception of capital as a totalitarian instrument and the perception of it as a *totality*, which is a

structure or system comprised of parts that are constituted by the whole system to which they belong and interrelate within that system.

Asserting the hegemonic position of capital and the totality of the system of production and consumption is therefore not a rejection of the heterogeneity of consumption or a denial of the ambiguous delights it may offer, but is, more significantly, an affirmation of the discredited notion that there is a connectedness, or a coherence, to the often bewildering modern phenomenon of consumption.

NOTES

¹ Of the presumably neutral variable of time, Lukacs (1971:90) insists that, in the production process, "it sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable 'things'...". Time, like every other aspect of the production-consumption circuit, thus also becomes subject to the process of reification.

² It can also be argued that signification is another form of exchange since signs, though not taking the form of money, are mechanisms that facilitate and propel the process of commodity exchange.

³ While it has come to achieve a heightened presence, the sign is not a recent invention. Historically, objects have always possessed a totemic appeal but in contemporary consumer culture, capitalism has provoked the exponential growth of these totemic symbols, which are entirely subordinate to its economic imperative. Arising in a context of capitalist necessity, sign-value is effectively generated by exchange-value.

⁴ From this, he concludes that the need for advertising to make objects appealing contradicts the commonly held suspicion that society is too materialistic -- had it been intrinsically materialistic, the need for its persuasive function would disappear. While this is not sufficient a criterion for establishing a definitive human 'essence', the empirical evidence of advertising's overwhelming success (made possible by its awareness of the malleability of human tastes and needs), coupled with a concomitant increase in levels of consumption, serves as a refutation of Williams's claim.

⁵ The hyperbolic case Baudrillard makes for sign-value has caused him to perhaps foolishly disregard its *economically* structural basis, which is undeniably that of exchange.

⁶ Their distinctiveness is predicated upon their contrasting names and signs, though their form and their usage is undifferentiated.

⁷ Baudrillard's description of the simultaneous (seeming) arbitrariness and (actual) coherence of the system of signs serves as a reflection of the schizophrenia that defines the body of his work. Having initially attributed the sign's existence to the nature of the political economy, he later repudiated this approach to promote the concept of a 'floating signifier'.

⁸ According to Marx (in Lowe, 1995:7), production and consumption is a connected circuit wherein production ends in consumption and consumption leads

to more production, but production remains the "real point of departure and hence also the predominant moment" in this circuit.

⁹ The evolutionary inception of consumerism has been located by Mukerji (in Fine and Leopold, 1993:64) in the sixteenth century, when capitalism began its initial ascendance, producing innovations in "consumption goods in response to a materialist world of thought".

¹⁰ This is not the same act of production forwarded by subjectivist theorists, who view consumption as a symbolically productive interaction between an active subject and an object.

¹¹ In this instance, the case of South Africa is less apposite as market dynamics did prevail here, unlike in those nations formerly considered to be communist.

Chapter 2

THE CAPITALIST REALISM OF ADVERTISEMENTS

The defining fact of life in the 1990s is its complete reorganization around the needs of corporations. The world of business, it seems, is becoming the world, period. The market is politics, the office is society, the *brand is equivalent to human identity*. (my italics)

(Frank, 1997:44)

It's not what you know, it's how you look.

(Edgars advertisement, 1997:19)

The previous chapter's account of consumption as a realm dominated by the far-reaching logic of the political economy, while not invalidating the existence of advertisements as self-contained, textually dense entities, works towards a questioning of whether adverts should be accepted as independent units free of politically resonant meaning. A discussion that privileges advertising's interpretatively varied, multifaceted nature to the exclusion of the capitalistic, ideological function moulding its content and its reception, speciously helps to bolster the popular perception of advertising and consumption as autonomous modes of activity. In Frank's (1997:44) analysis, there is no doubt that advertising is the

central ideological apparatus of the new capitalism. Advertising is the market's subsidizing mechanism... the device through which creative talent is rewarded and cultural enterprises succeed or fail. Advertising is the public face of capitalism (and)... the people who make advertising are, in a very real sense, the ideologues of the corporate revolution: They are the architects of dissatisfaction and of perpetual obsolescence.

Situating advertisements within a broader capitalist framework invariably tarnishes their status as free-standing texts comprised of dynamically distinctive and diverse structures and cues; yet, without intending to contradictorily accord it an undue prominence through the reifying practice of textual analysis, the increasing ubiquity and obtrusiveness of advertising has made the phenomenon harder to ignore. As the interlocutor between producers and consumers, or the “public face of capitalism”, advertising has become a cultural idiom that simultaneously interprets and informs social trends. Perhaps more than any other mechanism, advertising acts as the ideal ideogram, as a manifest representation, of the reigning social ethic: arguably, that of consumption. Just as the commodity acts as a hieroglyph for the relations of production, so does its attachment, the advert, serve as an index of relations of consumption and its defining value system. However, while the ad is undoubtedly a product of the relations of production, it removes every trace of production from its substance. As it is, the advert is a mere *sign* of the commodity, which is itself a reified form that bears no mark of the social dimension of the production process.

Nevertheless, the handling of the advertisement predominantly as a metonymic encapsulation of the ideology of consumerism remains challenged by a contrasting semiotic approach which views it as a distinct discourse type, a Bakhtinian text without a “tangible or stable identity (that is) the dynamic synthesis of many components” (Cook, 1992:3), fulfilling a social need for play and diversion. Of less analytical urgency to this perspective is the role of the advertisement as an ideological construct that masks the structural characteristics of the prevailing economic order with its distracting endeavours. Concurring with Cook, Bertelsen (1996:100) reacts against the

reductionist tendency of approaching the advert as a functional entity, claiming it instead to be an interesting and complex heteroglossic text significantly composed of a "shared vernacular of rituals, aphorisms and stories, which serves to confirm our social identity". What she fails to add is that, in capitalism, this social identity is always a commodified identity, hence advertising's role in its formation. Although credible arguments can be made for prioritizing the kaleidoscopic properties of the advert, its fundamental purpose stays intact. However discursively layered it is, the advert's content is always subordinated to its generic function, elemental to which is its commercial goal. An advertisement may be lauded for its engagement with social vernaculars, for its daring to reflect novel intellectual, music and fashion currents, but this characteristic is a function of the advert's format. The speed with which an ad is conceived and developed allows it to keep in step with the rapid turnover of social trends. In turn, its immediacy enhances the advert's accessibility to audiences. Consumers are more prone to identifying with an advertisement if they consider it representative of themselves or of their (desired) values and lifestyles. Therefore, it is only via this opportunistic co-opting of features from the cultural milieu that advertisements are able to acquire the cachet or relevance they need to be attractive to consumers. Of the dynamic adaptability of advertisements, Williamson (1988:8) maintains that despite their ongoing metamorphosis, their "semiotic refinement has not made the least difference to their basic function... they still intend to make us feel we are lacking". Because of their superficiality, the changes being wrought on the form of the advertisement should merely be interpreted as constituting a phase in its continuing evolutionary development.

Taking issue with the purportedly constrictive view of advertising as a "blatant deception" but perhaps contradictorily lending credence to the perception of it as an industry existing in close league with capitalism. Bertelsen (1996:101) astutely describes the changes it has undergone in its content and its form, which have transformed the advert into an altogether complex entity that is typically postmodernist in its construction and its manipulation. In this stage of its development, she writes, the advert utilizes

as its raw materials every major discourse of contemporary culture (high and popular artistic forms, family values, sexuality, politics, social mobility, race and gender issues...) and (by) aligning them with 'free market' thinking... makes a substantial contribution to the development of an organic ideology adequate to late capitalist demands.

But, given the manner in which the advertising adheres to the all-embracing logic of capital, it is hard to avoid perceiving it as anything other than a type of capitalistic propaganda. Through its expediently all-inclusive incarnation, advertising has achieved a congruence with capitalism by guilefully knitting together the realities of democracy (represented by the abundant availability of products that suit all kinds of people with all kinds of needs) and capitalism (the system that makes consumption possible) to further the ideology of consumerism without disclosing the details of its partnership.

More basically, the confirmation of adverts as commercial artefacts also places them within an ideological schema. Ideology, in Williamson's (1988:13) conception, is that which makes a specific meaning or pattern of beliefs

necessary by the conditions of a society, while simultaneously helping to perpetuate those particular conditions. By disseminating messages appropriate to these conditions, adverts function ideologically and thus their meanings, by being necessary, are visibly limited. The meaning of an advert, though potentially boundless, is circumscribed by its commercial aims. The 'higher' ideological aim of prolonging the economic order is written into the code of every advert: hence, any advert that attempts to interrogate the ethic of consumption, paradoxical as its existence may be, cannot be defined as such, and certainly cannot be tolerated by the hegemonic structures in that order.¹ The proscriptions imposed upon the advertisement comprise a single component of a broader censorship afflicting the ad sponsored media. Advertising, Marris and Thornham (1996:457) note, is a concealed subsidy system whose demands the media is required to stay responsive to. The threat of withholding advertising from television, magazines and newspapers carrying 'objectionable' material incompatible with the needs of advertisers serves to inhibit other forms of speech that the supposedly democratic media acts as an outlet for.

Notwithstanding the problematic considerations of advertising as an ideologically motivated enterprise, it remains invaluable as a lens through which to survey the socio-cultural landscape and gauge patterns of consumption and general social trends. Linked in with its qualitative function of reflecting cultural mobility, is its more literal, quantitative role: advertising's presence in every area of publicly and privately owned space -- shops, cinemas, schools, buses, coffee-shop racks -- provides salient evidence of an equally pervasive consumerism marked by an increase in rates of consumption on a par with the escalation in levels of advertising. Owing to corporate reluctance to divulge

their sales figures by confirming or denying the success of their products. advertising has to be relied upon as a measure, however approximate, of consumer behaviour. In the resulting equation, the expansion of the scope of advertising can be understood to convey a concomitant growth in consumer activity. Where previously advertising had been confined to overtly commercially oriented contexts, at present, no area seems exempt from its encroachment. Taken as a shorthand description of the global spread of commerce, Frank's (1997:44) statement that the "world of business... is becoming the world" ideally contextualizes the status of advertising in contemporary society. His declaration alludes specifically to the governance of the market principle whereby the profit margin is deemed a vital ingredient in the functioning of all institutions, commercial or otherwise, but implicates advertising for its part in entrenching this principle. As a subsidizing system, advertising benefits from the exploitation of these commercial exigencies by transforming them into advertising opportunities. Nevertheless, the survival of advertising is still dependent on a considerable increase in consumption: because of its prohibitive costs to manufacturers and advertisers alike, advertising itself has to be subsidized through the income generated by product sales.

An auxiliary factor implicated in advertising's omnipresence and in the rise of consumption are the structural modifications that commodities have undergone. Since Post-Fordist consumption appears to be defined by material and aesthetic obsolescence, new needs for a constant supply of new objects have to be created (Lee, 1993:114), with advertising existing as the available method of publicizing them. But this initiation of unfamiliar products into the marketplace is compounded by their lack of variation between each other.

Belying the claims of distinctiveness generated around them, commodities tend rather to be prototypically similar. It is during the necessary marketing stage that their similarities of function are transcended, or glossed over, when they achieve differentiation through their significations. Without the requisite product information provided by advertisements, consumers would be unable to distinguish between identical pairs of jeans that are manufactured under five separate labels. When the product is identified chiefly through its label, the sign begins to overshadow the object, acquiring an energy of its own. Worn on the outside, a reversal of its traditional concealment, the label subsequently performs an advertising function. It is through consumption that advertising has discovered the means through which to accomplish its objectives by galvanizing the advertised label into advertising itself.

Because they demonstrate the logic of consumption as it is manifested in theories of obsolescence and in the organization of advertising, branded products are an apt focus of study. They are the most prominent exponents of the glut of formerly inconceivable product-types that are now virtual household items, usefully providing a continuity with the discussed theme of object and sign proliferation. The nature of the commodity then, has been the determining factor in the selection of adverts. Their foreign, mainly American, origins have similarly meant that their adverts are devised in their place of provenance. However, the *Levi's* campaigns are exceptional as they are produced locally, as are their products. While the 1990s has proven to be the halcyon period for the designer commodity universally, the advanced integration of post-apartheid South Africa into a globalized economy has contributed to its newfangled popularity here. Previously, many brands had been withheld from the South African market, in which they have debuted only

recently. As a consequence, the retail sector has become noticeably altered. Where a limited number of trademarked jeans, athletic shoes, sunglasses, underwear and cosmetics were available for consumption before, the current inventory of designer goods on display on billboards and in department stores and periodicals, is dizzying in its range.

The chosen subject of the commercials under analysis has also regulated their media-form. Television reaches a mass audience, yet it is considered an inappropriate medium for the marketers of designer goods who concede that, for each product, theirs is a 'niche' and not a mass market; therefore, the exorbitance of television advertising rates eliminates it as an advertising option.² For this reason, television adverts have been omitted from the discussion, though it should be noted that these commercials are aired on television when products are first launched, so that their arrival in South African stores can be announced instantaneously. In spite of its wider reach, the medium of radio has also been neglected due to its lack of conduciveness to communicating the high image orientation of designer brands, which cannot be expressed aurally. Contexts that are hospitable to the visual requirements of brand-name advertising thus tend to be utilized.

Instead, print ads are more useful to the needs of advertisers as they operate on the plane of image, and can be strategically situated in fashion and 'youth' magazines geared towards promoting specific consumption-based lifestyles, thereby attracting desired categories of readers. Normally overlooked in discussions on magazine advertising but not by advertisers who recognize its advantageousness, are the editorial sections that serve as back-ups to advertisements. As magazines extract their revenues from advertising incomes

more than from magazine sales. they are often compelled to carry product endorsements in their editorial sections. These tactics can be effective in a way that conventional, discernably partisan adverts are not. Because of the impartiality expected of journalists, they are relied upon by their readers to deliver uninfluenced, independently formulated judgements on the values of products.

In this essay, the analysis of the print advertisement is followed by an examination of a relatively new and prevalent form of advert that employs the placed-based or point-of-sale medium. This form of advertising is distinct from more traditional varieties of adverts that are situated in print or electronic media. Regarded as a more interactive kind of marketing, place-based advertising is found in locations where products are sold. Beneficially incurring lower costs, this strategy shows its persuasiveness by 'speaking' to consumers when they are most vulnerable to being swayed. Unlike television commercials which can be 'zapped' or ignored with the assistance of a remote control, point-of-sale promotions, occupying the same physical space as the consumer, are harder to elude. Because they are spatially constituted, they are also able to modify the ambience of their retail realm to suit their advertising needs and hence, exert more control over the process of consumption.

Advertising Texts

Appearing prior to the *cK be* advert and its associated fragrance is the perfume that signalled the entry of the *Calvin Klein* trademark in South Africa, that of *cK One* (Figure 1). While the two perfumes possess no overt olfactory distinctiveness, an editorial in the *Femina Fragrance Directory*

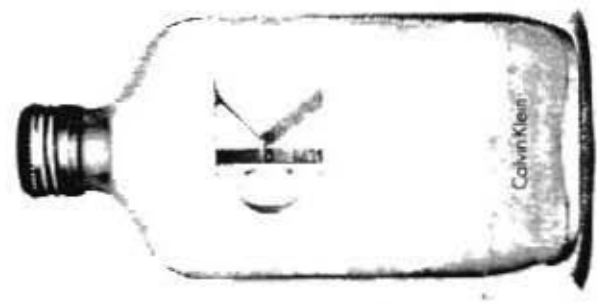
(1998:28). echoing the sentiments expressed in marketers' official press statements, makes assertive claims as to the uniqueness of their constituent elements. Where the similarities between the marketing of these perfumes in their use of monochromatic iconography and spare design may have created the impression of their identical nature, their uniform design is not intended to reflect upon the actual qualities that the different products are ascribed with. Without some sense of its individuality, an object cannot be successfully marketed. For this reason, the perfumes are made to carry contrasting significations in the course of advertising, in the course of advertising. With regard to the *Calvin Klein* products, the subtle differences in their sign-values are sufficient to establish the distinctiveness and thus, the desirability, of each product. Even though it appears as the 'sequel' of *cK One*, *cK be* (Figure 2) is nevertheless made to convey significations that its counterpart does not. Pioneering, or popularizing, the unisex fragrance concept, *cK One* still asserts the difference between a "man or a woman" by naming the categories of sex. On the other hand, *cK be* is confidently trumpeted as the "fragrance for people", abandoning the gender invocations altogether. As if to illustrate its message, *cK One* uses the pictograms of paired male and female figures to emphasize its unisex leanings. And, for the purpose of defining itself quite acutely against other fragrance campaigns, the ad uses the attention-grabbing device of pairing an older woman with a teenage boy. The combination of this image with the perfume is supposed to signify the unconventional status of the perfume and of the *Calvin Klein* name, which is of more significance than the product itself.

However, any show of non-conformism within an advertising context reveals itself as just that -- a surface stab at rebellion intended for no additional

Figure 2



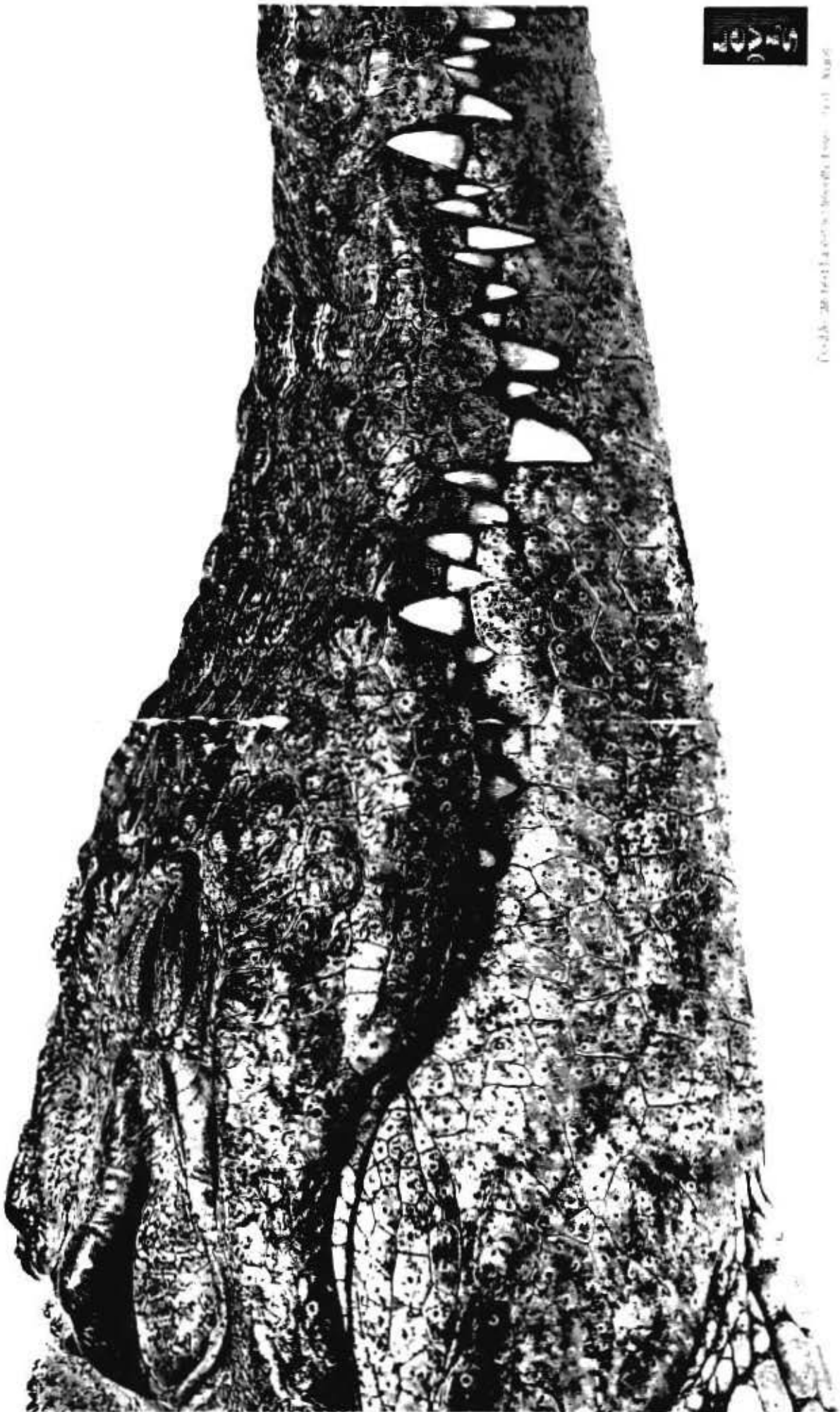
be hot. be cool. just be.
 cK be. The new fragrance for people. Calvin Klein.



a fragrance for a man or a woman.

Figure 1

17
 17



Downloaded from www.jstor.org/stable/1306666 on Tue, 20 Aug 2013 12:00:00 UTC



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

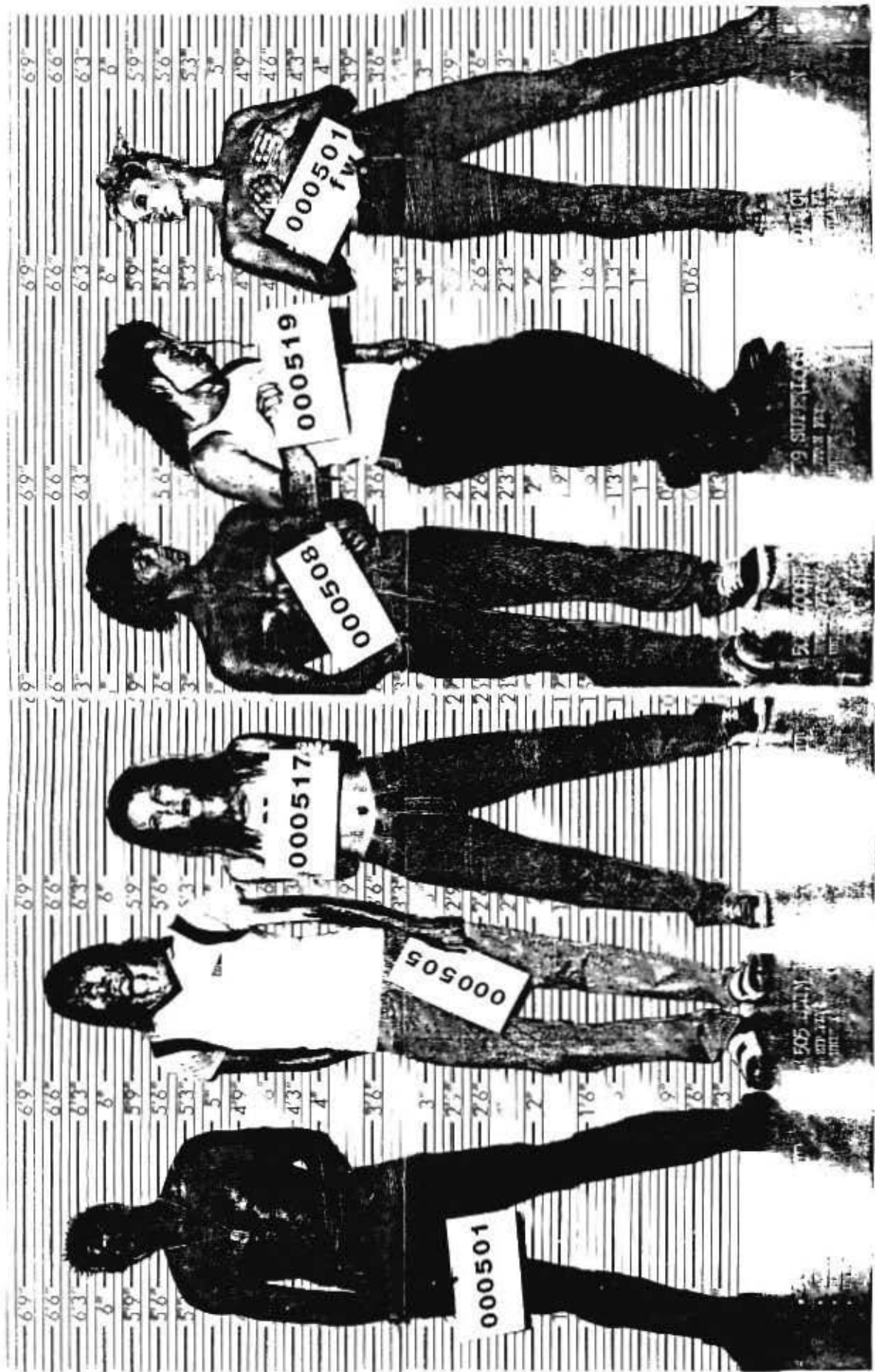


Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

purpose than that of *appearing* to be brazen. *CK One* merely flirts, to unsatisfactory ends, with the notion of nonconformity. It stifles its attempt at a convincing portrayal of an unorthodox scenario by affirmatively employing the usually 'invisible' image of an older woman yet, paradoxically, neutralizes its impact by casting her in the mould of someone younger. In her hip, leather-jacketed guise, she is rendered less threatening by being implicated in the common theme of youthfulness running through advertising. Serving as a reminder that it is still an advertisement with an underlying need to appeal to 'mainstream' values, the *CK One* ad blunts its rebellious edge by limiting itself to the use of the paradigm of heterosexuality that is coincidentally pervasive in all the varying adverts for the perfume. Although it aims to extend the boundaries of permissibility, it backslides into reasserting the traditional primacy of the (albeit modified) man-woman unit, and therefore tempers the possible disruption of meaning that the erosion of the distinction between a woman's and a man's fragrance may signify. The blurring of usually distinct gender roles constructed around trivial and arbitrary totems like clothing and perfume presumably helps to foment unsettling and nebulous gender subjectivities. To counter this ambiguity of meaning produced by the perfume, the advert qualifies the object with the byline "for a man or a woman", placed adjacent to the unequivocal image of a man-woman coupling.

While the advert makes an overt attempt to eschew the visual and thematic clichés that are the stock-in-trade of fragrance advertising, it co-opts the most frequently employed 'love' idiom to sell its product. *CK One*, by continuing in the tradition of presenting a narrative of love, finds itself participating in a grand, sentimentalized subject that is at odds with its aura of insouciant 'cool'. The sexually non-specific *CK he*, by contrast, appears to be reminiscent

of the *Charlie* ads of the 1970s, which carried images of forceful, single women and temporarily relegated the topic of romance to the sidelines in order to foreground feminist sentiments.³ Yet, advertising's tendency to adapt to shifting social currents has meant that the portrayal of women in advertisements has changed in accordance with the vicissitudinal status of feminist ideas within society. The strident *Charlie* woman has been replaced by a *cK be* figure who is part-adolescent, part-woman -- demure and waifish. In the professedly 'postfeminist' 1990s, she no longer has to assert herself as a *woman*; now she has the luxury of being a *person*, of just *being*, a condition relayed in suitably vapid terms: "be hot, be cool, just be". In what stands as an example of effective marketing, the motto attending *cK be* avoids alienating any segment of its potential audience by not actually saying anything. On the exterior, its negotiating between established polarities supposedly betrays the radical meanings bottled within the perfume, but these meanings remain unspecified due to the almost infinite connotations of the popular, colloquialized notions of "hot" and "cold".

The invitation to "just be" and actively proclaim an individualist existence in a mass society, is extended by many contemporary advertisements. Frank (1997:44) refers to this strategy of tapping into the need for existential fulfilment as "liberation marketing". In his summation, liberation marketing constitutes a conscious attempt to exploit social grievances that have arisen out of the structure of the capitalist system. Advertising, he continues,

knows that business has conquered the world. And in response it offers not just soaps that get your whites whiter, but soaps that liberate you, soda pops that are emblems of individualism, and counter-hegemonic hamburgers.

state where a mediating language, indicative of Symbolic difference, becomes redundant. At the moment when the connection between the subject of the advert and the subject of the consumer is made, the object becomes marginalized as a mere conduit between the two selves.

The manner in which the "gaze" is constructed in figure 4 raises complex issues of power in the relationship between adverts and consumers. Although the home-boy advertisement is composed of multiple subjects, only a single character gazes directly into the camera, hence subduing the threatening impact of the pictured scene. Visual contact by the advertising subject is a necessary element of an advert but the effect of endowing three subjects with point-blank facial expressions would possibly cause its audience to recoil from the severity of the picture. The inclusion of the white character, for the ostensible purpose of flaunting a racially mixed image, could perhaps be apprehended as an attempt to allay feelings of intimidation that white consumers may feel on being confronted by sullen black teenagers. Significantly, the gaze of the white youth is averted while his counterparts, one of whose eyes are obscured by the shadow cast by his hat, look on. His oblique stare automatically nullifies him as a threat, though his positioning in the photograph defends his prominence within the scene. While he also occupies less advertising space than the black protagonist, his presence looms larger than that of the teenager at his side.

Of the set of postcard adverts issued simultaneously by *Levi's* are two which star the same white male in different poses -- in figure 5, he walks bowleggedly through a street's intersection and in figure 6, his rear faces the camera while he is turned towards a check-out point in a store. Not interesting

or compelling in themselves, the symbolism of these adverts becomes evident when they are considered in relation to figure 4. The black males are depicted as a collective, having to share their space with each other *and* with another white male, while the man in figures 5 and 6 is featured individually as the lone subject. The casting of black characters in supplementary roles appears to be an aspect of a systemic bias towards catering to a consuming public presumed to be white. To be compared is the (expensive) two-page magazine layout filled with a racially neutral image of the crocodile with the "homeboy" ad, which was distributed free. In an effort to excuse these imbalances in representation, advertisers claim recourse to readership demographics and index figures establishing magazine audiences to be predominantly white, as the primary determinants in their campaigns. The postcard medium, then, seems to provide a viable outlet for black representation as it is not dependent on a host media context. Postcards and other free media, distributed usually in stores and eating places, act as safer options for advertisers in that they are aimed at target markets that are usually bypassed by the print media.⁶

In terms of the stylistic content of figure 4, the hybridization of American and South African 'ghetto' chic has been deliberately synthesized in order to capture a South African township audience, whose American cultural pretensions are manipulated. The print ads of *Levi's* may be locally formulated, but their cultural references are rooted quite deeply in a foreign milieu. Also partaking in this vein, figure 7 borrows the famously American image of the "line-up" to display the varying cuts of jeans that *Levi's* markets. The witty conflation of the numbered identity system of *Levi's* with that of the criminal parade betrays an unintended irony: where the trademarked styles of

jeans are presumed to establish the distinctiveness of the criminals, they are actually defined more felicitously by their jail identities. Prison identity numbers are arbitrary abstractions of the 'real' identities, yet they, at least, bear some relation to the individualized actions of those given the designations. On the other hand, the jeans numbers represent a further degree of abstraction in that they are determined by the line-up members' passive choices of pre-packaged, dissociated consumer items.

Arising from the juxtaposition of the image of incarceration with the theme of sartorial free-choice is a tension yielding another ironic moment that inadvertently betrays the true status of consumption as a paradoxically constituted area. To underwrite its official motif of variety and choice, the advert appropriates the condition of racial heterogeneity; the egalitarian positioning of the line-up poseurs, despite their contrasting gender, skin-colour and aesthetic determinations, lends sanction to the idea of consumption as being democratic. But since advertisements work hard to offer an idealized and thus contrived perspective of human relations, the meanings suppressed within readily seep through. As figure 7 promotes its ideal, it synchronically undercuts its celebration of difference by subjecting it to a framework of sameness. Racial variegation aside, the group's homogeneity is revealed in its slavish adherence to a singular fashion and consumeristic ethic. Yet the conflictual meanings generated by the "line-up" advert should not be interpreted as an aberrance: it is the *modus operandi* of advertising to co-opt socially current signs, irrespective of their political import, to bolster its own appeal. Unfortunately, advertising also subverts the messages it appropriates by subordinating them to a code of capitalist-defined similarity.

The 'progressive' garnishing of the line-up advert barely conceals its subtly sexist orientation. Almost tilting the sexual balance in favour of the females, the confident stare of the woman in the centre transforms her into the most potent figure of empowerment, setting her apart from her shifty peers. On initial inspection, the image of the topless woman seems less sexually exploitative as the men themselves are shirtless and reciprocally sexualized, thus pre-empting possible criticisms of the female's depiction. Of the three figures who are partially clothed, the woman on the right effects the most titillating image, however. Her status as the advert's sexual pivot is confirmed when noting the direction of the averted looks of the two men to her left. Their ogling is not blatant, but their interest is unmistakably being aroused by the spectacle of the woman's coy cloaking of her breasts. Her covering of herself, in accordance with the rules of propriety, means that she cannot hold her identity number. This, of course, fashions a pretext for the unbuttoning of her jeans as her fly appears to be the logical place for accommodating her identity. Unlike the others, who actively clutch on to their boards, she is 'penetrated' by hers. And, rounding off the sexual image, she is without shoes, making her more vulnerable than her cohorts. The difference between her portrayal and that of the "517" woman seems to be attributable to the fact that she is the only one wearing gender-specific jeans, which are "fw" -- for women. Where the unisex trousers are non-sexual and the norm, the women's are invested with obviously sexual qualities. But though she has been assigned a sexual role, it is a sexuality based on passivity, on being the object of others' desire.

The advertising blitz orchestrated around the lesser-known *Tommy Hilfiger* label has made the name as ubiquitous as those of *Levi's* and *Calvin Klein*.

What is distinctive about the marketing of the brand is that, in combination with its cultural references, it uses the additional sign of place. The *Tommy* label boldly appropriates the American flag by using its colours in its logo and in many of the adverts, as in the one for *Tommy Girl* (Figure 8), the flag acts as a backcloth to scenes of fresh-faced youths looking happy in landscapes that are identifiably American. *Tommy Girl* differs from the other *Tommy Hilfiger* adverts of groups in footloose poses as it features a woman on her own. As the advert propagates images of Americana, it also utilizes a feminist angle to sell the idea of womanly freedom. Female empowerment appears to be the advert's dominant message when the text is read in isolation as "Tommy Girl -- a declaration of independence". But this meaning is rapidly displaced by the image of the undulating flag in its promotion of a jingoistic interpretation of a "declaration of independence". The involvement of the flag unavoidably imposes a constraint on the meaning of "independence" -- where it could have been construed subjectively, the flag creates a prescribed notion of independence. More so than any advert discussed thus far, figure 8 stands as the most explicit indicator of the cultural imperialism that consumption acts as a carrier for.⁷

"Independence" as a virtue cannot be faulted, but when its meaning is explicitly Americanized and inserted into a South African context, its incongruity should be interrogated. Yet the invisibility of the "illogical" connections that adverts make (Williamson, 1988:29) will allow the *Tommy Girl* connection to go unnoticed. For the most part, the advertising process is characterised by its dextrous connections of different systems of meaning that are ostensibly logical and objective, but deeply flawed. Functioning chiefly at the level of image, adverts weave meanings intently for the goal of eliciting

superficial responses that preclude thoughtful contemplation thereof. The manner in which *Tommy Girl* is constructed bears testimony to this sleight-of-hand technique -- the image of the flag, combined with the advert's endorsement of the positive sign of independence, consequently endows the flag with the same significations. Hence, the American flag is forwarded as a positive symbol, immediately ratifying the whole ideological system of beliefs accompanying it. While *Calvin Klein* and other designer adverts are selling signs of status or sexual potency, *Tommy Girl* is selling the foundation of the entire production, advertising and consumption complex. It is peddling capitalism itself, the ideology with which the American flag has become synonymous.

The limited appeal of print advertisements have made advertisers recognize the commercial benefits of incorporating advertising into lived contexts. Advertisers' use of billboards, public transport vehicles and sponsorship deals as advertising media has become so commonplace that the nature of their encroachment on public space is rarely questioned. Differentiating this form from other types of advertising is the necessary intersection of advertising space with the medium of place, a widespread manifestation of which are the product installations that have become obligatory in department stores. In these places, elaborate displays comprised of life-sized posters and television sets running commercials vie for consumer attention. The products too are their own advertisements -- each label is constituted of a diverse range of apparel that collectively endorse each other.

Purely defined, the place-based medium of advertising is where the “demographics of reader, viewer or listener are controlled by the location in which the message is delivered” (McAllister, 1996:64). Place-based advertising, unlike traditional advertising methods which tend to be more speculative in design, is said to be attractive to marketers because of its propinquity to its target market. Whereas advertising normally depends on the mediation of newspapers, magazines and television, point-of-sale advertisements are able to direct their spiels at consumers during their most likely time of consumption. For the almost aggressively scientific control exercised by advertisers over place-based advertising, it can be said to constitute a ‘hard’ sell, even though Cook (1995:10-11) asserts that luxuries like designer products lend themselves to the ‘soft’ sell, tickling or teasing their consumers into buying and relying on the mood created around their objects rather than on a method of direct exhortation. The degree of these adverts’ manipulation of consumers in a place-based situation exceeds the amount of leverage held by advertisers in fashion magazines, for example, where editorial control can be surrendered entirely to the marketing *sine qua non*. As McAllister (1996:85) explains, the place is a text that advertisers are able to purify by converting it into a “synergistic textual dance” that utilizes both aural and visual elements for maximum obtrusiveness. In stores, advertisers have the power to sculpt their environments solely according to commercial considerations.

These environments are not finite and enclosed; those physical boundaries suggested by the actuality of place are made more malleable by the architectural features of their broader locale. With the re-organization of urban areas, retail stores have become amassed within the mega-spaces of

malls which provide common chambers of movement between shops and their entrance-points. The heightening of competition resulting from their close proximity to each other has led stores to stretch the limitations of their allotted areas and to focus their advertising outwards. To attract mall traffic, point-of-sale adverts are often erected near doorways for clear visibility, as is shown by the *Foschini's* display pictured in figure 9. Nevertheless, doorway layouts are designed merely as prefatory presentations for prospective consumers who, once lured inside, are subsequently confronted with the central advertising exhibits. In figure 9, the *Levi's* installation is constructed so as to enable the label to be completely self-referential, circularly pointing towards itself -- the mounted *Levi's* wall-hanging is situated adjacent to the *Levi's* "Kung Fu" poster, both of which advertise the garments underneath. Tautologically re-enacting this motion, the advertised clothes also exist as advertisements as each constituent item carries the *Levi's* brand-name.

From an advertising perspective, this self-reflexivity is necessary as it helps to establish the label's identity within itself, as well as to consolidate it against other labels contending for attention in a confined area. Figure 9 sees the *Levi's* installation placed immediately next to a *Calvin Klein* one, which showcases its wares in a similar fashion. Unexpectedly, companies are not averse to having their products compete so closely with one another, and included in *Levi's*' retail criteria is the stipulation that other brands be carried alongside its own, the reason given for which is that competition benefits long-term commercial aims (Davids, 1998). The paradigm of competitive capitalism is, in fact, appropriately played out in the phenomenon of branding. As the popularity of designer labels is predicated on the persuasiveness of advertising initiatives to promote their desirability, their expansion is

potentially limitless. The arrival of one brand invariably hastens the emergence of a rival brands intent on exploiting the market that has been moulded around the originating item. Since commodities possess sign-values that are meant to render them all attractive, consumers are conditioned to desire them all. Propelling this desire are the apparent differences in brand significations that enhance their perceived distinctiveness. In the *Calvin Klein* cosmetic installation pictured in figure 10, a television set, to a backdrop of perfumes, lotions and leather pouches, loops the brand's adverts as a reminder of what exactly they are purchasing. When the products were introduced in South African stores, television sets remained switched on, but the set in figure 10 becomes activated only at the consumer's behest, a detail that lends an apt touch to the purportedly interactive nature of point-of-sale advertising.

The infrastructural characteristics of the spaces that place-based advertisements inhabit comprise a significant aspect of their effectiveness. Not only are consumers manipulated into buying through forceful sales techniques, but their demographics and their reactions, manifested in their decisions to buy or not, are capable of being monitored more accurately in the panoptical milieu of an open-planned store. In this intimidating environment, on-site promotions also tend to ensure the reduction in consumer response-time between the moment of seeing an advert and the moment of consuming. Because consumers have a diminished chance of being able to evaluate their decisions, consuming assumes a volatility that is facilitated, or perhaps hampered, by the recent installment of accessible mechanisms of credit. Without the delayed payment agreements initiated by retailers eager for profit, designer goods would be beyond the reach of many consumers. In Davids' (1998) view, the success of *Levi's* is attributable mainly to the availability of

credit, without which its predominantly unsalaried target market of eleven to nineteen year-olds would be impotent. Easily obtainable credit therefore extends the domain of consumption to embrace, or ensnare, the economically disenfranchised by converting them into newly constituted consumers.

Advertising and Ideology

The economical merging of the respective organs of consumption accomplished through the appositional stationing of advertisements with products, emblemizes the increasingly sophisticated functioning of the consumption ethic. Despite the incontrovertibility of the evidence pointing to consumption as the consummation of the collaborative predeterminations of the hegemonic forces of production, advertising, retail, finance and the media, it continues to be posited as an autonomous process of self-affirmation. Unarguably, consumption is the manifest end-result of meticulous planning. In its initial stages, consumers are cajoled into voluntarily subjecting themselves to a form of surveillance by surrendering personal information (Maxwell, 1996:110). Market research of this kind is geared towards ensuring the success of proposed product-lines. Given these institutional attempts at establishing the dominance of consumption as a mode of behaviour and at perpetuating its base ideology, it is logical then that the perception of consumption as a contrivance remains suppressed. The functioning of ideology, as is stated in the preceding discussion, is predominantly imperceptible because it is achieved through the active, though perhaps not consciously realized, co-operation of those within its sovereignty. Williamson's (1988:44) definition of ideology usefully illustrates the mechanism by which advertising upholds and promotes the ideology of consumerism -- in ideology, as in advertising, "assumptions are

made about us which we do not question, because we see them as 'already' true". To sell their products, advertisers employ signs they presume to be current with consumers who, in return, pursue these signs for the same reasons. However, their assumptions have differing motivations. Consumers seek approval, whereas advertisers wish to instill the lack mentioned earlier. The notion of presumption is suggestive of actions that are reflexive and automatic, and does not account for the manipulation involved in the assigning of values to commodities for the production of intentionally precise meanings.

The effects of advertising are more insidious as adverts do not confine themselves to organizing meaning within themselves. As ideological constituents of a systemic edifice, it is their understood purpose to uphold the principles supporting the entire structure. Through their enactment of correlations between socio-cultural values and consuming, adverts are responsible for naturalizing consumption, for establishing it as a viable social behaviour necessary for the procurement of social acceptance. While the correspondence between signs and objects may be logically implausible, the repetitive intoning of the same message by the infinitely spread corpus of advertisements has the cumulative effect of legitimating that connection. The subliminal conversion of mores into commodities in adverts like those of *Levi's*, *Calvin Klein* and *Tommy*, is undertaken as a matter of course. It is also done with visible success, thereby serving as an indication of the commonly accepted rationality of the equation.

When advertisers are permitted to engage in the practice of transforming meaning, they are subsequently left free to structure it in accordance with

their own needs. Depending on their popularity, no meanings are considered incompatible with the advertising impulse. Because 'progressive' values of gender and racial equality and democracy are constitutive of the present social discourse, their traditionally inimical relation to the conservative, profit-oriented drive presents no barrier to their being appropriated by advertising. This perhaps presents the most disquieting aspect of consumption as it is currently manifested. As the adverts of *Calvin Klein*, *Levi's* and *Tommy Hilfiger* show, the coating of their artefacts with ostensibly enlightened veneers helps to foster the impression that consuming is an enlightened activity. They have used the resonantly political paradigm of democracy to forward the idea of consumption as an egalitarian activity by extracting the concept of choice inherent to democracy and investing it in consumption. They have convincingly promoted the belief that consumption offers consumers the the "right to choose", but what remains unarticulated is that consumers are only allowed to choose between commodities, and not between consuming and not consuming at all.

NOTES

¹ There have been attempts by organizations, one of which is the Canadian *Adbusters* collective, to subvert the advertising form by using it to promote an anti-consumption objective. However, their efforts to run their adverts on national television in North America have been thwarted by network banning orders.

² In a personal interview (14 April 1998) with the Deputy Managing Director of the *Hunt Lascaris* ad agency, Brenda Ross, it was revealed that the targeted categories of consumers for designer products, are those between L.S.M.s 3 and 7. L.S.M. is a 'lifestyle measure' index that is based on roughly thirteen criteria, amongst which are those of sex, race, age, income, political affiliations, personal ambitions, geographical location and home, vehicle and domestic appliance ownership. In the survey conducted by C.C.V. television in

1993, only a third of L.S.M. 3 and half of L.S.M. 4 owned television sets. TV commercials would thus only be seen by a small segment of the target audience and not justify the cost of airing them.

³ The 'progressiveness' of the ideas expressed in these adverts are questionable, however. Because of the common appeal of feminism in the 1970s, before the much-documented backlash, the usage of this particular message in advertisements aimed at women provided the best means of attracting them to a product.

⁴ Besides asserting that their products are not expensive, marketers of branded products try to justify their high prices with the claim that their overseas-produced items are relatively more costly due to financial exchange rates. Nonetheless, the prices of designer goods are exorbitant in comparison to those that have not been assigned designer status. The willingness of consumers to pay more money for a product with a label than for one without, provides some indication of consumer perceptions of the status of branded commodities.

⁵ Carol-Anne Davids, a marketing employee at *Levi's*, cited that in the U.S., where the jeans are normally priced and worn by a larger number of people, *Levi's* are not considered designer products. Although it may be debated whether that is reason enough to modify its classification, it qualifies as a designer label in South Africa.

⁶ With the predominance of L.S.M.s through which to define demographic categories, advertisers and marketers claim to ignore classifications of race and class. Marketing executives like Anne-Marie Strauss (18 February 1998) of *Markinor* opt for categories that are not politically resonant, such as 'urban' or 'youth' markets. However, when Carol-Anne Davids explains that *Levi's* is an "aspirational" brand, she is unwittingly revealing the class specification of the company's target audience. *Levi's* uses ghetto images in its advertising precisely because they are able to speak to the market it wishes to secure.

⁷ In a shameless promotional campaign run by *Edgars* in mid-1997, it itemized each of the American brand-names it stocked in order to celebrate America, the country. The store went as far as distributing bite-sized pieces of *Kentucky Fried Chicken* to passers-by in its Cape Town branch.

Chapter 3

CONSUMPTION AND THE PHENOMENON OF GLOBALIZATION

The ubiquity of imported images and objects dotting the cultural landscape of South Africa has inspired many to comment on the nature of the country's assimilation into the culture of the global economy. As more *Guess?*, *Diesel* and other stores devoted exclusively to the selling of overseas brand names burgeon in shopping malls, these pronouncements have become frequent and commonplace. Fueling these observations further is the visibly altered complexion of advertising, which serves as a compelling index of changes in consumption, and more generally, in cultural trends that have evolved in accordance with those occurring globally. In the adverts highlighted, the unilateral brandishing of American imagery -- somewhat equivocally in the *Levi's* ad and rather ingenuously in the *Tommy Girl* promotion -- presupposes an already locally existing currency of images and sentiments that are manifestly exotic to the South African context but are assumed, by advertisers and marketers, to be indigenous to it. By uninterruptedly promoting themes of a foreign derivation, these adverts are inescapably emblems of a process that is enacted under the auspices of a globally-inclusive, consumption-based culture, but is little more than a global movement towards economic and cultural homogenization.

Although suggestive of a profound shift in consumer relations, the global proliferation of consumer novelties does not, in itself, betray a full explanation of the developmental intricacies of globalization. Rather than being treated as holograms or as optical signs of underlying processes (Jameson, 1989:383), consumption is often considered according to its effect on cultural life and on the formation of subjectivities, instead of as *an effect*. Viewing consumption as a dialectical outcome of capitalist forces requires that the complex of interactions responsible for its form, otherwise overlooked in the consideration of consumption as a purely cultural

phenomenon, be acknowledged. It is through this initial confirmation of the profound interconnectedness between consumption and capitalism that the issue of globalization can then be engaged. Properly understood, globalization is the organizing principle of the political economy, being the mode by which capital has dexterously adapted itself to globally diverse conditions subsequently incorporated into its functioning. The ability of capital to enshrine its logic globally appears to be the characterising feature par excellence that defines contemporary capitalism against its earlier operative patterns.

The formulation of consumption as the after-image of capitalism acquires an additional stratum of complexity through the introduction of the topic of globalization, which necessitates the detailing of a particularized and concrete account of the workings of the capitalist system. Although global capital obeys the essential logic of capitalism in its pursuit of the profit motive, its manoeuvrings are multifarious in scope. Besides its innovations in the spheres of production, marketing and consumption, the influence of global capitalism extends into the political and cultural domains, where the exercise of its leverage is largely unhindered. And, because it is characterised by its tangled and covert proceedings, as well as by its spatial diffuseness, the difficulty of theorizing globalization has often been noted. But, as Yoshimoto (1996:109) explains, a clarification of the process needs to be attempted, despite the possibility that a

totalizing thesis on globalization would be vulnerable to criticism, easily invalidated by counterexamples which contradict the logic of the thesis. However, because of its complexity, globalization needs to be theorized and made comprehensible... If we do not wish to be trapped in a state

of complete powerlessness, we sometimes need to take a risk of being reductive. The urgency of understanding globalization far outweighs the danger of constructing a theory with gaps and holes.

Whether this powerlessness can, in the immediate future, be transmuted into a systematic opposition to the global behemoth remains contentious, comprising a debate that is beguiled by visceral responses of hope or despair at the seemingly irresistible power of capital. Can the aggregated globalizing entity really be made to retreat its advances by discrete localities who are named as such precisely because of their subordination to an overarching global structure, who are 'local' as a consequence of the existence of a 'global'? Articulated in these terms, the supremacy of the global appears to weaken the potency of any potential counter-response.

The formidability of the challenge necessary to halt globalizing tendencies has not quelled the debate around the phenomenon, however; instead, perhaps due to the intractability of the problem, it has intensified. Despite the variances in the approaches to globalization, some of which emphasize cultural strategies of resistance and others economic, an awareness of its urgency is common to all, as is the incredulity towards the official mythology of globalization which elides any mention of the states of crisis engendered globally by transnational capitalism. Using the benign vocabulary of a 'global community' brought together by a freemarket system of exchange between disparate nations, the mythology uncritically eulogizes the process: in doing so, it deceptively advances the interests of capitalism by venturing to speak on behalf of a world with purportedly common goals, while serving the needs of capital only, thereby pre-empting any interrogation of the legitimacy of global capital. Because of its favourable balance of power, capital is able to

dominate the discourse on globalization, successfully consigning interpellations thereof to the periphery, where less influential localities reside.

Globalization as a Manifestation of the Political Economy

It may be axiomatic to state that a study of consumption placed within a framework of the political economy invariably devolves into a discussion on capitalism and its manipulations. Approached in this way, consumption is capitalism domesticized, having made the leap from its shadowy, abstracted realm into the day-to-day experiences of its subjects who, through commodity consumption, are implicated in the continued existence of the capitalist edifice. Were a less structurally based exegesis of consumption to be forwarded, it would still be possible to map a circuitous relationship between globalization and consumption, the uniform pervasiveness of which is an outcome of global economic developments. Yet an understanding of the two phenomena formed without a review of the role capital plays in its generation would be inadequate, as capitalism provides the groundwork to both occurrences. How they differ is that where consumption is capital's culturally-oriented trope, globalization refers to its organizational dynamics, incorporating the modes of production and consumption, both of which have been transformed in the period of global capitalism.

A focus on globalization as the material result of capital's realignment of itself renews the consideration of the topic of production. While globalizing rhetoric stresses the internationalization of consumption, it is in the foundational area of production that globalism is truly manifested. The changes in capital's geographic arrangement, coupled with its modernization

of technology enabling the advanced mobility of production forces, have produced the 'spatial compression' that is pivotal to globalization theory. The discussion on consumption conducted earlier shows that the inflections in the compositional status of consumption reflect those metamorphic developments in the field of commodity production: thus, the increase in consumption points to a concomitant growth in production, essential to capital's vocational urge towards self-reproduction. As capital exacts its demands through consumption and the sphere of needs, it occupies a concurrent spatial dimension which, as Smith (1984:81) asserts, is an attribute of the use-value of commodities. However, the palpable property of space similarly infers its own parameters, suggesting a closure that is anathema to capitalism. For capitalism to follow the paradigm of growth upon which it is predicated, an extension of these borders is necessary to its requirement for open-endedness. Yet closure inevitably threatens via the prospect of needs saturation, compelling capital to augment its intensive servicing of known and developed markets with new markets in which to hawk its products. Scanning for new bases of operation therefore comprises a functional step in the evolutionary progress of capitalism, staving off an inertia that could signal the onset of an internal crisis.

This spatial movement of capital in consumption, in turn, prompts its spatial expansion in the area of production which can, in fact, be considered the feature that differentiates global capitalism from its antecedent phases of colonialism and imperialism. As in the arguments denying any crucial difference between capitalism and late capitalism¹, it has been contended that the perception of globalization as a unique form of capitalism is erroneous, given capital's pre-existing global diversification in production and consumption, the beginnings of which have been traced to the sixteenth

century when the world market was conquered (Pieterse, 1997:373). But, from Yoshimoto's (1996:113) statement that it is not the internal mechanism of (global) capitalism that has changed but its organization, it may be deduced that capitalism has always surveyed the globe as its canvas, and it is in the specifics of its organizational capacity that global capitalism is understood to be distinct. Abiding by the view that globalization does not present a fundamentally altered model of capitalism but is nevertheless divergent from its previous incarnations, Dirlik (1996:28) describes global capitalism as representing an "unprecedented penetration of local society globally by the economy and culture of capital". Of the distinguishing changes undergone by capitalism, he continues, those in the field of production and, more exactly, in the division of labour -- which has become transnationalized -- are pre-eminent. Again, this innovation may not be new, but

new technologies have expanded the spatial extension of production, as well as its speed, to an unprecedented level. These same technologies have endowed capital and production with unprecedented mobility, so that the location of production seems to be in a constant state of change, seeking for maximum advantages of capital over labour, as well as to avoid social and political interference (hence, flexible production).

(Dirlik, 1996:29)

At the core of capital's geographic encroachments is its pursuit of a dominance over labour, the rising cheapness of which guarantees it an ever-increasing surplus-value. Since the cost of commodities is dependent upon labour expenses, value in motion cannot be achieved through an increase in manufactured output alone. If they were to be produced in developed countries with relatively high wage levels, commodity prices would rise and consumption would drop. Soaring rates of consumption are thus only made

possible through low production expenditures incurred in 'Second World' or 'Third World' areas hungry for invested resources.² Contemporary capitalism, according to Lee (1993:114), is characterised by a vast increase in the rate and magnitude of surplus-value, outstripping levels attained when labour costs were fixed. But as capital becomes more mercurial, it scours the globe for cheaper labour, a condition responsible for the exponential growth of its profit margins.

The avoidance (or suppression) of "social and political interference" acts as the lever enabling capital's control over labour. Robinson (1996:13), in somewhat hyperbolic language that is nonetheless adequate to his intention of demonstrating the severe consequences of global economic developments, claims that globalization "denotes a world war" because of its internationalization of the inequities and conflicts that afflict capitalist society. Under global capitalism, the interests of labour are sidelined by the captains of industry: while this may not approximate a situation of war-like conflict, it suggests an intense and deliberate struggle concealed in the more sanguine portrays of an enfranchised global community which shares its ambitions and values. This tension does not stem solely from the realization of the capitalist dynamic that creates a conflictual relationship between capital and labour, but also from an active capitalist manipulation aimed at amassing an increasing surplus-value that prevents a materially prosperous labour force from ever emerging.

Capital dodges political and social "interference" ostensibly to "free market functions of non-economic considerations" (Greider, 1997:72)³ that are really those interventions geared towards safeguarding labour against capital's worst deprivations. Alternately, this avoidance can be recognized as a capitalist obstruction of nation-state sovereignty. For the fulfilment of its economic ideal, capital seeks to bypass traditional political boundaries, yet it can only accomplish this by means of an engagement with the political sphere. The seemingly untrammelled functioning of corporations in global territories is the effect of capital's orchestration of transnational commercial agreements like those of GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs) and NAFTA (North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement). De-regulatory in intent, the design of these treaties is expressly focused around the aggrandizement of corporate entities, a process that is licenced through the vocabulary of 'free trade'. With the support of these legal covenants, capital is able to circumvent those restrictions on its activities normally enforced by an autonomous nation-state. In accordance with the terms of these agreements, the political determinations of governments, who are prohibited from developing new social welfare programmes (an IMF stipulation) and from regulating business contravention of labour and environmental laws, are greatly curbed. Often, the barest indication of governmental interference in 'the market' unleashes the threat of a capital flight, a mechanism that ensures the full compliance of state bodies.⁴ Although capital mobility is a real occurrence, it is often the mere voicing of this threat that keeps governments in its thrall (MacEwan, 1994:7). Thus wages are kept low for fear that production facilities be transported to areas more amenable to the demands of multinationals.

The abuses confronted by labour through capital's enlistment of global localities for the production of commodities at 'competitive' prices are not

confined to the payment of wages, which are below minimum levels and exclusionary of benefits and job security provisions. Remarking on the itinerancy of capital, Greider (1997:73) writes that

manufacturers have moved around the Pacific Rim in search of bottom-rung conditions: from Hong Kong, Korea, and Taiwan to Thailand and Indonesia; from there to China, Vietnam and Bangladesh; perhaps on next to Burma, Nepal, or Cambodia. Since the world has a nearly inexhaustible supply of poor people and supplicant governments, the market keeps searching for lower rungs: no-one can say where the bottom is. Industrial conditions are not getting any better...

The incidence of death caused by coercive and abject working conditions have been documented even in the mainstream press. Greider continues to state that after the fire at the Thailand toy factory which killed approximately two hundred employees, all evidence of the disaster was removed and production resumed in another locale within the same country. Taking cover in their status as economic institutions, corporations remain unaccountable for their excesses, for which they relinquish responsibility⁵. The social distresses incurred by their need for profit-making are considered beyond their sphere of liability. So, while the political and social arenas are readily manipulable for the attainment of economic goals, the political and social fall-out of economic engineering is conveniently deemed to fall outside of capital's jurisdictional powers.

Since localities are, within themselves, unevenly affected by the intrusions of capital, the possibility of a combined resistance against its violations is effectively precluded. In addition to the structural support provided by compulsory agreements overseen by the hegemonic World Trade Organization,

globalization ideology succeeds because of the perception, promulgated by free-market thinking, that the proceeds generated by globalization will be released into its operative realms. These notions are however, not wholly fraudulent as they bear a tangential relation to real conditions, hence their veneer of legitimacy. Globalized thinking has gained acceptance partly because the phenomenon does generate wealth in outerlying economies: the global economy has been arranged so that wealth is not confined just to 'First World' countries, but is dispersed throughout the system. Only certain, exclusive elements of these societies tend to benefit from this capital circulation though: globalization. Chomsky (1997:6) declaims, internationalizes the 'Third World' prototype whereby the two-tiered model of social organization, based on stark differences in ownership of resources, is imposed on every locality brought into its fold.⁶ As Dirlik (1996:31) says, the transnationalization of production calls into question

the distinctions between the First and Third Worlds. Parts of the Third World are today on the pathways of transnational capital and belong in the "developed" sector of the world economy. Likewise, parts of the First World marginalized in the new global economy are hardly distinguishable in way of life from what used to be viewed as the Third World.

Although, prior to their initiation into the global economy, marginalized economies had been impoverished, globalization has heightened existing economic differences through its disruption of traditional modes of subsistence. Within agriculture, modern agribusiness has displaced rural peasantry who are unable to compete with giant corporations. The removal of border tariffs has, as well, meant that economies normally protected from lower-priced foreign commodities are now forced to accept them into domestic

markets. Millions of peasant farmers in places like Thailand have been uprooted and turned into cheap industrial labour in the cities (Greider, 1997:73). At the same time, a small, nascent managerial class profiting from the incursions of capital helps to maintain the overall stability of the society and of the emerging status quo.

Cataloguing the events following the toy factory tragedy, Greider notes that the Thai had believed that a worldwide boycott of the factory's products had been under way when, in actuality, toy sales were unaffected. While this may constitute a minor detail of fact in the metanarrative of globalization, it betrays the disjunction between the degenerate reality of commodity production and the glossy, fantasy world of commodity consumption. As reified forms, commodities are seldom associated with the circumstances of their creation. In spite of a media-generated consumer awareness of production conditions, the dissonance between their cognizance thereof and their consumption habits persists because of the overriding perception of consumption as a detached, self-enclosed sphere. During the process of objectification that is consumption, the imaginative leap required for the visualization of the production process is discouraged, and the relationship between the consuming subject and the object -- a perceptible, tangible reality -- is promoted as the only one worthy of regard. The global displacement of production appears to intensify commodity fetishism by doubling the invisibility of the forces of production. Where before, commodities were consumed near their places of production and industry was merely unseen, now it has been banished to the nethermost stretches of the world, to culturally distinct societies with whom an identification based on a shared sense of humanity has, notwithstanding the grandiloquence of globalizing lingo, not been effected.

Consumption highlights the paradoxical nature of the globalizing trend towards asserting both homogeneity and fragmentation -- it acts as the cultural adhesive element of globalization, but it accomplishes this through a cultivation of individualist tendencies, channeling "people's activities into a fixation with the search for individual consumption and survival" (Robinson, 1996:17). Contributing to the longevity of the global system, the preoccupation with the needs of the self serves as means of diverting attention away from the whole as it is constituted collectively. The paradox is elicited in the construction of globalization itself. Although globalization stresses the primacy of the global entity, betokening a one-way movement towards the consolidation of a globalized system, it simultaneously renews the visibility of the local, an engagement with which is necessary for the advancement of globalizing processes.

In their iteration of Wallerstein's (in Robertson, 1991:69) formulation of globalism as entailing an assimilation into the universal and conversely, an adherence to the particular, Morley and Robins (1995:116) state that globalization institutes a new dynamic of re-localization, achieving a changed nexus of global-local interaction. This revival of the local is manifested in two contrasting ways. To gain a foothold in diverse areas, the local presents multinational corporations with the opportunity to parade themselves as local phenomena through their image and marketing adaptations to the cultural specifications of local regions. The impingements of the local by the global are thus made to appear less invasive and consequently, more tolerable to inhabitants of localized regions, serving to "further mystify the location of

power" (Dirlik, 1996:34). Despite the efforts of capital to habituate itself to local environments and render its presence less conspicuous, the mere condition of capital -- overarching, foreign and entrenched in areas where it had no prior representation -- catalyses a negative reaction to its occupancy of local environments. Aspiring to counter the tendencies of capital to cast each realm it encounters in a capitalist mould, the local attempts to assert its distinctiveness against the homogeneous characteristics of globalist culture, thereby transforming itself into a location of resistance. Whether these strategies are adequate to the task of unseating global capital will be addressed later but, owing to the worldwide naturalization of the economic imperative of investment and growth, local intransigence tends to be more culturally than economically focused. Though it should be motivated by the wide-ranging structural adjustments made by capital, it is the cultural dimension of capital, consumption, with its propagation of globally uniform symbols, that elicits negative response from the local.

Wallerstein's idea of the interpenetration of the global and the local signals a reciprocity in their relationship where the inroads made by global capital into the local sphere are met by an equivalent motion of the local on its global counterpart, a movement that invests the local with an influence comparable with that of the global. However, the local is not necessarily accredited with an equal agency through its invocation by the discourse of globalization. Global capital welcomes variation, as Ross and Trachte (1991:3) state, and an acknowledgement of the distinctiveness of the local does not approximate capital's surrender to its conditions. Capital's employment of the terminology of the local enables it to tighten its grip on differing locales and does not betray a respect for culturally relative norms. Since globalization pays mere lip-service to the notion of diversity, acts of cultural affirmation are therefore

valid reactions to the presence of capital in local regions, yet they remain a rather limited response to the magnitude and scope of capitalist power.

Amplifying the concept of the universal and the particular, Friedman (1995:75) explains that the global system

involves the articulation between expanding/ contracting central 'sectors' and *their* emergent/ disappearing peripheries (my italics).

Peculiar to both centre and periphery is a constitutional expansion and contraction, yet belying this apparent parity is the biased nature of their dynamic which dictates that every rhythmical action of the global is answered by an attendant local reaction. The emerging and disappearing of the local is enacted because of the particular adjustments sustained by the global mechanism, meaning that its autonomy is limited by its relationship to the global. As the actions of the local are considered only in their relevance to the centre, the power balance clearly favours the central sectors, the shifting motions of which are seen to reverberate through to the outermost regions of the globe.

Just as the centre's expansion heralds the 'emergence' of the periphery, so its contraction signals the periphery's 'disappearance'. Bringing this conception of emergence into question is the logic determining that the rise of the periphery is only predicated upon the outward growth of the centre. Therefore, any local manifestation of development is qualified by its particular relation to the centre, never advancing beyond the rudimentary stage of emergence. Once established as the centre's periphery, the local remains as such since the terms of its exchange are defined so as to ensure the continual dominance of

the centre. In keeping with the dialectical nature of their interaction, the centre's contraction due to its alleged global fragmentation inspires the periphery's backtracking motion into a state 'disappearance'. Yet the local's reversion into disappearance does not signal a rupture in its connection with the centre. Instead, a disappearing periphery can be interpreted as a response to a contracting centre, though the two conditions are not equivalent. The centre's global dispersal into peripheral areas is meant to signify the transformation of the periphery into regions composed of centres of capital and influence, resembling what was formerly considered the centre but, in spite of this dispersal of capital, the marginality of the periphery in the global economy is still conspicuous. Its disappearance should, according to MacEwan (1994:7), be understood as a movement towards declining growth levels as heightened globalization, to which peripheries are more vulnerable, generates inequality that undermines growth. The growth that is created is not circulated through to labour, which is unable to transcend its wage induced poverty.

Friedman's portrayal of the global system as oscillating between expansionism and compression diverges from the manner in which globalization has been delineated thus far. The evidence of global capital's unfurling across the world discredits the proposition that it has recoiled from its expansionist agenda: as its influence has spread further, the logic it expresses is quite patently expansionist. Fragmentation of central hegemony has occurred only insofar that capital has devised a means by which to disguise its inhabitation of local realms: the delegation of its production duties to its local representatives indicates that the centre has re-organized rather than truncated itself. Under conditions of intense global connectedness and spatial compression effected by the agents of finance, communications, technology,

consumption, amongst others, the world has undoubtedly contracted and changed, indeed making it harder to pinpoint its centre amidst the prevailing global economic, cultural and social similarities. Geographically fixed in Western locations previously, the centre is now a physically blurred entity whose spatial adjustments have been misinterpreted as an abdication of its dominant global position.

A system that operates preferentially, asymmetrically advancing the interests of its constituent members, casts doubt on globalism as it is presently conceived. Considered all-embracing and as open as any freemarket structure, the global mechanism instead accentuates existing imbalances between the centre and the periphery and closes off the possibility of their transformation into equal partners in a truly globalist system. Besides crystallizing the differences between those given access to its organization, the global economic system denies admission to a large proportion of the world's population, its "basket case" element, according to Dirlik (1996:33), who comments that they comprise

those peoples or places that are not responsive to the needs (or demands) of capital, or are too far gone to respond "efficiently", (and) simply find themselves out of its pathways.

Although the areas formally acknowledged as peripheries have been authorized to participate in the globalizing process, albeit under terms prescribed by central institutions of finance and trade, the majority of the world's inhabitants is cut off from its workings. In Amin's (1993:3) analysis, the preponderance of peripheral regions beyond the Western circuit of trading nations do not even qualify as peripheries. Of these, only those countries in

East Asia and South America, who are successfully competitive in the world market, can be named as such. Places insufficiently industrialized and unable to produce an exportable supply of industrial goods are not conferred peripheral status as they are not adequately engaged in the practice of global economics. South Africa, though not marginalized like other African countries who are solely dependent upon the export of agricultural commodities, is a country that has not achieved the distinction of being peripheral yet.

The competitive advantages held by certain areas within the global-local conglomerate is nonetheless not necessarily indicative of the complete exclusion of marginal states from the global economy, an impression that Amin's categorization may mistakenly create. Though structural impediments preclude them from partaking significantly within the system, the measure of the inclusion within the global economic arrangement is sufficient a qualification for their status as peripheries. Localities, however negligible their influence on globalist economics, have already been initiated into its sphere, whose trade and loan conditions they are still subject to. Yet, by way of his perhaps severe judgements, Amin demonstrates the skewed nature of globalizing capital in its effect on the world's economies, the reality of which contradicts globalizing ideology's presumption of equality between trading nations. The reiterated claim of a purported trade parity amongst

states, what Chomsky refers to as neoliberal doctrine (1997:1), and the spurious stress upon the reported fragmentation of the centre, helps to conceal the starkly varied realities faced by constituencies of the global order. Since globalization designates a change in the organizational structure of capitalism rather than in its internal dynamic, the accelerated global dispersal of capital correspondingly does not radically rework the capitalist ethic by distributing capital more evenly on a global scale. Rather, globalization works as capitalism does by building upon existent disparities which are subsequently cemented by capital's drive to generate unmatched levels of profit. Applied to the situation of peripheries under globalization, the condition of 'emergence' is therefore more appropriately signifying of a *relation* that peripheral areas have with the capitalist centre and not of a process of progressive development being enacted in territories newly woven into the fabric of a globalized system of exchange.

Globalization, the Consumption Ethic and the South African Example

So far, the discussion of globalization has broadly explained its dynamic, adumbrating the process by generalizing its interactions between the centres of capital and their peripheries without focusing on individual case studies. Needless to say, the differing mesh of economic and social characteristics of varying domains means that their predicaments are all unique, as are their specific interactions with global capital. Nevertheless, globalization imposes similar constraints on diverging contexts, causing them to confront analagous dilemmas. For this reason, the situation of South Africa vis-à-vis globalization is clarified through an elucidation of the global economy's functioning. Foregrounding globalism's biased design, this analysis conveys the level to which South Africa's globalizing reality conflicts with the

rhetoric, voiced in business circles, extolling its supposedly full participation in the global economy. Ranked according to Amin's system of classification, South Africa's position in the globalized economy is unequivocally unfavourable: its contribution therein is negligible due to its lack of competitiveness in the export of industrial commodities to the world beyond its surrounding states. With an input scarcely registering on the global meter, South Africa has not secured a position in the periphery. Where Far East Asian peripheries bear the brunt of capital's exploitative propensities, being so intensely and inextricably embroiled with global capital, their involvement allows them a measure of bargaining power within the global structure, at the least. By contrast, South Africa's lack of influence leaves it defenceless against the forces of globalization. The distinction then, between the Asian countries and South Africa is that the former, by virtue of their heightened participation in global affairs, are active in the shaping of the discourse of globalization⁸. Existing outside of this discourse conversely renders South Africa passive and entirely beholden to central economic edicts. The recent dispute with Spain and its demands for fishing rights in South African waters highlights this country's vulnerability. For its refusal to grant these rights to European powers, the European Union has retaliated by banning South Africa's usage of the words 'port' and 'sherry' in its labelling of exported products; the E.U., bemoans Williams (1998:9), "has made it clear that the entire trade agreement will depend on South African acquiescence. In short, the E.U. has got us over a barrel...". Despite the egalitarian pretensions of global trade accords in their upholding of quid pro quo terms, the centre continues to strongarm its less powerful counterparts into obeying its diktats.

Its relative quiescence within the hegemonic global structure ironically demystifies the success of globalization ideology in South Africa and in those

localities marginalized by globalist economics. Though it has not experienced large-scale benefits of global trade because of its marginality, a belief in the advantages of the global mechanism and in the sense of global belonging remains locally entrenched. Following its protracted debarment from full international economic and cultural engagement, South Africa's post-apartheid initiation into these activities partially explains prevalent feelings of global belonging, but a cognate aspect of economic life, that of consumption, provides the key to fathoming the potency of the ideology of globalization. Global consumption helps to inspire the formation of a *culturally* informed consciousness that relies upon the global uniformity of consumption patterns as an index of deeper global commonality. Additionally, the failure of structural economics to incorporate peripheries into globalist exchange is countered by globalized consumption's initiation of localities not actively propelling the global economy into its system, treating them as markets for goods manufactured elsewhere and perhaps betraying the ultimate aims of global capital. As a globally cohesive agent, consumption evinces, in relation to more productive economies, the passivity of peripheral areas who do not appear to produce as much as they consume. Where production facilities are confined to certain territories, and ownership of the means of production is even more concentrated, consumption is a diffuse phenomenon capable of penetrating a diversity of locales.

Acting as markets essential to commodity production and distribution, these localities are pivotal to the success of the globalization which does not duly reciprocate their involvement in its processes. The uneven enactment of globalization is a bias unnoticed in the ostensibly unifying field of consumption, wherein global mythology's promotion of the unilateral advantageousness of equal and unfettered global trade is taken for granted.

Because consumption fetishizes the end mode of production, sealing it off hermetically from wider structural developments, it prevails as globalization's most effective ideological weapon. Compared with the picture of global togetherness fostered by consumption, the assertion that globalization is a "strategy for maximum exclusion" (Miyoshi:1995:71) proves to be of little consequence.

The advertisements in Chapter Two visibly demonstrate the manner in which the globalist ethic is forwarded through consumption, disseminating images with a meaning appropriate to the needs of globalization. In fact, their presence in a far-flung location like South Africa is a supposedly honourable testimony to its participation in globalist exchange. Serving to ensure the anchorage of foreign commodities in the local market, advertising allows South Africa, a globally marginal country, to appear as a fully-fledged participant in the global economy by propagating its globally transmitted symbols, such as those of *Levi's* and *Calvin Klein*, in the local context. It is arguably no co-incidence that the country's entry into the universal sphere in the early 1990s appeared to be inaugurated by the appearance of overseas name-brands previously denied to South Africans. Economic sanctions, enforced because of the repressiveness of apartheid, were often surveyed in terms of their effects on consumption and denounced for their curtailment of consumer aspirations towards simulating global consumption habits. Their subsequent removal though, paved the way for the arrival of global commodities into the South African market, emblemizing its re-entry into the globalized realm.

In the global marketing of products, there are essentially two dominant but contrasting strategies of promoting name-brands (McAllister, 1996:196).

Cognizant of distinctive local customs, a proportion of globally operative companies have calculated the advantages of catering to difference for the purpose of securing diverse markets. The modification of advertising methods in accordance with the specifics of place is termed a multinational strategy, while the marketing of products uniformly across national boundaries without any heed to the condition of cultural difference, is called global marketing. For the sake of cost-efficiency, global strategies employ standardized marketing campaigns devised in central locations to maintain brand uniformity, preserving their reputations across diverging contexts (De Mooij, 1991:78). Since brand-named commodities are heavily reliant on image, adapting marketing approaches to suit local tastes inadvertently alters product identities. Marketed by any other means, *Calvin Klein* and *Tommy* products would not possess the characteristics that they presently display. Yet, in this refusal to concede to the peculiarities of the South African market, a prior global consumer identification is presumed. Like most advertising, the adverts discussed are seen to promote values and lifestyle features that they assume are already existent, eliciting apposite responses by consumers making similar suppositions.

The sense of global identification encouraged by advertising benefits from notions of a decentred, fragmented world absent of a singular locus of power, a conception of the world system that allows global marketing strategies to seem legitimate and to conceal the source of advertising manipulations. The cultural symbolism represented in advertisements is paraded as being globalist in descent rather than as being a parochial reflection of particularistic, mainly American, cultural norms. However, the cultural portraits evoked in advertisements are not a synthesis of globalist cultural traits -- their references are specific, as are their commercial and creative origins.

Marketers, on the whole, are publicists for a quasi-globalism that is based upon an assimilationist instead of a multicultural model of inclusiveness. According to the logic of global advertising, the spread of an American image and value system constitutes an adequate attempt at embracing diverse global communities. The usage of the cultural discourse of America over any other nevertheless exposes the ideological basis of global marketing strategy. Hall (1996:2&7) writes that the ideological core of advertising is effective because

it works at both 'rudimentary levels of psychic identity and the drives' and at the level of the discursive formation and practices which constitute the social field.

Advertising manipulates this dependence of psychic identities on larger social discourses for the construction of suitable consumer identifications. Conscious that the constitution of social identity is an act of power (Laclau in Hall, 1996:5), advertisers have prodigiously employed the symbolism of America for the universal magnetism they have come to embody⁹: though *Tommy Girl* does this more explicitly than the other adverts, they are undeniably selling symbols of American and Western culture. Even in the sphere of advertising which, it should be remembered, is not disconnected from capital, the centre operates quite visibly and powerfully through the speech acts in transmitted communications (Habermas in Lash and Urry, 1994:29). Thus the conditions of reception of globally disseminated messages by peripheral areas like South Africa reveals the manner in which power is distributed in the global system. Augmenting their already economically handicapped status, local cultures are decidedly absent from the discourse of globalism as forwarded by global advertising.

This power dynamic rotates continuously in the activity of consumption: though trumpeted as a field of liberation, it camouflages systemically induced powerlessness by accentuating the supposed autonomy of the individual act of consumption. But, although its diversionary constitution dissimulates the unequal economic and cultural nature of global capitalism, the construction of consumption inadvertently displays the form of its set-up. Asserting that the image, a metonym for transmitted communications, has become the basic global commodity, Yoshimoto (1996:25-26) states that

capital now accumulates not only through the circulation of money but also through the circulation of images without end.

The dynamics of the global economy are therefore made discernable when looking upon the source of these globally mediated images -- the centres of capital -- hence confirming, through the proposed equivalence of image and power, that power still lies indisputably in these areas that have traditionally been the loci of economic and cultural influence.

As the overriding aim of this paper has been to explain the logic of capital and globalization, to uncover the style of its mastery over the individualized realm of consumption, the analysis thereof has been macroeconomic in focus. But the thesis that localized phenomena are all subsumed under broader structures unwittingly denies their historical diversity, which is generalized away by their present relation to capital. Consequently, the dialectic between the global and the local appears to be non-mutualistic in composition. Yet a totalizing theory does not necessarily obliterate the existence or the

distinctiveness of the local and importantly, cannot really be formed without its basic constituent element, the local, without which the global itself cannot exist.

The drift of power in the global-local relationship, while leaning in favour of the global, is nevertheless not statically co-ordinated. That the global mega-structure is comprised of the sum of its local parts potentially allows local arenas with space for action. Though opposition to globalization's violations appears to be fermenting in the activist quarters of Western society, the local's almost consistently adverse treatment at the hands of capital could viably act as a spur to the development of a widespread resistance discourse. As global capital seeks to homogenize populations globally, according to Dirlik (1996:35), it simultaneously enhances an awareness of local issues by attempting to assimilate these realms into a predefined mold. Smaller and more immediate in scope, the local embodies a reality that can be grasped, unlike the seemingly infinite, incomprehensible and alienating workings of the globalist mechanism. By being more palpable, the local serves as a site of empowerment wherein populations are able to directly voice their concerns about the impingements of capital on their rights. While capital is spatially dispersed, its effects tend to coagulate in local environments, providing the necessary impetus for the evolution of a place-based struggle. In Soja's (in Morley and Robins, 1995:28) estimation, the concept of space becomes important in this transitional period of globalization:

The current crisis is accentuating spatiality and revealing more clearly than ever before the spatial and locational strategies of capitalist accumulation and the necessity for labour and all segments of society peripheralized by capitalist development and restructuring to create spatially

conscious counterstrategies at all geographical scales, in all territorial locales.

However, it is questionable whether gestures of local resistance, as they are presently manifested, are sufficiently interrogative of the economic codes of globalism. An articulation of the local is not necessarily an indication of a desired eradication of the presence of foreign capital in local milieux. Local struggles are mostly formed around a politics of identity, through which the homogenizing effects of globalization are challenged. Globalization is thus perceived less as an economic invasion than as a cultural movement towards transnational and cultural similarity. By extension, consumption is also viewed through a cultural prism; rather than be considered an economic expression of globalizing capital, it is seen as a corruption of traditionally unique cultural forms. That consumer culture has partially displaced customary cultural rituals is undeniable, but it is arguable whether the path of globalization can be redirected by a cultural counter-movement.

Culturally based resistance, in addition, also problematizes the issue of culture, a terrain that is contested in every national region. Mass cultural action presupposes the existence of class, cultural and racial homogeneity within varying localities which are themselves riven by these divisions. Also, the immobility of cultural identity is taken as a given, whereas the constructs of culture and identity is always in the process of being recreated: in Schlesinger's (in Morley and Robins: 1995:46) words, "identity is not to be considered a 'thing' but a system of relations and representations". The formation of a cultural front against globalization would therefore be vexed by the question of whether any single local cultural manifestation appropriately expresses the diverse constitution of its population. In South Africa, where globalization has become a debated topic since the country's

induction into the global economy, the class and cultural divisions marking the social landscape impedes the creation of a single, unified South African identity. As in areas like Thailand, there are segments of its inhabitants in service to globalist schemes, whose beneficial relation to capital assists in the maintenance of the status quo. Amongst those aiding the process is the middle class which, buttressed by its class position, views itself as being unaffected by the labour and fiscal policies of global capital. Since a high proportion of South Africa's population resides in rural areas, completely marginalized by capital, the potential for their being mobilized against global capital is greatly limited.

Were a consensus regarding the form of the hypothesized action to be effected against globalism's cultural incursions, it would not pose a challenge to either the culture or the economics of globalization. A resistance that does not interrogate the capitalist logic behind the globalist economy will not cause a systemic disturbance; only a localism that recognizes the form of capital's impingement, that would work to contain the power of multinational corporations, is truly critical. As a caveat though, Morley and Robins (1995:117) pointedly state that the claims about the capacities for local autonomies should be treated with skepticism -- localities do not deal with corporations on equal terms and instead do so as supplicants. The unequal relationship between capital and peripheries effectively determines the kind of response that localities are able to stage. In the global arena, localities are

less likely to alienate capital than they are to welcome its advances, despite its exploitative tendencies.

South Africa's desperation for 'foreign investment' has caused its government to renege on its earlier socialist leaning policies for fear that their anti-Keynesian appearance would intimidate transnational capital into avoiding the country. As a result, its interests have diverged from those of South Africa's labour force, with which the A.N.C. had previously been aligned. Its eagerness to be a part of the global community has also led the country to accept the socially detrimental fiscal stringency imposed by the I.M.F. and the World Bank. Already experiencing economic deprivations, the reigning perception in peripheral areas such as South Africa is that these hardships would be aggravated by an outflow of capital, hence their kowtowing to capitalist dictates. Alienating capital from one locale would merely lead to its replacement by another. A rejection of globalist capital by South Africa or any other peripheral state would also estrange them from all globalist interaction since global economics remains the engine of global exchange. Of this quandary, Miyoshi (1995:71) says that globalization is the dominant discourse and insofar that discourse presumably enables all presences, nothing exists outside of this discourse; thus, there would be nothing outside of the global economy. Withdrawal from the globalized economy would therefore intensify the obscurity of peripheries who paradoxically, are compelled to engage with its structure for their potential economic advancement. Having acknowledged the inability of individual localities to mount an attack on global capital, Harvey (1989:46) notes that only a pluralistic confrontation with capital that transcends the borders of the local would succeed, as localized struggle rarely has the effect of challenging capitalism. The present conception of localism would however, need to be reconfigured: localism, at

present, is an affirmation of regional distinctiveness, symbolically oppositional to a global collective. Plural localism, on the other hand, appears to be grounded on the conviction that globalism has perforce imposed a common fate on peripheral nations, which can only be countered when local territories realize this and are ready to act in unison against its intrusions.

Nonetheless, the divisiveness of capital which pits localities against each other for its spoils, protects its hegemonic position against local recalcitrance. Global capital has achieved a commanding stature because of its success at reproducing its ideological beliefs to the extent that localities are not only impotent to react against capital, but they are even unlikely to think themselves out of its discourse. The global predominance of the capitalistic ethic has resulted in an aspirational conformism amongst nations who, believing the system to be legitimately conceived, are keen to live up to freemarket ideals. Capitalism has been effective in promoting itself as the only workable economic mode of organization, the idea of which has become universally pervasive. Its deftness at cultivating an image of itself as an economically positive force -- even in those nations harmed by its machinations -- has provided the foundation for the success of its globalist project.

But perhaps the most effective tool in its ideological armoury is the spectacle of consumption, which is manifest in areas where the influence of global capital is recessive. Unlike the evidently slanted enactment of global economics, consumption propagates an ethic of global inclusiveness, producing a 'feel good' illusion that shared cultural habits are symptomatic of the workings of a benign globalism. While the economic and political conformism of nation-states such as South Africa to the globalist creed shows

repeated signs of duress, of the inherently conflictual construction of the global economic system, consumption presents itself as a volitional sphere that consumers are under no pressure to partake in. Representing capitalism's most persuasive ideological component, consumption appears to be harmoniously constituted, a place of universal enfranchisement bound by common yet disembodied symbols of love, wealth, prestige, along with many others. In South Africa, where institutions of leadership struggle to assert themselves against globalist hegemony, global consumption has inspired a seeming capitulation in advertisers and consumers, offering a final testimony to the ideological vigour and strength of consumption in contemporary capitalism.

NOTES

¹ Jameson (1991:19), alleges that the term 'late capitalism' signals a continuity rather than a rupture with what preceded it, hence the designation 'late'. However, while its internal dynamic remains unchanged, the modifications in its "supplementary epicycles" betray distinguishing characteristics that define present-day capitalism against its earlier versions.

² The transference of production facilities from developed to underdeveloped areas appears to be the reason for late capitalism being termed 'postindustrial' capitalism. Viewed from the vantage-point of the 'First World', that may be so, but consumer societies are still implicated in the production process: they are only named as such because industry, the means by which capital accumulates its profits, has shifted elsewhere.

³ To justify its directives, capital employs the trickle-down defence, maintaining that the wealth it generates via its unfettered functioning will eventually be distributed throughout society. This tenet of freemarket capitalism, which Faux (1998:81) terms the "textbook benefits of expanded trade", has not been borne out in reality and the possibility of it occurring lessens under late capitalism.

⁴ This is common in the South African context, where capital withdrawal is feared. For example, the Minister of Health's challenge to the extortionary practices of pharmaceutical companies caused them to make similar threats of disinvestment.

⁵ The *Nike* corporation acquits itself of culpability for exploitative labour conditions in its production plants in South East Asia due to another global capitalist innovation. Instead of running its own industrial operations, *Nike* subcontracts its manufacturing assignments to other companies who are then

formally responsible for working conditions, a ploy which redeems the supracorporation of transgressions committed in its name.

⁶ Chomsky uses this notion to explain the effects of globalization and of unchecked corporate power specifically on American society, which is experiencing a widening of the gap between rich and poor.

⁷ Neoliberalism underpins the trade agreements imposed upon all participant nations, using the 'freemarket' hypothesis as a motivating principle to prohibit protectionism in the realm of exchange. According to Chomsky, it is intended as a subduing mechanism targeted at weaker nations when historically, wealthy nations of the West had always employed these selfsame controls in their dealings with other nations for the reason that protectionism was needed for the strengthening of their own economies.

⁸ The recent market upheavals in Asia and their global effects attests to the nature of its influence within, as well as its greater vulnerability to, the global economy.

⁹ This allure is obviously a function of the global power and influence of America, the discourse of which is constantly energised by the stream of media communications emanating from within its borders.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. *cK One* advertisement. Edgars Club April 1998: 5.

Figure 2. *cK be* advertisement. Femina October 1997: 10.

Figure 3. *Levi's* advertisement. Student Life November 1997: 32-33.

Figure 4. *Levi's* advertisement. Distributed Postcard. 1997.

Figure 5. *Levi's* advertisement. Distributed Postcard. 1997.

Figure 6. *Levi's* advertisement. Distributed Postcard. 1997.

Figure 7. *Levi's* advertisement. Poster Supplement to Student Life August 1998.

Figure 8. *Tommy Girl* advertisement. Student Life November 1997: 15.

Figure 9. Photograph of *Foshinis* Display. Jyoti Narshi. 1997.

Figure 10. Photograph of *Stuttafords* Display. Jyoti Narshi. 1997.