Culture Works
Cultural Politics

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A Cultural
Politics Book
for the Social
Text Collective

Culture Works

The Political
Economy
of Culture
To the memory of
Herbert I. Schiller
(1919–2000)
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Chapter One

Why Culture Works

Richard Maxwell

When we read best-selling books, go to movies, drink a beer, visit art museums, surf the Web, head out to the mall, flip through cable channels, go dancing, check a baseball score, or see an advertisement, we customarily ignore the political economy that hammers these features of culture into shape. For the most part, while we are out on the town or lounging with our feet up at the end of the day to watch TV we don’t think about corporate boardroom votes, lobbyists, public funding of the arts, the end of the Cold War, post-Fordist restructuring, mergers and acquisitions, stock swaps, intellectual property, intercapitalist battles, the class divisions of public space, or investment banks. Except for those whose job it is to know about such things, the rest of us would rarely say that any politico-economic force has any effect on culture as we know it. Because our lives appear to play out a good distance beyond the horizon of the political economy, we are not in the habit of making that connection. For that reason, voices that are critical of the political economy can seem to be speaking an incomprehensible language, one that doesn’t easily mesh with our experience or knowledge of culture.

This book aims to change that by offering readers a number of ways to link cultural experience to political economy. The authors collected here grapple with topics that provide them with a basis for a hard and honest look at those aspects of the political economy that have shaped the contours of familiar spaces and activities in everyday life. This book was designed to unsettle and provoke readers. It is a dangerous book for no other reason than that the authors have torn down the imaginary walls separating culture, economics, and politics. The definition of culture guiding these writers begins instead as a call to cross established borders between anthropology, sociology, art history, economics, communication and media studies, political theory, and performance. This attitude impels us to consider life in its totality, knowing that our attempt to do so will amplify the ethical and political dilemmas that confront us.

Culture works because culture is first of all the sum of stories we tell ourselves about who we are and want to be, individually and collectively. Culture works also as the staging ground of these identity narratives and of our daily routines. Culture comprises and constitutes the places where we
live; it is the built environment and the peopled landscape. It also works in the memories that reside in the flesh, from the spark of recognition, an uncanny remembrance, to the dull reflex of forgetting and the dogged reminders inhabiting bone and muscle of a body once stretched in sport, childbirth, dance, labor, lovemaking. Culture works in the traditional sense as well, as sources of cultural wealth—the patrimony of state, nation, people—commissioned and collected through private and public patronage and stored in museums, galleries, film archives, corporate offices, or displayed in parks, plazas, and other public spaces. Finally, culture works in the ordinary sense of work taking place in the factories, studios, warehouses, schoolrooms, and other sites of cultural realization. Culture works where people work building the material fund, or hardware, from which we draw conceptual and narrative sustenance to understand the world. Every phone, computer, television, film stage, tapestry, celluloid strip, videotape, computer disk, semiconductor, printing press, cargo vehicle, or any other imaginable tool or bricks and mortar structure used in the culture industries embodies this culture work.

Work is ironically the hardest part of the Culture Works to see. In part, this is caused by cultural labor’s dispersion and submersion in the contemporary political economy’s international division of labor. But work, even our own culture work, is also obscured by the mist of enchantment that surrounds the Culture Works and all the goods and services associated with it. Differential power in the division of cultural labor helps to foster this illusion too, for it is ordered as a hierarchy that grants an elite corps of culturati located in the world’s richest regions a weighty social presence. We remember them. They even live in places we customarily call cultural capitals: London, Paris, New York, Los Angeles . . . To find the bulk of the labor in the Culture Works, however, one has to descend, in a sense, from these commanding heights to encounter the earthly reality of cultural production occurring everywhere from schoolrooms to New York and London’s sweatshops to the shop floors in poor and industrializing countries around the world.¹

Consider what we might find in this encounter: media and communication industries so completely unfettered by government regulation that they can set up operations across the planet wherever they find the best cost options, destroying time-honored national economies and displacing people from traditional areas of work. With deregulated airlines, freight, and computerized telecommunications making far-flung and flexible operations possible, new regional pools of cultural labor are channeled into a transnational network. At the heart of this global Culture Works are low-wage jobs in the telephone and computer industries, film and TV production, electronics,
call-processing centers, and every other information technology–based enterprise. Culture works here on the backs of “investment hungry communities all over the world” who are forced “into common labor and consumption pools” and into unwanted competition with their counterparts in other nations who, like them, are compelled to win investment and jobs by lowering wages and benefit scales.2

Culture works also by encouraging us to forget about the work in culture. Forgetting is part of the enchantment of fashion, TV, sport, art, music, dance, and so on. The problem of enchantment is taken up later, but think for now about the difficulty of remembering the hard work that brings culture into being every day. As Gerald Sussman and John A. Lent note, there are no award ceremonies for assembly workers in Hong Kong’s consumer electronics factories, no Oscars for the carpenters who build sets for international filmed coproductions, no free trips to feature premieres for the animation workers in East Asia, no frequent-flyer miles for the data entry workers in the Caribbean, and little chance that those who happen to be doing most of this basic culture work in the poor regions of the world will ever “have the purchasing power to enjoy the goods and services created with their own labor.”3

Culture, no doubt, makes sense to many of us as primarily an aesthetic realm, but the writers in this book remind us that the work of culture has never taken place outside the areas of life determined by particular economic systems and power relations; that is, culture is always in political economy, however peculiar that might sound to those of us raised on a notion that culture, economy, and politics enjoy a happy existence independent of one another. To think of culture as already in the mix of political economy might also shake the faith of academics who are accustomed to thinking of political economy not as an objective force or set of power relations but rather as primarily a way of describing and knowing the world. This professional definition might center exclusively on a discussion in the technical language of concepts that have evolved inside this two-hundred-year-old discipline as it took up questions of culture. It might also suggest a résumé of intellectual schools that details competing models of political economy.4 This happens not to be the approach taken in this book.

Each essay in this book focuses on an aspect of present-day culture that many will find familiar and, perhaps, central to their experience: art, beer, advertising, dance, sport, shopping, the Web, and the media. Certainly, this list could be expanded. But the contemporary political economy is imperious, showing up as a prevalent force in the formation of the dense relations that bring about culture—this is evident as much in beer as it is in avant-garde
art or the media. This assumption leads to two important effects in the collection and design of this book’s essays. One is a sharper perception of the permutations between the political economy and cultural experience. The second and closely related effect is the activation of a politically engaged analysis, that is, a politics of writing. This critical approach unfolds from an elemental acknowledgment that culture, politics, and economy are interdependent. This politics of writing strives to identify and analyze the limitations, purposes, and possibilities of the work of culture, including its own, in the Culture Works. As the writers confront the vexing entanglements of culture, politics, and economy, they are pressed to envision the big picture of political economy as the general organization of the contemporary social realm and, secondarily, as an intellectual method for describing and analyzing the social realm. In that spirit, the writers here have been asked to demonstrate how a judicious and engaged critique of political economy can invite, rather than preempt, greater participation in the debate over the problems and prospects of culture. If there is an area of culture that has not been included here or if the writers have not gone far enough for you, then consider your days as a spectator over. It’s your turn to think and write about other areas of culture that you regularly inhabit, your turn to get into the culture work. Above all, it should be apparent that this enterprise is open to experimentation and modification.

So there are two ways to start to think about the critique of the political economy of culture. The first takes on the empirical political economy understood broadly as the wide social world in which we all work, consume, enjoy, stress out, fall in love, teach, learn, fear, perhaps raise families, create a home, and so on. The second way to think about this critique is to see what the theoretical political economy has to offer, in particular by showing a few moves that can be learned from the academic work of political economists. It is important to understand that reference to an empirical political economy calls for a good deal of specification, which means that we are already on the turf of academic political economy. Thus we begin to become political economists by making the simple move to specify in more definite terms the kind of world in which we live. For instance, when we say that America is a capitalist society, we are specifying the kind of political economy that regulates life here. It is a way to distinguish a historically distinct political economy from any general notion of how people have controlled their lives and set up systems for their survival. Indeed, capitalism defines with varying degrees of development and diversity among nation-states and regions the contours of most political economic systems around the world. Using the political economist’s compass of historical specificity, we will find that each polity
may interpret its role in the political economy with slight variation, but generally speaking the relation between state and economy in contemporary capitalist societies has been one of mutual support.

To specify the discussion about contemporary capitalism also means that we must explain how the political economy is sustained by an ensemble of institutions and by narratives that naturalize both the existence of these institutions and forms of sociability within them. Take, for example, just one key social institution of the contemporary political economy: private property. Capitalism depends on and promotes the private accumulation of income-generating property, or capital, which can appear in many forms, including money, land, machinery, film studios, telephone lines, office buildings, printing presses, stocks, and so on. Historically, the capitalist state at all levels of government has defended the dominion of income-generating private property and protected its holders in law and through social control (though there have been within the history of the modern state moments of real or symbolic resistance, the effect has been mostly to slow down rather than arrest the ascendancy of this institution).

In addition, and crucially for an appreciation of the political economy of culture, private property constitutes a way of making sense of the world—not only as a mode of evaluation and interpretation of things, people, places, and so on, but also as a condition of social intercourse, that is, as a reason to be social. To draw out this feature of the political economy of culture, we might contrast private property’s influential system of sociability with non-commercial forms of livelihood and exchange. Along these lines, Michael J. Shapiro relates a story about the Connecticut Pequots in which they made a fifty-thousand-dollar gift, drawn from ample casino revenue, to the Iowa Democratic Party and asked for nothing in return. Apparently, this and other donations made by the Pequots to the Democrats “puzzled” various “Euro-American” journalists who reported the story. Shapiro suggests that, for these journalists, the gift was incommensurate with the governing form of sociability shaped by private gain and exchange of income-generating property; hence their puzzlement. The private-property story has come to dominate what Euro-Americans might think of as good common sense thanks also to historical narratives that have vilified or maligned noncommercial, non-proprietary systems of living and exchange. Shapiro recalls, in this context, the conquest narratives that European settlers used to justify the expropriation of native lands. In these stories, Native Americans were depicted as merely wandering tribes, with wandering minds, unproductive of value in the commercial sense defined by English common law regulating property relations. This fostered the degradation of Native Americans that, in the
eyes of Europeans, made the American tribes dispensable and their lands susceptible to conquest.⁶

This is the kind of critical look at the institution of private property that can show us how the contemporary political economy shapes cultural experience. It offers one way to begin to see culture in the political economy, in this case the stories, places, identities, friendships, enmities, even the kinds of bodies that flow from the institution of private property and its sense-making narratives. In addition, the contrast with nonproprietary, noncommercial forms of sociability helped to raise the question about the availability of value interpretations and judgments that challenge the contemporary political economy. Such stories not only imagine ways to rethink culture’s possibilities, they also illustrate the profound contestability of private property or other fundamentals of the political economy of culture. A good critique will usually aim for this effect.

We might now start to think more about what the academic discipline of political economy has to offer. As with most academic fields, there is no general agreement on a definition of a political-economic approach to culture. Saying this would normally signal a long discourse about the proper way to do a political-economic analysis. However, it is more instructive to convey basic principles, or at least the principal attitudes, of political economy without retreating (too far) behind academic fundamentalism, arcane models, or unhelpful technical jargon. With this in mind, this book endeavors to show, rather than tell, readers what a critique of the political economy can do.

Let’s begin by delving into a broad and motley field of cultural experiences. Browse the nearby shelves for books on culture, and you will probably find mostly single-theme books on art, photography, TV, film, biography, music, sport, or perhaps on patterns of cultural consumption more generally (note that, by comparison, this book is unorthodox for its variety of topics). Whatever the topic, all critical books on culture exercise some of the moves of a political-economy approach. This typically means that they try to show how a particular sequence of production, distribution, and consumption relates to a particular cultural artifact or practice. Indeed, most efforts to write about the political economy of culture tend to focus on culture work within this industrialized framework. Hence, political economy of culture has often been defined as the study of cultural industries and their regulation by both markets and government policy.⁷ One subfield of political economy that has successfully developed around the study of cultural industries concerns the workings and influence of communication and media industries.⁸

Generally speaking, then, academic political economy of culture specializes in the study of cultural industries. But what most distinguishes the cri-
tique of political economy of culture from other approaches to culture (economic, aesthetic, behavioral) is the sustained focus on commercialization. When political economists analyze the commercialization of culture, they typically examine the historical circumstances and structure in which cultural products, resources, and even cultural workers and consumers are turned into a commodity form or some form of income-generating property that can be bought and sold in a market (capital, labor, productive assets, etc.). This process of commercialization has also been called commoditization (or commodification). By making this process appear peculiar, political economists can draw their readers out of what Michael J. Shapiro calls a “structurally induced amnesia.” To achieve this, political economists tend to cultivate two important qualities in their historical accounts of commercialization. First, commercialization is understood not as a physical or biological phenomenon but as a process that is social in origin (though biology has become an object of commercialization). This means that, as a rule, political economists put human effort and intention before human nature and instinct whenever they write about commercialization. This has consequences in the metaphors a strict political economist might use. For example, there are rarely any nonironic allusions to commercialization as a natural outgrowth of markets spontaneously forming from instinctual impulses to trade, barter, or truck; such phrasing would be considered pure mystification by a political economist and, moreover, as preemptory of analysis and argument. Commercialization is, rather, understood as the ongoing social process of conversion of life into commerce, into a form of sociability fortified by the institution of acquiring and exchanging private productive property.

The second quality in political economists’ historical accounts of commercialization follows from the first. It is the idea that as a process constituted in the social realm, commercialization was and is susceptible to social change. Hence, one will find a good deal of emphasis on the role of policy, politics, and organized social movements aimed at reforming or neutralizing some aspect of commercialization. It is taken for granted that change is possible, that commercialization’s rapacious hold of life can be disputed or strengthened, and that the process is uneven and never complete. In short, for political economists, the commercialization of culture is not an abstract, predetermined, or evolutionary process. There are people with identifiable interests, skills, and weaknesses behind the push to commercialize culture. There are also people who push back and struggle against these forces. There are, crucially, also specific conditions that position and socialize people in the story and structure of commercialization. One of these conditions has already been mentioned, namely, the institution of private property.
Once the structural characteristics of commercialization are identified and their history retold, a new dimension of analysis opens up. Political economists usually discuss this dimension in terms of an ethical problematic that confronts them with moral questions concerning how to judge commercialization in terms of equality, justice, and the greater social good. Confronting the standards of judgment and interpretation carried forward by the institution of private property can again serve as a starting point for understanding the ethical commitments of political economists of culture. Consider the moral vision implicit in a world in which the value of human effort is downgraded because it demonstrates no potential to produce in an economy based on the exchange of income-generating property. Indeed, imagine that this labor cannot even be represented as productive because it is invisible, absent, or misrecognized in the public realm of the marketplace. What kinds of degradation might result from this exclusion? Recall how Native Americans were derided within the European civilization narrative for lacking the full personhood accorded to holders of productive property. The land and people were subjected to the imperious English political economy, expressed in common property law imported by Anglo-Saxon settlers. By virtue of living their life in a precommercial manner that was not recognized by the moral and political vision of Europeans, Native Americans were rendered through law, art, and diplomacy into identities that were susceptible to bloody conquest. We can sharpen our perspective of this ethical problematic in the field of political economy of culture by considering the story of unpaid household labor. In it we will encounter an extensive chain of exclusions that have flowed, as in the case of Native Americans, from the dominant mode of comprehension that grasps only the commercial reality of work that is productive of income-generating property. Such exclusions are inscribed, for instance, in a gendered story about the separation of public and private realms: privacy is the intimate, consuming, nonproductive, disordered, feminine, nurturing, and melodramatic space, whereas public life is a masculine space of production where order and rationality beat emotion, and where politics and business are part of an epic narrative of conquest and control. In this contemporary political-economy story, the tacit moral basis of women’s inequality in the public realm is predicated on a degradation of work and person in the private realm, which does not register in conventional interpretations as a source of income-generating property.

If we heed this connection that leads from private property to social inequality, in both the spatial organization and the gendered stratifications of public and private realms, then the ethical dilemmas about commercialization multiply. This is the case when we consider the sexual composition of
the cultural workforce and the unequal wages of men and women. The is-

sues of equality in culture work are clearly raised here, but there is also po-
tential for differential application of justice under the power relations that
define and stratify the work of men and women. Further, the uneven geogra-
phy of justice within the global cultural workforce adds another twist to our
ethical probe of commercialization. Gerald Sussman, a political economist
of communication, reminds us of this in his analysis of transnational corpora-
tions (TNCs) involved in the Malaysian consumer electronics and informa-
tion technology sector. “The Malaysian government,” he says, “pitched the
idea of the ‘dextrous hands of the oriental female’ to attract TNCs and for-
eign capital.” He adds that the TNCs depicted women as expendable under
“highly stressful and dangerous shopfloor conditions” and “less likely to orga-
nize or rebel.”11 A personnel administrator at Intel, a company whose micro-
processors are in 80 percent of all computers, honored this peculiar notion
of equality and justice when he said that Intel liked to hire “girls because
they have less energy, are more disciplined and are easier to control.”12

Importantly, once political economists start solidifying their ethical
commitments within this dimension of analysis, they can begin to cultivate
language and goals for cultural policy and political action. So, for instance,
political economists who stake their ethical commitments to values derived
from noncommercial forms of sociability might think up ways of describing
the kinds of justice that will challenge the corporate criteria exemplified by
the depiction of female workers given above. The latter’s ethos of derision
and punishment of female labor demonstrates either a limited supply of
moral sources in schools of business administration or the glaring lack of them
(enterprising philosophy professors have already begun to take note of the
fact that only one in five U.S. business schools has courses on social and en-
vironmental issues).13 This business ethos is also based on a presumption
that a just form of employment is one that serves needs of corporate man-
agement and TNC investment. Moreover, it suggests a policy that is distribu-
tive of justice upward to male-dominated, transnational corporate elites.
A critical political economist might respond to this form of market-based
justice as an injustice (in some cases, naming it corporate welfare) with pro-
posals for redistributive solutions. Perhaps such a critical policy regarding
cultural workers would seek to promote laws ensuring, at a minimum, recog-
nition of the primacy of workers’ needs before corporate imperatives, equal
authority for male and female workers to determine how to meet their
needs at the workplace, and just levels of pay, benefits, and healthy working
conditions for mind, body, and emotions. Of course, there are other ways,
besides workers’ rights, in which political economists have theorized justice.
Some have focused on particulars, for instance, how specific cultural resources or opportunities are distributed; others have studied questions of universal application, such as how to regulate market and political forces to allow for greater social participation in culture, or for means to invigorate democratic institutions, or to pluralize the public sphere.

In sum, we see that from the perspective of political economists, culture is always and already in the political economy. This helps to fix our attention on the history and structure of commercial processes in culture. If we heed the more critical political economists, we can also remember that commercialization is not a done deal, and that it is highly contestable as a way of creating value, recognizing and representing people, organizing social relations, and extending health and well-being equitably. In the end, we are confronted not only with important ethical dilemmas but with a warrant to do something about them.

The world we live in is fraught with conflict demanding explanation. When we encounter explanatory gaps without a thread of intelligibility, we tend to fill in the gap with whatever we have at hand. This is our culture work. By expanding the range of stories we are able to tell and hear about ourselves and others, we not only make a difference in the direction and possibilities of culture, but we ask questions about the kind of society we want to live in. The culture work of critical political economists is about seeing beyond the moral boundaries inscribed in the property standard. It is about working to pluralize ethical and political resources and socialize them in order to make them available for people to honor or contest. For those reading these lines, your work may be literary, and you write in response. For others of us, our work may be in the daily encounters in a bar, the mall, or on a dance floor. Our jokes and the way we tell them rely on the wit and effort that constitute still another form of cultural work. Our families and friends tell tales or provide the antics we will recount in our own stories. Then there are the major-league baseball players who will energize the passions of millions today and the actors in a television drama who will do the same for millions more tomorrow.

And yet, to ask you to think of and delight in culture as work, to think of the possibilities for cultural labor, your own and others’, may be asking too much. The idea, after all, conflicts with common definitions of culture as something we consume, albeit a different sort of consumption, or something that formal beauty inspires, or something we endorse through surveys or even through the politicians we vote for. More than that, to ask you to give up the sense of culture as a leisurely activity also encourages you to relinquish a sense of your self as spectator, to make room, in other words, for the
possibility of your participation in culture. This is the direction taken by this book and the point of departure for the writers collected here. If you sense the risk involved in this, you are right. A position that revels in the work of culture threatens to shake up and even politicize the conventional attitude many of us have about the consumption of culture. It also cuts to an interrogation of two general assumptions about the experience of culture that this book strives to challenge.

The first is the presumed separation of the production of culture as compulsory work from the consumption of culture as voluntary and leisurely effort. For many of us, challenging this cardinal idea sounds like a setup for a cruel joke. Doesn’t it mean reconstituting production time and consumption time as one long workday? Isn’t this just another form of volunteerism? After all, doing away with the separation of production and consumption is like asking us to work extra during and after our paid job, even if in exchange we will make a difference in the quality of our cultural experience. This seems cruel because we are already overburdened in an already burned-out society. Today, Americans must work an average of more than six weeks more than they did in 1973 in order to maintain a 1973 standard of living. By the year 2000, Americans were working close to an annual average of 2,000 hours, the only developed country besides Sweden in which obligatory work hours increased (average annual hours fell from 1,809 to 1,656 in France, from 2,121 to 1,889 in Japan, and from 1,512 to 1,399 in Norway). Where would you find the enchantment in working longer hours to make and improve your culture for yourself? Obviously, you wouldn’t, for there is absolutely nothing inviting about this scenario.

However, the idea that the only way to expand participation in culture is through voluntary, extra labor is not only misleading, it verges on being outright propaganda in support of apathy and maintaining the commercial status quo of culture. People already work extra hours making and sustaining culture beyond their obligatory jobs. The line between production and consumption has long been eroded by obvious chores such as commuting to work, shopping for the household, or caring for children. These activities have diverse effects on cultural experience—drive time, among other things, reinforces social fragmentation via individualized, competitive, and fleeting engagement with industrial design, broadcast and recorded music, and environmental stresses; shopping can both work to satisfy the demands of the home economy and fortify a mode of sociability based on a commercial ethos of getting and spending; child care involves a range of cultural competencies applied in work taking place on the road, while shopping, at home, and even during formal work time. There are also less obvious, perhaps
milder, but still obligatory activities of culture work taking place during supposed nonwork time. These include having to make decisions about brand, style, and taste while shopping; or exposure to advertisements in public spaces or while listening to radio or watching TV. Moreover, consumption also has the quality of labor because the work it involves functions to complete a part of the cycle of capital expansion by fostering the turnover of investment. We don’t just buy things, we make the system run. In other words, we work, and are educated for such work, not only to interpret and judge all manner of cultural experiences, but we work by providing ourselves as sheer economic assets in the form of consumers and audiences for spectacles and media events that are financed by advertisers paying for our attention. There are, in short, hardly any times or spaces in American life that do not already merge production and consumption: we all work already when not working. Think of the last time you had a nonconsuming thought—what were you doing? The questions for the critique of the political economy of culture are for whom and to what end we do our culture work. One commentator answered by noting the increasing influence of market criteria over the nonwork, cultural realm, which he called private life:

In the United States an erosion of private life is gathering momentum—at the demand of market forces and made possible by new technology. The medical consequences of work-related “stress” are worrying the leading US financial papers. This reality contrasts sharply with the current media line which would have us believe that US employees, in considerable demand, are able to dictate their conditions to employers.18

To assume a separation of production and consumption does not therefore serve to protect a realm of voluntary engagement with culture. Instead, the belief in such a separation of spheres has become an important precondition for protecting prohibitive commercial control over the directions and possibilities of cultural production/consumption, that is, of culture work.

This leads to the second assumption challenged by this book: that the independent mind is preeminent in the experience of culture. This assumption originated with the scenario of split realms of production and consumption where it imposed two limits on the interpretation and judgment of culture. On one side, individual producers presumably express something inherently unique about their selves, an essential quality of the highest form of individual freedom: their own minds. In terms of judging cultural labor’s value, this scenario glorifies and promotes mental labor over physical labor; planning above assembling; writing above printing; composing above playing;
designing above carpentry; intellectual above popular culture; and so on. On the other side, the work of cultural consumption is judged based on an assessment of the mind work or specialized knowledge that is applied in making individualized choices about pastimes, purchases, art appreciation, or the composition of entire lifestyles. Hence, taste can be differentiated and stratified; aesthetes are on top; reading means more than watching TV; knowing box scores trumps the simple pleasure of following a home-run streak; museum going is ranked above theme-park attendance; how-to gurus such as Martha Stewart are better than your mother; and so on.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger once called this sovereignty of the individual mind a “sort of metaphysical do-it-yourself.”19 This is an apt phrase to describe the commonsense philosophy that accompanies mainstream accounts of the political economy of culture: up-by-the-bootstrap producers meet freethinking consumers in a marketplace of ideas, and so on. If, however, we can dispense with the separation of production and consumption, we are still left with the metaphysical do-it-yourself and its remaining, and more serious, rule through which the experience of culture can be known; that is, according to the metaphysical do-it-yourself, the limits and pressures of the political economy are irrelevant to the life of the individual mind. It is a soothing notion because having an independent mind means that you are protected from the crushing power of politics and economy. Culture in this metaphysic serves as a safe haven and preserve of enchantment. In this context, liberal humanism, the philosophical side of the contemporary political economy, promises that the experience of culture can be liberatory.

It is an emancipatory doctrine because it is filled with the sublime possibility that we can remove ourselves from the hard reality of politics and economics if we withdraw into culture. In this way, art would stand up for us against narrow and oppressive moral imperatives, opening up closed minds and freeing thought. Drinking beer and attending to the details of a pick and roll in a slow-motion replay on a huge color TV screen would lift spirits. Dancing frees the body from the obligatory work disciplines, the Web lets you get lost in the private, disembodied realm of cyborgs, shopping is bliss, advertising a harmless diversion. We might even return from cultural daydreams to our jobs and our political commitments with renewed hope and energy; it is a vision with redemptive power. Nothing wrong in that. Indeed, such a metaphysic proves to be a powerful rival for any critique of the political economy. Political economists should therefore acknowledge the draw of the metaphysical do-it-yourself, in particular for the way it preserves a secular field of enchantment for the work of culture.20 But as we push this metaphysic into a confrontation with the various constituencies
whose culture work cannot be disengaged from the political economy, it
starts to show fundamental weaknesses that betray its promise of freedom.
Among these failings is the supposition that political and economic forces
will patiently wait at the door of your independent mind while culture does
its work of entertaining, informing, enlightenment, and redemption.

Consider the effort to honor the hopeful vision of the metaphysical do-
it-yourself in a special issue of the *New York Times Magazine* devoted to
“The Me Millennium” (October 17, 1999). Its cover art showed the nude
torso of a woman, breasts and pubic hair erased, over which words were
printed in a style meant to look like body paint. It read in part, “We put our
self at the center of the universe. Now, for better or worse, we are on our
own.” Inside, on the contents page, was a brief primer in liberal humanist
fundamentals:

A thousand years ago, when the earth was reassuringly flat and the universe
revolved around it, the ordinary person had no last name, let alone any claim
to individualism. The self was subordinated to church and king. Then came
the Renaissance explosion of scientific discovery and humanist insight and,
as both cause and effect, the rise of individual self-consciousness. All at
once, it seemed, Man had replaced God at the center of earthly life. And
perhaps more than any great war or invention or feat of navigation, this
upheaval marked the beginnings of our modern era. There are now 20 times
as many people in the world as there were in the year 1000. Most have
last names, and many of us have a personal identity or a reasonable expecta-
tion of acquiring one. The special Millennium Issue . . . examines the trans-
formation of identity through different lenses . . . and concludes with reflec-
tions on how hard it is, in a time of gathering global conformity, to find one’s
own way.

Again, the metaphysic of the do-it-yourself lets the independent mind
work out its own puzzle: the self was invented and then set free only to be
enclosed by a “gathering conformity.” The concluding essay of this issue of
the *New York Times Magazine* suggested that the shapers of this conformity
were none other than the global consumer-goods advertisers and marketers.
This essay was followed by a full-page cartoon in which a man stands at the
lower left corner speaking, dwarfed by his own words, which are packed
into a dialogue bubble that nearly fills the entire page. His identity is re-
vealed in a string of possessive statements that appear to overpower him.
The list begins with “My room, My bed, My pillow” and ends trailing off
with “My dream, My tomorrow, My . . .”
One of the characteristic values of liberal philosophy is that thought is free of the imperatives of both earthly and divine lords. Free thought is a precept of the Enlightenment. Even this book rests on its foundation. But, as the saying goes, there is no royal road to this freedom. As the example of the *New York Times Magazine* argues, the independent mind is the basis of the romantic view of culture, with individualism its modus vivendi. However, the same example demonstrates even more forcefully with its accommodation to the commercial message that the assumption of the independent mind is also paradoxically one of the preconditions for the expansion of a constraining political economy. Out of 160 pages in the *New York Times Magazine*’s “Me Millennium” issue, more than one hundred were dedicated entirely to advertising. The concluding reflections on the oppressive nature of commercialism and possessive individualism were thus surrounded by artful visions of cars, perfumes, jewelry, electronics, thin, beige-toned fashion models of both sexes dressed in furs and fine cloth, luxury candy, luxury sheets, luxury pets, hair, TVs, vacations, and so on. An independent mind, as depicted in the metaphysic of the do-it-yourself, is never susceptible to mind management, so bring on the flood of advertising. The paradox is that the individualist notion of the independent mind is a reassuring guarantee of prior freedom that gives great power to secular influences of the political economy, that are congenial with life organized around private property. 21 Moreover, from the point of view of cultural labor, the metaphysic of the do-it-yourself offers only a partial and exclusive form of freedom because it ranks the value of effort, and with it the value of personhood, according to its volume of income-generating mental components. The essays in this volume dig deep into these fault lines of the political economy of culture and the liberal humanist version of cultural work and experience. They confront the metaphysic of the do-it-yourself in order to rework the detached, individualist promise of cultural pleasure and enchantment into a politically engaged critique of political economy of culture. They assume a world in which culture is worked over and worked out through conflicts, as well as blunders, that have made the expansion of commercialization complex, uneven, dynamic, and unpredictable. They are attuned to the tactics of popular interference with the directions and strategies of the corporate crusades to convert life into commerce. Examples abound in events as disparate as the pirating of video and sound recordings or the way the Connecticut Pequots transact to form bonds of friendship and build solidarity. Or consider the political economy of culture at the heart of the general strike against the privatization of a national telephone system in Puerto Rico in 1998. The strikers depicted phones as an attribute of national culture, a source of
noncommercial exchange, against the dominant property story that renders a phone into a mere consumer good and business service. Finally, there is the popular resistance to transnational corporate efforts to privatize the very governance of the political economy, as shown by massive demonstrations against the meeting of the World Trade Organization that took place in Seattle in December 1999. These conflicts are also evident in instances when advertising fails to win hearts and minds, when crass commercial values have absolutely nothing to do with decisions made by a family, by lovers, by nations, or, for that matter, by socially responsible companies. They are manifest in financial crises, strategic alliances, compromises, and cover-ups of corporate stupidity behind failures, fissures, and false starts. They show up when factional battles among business rivals and political contestants alter the media and modes of expression through which we experiment in making sense of the world. This applies as much to disputes over the allocation of public funds to the arts as it does to the look and function of the Web.

Although mostly focused on American experiences, the essays collected in this volume detail aspects of the political economy that necessitate the migration of research and analysis across international boundaries. The writers in this book envision culture as always and everywhere linking local and global scales of the political economy of culture. In chapter 2, Danielle Fox shows that any discussion of American art must deal with the international art market and the de facto export subsidy that American artists have received to help extend the U.S. corporate and political presence around the world. She describes how U.S. business and government both found political expediency in supporting avant-garde art during the Cold War—the first as a symbol for the freedom of American business operations and the latter as a cultural symbol supporting its expansionist foreign policy. In this context, Fox asks whether it is a coincidence that public funding for experimental art dramatically declined after the end of the Cold War. And what of the avant-garde in this changing political environment? Freedom to invent and innovate forms of expression is an axiom of modern and postmodern art; yet art’s form and function carry the stamp of political and business strategies that, in turn, foster preferences of taste and evaluation congenial with state and corporate interests. For Fox, art is already in the political economy, a fact she says will surprise only those who disavow the political and economic interests of arts patronage. She argues, moreover, that thinking of art outside the political economy limits the imagination of new conditions for work in the arts. The effort to understand the entanglements of art, politics, and economy works, then, to free up a little more freedom of expression without the metaphysics of the do-it-yourself.
Between art and media, there are plenty of mundane cultural experiences to link everyone to processes of globalization. For example, beer, once an object of local pride, became another brandable product within the global consumer goods business, even if the experience that is advertised with it has the familiar look of home. As Ben Scott argues in chapter 3, the most intoxicating element in this brew is not the beer itself but the magic system of advertising that associates the drink with life, enjoyment, sport, and manliness. Scott takes on Anheuser-Busch to show us how the political interests of the brewer are reinforced by both drinking and the advertising imagery of beer culture. The right to drink beer may not be inscribed in the U.S. Constitution, but the freedom to inebriate oneself rarely fails as a secular commandment of individualism, except perhaps when competing with health and property protections. Brewed in the imagination as one part liberty and one part fraternity, beer nevertheless flows from a political economy that structures the individual expression of sociability as masculine, commercial, and presumably based on physical rather than intellectual mastery. Beer advertising provides the script for the individual mind to make sense of beer drinking as a mark of freedom, while megabrewers such as Anheuser-Busch offer enough diversion to keep enchanted beer lovers from questioning such a blinkered vision.

As Inger L. Stole explains in chapter 4, advertising works just as hard to sell itself as to sell consumer goods and services. The business of advertising is a rickety one, Stole says, though it promotes itself as a necessary and solid fixture in the economy. Advertising survives through massive public-relations efforts that fend off critics and alternative views of advertising’s social value. Stole also reminds us that the advertisements surrounding us are virtually networked to commercial messages everywhere on the planet. We might wonder how these purveyors of an increasingly pervasive and global cultural experience comprehend the world if they are only willing to serve regions where per capita income averages ten thousand dollars a year, a threshold one major advertiser used to determine which nations deserved a place on the world marketing map.

Anna Beatrice Scott shifts direction in chapter 5 toward the global assembly line that transforms dance and, in turn, performers’ bodies into commodities. She tracks dance moves originating in Salvador-Bahía, Brazil, to explain the commercialization of what she calls “corporeal productions.” She offers a performing political economy of dance called “De/Cipherin’” to show how a dancer’s visceral and spiritual presence dissolves into the flow of the transnational entertainment industry, where it eventually reappears as mere stylistic elements yoked to marketable brands of Black Dance.
The Culture Works have more than one way to commercialize a body, as David L. Andrews indicates in chapter 6. He describes how entertainment industry mogul Rupert Murdoch has made millions from treating bodies as parts assembled in the global sport-media complex—ask loyal home fans from Los Angeles, Manchester, or Sydney. Andrews extends this analogy further to suggest that Murdoch has redefined sporting events as mass-produced goods in the same way Henry Ford redefined the manufacture and marketing of automobiles, though now in a more flexible, post-Fordist, global production system. Andrews also shows how extensive commercial marketing and the narrative strategies of the Olympic Games have strengthened the planetary grip of the sport-media complex.

The shopping mall, the strip mall, the big-box retailer, the “revitalized” downtown, the hypermarché, hipermercado, the galerías . . . by any other name, spring up everywhere, as Susan G. Davis argues in chapter 7, to form a veritable landscape of shopping. Davis explains how the experience of shopping has been shaped by an ensemble of global enterprises that are working to synchronize development of the built environment, not to the scale and rhythm of human needs and a fragile environment, but attuned instead to cycles of real-estate speculation and the frantic pace of retail turnover. Commercialization has been an extensive process in the sense that values and practices associated with commercial, market criteria have spread across geopolitical territories incorporating previously nonmarket economies or noncommercial areas of life inside market economies. Davis offers examples of the latter in her analysis of the growing trend among retailers to provide spaces within or near shopping malls that house commercial providers of (traditionally free) social services. Moreover, and with much social distress, such criteria have also taken up residence in once noncommercial institutions such as education. Anyone surveying the educational landscape from elementary to university levels will be struck by the weighty presence of corporate sponsors, retailers, fast-food operators, and so on.

Commercialization of culture has been an intensive process as well. It not only regulates the borders between the private and public contents of culture. It also promotes the extraction of information from intimate spaces of life through various forms of consumer surveillance. It is now widely accepted, for example, though hardly an easy truth to swallow, that information about personal consumption activities can be rendered into a commodity when harvested as marketing data. Nearly all the authors in this book touch on the expanding activities of marketing research, a business that aims to extract and commercialize information about people and their consuming habits, which is a central concern of Chad Raphael’s essay on the Web. As
Raphael explains in chapter 8, Web entrepreneurs are aiming to extend the shopping landscape into cyberspace worldwide. While those who are jacked in to the Web are certainly privy to a wondrous innovation of technology, the problem, says Raphael, is that the fundamental goal of this wonder is consumer surveillance and marketing.

The hard edge of expressive freedom that closes around the liberal humanist interpretation of culture is also the target of Michael Curtin and Thomas Streeter’s critique of media in chapter 9. Curtin and Streeter take on the restructured media industry to push the political-economic analysis beyond the mere denunciation of corporate ownership and control over media in the age of neo-networks. They argue instead that the liberal paradigm of authorship, based in the ever-present private-property story, is unstable at its core. They show the extensive reach of this paradigm, including, among other examples, how copyrighted material, the stock of the sources of creativity in a commercial culture, has moved to the center of both U.S. foreign policy and transnational corporate trade in the post–Cold War period. But they are also attentive to the small-scale works of authorial resistance within the contemporary political economy, encouraging readers to think about pragmatic interpretations of the value of culture work: some folks are in it as a job, others for the passion, and all struggle for creative air in the wake of the transnational corporate juggernaut. In this setting, Curtin and Streeter encourage greater sensitivity to the multiple sources of alternative media.

Each writer in this book confronts particular ethical and political dilemmas that arise from the analysis of specific cultural experiences, some dealing with justice and equality on the big universal stage, others with smaller, more temporal settings. These are some of the questions they might ask us to heed in order to become more alert to the connections between the political economy and our everyday experiences of culture: How can Americans rethink public funding of artistic experimentation when the state no longer feels responsible for ensuring even a semblance of freedom for its artists now that the Cold War contest with Soviet socialism is over? How can (mostly) young male beer drinkers take on a global business with huge investments in media, sport, and spectacle when they are encouraged by the same media, sport, and spectacle to look the other way as beer makers turn into political and economic power brokers? What can be done when American advertisers spend millions to suppress the voices of critics and reformers who are merely trying to make advertising honest? What memories can we draw from our flesh to recall the full potential of culture work forgotten in commercialized dance spectacles? What can we do when sport is the most
lucrative commercial spectacle on TV and transnational corporations have more say in the fate of our home team than we do? How can we confront shopping landscapes that cleave with social stratification and environmental damage while enticing us with abundance and helpful services? How can we make sure that the Web cannot get more out of us than we get out of it? What is to be done when creativity becomes nothing more than the stock-in-trade of intellectual properties?

These and related questions lead finally to the issue of the form and fate of cultural policy and political action. There will be a number of responses in the chapters that follow, and also a number of aporias or gaps in reckoning with politics. Nonetheless, the culture work represented in these essays deserves tribute for opening up the possibilities of political response—from informal to formal politics, from local to national and international scales of intervention, and from the imagination to the politics of writing. Finally, I hope that these critiques of the political economy of culture will be useful to everyone seeking a fuller understanding of the processes that give shape and meaning to experiences that are likely to occupy, with varying degrees of interest and time, a familiar place in our lives and, in many cases, in our future political, scholarly, or creative endeavors.

Notes

2. Sussman and Lent, Global Productions, 3.
3. Ibid., 1–2.
4. For an excellent overview of these schools as they relate to the political economy of media and communication, see Vincent Mosco, The Political Economy of Communication (London: Sage Publications, 1996).
8. Mosco, The Political Economy of Communication; Robert W. McChesney, Rich Media,
10. Ibid., chapter 1.
12. Quoted in ibid., 126.
20. For a more extensive engagement with this problematic from a critical, nonpolitical-economy perspective, see William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
22. The transnational consumer goods manufacturer Colgate-Palmolive completed a study that showed that “the number of developing-world consumers earning the equivalent of $10,000 a year—the threshold that marketers love to target—will surpass those in the United States, Japan, and Europe combined. The gap will widen by 2005,” *U.S. News and World Report* 122:5 (February 10, 1997): 55.
Chapter Two

Art

Danielle Fox

Some artists and promoters may reject any commitment and refuse to accept the notion that their work presents a point of view beyond itself or that it fosters certain attitudes. Nevertheless, as soon as work enjoys longer exposure it inevitably participates in public discourse, advances particular systems of belief, and has reverberations in the social arena. At that point, art works are no longer a private affair.

» Hans Haacke, “Museums, Managers of Consciousness”¹

To understand why a particular art movement becomes successful under a given set of historical circumstances requires an examination of the specifics of patronage and the ideological needs of the powerful.

» Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War”²

Art and political economy are usually regarded as separate subjects, pursued and practiced by people with very different interests. Yet, they are not as disparate as they seem. Indeed, art that appears to have no visible political content—even that which has been created by an artist without political intentions—can play a significant role in promoting political and economic interests. As this essay will demonstrate, in the post–World War II era, major U.S. institutions such as the government and multinational corporations have used art, and avant-garde art in particular, as a tool with which to shape public opinion and thereby promote specific political and economic agendas. This revelation serves to illustrate Haacke’s point, made in the epigraph above, that the context in which art is exhibited and received can generate new layers of meaning, assigning a social function to a work of art above and beyond any artistic role originally conceived by its maker. Although it may be tempting to dismiss this double-layering as incidental misappropriation on the part of insensitive institutions, in doing so one risks failing to come to terms with the tremendous impact that patterns of patronage have not only on the reception of works of art, but also on their creation. As institutions have exerted their power to select which art forms receive funding for commissions, publications, and international exhibitions, certain forms are promoted over others, encouraging artists working in those modes and discou-
aging others. In this way, the political and economic needs of government
and corporate institutions have influenced the growth and development of
U.S. art in the post–World War II era.

Prior to World War II, fine-arts patronage in the United States had been
the preserve of an elite group of wealthy industrialists and financiers, many
of whose collections formed the kernels for the country’s first private art
museums. In the years following World War II, in response to a widespread
expansion of interest in the arts, the burden of patronage shifted away from
private individuals to government agencies and corporations. This new level
of public interest in the arts has been attributed to unprecedented economic
growth during the postwar period, which led to an increase in upward mo-
bility, discretionary spending power, and education levels among the middle
classes. Cultural institutions such as museums and universities experienced
tremendous growth at this time, both responding to and fueling enthusiasm
through education, publications, and exhibitions. While public interest was
growing at an exponential rate, there was, however, a limit to the prices
middle-class audiences would pay to visit a museum, see a performance, or
buy a work of art. By the early 1960s it became evident that neither the
relatively small group of superwealthy private patrons of the arts nor the
broader public who enjoyed access to museums and performing arts were
willing to bear the enormous costs of supporting the large-scale cultural
institutions and individual careers necessary for a flourishing contemporary
art world. For roughly a quarter-century, from the mid 1960s to the early
1990s, U.S. government agencies and corporations filled this gap in the art-
world economy, providing subsidies for individual artists and organizations
interested in both traditional and avant-garde formats. This support, which
took the form of grants to museums and theaters for operations, perfor-
mances, exhibitions, and acquisitions as well as grants to individual artists in
the form of commissions and awards, enriched a cultural scene that was rec-
ognized throughout the Western world as an exemplar of vitality, creativity,
innovation, individualism, and free expression.

In the 1990s, by contrast, U.S. government and corporate commitments
to the arts in general—and to the avant-garde in particular—began to falter.
During that decade the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) had to fight
for survival against congressional pressure for increased censorship, reduced
funding, and the total elimination of the Endowment. While corporate grants
to arts institutions have continued to grow in terms of dollars spent, com-
panies have at the same time become increasingly blatant in their public-
relations agendas and more conservative in their choice of whom to fund.
Corporate collecting of contemporary art, a practice that brought substantial
sums to the avant-garde art economy in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, has slowed considerably. Today, corporations are less likely to target experimental forms and more likely to favor uncontroversial art with broad popular appeal such as the performing arts and blockbuster museum exhibitions of work by popular artists from past generations.

In order to comprehend the change in cultural policy that took place during the 1990s, this essay examines the ideology that fostered the original institutional funding structures of the 1960s. Analysis of the discourse—that is, the speeches and official statements, press releases, articles, and books generated by those who were most instrumental in the campaign to expand institutional support for the arts in the 1960s—illuminates the extent to which Cold War ideology informed patterns of art patronage at the time. The first part of this essay explains the link between freedom and the avant-garde that developed out of the U.S. cultural diplomacy programs of the 1940s and 1950s. The second part examines the discourse of freedom in the 1960s, focusing on the commissioning and exhibition of the 11 Pop Artists portfolios as a case study for examining the complex motives driving corporate and government patronage at the peak of the Cold War. The third part looks at the foundation of the National Endowment for the Arts and the legacy of the discourse of freedom in U.S. domestic cultural policy of the 1970s and 1980s. The last part considers the impact of the end of the Cold War on avant-garde art in the United States.

At the heart of this essay is an acknowledgment that art, because it operates in a public sphere, can function as a form of media, carrying messages from the institutions responsible for its presentation to a public audience. In this capacity, art has a constitutive role, that is, the power to influence how audiences view institutions such as corporations or the government and how they define “American” values and national identities. Implicit in this line of thought is the recognition that once visual art enters an institutionalized arena, the creator necessarily relinquishes control over how works are positioned, interpreted, and received. Although coming to terms with this fact requires a rather prosaic attitude that denies the romance and glory of more traditional humanist art-historical approaches, it also releases art from the passive and rarefied confines of aestheticism, showing what a powerful, functional, and multidimensional role it plays in modern society.

U.S. Cultural Diplomacy, Freedom, and the Avant-Garde in the Early Cold War Era

Until the mid-1960s when the National Endowment for the Arts was established, government commitment to supporting the arts in the United States
was negligible. The earliest government arts programs were driven by the political and economic requirements of the moment, with support for artists and their work evolving almost as a fortuitous by-product. Historians are fond of celebrating the impact that the New Deal arts programs of the 1930s had on the establishment of a professional art-world network in the United States, but the government’s goal in establishing these programs was to reduce unemployment levels—not to celebrate artistic creativity for its own sake. With the economic recovery that accompanied the advent of World War II, these programs were quickly terminated. During the early decades of the Cold War, however, a unique set of conditions was in place that fostered support for the arts—and the avant-garde in particular—among some of the United States’ most powerful political and economic leaders. The first and most straightforward of these conditions was the competitive and demonstrative approach the United States took to defining its role as a global leader. The second was a rhetorical tool employed in this political and economic campaign, which I term the discourse of freedom.

After several decades of isolationism in the first half of the twentieth century, the exigencies of the Cold War brought about a new awareness among U.S. political and economic leaders regarding the role of culture in promoting American ideology both at home and abroad. Faced with the threat of expanding Soviet influence after World War II, the United States found itself in a position where it had to prove its superiority by demonstrating the power and benefits of U.S. democracy versus Soviet communism. On the broadest level, this involved dramatic displays of economic power, military might, technological advances, and cultural achievement. From this challenge a cultural competition evolved in which the United States continually strove to outplay both the USSR and Europe. This competition provided a powerful impetus for U.S. government and corporate institutions to begin contributing significant financial resources to the arts in the 1950s and 1960s, consequently generating support for American art at a critical moment in the history of its development.

It is not difficult to understand how competition might have motivated U.S. leaders to invest in building museum collections, symphonies, and ballet companies that would be judged on a par with the cultural heritage of their counterparts in Europe and the Soviet Union. In the competitive atmosphere of the Cold War, political and economic leaders loved to flaunt U.S. cultural achievements on the international stage, offering them both as blatant symbols of U.S. cultural superiority and as evidence of the functional success of the American democratic and capitalist system. It is less obvious, however, why either the government or corporations would be interested in
supporting avant-garde art forms, which had been traditionally associated with anti-institutional, anti-establishment, and anti-status-quo values.

The answer to this query lies in the discourse of freedom that evolved during the 1940s and 1950s and became part of the established institutional political-economic-cultural discourse of the 1960s. This discourse was based on a presumption that the high levels of creativity, innovation, and individual expression found in a flourishing contemporary arts scene were the product and, therefore, evidence of a “free society.” Based on this assumption, the most radical and individual artistic statements of the period—which in the 1950s were identified with the work of the New York School of Abstract Expressionist painters—could be trumpeted as evidence of the freedom of individual expression inherent in the American political system.

At a very early stage, American art was brought into service as an ideological tool, as part of the war effort to “educate, inspire, and strengthen the hearts and wills of free men in defense of their freedom.” During and after World War II, the U.S. government sponsored a series of cultural diplomacy programs that were created to counter Nazi, and later Soviet, propaganda campaigns. These took various forms, ranging from the establishment of U.S. cultural centers, libraries, and educational exchanges in other countries to international performing arts and exhibition tours. One does not have to look far to see that these programs functioned as a particularly sophisticated form of propaganda—sophisticated because they filled a political function without having an obviously political content, or, in the words of one cultural exchange official, “It’s good propaganda because it isn’t propaganda.”

In his historical analysis of U.S. cultural diplomacy, Kevin V. Mulcahy elaborated on the functional ambiguity of these programs:

On the one hand, cultural programs were conceived as essentially non-political and concerned with the promotion of mutual understanding among nations. On the other hand, the programs were seen as instrumental in consolidating a country’s international political objectives. The use of cultural assets was thus comparable to, if not equal to, the use of economic and military advantages.

The goal of these programs was therefore decidedly political, while the means were less obviously so. In this, U.S. government agencies were able to have it both ways—participating in the ideological battles of the Cold War without appearing to use propaganda in a blatant attempt to mold public opinion. As Mulcahy notes, although such exchanges rarely achieved short-term political objectives, they did “help to educate other people about the
freedom of expression found in an open, pluralist society,” yielding “indirect returns in positive attitudes toward American values.”

While most cultural diplomacy programs of the early Cold War period were initiated from the State Department and its branch agencies, and others were orchestrated covertly by the CIA, private businesses and privately financed museums were also very often invited to participate. Collaboration between the government and private institutions helped to allay fears (dominant primarily within the business world and right-wing political parties) that the government could potentially gain too much control over the arts and the definition of a national culture. Private patronage also helped to obscure the program’s propagandistic functions, as the resulting tours and exhibitions were not so directly identified with government sponsorship. Finally, private funds lessened the need for State Department officials to constantly approach a culturally conservative Congress for funding and program approval.

Private and public collaboration began as early as 1938 when the State Department announced the establishment of a Division of Cultural Relations, whose original purpose was to counter growing Nazi influence in Latin America. From the beginning, this was conceived as a project that would “rely on the private sector as the major partner in shaping policies.” According to Eva Cockcroft’s account, Nelson Rockefeller (as head of Roosevelt’s wartime intelligence agency, the Office of Inter-American Affairs, and later as assistant secretary of state for Latin American affairs) commissioned his family’s private museum, the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MOMA), to organize no fewer than nineteen exhibitions of contemporary American painting on behalf of the government for circulation in Latin America. Although intended as a counterweight to growing German influence in the region, these exhibitions also maintained a high pro-American profile in an area where, as Cockcroft has pointed out, the Rockefellers had developed their most lucrative oil investments. The confluence of interests represented in this scenario is exemplary in both their broad range and their tight entanglement. These include the U.S. government’s interest in promoting the benefits of liberal democracy (and fighting fascism) abroad, its interest in demonstrating the vitality and superiority of U.S. culture to foreign audiences, and the dual political and economic interest in protecting foreign investments and developing foreign markets.

Various other U.S. international diplomacy programs sponsored by the State Department followed the Division of Cultural Relations, culminating in the United States Information Agency (USIA), which was created in 1953 by the Eisenhower administration on the recommendation of the Rockefeller
Commission. Although operationally independent from the State Department’s cultural programs, the USIA’s mandate was similarly to support U.S. foreign policy and to promote U.S. interests through international cultural exchange programs. In these wide-ranging activities, which included educational exchanges, performing arts tours, and international art exhibitions, the promotion of avant-garde painting played only a small part. On the other hand, in the small world of the 1950s New York avant-garde, international exhibitions had immense power in their ability to promote Abstract Expressionism as the next major step in the development of international modernism, and in so doing, to celebrate the new role the United States was assuming as a leader in the progression of Western culture.

However, official views on government patronage of avant-garde art were by no means unanimous in the 1950s. The strongest resistance came from a right-wing congressional faction represented by George A. Dondero, a Republican congressman from Michigan, whose McCarthy-era experiences had left him suspicious of the liberal political leanings of many contemporary artists, which suggested links between progressive art and communism.

Dondero’s position had enough political support behind it to result in the censorship of several USIA exhibitions, most notably the mid-tour withdrawal of “Advancing American Art” and the cancellation of “100 American Artists.” While Dondero rejected and feared avant-garde art, aligning it with subversive (and hence, by association, communist) ideology, America’s “cultural Mandarins” promoted it as a specifically anticommunist ideology associated with freedom and free enterprise. These “Mandarins” included members of the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art, USIA officials, and other “enlightened cold warriors,” such as Thomas W. Braden, who was in charge of the CIA’s cultural programs (including the leftist intellectual front organization Congress for Cultural Freedom) during the 1950s and 1960s. In contrast to Dondero, these individuals understood that displays of dissent and controversy, whether in the form of political rhetoric or artistic expression, could be an effective propaganda weapon in the Cold War, particularly in gaining influence over liberal intellectuals in Europe and Latin America.

Although these efforts were supported within certain sectors of the government, particularly those affiliated with the State Department, the USIA, and the CIA, congressional opposition was such that it ultimately fell to private institutions, including corporate-backed museums, to organize the most ambitious international statements of the American avant-garde during the 1950s and early 1960s. This included representation at the Venice Biennale, where the United States was the only country represented by a private body.
(the Museum of Modern Art) rather than by an official government agency. “With the government unable to execute successfully its own cultural exchange programs,” historian S. Tnenbaum writes, “the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art in New York played a key role—by default as an ambassador of cultural diplomacy throughout the Cold War.”

The International Program of the Museum of Modern Art was founded in 1952 and supported by the Museum’s International Arts Council, a group of art patrons and community leaders who wished “to let it be known especially in Europe that America was not the cultural backwater that the Russians were trying to demonstrate that it was.” An initial five-year grant of $625,000 for the council came primarily from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and was used to pay for transport, publicity, and publications related to exhibitions of American art in Europe. Among the thirty-three international exhibitions sponsored by MOMA between 1950 and 1956 were “Twelve Contemporary American Painters and Sculptors” (1953–54), “Young Painters” (1956), “Modern Art in the U.S.” (1956), and “The New American Painting” (1958). Abstract Expressionism had a particularly high profile in these exhibitions, a consequence in part of the proselytizing activities of MOMA’s chief curator, Alfred Barr, who promoted Abstract Expressionism to financial leaders such as Nelson Rockefeller and Time/Life magnate Henry Luce by designating the style “Artistic Free Enterprise.”

That the Cold War need for symbols of freedom underlay the institutional promotion and ensuing international success of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s is a well-established argument, pioneered by Eva Cockcroft and explored in considerable depth by Serge Guilbaut. According to Cockcroft, the open, seemingly unregulated style of Abstract Expressionism contrasted with the tightly controlled socialist realism of Soviet art, making it particularly useful as cultural propaganda. “It was the perfect contrast to the regimented traditional and narrow nature of [Soviet] socialist realism,” she argued. “It was new, fresh and creative. Artistically avant-garde and original, Abstract Expressionism could show the United States as culturally up-to-date in competition with Paris.” Serge Guilbaut summed up the same dynamic as follows:

Abstract Expressionism was for many the expression of freedom: the freedom to create controversial works of art, the freedom symbolized by action
painting, by the unbridled expressionism of artists completely without fetters. . . . Abroad, this domestic battle was presented as a token of the freedom inherent in the American system and contrasted with the restrictions placed on the artist by the Soviet system. . . . Freedom was the symbol most actively and vigorously promoted by the new liberalism in the Cold War period. Expressionism stood for the difference between a free society and a totalitarian one.24

Although European critics were mixed in their reactions to “The New American Painting,” the tremendous cultural impact of this and other MOMA exhibitions on both artists and audiences in Europe has been well documented.25 Needless to say, in the United States, MOMA’s exhibitions were heralded as a tremendous success and an international triumph. Even conservative cold warriors, who may have been initially uneasy about supporting avant-garde art, could not help being pleased with the success of this program of cultural imperialism, as it meant that the United States could add contemporary art to its constantly touted list of economic, technological, and cultural achievements.

As Cockcroft and Guilbault have successfully argued, it was the specific visual characteristics of Abstract Expressionism that made it a particularly apposite symbol for political freedom in the 1950s. Unfortunately, however, this has led to an erroneous assumption that the association between the discourse of freedom and avant-garde art was unique to Abstract Expressionism, and that once U.S. cultural supremacy had been established at the end of the 1950s, America had won the Cold War cultural contest. On the contrary, the need for cultural symbols of American freedom and superiority continued well into the 1960s and beyond. As long as there was an atmosphere of threat, fear, economic instability, and competition, government and corporate institutions could justify promoting the American concept of individual freedom of expression and, with it, the avant-garde. And so it evolved that rhetoric born out of the promotion of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s was used as a justification for promoting broader cultural categories in the 1960s, raising avant-garde art, and to some extent art in general, to a privileged position as a symbol of American freedom. Even after Abstract Expressionism had been superseded by later movements such as pop and op art, the avant-garde and the discourse that surrounded it continued to be useful to government, corporate, and art-world institutions interested in promoting any number of freedoms, including freedom from totalitarianism, individual freedom, artistic freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of speech, freedom to consume, freedom from government regulation—even international free trade.
Corporate Patronage in the 1960s and the 11 Pop Artists Portfolios

Far from subsiding, Cold War tensions escalated after the 1950s, with the need for cultural symbols of American freedom and superiority continuing to be a priority well into the 1960s and beyond. The Cuban Revolution in 1959 was soon followed by the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the construction of the Berlin Wall, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the 1964 detonation of an atom bomb in China, and the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Along with these developments came growing anxieties within government and corporate communities about the spread of communism and about the potential loss of U.S. foreign markets and capital investments. Indeed, it is the pervasiveness of corporate ideology in the discourse of arts patronage and cultural policy during the 1960s that is so striking.

The 11 Pop Artists portfolios present an instructive case study into how the ideological needs of powerful institutions were met by the promotion of avant-garde culture in the 1960s, illuminating the ways in which both government and corporate interests were served by modern art in the 1960s. Philip Morris, purveyor of cigarettes and the Marlboro Man, commissioned three 11 Pop Artists portfolios as its first foray into sponsorship of the arts in 1965. Each of the portfolios contained eleven prints by eleven important artists of the American and British pop art movements, including Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, Tom Wesselman, Jim Dine, Mel Ramos, Allen Jones, and Peter Phillips, among others. The resulting prints were designated for two separate exhibition campaigns, one domestic and one foreign. For the U.S. tour, Philip Morris contracted the American Federation of Arts (AFA) in New York to exhibit the pop prints alongside thirty op prints it had directly purchased. Meanwhile, duplicate sets of the pop prints were sent abroad in the form of an exhibition called 11 Pop Artists: The New Image. This international show was organized by Philip Morris’s public relations firm Ruder and Finn, and was circulated by the USIA to museums and galleries in major cities in Europe and Latin America.

At a time when most companies were funding classical performing arts, such as ballet, opera, and orchestras, Philip Morris was following the precedent set by the Rockefellers in sponsoring the latest avant-garde art forms. The decision to use pop and op was in fact made with great deliberation and care, upon the recommendation of Ruder and Finn, who hoped that by sponsoring “innovative” art movements, Philip Morris could reinforce its own identity as an innovative company. By sponsoring an avant-garde style, Philip Morris was also positioned to take a leading role in the Cold War campaign for artistic, political, and economic freedom.
In launching an art patronage program in 1964, Philip Morris’s president, George Weissman, was answering a call for corporations to join the government in taking on a greater role in supporting the arts. This call had been issued as part of President Kennedy’s New Frontier campaign and attracted strong support from “a new breed of executives,” among them David Rockefeller of Chase Manhattan Bank, Frank Stanton of CBS, and Richard Eells. These mainly Republican leaders not only advocated business contributions for the arts overall, but they also understood that there was a special premium in promoting avant-garde art, precisely because its controversial nature reinforced the image of America as a land of tolerance, choice, and freedom of expression.29

The Rockefeller family’s influence in promoting these ideas was extensive, for it was largely in the context of Nelson Rockefeller’s various political appointments, research conducted by the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation (a New York think tank that advised the government on foreign-policy issues), the Rockefeller-funded Museum of Modern Art’s International Program, and the Business Committee for the Arts founded by David Rockefeller that the ideology of freedom became so inextricably linked with the imperative for institutional support for the arts in the United States. As pioneers in the field of both government and corporate patronage of the arts, the Rockefellers were trendsetters among the political and financial movers and shakers of the era.30 Other corporate executives soon followed suit, espousing the ideology of freedom in the arts, donating funds to arts organizations, and establishing corporate collections.31

Richard Eells was a professor of business at Columbia University, an adviser to the Rockefellers, and one of the most prominent spokesmen for corporate cultural interests in the 1960s. Eells couched his advocacy of corporate support for the arts in both political and economic terms. In a 1964 report commissioned by the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation on the financial and social status of the performing arts in the United States, Eells described the broadening of art audiences in the mid-1960s as a “cultural explosion—a demand by people for cultural outlets for their growing leisure time.”32 At the same time, Eells observed that despite this demand, rising costs meant that art institutions could not support themselves by ticket sales alone and would need subsidies to survive. Eells encouraged corporations to fill this gap, justifying corporate funding of the arts on what he called “teleological grounds.” Here Eells conceded that “the public welfare aspect of the performing arts is an important argument,” but he found other more compelling arguments for corporate support of the arts, which included “investment in the good society where free institutions can flourish” and the
“avoidance of a shift of the responsibility, and therefore of the power, to government bureaus.” It is safe to assume that when Eells spoke of freedom in this context he was not so concerned with the First Amendment rights of political activists, but rather with maintaining a political environment in which corporations were free to operate with a minimum of interference from government.

Herbert I. Schiller, in his book *Culture Inc.*, describes how, during this era, “big business” was often posited as the only viable alternative to “big government.” The two were played off each other as opposites, with big government associated with communism and totalitarianism and big business becoming associated with freedom and democracy. In this binary campaign, the Cold War threat was used to generate fear among the American populace and hence stimulate its support not only for cultural freedom, but also for “economic freedom”—a euphemism, as Schiller pointed out, for “private enterprise unfettered by social accountability.”

In Eells’s 1968 essay “Business and the Performing Arts,” he went so far as to claim that “The forward thrust of a free and open society depends in a large measure upon both the vigorous and untrammeled artistic life of the community and the maturation of the corporation as a social institution.” In this statement, cultural and corporate development were aligned as parallel projects, both necessary to the continued freedom of American society. In his 1967 book *The Corporation and the Arts*, Eells articulated his view on the relationship between artistic freedom and economic freedom in the clearest terms:

> Freedom to create and innovate is one of the necessary conditions for the flourishing of the arts. There is no free society where this freedom has been suppressed or snuffed out. In the interplay of enterprise and the arts this freedom is basic to both. Nor is it too much to say that the artist’s freedom to create works of art, untrammeled by authoritarian and totalitarian commands, shrinks most disastrously in precisely those regimes where economic enterprise is most comprehensively and systematically subordinated or “coordinated” to something else.

Eells’s 1964 report to the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation was distributed to several hundred business executives attending the June 1965 meeting of the New York Board of Trade. The report raised enough concern that the first steps toward a unified corporate approach to art patronage were taken. In 1966 the board and *Esquire* magazine sponsored the first Business in the Arts awards. In September of that year, David Rockefeller presented...
a landmark speech at the fiftieth anniversary conference of the National Industrial Conference Board, “Culture and the Corporation,” in which he called for the foundation of an organization to help foster business support for the arts. The result was the founding in 1967 of the Business Committee for the Arts (or the BCA), an organization chaired by industrial and financial executives whose mandate was to provide support services for companies and arts organizations interested in developing mutual relationships. In addition to sponsoring annual Business in the Arts Awards, the BCA provided a forum in which the new generation of executive “art advocates” could espouse their cultural/economic ideology in meetings, conferences, and publications. It was in this context that Frank Stanton, president of CBS and chair of the BCA from 1970 to 1972, declared, “the first place to worry about American life losing its vital qualities or individualism is in the arts. If this happens, no liberal education will save our kind of society, and no business enterprise will long prosper in what is left to it.” Eells’s, Stanton’s, and Rockefeller’s remarks show quite clearly how support for freedom in the arts was promoted in the 1960s as a means to maintain a free-enterprise economy. Even thirty years after the committee’s foundation, when the BCA established an annual lecture to honor its founder (David Rockefeller), the series was dedicated to the purpose of advancing Rockefeller’s belief “that the arts are essential to free enterprise and human achievement.” Here we see how the causal relationship between a free society and individual expression that had been established in the cultural diplomacy programs of the 1950s was inverted. In the discourse that circulated among powerful political and economic leaders in the 1960s, progressive contemporary art was raised to a privileged position as not only evidence of, but also a precondition for, freedom.

The extent to which these ideas informed the views of George Weissman at the very inception of the pop art project is evident in his introductory essay for the Pop and Op exhibition catalog, in which Weissman quoted Eells to justify his patronage of an avant-garde movement: “The cherishing of artistic creativeness contributes to a deeper and more comprehensive view of human life and strengthens the concept of a plural society in which individual ideas and freedoms are themselves cherished.” For their efforts in advancing this corporate/cultural ideology, one of the first “Business in the Arts” awards was presented to George Weissman and William Ruder of Ruder and Finn for Philip Morris’s Pop and Op exhibition.

Meanwhile, Ruder and Finn, acting on behalf of Philip Morris, worked closely with the USIA to organize an international itinerary for the 11 Pop Artists portfolios that included countries where Philip Morris was interested
in promoting its products and where the USIA was concerned with shoring up democracy and free trade. Responding to the successes of the CIA and MOMA’s cultural diplomacy programs of the 1950s, the USIA’s role was allowed to expand somewhat in the early 1960s, at the time moving away from negative propaganda campaigns describing the threat of the Soviet Union and toward the promotion of more positive aspects of U.S. society and culture. In 1962, the organization assumed responsibility for U.S. representation at the international contemporary art exhibitions held in Venice and São Paulo. When Robert Rauschenberg, an American avant-garde artist associated with the proto-pop movement, won the grand prize at the 1964 Venice Biennale, it was heralded as a great success for the USIA, and further enhanced perceptions of the effectiveness of avant-garde art in promoting U.S. culture to foreign audiences.

Unfortunately, with more resources now being directed toward high-profile exhibitions such as the Biennales, funding for the USIA’s smaller embassy-based cultural programs was cut in 1964, leaving local agencies with the task of finding alternative ways to fund foreign exhibitions of U.S. art. Given this financial and administrative pressure, a partnership with a U.S. corporation willing to pay for shipping and public relations was an opportunity that could not be passed up. Moreover, the consumer-oriented subjects and styles of the 11 Pop Artists prints presented an excellent tool to inspire enthusiasm for both the American consumer lifestyle and the political and economic structures that made that lifestyle possible.

Field messages sent via cable from embassies in Latin America to the USIA headquarters in Washington, D.C., provide further insight into the USIA’s ideological interest in cosponsoring the 11 Pop Artists world tour. In Maracaibo, Venezuela, for example, local officials considered the show particularly successful because it drew “some 25 student artists of the ‘40 grados en la Sombra,’ a leftist cultural organization whose members had never visited Casa Americana before.” In Caracas, the show was a major event: Roy Lichtenstein flew in to spend several days giving talks and television interviews concerning his own work, pop art, and what it is like to be an artist in the United States. Summing up Lichtenstein’s visit, the local USIA official reported that it was “extremely successful. Brought BNC [Bi-National Center] into closer communication with artists and aficionados of every political stripe” and stimulated a “healthy discussion of American philosophy . . . by politically minded Venezuelan artists and aficionados,” while continuing to be “reflective of U.S. artistic freedom, especially in coincidence with Soviet conviction of two Russian writers.” Finally, the event provided the opportunity to distribute more than four thousand pamphlets, including
those titled “Sobre la Democracia,” “La Democracia en la América Latina,” and “Why Vietnam?”

When the Pop and Op show opened in the United States, most reporters emphasized stylistic and iconographic content in their reviews. A few reporters, however, considered Philip Morris’s political and economic motivations for sponsoring the show. One anonymous United Press International writer published a succinct conclusion that was reproduced in papers across the nation, writing, “In short, the company feels that only so long as individual ideas and freedoms are cherished will the atmosphere in which the free enterprise system flourishes be cherished, and preserved.”

Another reviewer, whose article was featured on the cover of the New York Journal American, “Pictorial Living Section,” in February 1966, went so far as to title his enthusiastic article “Art for a Free Society.” Featuring three pages of large, glossy color reproductions of pop art prints, the brief text states simply: “Art reflects the tensions and trends of our times; in fact, history is often studied in the works of art each era produces. In mid-century we know that political tyranny dictates the artist; it is the free society that zealously protects his individuality and understands his creative impulse.”

Clearly, it was the intent of both Philip Morris and the USIA that the 11 Pop Artists prints would function as symbols of individual freedom under American democracy, helping to promote faith in American capitalism and skepticism toward communist ideology and totalitarian regimes. That this intent was so explicitly stated both in the exhibition catalog and in the newspapers makes it difficult to imagine audiences of the time viewing the work without considering this level of meaning.

But sponsorship of the 11 Pop Artists portfolios benefited Philip Morris in another way as well, as it was precisely at this juncture that the tobacco company was facing a crisis of unprecedented dimensions: in 1964, the Surgeon General’s Advisory Committee published its first report conclusively linking smoking with lung cancer. After a decade of tremendous growth primarily as a result of aggressive advertising directed toward expanding television audiences, the tobacco industry now faced a barrage of threats, from the proposal that warnings should be included on cigarette packages and in advertisements to the suggestion that cigarette advertising should be banned altogether.

Suddenly identified as a serious threat to public health and society’s welfare, Philip Morris needed to do everything it could at this time to boost its corporate image, counter criticism of its advertising tactics, and boost its sales. The promotion of a series of pop art prints, which in both their content and style celebrated advertising as a vital force in American culture, presented an
excellent vehicle for achieving these goals. Many of the *11 Pop Artists* prints featured corporate logos and references to advertising media—some even to cigarette advertising. For example, Allen Jones’s *Miss America* refers to the romantic myth of the American West as it has been used, for example, in advertising cigarettes. (The cowgirl, wearing hot pants and standing with a gun in her hand among cacti, would make a dream date for the “Marlboro man.”) Mel Ramos’s *Tobacco Rose* (figure 2.1) depicts a pin-up girl sitting bare-bottomed on a giant pack of Philip Morris cigarettes, and Jim Dine’s *Awl* (figure 2.2) combines a pack of Marlboros (another Philip Morris brand) with the bodies of glamorous women cut from fashion magazines.

For Philip Morris, the pop prints presented an opportunity to frame advertising imagery within the context of fine art, discouraging viewers from thinking about its sinister functions and encouraging them to enjoy it as a source of visual or aesthetic pleasure. Perhaps to reinforce this reading, Philip Morris hired Max Kozloff, a well-known art critic and editor, to write an essay for the portfolios and exhibition catalogs. Kozloff used lyrical language to describe the works, emphasizing how their artistic qualities subsumed their commercial function in such statements as “Pop art establishes an aesthetic intimacy by transforming commercial ends into artistic means” and “Commercial imagery becomes a new form of nature.” After the exhibition, Richard Eells reiterated this view, writing in *The Corporation and the Arts*: “It has become intellectually fashionable to elevate the popular arts to high status, as though Pop Art somehow distills out from contaminated surroundings an unparalleled aesthetic purity.” In a *New York Times* review of *Pop and Op*, art critic Walter Carlson confirmed that the show “is certainly changing many a view of advertising.”

This kind of response would have been particularly important to Philip Morris in 1965. Here was a chance for the company to deflect public criticism of cigarette advertising with the message that it is not, as some were professing in congressional hearings, a cause of death, but rather is akin to *art*, appropriate for a museum wall—aesthetic, and therefore pure. The print exhibition also positioned advertising as a celebration of the vibrancy and plenitude of commercial America, presenting images that were innovative, tantalizing, colorful, exciting, and fun.

In light of this analysis, a brief return to Philip Morris’s role in using culture to promote the ideology of freedom and democracy now seems pertinent. For Philip Morris, “freedom” and “freedom of expression” meant more than the celebration of a democratic society that would nurture a free-enterprise economy. In the United States, freedom of expression was a First Amendment right—and it was this particular right that tobacco companies
were citing in Senate hearings throughout 1965 as a means to defend the legality of both their advertising and their products. People are free in America, the industry lobbyists claimed, to make and view whatever images they like (including cigarette ads), and people are free in America to make their own choices (to smoke or not to smoke) without the intervention of the state.
into their personal lives—an alternative that, we should remember, at the
time evoked the specter of “big government” and a totalitarian, if not specifi-
cally communist, social and political structure.53

Finally, the most obvious motive for Philip Morris’s sponsorship should
not be overlooked. With the domestic tobacco market weakening follow-
ing the U.S. cancer scare of 1964–65, expansion of foreign markets was

Figure 2.2. Awl, by Jim Dine. From the portfolio 11 Pop Artists, Volume 1, 1965
(published 1966). Screenprint, printed in color, composition 23 7⁄8 × 19 11⁄16 inches
especially important. Although Philip Morris ranked fourth among U.S. tobacco companies in terms of domestic sales, the company was ranked first in international exports in 1966,\(^5\) with seven manufacturing affiliates and licensing agreements in thirteen countries (most of which were in Europe and Latin America). In a 1998 analysis of the tobacco industry’s international marketing tactics, it was observed that cigarette advertisements tend to focus on themes of freedom, wealth, and luxury “marketing U.S. culture and a culture of consumption” and that in so doing, tobacco transnationals “tap into the aspirations of people living in targeted countries where populations are beginning to have some disposable income by selling not just cigarettes, but a Western standard of living, freedom and democracy.”\(^5\) Although Philip Morris was ostensibly motivated by philanthropic concerns, it should be evident that by promoting the *11 Pop Artists* prints as symbols of U.S. freedom and democracy in Europe and Latin America, the company was also trying to develop and maintain foreign markets for its products.

In sum, while promoting the virtues of democratic values and capitalist economies to both domestic and foreign audiences, the *11 Pop Artists* portfolios were a means for the USIA to reinforce perceptions of U.S. artists as international cultural leaders, particularly in parts of the world where communist influence remained strong. For Philip Morris, a multinational company with foreign investments and markets to protect, the need to promote its products and maintain social conditions in which free enterprise would be assured was a similar imperative. The discourse of individual freedom was useful to Philip Morris on the domestic front as well, as the First Amendment was the underlying constitutional and philosophical premise on which its fight against government regulation of the tobacco industry relied.

**Government and Corporate Arts Policy, 1965–89**

In late 1965, responsibility for U.S. art programs in Europe shifted from the USIA to the Smithsonian Institution, and in 1967 the CIA’s covert cultural operations were terminated after being exposed in the press.\(^5\) The mid-1960s may have marked the end of an era of official U.S. international cultural diplomacy, but it was also the dawn of a new era in domestic cultural policy that was equally influenced by Cold War ideology. It was out of the context described earlier, one in which artistic freedom was valued for its political and economic potential, that discussions and congressional hearings regarding the possibility of creating a National Endowment for the Arts were begun in 1963 under President Kennedy and finalized in 1965 under President Johnson. Although the NEA was created to fund domestic rather than international arts
programs, the commitment to the arts that Kennedy and his administration came to represent was still very much a product of, and consequently heavily informed by, both the Cold War urge toward international competition and the discourses regarding the relationship between culture and freedom that had developed over the course of the preceding two decades.

For President Kennedy, support for the arts was both a heartfelt belief and an effective political tool. Because the discourse of artistic freedom had so much support within the largely Republican business world in the 1960s, it bridged political gaps, bringing “enlightened” politicians from both the Democratic and Republican parties into a position of agreement. Aligning himself with this ideology also helped Kennedy to establish his reputation as a patron of the arts, which was particularly important because it seemed likely at the time that he might face Nelson Rockefeller in the 1964 presidential election. Then governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller had pioneered the field of public-arts funding with the establishment of the New York State Council on the Arts in 1960. Interestingly, it was not Nelson but his brother John D. Rockefeller who was invited to testify at a 1963 congressional hearing regarding Kennedy’s proposal to establish a National Arts Council. Here he went on record saying: “Democratic government and the arts are, in my opinion in league with one another, for they both center on the individual and the fullest development of his capacities and talents. To free men, the arts are not incidental to life, but central to it.”

In a speech the same year, President Kennedy invoked a similar sentiment, preempting Eells in his conviction that the arts were essential to the maintenance of a free society:

Above all, we are coming to understand that the arts incarnate the creativity of a free society. We know that a totalitarian society can promote the arts in its own way. . . . But art means more than the resuscitation of the past; it means that free and unconfined search for new ways of expressing the experience of the present and the vision of the future. . . . A free government is the reflection of a people’s will and desire—and ultimately their taste.

During his term, President Kennedy helped to raise the profile of the arts in the United States by inviting artists and writers to participate in special events at the White House, and presented many with the “Presidential Medal of Freedom” award. Finally, there was a distinctly Cold War competitive edge to Kennedy’s (again 1963) statement, “I look forward to an America which commands respect throughout the world not only for its strength, but for its civilization as well.”
From its inception, the NEA was organized according to “democratic principles,” with peer panels reviewing all applications and passing recommendations up to the National Council and then to the presidentially appointed chairman. As long as the Cold War ethos of commitment to individual freedom and resistance to totalitarian censorship of artistic expression remained in place, the NEA was committed to funding a wide range of classical, community, and progressive art forms. Examples of avant-garde artists who received grants from the NEA in its first fifteen years include the Martha Graham Dance Company, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Merce Cunningham, Alexander Calder, Isamu Noguchi, William Wegman, Lee Friedlander, and Laurie Anderson, among many others.

The National Endowment was also originally conceived as a government program that would work in tandem with business to raise funds for the arts. In 1967, NEA chairman Roger Stevens observed that the gap between income and costs was more than $23 million a year in the performing arts sector alone, warning that “The Federal government cannot, and should not, be expected to carry the total burden” and that arts funding “must be a cooperative effort, to include private enterprise.”62 According to Livingston Biddle (who was to become chairman of the NEA under President Carter), the relationship between the NEA and the business community was constantly nurtured. As an officer for the NEA in the late 1960s, Biddle attended frequent meetings with the Business Committee for the Arts, acting as a liaison between the two bodies, and encouraging companies such as Philip Morris, Ruder and Finn, Occidental Petroleum, CBS, Exxon, Alcoa, Allstate, Mobil, Pepsi-Cola, Xerox, AT&T, and General Electric, among others, to make financial contributions to art projects and organizations.63 Although the Endowment’s preliminary attempts to attract corporate contributions directly to the NEA’s “treasury account” were of limited success, when businesses were given the “freedom” to make their own choices about which individual projects would receive their funds in the form of matching or challenge grants (and consequently which individual projects would be associated with their corporate image), business contributions to the arts doubled.64 Although the majority of these grants went to performing arts and public television, the Museum of Modern Art received grants from Alcoa, Philip Morris, and Mobil during the 1970s, and a much broader range of companies, including Chase Manhattan Bank, supported modern and avant-garde art through purchases for growing corporate collections.65

Meanwhile, support for the arts remained a top priority for both Democratic and Republican political leaders in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1969, Richard Nixon was able to revel in the international cultural status achieved
by the United States, claiming that “America has moved to the forefront as a place of creative expression. The excellence of the American product has won worldwide recognition.” Nixon went on to say that artists were keepers of the flame of freedom: “Our creative and performing artists give free and full expression to the American spirit as they illuminate, criticize and celebrate our civilization. Like our leaders they are an invaluable national resource.”66 To further promote this position, Nixon appointed Nancy Hanks as chair of the NEA in 1970. In a speech offered at her swearing-in ceremony, Hanks offered a few by now familiar thoughts on freedom and the arts, saying: “It is part of the essential idea of our country that the lives of people should be advanced in freedom and in comprehension of the tough and soaring qualities of the spirit. This is not possible without the arts. They are not a luxury; they are a necessity.”67 With support from both Nixon and powerful congressional leaders, Hanks saw the budget for NEA grants multiply fourteen-fold during her tenure, rising from $9 million in 1970 to $123.8 million in 1978.68 Under the guidance of Joan Mondale and Livingston Biddle, the NEA budget continued to expand during the Carter years, reaching $158.8 million in 1981.69

Although the ideological objectives of the Cold War were becoming less immediate in the late 1980s, the discourse of freedom had become so entrenched in government arts policy that even President Reagan felt compelled to publicly support it. In 1987, at the National Endowment’s National Medal of the Arts ceremony, Reagan offered a lyrical speech on freedom and the arts worthy of a Rockefeller. He asked, “Why do we, as free people, honor the arts?” and explained that in addition to their capacity to “reach out to other cultures,” “We honor the arts . . . because we are a free people. The arts are among our finest creations and the reflection of freedom’s light.”70

Reagan’s speech, like those of Kennedy, Rockefeller, and Nixon, illustrates the extent to which the NEA, while not an international propaganda weapon of the Cold War, was still very much a product of the discourse of freedom that had developed out of the Cold War cultural programs of the 1950s, and was seen as an integral part of the mandate to protect freedom as an overriding American and moral objective.

Although Reagan lent rhetorical support to freedom of expression, it was under his administration that the first signs of hesitation regarding financial commitment to the arts eventually became evident. In an early manifestation of the broader 1980s trend toward privatization, Reagan cut federal arts funding by 10 percent in 1981, suggesting that corporate contributions, which had been growing steadily since the 1960s, would make up the difference.
Indeed, by 1977, for every federal dollar spent, private bodies were already contributing three or four dollars to the arts.71

With the flush of profits earned by U.S. corporations during the economic boom of the 1980s, businesses were especially well positioned to invest in art, knowing very well what kinds of political and economic, or “extra-aesthetic,” returns could be reaped from what on the surface appeared to be a philanthropic gesture of social welfare. One of the most pervasive extra-aesthetic motivations for corporate support of the arts in the 1980s was the development of a public-relations campaign that promoted a positive and socially conscious view of the company. This was particularly important for companies that mass-marketed harmful and controversial products such as petroleum and tobacco. As a marketing and public-relations exercise, it is clearly in the sponsoring corporation’s interest to promote blockbuster museum exhibitions that attract a maximum number of visitors. It therefore goes without saying that exhibitions of avant-garde art, which attract a more specialized audience and have the potential to generate dangerous controversy, do not have adequate mass appeal to serve this purpose. Much more effective are surveys of work by European Old Master and nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists, foremost among them those from the widely accepted Impressionist, Postimpressionist, Early Modernist, and Surrealist schools.72 Thus, while the quantity of corporate dollars spent on museum exhibitions rose in the 1980s, the content of the exhibitions became more conservative.

Another motivation for growing corporate support for the arts in the 1980s stemmed from the need to “introduce products to new and foreign, somewhat reluctant communities.” This dynamic, which Rosanne Martorella describes as a form of “shadow government,” operates both on a local level (when a company expands business to a new state and has to develop a new relationship with the local government responsible for zoning, taxation, and environmental policy)73 and, as Brian Wallis has observed, on an international level. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example, corporations supported several cultural festivals featuring the arts of foreign countries where U.S. multinationals were heavily invested.74 For the foreign government sponsors, these festivals offered a means to promote a very specific national identity to U.S. audiences, to “transform negative stereotypes into positive ones and, in the process, to improve the political and economic standing of their country.”75 Wallis describes these cultural festivals, including Mexico: A Work of Art (1990), Turkey: The Continuing Magnificence (1987–88), and Festival of Indonesia (1990–92) as successors to the “treasure” shows of the 1970s, which had included, among others, The Treasures of King Tutankhamen (Exxon, 1976–79) and Treasures of Ancient Nigeria (Philip Morris, 1980).
He goes on to explain that the festivals function as “intricate multi-layered engines of global diplomacy, which, when staged properly, are almost indiscernible as self-promotions.”

For the corporate sponsors, on the other hand, these shows helped to establish “favorable conditions” in both the host country and at home, by projecting an image of respect and veneration toward a culture that in reality probably represented little more than an exploitable market. Hence Philip Morris developed an advertising campaign for the Turkey show that emphasized the building of “bridges between cultures” at precisely the moment when Philip Morris was entering the Turkish tobacco market for the first time; Mobil’s 1979 sponsorship of Treasures of Ancient Nigeria played a role in the company’s efforts to improve its standing “in the eyes of the Nigerian government at the expense of British Petroleum”; and Mobil’s 1992 contribution of $1.3 million to the Festival of Indonesia sculpture exhibition has been read as an effort to butter up the government in anticipation of its upcoming review of Mobil’s right to operate in Indonesia.

Meanwhile, avant-garde art was being supported through an entirely different venue in the 1980s: the corporate collection. Whereas manufacturing and oil companies had led the way in assembling art collections in the late 1960s and early 1970s, banking, real-estate, and financial companies dominated the market in the 1980s, and as investment in new premises grew, so did commissions and purchases of contemporary art to install in new, modern headquarters. Chase Manhattan Bank’s collection, for example, already included thirteen thousand pieces of postwar American art in 1996 when it merged with Chemical Bank. As a result of this partnership, two thousand additional works from Chemical Bank were added to the collection.

As this demand combined with other factors (including the strength of the Yen and the participation of Japanese banks in the international modern art market), prices rose, and corporate purchases as a form of “investment” for the stockholders proliferated. Stockholders’ interests were likely also borne in mind when corporate curators and collection committees selected which living artists they would support. As Marjory Jacobson has explained, corporate taste in the 1980s remained on the conservative side of avant-garde, favoring “cheerful” abstraction over realism, and avoiding works featuring nudes or overtly political subject matter. Even so, the impact of this scale of patronage on the contemporary art market and on the professional standing of many individual living artists was enormous, making the late 1980s a high point in the growth of the market for avant-garde American art.
Despite Reagan’s initial reduction of the NEA budget, federal arts appropriations were maintained at a relatively steady level, in the region of $165 million annually, during the 1980s. The real threat to the NEA, to the avant-garde, and to the discourse of freedom did not come until 1989, under President George Bush. For the first time since Congress had censored the USIA’s exhibitions in 1956, government support was withdrawn from a series of high-profile avant-garde art projects. Several Republican congressmen, represented by the archconservatives Jesse Helms, Philip Crane, and Dana Rohrabacher, and backed by the Traditional Values Coalition and the American Family Association, questioned the acceptability of taxpayers’ money going to support museum exhibitions that included controversial works, in particular those by photographers Andreas Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe. Amid much scandal and controversy, police were sent to close one such exhibition, bringing the curator to trial for displaying what the coalition considered to be “obscene” materials.81

While President Bush and his NEA chairman, John Frohnmeyer, appointed in 1990, continued to profess that they had no interest in censorship, Bush condemned federal funding of controversial art, saying that he was “deeply offended” by some of the art that federal monies had supported, describing it as “sacrilegious,” “blasphemous,” and “filth.” This climate, combined with congressional pressure, eventually led to various revisionist measures. These included the requirement that artists receiving NEA funding sign a written pledge that they would not make anything that could be considered “obscene,” ratification of an antiobscenity law regarding the use of NEA funds, increased congressional oversight of the Endowment’s activities, autocratic power for the presidially appointed NEA chairman to overrule the recommendations of the peer panels, and the unprecedented application of that power in chairman Frohnmeyer’s repeated refusal to fund artists and projects recommended by those peer panels (including two by well-established artists Karen Finley and Mike Kelly) on the basis that their work was simply “too political.”

It could be sheer coincidence that government support for freedom of expression in the arts was withdrawn for the first time in 1989, the year the Cold War was declared to be officially over. Although it would be hard to draw a direct line of causality between the fall of the Berlin Wall and court cases regarding U.S. obscenity laws taking place in Cleveland and Washington, D.C., it certainly seems that the 1989 triumph of liberal democracy over communism raised unforeseen problems for freedom of expression in the
United States; for without the mandate to pose as an international model of freedom, the most repressive forces of U.S. society—suppressed since the McCarthy era—could once again surface. In this new post–Cold War ideological atmosphere, conservative politicians are “free” to formulate restrictive cultural policies that are closer in character to those of the totalitarian governments that the United States fought against so mightily and for so long.

As long as American democracy was threatened by the spread of communism and the strengthening nuclear arsenals of China and the USSR, the U.S. government remained committed to fighting totalitarianism on an ideological level (and the Cold War was one “waged in the hearts and minds of men”). Regardless of how conservative the individual tastes of government and corporate officials may have been between the 1940s and 1980s, the ideology and rhetoric of freedom of individual expression superseded it. Only now do we see how superficial the Cold War faith in individual freedom of expression was, and how quickly the ideals of tolerance, individualism, creativity, and innovation were abandoned once the supporting ideological structure of the Cold War was no longer in place. Certainly the progressive ideals of the 1960s had an element of naïveté, and yes, there is no question that the discourse of freedom in the arts was more a political and economic tool than a fundamental belief. But it had a functional power in setting standards for behavior, which, regardless of how superficial they were, created an environment that fostered tolerance and freedom of expression in the United States.

Since the end of the Cold War, the attention of U.S. political leaders has turned away from international affairs to focus increasingly on domestic and moral issues. In this context the ideological function of avant-garde art as an international sign of freedom of expression and democratic values has not only become redundant, but has become the target of conservative policymakers who have cited moral transgressions in avant-garde work as a justification for eliminating federal funding for the arts. Despite support from President Clinton and the Senate, Congress has been reducing NEA allocations since 1992, with renewed attacks in the middle of the decade resulting in a dramatic drop from $170.2 in 1994 to $98 million in 1998.82

While critics argue that the NEA’s fiscal contribution to the arts is so insignificant compared to those generated by private enterprise that no one would notice if it disappeared, proponents argue that, particularly through the challenge grant program, the NEA has played a key role as a catalyst, not only by stimulating much greater amounts of private funding, but also by influencing where that funding would be directed. By legitimizing certain artists and art institutions with government grants, the NEA provides an
important voice representing artistic concerns in the sea of market-driven selection criteria employed by corporate sponsors.\textsuperscript{83}

Reduced federal funding has consequently left U.S. museums in a position of near-total reliance on corporate donations for their exhibition programs, resulting in a “tightening interlock between corporate power and dependent art institutions,”\textsuperscript{84} which, according to Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, constitutes “an inherent, insidious, hidden form of censorship” because it requires museums and artists to practice self-censorship.\textsuperscript{85}

Although corporate patrons do not directly dictate the contents of museum exhibitions, Hans Haacke and others have observed that museum curators learn quickly what kind of shows are likely to attract corporate funding, and those exhibition proposals that “do not fulfill the necessary criteria for corporate sponsorship” and those that “could promote critical awareness or question relations of power” have a slim chance of being approved.\textsuperscript{86} To attract funding, the burden is now on museums to convince corporations of the ways that art patronage will enhance their public image or “offset negative attitudes” about a company and its products.\textsuperscript{87}

As corporate patronage is ever more blatantly linked to marketing goals, it follows that exhibitions of work by popular canonical artists held at well-established institutions in major urban centers are favored over the promotion of new and potentially controversial ideas being developed by younger and regional artists. Moreover, since the economic recession and art-market crash of the early 1990s (when corporate allocations to the arts fell for the first time since 1967, from $634 million in 1988 to $518 million in 1991),\textsuperscript{88} art and its role in the business world have been reevaluated.\textsuperscript{89} In an increasingly conservative and competitive marketplace, corporations are under more pressure than ever to serve stockholder interests by meeting the bottom line.\textsuperscript{90} Since the art-market crash of 1989–90, the investment value of modern art has been undermined, and financial institutions that collected at the height of the market in the 1980s have consequently faced serious losses in the value of their collections. As renovations, construction, and acquisitions by corporations have also been cut back, corporate collecting programs have been curtailed and many others are threatened by deaccessioning and liquidation.\textsuperscript{91}

Certainly, there are exceptions—curators at Chase Manhattan Bank, for example, have remained particularly committed to the “legacy of avant-gardism,” “innovation,” and maintaining the “high standards set by David Rockefeller and Alfred Barr thirty years ago.”\textsuperscript{92} But, in contrast to the mood in 1965, most corporate leaders have abandoned ideals about the role of the corporation and the arts in building a “free” democracy.
Although Philip Morris continues to place advertisements in *Time* magazine boasting about its commitment to “Supporting the Spirit of Innovation,” its high-profile 1998–99 funding campaign went to an exhibition of work by Robert Rauschenberg—a very creative artist, but hardly on the cultural forefront of 1990s culture, as this is the same artist whose work won the grand prize at the USIA-sponsored Venice Biennale in 1964. And whereas the executives at Philip Morris were convinced in 1965 that the battle to maintain their right to advertise lethal products would be won with rhetoric about freedom of expression and free choice in the United States, today they support the very congressmen who are responsible for restricting freedom of expression in the United States. Instead of directing funds to museums of modern art as a celebration of liberal values, Philip Morris now buys conservative congressional favors by supporting the Jesse Helms Museum in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.93

With the new inward focus on interparty politics, political and economic leaders have either failed to notice, or perhaps simply do not care, that the United States is losing its hegemonic grip on the international fine-arts world, particularly in Europe. While U.S. popular culture and products continue to dominate mass markets worldwide, new funding structures have generated a fresh vitality in European contemporary arts in the 1990s. Responding to the postreunification economic boom, Germany’s ascent as a cultural capital was recognized as early as 1992, when it was announced (perhaps prematurely) in the *New York Times* that Cologne, rather than New York, was slated to become the new international center of contemporary art.94

Across Europe, European Union money for urban revitalization projects has led to the renovation and construction of new opera houses, theaters, and museums. In France, where cultural decisions have long been the preserve of centralized groups of government ministers, a cultural commitment to dissent and debate means that the avant-garde tradition is protected.95 French tax laws passed in 1987 also support patronage of contemporary art by encouraging businesses to not only purchase works from living artists, but to place those works on public display.96 The importance of culture in France is further reflected in the government’s commitment to a “1 percent for culture” scheme, an incredible amount compared to the United States, which allocates less than .01 percent of the federal budget to the arts. In the United Kingdom, where lottery proceeds have been designated for national and regional cultural programs, including sport, heritage, and the arts, public spending on the arts in 1999–2000 has reached a level of £227.3 million or $375 million—more than three and a half times that spent in the United States, or approximately nineteen times as much in per capita terms.97
Enthusiasm about corporate and private sponsorship, long anathema to European institutions, is also growing as major collections of avant-garde works by contemporary European artists are being assembled. In the United Kingdom, it is the private patronage of advertising executive and political adviser Charles Saatchi who has placed a new generation of young British artists at the center of the international stage for avant-garde art. Saatchi’s cutting-edge collection was exhibited as part of the *Sensation* show in London and Berlin in 1998–99 before traveling to New York. Containing many sexually explicit and morally and aesthetically challenging works (including Chris Offili’s elephant-dung *Madonna* and Damien Hirst’s sliced shark in formaldehyde, among others), the show was designed to shock, to pose questions, and to push limits. Although the exhibition generated controversy in London, politicians steered clear and the Royal Academy, regular host to blockbuster exhibitions of work by Monet and Van Dyck, considered it a great success. In Berlin the following year, *Sensation* also drew record crowds and “hardly a murmur of public anger.”

In the United States, however, the contents of the exhibition were vetted by the right-wing mayor of New York, Rudolph W. Giuliani, who found Offili’s work “offensive” to his religion. In a thinly disguised attempt to gain votes from the Catholic community in New York, he threatened to evict the museum, withdraw financial support, and fire the board of trustees unless the offending piece was removed. In a preemptive move, the museum charged the city with violation of the First Amendment, bringing the issue of freedom of expression back to public attention. Meanwhile, directors of other New York museums, most notably the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum, refused to comment on the issue, knowing full well that standing up for freedom of expression would jeopardize their eligibility for financial support from the city.

With the end of the Cold War and the ensuing shift from liberal to conservative values among the country’s most influential political and economic leaders, the United States has lost both the rhetorical faith in freedom as a moral right and an interest in maintaining a culturally competitive edge on the international scene. Although it is hoped that the United States’ disinterest in leading the international art world will open the way for other cultural voices to be heard and seen, it has been a great loss to the contemporary art world in the United States. Of course, artists are still free to create what and how they like, but unless they submit themselves to a process of self-censorship on behalf of Jesse Helms, Rudolph Giuliani, and the like, they risk making themselves ineligible for both grants and participation in exhibitions organized by both government and corporate-funded museums.
Ironically, it is the morally minded conservative politicians who have done the most to show—despite their claims that politics has no place in art—how much political and ideological power art has. If art were simply an aesthetic statement or a passive reflection of the world around it, surely it would lack the power to threaten the moral foundations of the Christian right, and would have no role to play in garnering votes for upcoming elections.

**Conclusion**

In recent decades, social art history has expanded the scope of traditional academic art history and has, as a result, added another layer to our understanding of art’s multidimensional role by examining the ways in which broader economic trends and shifts in political power have, at various historical junctures, influenced what kinds of art would be made, in what context it would be viewed, who would view it, and in which ways ideology and discourse have conditioned how works are understood. At the same time, sociologists have begun to analyze stylistic trends in contemporary culture, providing statistical evidence for the influence of art patronage on styles, operating according to the premise that art is a “social product that is specific and responsive to its environment.”

The political-economic approach taken in this essay derives from both these scholarly modes, focusing on how the ideological needs of corporations and the government have, in the post–World War II United States, created conditions in which certain kinds of art—for example, avant-garde art—could alternately flourish and languish, and how the selection of certain cultural forms for financial support has played an active role in the construction of national and corporate identities both in the United States and abroad.

In taking such an approach, attention is turned away from the romantic-humanist emphasis on the individual artist’s experience and instead toward the economics of the art world, patterns of patronage, and institutional discourse. The expectation that meaning is inherent to artistic intention or that it is invested in the works themselves is consequently relinquished, as the impact of contextual conditions on reception becomes increasingly apparent. Although this approach does not preclude leaving oneself open to experiencing art on a personal, emotional, or aesthetic level, it does open up questions about how that personal response may have been influenced by discursive and contextual factors, whose ideologies are being confirmed by that response, and what institutions are benefiting from it.

Having considered the political economy of art (and this essay has only superficially addressed what is a vast and complex subject), one may also
begin to take note of the extent to which institutions reinforce the pre-
conception that art is the product of individual expression and has nothing
whatsoever to do with politics or economics. This myth has an extremely
well established history as part of the liberal-humanist view of culture. Yet it
is worth considering the extent to which the continuing reiteration of this
premise promotes the political-economic cultural enterprise, as it is precisely
the expectation that art has nothing to do with politics and economics
that makes art so effective as a political-economic tool. And therein may lie
the key to the problem, for the more one condemns the capitalist contami-
nation of art, the more one’s faith in the notion that art has the power to
transcend prosaic economic concerns is revealed. It follows that one who is
convinced of the separation between art and political economy is all the
more likely to overlook the political-economic mechanisms and machina-
tions of the art world and all the more prone to fall prey to its influence.

As public culture is increasingly mediated by political and economic
concerns, the humanist ideal of an interest-free or aesthetically driven cul-
ture becomes more and more remote. Although we may never be able to es-
cape the political and economic implications of patronage, by accepting this
fact rather than denying it, we will be better equipped to understand and
resist it. Certain artists, Hans Haacke among them, have faced the political
economy of art head-on in their work, writings, and actions, laying bare the
multifarious motivations behind government and corporate patronage. It is
these more radical members of the art world who are keeping the discourse of
freedom of expression alive, although today they must fight in the Supreme
Court to justify the freedoms that three decades ago were considered an in-
tegral part of life in America.

That art has the potential to communicate, influence, and reinforce po-
itical and economic values should be clear. The question for the future is
now a matter of who will have the power to decide which artworks are pro-
moted in the public arena, and consequently whose political and economic
ideologies will be promoted along the way.

Further Reading


Notes


3. I consider the category of art to be that which exists in the public sphere. There is, of course, the possibility of producing a private art that is not meant for public reception. Although it could be argued that this is still, in ontological terms, “art,” its power to communicate is so limited that it is irrelevant in the context of a public discourse such as this. This “public” is, of course, definable to the extent that it is an art-viewing or art-consuming public, which is likely to have certain demographic characteristics. The audience can be defined further depending on the art being viewed. For example, Victorian painting and pop art attract different audiences, and institutions will choose which kind of art to sponsor depending on which audience they wish to target and what kind of public image they want to project.


6. Ibid., 274–75.

7. Ibid., 276.

8. Frances Stonor Saunders, Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War (London: Granta Books, 1999). U.S. museums, particularly those with modern art collections, tend to be private institutions run by a board of wealthy patrons with clearly defined corporate and political interests. For a discussion of the board members of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and their links to the CIA, see pp. 260–63. See also Mulcahy, “Cultural Diplomacy,” 274.

9. Using the CIA to organize international cultural activities was another way to circumvent congressional objections, as detailed knowledge of the agency’s expenditures and activities was confined to only a few top-level government officials.


12. These included the Office of War Information, the Office of International Information and Cultural Affairs, the International Information and Educational Exchange, and the International Information Administration. The President's Advisory Commission on Governmental Organization was known as the Rockefeller Commission. See Mulcahy, “Cultural Diplomacy,” 282–83.

13. Dondero, who was a product of the isolationist pre–World War II generation, was famous for his public outcries against modern art, linking it structurally with anti-traditional and hence anti-American and communist beliefs. But Dondero had failed to notice that ever since the 1920s, the USSR had been promoting an extremely conservative form of socialist realism and had been censoring avant-garde art, criticizing it as elitist excesses in individualism. The “enlightened” cultural warriors were aware of this and took avant-garde art up as an antitotalitarian cause.


16. Cockcroft calls them “enlightened” cold warriors; Saunders and others call them “Mandarins,” to refer to an intellectual and cultural elite who saw beyond the popular McCarthyist rhetoric of the time.

17. The actual relationship between the USIA and the Museum of Modern Art in organizing the major Abstract Expressionist exhibitions of the 1950s is a matter of dispute. Eva Cockcroft suggests that the USIA asked the Museum of Modern Art to cosponsor the 1958–59 European tour of “The New American Painting,” as a way of establishing a kind of private “front” for its political activity and as a way to cover up operations that would not have gained congressional approval. Tenenbaum, however, disputes this argument, showing that there is little evidence to prove that the USIA had anything to do with this exhibition and that it was actually organized by MOMA in response to requests that came directly from European museums.

18. Tenenbaum, A Dialectical Pretzel, 1. For more on the ineffectiveness of the USIA, see Mulcahy, “Cultural Diplomacy,” 287–88. The inability of the USIA to realize its cultural propaganda goals meant that the CIA also took on a larger role in promoting avant-garde art to liberal audiences in Europe and Latin America, as the CIA’s operations were covert and did not need congressional approval. For a complete account of the CIA’s role in cultural diplomacy during the Cold War period, see Saunders, Who Paid the Piper?


26. In his book on Philip Morris’s art patronage, Sam Hunter downplays the importance of the op works to the program, saying that they were “included perhaps to balance matters politically, and for the sake of alliteration” (Sam Hunter, Art in Business: The Philip Morris Story [New York: Abrams, 1979], 33). The pop and op show opened at the AFA galleries in New York and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond (where Philip Morris’s headquarters and main manufacturing plant were located). The exhibition was hosted by major institutions such as the Baltimore Museum of Art and the San Francisco Legion of Honor—as well as smaller venues, including the Hollywood Art Center in Florida and the Municipal Art Gallery of Los Angeles, between 1966 and 1968. “Itinerary” (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1966), from the archives of the American Federation of Arts. This source will hereafter be referred to as AFA.


28. In the mid-1960s, Philip Morris, historically a relatively small cigarette company, was in the process of establishing itself among the top four leaders of the industry. This was achieved through a series of creative marketing moves whereby Philip Morris introduced new products that began industry-wide trends. In a 1967 article on the company, Philip Morris President George Weissman stated: “Our strategy has been to try the end run on new innovations. . . . As a small company, whatever we have done has been through innovation” (John Thackray, “The Marketing Merlins of Philip Morris,” Dun’s Review, April 1968, 33).

29. The Ford Foundation’s early support was also of great significance, primarily in the performing arts field.

30. Nelson Rockefeller established the New York State Council on the Arts in 1960, several years before a federal one was mandated, and David Rockefeller’s energetic creation of a major contemporary art collection for the Chase Manhattan Bank in the early 1960s was one of the first of its kind.

31. Additional early important corporate collections of modern art in the United States included those of the Container Corporation of America, IBM, and Mead Corporation, among others.


33. Ibid., 2, 22.


35. Ibid., 12.


38. Finn and Jedlicka, The Art of Leadership, 25–30. As an adviser to the Rockefeller brothers on cultural issues, it is hard to imagine that Eells did not have a great deal of input into the content and wording of this speech.

Finn, a public-relations and arts consultancy firm that served the BCA and Philip Morris, among others. Stanton chaired the BCA from 1972 to 1974.

40. Finn and Jedlicka, _The Art of Leadership_, 35; my emphasis.
42. Press releases issued by Ruder and Finn around the same time announced that in the spring of 1966, sixteen separate sets of the portfolios would be sent to museums and galleries in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, England, France, Canada, Germany, Guatemala, Lebanon, Switzerland, Venezuela, and Yugoslavia. Many of these countries were hosts to Philip Morris subsidiaries already. The exceptions of Lebanon, Yugoslavia, Puerto Rico, Sweden, and Spain were most likely areas where the USIA believed the show would have an important political impact. “Memo to Editors,” Smithsonian Institution Archives, records of the Office of Program Support, National Museum of American Art, 1954–81; hereafter referred to as SIA/NMAA.

44. Carol Cutler, “The USIS in Paris,” _Art in America_ 56 (May–June 1968): 82. The USIS is the U.S. Information Service, a subdivision of the USIA referring to its field offices abroad. The Department of State administered U.S. exhibition activities abroad until 1954, when the activity was transferred to the USIA. USIA organized and circulated art exhibitions abroad and supported American participation in international art shows until 1965. In November 1965, the Smithsonian Institution, working as the International Arts Program (IAP) of the National Collection of Fine Arts (NCFA), took over the administration of new international exhibitions and programs, such as the Biennales, with the exception of those in Soviet bloc countries, which USIA continued to handle. USIA did, however, continue to provide financial and logistical assistance for projects such as this one, which had begun before the program transfer was made. Paraphrased from copy in the Smithsonian Institution database under the subject heading “OPS, National Museum of American Art, 1965–1981 with related records from 1954.”

45. “Fact sheet” included in the _11 Pop Artists: The New Image_ publicity kit distributed by Ruder and Finn, SIA/NMAA. Britain was a major market for the products of Philip Morris, originally a British company, which helps to explain the inclusion of several British artists in the portfolio.
46. “Field Message: Pop-Art Exhibit at USIS Maracaibo” (May 2, 1966), SIA/NMAA.
48. _News Texan_ (Arlington, Texas), February 25, 1966. This is one among other unidentified appearances, all collected in the clippings files of the archives of the AFA.
50. Quoted in the press release “Unique Pop Graphics Exhibition Premiers at . . .” (1965), SIA/NMAA.
51. Eells, _The Corporation and the Arts_, 284.
55. INFECT, 33.
56. “In November 1965 the Smithsonian Institution and the USIA agreed that the USIA would assume responsibility for an international exchange program of art exhibitions; support American entries in international art exhibitions, in particular the Venice and São Paulo Biennales; and field the USIS’ field requests, when possible; the USIA would continue to be responsible for national exhibitions presented in the Soviet Union and East European Countries” (Office of Program Support, National Museum of American Art Database). On the one hand, this signals a retraction of political commitment to these programs; on the other hand, it was a way to once again obscure the propagandistic functions of the exhibitions by hiding behind a supposedly neutral art-world institution. For details on the breakdown of the CIA programs in 1967, see Saunders, Who Paid the Piper? 381–416.

57. Lawrence Mankin, “Government Patronage: An Historical Overview,” in Mulcahy and Swain, Public Policy and the Arts, 114, 163–64.


61. John F. Kennedy, address delivered at Amherst College (1963), quoted in ibid., 112.


63. Biddle, Our Government and the Arts, 442.

64. Ibid., 442–43.


74. According to Wallis, these countries share an economic profile that includes huge

75. Ibid., 267.
76. Ibid..
78. On Philip Morris, see Wallis, “Selling Nations,” 278 and 281 n. 38; on Mobil, see 280–81 n. 36 and Wallis, “Institutions Trust Institutions,” 56.
91. Ibid., 28–29.
95. As a cultural official representing the French government remarked in the early 1990s, “We come from a culture where the ethics of transgression are so deeply rooted that this debate [the Mapplethorpe censorship issue and obscenity trials] does not make much sense” (Annie Cohen-Solal, “Culture and the French Nation,” in Buchwaltcher, *Culture and Democracy*, 169).
97. Figures from *The Arts Council of England: Historical Summary*, www.culture.gov.uk. ARTS.HTM (September 23, 1999). Note that there is additional public expenditure on the arts in the United States in the form of state funding, but as this varies from state to state and is not vetted or funded by federal bodies, it is difficult to summarize.
this context. A comparison of federal and state or national and regional arts funding structures in the United States, France, and the United Kingdom would be a complicated but useful subject for research.

98. See Jacobson, *Art and Business*, for a discussion of corporate collections of contemporary art around the world.


Chapter Three

Beer

Ben Scott

Mention beer to Americans and predictable images come to mind. Some will think of the baseball game last weekend. Some will picture couches, coolers, and *Monday Night Football*. Some will recall picnics, barbecues, and hot dogs with family and friends. Memories of fishing trips, nightclubs, corner bars, hockey games, racetracks, rock concerts, restaurants, and fraternity parties might also include a requisite six-pack or pint glass. Other folks will just smile. Undeniably, beer holds an intimate place in American culture. Most Americans, from college kids to senior citizens, enjoy a beer or two now and then. After all, beer aims to please, whether you prefer a low price, a high octane, an import, a local brew, or an outlandish flavor. It hardly matters where you are, either. Ballpark or airport, gas station or grocery store, nightclub or steak house, more often than not a can, bottle, or tap will be close at hand. Americans drink for all kinds of reasons in all kinds of places. You might say that America is a beer culture.

Yet, it is a particular kind of beer culture, one marked by an uncanny alcoholic presence in virtually every social function. It appears that Americans’ desire and demand for the beverage account for its ubiquity. The unique taste and pleasant intoxication ensure perpetual popularity. However, simple appeal does not entirely account for the complex images and cultural meanings we associate with alcohol. Why is it that sports, fun, music, and pleasure come to mind when we think of beer? More to the point, where are the negative associations? Certainly, we are all aware of the harmful effects of alcohol. We know that alcohol is a factor in crime, auto accidents, dysfunctional families, and health problems. These beverages do bear a warning label. Even aside from these major side effects, most of us do not immediately relate beer with its more common drawbacks: hangovers, social misconduct, or a loss of motor skills. We all know these are a part of the beer culture, yet they are in the shadows of euphoria and entertainment.

We respond to beer in distinct ways because of its presentation in culture. From the moment of first visual exposure and physical experimentation through years of consumption, the way we think about beer is determined by where and how we see, buy, and use it. Alcohol plays such a central role in so many cultural events and social activities these days that it is hard, particularly for the younger generation, to remember times when
life was otherwise. To a significant degree in recent years, supply has begun to outpace raw demand. Or, more precisely, demand has been artificially inflated. As American culture becomes more consumption-oriented, material goods that hold inherent popularity, such as beer, become indispensable. Certainly, we wanted beer at sporting events and rock concerts; we wanted alcohol to play a part in our social lives; we wanted our brand of beer to say something about us. But, how much of American beer culture is determined by this desire? Undoubtedly, cultural conditions and accepted conventions determine where and how we drink. But who sets these conditions and conventions, and how? For most of us, they just seem natural.

In reality, they are part of a political-economic system that regulates public demand, redefining desire by influencing social experience. Culture can no longer be seen as distinct from the economy or the political system, if indeed it ever could be. The power of corporate America has been brought to bear on the structures of social convention, including how we drink and think about beer. Beer comes packaged with commodified cultural activities and social consciousness. Beer has been systematically invested through sophisticated advertising with images that associate it with events, emotions, and personalities. Beer has been given identity. Yet few of America’s millions of drinkers see it happening. Partly, this is because the moral ambiguity that surrounds the mass consumption of an intoxicant demands that cultural perception be muddy enough to obscure any self-incrimination. Mostly, it is because the workings of the beer and alcohol business remain out of sight and out of mind. Blinded by contentment, immobilized by moral issues, and numbed by the barrage of corporate messages in the public sphere, beer drinkers risk handing over the reigns of cultural experience.

The Political Economy of Anheuser-Busch

Since the early 1990s, the American beer industry has been developing into an oligopoly of megabrewers that dominate the market. Advertising budgets have exploded into the hundreds of millions of dollars, representing a heavy investment in the cultural channels that promote the product. International marketing has capitalized on exporting American culture with American products. Furthermore, brewers have become involved in the political issues that affect the industry, sending lobbyists to Washington and state capitals. Power drawn from economic networking and political connections enables advertising on an ever-widening scale, encroaching on the isolation of private lives. From highway billboards to Internet gift shops, invitations to plug into the beer culture saturate public space. Most of these ads are carefully
constructed with micromarket research to tailor persuasive messages to specific audiences.

Consider Anheuser-Busch Companies. Anheuser-Busch is the largest and most successful American brewery and exerts the most influence of any brewer on American culture. The Anheuser-Busch empire extends far beyond Budweiser, Bud Light, and Clydesdales. In addition to extensive economic assets, it is involved in politics at both the local and national level. Anheuser-Busch exemplifies the politico-economic influence on beer culture. Through the brewery’s extensive economic holdings, political involvement, and what can be called its “cultural interests,” it has become a major player in the lives of Americans and the self-appointed king of the beer culture. It has the power to underwrite sports teams, stadiums, and media channels, the means to influence legislation and government policy, and the ambition to become America’s primary cultural ambassador to the world. Closer to home, it controls the wholesale and delivery of beer to local markets, funds and caters local and regional events, studies and labels consumers in massive databases, and pumps out products and slogans designed not simply to appeal to the American beer culture, but to shape and define it. Combining power and influence at local, national, and international levels, from the supermarket to Capitol Hill, it dominates not only the beer industry, but also the beer culture and the way American drinkers think about beer.

Economic Interests

Anheuser-Busch Companies is not simply a brewer. It is a parent company that presides over thirteen subsidiaries that handle everything from agriculture, brewing, and packaging to marketing, investing, and entertainment (the technical term for such a structure of holdings is vertical integration). Anheuser-Busch, Inc., the company’s largest division as well as the world’s largest brewer, owns and operates a dozen breweries inside the United States. It produces approximately thirty beers, including the Natural, Busch, Budweiser, and Michelob families, which span the product line from sub-premium to superpremium. Additionally, it sells malt liquors, nonalcoholic brews, and a number of specialty beers that vary by season and region, including an equity investment with Redhook Ale Brewery in Seattle.

Business is booming. In the first quarter of 1999, Anheuser-Busch experienced a record 22 percent increase in earnings per share, even as its domestic market share rose to 48.1 percent. The company’s success results in no small part from the degree of vertical integration it enjoys in the brewing process, allowing it to self-monitor operations from start to finish. A typical
Brew actually starts with raw materials produced through Busch Agricultural Resources. It is then canned, bottled, packaged, and labeled by Anheuser-Busch divisions that handle metal containers, packaging, printing, and labeling. Transportation to and from the brewery is handled by Manufacturers Railway Corporation and the St. Louis Refrigerator Car Company, both owned and operated by Anheuser-Busch. Anheuser-Busch’s recycling subsidiary even handles the product after consumption.

The brewery’s control does not stop at the doors of its impressive array of subsidiary companies. It also exercises a sustained pressure on the wholesalers that distribute its product to retailers. The company itself owns thirteen wholesale operations and works with approximately seven hundred others. Its Wholesaler Equity Development Corporation has instituted new programs called the “100% Share of Mind” and “Impact Selling,” which divide distributors into multiple tiers, giving cash discounts, favorable credit terms, and preferential treatment to those who carry exclusively Anheuser-Busch products. These programs give tremendous leverage to the company, whose products compose nearly half of all beers on the market. For example, many distributors have succumbed to the pressure to drop craft beers from their service line in order to gain the double bonus of retaining Anheuser-Busch’s products and receiving the economic rewards. Immediately after its launch in 1997, “100% Share of Mind” brought criticism from the Brewers Association of America, lawsuits from smaller brewers on grounds of antitrust violations, and a probe by the Justice Department. Industry experts warn that the actions of the megabrewers, led by Anheuser-Busch, threaten the independence of the distributors, restrict access to the market for smaller breweries, and raise the bar for new competitors. Executives at Anheuser-Busch’s world headquarters in Saint Louis have denied that any of their practices are illegitimate, and their claims are borne out by the closure of the government investigation. However, class-action lawsuits against the company remain unresolved.3

Issues that pit megabrewer versus microbrewer appear frequently. Following larger economic trends of merger mania, the brewing industry is becoming more and more polarized, pushing a larger majority of profits and power into the hands of the top-tier companies and marginalizing others to either regional niches or, more often, extinction. Following the decline and closure of the Stroh Brewery in the late 1990s, the balance of power is being redefined. As one industry analyst describes, “there are now huge gaps in the competitive structure of the U.S. brewing industry.”4 The highest and mightiest are reaping the lion’s share of the benefits, increasing competitive disparity. Anheuser-Busch, topping the list, is fully twice the size of Miller, its
nearest competitor. Miller, in turn, is double the size of its nearest competitor, Coors, and Coors is four times the size of next-in-line Pabst. Pabst is three times the size of any other brewer below it. The current distribution of power means that Anheuser-Busch controls more than fifty times the market share of number five Genesee. As Anheuser-Busch pulls farther ahead of the field, legitimate challengers are faltering.

The implications of giantism are not confined to product market share, because of the expansionist nature of corporate power. Domination, once achieved, is self-perpetuating. The influence of the Saint Louis brewer extends into many fields of the economic sector. Anheuser-Busch’s Investment Capitol Corporation manages investments and growth strategies to ensure increased revenue and profitable endeavors for other subsidiaries. Often opportunities are designed to support the products by establishing the company as a force in the economic sphere, creating and utilizing the company’s network of economic associates. A cursory glance through its board of directors gives telling expression to the connectivity fostered by success, wealth, and power. At the same table with President August A. Busch III sit high-level executives from NationsBank, Emerson Electric Company, Baxter International, SBC Communications, and J. P. Morgan, as well as individuals representing influential law firms, investment companies, and universities. These links represent only the inner circle of corporate networking, which produces little overt gains but incalculable value behind the scenes. This is the framework that supports Anheuser-Busch’s involvement with media companies, athletic organizations, and music groups, establishing a firm interface between the economic and cultural sectors by interlocking at multiple levels, through both corporate partnerships and interpersonal relationships.

The final subsidiary that warrants attention is Anheuser-Busch International. Foreign markets are the largest potential growth area for the entire company. Anheuser-Busch has capitalized on this opportunity, establishing partnerships with leading breweries around the world and placing its flagship beer, Budweiser, in bars, supermarkets, and restaurants on every major continent except Africa. In Canada, a long-standing deal with the Labatt Brewing Company has made Budweiser the third-largest selling beer in that country, outselling all other U.S. brands combined. Central and South America are also hot spots. Topping the list is Anheuser-Busch’s 50.2 percent direct and indirect holdings of Grupo Modelo, the largest brewer in Mexico, which exports such popular brands as Corona. Deals with large brewers in Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and five Central American countries have sparked further growth south of the border. Across the Atlantic, the company has arrangements with Guinness Ireland, as well as its own Budweiser Stag Brewery in
the United Kingdom, supplemented by agreements with some of the largest brewers in Spain, France, and Italy. Together, these partnerships have allowed Anheuser-Busch to break into a well-ensconced European beer market with surprising speed and success. In Asia, it retains partnerships in Japan, China, South Korea, and the Philippines, enabling it to make use of the expansion of American culture into the Pacific Rim. In an age where culture is imperialistic and transnational corporations are the instruments of unregulated globalization, Anheuser-Busch excels in exporting both American beer and the American beer culture. Or, more accurately, it excels at exporting the Anheuser-Busch beer culture.

**Political Interests**

Who mixes beer and politics? On the surface, Anheuser-Busch seems well separated from government. Yet, to underestimate its interest and influence in the political arena would be to misjudge the nature of democratic capitalism. The very character of the American political economy merges law and business. More bluntly, wherever economic interests are affected by law, corporations will be partisan. However, the corporate voice in the body politic differs from a public constituency in message, goal, and, most important, volume. The larger the company and the more influential its connections in the economic sector, the more effective its lobbying becomes. But, laws are seldom bought and sold. Political influence comes from involvement, visibility, the timely marshaling of resources, and the combination of corporate powers to form loose coalitions. Corporate organizations are able to invest in lobbyists from state legislatures to Capitol Hill. What might be perceived as inappropriate strong-arming goes largely unnoticed by the public because power transactions between corporations and government rarely take place in the public arena. On the contrary, the public’s perception of corporations is largely formed through media channels dependent on advertising dollars. Inappropriate activities are masked or de-emphasized, if they are presented at all. Additionally, corporations that are politically active deny critics the righteous authority to blow the whistle on improper action by donating to charities and underwriting public programs. Any corporate citizenship or public service must be seen in the context of the larger concern of sustaining economic growth and preventing legislation that thins profit margins. These goals are partially attained in the cultural arena through the control of media.

Anheuser-Busch has a particularly interesting style and position in the political arena. Ground zero of its power is Saint Louis, the world headquarters.
Buildings, streets, and the sponsorship of countless local events and organizations bear the name, decal, and influence of Anheuser-Busch. The ubiquity of the brewer’s name in the city is surpassed only by the Budweiser logo. The political component of Anheuser-Busch’s presence in Saint Louis began in 1953 when Mayor Raymond Tucker called together prominent corporate leaders to assist in combating social problems and funding shortages. On these auspices, the executives formed a semisecret club known as Civic Progress. Its first president was August A. Busch Jr. Over the decades, the organization has grown in power with a track record of golden achievements. The wealth and ability of successful executives moonlighting as politicians reversed many of the negative conditions in the city and handed residents a more livable community. However, they also gently guided the city government into a dependency relationship with the economic elite, whose continued vigilance would ultimately depend on a mutually beneficial arrangement.6

Most city residents are content to accept Civic Progress because of its genuine desire to aid the public. However, the implications of interlocking the business and political interests of Saint Louis are alarming to some. Critics have described the twenty-eight member group as “the metropolitan area’s gatekeeper.”7 As a political gatekeeper, Civic Progress has the dubious quality of being unelected and generally unrepresentative of the Saint Louis citizenry. Civic Progress members are not autonomous officials, but rather, highly interconnected business associates. Their companies have interlocking directorates, which is to say that members commonly sit on the board of directors in each other’s companies. For example, cross-referencing Civic Progress with the board of Anheuser-Busch turns up four matches. Other members have similar interrelationships. This corporate “buddy system” often entails substantial directors’ fees (for which Anheuser-Busch is known as the most generous), which often reach into the tens of thousands of dollars annually. In addition to exchanging these salary bonuses, this directorate network means that “chief executives can help guard against corporate boat rockers.”8 Applying this established business practice to the political arena—as Civic Progress does—suggests that the same conservative influence would transfer to the curbing of any political opinions that stray from the consensus.

In the 1990s, Civic Progress expanded its operations, becoming involved in an increasing number of local issues and policy decisions. In the spring of 1997, the group fronted millions of dollars to bail out ailing Trans World Airlines, the Saint Louis–based commercial airliner. TWA was considered too valuable a business interest to be allowed to fail.9 Civic Progress participated in a divisive school-board election, endorsed taxation plans, purchased
a controlling interest in the St. Louis Blues (a professional hockey team), and became “caught up in so many controversial and arguably important issues” that serious criticism began to mount.\textsuperscript{10} Local minority leaders saw the group as a club of elite, white males who have illegitimately gained political power without the requisite burdens of representation. By the fall of 1998, all but one of the African-American members of the group resigned out of protest over the lack of attention paid to racial issues.\textsuperscript{11} The \textit{St. Louis Post-Dispatch} reported that “an increasing number of scholars, politicians and even a few Civic Progress members themselves have wondered whether it’s time to improve or even scrap the organization.”\textsuperscript{12} However, the city had become too dependent on the group for any substantial revision to occur. Civic Progress practically commands the infrastructure of the local political economy. This association facilitates the behind-the-scenes governing that Civic Progress performs, circumventing the gridlock of the administration and presenting the city with fait accompli programs whose genesis is removed from public view. Despite reservations, even critics admit that Civic Progress has become necessary for the continued sustenance of the Saint Louis status quo. The community is over a barrel, having overextended itself on the security of a corporate governing body whose suspect nature is now subordinate to its much-needed power and influence.

Anheuser-Busch continues to be an important member of Civic Progress, exercising its power and interests in the political arena with the de facto authority provided by the city’s dependency on the company’s wholesalers and media channels. In addition, Anheuser-Busch pursues political issues on its own, utilizing the implicit credibility gained from its involvement in the larger group, and the economic block that supports the entire politico-economic infrastructure.

Anheuser-Busch also maintains lobbyists at all levels of government beyond Saint Louis, lending its wealth and prestige to numerous special-interest groups. In the federal government, for example, it opposes excise taxes on alcohol and advertising bans that might cut into profit margins and curb exposure opportunities. It is often involved in state politics as well. In 1998, it publicly opposed legislation in Missouri that would have lowered the state’s blood alcohol limit for driving under the influence to .08 from .10. In 1999, it joined the National Rifle Association in an unsuccessful campaign to pass Proposition B. This Missouri bill, often called “Conceal-Carry,” would have allowed concealed handguns to be taken into establishments that sell alcoholic beverages, including stadiums, bars, casinos, and restaurants.\textsuperscript{13} Obviously, this referendum carried substantial moral controversy. Critics have harshly denounced Anheuser-Busch for endorsing the mixture of alcohol
and guns, accusing the company of using its influence to interfere in society and “put profits before public safety.” At the base of these attacks was the fundamental concern generated by the rapid changes taking place in the relationship between government and business. Translated loosely to the national level, Saint Louis foreshadows what may be in store for the rest of the United States as the forces and interrelationships of government and business continue to become increasingly tighter.

**Cultural Interests**

In the cultural arena, Anheuser-Busch’s primary goal is to profit from exposure. Success and visibility are directly proportional, as are economic and cultural market shares. Cultural interests are handled by three subsidiaries: Busch Creative Services, Busch Media Group, and Busch Entertainment, whose concerns, respectively, are advertising, marketing, and theme parks. All of these divisions aim to increase profits by raising the cultural market share, that is, becoming involved in more of the events, activities, and images that help define American society. The focal points of these efforts are entertainment, sports, and mass media.

As in economic competition, the cultural market is best controlled in a closed environment. Anheuser-Busch’s nine theme parks around the country—the SeaWorlds, Busch Gardens, Water Country USA, Adventure Island, and Sesame Place—serve this function nicely, drawing some 21 million guests annually. Amusement parks seem an unorthodox enterprise for a brewery to operate. Yet, it is precisely this incongruity that makes them ideal for advertising. As the company reported to its shareholders: “The parks complement our beer business by offering a positive setting in which to showcase our products.” The company uses a cultural event associated with fun, excitement, and adventure to promote a product and construct new images of the beer culture. Further, because even media-savvy Americans are not likely to think of SeaWorld as a giant venue for exclusive advertisement, patrons will receive commercial messages with their guard down. The company’s theme parks thus combine three maxims of the advertising world for increasing message potency: It advertises in nontraditional territory, minimizing the public’s natural resistance to salesmanship; its products are exclusively featured, denying both the “clutter” and competition of other mediated messages; and it is able to dominate all channels of visual and physical distribution from ad space to the actual products being sold from concession stands. The ethical questions of using a family-oriented event, designed to entertain children, as a vehicle for advertising an alcoholic beverage and developing
connections between theme parks and beer culture are somehow lost on this operation. If water parks and roller coasters go well with Budweiser, why not Shamu and Big Bird?

Busch Creative Services, Busch Media Group, and the advertising agencies used by Anheuser-Busch have taken the idea of event marketing epitomized by the theme parks and applied it to every open cultural space. Perhaps the most impressive example came during the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. As one of the ten official sponsors of the games, Anheuser-Busch spent more than $100 million on a fully integrated marketing campaign including special packaging, promotional sales offers, sweepstakes, and the highlight of on-site commercial/cultural activities inside Bud World, a mini-village of Anheuser-Busch products and advertisements within Olympic Park. Additionally, the company targeted local bars and restaurants with Budweiser sponsorships. Local radio and television stations were saturated with a promotional campaign. Visual images of Budweiser alongside the Olympic rings appeared on every available public billboard, a blimp that hovered over the city, inside the Bud World Beer Garden, and on the side of the Clydesdale horse and carriage that paraded through the Olympic village twice daily. The Budweiserization of Atlanta paid significant dividends. The flagship beer had the number-one recall of any product advertised during the games. Doubtless, the efforts of Anheuser-Busch International were facilitated by these efforts in Georgia, as the Olympics were broadcast in 196 countries to a potential viewership of 800 million. Further drawing the economic and cultural arenas together, William Payne, director of the Atlanta Olympic Committee, joined the board of directors at Anheuser-Busch a year after the games.

Anheuser-Busch’s involvement with the Olympics was a temporary affair, but its ties to American professional sports are not. Long linked as a complementary pair, beer and sports have become Anheuser-Busch’s forte. By snapping up the contract with the National Basketball Association (NBA) that was dropped by the Miller Brewing Company in 1998, Anheuser-Busch locked up the last of the “big four” professional sports, becoming the official sponsor of Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Football League (NFL), the National Hockey League (NHL), and now the National Basketball Association (NBA). The NBA deal gives Anheuser-Busch ad time on virtually all NBA games as well as the global rights to telecasts promoted outside the United States (an audience that includes two hundred countries). At home and abroad, Anheuser-Busch will have the rights to use the names and logos of all twenty-nine NBA teams, as well as those of the league, the All-Star Game, and the play-offs. Anheuser-Busch has similarly comprehensive
arrangements with the other “big four” sporting associations, often using these opportunities to cross-promote with the other sports to increase visibility. A significant portion of the more than ten thousand Anheuser-Busch television commercials air during these sporting events. The company works with all of the major U.S. broadcasting networks, many cable channels, and four international media stations.

The Saint Louis megabrewer invests heavily at the top of the sporting world, but the reach of the advertiser is virtually limitless. The list of Anheuser-Busch–sponsored sports and sporting events is staggering. The company’s sponsorship stretches from golf tournaments to National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) football and basketball. Tennis, mountain biking, hydroplaning, boxing, and regional events sponsored in local markets are also in the company’s advertising repertoire. Particularly lucrative is the sponsorship of the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), which Budweiser will hold until 2002. With the sport’s popularity growing at a rapid rate, Anheuser-Busch promotes not only the sport, but individual races and top drivers. Following the trend to tie in to internationally popular sports, the company has been behind Major League Soccer (MLS) from its infancy. This deal complements a recent renewal of its partnership with the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) to serve as the official beer sponsor of the World Cups of 2002 and 2006. Inside this deal are provisions for two on-field billboards at every World Cup match and the rights to use the World Cup logos in advertisements and packaging. As the world’s most popular, most watched sporting event, the World Cup offers Anheuser-Busch optimal exposure to the maximum audience. Furthermore, the very nature of sponsorship in these sports places the company in a favorable position. One advertising expert reports that “sponsorship grants marketers control over cultural events, so that the events become one big advertising vehicle.”

The last pillar of Anheuser-Busch’s cultural interests is music. As a company marketing manager explained it: “Music and sports are universal languages—they appeal to just about everyone. A lot of people are passionate about music and sports, so we try to link this passion with our products.” As in sports, Anheuser-Busch’s infiltration of the music scene is thoroughly integrated. At the national level, it sponsors major rock bands and music tours. Through a more pervasive scheme, the Budweiser Concert Series, the company has targeted regional markets by sponsoring local bands and music festivals. Oftentimes, these events are cosponsored by local wholesalers who share the costs and benefits, drawing economic ties tighter in the process. In support of these concert events, which bear
the Anheuser-Busch brand names from start to finish—in print, television, signage, and packaging—the company selects and sponsors particular clubs, bars, concert halls, and outdoor arenas. Finally, in case its customers missed out on the shows, it has designated radio stations across the country to advertise for the next event in the concert series and to showcase the works of the official bands in and around promotional airtime. As a final addendum to the programming, it places all of its music events on its Web site with convenient search engines to locate the officially approved venues for cultural enjoyment in users’ localities. In music as in sports, if there is a cultural event that people will watch, Anheuser-Busch will buy a piece of it.

**Cultural Implications**

Anheuser-Busch should be seen as one player in the much larger cultural complex of capitalism. Obviously, like any business, the primary means by which it engages the public is through advertising, but it should be remembered that its advertising units do not act alone. Without the economic and political powers retained by the company, the cultural endeavors could not function effectively. The increase in wealth, power, and influence in one of the three wings of its operations is directly proportional in the others.

To address the company’s cultural influence, it is important, first, to analyze its power to direct the forces of cultural production such as media, government, and social institutions. Second, and of equal importance, is to understand the meaning of the signs and symbols generated by its cultural apparatus. This semiotic method locates the intersection of cultural meanings and commercial messages in an attempt to trace the legitimation process of commercial culture and its power to displace alternatives. Matthew McAllister labels these approaches, respectively, “external control” and “internal control.” In other words, culture is shaped simultaneously from the outside and the inside. Anheuser-Busch’s goal is to gain control over these formative processes and direct them toward the same ends: profit, exposure, and influence for the brewer. Externally, the brewer maintains powerful legislative lobbies and interlocked networks of economic influence to open the media channels, block taxes, prevent advertising restrictions, and facilitate economic opportunities. Functioning then as a politico-economic gatekeeper, it ensures that its symbol-laden ad campaigns achieve maximum exposure for maximum internal control of the conventions in American beer culture and the identity of the American beer drinker.
External Control

External control of cultural forms and messages requires both the attention of the public and the means to force it to listen. This is done by purchasing public space on the airwaves, television, and increasingly on anything that will bear a commercial message, from city buses to blimps cruising overhead. Advertisers engage public attention by surrounding people with messages to such a degree that by virtue of frequency they become unavoidable. Of course, this style of mass persuasion requires significant funds and access to the media channels, which makes cultural control dependent largely on the extent and utility of politico-economic assets.

The primary means for external control of cultural messages is through power over the media. Most media channels from television to radio are largely dependent on advertising dollars to keep them solvent. More and more, as advertisers use this relationship to influence what goes on television, what stories appear in periodicals, and just as critically, what does not appear in the media, they exercise steadily increasing power as both gatekeepers and agenda setters. As McAllister puts it, “They encourage media to cover some things and ignore others.” Anheuser-Busch advertises in places favorable to selling, thereby prompting the content choices that cater to this preference. Its ad dollars are not likely to endorse texts containing a politically charged issue for fear that a consumer’s dander might be aroused and that a negative emotional response will be associated with the commercial product that follows. Nor is Anheuser-Busch likely to rush to place ads in a documentary about the family-wrecking propensities of alcoholism, though it will certainly stand with an open wallet behind sporting events and the latest sitcoms. This pressure is either explicit (as when advertisers pull or threaten to pull ads based on undesirable content) or implicit (when media channels self-censor in anticipation of corporate displeasure). For the most part, the public never hears about the former and can hardly be privy to the latter. Over the years, America has slowly found itself with a media/entertainment industry that is driven toward selling products rather than conveying independent thought and expression.

Anheuser-Busch has become involved in some of the most recent trends in media agenda setting. It has moved into nontraditional media in order to reduce the dissonance associated with advertising and the clutter of competitors’ messages. For instance, in 1998, DDB Needham Chicago, one of the company’s contracted ad agencies, created two half-hour “infomercials.” They were not conventional in method or content, taking instead the form of a documentary on the history of beer and brewing followed by the history
of Anheuser-Busch and Budweiser. The Learning Channel agreed to broadcast “An American History of Beer” not as an infomercial, but as a documentary. After critics berated the channel for blurring the line between ads and programs, it pulled the program off of its afternoon lineup and ran it instead in the early morning hours. Critics were outraged. Their primary concern centered on the biased presentation of a product that contains a drug. In advertising, it is the brewery’s right by purchase to portray its products in whatever light it pleases, within the law. In a purported documentary, however, critics argued that the presentation of alcohol as a benign component of American history, free from any mention of the negative effects of use and abuse, is propaganda that draws credibility from the neutrality of the form to propagate biased and potentially harmful ideas.

The critique is particularly true in the case of Anheuser-Busch, because of the moral ambiguities of alcohol, but its application is equally valid across the board. Magazines and newspapers often include promotional feature stories that are nothing more than paid advertising in the guise of articles. Product placement in television and film also merges advertising and entertainment. Moreover, the advertisements themselves have begun to assume the forms of the media they surround. Anheuser-Busch’s “Bud Bowl” campaign launched during several Super Bowls is an example of this mimic effect. The promotional message is couched in the visual and textual terms of the football game that it interrupts. The idea is to tap the positive connotations of sporting events in order to blur the commercial function of the images. “What the record reveals,” notes Herbert I. Schiller, “is an almost total takeover of the domestic information system for the purpose of selling goods, services, people, and prefabricated opinion.”

Commercial America is marked by “the expansion of the corporate principle into the details of people’s lives.” Corporations such as Anheuser-Busch control the cultural marketplace in much the same way they control the internal function of their businesses. Anheuser-Busch has virtually the same philosophy of vertical integration in cultural influence as it does for beer production. At the bottom rung, the company engages in extensive market research, including retail demographics and customer profiling. It collects mountains of data based on supermarket scanners, per capita income, speculative psychographics, and U.S. Census Bureau information. These figures are used to generate customer profiles on which advertisements are constructed in order to tailor specific messages to niche markets and predictable demographics. At the mid-level, the company sets out to maintain a presence, or if possible actual control, over cultural venues. The company and its wholesalers are frequently the funding block behind local
sporting events, music concerts, and festivals. Furthermore, event arenas are often dependent on alcohol sales to stay afloat. With its colossal resources for production and delivery, Anheuser-Busch holds considerable power to dictate how arenas are used as advertising venues as well as cultural activity purveyors to best suit the target markets in the region. Finally, at the top level, the company spends hundreds of millions every year on advertising in order to gain the exclusive attention of potential customers. During the 1999 Super Bowl, for example, it spent $4 million per minute for commercial airtime, laying out 20 percent extra in order to exclude competitors from the game altogether. The mechanisms of external control not only work on the cultural system in America, they work to displace it, supplanting it with a corporate construction of desire, identity, and satisfaction.

**Internal Control**

Corporations paradoxically claim that advertising has little effect on consumer attitudes and behaviors even as they continue to spend billions every year to pursue what they would claim is futile. Social scientists who emphatically criticize the advertising industry are hardly more precise. A convincing sample of studies has found little indication that attitudes and decision making are affected by commercial messages. However, it seems clear that advertising has some effect on people, and more scholars are beginning to turn to the abstract realm of cultural meaning. As media scholar Arthur Asa Berger writes, “it is advertising’s cultural role that is significant.” This cultural role has been one of establishing conventions for linking the signs and symbols of a culture to specific meanings, which, of course, are suitable for the commercial message.

Consider, for example, why beer and sports are linked in the American cultural imagination. Objectively, how could a beverage that impairs motor skills, causes health problems, and warps judgment be equated with the pinnacle of physical conditioning, professional athletics? Even *Sports Illustrated* calls this unlikely marriage a “cultural hypocrisy.” More pointedly, how can we endorse the merger of beer and car racing with the obvious ethical implications? The answer is beer commercials.

When advertisers have a product that is not substantially different from that of its competitors (such as virtually all American beer), they often associate their goods with social meanings that will bestow a positive perceptual differentiation on the product where physical features fail. Ad men may pick old standbys like fun, sexuality, wealth, health, status, or, in the case of the beer industry, sports. After preliminary product/meaning links have been
made, the primary purpose of the symbolic exchange changes from differentiation of the product to its association with the positive appeal of sports. For example:

Step 1: Advertisers note that Americans like sports.
Step 2: Beer is advertised with sports, as sports, and during sporting events.
Step 3: Through time and repetition, beer is perceived with the positive feeling of sports.
Step 4: Americans grow to associate the two, combining the appeal of both.

Over time, with substantial repetition (or ubiquity), the implied connections between the symbols begin to solidify in the public imagination. Of course, the symbols attached to beer also rub off on the meanings associated with sport. Many critics argue that the promotional use of sports devalues the original symbol—that is, the meanings of sport—even as it raises the status of the product, making commodification even more subversive. These criticisms are particularly striking in reference to Anheuser-Busch’s sponsorship of charity organizations, ethnic associations, and environmental groups.

Berger, in his research on beer commercials, identified six major appeals that are connected with beer drinking: sports, sexuality, humor, fun, success, and rewards. He argues that when viewed in combination over a number of years, Americans are subjected to “tacit enculturation,” or an incremental process of meaning making that locks perceptions of drinking into the fundamental building blocks of identity and socialization. He concludes that drinking is slowly “naturalized” as a social behavior and incorporated into the American self-perception. Another communication scholar explains: “Advertising, like any form of mass communication, performs the function of socialization, that is, the transmission of cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes, and influences the way we view the world.” This new set of cultural meanings that ties in to virtually every facet of self-perception has come to be described as a mythology. Mythology here does not mean fairy tales, but rather “an uncontested and unconscious assumption that is so widely shared within a culture that it is considered natural, instead of recognized as a social convention.” Cultural scholars have concluded that Americans share myths about manhood, sexuality, self-determination, and hard work that are all reflected, reinforced, and recombined through calculated advertisements to include beer. Anheuser-Busch did not concoct the mythology, it simply exploited the opportunity to use it to reshape existing American identity into a consumer culture. Furthermore, the very nature of mythology is conducive to this reification. Roland Barthes writes that “myth essentially aims
at causing an immediate impression—it does not matter if one is later al-
lowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the
rational explanations which may later belie it.” These myths are received
innocently because they are already naturalized. Did anyone blink when
the cowboys in the Busch commercials pulled six-packs of beer straight out
of a mountain stream just adjacent to their grazing land?

Seen through these lenses, Anheuser-Busch’s ad campaigns featuring
sexy women, cowboys, cartoon characters, sports heroes, and pop culture
references assume a powerful influence. Recent controversies over the talk-
ing frogs and lizards in its ads are a poignant example, but not a singular one.
Spuds Mackenzie and the BudIce Penguins, characters of years past, held
the same appeal. Critics have argued that these advertisements encourage
children to drink by associating alcohol with popular, humorous animals.
Indeed, the lizards have been consistently rated as the favorite of children,
bearing the highest recall percentage of any ad on television, beating out
Pepsi, Coke, Nike, and McDonald’s. The parallels between the much-
castigated, retired Joe Camel and the Budweiser animals are hard not to
draw. The Federal Trade Commission has launched probes to ascertain
whether the beer industry is marketing to underage drinkers. Yet, Anheuser-
Busch continually denies any wrongdoing, answering critics with further
campaigns featuring the same popular critters.

Consider also the goals and effects of the company’s deals in the sports
world. The clauses that guarantee it rights to the logos of the professional
sports teams, leagues, and events seem now to have a larger meaning. Not
only will it have the exposure at all of these cultural events and venues, but
it will have the visual association of the logos on its labels wherever the prod-
uct is distributed. The real investment for Anheuser-Busch lies in the effort
to establish a common image and appeal between particular teams, the pro-
fessional sports world, and its beers. For instance, in 1997, the company
repositioned the image of Budweiser as a “classic.” To do this, it consciously
leaned on its rights to the logos of Major League Baseball, a sport with a clas-
sic image as a national pastime and a staple of American culture.

Anthropologist Marianna Adler notes that the meaning of beer in Ameri-
can culture has been fundamentally altered by commercialization. It has
gone from a symbol of human relationship and social exchange to an object
invested with the static values of the individual. She describes it as a politi-
cal economy of “you are what you drink.” This description of alcohol falls
within a larger phenomenon in American culture. Advertisers’ manipulation
of cultural symbols and social values has created a society in which products
are seen to have generative properties. Beer is not only associated with fun,
excitement, acceptance, and so on, it is portrayed as a kind of magic potion that actually creates these desirable qualities. Consumption is implicitly posited as the means to enjoy life, to become a better person, and to gain positive attributes. “In the world of advertising self-actualization is achieved not through political participation or intellect or world awareness, but through consumption.” This transition is likely as important symbolically to American identity as it is practically to American behavior. “By investing purchasable commodities with connotations of action, having vies with doing in the available lexicon of self realization.”

The unique pressures of morality also factor into the processes that shift symbols surrounding alcohol and American identity. In a society that endured Prohibition and enjoys an atmosphere of general social conservatism, many people are hesitant to precisely define their relationship with an intoxicant, a drug. The blind eye is simply the path of least resistance. Without a firm conviction, any guilt that might arise from habitual consumption will dissipate in a self-imposed ambiguity. The American desire for drug-induced intoxication is balanced by an unwillingness to define exactly why—mostly because of the potentially negative conclusions. This hazy moral code provides a cultural environment that facilitates the transfer of meanings and associations from one perception to another, generally favoring a turn toward the more positive. More simply, because Americans do not exactly determine how they feel about alcohol, beer companies can more easily interpret their culture for them, and alcohol advertisements can sell positive images (even absurd ones) while ignoring negative consequences. The devices of the politico-economic influences on culture are complemented and assisted by the moral climate in America regarding alcohol.

The dangers for the young and impressionable are obvious. Anheuser-Busch’s denials notwithstanding, common sense tells us that beer commercials affect children. Leaving talking frogs aside, the associations of masculinity, sophistication, mastery over challenge, hard work, and rewards are enough to draw the interest of young and old alike. Further, in advertising, audiences are rarely presented with the negative effects of drinking, and if so, it is a watered-down version of the truth. Abuse, criminality, car accidents, and family dysfunction are rarely approached in the mainstream media. Although Anheuser-Busch does spend considerable time and money on raising awareness, the massive disparity between activism and advertising ensures that the emphasis will lie with the positives, and the negatives will be ignored or simply never witnessed. Regardless of the truly ambiguous nature of alcohol in American society, with the continued one-sided presentation of advertisers will come one-sided perception. As complacent as we
have become to cultural redirection and redefinition, in the final analysis, what happens when the images of consumer culture cannot deliver?

**American Beer Culture or Anheuser-Busch Beer Culture?**

Looking back at the American beer culture, the illusions of simplicity can no longer mask the impact of the political economy. Individual desires are only one element in determining how we drink and think about beer. Because it is primarily thirst or greed that sends us trotting to the refrigerator during halftime of the big game, it is easy to ignore the multitude of factors that quietly encourage, facilitate, and define the beer-break experience. However, awareness alters interpretation. Recognizing the depth of influence exerted by companies such as Anheuser-Busch on private American lives is, indeed, sobering.

Consider the influences that may help determine why, how, and which beer stands waiting in the kitchen. If the beer was purchased at a supermarket, the consumer may have a megabrewer’s political lobbyists to thank for ensuring that the county is wet, that alcohol can be sold in the evening hours, and that liquor licenses are affordable and not limited to bars and restaurants. Local corporate executives may even have influenced political decisions that set local taxes on alcoholic beverages, not to mention city zoning and construction procedures that allowed the grocery store to be built and city streets to lead to it. Furthermore, politico-economic coalitions in the alcoholic beverage industry may have rejected advertising restrictions, making sure that motorists on freeways and in school zones alike are exposed to beer ads on billboards. Other industry activists may be congratulated for fixing prices by preventing excise taxes and blocking antitrust legislation.

Inside the store, product availability depends on another set of industry directives. Most grocery stores deal with wholesalers whose product lines are limited by the major brewers who provide them business. Furthermore, specialty beers are often available only if demographic and psychographic research has deemed them likely to sell. This means that grocery-store refrigerators may be dominated by the products of one or two major brewers (utterly eclipsing smaller brewers, whose products may never see a customer) and limited within that set to the beers that appeal most to the average customer in the area. Demographic data encourages further streamlining to consumer profiles by guiding the proportion and type of advertising on billboards, event sponsorships, and local media channels. The sports teams, stadiums, bars, restaurants, concert halls, radio stations, and cultural venues sponsored
by Anheuser-Busch have advertising messages designed specifically for the
audience the research indicates will be watching, listening, and drinking. Megabrewers such as Anheuser-Busch have the resources to dictate not only
what is on the shelf at the store, but also how beer is represented in society,
with what it is associated, and by whom it should be consumed. Thus, the
beer industry not only caters to the beer-drinking public, it helps to create it.
The level of cultural saturation is so high that virtually everyone is affected,
whether they like it or not, even the erstwhile sports fan, blinded by thirst
and a halftime ritual.

As the beer industry becomes further dominated by megabrewers, led
by the hegemonic Anheuser-Busch, the ability of the corporation to move
outside of the economic sector into political and cultural arenas increases.
The politico-economic integration that characterizes a group such as Civic
Progress facilitates the transfer of substantial governing power into the hands
of nonelected executives. As the lines between politics and economics blur,
corporations are further enabled to infiltrate and displace existing cultural
conventions, thereby bending events, media messages, and consumer iden-
tity to a commercial bottom line. For the beer culture, this means that
Anheuser-Busch will continue to regulate with increasing precision where,
how, and when Americans drink. As the institutions of drinking and socializ-
ing change with the implacable demands of profit, the pace of public percep-
tion of the shifting conditions lags badly. We may hold fast to the notion that
personal taste and volition are enough to retain control of the beer culture,
but this naïveté founders when matched against the politico-economic gate-
keepers of cultural image whose commercial aims trump individual prefer-
ences. The mismatch is particularly glaring for the next generation of beer
drinkers (so shamelessly targeted by corporate advertising), which lacks the
perspective of past diversity.

One final question remains. Why do Americans fail to prevent the un-
palatable transformation of the American beer culture into the Anheuser-
Busch beer culture? Partially, the answer lies in the moral issues surrounding
alcohol. Yet, more directly, Americans fail to oppose corporate domination of
the beer culture because they do not see it happening. The workings of politi-
cal and economic integration and its corresponding effect on cultural forms
and meanings are hardly items of dinner-table conversation. Furthermore,
corporate power endeavors to keep a low profile, masking cultural displace-
ment with community service and positive media. However, ignorance is an
expensive bliss when cultural values and social identity are at stake. Yet, even
resistance and rejection of obvious commercial propaganda are insufficient
to block the more subtle forms of cultural influence. Ubiquity is a powerful
opponent, particularly when exercised by a well-established politico-economic system. By far the largest obstacles remain the average beer drinker’s complacency and thereby complicity in the corporate merger with American culture. Only a concerted recognition and conscious critique of corporate control in all its complexity has even a chance of altering the face of the beer culture.

We must work as hard to reclaim the beer culture as megabrewers do to usurp it. For starters, we can be aware of the presence of advertising, even in unlikely places, in order to dissociate cultural experience from commercial messages. We can learn which beers are owned or underwritten by the megabrewers and which are independent companies and consciously alter our purchasing habits. We can demand selection from local distributors to help lower the bar for entry into wholesale competition. We can support political policies that exclude economic power from governmental influence. Centrally, however, each individual must attempt to define a personal conception of beer and stick to it, laughing and becoming outraged as appropriate when challenged by corporate persuasiveness. Most likely, because of latent moral ambiguity and ensconced corporate power, the almighty Bud will defy criticism. Yet it is a start to begin thinking critically on the way to the refrigerator.

Further Reading

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all facts and figures in this section and those following concerning Anheuser-Busch are drawn from Anheuser-Busch Companies, Inc. Annual Report, 1998.


7. Ibid.


9. Christopher Carey, “Companies Fuel TWA’s Future with $26 Million,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 5, 1997, 1A.


25. Ibid., 47.


34. Ibid., 324.
40. Ibid., 115.
41. Ibid., 117.
43. Ibid., 131.
Throughout the 1990s, advertising expenditures grew faster than the rest of the U.S. economy. In 2000 alone, businesses spent more than $230 billion to advertise goods and services to the American public, and estimates for 2001 place the figure at around $250 billion. By the end of the 1990s, the average American adult was exposed to an estimated three thousand advertisements per day. The social, cultural, and political implications of this commercial saturation are enormous. As James B. Twitchell puts it, the entire contemporary U.S. cultural experience has become an “Adcult.”

What may seem ironic is that despite advertising’s central and growing role in the economy, media, and culture, most of us in this adcult know little or nothing about the industry behind the flashy and expensive advertisements. Although numerous factors could contribute to an explanation, one factor is paramount: the advertising industry itself. Recognizing its own controversial nature and a widespread public skepticism toward advertising’s value, the advertising industry—also known as “Madison Avenue”—has worked tirelessly for almost all of its history to channel criticism into forms that neither threaten nor expose its own economic underpinnings. To accomplish this end, it has employed aggressive uses of public relations (PR).

In this essay, I will present a political-economic and historical perspective on the development, role, and nature of U.S. advertising. Such a perspective provides a road map for understanding how we ended up in the current situation and what will be necessary if the role and nature of advertising are ever to be changed. The purpose of this essay is not to chronicle the economic structure of the U.S advertising industry; such a description is available in any introductory advertising textbook. To the contrary, my purpose is to lift the veil off of the advertising industry, to understand its economic function and its peculiar immunity to political challenge or public criticism.

This essay first confronts the questions that are virtually off-limits in advertising industry PR: why did the advertising industry come into existence in the first place and what is its primary economic function today? In answering these questions, we will discover a paradox facing the advertising industry: namely, that its economic function is, to be frank, a rather dubious one, and this is something the industry and its supporters can never acknowledge. I then discuss the advertising industry’s moment of truth, so to
speak, in the 1930s, when a feisty and radical consumer movement demanded that advertising be reformed from commercial propaganda to serve the legitimate informational needs of consumers in a market economy. The advertising industry’s solution to this problem was to develop an elaborate public-relations effort, a program it has maintained to the present day. Finally, I update the story and prospects of the consumer movement and the advertising industry PR from the 1940s to the present.

The Rise of Modern Advertising

The starting point for understanding advertising is asking why it exists in the first place. Advertising textbooks are of little help as they, according to Vincent P. Norris’s findings, tend to provide absurd explanations or ignore advertising’s origins altogether. Even advertising executives cannot always come up with a clear explanation. Most agree, however, that advertising must be understood as a business expense. But this is far from sufficient; the United States has had a private-enterprise economy throughout its history, but advertising only emerged as a dominant institution in the twentieth century. There was advertising, of course, prior to the Civil War, but most ads were akin to what today is called classified advertising, that is, dry factual reports seeking primarily to inform potential customers about products and their availability. Following the Civil War, advertising began its climb to prominence. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed major changes in production and distribution of consumer goods, along with the rise of national advertising.

Most discussions of the rise of advertising emphasize technological innovations such as the railroad and telegraph as well as the massive influx of immigrant workers to America’s burgeoning industrial centers that in combination contributed to a record production of goods in the years following the Civil War. By the first decades of the twentieth century, products that only a few years earlier had required labor-intensive processes at home were being mass-produced in huge factories by increasingly sophisticated machinery. The result was a torrent of well-made, lower-priced goods flowing into the shops and stores, and eventually into American homes. But the manufacturers of these new mass-produced products soon faced a problem. The flow of goods was frequently blocked by limited outlets, and this threatened unprecedented capital investments in machinery, labor, and goods. Manufacturers realized that they needed to seek national markets for their products—in effect, to cast a wider net. It was in this capacity that they turned to national advertising.
This explanation is good as far as it goes, but it fails to convey exactly why some industries featured a great deal of advertising while other industries featured very little. It also fails to explain why advertising became a mandatory business expense for firms in so many industries. To get answers to these questions—to get to the bottom of the issue—we need to understand the transition from an economy dominated by relatively competitive markets to one dominated by what economists call oligopolistic markets. In competitive markets, there is little incentive to advertise. Firms can sell all they produce at the market price, over which they have no control. Think, for example, of a farmer going to market with his corn or wheat. Why would the farmer advertise his product when he could sell it all at the market price but none of it for one penny over the market price? If the industry becomes especially profitable, new firms will enter the market, increase the supply, lower the market price, and reduce the profits. It is not a very desirable type of market for a capitalist to be in.

Oligopolistic markets, on the other hand, tend to be dominated by a small handful of firms who provide the vast majority of the industry’s output. These firms are not price-takers, as are firms in competitive markets, but they are price-makers, with considerable control over the level of industry output and pricing. It is preferable for a firm to be in an oligopolistic, rather than a competitive, industry. The former tend to be much more profitable, with pricing and output levels closer to a pure monopoly than to a purely competitive market. The key to having a stable oligopolistic market is that there are barriers to entry that make it very difficult for new firms to enter these markets, even if they are extremely profitable. In the United States, an unprecedented wave of mergers and acquisitions at the turn of the twentieth century helped to crystallize the dominance of the economy by large corporations operating in oligopolistic markets.

The rise of oligopoly is the gasoline that fuels the flames of modern advertising. In oligopolistic markets, the dominant firms are hesitant to engage in cutthroat price competition. Each of the firms is large enough to survive a price war, so the result of price competition is just to reduce the size of the revenue pie that they are fighting over. Accordingly, oligopolistic markets tend to gravitate to a pricing structure that maximizes the total revenue coming into the industry. Advertising emerges as a primary competitive weapon in the battle to protect and expand market shares without getting into cutthroat price competition. The role of advertising, then, is twofold. First, advertising permits firms to increase their sales without cutting prices, thereby maintaining healthy profit margins. Second, advertising serves to establish a brand identity around a given product or service, thereby making its loyal
users less susceptible to appeals from direct competitors. Understood this way, advertising becomes a mandatory expense for the firm in an oligopolistic market, if only to protect its market share from attack. Advertising as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) rose in direct proportion to the rise of the giant corporations operating in oligopolistic markets. It went from less than three-tenths of 1 percent in 1865 to more than 3 percent of GDP by 1920. Since the mid-1950s, advertising expenditures as a percentage of the GDP have remained at around 2 percent.

In this light, much of what transpires as advertising should begin to make sense. For one thing, advertising expenditures are dominated by a few hundred large corporations. In 1999, the top hundred advertisers in the United States accounted for approximately one-third of all ad spending. That year General Motors topped the list as the largest U.S. advertiser and the first American one to crack the $4 billion mark in annual advertising spending. Following the automaker in advertising expenditures were Procter and Gamble, Philip Morris, Pfizer, and AT&T. Taken as a group, these companies alone spent more than $12.5 billion on promotions.

Virtually every national industry that features advertising as a significant expenditure is a classical oligopoly. Take, for example, athletic footwear. In 1997, 47 percent of all athletic shoes sold in the United States were made by Nike. Combined with Reebok (15.4 percent), Adidas (6.1 percent), and Fila (6 percent), the four manufacturers accounted for some three-quarters of all athletic footwear sales in the country. Because these shoes are produced at a fraction of their retail cost, manufacturers could theoretically cut their prices substantially and still turn a healthy profit. The problem, however, is that if one of the firms decided to cut prices in order to gain a larger share of the market, the other three could, and would, follow suit. This would then lead to a decline in the overall revenues going to the U.S. athletic shoe market. With these firms finding themselves fighting over a severely reduced “pot,” shareholders would demand the heads of executives responsible for falling prices and disappearing profits. How, then, do these firms effectively compete to increase their share of the market without threatening revenues and profits? Ever since the early twentieth century, advertising has provided a solution to the dilemma.

In oligopolistic markets, advertising copy that appeals to consumers’ sense of reason, providing information enabling them to comparison shop, does not serve the manufacturer if there, in fact, are no real differences between the dominant brands in a market. To tell the truth about a product—that it costs the same as its competition and is basically identical in quality—would hardly develop brand loyalty or lure new users. Hence a major trend
in modern advertising is to employ puffery, imagery, and emotional or irrelevant claims in advertising messages. The point is to create a difference in consumers’ minds even if there is little or no difference between the product and its direct competitors. In the early twentieth century, leading scholarship supported this approach. Scholarly reports suggested that “the masses” were inclined to engage in impulsive action and that their behavior was easily manipulated. Sigmund Freud’s view of the human mind as irrational, easily manipulated, and driven by unconscious (mainly sexual) instincts and desires invited advertisers to apply psychological constructs to their commercial strategies. The fact that scientific opinion buttressed manufacturers’ strategies legitimizated, even justified, their methods. The corollary idea that the consumer could best be reached by an appeal to his or her irrational thinking and subconscious desires tantalized manufacturers and inspired marketing strategies based on motivational research.

Interestingly enough, this rationale still rules. Consider, for example, this Chanel No. 5 perfume ad: The commercial, which Chanel describes as “a fairy tale for big kids,” opens with a shot of model Estella Warren as a grown-up Red Riding Hood treading a footbridge to an armored door marked with the “5” from the Chanel logo. The model enters the fort, grabbing a bottle of Chanel No. 5 from a shelf. Suddenly, a black wolf emerges, ready to pounce. But beauty prevails over the beast, defusing the attack with a tender shush. As the model departs, the wolf howls and the camera pulls back to show an oversized “5” on the floor, which then becomes a bottle of Chanel No. 5. “Share the fantasy,” urges the announcer at the end of the spot. “One thing we have learned,” states Laurie Palma, vice president for fragrance marketing at Chanel, “is that young people increasingly talk about escaping from reality and the stress in the world.” Chanel spent more than $3.2 million during the last three months of 1998 alone.

But it is putting the cart before the horse to suggest that a perception of the audience as irrational led advertising away from claims based on reason. In fact, nothing delights advertising agencies more than to have a client whose product has a tangible advantage over their competitors. The problem they face is that for many, or most, of their products, such differences barely exist or do not exist at all. As a leading advertising executive, Jeff DeJoseph, put it in 1996:

In a whole variety of categories there’s nothing to say about the product. The actual competitive differences are ever so slight. Many brands have parity status. And consumers are bombarded with exponentially more messages, so there’s no reason to select a brand other than how you affiliate with
it, how you feel about [it]. It’s not the fact of the brand, its the emotion you attach to the beer or the car or the jeans.¹⁵

DeJoseph highlights why the public historically has held advertising in fairly low esteem; it obfuscates the nature of products more often than it illuminates them. Nowhere is this more apparent than in those categories termed “parity products,” meaning products where there is no meaningful difference between any of the brands. The irony of modern advertising is that the more products are alike in oligopolistic markets, the more money firms in those markets must spend on advertising to convince the public that they are different. Therefore, the list of the ten industries that do the most advertising includes soaps, beers, perfumes, and pain relievers. It is not coincidental that producers of proprietary drugs spend 19 percent of their budgets on advertising or that the corresponding number for perfumes and cosmetics is 14 percent; for liquor, 11 percent; for cereal, 11 percent; and for cigarettes, 8 percent.¹⁶ Most of the scholarship suggests that at least a part of this cost is added on to a product’s retail price.¹⁷ At the very least, heavy advertising expenditures become an onerous expense that makes it that much more difficult for new firms to enter oligopolistic markets. In this sense, advertising impedes competition in the market. In sum, the very nature of modern advertising suggests that it will always have problems convincing the public of its inherent worth.

Advertising and the Consumer

By World War I, national manufacturers had become increasingly dependent on advertising to secure “brand loyalty” in order to sell their products. This elevated advertising’s role within the larger business process and several advertising interest organizations began to appear. The Associated Advertising Clubs of the World (AACW), with local advertising clubs as its members, was formed in 1914. The American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA or 4As), a group consisting of large advertising agencies closely connected with national advertising, followed suit in 1917. Two years earlier, the business community witnessed the start of the Association of National Advertisers (ANA), originally formed in 1911 as the Association of National Advertising Managers. ANA’s purpose continued as that of protecting the interests of national advertisers. The Advertising Federation of America (AFA) got its start in 1929. Consisting of national advertisers, this group focused its energies on developing general business policies for national advertising and kept an attentive eye on Washington lawmakers. An active interest in adver-
Advertising research led the AFA to form the Advertising Research Foundation in 1936. In 1968, the AFA changed its name to the American Advertising Federation (AAF). Not only did the various advertising organizations provide help and support for their members, they also signaled that advertising had reached increased importance to the American economy and given the industry prominence in the society at large.\(^\text{18}\)

The real measure of advertising as an institution, however, took place in the concrete experiences of millions of Americans as the institution emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, it was during this period that a major political fight developed over the fundamental nature and the very existence of modern advertising, culminating in the passage of the Wheeler-Lea Amendment of 1938, the statute that still mandates the regulation of advertising by the Federal Trade Commission.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed massive immigration to the large American cities. Before arriving in the large commercial centers, most immigrants had relied on home production for a major part of their consumption needs. Practical considerations demanded, however, that the new city dwellers rely on mass-produced products for the same needs. The consumer became a new economic focal point. Population growth, increased urbanization and industrialization, and improvements in transportation and communication technology aided the creation of mass products and their marketing and distribution on a national scale. Advertising played an important role in expanding and stabilizing national markets.\(^\text{19}\) Instead of providing consumers with facts and information about their products, however, manufacturers made heavy use of advertisements that “coached” and “guided” consumers toward goods with the “right” image. The trend, by the 1920s, was toward image-driven ads that played on people’s fears and insecurities. Dominating the field were ads that magnified minor problems to the point where they appeared crucial to important life decisions. Potential consumers were told that bad breath, or old-fashioned furnishings, or sagging socks prevented professional and social success, and that failure to use certain products for health, hygiene, or attire would hinder their ability to keep up with modern society, much less “get ahead.”\(^\text{20}\)

There is little doubt that, for many people, such products as cars, washing machines, and electric toasters made life easier or that the mobility brought on by a new car could improve someone’s quality of life. The missing link, however, was a failure to provide consumers with adequate information about consumer goods in the marketplace. This was true for big-ticket items, but particularly so for products that people needed on a more regular, even daily, basis. Whereas purchasers of big-ticket items such as a
car would buy a particular brand on the basis of more than an image-driven advertisement, consumers of low-priced items (of whom there were many more) were forced to rely on advertising as their prime source of information about consumer goods. “It seems probable,” reflected consumer advocate Robert S. Lynd in 1934, “that under the pressure of modern business development, the consumer is becoming confused and illiterate as a buyer more rapidly than the combined factors of education, standardization, and so on are making him literate as buyer.” These anxieties and doubts about a rapidly commercialized society reflected a genuine concern over the average citizen’s rights and well-being in a society where corporate concerns took a front seat. Rather than fighting advanced capitalism, Lynd wanted to make it accountable to those it claimed to serve. He argued that people had a right to consumer information and challenged manufacturers’ decision to ignore such requests.

Lynd was not alone. A consumer movement had been building strength and momentum since the early years of the twentieth century. Its focus during the Progressive Era had been on sanitary food production and workers’ conditions. The rapid commercialization taking place during the early decades of the century, however, shifted the consumer movement’s attention to advertising. The 1930s consumer movement consisted of several groups. Some were professional women’s organizations such as the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, the American Home Economics Association, and the National League of Women Voters. The movement’s radical wing took its cues from Consumer’s Research and Consumers Union. The latter took it upon themselves to conduct independent testing and evaluations of consumer goods and published the results. Both middle-of-the-road and leftist critics argued that it was the emotional appeal in advertising that made it a waste. The public was especially irked by testimonial advertising and did not appreciate the use of pseudoscientific jargon, unwarranted superlatives, tabloid-like appeals to “fear,” or advertisements that touted sex.

Adding to the advertising industry’s uneasiness was a growing public interest in books intending to inform and protect consumers in the marketplace. Both Your Money’s Worth (1927/1931) and 100,000,000 Guinea Pigs (1933) exposed inadequacies and laxities in the production of consumer goods, pointed to manufacturers’ fraudulent advertising practices, and spotlighted the lack of laws to protect consumers against such marketing. The books became best-sellers. By the late 1930s, Your Money’s Worth had sold 100,000 copies, and 250,000 individuals and institutions had bought 100,000,000 Guinea Pigs. A library in Southbridge, Massachusetts, reported a two-year waiting list of people wanting to read the latter book. By
1940, 24 percent of those responding to a Gallup poll admitted to having read at least one consumer interest book.\textsuperscript{25}

Recognizing advertising as the major, if not only, forum where manufacturers explained themselves and their products to the public, the consumer movement sought to alter the manner in which ads addressed consumers. Rather than confuse and impress, ads should provide potential consumers with more information about the various products. If manufacturers were not willing to do this, consumer advocates were ready to seek advertising regulation in the form of law. Before long, the consumer movement had made federal regulation of advertising one of its key issues.

People’s growing dependency on mass-produced goods, and on advertising to inform them about these commodities, had not been evident when the existing Food and Drug Act had been written in 1906. Consequently, the law applied only to labeling, and not to general advertising, of goods.\textsuperscript{26} By the time of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s inauguration in January 1933, considerable momentum existed on behalf of establishing formal federal regulation of advertising. In June of that year, Senator Royal S. Copeland (Democrat, New York) introduced a bill to amend and revise the Food and Drug Act. The bill was drafted under the supervision of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and it won the support of Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Rexford G. Tugwell. The “Tugwell bill,” as the measure came to be called, empowered the FDA to prohibit “false advertising” of any food, drug, or cosmetic. It defined any advertisement as false if it created a misleading impression “by ambiguity or inference.”\textsuperscript{27}

As a professor at Columbia University, Tugwell had earned a reputation as a strong defender of consumers’ rights and someone who bore very little patience for corporate greed. He supported advertising only to the point where it helped consumers make educated choices between different products. He viewed advertising, designed with the single purpose of shifting consumer loyalty from one brand to another, as wasteful. Because the latter characteristic fit the majority of consumer advertising too well, it was no wonder that the advertising community deplored Tugwell and the bill carrying his name.\textsuperscript{28}

Madison Avenue accused the movement behind the Tugwell bill of wanting to destroy advertising. Consumer advocates, on the other hand, found little sympathy for an institution that claimed it would be destroyed unless it was allowed to use “inference” and “ambiguity” to sell its products. Their objective was to alter corporate advertising practices so that ads would respond to the needs of the public.
The Advertising Industry Reacts to the Consumer Movement

The advertising industry’s reaction to the Tugwell bill was strong and adverse. While admitting that a few shady advertising practices needed to be cleaned up, it maintained that the bill was a far too drastic measure. Advertising Age equated the bill with “using a shot-gun, instead of a swatter, as a means of eliminating houseflies.” The industry claimed that the bill’s wording was too vague, and that the definition of “false and misleading” advertising was left to the government’s arbitrary determination.

While industry representatives did not shy away from attacking bill supporters for their lack of understanding about advertising’s role and function, they were also confronted with their own inabilities, or perhaps unwillingness, to explain the industry’s marketing strategies. “Illusions,” proclaimed AAAA president John Benson, in an attempt to deflect the issue, “are what men live by and if advertising can create a desire for better things, thereby creating more jobs and a sounder economic structure, it is doing America a real service.” The advertising industry did not view lack of product information in advertisements as a problem. In fact, argued one representative, ads did a better job of serving consumers when they catered to their dreams and desires, because “in a jar of face cream, the advertiser may pitch a dream of youth more priceless to some than the rarest unguents of the orient. Or in a carton of breakfast foods he may enclose an ambition to be another Babe Ruth, more satisfying to a boy than all the calories.” Justifications aside, however, there is no doubt that the consumer movement and the subsequent Tugwell bill had located the industry’s Achilles’ heel and that advertising had a difficult time explaining itself.

Beyond the battles at Capitol Hill over advertising regulation, the advertising industry had considerable reason for concern. The persistence and growth of the consumer movement suggested that advertising would face an ongoing attack during the 1930s—possibly far more than other major U.S. industries. In this sense, the demands of the nascent consumer movement represented an identity crisis for the advertising industry. Moreover, it appeared that the conflict was fundamentally irresolvable. The industry lived in constant fear that criticism from the consumer movement’s radical wing might spread even further and lead to pressure for even stronger government regulations.

The advertising industry was in dire need of a solution and found hope in an aggressive public-relations program to combat the challenges to its legitimacy. The point of PR is twofold: to move public opinion in a direction more favorable to the client, and to apply pressure on lawmakers and regulators to
better heed the client’s needs. The political theorist Alex Carey argues that PR is one of the three great political trends of the twentieth century, and a direct consequence of the other two. These three developments are the growth of democracy (and near universal adult suffrage), the growth of corporate power, and the growth of propaganda—that is, public relations—to protect corporate power from democracy. Hence, as Carey puts it, despite its specific function for individual practitioners, the overriding point of PR is to “take the risk out of democracy” for powerful business interests. The goals of public relations are, then, to discredit those who question the legitimacy of corporate domination and to “identify the free enterprise system in popular consciousness” as an entirely benevolent proposition.

Early public-relations theories had operated under the assumption that the public was easily led and manipulated, a concept the advertising industry had bought in its entirety. Not only were its creative strategies modeled on this assumption, they also guided the industry’s early dealings with the consumer movement. Advertisers more or less assumed that a loud and categorical denial of the consumer movement’s claims would prevent the latter’s ideas from spreading. Gradually, however, advertisers realized the need to alter their strategies vis-à-vis the public. The advertising industry’s greatest public-relations problem, at least in the mid-1930s, was its inability—or perhaps unwillingness—to address advertising’s heavy reliance on emotional appeals. This was one of the consumer movement’s core concerns and one that the Tugwell bill clearly reflected.

Because parity advertising played such a major part in the marketing strategies of American business, the advertising industry exhibited an extremely defensive attitude when criticized on this point. Rather than admitting that such advertising was the direct result of product competition in an oligopolistic economy where America clearly took the lead, industry defenders argued that these emotional appeals had come about as a result of some inherent characteristic in the American consumer. Advertising practitioners found it difficult to admit that their main functions were to de-emphasize price and product information because such an admission would play directly into the hands of the consumer movement and provide more ammunition for its regulatory demands. The very nature of advertising suggested that advertising would find itself in a perpetual public-relations war to establish its legitimacy and to undermine its foes. Starting in the mid-1930s, the advertising industry engaged in a series of activities designed to undermine the consumer movement and discredit its claims.

One method was a move to establish a series of business-backed consumer groups. The Consumers’ Advertising Council was a typical representative of
this strategy to divide and conquer. Heavily funded by advertising, publishing, and business interests, the group’s function was to supply business-backed data about advertising and advertised products to create favorable opinions about advertising among the public, while keeping antiadvertising sentiments at bay. As an additional means of “delegitimizing” consumer groups with different political agendas, the advertising industry began referring to adversarial consumer groups as the “so-called” consumer groups. Creating these bogus consumer groups could only sow confusion in the general public. In doing so, the advertising industry was a pioneer in the now common PR technique of establishing seemingly neutral “third-party” front organizations to do the industry’s bidding.

Before long, the nation’s schools became a favorite target for the industry’s PR program. Schools, colleges, and universities became critical new battlegrounds for the fight over the role of advertising in American life. The fact that millions of students would mature into consumers, community leaders, and voters did not pass unnoticed. The advertising industry harbored a deeply felt suspicion toward teachers, considering them to be particularly susceptible to the consumer movement’s agenda. Its own figures suggested that “antiadvertising propaganda” in the form of “doctrines” from the consumer movement’s radical wing was being taught in schools and at major U.S. universities. In order to counteract antiadvertising sentiments in America’s institutions of learning, the industry launched a wide range of efforts to “widen the score” and possibly tip the balance in its favor.

The financial hardships experienced by many schools during the Great Depression presented a perfect opportunity in this regard. Many school districts struggled with limited funds for new and up-to-date textbooks. This provided major manufacturers such as Heinz, General Foods, Hershey, American Can, and Calvert Distillers with a chance to provide classrooms with commercially sponsored material that would subtly aim at making advertising appear useful and productive. General Motors, for example, published a set of books for use in science classes; other manufacturers supplied instruction on the use of makeup, hair care, shaving, and clothes. Such booklets as The Romance of Copper, The Romance of Modern Decoration, and The Romance of Rubber represented typical examples of manufacturers’ attempts at replacing or substituting traditional forms of textbooks with commercially sponsored material. A student essay competition, inaugurated by Advertising Age in 1936, was part of the strategy. Designed “to encourage sane thinking about advertising,” the contests asked high-school students to explain “How Advertising Helps the Consumer.” College students were quizzed on a topic called “The Economic Value of Advertising.” Much to the...
trade publications’ delight, the contest drew some 1,300 entries from all across the nation. Several teachers made the essay writing part of their required curriculum.43

The advertising industry also benefited from its close ties with the media industries. In the case of the Tugwell bill, for example, bill opponents convinced advertising managers in the newspaper and magazine fields that the measure, if passed into law, would result in severe revenue losses for their publications. This affected news coverage of the issue. Newspapers and popular magazines played down or ignored the story, leaving readers ill-informed about the Tugwell bill and the central issues at stake.44 Consumer groups (in the original meaning of the term) had severe difficulties defending themselves against the onslaught of business-sponsored propaganda. Because they were essential grassroots organizations that depended on their members for funding, they plainly lacked the deep pockets of corporate giants.45 The industry’s command over the media was not foolproof, however. This was demonstrated when the Joint Committee on Sound Democratic Consumer Legislation, a group formed for the purpose of fighting the bill, became outraged over the National Broadcasting Corporation’s decision to provide Tugwell supporters with free airtime to present their case.46

However, the final version of the Tugwell bill, renamed the Wheeler-Lee Amendment, reflected the advertising industry’s lobbying and PR clout.47 Between 1933 and 1938, the industry and its allies lobbied successfully to have their demands incorporated into new versions of the bill, slowly chipping away the original bill’s spirit of consumer protection. Whereas the Tugwell bill had asked for a stop to the use of “ambiguity” and “inference” in ads, the Wheeler-Lea Amendment, regulated under the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and incorporated into the Federal Trade Commission Act of 1914, interpreted “false and misleading” in a way that was more lenient on advertisers. The law banned the use of advertisements that were explicitly false, but it had no way of policing ads that used ambiguity and inference to imply falsehood. The positive aspect of the new bill was the FTC’s authority to intervene on behalf of consumers. But whereas the Tugwell bill had wanted advertisers to make sure of their ad’s truthfulness, the Wheeler-Lea Amendment left the government with the difficult task of proving that an ad was false. This bill, which is still the major law on advertising, did not force advertisers toward producing more informative ads. On the contrary, the immediate and somewhat ironic result of the Wheeler-Lea Amendment was a tendency toward increased glamour and indirect assertion. Because it was relatively easy to check the truthfulness of verbal claims, advertisements increasingly relied on the use of pictures and illustrations to get around the
law. “It was obvious,” argued Otis Pease, “that a pictorial illustration could frequently pass muster where a verbal presentation would not, [and] that a promise of reward as a result of purchasing the product could often be left unspecified and thereby innocent of legal transgression.”

Despite the Wheeler-Lea Amendment’s weak consumer protection, the consumer movement did not fight the measure once it was written into law. The five-year struggle for a regulatory law had made it clear that those fighting to expose the institution of advertising were in for an uphill battle, and that the odds were stacked against them. The advertising industry, on the other hand, was in no mood to rest on its laurels. Public relations had proven a powerful and most useful tool against public pressure. Not only had the industry avoided the largest regulation threats thanks to clever uses of PR, but the power of “spin” had allowed this without forcing the industry into an explanation of why the consumer movement’s demands were fundamentally at odds with advertising’s oligopolistic functions. The advertising industry had managed to redirect the most severe accusations into more manageable venues and forms.

Consolidation of the Status Quo

Smashing the radical consumer movement and getting sympathetic legislation passed did not obviate the need for ongoing aggressive public relations by the advertising industry. The industry was still formally regulated by the FTC, so it would be crucial to keep public opinion, members of Congress, and regulators in check. Moreover, because advertising by its very nature would always generate social criticism, the function of good PR would not necessarily be to eliminate this criticism but to neutralize it. Indeed, only a few years after the passage of the Wheeler-Lea Amendment, the advertising industry faced another direct threat to its modus operandi, and to its standing in the public’s eyes: World War II.

The nation’s shift to a full-scale wartime economy in the early 1940s suddenly undermined the entire rationale for advertising that the industry had devised during the preceding decade. The advertising industry had traditionally justified advertising on the grounds that it led to increased demand for goods, which, in turn, resulted in higher production, industrial expansion, and more industry-related jobs. A shortage of workers and material brought on by the war invalidated this reasoning. To encourage consumption under these circumstances would be unpatriotic; it might exacerbate shortages and stimulate inflation. The situation prompted a proposal to repeal the excess profits tax. This law, which allowed business to declare large portions
of advertising expenditures as tax-deductible items, had existed almost without interruption since World War I. Given the new concerns about advertising, however, several lawmakers argued that if manufacturers wanted to advertise, they should pay for such promotions out of their own (taxed) profits, instead of declaring them as a tax-deductible expense.49

Advertisers were outraged over the proposal but also feared that an open fight on the issue might be viewed as unpatriotic, reflect poorly on the industry, and leave it open to public attacks, thereby destroying all the good public-relations work it had done in the years leading up to the war. In a very timely fashion, the Advertising Council, one of the most successful public-relations ventures the industry has ever embarked upon, presented itself as the answer to these problems. The Advertising Council (called the War Advertising Council between 1943 and 1945) was formally established in early 1942. Its official purpose was to coordinate the government’s need for publicity about home-front campaigns with donated ad space and creative expertise from the advertising community. During the 1,307 days of war, American advertisers, working through the Advertising Council’s directives, helped encourage the American public to purchase more than 800 million war bonds, plant 50 million victory gardens, and raise several million dollars for the Red Cross and the National War Fund drives. Council projects fought inflation, recruited military personnel, spread information about a wide variety of salvage and conservation campaigns, and enlisted workers for industrial war plants. By the war’s end, the (War) Advertising Council had been involved in more than 150 different home-front campaigns and had, by its own estimate, contributed more than $1 billion in time, space, and talent toward the war effort.50

The advertising industry’s financial sacrifices were easily offset by a series of political victories. Partly as a reward for incorporating the government’s home-front campaigns into their ads, advertisers were allowed to deduct “reasonable, ordinary, and necessary” advertising costs from their income taxes. While average citizens witnessed a dramatic tax increase during the war, tax breaks to major advertisers slipped through the back door. Those daring enough to criticize this arrangement were told that advertisers were entitled to this break because they (in contrast to ordinary Americans) performed an indispensable patriotic duty.

The industry’s work with the government through the Advertising Council offered other rewards as well. The relationship between Madison Avenue and Washington, tainted with hostility and uncertainty through the 1930s, had turned downright cozy by the war’s end. During the national crisis, advertising representatives had developed mutually beneficial relationships
with key governmental individuals. More than ever, the advertising industry was regarded as a key player. Beginning in 1944, for example, the invitation list for what would turn into annual “off-the-record” meetings at the White House, included several prominent members from the advertising community. The general purpose behind these get-togethers was to give America’s industrial leaders a chance to discuss the country’s future with the president and members of his administration. The advertising industry’s elevated role was largely the result of the council’s activities on its behalf. “We have discovered,” stated council chairman James Webb Young, “that just as a man wants to do a public relations of character-building for himself, he can do it better by acting as a good citizen instead of just talking about himself as one, so can an advertiser or industry do a better public relations job for himself [sic] by demonstrating good citizenship instead of talking about it.” The council’s role, argues advertising historian Frank W. Fox, was to use advertising to sell not only products, but the corporate ideology behind them as well.

The Advertising Council’s unstated but overarching goal was to have the American public internalize a view of the advertising industry as a democratic institution that had been instrumental in winning the fight over the Axis powers. How, asked the council, could an institution that had contributed close to $1 billion to the war effort, cooperated with the government against the country’s enemies, and promoted the peace to boot fail to represent a cornerstone of democracy? Madison Avenue was delighted to discover that the war experience had made postwar consumers more accepting of its own answer to this question. There were no longer any organized efforts to change the advertising industry’s marketing practices. The Advertising Council’s relentless PR work had not changed the industry, however. More than ever, advertisements played on consumers’ fears (of not keeping up with the Joneses) and stressed the importance of image (in order to impress and get ahead) while shortchanging consumers on product information. Rather than focusing on advertising’s shortcomings, the council had encouraged the public to take a broader view of advertising in order to discover its social usefulness. The council was so encouraged by its own accomplishments that it decided to continue its operations into peacetime.

The Postwar Years

The postwar introduction and immense popularity of television put Americans in even closer proximity with advertising. In sharp contrast to radio, which had emerged only a couple of decades earlier, few challenged television’s commercial nature. Specific advertisements were still lampooned
for being loud, annoying, and obnoxious and the seeming insincerity of people in the industry continued to draw attention. Few, if any, however, pointed to the institutional flaws or called for the kind of draconian regulation of advertising that was proposed by many in the early 1930s. In short, radical criticism of the advertising industry, as in the 1930s, was as good as dead. It was replaced by a far less threatening critique of specific ads or specific advertising practices that paid little attention to the political economic foundation of the industry.

So it was that advertising’s role in manipulating women into lives of domesticity and consumption was a central theme in Betty Friedan’s path-breaking book *The Feminine Mystique*, which signaled the beginning of a feminist critique of advertising. Numerous books and magazine articles published in the 1970s and beyond argued that advertising’s power to define female beauty had a devastating impact on women’s feelings of self-esteem. Advertising’s undermining effect on women is, in fact, central to contemporary feminist scholarship even today. In contrast to consumer advocates in the 1930s who believed that advertising had to be fundamentally changed, even the most radical feminist critics merely wanted to see images of women altered to be less stereotypical, insulting, and symbolically harmful. The content of the ads otherwise was not considered within the realm of what could be changed. And the less optimistic feminist advertising critics simply hoped to equip consumers with enough knowledge and self-esteem to resist the advertised messages. This critical interpretive strategy, however, implied that consumers, because they have a choice in accepting or rejecting a commercial message, were themselves partly responsible for being ripped off or misled by advertisers. By focusing on advertising’s excesses rather than its lacking consumer information, this form of criticism posed, and still poses, a threat to Madison Avenue that is very limited by comparison with the challenges mounted during the 1930s.

Nevertheless, the 1960s witnessed a partial rebirth of the consumer movement. Unlike their 1930s counterparts, however, the new consumer advocates did not make advertising their primary focus. Led by Ralph Nader, the new movement was mostly concerned with faulty production practices, including manufacturers’ negligent attitudes toward consumers’ safety. When Nader finally attempted to establish an Institute for the Study of Commercialism in the 1990s, he was frequently hampered by a lack of funding. The advertising industry, on the other hand, experienced no such setbacks. On the contrary, as advertising expenditures kept growing, the medium became even more intrusive and all-pervasive. And with the rapid spread of commercialism throughout American society, one might project that it will
be more difficult than ever for the industry to be subjected to the sort of democratic debate that the 1930s consumer advocates desired.

The consumer movement has not been helped by the fact that the daily press, radio and television, and most of the nation’s magazines have become—in effect—part of the advertising industry. Both the daily press and the nationally distributed magazines, which grew in size and popularity during the latter part of the nineteenth century, introduced a strong media dependency on advertising as a source of revenue. As chief financial supporters of the press, advertisers are not satisfied with space for their sales pitches. They want the overall media content to complement their commercial messages and view newspapers as marketing vehicles rather than intellectual forums.61 It is, in fact, a medium’s ability to attract advertising money that determines its success and market viability.62 In addition to access to the proper demographic groups, advertisers are increasingly obsessed with media content that resonates with their products and corporate profiles. Nonconformity with these demands might lead to sponsor withdrawal and put the media operation at financial risk.63 Today, newspapers receive 75 percent of their revenues from ads; general circulation magazines rely on this source for half their income. Broadcasting interests, on the other hand, receive close to all their income from advertisers. The newest challenge on Madison Avenue appears to be that of making the Internet profitable for advertisers.64 Because advertisers pay an extraordinarily high price for reaching the mass media’s readers and audiences, owners of newspapers, magazines, and networks are more than willing to adhere to programs and stories according to advertisers’ wishes. In fact, commercial concerns are so embedded in the media’s day-to-day operations that advertisers rarely need to raise their voices to make their wishes known.65

Consumer advocates do not have the same options as media activists, who are able to create alternative news and information sources on shoestring budgets. Major brands are registered trademarks, which prohibits unauthorized use. This hinders all alternative uses of these brands. Consumer activists cannot, for example, create alternative Coca-Cola, Marlboro, and Nike ads in order to provide consumers with more facts and information about these products. This strategy would guarantee them, and any publication willing to print their ads, a massive lawsuit. Contrary to the mass media, which at least pretends to pay some attention to its critics, the advertising industry either claims First Amendment protection or, if that is not enough, claims little or no responsibility for how the message affects consumers. (R. J. Reynolds’s claim that its Joe Camel campaign was not targeting young people, and Budweiser’s denial of using animated frogs to reach underage drinkers, are but two recent examples.)
If that is not enough, since the mid-1970s, the advertising industry has won important cases before the U.S. Supreme Court to the effect that commercial advertising is now increasingly protected from government regulation by the “free-speech” clause of the First Amendment. It is not entirely unthinkable that, at some point in the future, advertising will be made, in effect, part of the U.S. Constitution and thereby removed forever from the arena of public debate and regulation. At that point, the PR victory of the advertising industry will be all but complete. Until then, however, advertising cannot rest on its laurels. The social, economic, and environmental problems of a consumer society are arguably greater than ever, and, in certain respects, public dissatisfaction with commercialism is rampant. Even *Business Week* has run cover stories in recent years bemoaning the commercial carpet bombing of society.

Short of abolishing established marketing practices, the advertising industry can only react to these concerns by devising new public-relations schemes in order to obscure and neutralize the fact that advertising rests on such a dubious base. And if this is the nature of advertising, what does it say about the nature of the economy that demands it, the media system that largely subsidizes and directs, and the consumer culture to which it is joined at the hip? These are questions the advertising industry’s PR also works to keep masked, or to bury in self-serving rhetoric and myths. One may or may not believe that advertising provides a benevolent and necessary service to society, but its role should certainly be subject to scholarly examination and public debate. The advertising industry, which ironically enough sees itself as the frontier defender of the First Amendment, has been and continues to be the major reason that no such debate has taken place since the middle of the last century. The extent to which this is true is the extent to which American democracy is neither as rich nor as vital as it could and should be. The frustrating result, at least for now, is that the advertising industry somehow remains on a higher plane, its economic justification unchallenged and removed from the sphere of legitimate discussion.

**Further Reading**


**Notes**


10. Ibid.


ries. For a discussion, see Alan R. Raucher, Public Relations and Business 1900–1929 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), 128–34.
17. Ibid.
26. The Federal Trade Commission (established in 1914) held power to deal with misleading advertising, but only if and when such practices led to unfair competition between business interests. The commission held no jurisdiction to intervene in cases where individual consumers had been the victims of misleading advertising practices. For a discussion of this issue, see Richard Tedlow, “From Competitor to Consumer: The Changing Focus of Federal Regulation of Advertising, 1914–1938,” Business History Review 55:1 (spring 1981): 35–58.
34. Ibid.
35. The theory, commonly referred to as the “magic bullet” or the “hypodermic needle” theory, was based on the notion that audiences were uniformly affected by mediated messages. For a discussion of this theory, see, for example, Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, Propaganda and Persuasion (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1986), 99–100.

46. Letter to Mr. Aylesworth from Wm. P. Jacobs, November 17, 1933, Box 22, Folder 37, NBC papers.

47. The Wheeler-Lea Amendment amended the 1914 Federal Trade Commission Act. The 1914 law gave the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) power to deal with misleading advertising only if such practices resulted in unfair business competition. The Wheeler-Lea Amendment authorized the FTC to intervene on behalf of consumers as well.


52. "Business Men Urged to Weigh Social Responsibilities," Advertising Council press release, November 20, 1945, Box 6, Folder: WAC news releases 1945, Record Group 13/2/305, Ad Council papers, 3; emphasis in the original.


59. See, for example, Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American


This essay will introduce the reader to popular dance as a reified object of cultural and monetary value as well as a marker of race and nation. Although dance is a dynamically unstable activity, changing from heartbeat to heartbeat, space to place, very often it is utilized as a fixed entity by broadcast and digital media to convey skill, emotion, time, location, forces of nature, social worthiness, and race. In entertainment industries, dance appears as both a normalizing event and a marker of extraordinary skill of the performer/product. It is reduced to a lowest-common-denominator teaser, like the woman bent over a car on a hot-rod calendar. Dance has nothing and everything to do with these types of “performances.”

I have devised this essay as a performance of a participatory nature. Popular dances that you may or may not be familiar with are presented as both scenes and case studies. Because popular dance is both a thing and an activity that you have had involvement with, even against your will (think of your high-school prom), how it is deployed and/or manipulated as something other than “leisure activity,” “art,” or “job” may be difficult to readily grasp. For this reason, I have employed the use of humor and common settings that may be familiar to you in order to render them as something aside from your day to day, as something worthy of a closer look or, as the case may be, a harder butt shake. Let’s move into the uses and abuses of what I’ll loosely call Black Dance.

This Black Dance has its origins in the United States and its idiomatic expressions are quite convoluted, shaped as they are by a remarkable history of hide-and-seek, to put it mildly, with the dominant white population. This dance, once considered lurid, even dangerous, has come to signify fun and “American.” Like jazz music, Black Popular Dance has been claimed as American culture’s true indigenous dance expression, but not officially. You will not find a Smithsonian scholar on the Running Man, or a Lincoln Center dance series featuring the Night Train, the Chili, or the Hulley Gulley, definitely not the Smurf or the Electric Slide, and, unbelievably, not the Hustle. No, the television commercial and music video have served as the great patrons of Black Popular Dance. Not surprisingly, Black Popular Dances that have been deemed suitable for academic inquiry are those that the enslaved black body practiced, the Cake Walk, the Buck & Wing, the Juba, the Buzzard
Lope. Then there’s the series of dances that complement the Harlem Renaissance, but more often than not, the gangster joy of the Roaring Twenties—the Charleston, the Jitterbug, and, much later on, configured as “When America danced, the Age of the Ballrooms,” the Lindy Hop. But, as soon as you move into the age of transnational entertainment industries, global distribution of music as recorded sound, and the personalities that created them, most analysis of movement grinds to a halt. If dance is particular to the body that performs it—and that body is a person particular to a certain family, locale, region, nation—then dancing takes on meaning as an identity marker and demarcates territory, both real and imagined. Crossing these boundaries engages discourses of power and requires scrutiny of the concepts of authenticity, appropriation, misinterpretation, and misuse.

Local dance practices are transported and transformed through the global entertainment industry, but not simply as a result of “Western domination.” The personal intentions of local producers and the political intentions of their funders also play significant roles in the global trade of dance. Black bodies moving product, not just their own butts, feels like a reinscription of slavery, but many are on the studio payroll by choice. In order to get closer to making sense of an apparent conundrum, I will introduce a concept that I call De/Cipherin’ in place of “Black Dance.” De/Cipherin’ implies the relationships of the components of a “dance event” that are often not regarded as vital to the dance, but are in fact integral to the execution and evaluation of African Diaspora performance. These elements can include dance, place, costume (hair, shoes, fabric, jewelry), lyric, melody, rhythm, interval, and spirituality. It’s not just about dance; it’s about the flow of the body in the flow of its material reality and the intersection of that flow with dominant ideologies about proper bodily behavior and comportment. It’s also transnational in its development and dissemination and has always been so.

De/Cipherin’ also encompasses improvisation, a critical component of most live African Diaspora performance practices. In order to improvise, one must have first mastered the rudiments of the form, then experimented with distorting the form, and finally re-create the form, but with a difference. It’s BYOB, bring your own body, which includes your culturally determined muscle memory and articulation. This is what has been traditionally called “call and response” in the study of Black music; that is, the audience performs as much as the performer. The person set apart as the performer adjusts her performance to the response of the crowd. If you’ve ever been to a DJ’ed event, you have experienced this effect kinesthetically.

People’s corporeal productions dissolve when they are disconnected from their social and historical contexts and delivered into transnational entertain-
ment flows. This disappearing act gives rise to “unauthored” performances by creating a universal “form” that obliterates the person-performer’s specificity and agency. Deployments of certain colors or decisions to perform at a specific time become stylistic choices and are misinterpreted as mere by-products of the dance event. De/Cipherin’ reincorporates these and other supposed by-products into the main body, allowing people, not just bodies bouncing for bucks, to become evident once again. De/Cipherin’ thus makes it possible for us to envision people’s impact and movement within the very trade flows that tend to erase their presence. This may appear at first to strip the groove of its fun and release function that we associate with bumping and grinding in “American” popular culture; our notions of enjoyment and the bottom line might be radically altered. By De/Cipherin’ we can begin to get a stronger grasp on the power that the booty can and does make within and without black communities worldwide, and how that power is more often than not dissipated as it circulates in one or another form of capital.

Some questions that spring from this approach might be: Who holds the performance rights to the Rock, the Pony, and the Wop? Can we ever put that little “r” in a circle next to Michael Jackson’s moonwalk, or would the patent belong to Neil Armstrong? If I want to get jiggy with it onstage, whom should I send my request for public performance rights to, Will Smith or Jiggy herself? Should dance be considered intellectual property? What about folkloric expressions—do they exist in the “public domain” or is there such a thing as a national trademark? Since choreographers are paid, would they have to pay a licensing fee to the “dance body of origin”? How is an activity that is rather personal—dancing—constructed as a public and therefore exploitable domain?

I have three sets prepared for you, some more elaborate than others, the USA, Brazil, and India. What they all have in common is the utilization of Black Popular Dance as a marketing tool. Ready, set, cipher.

roll sound track: Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud

The performance of Black Power ideologies provides an excellent opportunity to De/Cipher since the movement benefited greatly from broadcast media and airline jet travel. Songs and fashions from the United States that were intended by their distributors (not necessarily the performers/creators) as imports for leisurely consumption became touchstones for social and personal change in carnaval in Bahia, Brazil, spawning a very particular type of Cipherin’. Blocos afros, as these percussion performance clusters are called, have been around now since the early 1980s. They call their performance
and ethos Afro. Afro is constructed by my consultants in Bahia as many things and anything related to or conceived as Black Power as created and expounded upon by North American Blacks. But Afro has become much more than that in Bahia, as Afro is typically associated with performance and an assumed politics, but one can still conceivably perform Afro without the background data. Then is it just a hairy signifier?

Afro draws from an archive of disparate signs, symbols, moves, meters, rhythms, gestures, sounds, and spirits. It is contingent by definition. We tend to think of it in compartments: dance, music, costumes, hairstyles, and architecture. It is easier to analyze the parts, primarily because of the tools that we have inherited from disciplinary approaches. Afro is already an analysis articulated by the De/Cipherin’ Black-identified body, a site-specific treatise that requires just as much of the “audience” as it does the performer. In order to De/Cipher, you must link into the chain of meaning created by the various juxtapositions and quotes occurring in the costumes, choreography, music, voice, and body of singers, the drum corps, and the drum corps leader’s body. Each step completes and creates meaning. The resulting dances are movements of liberation, bodily exhortations to transform the social structure.

The repetitive quality of the rhythm and the pseudosacred aspect of bloco afro performance were derided by many non-Black performers, and were the reason recording studios and producers found it financially worth-
less. But when Luis Caldas spoofed Afro by mimicking the bloco afro sound on his 1985 album Magia with the hit “Fricote,” he began a process of denigration and aesthetic transformation that resulted in a hybrid form called “axé music.” Unlike Afro performance, this style was created specifically within the recording studio. Axé music introduced synthesizers, horns, electric guitars, mandolins with electric pickups, fewer percussionists, and most important, lighthearted lyrics driven by sexual innuendo—the ingredients of a studio-friendly, marketable musical style. Once considered a slander on those who played Afro music, axé music has become a legitimate musical form in Bahia. It is also considered, depending on the time of year and who you talk to, a meal ticket, a scourge, a joke, a pimp, a social index, non-existent, quintessentially Bahian, or a marketing ploy.

With the transmutations of the music of Afro style to axé music, a De/Cipherin’ body was beside the point. Bopping along at almost supersonic speeds, axé music paved the way for the latest Bahian dance craze, sambalâncó, what some refer to as pagôde, a type of funked-out samba. Dança do Robó, Dança da Garrafa, O Tchán—all these booty shakin’ genital-grindin’ dances mimic Afro style by literalizing the movements. Torsos that slightly contracted and released to make room in the rotator cuffs for broadly swung arms become jiggly and pop, with the arms rarely traveling over the head—not enough time in the rhythm. Hyperflexed knees that evoked the Yorúbà

Figure 5.2. Members of bloco afro Malé do Balé perform Afro-style movement. Passeata do Axé, December 1994. Photograph by the author.
deity Oxossi hunting through thick brush are opened to display a thrusting pelvic girdle. There is a beat for everyone, with dance steps demonstrated by onstage performers.

Mesmerized by the tits-and-ass show on stage, most audience members are purely being entertained. The concerts attract thousands of people, typically to private social/sports clubs with outdoor arenas. The stage is built on scaffolding at a height great enough so that everyone can have a clear line of sight. The three dancers power across the stage in front of the band in the tightest of short shorts. Sometimes the two women wear miniskirts with dance undies underneath. Given the height of the stage, the audience spends most of its time looking at the groins of the dancers, especially since they seem intent on thrusting their pelvic girdles out of whack. Since the music is literal, the dance clear in its sexual connotations, and the costumes practically nonexistent, there is nothing to decipher. Where the *ase* of Afro was a tool of the articulate body—the dancer able to refine, relocate, augment, and analyze the *afro* performance—a dancer grooving to *axé* music only consumes it. When a body no longer De/Ciphers, it becomes susceptible to the flows and arrhythmia of the marketplace.

The beer and soft-drink companies Antartica and Brama, along with MTV Brasil, are just a few of the benefactors and promoters of this last wave of dance crazes (there seems to be a new one every three months or so). They sponsor tours and front money for *carnaval* groups of all skin tones, making dance steps into stepping stones of market-share success. Various recording artists are also utilized in marketing campaigns for special events such as *carnaval* and the World Cup competition.8

Very often the development of these lowest-common-denominator (LCD) types of popular dance are spearheaded by a shrewd Black businessperson in search of newer, broader markets.9 By LCD I mean those dances that can be acquired from a three-minute twenty-second description on the record and a fifteen-minute “this is how it goes” session with friends. Capturing the gyrations of one people and feeding them back as the imagination of another is quite a feat of late-capitalist marketing. That is not to say that Europe did not suffer the craze of “infectious rhythms” in the nineteenth century. Dances such as the Calinda10 created the highest level of anxiety and social turmoil; but they did not increase the popularity of the plantation as a place to live in luxury and comfort, nor did they improve the image of the “Great Institution.” That popular dance can now be constructed as a commodity is often overlooked; stage dance is far more obvious because choreography is about one vision, one body, re-creating space, sound, and rhythm to get across a particular idea, or lack thereof. But the phrase “popu-
lar dance” itself implies that there is no one creator, no master lurking in an empty studio at dawn trying to figure out the transition from a center stage grand plié to a downstage exit.

This commoditization of popular dance reconfigures the body that performs said dance as a consumer and a consumed “item.” The performing body, and hence the performance, must be reduced to its most tantalizing parts for the maximum effect in a minimum amount of time and space. Choreographically, this works out as dances that can be done with feet or foot either planted or tracing out a small “boxed” area and hips and torso pulsing in isolation patterns that accentuate the heavy rhythmic emphasis of the music it is constructed to represent. In other words, more tits and ass, the choreographic equivalent of the sixty-second commercial spot.

In the Brazilian Dança da Garrafa, for example, a bottle is placed on the floor with a woman gyrating down to touch the top with her pubis. In Miami, a woman lifts or spreads her legs to make the vaginal area rhythmically appear and disappear, known as “Poppin’ the Cootchie.” Both dances were created by Black “artists” as kinesthetic “hooks” to their music, Companhia do Pagôme in Bahia and Luke SkyyWalker of 2Live Crew in Miami. These dances function as by-products of the official manufactured good, the record, tape, and/or CD, even though they themselves are “manufactured.” They are a way to add brand equity to a product to control a market niche. They hook themselves into the performance of the music, and, it is hoped, into the muscle memory of the consumer. This series of kinesthetic reductions are now caricatures of a black De/Cipherin’ body, used as a marketing tool for mass-produced music, authenticated as “real” by an allusion to an imagined “Black” popular dance.

roll sound track: Ain’t no half-steppin’, steppin’, steppin’, steppin’, uh

Dances have been constructed to promote a record many times in the history of recorded sound. Usually the dances were constructed as “signatures” to promote a personality, a specific body who was in turn already carrying the burden of representin’ a generation’s longing to be in ways other than the socially accepted and narrow sets upheld by the preceding generation. Think of Cab Calloway or James Brown, or that body of all misplaced/unspoken desires, Elvis. Fast-forward to Michael Jackson moonwalking or grabbin’ his “shit,” an auteur, solitary and unified on a stage of highest record sales in history, at least pre-Spice Girls, on the cusp of “male.” Men male-childs, all pumped up with testosterone; these bodies with signature moves and music that generated dance crazes were also letting us know about social
roles and responsibilities. After all, it was a man’s world, rockin’ a jailhouse and all, and Poppa had a brand-new bag even if Billie Jean wasn’t his lover. Although the Artist formerly known as Prince tried very hard to get people to purchase his music on its sheer mastery of form and sex, even he had to create a “housequake” to get our ears’ attention while his homeboys, The Time, simply pulled some Cab Calloway out of the dustbin, giving it to us as a “freebie” in their music videos. Nothing like added value.

Dança da Garrafa was created by the sister and brother team behind the lyrics and music of Companhia do Pagôde. They are two Black folks from a not so nice part of town being driven to an early grave by a need to sell as many records as possible to cover their advance. Dança da Garrafa was in fact a dance they grew up with. It was a samba circle competition done by *senhoras*, usually washer- or market women, strutting their everyday back-breaking toting skills perhaps in an attempt to take this drudgery and wring a few blissful moments of joy from it. This Jar Dance was exciting in its simplicity, a vase of water balanced on the head, some women and some clapping hands, faster, faster, faster until some slovenly excuse for a woman spilled her water all over everyone, *mal criada!* It can only be seen now in Companhia do Pagôde’s hometown of Salvador in folklore shows—with empty jars, of course. Dança da Garrafa is still ciphered in remote interior cities like Cachoeira and Santo Amaro, but the young folks like to get down on the bottle there too.

As for Poppin’ the Cootchie, this dance began as a competition as well, but not as nice as it is in its current form. In the Mid South—Tennessee, Mississippi, Arkansas (what those not from there call the Deep South)—in the Black community on what Katrina Hazard called the “jook continuum,” were several nightclubs that were not faring so well in the late 1980s. So they got themselves a plan. Certain nights were deemed “Ladies’ Nights,” allegedly meaning that ladies were the special guests and could get in for free up to a certain time. Well, eventually this turned into a soft strip night, because, try as they might, the decent self-respectin’ Black Southern Belle-to-be was not gonna be caught dead in those joints, thus significantly diminishing the ratio of women to men. Since I wasn’t no Belle-to-be, I would guess that for every one of me, there were about eight guys. With the announcement of Ladies’ Nights, the number of men increased even more. Soon I didn’t even go. There was nothing left to do but make sure that the women who were there were available to “dance” with all the guys in the house—the contest began. The true lost girls would get up on the stage in those mass-produced miniskirts that never cover a Black woman’s backside properly, with no underwear, and shake and pop, semiprone, until declared
the winner. A truly good performer could do it such that guys in the front could hear “it,” poppin’. This was no dance, just sheer indecency for a hundred dollars. Enter the Miami rap scene led by the infamous Luther Campbell, aka Luke SkyyWalker.

His music catered to this Southern Gangsta sensibility, or “Players”—JD, hot nights, and some greasy chicken and ass. What he wanted to do was make some money, so he made records and constructed elaborate fantasies in music videos of the pool party sort, utilizing this familiar tawdry scene of female degradation called Cootchie Poppin’. Even MTV would go only so far in the 1980s, so the women were clothed, but Cootchie Poppin’ became a dance hook for the song, “Pop that Pussy,” which is also the refrain, by the way. As an LCD dance, it was an instant hit.13

Those enamored enough to practice it at home before attending his

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 5.3. 2Live Crew’s economy of the gluteus maximus. Photograph courtesy of Lil’ Joe Records; reprinted by permission.*
concerts often were lucky enough to make it on stage with him for a little fifteen seconds of fame, and a revival of the original “art form.” He also went on to make hits such as “Hey We Want Some Pussy,” “Throw dat Dick,” and its sequel, “Pussy, for those who like to fuck.” In this example, a popular form—staged sex acts—and the culture it spawned are captured as a dance-for-sale, mass-produced in music-video scenes. At that mediated proximity, there are no smells, no sweat, and plenty of women to go around branding the product, identifying the consumer with a particular lifestyle. It also created a different type of rap and speed. Since the sex act was being emulated in this dance-for-sale, why not pick the best moment, the orgasm, and keep it at that frenetic fevered pace for seven to ten minutes for the dance mix versions? These records were recorded at 130-plus beats per minute. Gibbering bodies, janglin’ genitalia—who needs an interval in which to make sense when you can get straight to the point? Sex sells, is fun, feels good, and is the primary focus of any decent Black party.

The recording studio is central to the success of this music; it even travels with the performers to concerts in the form of prerecorded tracks and turntables. The live performance is a displacement. What appears as apparatus and stage tricks are in reality the performers. Overzealous audience members are acutely aware that their “dancing” (perhaps gyrating would be a better term) bodies are illustrations of the records and the records are representations of them—a digitized communion officiated by the microprocessor.

roll sound track: But my products got soul, you got it, you, you, ya, ya got it!

To move something, if the only something you got is your body and your body has historically been a commodity, is to disrupt societal restrictions on your body. Overt and implied policing of what is dance for you, what is music for you, where, when, and how you may gather with other bodies like you, makes you a public space. Declaring your parts and practices private through movement allows possibilities in your daily life that might not have otherwise been present. One could capitalize on one’s own predicament. Doo-wop was a street-corner thing that Berry Gordy and Motown took on tour. The aspirations and failures of normalcy are all wrapped up in those lyrics and moves. Precision normalcy. Now they sell raisins and are the backdrop for a thematic café. Those songs and moves are used in “mainstream” media to represent coolness and comedy on the nonblack body. Performed in such a way, they signify on the coon, trope on the pickaninny.

The Soul Music revolution of the 1960s and early 1970s was an expression of an intergenerational group of people struggling to improve their politi-
cal and social status within their respective national borders. They not only sought to belong to the Black World but to make it into that category called “citizen.” On the way, Soul fell victim to the White Cultural Imaginary, that realm of representation where people imagine themselves to be free when in reality they are clueless about the inequalities and injustices that structure their minds, bodies, and institutions. In Brazil, as well as in the United States and Europe, Black De/Cipherin’ practices have been forceful tools of change within their communities, yet once out into the wider world as pure recorded sound, they become accomplices in the commodification of an attitude. It was a Beastie Boy that said Black is a state of mind. And if you have the record library memorized, played back to you in bits and bytes hawking everything from makeup to hamburgers, surely you’se black enough.

Even when the cipher travels via video, a medium that allegedly contains all the elements in their entirety, the transformation is similar, if not confusing. Privileging the eye in the body of a spectator and not that of a mover/performer, televised De/Cipherin’ practices hide the local context of those caught in frame, while providing an “eye treat” that still has enough force to make you want to shake your thang. Remember trying to learn how to do a particular move after seeing someone do it on a video or a dance show like Soul Train or MTV’s Do What? You could get close, but since your perceptive frame was predetermined by someone else miles away, you could never quite go beyond an imitation. Pulled out of the cultural milieu that gave rise to it, the movements that you seek to duplicate become replicas, not of the body of the source of your inspiration, but of the moment of their enactment. Yet in your physical struggle to attain the move, you create one all your own, one that maybe your friends will want to learn, and then schoolmates, and finally, “the ‘hood.” This is a process that has become a style known as hip-hop dance.17

What complications arise from this way of learning a dance when the body on the screen is black and the one in front of it is not?

this is not the place nor the time
to remind you of yourself
captured in stories wrapped around dollars
bucks in a blanket
what is there to keep real
hip-hop was a phrase not a place
and yet here we are, in residence
charging rent for those who want to come peep
through our windows
this is not the time nor the place
many pages have been written
to explicate validate enunciate and truncate
this thing called hip-hop
just words and beats ain’t nothing to do with moves
but when the bass drops
anyan comes to take all of us with a pulse
wreakin’ havoc on our joints
daring us to try and stand still
it’s real then
hip-hop does dance, is perhaps
only that started in a club after all
move your hip
then you hop

dance is not the time nor the place
to think about race
club scene was an art scene
art scene was a we seen
all y’all there, not just any ol’ body
not any particular body
we felt your heat, wiped your sweat off our face
after you did that dope ass spin
first your hip break, then we hopped
Latino, Puertorican, Black, White, all of the above
twist that hip make that ribcage hop and pop
it was solo freestyle party over here
naw, party over there
naw party now on MTV so what you gon’ do now?

this is not the time our place
but when you see my black face, my backside, my hip
you seen all my sisters and brothers too
we roll like that, feel real bad when one get dissed
want to be the originators
not the perpetrators
even if that means taking television on as a mentor
learning moves far from their home
giving names without knowing that they already had one
and don’t try and call us no slave drivers
From its origins during the 1970s in the Boogie Down Bronx, hip-hop was associated with break dancing, documented as a mostly Latino/Puerto Rican cultural expression. The rappers, however, were mostly Black, from the United States and the Caribbean. The music-video choreography that we see today has traces of break dancing inside of it, but basically it is an entirely different practice since it has been cut and mixed together through both local and mediated acquisition of ciphers with the intention of grabbing the attention of a television viewer, giving rise to the “background dancer.” These bodies are part of the crew or group, but do not get verbal. The better ones go on tour and tend to do synchronized movement that may or may not have anything to do with the lyrics. I would like to attribute this dance signature change to MC Hammer, the purveyor of precision hip-hop choreography. Prior to his success in the early 1980s, rap music videos had mostly gestural moves, and party scenes, not one driving choreographic intention. Selected b-boys were brought in as “specialists,” executing dramatic daredevil movement like spinning on one’s head. Hammer and his dancers developed a signature of motion from the various international dance influences of his hometown of Oakland and the poppin’ and lockin’ culture of nearby Fresno. I was actually in an Oakland-based Senegalese dance company that had an open-door rehearsal policy. It was not uncommon to see Hammer’s dancers at the door, coppin’ moves from our “folk” productions.
From his commercial association with dances like the Running Man through his PepsiCo campaigns for both Pepsi and Kentucky Fried Chicken, MC Hammer’s black body and those of his background dancers began to operate as authenticators of otherness. National mainstream media hype racialized all of hip-hop movement culture as “Black” based on a locally produced set of ciphers (in Oakland) that had very little to do with the ethos of hip-hop’s self-proclaimed leaders in the site of “origin,” New York.

Arguably, each postindustrial city (following Rose’s definition of rap) in the United States has its own hip-hop culture; De/Cipherin’ is a local act. Broadcast media allows the transference of locally produced ciphers to the stage of the national. You could perceive these as a redistribution of power, or another paternalistic attempt to categorize, commodify, and control a group’s cultural production that does not reflect the wider aspirations of a “national identity.”

Hip-hop precision dance performed in a music video in India, on the other hand, signifies progress, future, a break with old restrictive ways. Yet it functions in a more insidious fashion by determining what kind of Indian body represents a modernized national identity. Hindi-speaking Brahmans bopping around on a temple soundstage playing at embodying the divine for the going day rate bind themselves in an ongoing video fantasy, one where they easily traverse national boundaries to be youth wherever their work may take them. Bollywood youth-oriented romance films are notorious for their big dance scenes that seem to come out of nowhere. After reading several reviews of 1998’s “best film” awardee, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Something’s going on), these massive group choreographies are an integral part of the genre itself. The sound tracks for these films are pushed with these music-video-in-a-movie moments in addition to actual music videos in heavy rotation on MTV India and Channel V. A combination of Bharatnyam and breakdance-like moves, the potential is there for De/Cipherin’ of both practices. Because the imported moves are inserted without understanding of their prior context, the choreography is, in the end, a massive trophy piece, displaying the production company’s marketing acumen. Hip-hop is reconfigured as dominant culture, even though it is practiced by a miniscule segment of the population. Hip-hop moves are divestments in the material reality of India’s totality, rather than an interrogation of the impact of that reality on everyday life. The choreography becomes a place, a fleeting territory unfettered by history, unproblematized by the caste system. Pulled out of all the various cultures, classes, and skin tones that comprise India, hip-hop dancing youth are breaking with their social constraints and realities.

That was, after all, the intent, as James said, “I don’t need nobody to give
me nothing, open up the door and I’ll get it myself.” And it was still funky and cool to dance to it. Lost on a culture based on eyeballing, De/Cipherin’ practices may simply be too complex for the full scope of intent to register, or too slick to directly communicate what is meant or sought after. All you got is you, master yourself, pull yourself into a new flow, and give it to the world in a flurry of hands, storm of feet, and death-defying grace. Improvise.

**roll sound track: I hold the microphone like a grudge, B’ll. hold the record so the needle won’t budge**

A De/Cipherin’ art form is chaos itself, physically demanding of performers, sound technicians, space, and equipment. Take six sounds nothing like take one. Improvisation becomes costly in the sound booth. A quick survey of recording technology explains why. Recording technology is based on mathematical equations of pitch on the chromatic scale. Historically, the recording engineer was not a musician at all, but rather a scientist, though this has changed with the advent of computers and correspondence courses. The sound booth itself was constructed for sound waves and recording apparatus, not bodies. Although there is a chart for the speed of sound and the length of sound waves and the speed at which they travel depending on the matter through which they are traveling, interestingly, flesh, blood, and bone are not on the list. Modern-day recording technology is based on these assumptions.

Confronting this technology is important because it will help you understand why “keepin’ it real” is such a battle cry for performers and consumers of De/Cipherin’ practices. If the body is dissolved by the technology, creating a “clean room,” the performance cannot refer to the body that creates it, nor can it reveal who its master, or producer, is. Returning to our Brazilian example, Afro performance is a continuum. While I learned to play marcação dois, a surdo part in samba reggae, I also learned to dance and walk with the instrument. In fact, many of the complex rhythms are not possible unless you dance while you play in order to keep time; counting would throw you off. There is not enough room in your typical studio to dance around, not to mention the feedback problem that ensues as cables cross during performance.

Within the African Diaspora tradition, drums are already recording instruments meant for outdoors playback. The rhythms we have inherited come from tonal, oral languages whose culture is archived within the beat. The talking drum and the phrase “drum talk,” at one point in the United States were literal statements. The body of the player is to be evident, readily discernible by the timbre, length of the strokes, and intervals. The performer’s
culture and history are also evident—you can tell who his teacher was, or what language she speaks. The drum called one to move, as an individual, as a unit, as a movement—an insurrection.23

Today the power of percussion is referenced in the skills of the DJ behind the wheels of steel and the imprint of the R&B and hip-hop producer, otherwise known as “the sound.” Ever noticed how all of Baby Face’s LaFace recording artists sound just like him? Or how Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis dig big horn sections, live and digital. Drumming was a revolutionary act.

roll sound track: Doin It To Ya’ In Your Earhole

go audio
BEGIN PERFORMANCE
THE SOUND BOOTH IS THE HOLD
OF THE CONTEMPORARY
SLAVESHIP

ITS DECK, THE MUSIC VIDEO

go video, no sound

IN THE MUSIC VIDEO
WE CAN SEE EACH OTHER
WALK THE PLANK CIPHERIN’
LUCID BODY FALLING
OVERBOARD AS A LURID
EXCESS OF JANGLING GENITALIA

ONE CAN HEAR THE ABSENCE
OF SWIRLING HIPS
AND SWINGING ARMS
AN UPRIGHT & TIGHT RHYTHM
NOT ENOUGH SENSE TO MAKE TIME
NOT ENOUGH TIME TO MAKE SENSE
NOT ENOUGH CENTS
TO PAY ALL THE MUSICIANS IT WOULD TAKE
TO SUBVERT THE ABSENCE
TO MAKE AN INTERVAL OF MEANINGFUL PROPORTIONS
pour beer “laroye”
SPACE ENOUGH FOR MY FOOT TO RESONATE
MY TORSO TO INQUIRE
MY HEAD TO JOURNEY
I WAS TOLD NOT TO PAY ATTENTION
TO THE SPLASH
JUST THE SOUND OF THE SHIP
CUTTING THE WATER’S PROTESTATIONS
JUST THE SOUND
OF SELF INDULGED GIBBERING
DEVOID OF FUNK
AND NOW WE’LL NEVER DANCE STARCHILD

SOUND CARRIES THE IMPRINT OF THE SPACE FROM WHICH IT
EMMANATES
SPACE THAT IS SOCIAL
CULTURALLY
DISCURSIVELY
CONSTRUCTED MARKS UP THE SOUND WAVE
TRYING TO HIDE AS PRESENCE
BUT ECHOING AS MEMORY

pause
stop audio

Intel Inside

Who is inside Intel’s BunnyPeople? You know, the disco chip assemblers, all funk and Technicolor, first seen in January of 1997 thanks to “the first technology company to run an ad during the Super Bowl.” Faceless so as not to confuse the consumer with social realities and historical trajectories, these funkdafied bodies performed reified dance to push a product, a microprocessor, that was not a consumer-end item; only computer manufacturers could actually purchase the chip. The BunnyPeople! I personally thought that they were called “A Gigabyte of Funk Patrol.” One of the most expensive ad campaigns ever undertaken by a tech company at that time, Intel wanted to make sure that it got the most bang for its buck. Who’s inside the Bunny Suit? Well, it’s obvious: fun-loving cartwheeling, don’t-you-wish-you-had-this-job globetrotting electric sliding phenomes—you know, niggahs, those ultimate constructions of the White Cultural Imaginary. You can never go wrong with dancing niggahs in an ad campaign.

They rolled into our hearts like a posse of ghetto clowns, Zip Coon, move over! So enamored were we that they released a line of beanie babies in their image, more “African-American collectibles,” as porcelain mammies and metal coon clocks are unfortunately called at flea markets. Coded but
not marked as “black,” the BunnyPeople have a cross-cultural appeal. Really, they aren’t any particular body. That funky hip-hoppity dance is internationally recognized as “American,” and not necessarily understood as a historically racialized performance practice, Black Popular Dance.

Intel has harnessed U.S. culture’s fascination with black physical prowess and agility to say that its microprocessor can do anything creative and colorful because it has a Black soul. Other microprocessors can’t even come close, they just calculate; the Pentium II creates. Utilizing those faceless bodies in the commercials asks the consumer to believe that the preeminent Intel wants to give a little something back since the chip was pure fun to make. More important, the BunnyPeople were telling us that it does not matter who’s inside Intel, because you could be there too.

Those hooded B-movie sci-fi outfits that all real chip assemblers wear are called Bunny Suits, and hence chip assemblers are called BunnyPeople. What does this say about the work? Bunnies are supposed to be cute little twitchy things that spend all day attending to the details of their cute little existence. Cottontails with floppy ears conjure up images of rolling green meadows with lovely wildflowers sprouting all over the place with the requisite tall, old oak tree in the middle of the meadow, a gathering place for all the happy little animals. “Here comes Peter Cottontail, hopping down the

Figure 5.4. An actual BunnyPerson. Notice the tight space of the “clean room” and the solitary nature of the work—not exactly ideal conditions for disco dancing. Photograph courtesy of Intel Corporation.
Bunny trail, hippity hoppity . . .” Anybody who’s seen it knows that Silicon Valley paved over and built on top of that meadow; that folks making the chips weren’t jumping with joy to leave their families during double shifts; and that the chances of there being a Peter inside one of those suits are quite slim. Hua, Jun Lee, Trinh, Chow are inside the sterile white suit, alienated from the labors of their predominantly female bodies, their noses itching, their palms and feet sweating, heaven deliver her from a yeast infection.

At the sterile high-tech plantation called Intel, Orientalism is a way of life: “delicate Asian features”—small hands, thin fingers are prized for their efficiency. Bodies do not matter and are just meat with temporary work papers or perhaps none at all. Or they are recently arrived immigrant families, huddled around a kitchen table doing piecework, hazardous materials next to the salt shaker.²⁵ The upside: well, at least U.S. children are not doing the work, you do know that they would be the only other choice, well, of course, after children in Taiwan, Malaysia, Saipan, Indonesia . . . “Here comes Peter Cottontail, hopping down the bunny trail, hippity hoppity hip hop you don’t stop GOOD TIMES! These are the good times!”²⁶

Figure 5.5. BunnyPeople in full-on funky rainbow action in one of the five television ads that ran throughout 1997 and the first half of 1998. The series culminated with a BunnyPerson at a video-editing console headbanging to Jimi Hendrix’s “Have You Ever Been Experienced?” shutting down the tele-wall behind him. Photograph courtesy of Intel Corporation.
Silicon Valley is bringing back America! Put on your dancing shoes ‘cause Intel wants to boogie with you! Even if you don’t, you probably already have. More than 80 percent of the world’s microprocessors were manufactured by Intel. They are inside everything from satellites to watches, sound edit boards and microwaves, the handy cam and the airplane. They’d also like to be inside your mind, tracking your Web surfing with the new and improved Pentium III chip so as to sell your information back to Web advertising companies.

Intel’s technology has allowed techheads to create software and Web servers that analyze a user’s desires and fantasies, re-creating a disembodied version of that on the Web, the perfect consumer statistically deduced by the types of searches and pages requested. Choreographically, the body is reduced to a tapping finger and scanning eyes set in a cutout board. Everything from music and photos to download from suggested reading to pornographic material flash across your screen at eye level, making you the offer of the century. Racialized, marked for gender and class, this digital body springs from this intricate matrix of code and logarithm, with a voyeuristic tendency.

A De/Cipherin’ practice passing through this web of meaning making soon discovers that it has passed through a chemical bath, all its combining parts, stripped of each other, like so much flotsam and jetsam, squeezed through the appropriate circuits and bandwidths. Irrevocably, entertainment.

Celebrated choreographer Bill T. Jones has recently collaborated with multimedia computer artists of the Riverbed Collective, rendering his lithe, articulate body into subsets of gestures, gigabytes of phrasing. After they recorded him dancing, they choreographed him. It’s a not-version of Jones, suspended somewhere between animation and line drawings, compelling in its own right, but gaining power from its source, a “ghost of an original,” as he calls it.

Stripped down to math equations called motion, would this performance constitute De/Cipherin’? Each gesture, spin, dip, and turn has been treated as a phoneme, purposefully placed alongside each other in the quest for meaning. It is improvisatory in nature, pushing no product, and emanating from a black body. The Internet is lauded for its ability to defy the laws of physics and make people, places, and things occupy the same space. Space is needed in which to dance, but place is needed in which to cipher. As entertaining as Ghostcatching is, you have to De/Cipher it; you must bring the place to the monitor. While challenging our notion of “black performance” (are the members of Riverbed Black and does it matter?), this cyber-performance reminds us of the community-building potential of noncommercial deployments of De/Cipherin’ practices.
Black Popular Dance and cultural practices in commercials like Intel’s present very obvious social disjunctures in an attempt to promote a unified “American” culture that potentially exists within the pockets of us all. De/Cipherin’ with the commercial gives us a look inside the Bunny Suit, bucket, burger, or video game. Were I content just to be entertained, and did not have muscle memories associated with that music and those moves, I would be fascinated by the future offered by the many products that pimp my Black cultural production.

But De/Cipherin’ cuts up, acts out, marks off space for grace in its ever-changing devices. When in collusion with transnational market forces, a De/Cipherin’ body settles into “entertainer,” “recording artist,” “personality”—a reflector of a wider lack of creative skills to re-create the world as one feels moved from within. The audience is clearly delineated and contained, bodyguards and guard rails when necessary, press releases and A&R people filling in at chats online. Even in their attempts to lead fads and change tastes, these individuals and their dance productions do not manage changes within vernacular dance because De/Cipherin’ is a communal production that cannot be conducted from afar.

The pressure of global capital on the local site of creation and performance renders the act of creation into the repetition of production. The struggle to export one’s culture becomes so involved that the actual cultural manifestation may begin to lose its joy and revelatory power, in other words, become “played.” How often would you want to perform in a state-sanctioned peep show otherwise known as a “folklore show”? What does it feel like to see your De/Cipherin’ vocabulary truncated and manipulated into two-dimensional coonin’? But, as folks strive to keep it real and get paid, since ain’t nothing going on but the rent, I have to wonder what’s so revolutionary about having something to consume.

Be it in India, the United States, or Brazil, where the upper-class or ruling classes take up these ciphers as amusement or to signify their (or their products’) inherent “difference” from the pack, the power or the strategy becomes lost. The body in motion no longer refers to a specific community conceiving, under certain sociohistorical pressures, a method by which to insert itself, however temporarily, into the flow of history. Rather, it invokes a business-as-usual response: look at those happy dancing people. A disarticulated body is easily subsumed into a wider ethos of consumer/product relations, even as it mutters a different reality.

One has only to watch satellite TV in India to realize that integrating these moves into one’s own cultural idiom is claiming the ultimate in modern lifestyle management. The mere appearance of improvisatory skill suddenly
conjures up images of hot jazz and cool heads, of progress through a knowledge of the progressions. Why be constrained in traditional female roles by the Vedas when, with a little dose of hip grinding, you can declare that your coon within has forever made you a modern liberated woman? Hell, even the Colonel can do the Cabbage Patch.28

Further Reading


Notes

A version of this chapter was originally presented as a keynote lecture / performance at UCLA for the Cultural Dance Studies conference “Dance under Construction: Phase I,” March 6, 1999. The author would like to thank Professor Emerita Sylvia Wynter at Stanford University for leading the way to De/Cipherin’.

1. How dances come to be racialized is not directly examined in this essay. For a discussion on authenticating bodies and the place of race in ethnic dance classes, see my article “Spectacle and Dancing Bodies That Matter,” in Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies in Dance, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

2. I needed a tool that would allow me to talk about cultural exchanges within a wider political-economic analysis of those exchanges, about relations and interstices of all the elements that have been identified as part of a dance performance in Black cultures, including pleasure and faith. Not that De/Cipherin’ could not be applied to another ethnic group; technically, all cultures are in diaspora from Africa, but that’s another story. I do not know if De/Cipherin’ is appropriate for analyses of non-Black performance practices. My guess is that it would fall apart, especially when used on a performance that conceived of itself as autonomous from its parts: the performer is just a ______—fill in the blank, and the audience is just an audience; the audience does not contribute anything to the performance other than cash, eyes, and ears and an occasional clap.

3. Back in 1989, Vévé Clark espoused the idea of a three-part transformation during a visiting scholar lecture she delivered at the University of California, Berkeley. She was
critiquing Houston Baker’s theory of improvisation as having only a two-part construction by the example of John Coltrane’s rendition of the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic “My Favorite Things.”


7. *Aṣe* means “power,” or “vital force.” It can also function as a verb and is used to close out orations, interject supportively within verbal performances, and describe the skills or blessedness of an individual, as in “she has a lot of aṣe.” Everything and everyone has varying degrees of *aṣe* and are therefore sacred. The word is used a lot, and non-believers turn this on its head, interpreting the “overuse” of the word as a sign of a lack of vocabulary.

8. During the 1994 World Cup competition, *axé music* megastar Daniela Mercury represented Antartica on the airwaves and it continues to support portions of her tours and *carnaval* excursions throughout Brazil. Sometimes, the desire to back a particular *carnaval* group leads to intragroup conflict. Brahma beer would only give money to Ilê Aiyê, a Blacks-only club, for its parade if it agreed to let the CEO’s white wife ride on the main float.

9. A really good example of LCD entertainment produced and promoted by black businessmen would be the late 1990s spate of white pop groups and divas, all of whom actually sing and dance in styles that are (or were) considered racially marked as black. Jive Records recording artists Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears are the more successful of the lot and are produced and handled by Max Martin. The hit maker Eric Foster White writes a great deal of their material.

10. A partner dance with origins in the African slave population of what is now Trinidad and Tobago that required the dancers to slap thighs at the end of the phrase, like a frontal “Bump!”


17. Mediated transmission of cultural dance practices is nothing new. As soon as Dick Clark launched *American Bandstand* in 1956, youth began to acquire nonlocal dance practices as their own from dancing with the TV. For an excellent extended study on music, pop culture, and TV, see Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Although the title leads you to believe otherwise, there is not much analysis of movement in the book.

18. For an extensive study of rap music and hip-hop culture, see Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*
There is not much in the book on dance; she reduces it to a symptom of a larger thing called hip-hop, but she grapples with contradictory notions of race and authenticity within the form itself that are central to this illustration I have chosen.

Many thanks to Thomas Guzman-Sanchez for granting me an interview to talk about his forthcoming book *Underground Dance Masters: History of a Forgotten Era*. An eight-year study of what has become known as “break dancing,” his work will prove to be both invaluable and controversial as the mantra of “keepin’ it real” continues to hold mystic powers over the history of hip-hop culture. See the Web site http://www.dancemaster.com for excellent old school photos.

For an analysis of India’s vibrant broadcast and satellite local industries, see the video series *Serial for Breakfast*, Assisi Kumar and Ababa Adhiya, producers, Omusha Communications, 1998.


This is a common phrase from George Clinton on his Parliament Funkadelic records.


Peter Cottontail is a public-domain popular Easter song for children in the United States; the other song is by Chic, “Goodtimes,” *Risqué*, WEA/Atlantic, 1979.


PepsiCo Kentucky Fried Chicken ad campaign that ran in 1998–99. The Colonel was animated and danced while cheering himself on.
Ignoring MediaSport today would be like ignoring the role of the church in the Middle Ages or ignoring the role of art in the Renaissance; large parts of society are immersed in media sports today and virtually no aspect of life is untouched by it.¹

Any journalist making such trite observations as “it’s no longer ‘only a game,’” “it’s all about the money these days” or, heaven forbid, the interminable, “sport has become big business” should have his or her salary docked and press pass revoked for stating the mind-numbingly obvious. During earlier phases in the evolution of the capitalist system, sport may have possessed a degree of autonomy from profit-driven rhythms and regimes. If misty-eyed nostalgia exaggerates the extent of this long lost independence, then the sport industry’s gross annual revenues of some $324 billion worldwide—nearly half of which is generated in the United States alone²—make it inconceivable to think of sport as anything but an important armature of the global capitalist order. Yet, the very term sport industry is misleading. The production and consumption of sport-related goods and services spans any number of industrial sectors, including (but not restricted to) manufactured products and apparel, travel, biomedicine, building construction, and education. But it is the pervasive presence and influence of the commercial mass media that direct us to the most culturally significant sector of the sport industry. As David Rowe notes, “sport and the sports media, as cultural goods par excellence, are clearly a central element in a larger process (or set of processes) that is reshaping society and culture.”³

Doubtless, if poetry recitals arrested the popular imagination in the same way that sport presently does, we would be ensconced in a culture dominated by, among other things, Sunday afternoon televised live poetry readings; twenty-four-hour poetry news cable channels; back-page poetry reporting in newspapers; mass- and niche-market poetry magazines; poetry Web pages; and, of course, an army of celebrity poets endorsing anything from HB pencils to athletic footwear, and even appearing on a Wheaties cereal box. Of course, rather than poetry, it is sport whose self-fulfilling, commercially mediated, cultural prominence has anchored it at the epicenter of
contemporary American culture, where there is little sign of, or, indeed, mechanism for, its displacement.

Within the context of the U.S. political economy, the explosion of sporting content on network and cable television, on radio, in newspapers and magazines, and on the Internet has transformed sport into an intrusive and influential cultural practice, one that profoundly contributes to the shaping of everyday understandings, identities, and experiences, as it swells the coffers of the wider economy. Propelled by media machinations, sport has risen to replace work, religion, and community as the cultural “glue of collective consciousness in latter twentieth century America,” while simultaneously becoming the “most potent of global ‘idioms.’” Hence, this essay focuses on the popular cultural phenomenon variously described as “mediasport,” the “sports/media complex,” the “sport-business-TV nexus,” “sportainment,” or “the high-flying entertainment-media-sports industry.”

Far from providing a comprehensive overview of the subject, this essay analyzes the relationship between contemporary sport culture and the media industry. Despite the growing awareness of what one writer calls the “institutional alignment of sports and media in the context of late capitalism,” sport continues to be fetishized by large sections of the general populace as a cultural form somehow removed from the invasive influences of late capitalism. Even the most critical of cultural commentators can slip into a whimsical romanticism whenever sport is mentioned, thereby totally ignoring its broader social and economic derivations or ramifications. Countering such naïveté, and invoking Marshal McLuhan’s dictum “fish don’t know water till beached,” this discussion encourages readers to think outside commonsense, uncritical, and myopic understandings of sport by highlighting two exemplars of this most evocative of late-capitalist synergies (that between sport and the commercial media), namely, News Corporation and the Olympic Games; for, the minimum requirement for becoming a productive contributor within the sport industry, an accomplished sport studies scholar, and—perhaps most important—an informed sport consumer, is the ability to discern and dissect the political economic nexus of sport-media-commerce.

Sport in the Late-Capitalist Moment

If cultural fields are “always constituted with and constitutive of a larger context of relationships,” then sport cultures are unavoidably—indeed, dialectically—linked to contemporaneous economic, political, social, and technological arrangements. Prevailing sport forms of both preindustrial and industrial eras were, in a cultural-Marxist sense, a “product of historical conditions...
and are fully applicable only to and under those conditions.” For instance, the maturation of nation-state–based capitalism in Western Europe and North America, during the second half of the nineteenth century, was accompanied by the emergence of institutionalized sport as—at least partially—an agent of social control for the urban industrial masses. By codifying sporting practice (regulated participation) and sanctioning cathartic release (mass spectatorship), the patrician-industrialist power bloc ensured that sport helped constrain working bodies to the demands and discipline of the industrial workplace, while simultaneously contributing to the commercialization of urban leisure culture. As labor historian Harry Braverman put it:

the filling of the time away from the job also becomes dependent upon the market, which develops to an enormous degree those passive amusements, entertainments, and spectacles that suit the restricted circumstances of the city and are offered as substitutes for life itself. Since they become the means of filling all the hours of “free” time, they flow profusely from corporate institutions which have transformed every means of entertainment and “sport” into a production process for the enlargement of capital.

Thus, within the modern industrial era, institutionalized sport became an emergent site of “surveillance, spectacle, and profit” in a newly defined realm of “free” time.

Despite a few examples of sport’s commercialization in the United States before the industrial era (for example, in the promotional activities of colonial taverns), many sport organizations and institutions continued to outwardly resist the lure of capitalist economic forces well into the twentieth century (some undoubtedly conditioned by residues of de Coubertin-esque idealism). Sport in this sense remained a “semiautonomous sphere of culture,” that is, only somewhat removed from the practices and pressures of the marketplace. After World War II, however, the intensification of corporate-based consumer capitalism accelerated the “infiltration” of market forces into almost every facet of human existence, including sport. Corporate capitalism’s inexorable appropriation of sport culture replaced the amateur(ish) volunteerism of official “old-boy” sporting values with the scientific business principles and rationalities espoused by “men and women of the Corporation.” These new values infiltrated sport via “modern forms of domination, such as ‘business administration,’ and techniques of manipulation, such as market research and advertising.” Sport was thereafter effectively and efficiently reorganized in accordance with corporate values and a logic of profit maximization. Initially in the postwar United States, and
subsequently in the corporatizing economies of Western Europe, Japan, and Australasia, this imperious corporate model transformed sport into big business, undermining once and for all any claim that sport enjoyed a semi-autonomous relation to the political economy.

Once conclusively appropriated by corporate capitalism, the very constitution and delivery of sport culture became dialectically implicated in subsequent changes in the economic order. Today’s media-driven sport culture can only be understood in relation to what Jameson famously described as the cultural logics of late capitalism that crystallized in the final decades of the twentieth century.19 Before this phase of late capitalism, the political economy had been dominated by mass material manufacturing carried out by large-scale manual workforces, in traditional factory settings, using heavy industrial machinery. During the 1970s, declining industrial productivity rates, and the inflationary effects of global oil crises, incited the gradual unraveling of industrial capitalism after almost a century of relatively stable growth. Within this climate of economic stringency, the desire for reduced labor costs, and the lure of streamlined high-tech communication industries (both sources of increased profits), prompted the large-scale relocation of the labor-intensive material manufacturing sector to the industrializing peripheries of the global economy. In contrast, within core economies, in addition to a flourishing and multifaceted service sector, a manufacturing void was filled by a novel order centered on culture industries (advertising, marketing, and the commercial media), whose emphasis on a mode of information20 facilitated an economic transition from the material to the cultural, mirrored in the shift from production to consumption as the primary activity within the contemporary economy.

To a certain extent, then, mass cultural manufacturing (realized through the utilization of sophisticated communications technology by a highly educated and well-compensated technical elite) acts as a principal mechanism and source of capital accumulation within the late-capitalist condition. As Steven Connor noted, the contemporary economy revolves around the “production, exchange, marketing and consumption of cultural forms—considered in their widest sense and therefore including advertising, TV and the mass media generally—as a central focus and expression of economic activity.”21 Because overseas labor reduced manufacturing costs to absolute minimums, there has been a reconfiguring of the commodity value chain;22 specifically, promotional (marketing, advertising, and the commercial media) links have been mobilized as the primary means of creating the inflated surplus values required for economic profitability. Hence, the monetary value of late-capitalist commodities is largely shaped within the cultural (or symbolic)
realm of the “Consciousness Industries,” as opposed to traditional industries in which value is accrued through the mass manufacturing of raw materials into finished products.

With reference to a noted sport example, the exorbitant monetary value of a pair of Nike Air Jordan shoes is practically unrelated to the relatively minuscule cost of material production realized in overseas industrializing economies. In marketing parlance, the competitive advantage held by Air Jordan’s over rival sport footwear products (almost all of which are made in similar socioeconomic locations, frequently in the same factories) is added (or manufactured) during the promotional phases of commodity production originating in the United States and often involving the use of sport celebrities. Through innovative advertising campaigns that both capitalized on and accentuated Michael Jordan’s cultural prominence, Air Jordan shoes were furnished with a symbolic value that effectively transformed a gaudy concoction of leather, nylon, and rubber into a prized cultural commodity, a commodity whose media-nurtured desirability represented the key determinant in establishing an inflated economic value within today’s informational-symbolic order.

The Sport-Media Complex

Without question this discussion of the political economy of sport could focus exclusively on Nike. Nike is, after all, the brand that has most effectively blurred the boundaries between sport, the economy, and contemporary media culture. Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson have even suggested that we live in a “Nike culture.” Nevertheless, and with a nod to Nike, we must take a broader view of contemporary sport culture, and turn instead to the merger of media and sport, which has fostered a process that Rowe calls the “culturalization of economics.” In an era in which Business Week could remark that “entertainment has replaced the defense and auto industries as the driving force of the U.S. economy,” the media-sport entertainment complex can be shown to stand out as a key source of wealth creation.

The recent reinvention of Westinghouse provides a graphic example of the U.S. political economy’s transformation to cultural industrial logics and the role sport plays in this process. At one time an industrial giant with thriving interests in the consumer durable, commercial engineering, defense, and nuclear industries, Westinghouse had amassed $15 billion in debt by 1993, because of a failure to respond expeditiously to the macroeconomic changes that signaled the demise of the traditional manufacturing sector.
The threat of financial collapse was resolved by hiring (the other) Michael Jordan from PepsiCo in 1993 to direct the corporation’s transformation. Jordan initiated a five-year plan that, while including more than twenty thousand job losses, saved Westinghouse for its shareholders. His solution: make it a media corporation. This was achieved by selling off traditional businesses in order to fund the purchase of the CBS media group for $5.4 billion in 1995, and the Infinity Broadcasting radio group in 1996. As if to finally signal the death knell of its industrial capitalist past, and indeed its rebirth as a major force in the media sector, Westinghouse officially changed its name to CBS Corporation in 1998. This was followed by Viacom’s (owners of Paramount Pictures, MTV, VH1, Nickelodeon, and Simon and Schuster publishers) $34.5 billion purchase of the CBS Corporation in 1999, which effectively created a diversified media-entertainment giant to compete with Time Warner, Disney, and News Corporation.

Sport played a central role in this industrial restructuring process. CBS had reached its nadir after losing television broadcast rights for National Football Conference (NFC) games to the maverick Fox network, which made an unprecendented $1.58 billion bid in December 1993, ending CBS’s thirty-eight-year relationship with professional football. Few were surprised in 1998 when the newly reorganized and competitive CBS regained an NFL foothold with its $4 billion purchase of rights for American Football Conference games for the period 1998–2005. Leslie Moonves, then president of CBS television, said the deal put CBS “back in the game.” In the words of Don Hewitt, executive producer of 60 Minutes, “I think it’s like restoring a piece of the CBS logo” (60 Minutes’ ratings suffered more than others from the loss of NFL coverage, which aired before it on Sunday evenings). As if to further consolidate the network’s standing, in late 1999, CBS signed an unprecedented $6.2 billion contract for worldwide multi-platform (television, radio, Internet, licensing, sponsorship, and publishing) rights to the NCAA men’s basketball tournament for the eleven-year period from 2003 through 2013, thus consolidating a “relationship” that dated back to 1981.

Although increasingly challenged by new cable, satellite, digital, and Internet-based media—as well as the resurgent movie sector—commercial network television was still the centrifugal force of the entertainment industry at the end of the 1990s. Networks had become subsidiaries of large media or industrial conglomerates, including ABC (Disney), CBS (Viacom), Fox (News Corporation), and NBC (General Electric). Because revenue derived from the sale of advertising space represents network television’s principal revenue stream (augmented by sponsorship income and syndication
fees), the size and composition of program audiences assume critical importance; audiences effectively become commodities sold by media outlets to advertisers. Under this economic system, the boundaries between advertiser and programmer interests have been virtually erased. With scant regard for television’s educative and informative potential, commercial television networks routinely originate repetitious and bland menus of entertainment-oriented programming (games shows, situation comedies, docudramas, and infotainment), designed solely to secure mass audiences. Sport is on the menu too, offering a number of unique qualities: it is relatively inexpensive and easy to produce (certainly compared with equivalent programming lasting upwards of two hours), it is practically the only live television program involving uncertain outcomes, it has a historically and culturally entrenched popular appeal, and, perhaps most significantly, it can boast the rare ability to attract high concentrations of the eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old male consumers prized by corporate advertisers. So, in purely pecuniary terms (and that is primarily what they are motivated by), live sport coverage is an attractive proposition for the major networks. As George Sage neatly summarized, “The media have no inherent interest in sport. It is merely a means for profit making. . . . For TV and radio, sport gets consumers in front of their sets to hear and see commercials; in effect, TV and radio rent their viewers’ and listeners’ attention.”

Despite recent declines in television ratings caused by an ever-fragmenting media culture, sporting “mega-events”—such as the Super Bowl, the Olympic Games, the NBA Finals, the MLB World Series, and the FIFA World Cup Final—continue to represent some of a dwindling number of collective media experiences that provide a thread of commonality (regardless of how ephemeral) in the life of a nation. For instance, of the ten largest audiences for shows on American television, nine have been sport-related: seven involved Super Bowl programming, and two were of coverage of the 1994 Winter Olympics (the Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding skate-off). The remaining one, in ninth place overall, was the 1983 M*A*S*H special that concluded the long-running comedy series.

The clamor for audience ratings has led to network television moguls’ perpetual engagement in a circus of spiraling bidding wars for the exclusive rights to these high-profile events. For example, in order to maintain its position as the Olympic network, the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) invested $3.55 billion for television rights to the three Summer and two Winter Olympiads between 2000 and 2008. Broadcast rights for the Super Bowl also represent a significant part of the shared $17.6 billion eight-year contract signed by the NFL and ABC/ESPN, CBS, and Fox in 1998. Having
effectively purchased the American population’s sporting attention, it is sub-
sequently leased for exorbitant sums to corporate advertisers. Jon Mandel of
Grey Advertising noted that “When you think that virtually half the coun-
try’s watching the Super Bowl . . . this makes a hell of a statement.” Mandel was referring to Super Bowl 22 in 1997, which tied for the third-
most-watched television show in U.S. history. Hence, in 1999 the popular
appeal of the Super Bowl spectacle enabled Fox to charge $1.6 million for
each of the thirty-second advertisement spots (of which there were fifty-
eight in total), a figure that is expected to rise to $1.9 million per spot for
2000. Similarly, NBC charges elevated advertising rates for its near three
weeks of prime-time Olympic coverage, making its television rights a highly
profitable investment (see later discussion of the Olympic Games).

Yet, direct advertising revenue is not the only benefit of televising these
truly mass-media experiences; they also represent a priceless opportunity
for promoting the network’s other programming (particularly new shows) to
otherwise unimaginable percentages of the national populace. In the cut-
throat world of prime-time television, this entrée into the consciousness of
the American viewer can have important effects on establishing the popular-
ity (and hence longevity) of new programming, thereby affecting the
profitability of the entire network.

Although high-profile sport mega-events draw huge audiences from a
broad spectrum of the population, regular major-league sport programming—
often with seemingly modest television audiences in terms of volume—
routinely attracts high concentrations in the more narrow male demographic
category prized by corporate advertisers. This explains the significant outlay
paid by networks for the television rights to America’s professional sporting
big four: $17.6 billion (ABC/ESPN, CBS, and Fox) for NFL rights from 1998
to 2005; $2.4 billion (NBC and Turner) for NBA rights from 1998–1999 to
2001–2; $1.7 billion (NBC, Fox, and ESPN) for MLB rights from 1996
to 2000; and, $600 million (ABC/ESPN/ESPN2) for NHL rights from
1999–2002 to 2003–4. Although losing portions of its core male viewership
to the media culture phenomenon that is TNT’s WCW Monday Nitro and
USA Network’s WWF Raw, ABC’s Monday Night Football continues to
preoccupy the American male adult gaze to such a degree that it receives a
staggering $380,000 for every thirty-second advertising spot. Lower down
the television sport food chain, despite being expected to garner modest
viewing figures, the very fact that approximately 40 percent of the audience
for its telecasts is drawn from the cherished eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old
male demographic means that ABC’s NHL television coverage commands
between $30,000 and $35,000 per thirty-second spot.
In addition to the regular network coverage catering to televised sport’s traditional adult male constituency, sport programming targeted at specific market niches has recently come to the fore. Whereas *Monday Night Football*’s adult male demographic was once the almost exclusive quarry of sport programmers, now late capitalism’s broadening exploitative reach has brought female, youth, ethnic, and gray markets into the televised sport universe, as evidenced by the presence of the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) on NBC and Lifetime; the X Games on ABC/ESPN/ESPN2; Major League Soccer (MLS) on ABC/ESPN/ESPN2; and numerous Senior Professional Golfers’ Association of America (PGA) events on various channels. This trend is vividly exemplified by NBC’s creation and coverage of the Gravity Games, a response to the network losing the rights to broadcast AFC football to CBS in 1999. As *USA Today*’s Sal Ruibal put it:

> Instead of running dead air or Lassie reruns, the Peacock Network is attacking the soft underbelly of the NFL: boys ages 10 to 17. Some of them don’t care about the NFL—yet. They like football when they play it on a video game, but their favorite TV sport is pro wrestling. Their heroes aren’t 35-year-old quarterbacks, but they dig edgy teens like Pastrana [a motocross stunt jumper] who go one-on-one with death. That demographic niche also happens to be the Holy Grail of marketing: Snickers-munching, Pringles-crunching, Gatorade-sucking, acne-wary consumers who have yet to form life-long brand preferences.41

A prerecorded and prepackaged Sunday afternoon fabrication, the Gravity Games were thus designed to exploit the young male devotion to the extreme activities popularized by ABC/ESPN/ESPN2’s blanket X Games coverage. NBC sought to wrench teenage males away from AFC coverage in sufficient numbers in order to dent CBS’s audience ratings while consolidating its own. Once again, although expecting diminutive ratings, the carefully crafted demographic specificity of niche sport programming such as the Gravity Games offers the opportunity for advertisers to—somewhat reliably—target highly desired markets. Ruibal adds that “Advertisers don’t care that the Gravity Games might only draw a 3 rating compared to the NFL’s 10-plus; this is smart-bomb marketing.”42

As the sport audiences created by television continue to diversify in terms of size (sporting mega-events) and specificity (regular and niche sport programming), the media-sport complex strengthens its strategic hold on the structure and logic of commercial television, proving to be an almost unassailable means of attracting advertiser dollars. For this reason, and as
David Jary lamented, there exists an “increasing tendency for sport organizations in particular to become indirectly controlled or monopolized by media organizations and/or major advertisers.” In light of this trend, the remainder of this discussion focuses on two case studies, News Corporation and the Olympic Games, which in different ways are both heavily implicated in late capitalism’s “seductively consumerist union of commerce, sport and television.”

News Corporation

There is no one in the media world who has a greater commitment to the commercial exploitation of sport than Murdoch.

Rather than Michael Eisner (Disney’s chairman and CEO), Charles Dolan (Cablevision’s chairman), or John Malone (TCI’s chairman and CEO), it is Rupert Murdoch (News Corporation’s longtime chairman and CEO) who is perched atop the global sport-media complex. This is no mean feat for someone with a professed disinterest in sport per se. Yet it is wholly indicative of a masterly entrepreneur who recognizes the importance of sport’s cultural significance to the process of capital accumulation within the media and communications industries; for, in Murdoch’s terms, throughout the 1990s, News Corporation used sport as a primary “battering ram’ for entry into new markets” throughout the world. As Peter Chernin, News Corporation’s president and chief operating officer, outlined, “This company is so defined by sports right now because what we have found in building our worldwide TV ventures—which are essentially pay-TV—is that two things that drive them are movies and sports. And sports is the more important.” In this manner, Murdoch mobilized sport’s popular appeal, and the economic benefits derived from it, as a means of elevating News Corporation to the level of Disney, Time Warner, and Viacom within the global media oligopoly.

The son of a noted Australian newspaper owner, Rupert Murdoch inherited a significant interest in two regional Australian newspapers, the *Adelaide News* and the *Brisbane Courier-Mail*, following his father’s death in 1952. Compelled by his mother’s budgetary concerns, Murdoch’s shares in the *Brisbane Courier-Mail* were briskly sold, leaving him with a controlling interest in the *Adelaide News* with its paltry seventy-five thousand circulation. From these relatively humble beginnings few could have prophesied Murdoch’s fashioning of his News Corporation into a worldwide multimedia empire incorporating nine media formats, spanning six continents, supposedly reaching at least two-thirds of the world’s population, and generating
revenues approaching $19 billion per annum. Even more astoundingly, through aggressive incursions into the sport realm, Murdoch has been charged with being responsible for changing “American sports forever.” Yet News Corporation’s sporting reach and influence are truly boundless; its acquisitional and diversified media strategizing radically altered the global sporting landscape, turning sport into a central component of a fully integrated worldwide media entertainment system.

Sport was certainly not a primary focus of Murdoch’s initial forays in the media business. Beginning in Australia, then moving into New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, News Corporation acquired a vast stable of newspapers that presently numbers 132 separate properties, magazines (e.g., TV Guide, the Weekly Standard, and the Times Literary Supplement), and publishing houses (HarperCollins, Regan Books, Zondervan). Although this array of print holdings helped establish Murdoch’s media empire, News Corporation’s elevation to the status of a “main player in the global media system” was realized through key movie and television industry acquisitions made during the 1980s. In 1985, Murdoch purchased a 50 percent stake in the struggling Twentieth Century Fox film and television studio for $325 million. This transaction provided News Corporation with a familiar brand identity, film and television production facilities, and a library of more than two thousand films. All three factors proved instrumental in Murdoch’s subsequent creation of a fourth national television network to challenge ABC, CBS, and NBC. In May 1985, News Corporation purchased seven television stations from Metromedia for $2 billion, instantaneously providing the newly founded Fox Television Incorporated with a presence in the United States’ major television markets (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, Houston, and Dallas). Twentieth Century Fox’s production facilities also proved an important resource for originating network programming, as did access to its vast film library. Murdoch subsequently brought his populist (some might say consciously lowbrow) production values—honed in the highly competitive newspaper business—to network audiences, as In Living Color, The Simpsons, Beverly Hills 90210, and tabloidic telejournalism signaled the arrival of Fox Television. News Corporation became increasingly television-oriented, as evidenced by the fact that TV presently generates more than one-third (35 percent in 1998) of the company’s earnings.

Having secured a foothold in the all-important American television market, Murdoch’s ambitions expanded to colonizing the new media platforms that emerged in the 1980s from the worldwide spread of communications deregulation and privatization policies. So News Corporation embarked
on a globally oriented satellite television expansion that included Foxtel (Australia), JSkyB (Japan), Zee TV (India), Sky (New Zealand), Vox (Germany), and Star TV (Asia). However, perhaps of most note was the launch of British Sky Broadcasting (BSkyB) in the United Kingdom, which foretold important elements of News Corporation’s future involvement in sport. Following a short yet acrimonious and financially draining struggle between Murdoch’s Sky Television and British Satellite Broadcasting, these rival fledgling satellite providers eventually merged in 1990 to form BSkyB. As a subscriber service, BSkyB’s profitability—indeed, its and News Corporation’s very existence following the massive losses incurred prior to the merger—was dependent on the ability to attract paying customers, something abhorrent to many media consumers in the United Kingdom. Murdoch’s savior was none other than the much-maligned English soccer fan. One would be hard-pressed to find another cultural product with anything like the same popular appeal of English soccer. The entrenched popularity of soccer meant that it was “the only sport that was clearly capable of attracting significant numbers of new customers to satellite TV.” Consequently, in 1992, Sky Sports (BSkyB’s sports channel) paid £304 million (an increase of some 600 percent over the previous contract) for an exclusive five-year deal with the newly formed English Premier League to televise live games. Without question, English Premier League soccer became the “jewel in the crown” in BSkyB’s consciously populist diet of trite situation comedies, sensationalist news coverage, and blockbuster movies. Yet Murdoch also recognized the potential of other sporting contests. BSkyB subsequently embarked on a seemingly relentless, and usually successful, pursuit of Britain’s most-coveted sporting events, resulting in most of the English national soccer team’s games, England’s cricket test matches played abroad, many major rugby union games, rugby league in its entirety, and the Ryder Cup, all becoming Sky entities. This sport-oriented strategy certainly proved effective, as satellite dishes began adorning the outside of Britain’s houses and flats in sizable numbers, signifying a rapid rise in BSkyB subscribers that guaranteed the network’s existence (and provoking Prince Charles, with his less than populist sensibilities, to describe them as “architectural acne”). When Sky Sports’ initial contract with the Premier League ended in 1997, not surprisingly, Murdoch moved quickly to quash any competitors by agreeing to pay £670 million for a four-year deal.

Murdoch’s experiences in the United Kingdom alerted him to the importance of sport in the process of shaping News Corporation into a truly global media power. As Murdoch himself outlined in 1996, News Corporation “will be investing and acquiring long-term rights and becoming part of the
sports establishment . . . Football, of all sports, is number one." This philosophy underpinned Fox Television’s wrestling of television broadcasting rights to National Football Conference games away from CBS in December 1993. Fox paid the National Football League a staggering $1.58 billion for the four-year contract, a vastly inflated price designed to deter the more established, and perhaps more conservative, networks. Justifying Fox’s huge outlay, Murdoch brazenly admitted: “We put that $380 million a year on the table to help build Fox. We didn’t do it so some quarterback can make another half million a year. . . . That’s just a by-product. What we did, we did selfishly, to build the network. It was a selfish business decision.”

And build the network it did. The acquisition of NFC football proved so successful in establishing and defining Fox’s network status that it plainly solidified a necessary relationship between network television and the NFL as a whole, prompting one unnamed network executive to later rue, “I just don’t think you can be a network anymore without NFL football.” This sentiment was ably reflected in the frenzied negotiation that led to the signing in early 1998 of an eight-year contract for NFL television rights, for a combined $17.6 billion (or $2.2 billion annually), divided between ABC/ESPN ($9.2 billion), Fox ($4.4 billion), and CBS ($4 billion). Fox Television was not only playing with the “big boys,” it had helped establish the criteria for membership to this exclusive sport-media order.

Having hugely benefited as a network from its NFL coverage, Fox Television then turned to Major League Baseball (MLB) and the National Hockey League (NHL) with similar expectations. Largely because of the lure of World Series coverage (even if shared with NBC), Fox’s joint involvement with NBC and ESPN in a $1.7 billion five-year contract (1996–2000) for MLB coverage has proved moderately successful. Conversely, despite numerous innovations designed to popularize televised coverage of the game (including the infamous glowing puck), Fox’s involvement with the NHL proved less than satisfactory in terms of national viewing figures, leading to ABC/ESPN’s uncontested $600 million bid for a five-year television contract beginning in the 1999–2000 season. Of course, by this time News Corporation had developed a significant sporting presence within the U.S. cable television market through its setting up of the Fox Sports channel in 1993. Nine regional cable sports networks were subsequently purchased in 1996, providing the groundwork for the innovative Fox Sports Net, a network of twenty-two regionally based cable sports channels linked by the national nightly highlight show “Fox Sports News” and other nationally aired programming, but also incorporating a large proportion of regionally focused sports coverage. Fox Sports Net presently controls the local cable television
rights to seventy-one of the seventy-six U.S.-based MLB, NBA, and NHL teams, placing it in a significantly stronger position than ABC’s more established, but less regionally flexible, ESPN and ESPN2 cable sports channels. Indeed, such is its vigorous good health that one commentator referred to the “8,000-pound gorilla that Fox Sports Net has become.”

Television coverage rights and networks are but two aspects of Murdoch’s broader vision of creating a vertically integrated and globally encompassing sport-media delivery system. Countering the broader trend toward corporate outsourcing and institutional disaggregation (horizontal integration), News Corporation has sought to secure central ownership and control over the various revenue-generating nodes of the sport entertainment industry (vertical integration). For this reason, the late 1990s saw News Corporation engage in a global quest focused on the acquisition of entire sport leagues, individual teams, and even stadia.

Murdoch’s most comprehensive sporting coup came with his purchase of the British Rugby League for £87 million in 1995. With the express purpose of securing inexpensive programming for its Sky Sports cable network, News Corporation effectively bought a one hundred-year-old sport culture ingrained in the working class and history of northern England. Rugby League was thus transformed from a financially troubled and poorly administered sport into a single “corporate entity” owned and controlled by BSkyB, which implemented divisional restructuring, new pseudo-American teams (with names such as the Bradford Bulls, Wigan Warriors, and Halifax Blue Sox), and merchandising initiatives. The takeover also saw a century of Rugby League tradition conveniently erased when the game was switched from a winter to a summer playing season. Whether beneficial or not in the long run for spectators and players alike, this profound alteration in the game’s very complexion was solely motivated by corporate exigencies. Specifically, the shift ensured that coverage of the Sky Sport’s newly formed “Super League” would not clash with English Premier League soccer, Murdoch’s prize possession within a British broadcasting rights context. To a lesser extent, he also wanted to avoid scheduling and player conflicts with the rival rugby union code in which he had a considerable investment.

At the same time, News Corporation was fighting a more contested takeover battle within the Australian sport market. Murdoch had long coveted Kerry Packer’s domination of cricket and the Australian Rugby League (ARL), both of which figured prominently on Packer’s Nine Network (Packer was Murdoch’s arch media rival within the Australasian context). Sensing an opportunity to loosen Packer’s grip on the Rugby League in early 1995, and desperate for popular programming to provide impetus for his new Foxtel
cable TV network, Murdoch announced plans to establish a rival “Super League” in 1996 made up of elite players and six entire teams prized away from the ARL. After much legal wrangling, the competing leagues went into direct competition. Both fared poorly in terms of game attendance and television viewership because of the perceived fractured and diluted nature of either product. In late 1997, the inevitable ensued with the merger of the ARL with the Super League to form the National Rugby League, jointly owned by the two camps. The merger meant the closure of a number of teams and the eventual merger of others. As a result, Murdoch was castigated for precipitating the ruin of a national institution and a community resource—not that he would have been perturbed by such criticism, as ultimately he realized his goal of gaining (at least joint) control of Australia’s premier rugby code. The ARL–Super League scenario merely underscored Murdoch’s conscienceless modus operandi, the ruthless “determination to secure whatever corporate advantage he can, regardless of the cultural or commercial obstacles.”

Not all sports leagues are as vulnerable to News Corporation’s advances, forcing Murdoch to turn his avaricious gaze to professional teams as a means of expanding his sporting media network. In Stuart Miller’s terms: “‘software’ is what media empires call the teams they own. Fans may see the Los Angeles Dodgers or the New York Knicks as home teams with illustrious histories, but the new breed of owners—Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp., Time Warner, Disney, Cablevision, Comcast—view them as content, programming fodder for the insatiable beast called television.

Doubtless initially coveting a large television market-based NFL franchise, within the U.S. context Murdoch’s football aspirations were stifled by the NFL’s prohibition on corporate ownership of league franchises. According to NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue, a media corporation’s involvement in the league “would present a conflict of interest in competitive situations” over rights fees negotiations. “We always want our interests to have but one interest. That might be compromised.” With such restrictions in place, Murdoch turned to America’s other major professional sports. Most notably in March 1998, and after protracted negotiations with MLB, Fox purchased the entire Los Angeles Dodgers organization for $311 million, thus commandeering “one of the great brand names in America in a world where brand names are increasingly important.” Through this investment in the Los Angeles Dodgers, Fox Entertainment effectively purchased a permanent and high-profile presence in one of the United States’ largest television markets, by being able to offer a marquee programming attraction to the local viewing audience.

Although successful in acquiring the Dodgers, Murdoch’s even more
audacious £623 million bid for Manchester United was ultimately blocked by the British government’s Mergers and Monopolies Commission (MMC) in April 1999. The rationale for this denial centered on the deleterious effects on competition in the broadcast sport industry arising from the competitive advantage BSkyB would command—as owners of arguably the most popular and watched English Premier League clubs—when negotiating for the league’s television rights. In the words of the MMC:

The adverse effects of the merger, in particular the reduction of competition for premier league rights and the consequential reduction of competition in the sports premium channel market and the wider pay TV market, appear to us to be very serious. As it is our view that no undertakings would remove these adverse effects, we conclude that prohibiting the merger is both an appropriate and a proportionate remedy, and we recommend accordingly.

Murdoch consequently changed tack and has, through stealth as opposed to brute force, sought to garner influence over the future destination of English Premier League television rights. To this end, BSkyB embarked on a “buying spree” of up to 9.9 percent (the maximum percentage allowed for ownership in multiple clubs) of shares in individual clubs. With Manchester United, Manchester City, and Leeds United already in his portfolio, Murdoch turned his attention to, among other clubs, Aston Villa, Chelsea, Tottenham, Newcastle, and Sunderland as targets for future investment.

Sport league and team ownership provides guaranteed popular television content on a truly worldwide scale, and has thus been a crucial element in establishing News Corporation as the “first vertically integrated entertainment-and-communications company of truly global reach.” Despite the mammoth initial financial outlay required for the purchase of sport leagues and franchises, these costs can be partially recouped through long-term savings in television rights fees. In addition, sport content nurtures other important revenue streams: sport programming inventory is customarily attractive to advertisers; it offers significant opportunities for intra- and cross-network promotion; and its popularity allows networks to increase the rates paid by cable systems for carrying their channels. The control afforded by ownership also provides networks with the ability to generate significant revenue from the “migration” of game coverage to lucrative pay-per-view television platforms.

With a multichanneled global television footprint such as that possessed by News Corporation, the cross-fertilization of sport programming has become yet another lucrative option: BSkyB feeds of English Premier League
soccer represent a staple part of Fox Sports Worlds offerings in the United States, with live games on Saturday and Sunday mornings also available to pay-per-view satellite systems. Given the multiple opportunities for revenue generation afforded by News Corporation’s local, national, and global reach, it is no wonder that Murdoch makes high-priced bids for sporting properties and thereby “inflates cost and undercuts competitive balance.” Put another way, News Corporation approaches sport (leagues, teams, and stadia) not as profit centers but as “cog[s] in the machine” of global media capitalism for which it is willing to pay substantial amounts.81

Murdoch has implemented a revolutionary process of rationalization and consolidation within the global media-sport complex. One might venture to say that Murdoch is the Henry Ford of the postindustrial era, with sport programming representing the Model T (or primary commodity) of the new information-based mode of production. As NBC Sports president Dick Ebersol commented in response to Murdoch’s repeat ranking at the top of the Sporting News Power 100, the annual list of the top one hundred most powerful people in sports, “It isn’t even remotely a race. You could make him Nos. 1 through 5.”82

Olympic Games

Whenever we switched on the tube, we saw what Ebersol wanted us to see, when he wanted us to see it. . . . Whether we like it, we watched. But we weren’t watching the Olympics; we were watching Ebersol’s vision of the Olympics.83

The previous case study focused primarily on an illustration of the structure underlying the political economy of contemporary sport media culture. The discussion now turns to the Olympic Games, a true sporting “mega-event”84 that grabs the attention of the global populace and reveals how the media leviathans of late capitalism creatively appropriate sport content as a means of furthering their rapacious agendas. Politics, corruption, and commercialism have been an ever-present aspect of the modern Olympic movement since its inception with the Athens games of 1896.85 Nevertheless, even in the hypercommercial world of late-twentieth-century sport, the Olympic Games have somehow managed to maintain an aura—however spurious and symbolic—of sporting purity and unity seemingly unsullied by the world around them.86 John Williams would perhaps argue that the Olympics’ wholesome appeal is derived from “the joys of performance and the excitement of unpredictable drama [that] still have the ability to transcend the
commodification of sport.”87 Within the television universe, however, such an assertion could not be further from the truth.

The drama of the Olympic Games as broadcast to millions of Americans by the National Broadcasting Corporation is neither unpredictable nor divorced from the pervasive commodification of sport.88 Instead, NBC’s televisual Olympics are a “media event” consciously designed, promoted, and delivered to serve the network’s profit driven purposes.89 Focusing on NBC’s coverage of the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta, this discussion unearths the motives, manifestations, and consequences of the network’s reviewing, massaging, and repackaging of Olympic reality.90

In 1995, NBC signed two contracts with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), amounting to $3.55 billion, which secured the broadcasting rights to the Summer Olympic Games in 2000, 2004, and 2008, and to the Winter Olympic Games in 2002 and 2006.91 For the foreseeable future, NBC effectively bought the rights to becoming America’s Olympic channel. In doing so, Dick Ebersol, president of NBC Sports (and executive producer of NBC’s coverage of the Atlanta games), had purchased the right to creatively suture the network’s trademark peacock logo to the accumulated and emotive symbolism of the Olympic rings. As Richard Pound, the principal marketer of the Olympic Games brazenly admitted, “if you owe them [the bank] $10,000, you’re a customer. If you owe them $10,000 billion you’re a partner.”92 With the “thoroughly modern marriage”93 forged between NBC and the International Olympic Committee, in an American context the Olympic Games are as much, if not more, about the advancement of NBC stock as about covering the event itself. This was particularly true in that NBC had guaranteed its corporate advertisers a 17 Nielsen rating (equating to roughly 16.3 million households). Should Olympic broadcasts fall below that mark, the network would provide advertisers with free airtime, an unwelcome eventuality that would eat into the anticipated return on the $465 million investment paid for the rights to televise the Atlanta games.94\n\nClearly, NBC was substantially more than a channel of transmission for the Olympic event, and the Atlanta games were destined to become an NBC directed, prefabricated Olympic spectacle: a “highly artificial construct, designed for maximum sentiment and ratings.”95

In the lead-up to the Atlanta games, Ebersol predicted that people would get the “results from CNN or the Internet . . . but they’ll get the stories from NBC.”96 This Olympic production strategy was certainly nothing new; it merely represented the latest, and perhaps most sophisticated, attempt to transform televised sport in such a way that it could better compete with other forms of mass entertainment.97 Ebersol even acknowledged
his role and influence at the helm of NBC’s Olympic fiction factory: “I get to arrange how all these things are perceived in the world.” Ebersol’s perceptions, and thereby NBC’s manipulation of the Olympic spectacle, were significantly informed by more than ten thousand interviews carried out by network researchers with the aim of “trying to pinpoint what viewers like and don’t like.” The results of these interviews provided the basis for what NBC’s director of research, Nicholas Schiavone, identified as the five principles underpinning NBC Olympic television production values: story, reality, possibility, idealism, and patriotism.

Driven by the economics of the marketplace, Ebersol freely admitted that “ratings are the yardstick by which it [NBC] will judge its Olympic Games coverage.” As a result, he had to “keep in mind appealing to the widest audience.” For Ebersol, ensuring a wide audience meant capturing and sustaining the interest of women viewers. Women were of particular interest to network executives because, through its ongoing research into the Olympic television audience, NBC had deduced that “men will watch the games no matter what.” This research also determined that, unlike other sporting events, women are drawn to the spectacle of the Olympics in roughly equal numbers to men. Consequently, the size of NBC’s female viewership would determine the difference between commercial success and failure, between reaping the financial benefits of charging up to seven hundred thousand dollars per thirty seconds of advertising and being forced to offer free advertising space as a way of alleviating corporate customer dissatisfaction with poor ratings. Hence, NBC’s brief involved packaging the Olympics in such a way “that women will stay glued.” This fact predetermined that, despite the merit or otherwise of the forthcoming exploits of female Olympians, the Atlanta games would be a celebration of Olympic womanhood. Within its battery of promotions preparing the American audience for the upcoming spectacle, NBC openly declared that its focus would be on women’s sports. Before the ceremonial flame had been lit, and despite the fact that male athletes continued to profoundly outnumber female athletes 6,582 (63.53 percent) to 3,779 (36.47 percent), a complex illusion of Olympic gender equality and emancipation was already artificially piloting NBC’s mediation of the Atlanta games.

NBC’s representational strategy for the actual coverage of the Atlanta games involved manufacturing a stereotypically “feminine” Olympic spectacle. In creating this prime-time “Oprah Olympics,” NBC manufactured its own Olympic reality centered on events deemed appropriate to female viewers, and infused with sentiment designed to resonate with the female psyche. According to production executives, NBC’s conscious manipulation
of the content and structure of Olympic reality “was based on a scientific campaign to shape their broadcasts to a feminine sensibility.” NBC’s crude interpretation of its Olympic audience research findings reduced the complexities of consumer motivations and predispositions to a binary and essentialist model of gender norms and differences. In accordance with this reductionist model, certain sports are viewed as being popular among women simply because they incorporate and celebrate traditionally feminine traits such as bodily beauty, grace, and expression. Conversely, male sports are deemed to be unpopular among women because their embodied masculine characteristics are viewed as anathema to feminine sensibilities. This point was succinctly—if crudely—expressed by Ebersol: “If you put boxing in the middle of the greatest family entertainment in all of sports, you’re going to drive people away... Women and children won’t stand for it.”

NBC’s Atlanta Olympic coverage highlighted events that represented women in ways that the network deemed gender-appropriate for a mainstream American audience. Predictably, NBC’s prime-time coverage focused on a surplus of meanings associated with the presumed hyperfemininity of certain events. This perspective foregrounded gymnasts such as Shannon Miller, Dominique Dawes, Dominique Moceanu, and Kerri Strug; swimmers such as Janet Evans, Amanda Beard, and Amy Van Dyken; and, divers such as Mary Ellen Clark and Becky Ruehl. Of course, there is nothing inherently feminine about these sporting activities. However, all of them have long been culturally coded as signifying the type of vulnerable, aesthetic, and heterosexualized embodied femininity on which NBC chose to center its Olympic reality.

Feminizing the content of the prime-time Olympic schedule was aided by the economic leverage held by NBC over the IOC: a clear example of “the television tale wagging the sports dog.” As John Krimsky, U.S. Olympic Committee deputy secretary-general and managing director for business affairs, admitted, the Olympic Games are essentially a “made-for-TV event... and there are a number of things we can do to enhance that. That’s our job, to enhance the brand.” Hence, among other measures, the IOC sanctioned the expansion of the gymnastics competition from seven to nine nights of prime-time coverage, the inclusion of a made-for-TV champions gala as an audience-grabbing finale to the gymnastics competition, the enlargement of the swimming program from six to seven days, and the promotion of the diving program within the Olympic schedule. Presumably because they were deemed not to have exuded the appropriate feminine aura, the highly successful U.S. women’s basketball, soccer, and softball teams received nothing like the same prime-time coverage. Meanwhile, even less
telegenic “boxers, wrestlers and weightlifters—hairy, sweaty undesirables” were left to compete in the “daytime ratings wars.”

The structure of NBC Olympic production was similarly framed by an essentialist understanding of gender as a binary category, within which the rational, sports-loving male was positioned against the emotionally driven, sentiment-loving female: “while men enjoy sports ‘from the outside in’—that is, they want the event itself and then, possibly, some connection with the people involved—women come to sports ‘from the inside out.’ Before they get interested in an event, they need to know the characters and sympathize with them.”

The goal of fashioning the Atlanta games into a feminine product designed to bring “a tear to the eye and bullion to the coffers” necessitated NBC’s manipulating the structure of Olympic reality into a “highly elastic style narrative” that artificially dramatized the event through the preprogrammed, and frequently delayed, manipulation and amplification of Olympic televisual discourse. It has been noted that sport’s unique quality over other forms of televised popular entertainment is the immediacy and uncertainty of sporting spectacles. Recognizing, yet subverting, the primacy of the live sporting event, NBC’s Olympic televisual spectacle was consciously fashioned into a timeless and unreal space that, to the casual observer, appeared as if it were live (even though up to 40 percent of it was not). According to Dick Ebersol, “In our minds, we’ll be live at all times,” and certainly the network’s announcers expressed nothing that indicated to the contrary. In actuality, NBC’s nightly broadcasts were considerably more complex:

Within NBC’s broadcast of the Games, there are three types of production. The first is purely live, when something is shown in real time. The second is called live-on-tape . . . What viewers see is called live by the announcers but is shown several minutes or several hours later. The third is taped coverage, which is usually easy to distinguish because there are breaks in continuity. A feature may be thrown in and special effects added.

The motive behind the intermingling of purely live, live-on-tape, and taped coverage under NBC’s deceptive rubric of being “plausibly live” was plain. “Its job was to build interest and drama in the unfolding panorama of the Olympic Games.” The adoption of multiple programming formats allowed NBC’s Olympic production team to artificially heighten and intensify the dramatic content of its broadcasts, giving it a degree of creative flexibility that simply does not exist in “purely live” production. The network utilized “plausibly live” programming to mold seamless and engaging narratives that
were invariably built to a suspenseful climax, but whose relation to unfolding real-time events was largely irrelevant. NBC simply chose to blur “reality in the name of a good story,” the network’s logic being that if you “Tell them stories . . . they will watch.”

The most conspicuous example of NBC’s plausibly live strategy centered on the delaying, rearranging, and massaging of Kerri Strug’s final vault in the women’s gymnastics team competition. The “historic” vault actually took place in the late afternoon, but it was not shown on NBC until approaching midnight Eastern time. Seizing upon the emotive narrative offered up by the exploits of the injured Strug, NBC’s prime-time programming served as a vehicle for gradually intensifying the drama surrounding this admittedly heroic, triumphant, yet ultimately irrelevant vault (the United States had already won the gold medal prior to the vault). The result was NBC’s “highest, most emotional, most poignant moment,” which garnered a phenomenal 27.2 Nielsen rating. Despite the notoriety of this particular event, the repackaging of Strug’s vault was indicative of NBC’s production strategy throughout the games: “To NBC, the Olympics are episodes or segments in a prime-time show. It is all about stories, tales to be told, athletes to admire. Results are incidental. The events need not be presented on television in the linear fashion in which they unfold in real life.”

As well as creating a “zone of fictional time,” an equally significant, and related, element of NBC’s narrativizing of the Olympic schedule involved the strategic insertion of taped personal profiles as a means of creating emotive attachments between the television audience and particular athletes, and thereby events.

The influential Roone Arledge developed “Up Close and Personal” profiling for ABC’s groundbreaking coverage of the 1972 Munich Olympics. For the Atlanta games, Ebersol enthusiastically appropriated this technique, and commissioned 135 two-to-three-minute emotion-laced segments featuring various athletes, personalities, countries, and events drawn from the televisual vaults of Olympic history past, present, and future. These syrupy examples of “formulaic hagiography” focused on a broad array of athletes, from predictable features on high-profile American hopefuls such as Michael Johnson and Janet Evans, to stories on foreign notables such as the Belorussian gymnast Vitali Scherbo, the British triple jumper Jonathan Edwards, and the Canadian rower Silken Laumann, to more bizarre features such as that on the failed thoroughbred racehorse Nirvana II. These humanizing—sometimes anthropomorphizing—segments personalized “the competitors with feature stories that emphasize[d] family tragedies, childhood physical ailments and heartbreaking disappointments.” By narrating contests through
the stories of particular individuals, NBC framed the coverage of events in order to influence the way they were consumed. These “motivational info-
cmercials” acted as affective anchors by orchestrating viewers’ emotional in-
vestment in the simulated narrative evolving before their eyes.132

In sum, the real-time Olympics became completely lost in the midst of the multiple temporal zones engaged during the carefully scripted produc-
tion of these “soap opera games.”133 NBC’s fabrication of highly emotive narratives framed the Olympics into a “17-day marathon ‘Melrose Place’.”134 for women who, according to the network, are “addicted to melodrama.”135 In this sense, NBC’s Olympic show concocted a soap-opera Olympics where entertaining and endearing athletes were the leading characters, and female support for the games the desired “discursive effect.”136 In other words, melodrama’s language and structure were used to generate an objective, and therefore measurable, presence of female viewers.137

NBC’s conscious decision to fashion the games into a distinctly femin-
ine televisual spectacle was certainly a ratings and financial success. This gendered Olympic strategy was seemingly vindicated by averaging a 21.6 Nielsen rating (equating to roughly 20.7 million households), an impressive 41 percent share of the television audience, which equated to a weighty 25 percent increase over the viewing figures for the Barcelona games.138 In the crucial eighteen-to-thirty-four female demographic segment, NBC’s ratings had improved 16 percent from the Barcelona figures, and a staggering 69 percent from Seoul.139 NBC’s ratings far surpassed the guaranteed mark set for securing full payments for advertising airtime. As a consequence, and even after sharing 10 percent of its profits with the IOC, NBC made a $70 million profit on its initial $465 million Olympic investment.140

Yet these figures fail to express how the typically diverse and unpredict-
dable viewing patterns were rendered irrelevant by NBC’s media machine, which directly—and uncritically—attributed the reasons for higher Olympic viewing figures to its “innovative” production strategies. No other explana-
tion was even plausible. As a result, the widespread skepticism and resistance to the NBC Olympics expressed by many consumers was neutered, and became wholly submerged, under the symbolic weight of the network’s increas-
ingly reified, strategically concretized, and evidently satisfied imaginary female consumer.141 Fabricated “with Mrs. Six-pack and the kids in mind,” NBC’s clean, face-lifted, and engineered emotional spectacle was modeled on stereotypical and demeaning models of women as both hyperfeminine ob-
jects of production and hypersensitive subjects of consumption.142

The progressive political potential of an increased female presence in the Olympic spectacle thus was neutralized by the demeaning way in which NBC
chose to represent and engage women. Yet, given the economics of the television industry, Ebersol announced that money talks in regard to the network’s Olympic production strategies; thus his antiquated gendered world is set for a periodic reprise. “Get used to it,” as one commentator put it. “The ratings were so high that NBC will take the same tack into Sydney and beyond.”

Coda

In corporate/Americanized sport, the game has become somewhat less important than its capacity to be a vehicle presenting particular messages to a particular select and often massive audience.

This discussion may have unearthed some disheartening revelations pertaining to the political economy of contemporary sport culture. Elsewhere I have argued that sport has, in Francis Fukuyama’s terms, reached the end of history precipitated by the “total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives” to the sport-media-entertainment complex discussed here. On reflection, this sentiment intimates a resigned bitterness that adds little to the critical analysis of contemporary sport. Without question, the global sport economy is dominated by brazenly commercial enterprises that make no pretense as to the cardinal importance of delivering entertaining products designed to maximize profit margins. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to engage in rigorous and thoughtful critiques of the hypercommercial sporting cultures that transfix many of our lives. As enthusiastic sport consumers, we may be temporarily intoxicated by the intensity of a Dodger’s rally in the bottom of the ninth, or a heroic feat by an American Olympian, but we should not overlook the economic, technological, and political forces that come together to structure our experiences of contemporary sport culture. As the novelist E. M. Forster commanded in Howards End, “Only connect! . . . Live in fragments no longer.” For only then is it possible to “give a better understanding of where ‘we’ are so that ‘we’ can get somewhere better.” From where I stand, that is a place where the sporting medium is no longer inextricably tied to a commercial message.

Further Reading

Notes

3. David Rowe, Sport, Culture and the Media: The Unruly Trinity (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 67.

16. This apt metaphor is borrowed from Jürgen Habermas, “Conservatism and Capitalist Crisis,” New Left Review 115 (1979): 73–84.
23. Jameson, Postmodernism, 68.

26. Rowe, Sport, Culture and the Media, 70.
29. M. Hiestand, “CBS Locks in College Hoops for $545m,” USA Today, November 19, 1999, 1C.
34. R. Martzke, “Viewers Tune in Super Drama,” USA Today, January 27, 1998, 1C.
36. Quoted in Martzke, “Viewers Tune in Super Drama,” 1C.
40. For example, the Fox network averaged a minuscule 1.4 household television rating for its regular season coverage during the 1998–99 season. See L. Brockinton, “Networks Begin First Season of Deal,” Street and Smith’s Sports Business Journal, October 4–10, 1999, 29.
41. Sal Ruibal, “NBC’s Gravity Games an Alternative to NFL,” USA Today, October 1, 1999, 12C.
42. Ibid.
48. Forefronting the new informational economy is a species of economically and culturally imposing global media corporations such as Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, Sony, Seagram, Bertelsmann, Granada, and News Corporation. These purveyors of variously formatted mass-mediated cultural products represent the dynamic force in the late-capitalist economy, occupying much the same role as mass-manufacturing titans such as Ford, General Motors, General Electric, Dupont, and Westinghouse Electric did in the industrial economy. See E. Herman and Robert W. McChesney, “Dominant Firms in the Global Media Market: News Corporation,” in The Global Media, 70–77, for a detailed explication of these “new missionaries of corporate capitalism.”
52. For the most comprehensive list of News Corporation’s worldwide sport-related holdings, see Rowe and McKay, “Field of Soaps,” 191–210.
54. Herman and McChesney, The Global Media, 70.
55. Shawcross, Murdoch.
56. Under a prearranged agreement, one of the seven stations, WCVB Boston, was immediately sold to the Hearst Corporation. In 1985, compelled by federal regulations that forbade an individual from owning a newspaper and a television station in the same city, Murdoch was forced to sell the New York Post. The rule against foreign ownership of broadcasting licenses also forced him to change his citizenship from Australian to American. Fox Television’s subsequent purchases brought U.S. television station holdings to twenty-two, the largest in the nation, and a clear indication of Fox’s emergence as a truly national network.
58. In descending order, the rest of News Corporation’s earnings are derived from newspapers (25 percent); magazines and inserts (22 percent); filmed entertainment (15 percent); books (2 percent); and, other (1 percent). See Chief Executive Officers Review,

60. Ibid.


62. Murdoch’s successful procurement of the broadcast rights to many of the key events within Britain’s sporting calendar has caused widespread consternation among the viewing public, because the financial restrictions it places on citizen’s access to core aspects of their national culture. This has led to government legislation that attempts to protect eight events deemed of national importance (FIFA World Cup, the Olympic Games, Wimbledon, the English and Scottish F.A. Cup Finals, the Epsom Derby, the Aintree Grand National, and home test matches for the England cricket team) for “free to view” TV services (Arundel and Roche, “Media Sport”).


64. Quoted in Pierce, “Master of the Universe,” 182.

65. Quoted in Carter, “Football Deal.”


67. For a discussion of the differences between horizontal and vertical integration, see Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*.

68. Arundel and Roche, “Media Sport.”


73. As part of Fox Entertainment’s purchasing of a 40 percent share in Rainbow Media Holdings (a Cablevision subsidiary) in 1998, Murdoch gained a 40 percent interest in both the New York Knicks and the New York Rangers.


75. Fox’s position in the Los Angeles market is destined to be strengthened by Murdoch’s stated desire to exercise his option to purchase 40 percent of the Los Angeles Kings and 10 percent of the Los Angeles Lakers, both clauses associated with his 40 percent investment in the team’s new arena, the Staples Center, in April 1998. Moreover, as well as the Staples Center, and as part of his sport franchise dealings, Murdoch acquired Dodger Stadium and a significant interest in Madison Square Garden (40 percent ownership), thus adding control of sport stadia and venues to his vertically integrated sports-media delivery system. See Rofe, “The 800-Pound Gorilla Keeps Growing.”


79. Shawcross, Murdoch, 399.
80. See Bruck, “The Big-Hitter.”
84. Roche, “Mega-Events and Micro-Modernization”; Roche, “Mega-Events and Urban Policy.”
90. NBC broadcast seventy-nine hours of prime-time Olympic coverage during the Atlanta games, 171.5 hours in total. See S. Zipay, “Atlanta Olympics—Media—Absurdity Dominates Coverage,” Newsday, July 30, 1996, A60.
91. Real, “MediaSport.”
105. Ibid.
110. Quoted in Gunther, “Get Ready for the Oprah Olympics,” 43.


117. Ibid., 26.


120. Sandomir, “NBC’s Money Shots Prove It,” 14B.


126. Ibid.


133. Ibid.

134. Sandomir, “NBC’s Money Shots Prove It,” 14B.


146. Andrews, “Dead and Alive?”
147. L. Grossberg, We Gotta Get out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture (London: Routledge, 1992), 21.
Chapter Seven

Shopping

Susan G. Davis

The opportunity and imperative to shop are everywhere. As retail theorist Paco Underhill rhapsodizes:

the economic party that has been the second half of the twentieth century has fostered more shopping than anyone could have predicted, more shopping than has ever taken place anywhere at any time. You almost have to make an effort to avoid shopping today. Stay out of stores and museums and theme restaurants and still you are face to face with Internet shopping twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, along with its low rent cousin, home shopping on TV. Have to steer clear of your mail box, too.¹

Indeed, shopping now reaches into every corner of life, connecting people to the culture of capitalism in repetitive and daily ways. It not only offers things for us to buy, it teaches us how to imagine ourselves buying, owning, and being transformed by goods.

The shopping landscape did not spring up naturally or evolve in response to consumer demand. It had to be built. As a system of distribution and an environment of persuasion, it had to be organized, planned, fought over, theorized, and directed, though not without failures and false starts. The United States was the “first country in the world to have an economy of mass production” that pumped out a huge flood of manufactured goods, writes William Leach. But it was also “the first to create the mass consumer institutions and enticements that rose up in tandem to market and sell” them.² This essay describes and analyzes the political economy of shopping as it developed over the course of the twentieth century. It is hard to imagine that an activity that seems so practically and viscerally about needs in the here and now has a history. Yet by tracing shopping’s past we can become more alert to the forces that shape shopping’s rhythms and textures today. Indeed, our manners of browsing, spending, or simply killing time are all inherited activities that have been sculpted by the pressures of the wider political economy. As this essay aims to show, what is new about shopping today is the unprecedented concentration of corporate control over the landscape of shopping and the techniques available for shaping its pleasures.
The period from roughly 1970 through the present has seen two contradictory developments. On the one hand, the shopping world has been extended fabulously. There have been whole new spatial and conceptual developments: the mall, the superregional mall, the big-box discount store, the hypermarket. Experimentation with new forms of merchandising—for example, television and Web-based selling—is vigorous; older merchandising techniques such as the catalog have been reinvented and given new life. The shopping world is now dependent for its very workings on vast flows of electronic data to move goods and manage customers. New communication technologies allow tighter and more direct connection between shopping spaces and the electronic mass media. And today’s shopping world is characterized by increasing concentration of ownership, by vertically integrated conglomerates, and by the integration of previously distinct spheres and activities. To no one’s surprise, this consolidated American-style shopping has an increasingly global reach.

On the other hand, the standard of living of most Americans has declined or stagnated in both income and social terms. After rising steadily nearly every year between World War II and 1973, average weekly earnings declined by 19 percent in constant dollars. The subsequent expansion of the service sector of the economy (of which retail is a large part) fueled the growth of low-wage, no-benefits positions that increasingly characterize the job market, especially for young people. At the same time, economic inequality has become more stark, with the gap between the richest and poorest Americans now the largest of any industrialized nation. But those who are already wealthy have done fabulously well. The mean incomes of the top fifth of the population have risen dramatically, while those of the poorest fifth have declined. The top 20 percent now receive only 2.1 percent less income than the entire “middle” 60 percent of the population. In 1996, the mean income of the top 5 percent of the population was $217,355—nineteen times that of the bottom fifth, and nearly 160 percent that of the top fifth.

While the top celebrates and the bottom suffers, the income share of the middle three-fifths of the population has shrunk. The middle is in a precarious position, many having been downsized out of well-paying manufacturing and white-collar jobs into work with lower wages and few or no benefits and retirement plans. These economic shifts have had widely discussed social consequences: swelling ranks of the uninsured and the homeless; more people working two jobs to break even; more people feeling that they do not have adequate time for children, families, and neighbors; falling rates of savings; and rising levels of debt and personal bankruptcy.3
Shopping is being reorganized under these extreme and contradictory conditions of wealth and stagnation. The fantastic world of retail has been able to keep growing—indeed, it must keep growing—but it has had to become split (even two-faced!), dividing its attentions between those who can spend expansively, competitively, and even grotesquely, and those who increasingly shop only frugally, when they can shop at all. The shopping world’s builders, managers, and investors must dazzle the shrinking number of Americans with growing income, while trying to hold on to everyone else. Like the American population under neoliberalism, shopping is fragmented and pyramid-shaped. At its pinnacle are elegant boutique dreams for the affluent; a huge belt of inelegant but ruthlessly efficient “discounters” flog plenty at the pyramid’s precarious middle. At its base are the world’s workers and poor, on whose cheapened labor the rest of the pyramid depends for its incredible abundance. Continuing to expand individual consumption U.S.-style depends on their further impoverishment. Thus the daily and prosaic activity of shopping is bound up with national and international political issues, as well as personal ethical questions. We will return to explore these issues in the concluding section of this essay.

Shopping Has a Past

The history of the shopping landscape in the United States is one of constant change, tumultuous expansion, brutal competition, and successive bursts of concentration. Between about 1880 and 1930, the American mass-consumption economy—the system of mass production of consumer goods and the system of mass distribution to enable consumption—was underpinned by increasingly sophisticated processes of production and distribution, the refinement of mass-mediated persuasion, and endless creative experimentation with physical milieus for displaying goods and enticing consumers. Throughout this period, rising standards of living and consumption were punctuated by severe crises of overproduction. Led out of the near-total collapse of the Great Depression by war and extensive federal intervention in favor of mass consumption, the American economy rebounded to deliver a postwar boom that not only multiplied the goods available, but massively expanded the physical apparatuses of selling.

As the United States “completed the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society” after the Civil War, “modern organizational systems and advanced technologies for production and distribution transformed industry itself.” The explosive growth of the American economy at the end of the nineteenth century was felt by social theorists as a crisis in the nature of
social order, by consumers as an extraordinary opening of a world of things to buy, and by merchants and retailers as a crisis in distribution. American industries pumped out “countless new products—some of them packaged versions of goods people had used for centuries, others completely new.” A torrent of factory-made goods, “toothpaste, corn flakes, chewing gum, safety razors, and cameras—things nobody ever made at home or in small crafts shops,” flooded a market that was now less local than national. Manufacturers and retailers responded to the need to capture new markets by inventing new needs for new goods, by developing outlets on a vast scale, and by working hard to create new attitudes toward consumption.

From before the turn of the century the new national consumer-goods companies, such as Procter and Gamble, not only worked hard to discover products, they invented techniques to move their mass-produced products. National marketing, labeling, and branding helped teach Americans what the goods were good for (see chapter 4, this volume). As Susan Strasser writes, “People who had never heard of toothpaste had to be told that they needed it; the very ideas of chewing gum and flashlights had to be introduced.”

More than products were being created; consumers were being invented, too. A new material and psychological world of consumer capitalism had arrived, wrapped in what were at first unfamiliar ideas. As William Leach has observed, “the cardinal features of this culture were acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire, and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society.” This new culture had to make a decisive break with the older, largely Protestant religious and moral values of thrift, saving, and hard work. “Spending, even spending to excess was extolled as good for the ego, if not for the soul,” writes economist Juliet Shor. In the movies, for example, “A tendency to spend too much was [and we might add, is] cast as an attractive trait. If it was a fault, it was the fault of an open, honest and generous person; frugality was portrayed as the proclivity of a small, pinched personality.” Consumerism became not only “a new, therapeutic belief system,” consumption became a civil entitlement, and spending became patriotic.

Critical to the transition from self-restraint in an ethic of production to self-expression through consumption was the creation of new spaces of material and symbolic exchange, the modern institutions of retailing. Two key retailing forms, the department store and the mail-order catalog, reached widely different markets, but each was as involved in building the “dream life” of the world of goods as it was in efficiencies of distribution. These institutions circulated goods, to be sure, but they also helped lead the ideo-
logical attack on resistance to spending and self-indulgence, a form of tradition that capitalist culture could not afford.

Before the Civil War, urban Americans had been familiar with the mercantile and dry-goods store, downtown depots where local merchants housed a range of products. In contrast, rural Americans had relied largely on home production and itinerant pack peddlers. In the city, goods were plentiful but not widely varied. City shopping often involved asking a clerk to fetch an item from a high shelf or a dark back room. By the 1880s, however, urban merchants were experimenting with larger buildings, expressive techniques of display, and refined standards of service to move masses of goods through growing urban markets. These new “department stores” were so called because they brought together under one roof the inventories of many smaller specialty stores—millinery, footwear, housewares, furniture, stationery, ladies apparel, and toys, for example. Alexander Stewart, John Wanamaker, R. H. Macy, and Marshall Field worked to make the experience of shopping at once more controllable and positively enjoyable. By standardizing prices and marking goods with labels, these merchants eliminated negotiating and bartering from the sales transaction. Offering delivery, attentive service and store credit, and accepting returns, they catered heavily to middle-class and wealthy women. They advertised generously, and not only in newspapers but through their spectacular buildings.¹²

In Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, department stores became multistory palaces of consumption. Instead of keeping merchandise behind the scenes, the merchants made commodities the center of imaginative displays. Their designers experimented fabulously with lighting, color, and glass in display cases and show windows that enabled customers to come enticingly close to the goods. Theatrical window-dressing techniques encouraged the customer to insert herself into a drama of wealth, travel, and cultured sophistication. These dramas were coordinated in tone and imagination with advertisements and fictions unfolding in the new mass-market magazines.¹³

The great stores had established themselves not only as retail powerhouses and large employers, but as the cultural centers of the great commercial cities. The stores grew in economic and cultural power as their owners worked hard to make them culturally central: they provided services such as baby-sitting, ladies’ lounges, and convenient postal stations. Wanamaker’s department store in Philadelphia was widely known for its organ concerts and art exhibits. It was a customary place to meet, take tea, or gaze at the world’s largest chocolate Easter egg. By the 1910s, although the majority of poor and working-class city dwellers still shopped in local mercantiles, and from barrows, stalls, and pushcarts, the department stores had seriously
damaged their competition among small retailers. William Leach writes that department stores “were—and are—indispensable to the capitalist economy. They brought the reality of capitalism—the dream life of capitalism, that is—directly, concretely home to generations of men and women. . . . Without them, the new corporate economy [of mass production and mass distribution] could not have functioned.”

While department stores reshaped the urban shopping landscape, they barely touched the countryside and small towns. Here the mail-order catalog reached out to the enormous but dispersed rural population. From the early 1870s, Montgomery Ward offered an illustrated catalog (in the beginning, just a list) featuring everything from swaddling clothes to tombstones. Purchasing large lots directly from the manufacturer, eliminating the need for the ubiquitous wholesaler, doing away with interest, sales commissions, and debt: these were Ward’s devices for offering low prices on the new mass-produced commodities. By 1893, Ward’s 544-page, free “great wish book” was familiar throughout the United States, “provocative and alluring” in its combination of image and text, and in its display of a variety of goods beyond what could previously have been imagined. A bit later, Richard Sears introduced an even wider range of hard and soft goods in his Sears, Roebuck catalog. Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen describe the Sears, Roebuck Company as “an ingenious blend of evocative propaganda and superbly orchestrated distribution system.” By the 1910s, Sears was shipping everything—even plans and parts for mansions and bungalows—with remarkable speed into the remotest spots in the American hinterland. Henry Ford studied Sears’s streamlined distribution system as he contemplated automobile manufacturing. The Sears plant was built on a forty acre tract in Chicago, with buildings connected by pipes, wires, railroad tracks and underground tunnels. The Merchandise Building housed a clothing factory and could receive a sixty-car train; freight handlers worked night and day, in any weather. Two thousand people opened and processed more than nine hundred sacks of mail a day. The express companies, railroads, telegraph companies and post offices all managed branches on the grounds.

Sears’s sheer size precluded the need to mark prices up significantly from wholesale: local and regional retailers rightly saw Ward’s and Sears’s catalogs as a deadly threat to their businesses.

Chain stores piled into the same territory. Begun by coffee and tea merchants in the nineteenth century (the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, or
A & P), the chain concept had spread to mercantile, groceries, variety stores, five-and-ten stores, notion stores, and drugstores, and eventually into hardware and automobile parts. Chains could not usually handle the extensive variety of goods that catalogs did, nor did they sell with the style and spectacle of John Wanamaker. But they allowed members to pool purchasing, advertising, and retailing expertise and services, so they offered economies of scale. Chain stores displayed cheaply, too, laying merchandise on counters to be examined. And they reached out to smaller towns and cities, seizing opportunities to fill unmet needs and new markets: for a store right in town, for a place to buy the new mass-market cosmetics, tobacco, and cheaper garments.

In the 1920s, many regional chains had become national. J. C. Penney, for example, opened one “Golden Rule” “junior department store” in tiny Kemmerer, Wyoming, in 1902. By 1923, his 475 self-named stores dotted the continent. Chains of all kinds combined wholesale and retail operations under the same management; they drew fire from the small shop owners, large local dry-goods merchants, and other retailers that they undercut. In the South, several political movements led by retailers sought unsuccessfully to heavily tax chain stores, or even outlaw them. During the farm crisis of the 1920s, overproduction and man-made environmental disaster caused the bottom to fall out of agricultural prices, and farmers’ standards of living fell, too. As bank foreclosures forced farmers off the land, the catalog stores lost their markets and began to desert the countryside, following the rural population to the cities, where they too tried to start over.

By 1930, the landscape of mass consumption had been laid down: it featured an astounding number of spaces for shopping and a variety of ways of selling, from urban fantasy palaces to chain-managed mom-and-pops. Things could be bought in person, by mail, by telegraph, by telephone. The diverse and cutthroat retail environment was always unstable, and it was transformed again during the following decade. During the 1920s, waves of mergers set off in large part by investment banking firms forced chain stores to continue to combine “to dominate and control competition.” The catalog houses, the mass-market retailers, and the national chains pushed the department stores toward greater concentration, threatening to displace them as they all had displaced many small retailers at the turn of the century. Although department stores were “formidable local corporations” with enormous clout, they were now forced to become part of regional and eventually national systems of stores. Getting and spending were spurred on by the dreams represented on catalog pages and in store windows, and increasingly, by credit offered by the stores, but finally consumption depended on

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wages. As the economic boom of the 1920s collapsed into the Depression of the 1930s, all of retailing was deeply shaken by high rates of business failure and the stalling of consumer spending. The crisis of overproduction resulted in still more concentration, as big fish ate little fish, and in sharp calls for federal intervention. New Deal policies of “reinflation” aimed to bring wages up and stabilize prices, and so pull the economy out of free fall. Finally, only a war-based economy of mass production offered a way out of crisis.

Extending the democracy of individual desires to the furthest reaches of the continent, the landscape of consumption was—and remains, as we will see—the result of processes of social decision making that privileged the desires of the most powerful private interests. Enormous institutional and political force had been brought to bear by the national corporations producing the goods, by the investment banks interested in the expansion of the producers, by the distribution system, by the merchants themselves, and by direct federal intervention. All these forces helped make sure that the culture of consumption would succeed and expand. Telegraphy and, later, the telephone facilitated consumption’s spread. Transport by railway lines and later trucklines, and the extension of mail and shipping service, had been publicly subsidized, if not built outright at government expense. The advancing concentration of the industry had been protected by state and federal courts. All these political choices privileged the general interests and goals of the large producers over the resistance of labor, farmers, smaller merchants, and consumer organizations.23

Shopping Moves to the Suburbs

The shopping world would see another enormous expansion after the years of the Depression, one that would build an even more intense and now suburban landscape. As early as the 1920s, small shopping strips and “business blocks,” with drugstores, groceries, and movie theaters, sprouted in the streetcar suburbs. As car use grew, these blocks began to trace the automobile arteries as well. Suburbanization and investment in retail real estate went hand in hand. At first, the new shopping strips were developed a few buildings at a time, and on a neighborhood scale, in what was a slow, labor-intensive, high-maintenance way for local businessmen to make money.24 Until the late 1940s, the collection of retail stores managed by a single landlord and designed to pull in shoppers from a large area was unknown. Just after World War II, a few elegant shopping centers anchored by department stores established a beachhead in the new suburbs, as real-estate developers took the department-store concept and reinvented it as the mall. Still, the
numbers of these centers remained very small. Not until the late 1950s and early 1960s was there an explosion in both number and scale of shopping centers.25

Although rising income played a role, the postwar retail building push was not just a response to new affluence. Mall building boomed because of national policies. Federally financed mortgage insurance made possible the vast extension of suburban building after World War II. A rapid rise in automobile ownership and the federal postwar highway building programs allowed large numbers of people—and retail businesses—to move out of the downtowns.26 At the same time, in some parts of the urban United States, the mobility of industrial capital had already begun pulling plants and businesses out of urban areas, setting off the racialized “urban crisis” of the 1960s and prefiguring the catastrophic deindustrialization of the 1980s.27 According to Lizabeth Cohen, “between 1947 and 1953 alone, the suburban population increased by 43 percent, in contrast to a general population increase of 11 percent,” and this population was increasingly racially and ethnically segregated.28

Tax and lending laws were changed at this time to favor the interests of large real-estate developers and investors. Tax write-offs, construction loan interest write-offs, low capital gains tax rates for real-estate profits, and especially a tax maneuver called “accelerated depreciation” added up reasons for the very wealthy to speculate in buildings and land. Basically, 1950s tax laws helped turn retail real estate from a slow into a fast way to make money. Accelerated depreciation allowed the income from many kinds of buildings to be written off as a tax loss from the first years of a structure’s life, so that “an investor making a profit from rental of a new building usually avoided all taxes on that income,” according to historian Thomas Hanchett.29 With vacant land scarce and expensive in the cities, suburban and exurban malls and shopping centers (and hotels, motels, apartment and office buildings) now attracted venture capital looking for a quick return. Because it was taken only on new construction, the accelerated depreciation deduction was “a powerful force” underpinning the growth of suburbs, as investors pulled dollars, businesses, and jobs away from downtowns.30

Meanwhile, the control of real-estate investment was fast moving away from local capital, upward and outward to a national class of the wealthiest Americans. Fewer than 1 percent of Americans qualified for the tax-shelter benefits of accelerated deduction.31 Between 1955 and 1970, nearly thirteen thousand shopping centers had been built, and although some modest changes aimed at recapturing tax revenue were made to the code, “the shopping center construction boom continued with only minor changes in pace
through the 1970s and into the 1980s.” In 1981, the Reagan administration tax cut set off still another wave of retail building. By 1998, the United States had 5.33 billion leasable square feet of retail space in 43,600 operating shopping centers. Of these, nearly 2,000 were regional malls larger than 400,000 square feet; 379 were supermalls of more than a million square feet.

From the mid-1950s, the mall builders hired the best architects and elaborated the shopping-center form. The basic mall model was composed of small stores clustered around big anchor retailers, and unified by leasing policy. In 1956, the Viennese-born architect Victor Gruen introduced the idea of the indoor, inward-facing, climate-controlled environment at Southdale Plaza in Edina, Minnesota, a weatherproofed reproduction of the center city. As the mall form evolved, it was typically located outside cities on outlying highways, and designed to attract shoppers over regions of one hundred square miles or more. Paradoxically, Gruen’s theory held that rational shopping planning could rescue the old commercial downtown from the siege of congestion, inconvenience, and crime. In the process, the mall experiments helped deal the death blow to the old downtowns.

The regional malls were often constructed by developers who owned department stores, and they followed many old department-store rules. As at Wanamakers, lighting and color and decor were important; now sound, temperature, and interior landscaping using streams, waterfalls, trees, and faux vistas were added in. Like the department stores, regional malls absorbed and created community activities, housing local organizations as they worked to legitimate themselves as civic centers. In early New Jersey malls, “well-attended programs and exhibitions taught shoppers about such ‘hot’ topics in the 1950s and 1960s as space exploration, color television, modern art and civics.” Lizabeth Cohen adds that “Evening concerts and plays, ethnic entertainment, dances and classes for teenagers, campaign appearances by electoral candidates, community outreach for local charities,” were all ways that malls made themselves central and indispensable to community life.

But mall designers and managers were making up new rules. Building centrally planned, entirely privately owned commercial space that was also designed to be collective space, mall developers used commercial market segmentation to shape community life. Designed to pull particular kinds of shoppers, drawn from favorable demographics and income groups, the community life contained in the mall was determined largely by landlords and retailers. The community engineering techniques were designed to overcome the anarchy and chaos of the old downtown. As such, the new techniques were (and remain) based in market research, the pseudoscientific
study and surveillance of particular consumers. Market research also sorts
and ranks consumers according to the client’s preferences. In the case of
mall developers, these preferences were clear. As Cohen found, from as
early as the 1950s, regional malls were built on specific exclusionary racial,
economic, and political terms. The profit needs of developers and the shop-
ping needs of affluent suburbanites took precedence over the consumption
and social needs of the poor and the working class, even when the poor lived
nearby. In Paramus, New Jersey, just outside Manhattan, for example, malls
were built to serve automobile owners, who tended to be richer and whiter
than the rest of the area’s population. Many people of more modest incomes
lived within a half-hour drive. Even the bus routes and schedules favored
white suburban shoppers. And insofar as mall space was public space, it was
now privatized public space—not just a contradiction in terms, but also a
contradiction of democratic principles. Political speech and personal expres-
sion took place when and as they suited the owners and landlords, as Cohen
demonstrates.

The concentrated ownership and centralized control of mall space gave
rise to a “science of malling,” designed to give owners fair certainty over
rents and percentages of sales, and investors reliably larger returns. The “sci-
ence” began with the location of the development itself. After a center was
built, its “centralized administration made possible the perfect mix and ‘sci-
entific’ placement of stores, meeting customers’ diverse needs” as the devel-
oper understood these, “and maximizing store owners’ profits.” From the
1950s on, developers and landlords strongly favored national chains and
franchises over local stores, and malls expressed an impressive level of ration-
alization and standardization, a sameness that would be extended, expand-
ed, and sometimes successfully camouflaged over the next decades.39

Urban historian Kenneth Jackson calls the shopping mall American cul-
ture’s “most distinctive product of the post-war years.”40 He may be wrong.
Although shopping malls give work to the most sophisticated architects and
designers, and so attract the interest of architectural and cultural historians
and theorists, the bedrock of the shopping world is the homely discount
store. Discount houses began at the same time as the malls, and out of the
same impulses. In the 1950s, they were good investments and a solution to
the problem of distributing the wider range of postwar consumer products;
they flourished by reaching out to shoppers left out of or priced out of the
department-store market, and the former customers of the old catalogs, va-
riety, and five-and-dime stores. The first discount stores were nearly secret
operations, or at least they had a slightly back-alley atmosphere. Opened in
warehouses or lofts in big cities, they recruited customers only by word of
mouth about their low prices. In the 1950s and 1960s, discount-store moguls pulled together large chains, such as Kresge (later K Mart), Target, and Woolco, in cities and suburbs, to feature a broad range of soft and hard goods, often with nationally known brand names, usually at prices below those set by manufacturers. In contrast to the malls, discounters operated on the supermarket model of long hours, self-service, and cheaper locations. By 1960, sales by discount retailers had caught up with those of department stores, and soon they surpassed them, until by the early 1970s discounting was the largest segment of the retail industry.

It was Sam Walton’s genius to realize that even as late as 1960, 40 percent of the American population still lived on farms and in small cities or towns that lacked a department store, or even a national retailer such as Sears. Walton built up a small cluster of Arkansas five-and-dime stores into a regional network of discount stores in the western South by buying up and beating down variety-store competition. He saw population growth in the Sun Belt’s future; he took advantage of its cheap, nonunion labor and inexpensive real estate. A Wal-Mart was typically located on a connector highway outside a small community. In many cases, it soon became the community’s retail center, drawing business away not only from smaller local retailers, but also from nearby towns. It was not only location: Wal-Mart’s many ways of driving down costs gave rural people a chance to buy the city’s brand-name goods at lower prices. Wal-Marts were and remain strictly functional-looking, no-frills, windowless boxes surrounded by forty-acre parking lots. The entire Wal-Mart environment telegraphs—down to the calculator on the handle of the shopping cart—that no expense has been spared to cut prices. Because it controlled expenses so ruthlessly and expanded so aggressively, Wal-Mart’s new store openings, square footage, and gross sales figures grew through the 1960s at double-digit rates. By the late 1970s, Wal-Mart had steamrolled Sears and K Mart to become the nation’s largest retailer. In the 1980s building boom, it led the retail industry in construction of new stores. In 1997, Wal-Mart’s 728,000 employees rang up more than $104 billion in sales. The company is now the world’s largest retailer. With some one hundred thousand different product lines, a Wal-Mart evokes a sense of unlimited possibility, a world where happiness and democracy equal a warehouse of cheap plenty.

Cruel Abundance

The discount “big boxes” and the regional mall are, arguably, the two poles of the shopping world, defining the consumer experiences of the entire
American population. Whereas Wal-Mart space is crowded and utilitarian, mall design techniques present a carnivalesque play of color, cultural diversity, and seeming unpredictability. Mall space appears to endlessly recombine a variety of stories about culture and history—to contain a whole world of colonial seaports, Mediterranean hill towns, or Rocky Mountain lodges—but the available themes are severely limited and the upscale goods entirely familiar, if always changing.

Although sharply different, as environments the mall and the discount store both convey a basic message: the world’s abundance is incredible, and Americans have a fundamental and endowed right to consume what they want of it. Paradoxically, the flood of high-quality, even luxury, goods at cheap prices has helped the American middle-class standard of consumption seem within reach, even while the mass of Americans’ income and chances have been eroded. This is the most important ideological effect of the discounters. They are delivering the consumer entitlements of middle-class life to people whose very class identity is precarious.

The celebration of abundance is peculiar and, ultimately, cruel, premised as it is on the radical separation of consumption from production. The great department stores of the late nineteenth century were built in major cities, not only because that was where the shoppers lived, but because the stores needed proximity to the factories producing the goods they sold. Yet, although manufacturing processes were visible nearby, the department-store displays made the processes of production nearly invisible, even while they foregrounded and elaborated the service labor of fitting, selling, and delivery. (This was and remains even truer of catalogs.)

At the end of the twentieth century, whether in the big box or the boutique, the invisibility of production processes became more severe. Manufacturing has been extensively internationalized since 1980. Retailers’ profits today depend heavily on unprecedentedly cheap brand-name goods made in poor countries under sweatshop conditions—in some cases, even under conditions of slavery. Neoliberal policies—the North American Free Trade Agreement is the best known of these in the United States—have lowered trade barriers, and weakened labor rights and environmental standards around the world, creating unprecedented mobility of capital. Jobs and manufacturing processes have been exported out of the United States to economically desperate and Western-dominated countries such as Mexico, Haiti, El Salvador, China, Korea, Poland, Thailand, and Turkey, many of which have been forced by U.S.-led “structural adjustment” programs to become, more than ever before, the cheap labor pool for the wealthy world. Trade agreements privileging U.S., European, and Japanese capital, and the coordination of a rapid,
international “intermodal” transport system of ports, shipping, long-distance trucking, and railroads, have accelerated the importation of very cheap goods into the United States.42

These changes in policy and the international division of labor have made mass-market discounters possible. Once again, as the world’s largest retailer, Wal-Mart provides a good example. In 1998, the New York-based National Labor Committee (NLC) found that the company’s subcontracting vendors in Honduras were paying clothing-factory workers forty-three cents an hour, only 54 percent of the cost of bare physical survival in that country. Honduras was, in that year, the fourth-largest exporter of apparel to the United States worldwide, after China/Hong Kong, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic, with more than one hundred thousand maquiladora (assembly plant) workers, mostly young women fourteen to sixteen years old, sewing clothing for export to the United States in 151 factories. Many Wal-Mart (and Sears and J. C. Penney) suppliers in Honduras are Korean-owned: they produce such brand names and store lines as Nike, Yankee, Ecotex, White Stag, McKids, Faded Glory, Arizona, and Simply Basic. The NLC points out that Wal-Mart’s profits never grow fast enough. Even while the company is making fabulous profits off young women who are routinely subject to forced overtime and denied union representation and the right to organize—young women who can only be described as desperately poor—Wal-Mart turns around and squeezes tax subsidies out of Honduras, further immiserating its people. According to the NLC report, “Wal-Mart and its contractors use free trade zones, which are 100 percent tax free—no corporate taxes, no entry or exit tariffs, not even a sales tax can be collected.” Wal-Mart’s low prices are directly subsidized by Hondurans, “despite the fact that Wal-Mart’s annual sales [for 1997 were] 98 times greater than the entire national budget” of that country.43

Lest it seem that Wal-Mart’s subcontractors in Honduras are a painful aberration, the NLC and other labor, student, and religious activist groups working on labor issues have documented many other cases. In 1998, NLC-connected activists studied twenty-one sweatshops in China, where forty-four thousand apparel factories employ more than four million workers. They found that with impetus from major labels such as Ann Taylor, Kathie Lee/Wal-Mart, Esprit, the Limited, Liz Claiborne, and Ralph Lauren, subcontractors were lowering their already starvation-level wages and moving shops to unmonitored and unregulated provinces in southern China. The activists showed that the American retailers who take in one-third of China’s total world exports are actually lowering standards in China, even disposing factory owners to use slave labor. Although the NLC focused on Wal-Mart,
it found that expensive boutiques such as Ralph Lauren or Ann Taylor rely just as heavily on the eighty-hour week at twenty-three cents an hour. Paying prestige prices does not buy the consumer distance from the sweatshops.44

**Appearances Deceive**

Another apparent difference between a Wal-Mart and an upscale mall is in the design of the architectural, visual, and aural textures of shopping. To a large extent, shopping’s qualities as consumer experience and social interaction are the result of careful study and formulas that dictate “the mix” of products, in the case of discounters, and of products, tenants, and their wares, in the case of malls. Wal-Mart simply has different design consultants than the Mills, Simon, or Westfield companies.45 Nevertheless, centralized planning and commercial logic create a sameness underlying aesthetic differences. There is only one justification for the presence of any feature or any kind of store: sales per square foot.46

Differences also disappear as the shopping landscape grows unchecked. Paco Underhill, one of the many selling experts, sees the flood of goods and the overproduction of space creating the same underlying problems for malls and discounters alike. “We are now dangerously over-retailed—too much is for sale, through too many outlets. The economy, even at its strongest[,] cannot keep up with retailing’s growth. . . . Retailers are not opening stores in the United States to serve new markets anymore. They are opening stores to try to steal someone else’s customers.”47 With so many things to sell in so much retail space—malls alone contribute an average of sixteen square feet of shopping space for every man, woman, and child in the United States—competition is ferocious. And American customers are harder to find. Although shopping is considered a major recreational activity, partly because of longer working days for women, the “number of trips made to malls annually has . . . fallen,” often in favor of trips to the big box. The average visit to a mall has been more than cut in half since 1994, reduced from one and a half or two hours to forty minutes.48 Most important, although a small proportion of the population has become staggeringly rich as tax cuts and the stock market shifted wealth upward in the 1980s and 1990s, the majority of American incomes have stagnated or slipped since the 1970s. The unified, cross-class American market for goods that industrial production and rationalized distribution helped build is considered “dead” by today’s retailers.49 Regional shopping malls have had to focus on the proportionately smaller quality markets, as the discounters and shopping centers duke it out over nearly everyone else. Niche chains aimed at the affluent
are sprouting, and even Wal-Mart is trying to spin off substores in search of the well-off.⁵⁰

Another response to the need to keep sales expanding is thematic differentiation, refreshing and restyling the shopping spaces. Finally, a less flashy strategy is concentration of ownership, a reprise and continuation of the waves of mergers that shook American retailing in the early 1930s.

The Shopping Landscape Conquered

Regional mall chains, themselves the results of mergers and acquisitions, are being combined into behemoth packages, and new chains are being built by a shrinking number of development-management conglomerates. In the early 1980s, prominent California developer Ernest Hahn noted: “There are probably fifteen developers throughout the country who are readily accepted by the chains, and fifteen develop about 90% of all regional shopping center space in the United States.” He noted that each developer had outgrown an original geography of influence, and all were now “leapfrogging around the country.”⁵¹ Twenty years later, the number of companies is even smaller, and the leapfrogging transoceanic. In 1980, Hahn combined with Trizec, a Canadian development company, to make TrizecHahn. In 1998, Westfield America (a subsidiary of an Australian mall conglomerate) added TrizecHahn’s twenty American malls to its holdings, in the process acquiring some of the most profitable centers in the western United States.⁵² The results can be seen in San Diego, the sixth-largest metropolitan area in the United States, where seven of the ten largest and busiest malls are now Westfield Villages. Westfield is reported to own 34.2 million square feet of retail space in the United States alone.⁵³ In Australia, the term Westfield is used interchangeably with mall, and the company hopes to change the American usage, too. Also in 1998, Simon DeBartolo Group, itself an agglomeration of Mall of America builder Melvin Simon’s and real-estate magnate Edward DeBartolo’s (previously separate) development companies, became the largest owner of retail properties in the United States. DeBartolo-Simon bought Corporate Property Investors, adding two dozen premier regional shopping malls and New York City’s General Motors building to give the Simon Property conglomerate 221 retail sites around the United States.⁵⁴ The second-largest company after Simon Property is the aptly named General Growth. General Growth spent more than $930 million acquiring malls in 1998 alone, ending up with interests in 121 major sites.

The largest and most profitable shopping malls in the United States are now concentrated in the hands of a very few owners, and these conglomer-
ates coordinate development, design, and management. Concentration works for both the largest tenants and the owners. Malls need “anchors,” and conglomerate mall groups appeal to the important national department stores and retailer chains because they have deep pockets, and so can offer their tenants broad choice in the selection and design of new sites. Size allows mall management companies to lower overhead costs by demanding tax and zoning concessions from local governments; it lets them negotiate more cheaply for private services such as security, marketing, and advertising. And, from the behemoth’s point of view, consolidation “makes sense in the retail sector because the ability to control multiple locations and to dominate individual markets gives pricing power and the ability to leverage [leases and other kinds of revenue] with large chains.”

This latest and unprecedented wave of concentration was made possible by the invention of a new financial instrument to serve the owners’ interests. In the 1990s, the developer-owners reconstituted themselves as publicly traded real-estate investment trusts (REITs), answerable to Wall Street and to such enormous institutional investors as pension funds. REITs were invented “to turn an illiquid asset, namely land and buildings, into a commodity that can be traded and repackaged like mortgages and pork-bellies.” In return for significant tax sheltering, REITs are required to distribute 95 percent of their short-term profits annually: they draw investors by promising generous and stable, short-term income, rather than longer-term, appreciation. Concentration and consolidation are favored as a way to keep these immediate profits coming. It should be emphasized that what the REITs are taking to market are what most of us experience as the core of our neighborhoods. Shopping malls and centers have become not only the central location of essential services and employment, but our popular hangouts and meeting places as well.

While concentration results in stability for owners, it also means higher rents for many retail tenants, and numbingly predictable experiences for shoppers. Malls and smaller shopping centers have been formula-driven for decades, but, as the REITs have looked to enlarge income streams and more predictability, they seek out the big chains “with proven track records” that can better afford the higher rents and will apply their well-understood designs. The pro formas are recycled everywhere, so that the franchise-dominated collection of retailers makes malls and neighborhood centers across America more and more the same. Redeveloped downtowns and suburban village centers are increasingly marked by the same mix, and smaller entrepreneurs face brutal competition even to find a spot from which to go up “against the tried-and-true” franchises.
Meanwhile, petty entrepreneurs who cannot occupy REIT space at all are pushed to street corners and vacant lots (true small-scale street retailing is usually permitted only in very poor neighborhoods). They may find spots in flea markets, swap meets, or sagging older malls, where a vibrant market culture flourishes, although it is always one step ahead of the urban improvers. The recycling and reuse of abandoned and declining malls, shopping centers, strips, and even big boxes is a growth industry. In areas where “the diverse demographic make-up of the trade area makes no sense to investment bankers used to crunching numbers derived from homogeneous suburban areas,” where shopping patterns are easily tracked, grocery and drugstore chains mingle with a roster of tenants the REITs will not touch: check-cashing outlets, off-price clothing stores, mom-and-pop video and deli combinations, and special local services for immigrants.

Overbuilding and the costs of mergers and buyouts place pressure on both discount and upscale retailers to get the maximum out of their properties, which means getting the maximum from their customers. Wal-Mart, for example, must satisfy its shareholders: it must continue to live up to its reputation as a growth company that enjoys tremendous gains every year. So the shopping world employs a number of strategies. One way to continue to grow at home is to incorporate more and more profitable activities from the rest of the retail world. For example, Wal-Mart’s strategy is to fold in its peripheral competition—specialty chains, auto supply and repair, optometrists, photodeveloping, drugstores, banks, and even supermarkets—into its stores. The resulting agglomerations are called supercenters. But the company is also building relatively small “neighborhood markets” (essentially giant 7-Elevens, scaled at a mere forty thousand square feet) for close-to-home shopping trips and gasoline fill-ups.

Retailing Social Services

Other ways of extracting profits from overbuilt space include absorbing previously nonprofit spheres of activity and working them into the shopping world. For example, a way to get people shopping longer is to provide needed social services, especially those that have withered in the tax-starved and defunded public sector. Early department stores experimented with providing drop-in day nurseries for female shoppers. Today, shopping malls are experimenting with installing baby-sitting drop-offs, full-scale day-care centers, and pay-to-enter playgrounds on the premises. Retail developers consider the new chains that provide such services “desirable because they attract a
coveted market,” help that market stay at the shopping center longer, and can occupy large, difficult to lease spaces, such as former supermarkets. Mall managers are also appealing to city and suburban parents’ fears of public space by building parks and recreation centers—even schools—on the premises. Of elaborate indoor playgrounds, the J. W. Tumbles, Gymboree, and Discovery Zone franchises are the best known. An experiment with lots of ups and downs—it has been in Chapter 11 bankruptcy twice in ten years—Discovery Zone aimed at families with small children. The chain was founded in 1989 by a gymnastics coach “who figured harried parents—particularly on rainy days—would happily pay for a clean, safe, indoor play area filled with games, mazes and climbing areas.” At Discovery Zones, adults usually watch while children play by themselves, or are led through all kinds of fun, from traditional arcades to movies, videos, and computer games, by peppy, college-aged staff. “We offer a safe secure environment,” said Chuck Gelman, a vice president of marketing. “Let’s face it, you can’t go to an outdoor playground in a lot of areas. It’s a treat for the kids, and it’s a hell of a value. Think about the price of mom taking her three kids to the movie.” In recent years, Discovery Zone spokespeople have said that the company is exploring holding “music, dance, and computer classes at the centers; hosting parties for Christmas, Halloween and other holidays; even sponsoring parent groups.” “We see ourselves in the future as a paid for community center,” Donna Moore, the president and CEO, proclaimed in 1996.

Where retailing and families with children meet one expects to find the Walt Disney Company. Disney’s ambitious Club Disney projects have tried to fold diversion, recreation, self-improvement, and Disney media content into the suburban mall. Its first 24,500-square-foot Club Disney, in Thousand Oaks, California, contained “more than a dozen play areas in four intensively themed sections based on Disney characters.” Disney has promoted its clubs as specifically educational, offering “multimedia and science workshops and parentchild [sic] art classes.”

In late 1999, Disney folded its much-heralded kids’ clubs, shutting down five large facilities. After extensive promotion, the company apparently found that there were limits on the steady return market for Club Disney, and that its pay-to-enter community services were expensive to run. Disney was also overextended and vulnerable in a shaky international economy. We will see more Club Disney and Discovery Zone experiments, however, because the problems these products aim to solve remain. On the one hand, the urban and suburban infrastructure of public places and services for children has gaping holes. On the other hand, commercial space has become one of the most important spaces in which children hang out, socialize, and...
come to know themselves. Undoubtedly, there will be more experimentation with for-profit, franchised spaces to pick up the after-school, before-school, and weekend slack. And, like Club Disney and Discovery Zone, these market-driven places will continue to be vulnerable to shifts in the national and international economy. Their supposedly useful social functions will be available only to those who can afford them, and they will provide services just as long as they make sense to the conglomerate bottom line.

That’s Entertainment

Making shopping spaces more interactive and “full of experiences” “rather than simply functional” brings people out to shop. So landlords have multiplied entertainment outlets inside malls and megamalls, in an attempt to build “urban entertainment districts,” spaces trying to replicate the intensity of an old downtown in a superregional mall, or even in an exurban strip of supercenters. “Modern consumers shop as if they are sightseeing,” and “They are looking for and having the same kinds of experiences they would if they were on vacation or on tours,” affirms retail designer Simon Graj. Indeed, part of what Graj sells is the vision of a public life remembered from an older city. Ontario Mills Mall in Ontario, California (one of a national chain of Mills Company malls), devotes more than one-quarter of its one million square feet of retail space to cineplexes, with more than thirty screens at last count. Attempting to create urban bustle for the dispersed high-desert suburbs, Ontario Mills fills in around its discount stores with themed restaurants and specialty theaters, featuring nature movies, a wildlife museum, film rides, a Dave and Buster’s, and a Gameworks video arcade. The vast mall is trying to be not only a regional entertainment district for southern California, but an international tourist attraction. Ontario Mills runs special buses from the Los Angeles airport for international, mostly Japanese, visitors.

Making stores and entire malls more like theme parks has become a popular strategy for developers. Many have literally folded entertainment and media content into the three-dimensional space of the mall, the boutique, or the discount store. Real-estate developers are striking partnerships with entertainment corporations such as Disney, Warner Brothers, the Discovery Channel, and even the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, in hopes that the powerful brand identity and mass-media presence will assure steady streams of shoppers. There are seven hundred Disney Stores in high-rent malls and shopping districts worldwide, presenting Disney’s proprietary media products (videos, books, music, and collectible cartoon cels) and licensed merchandise (clothing, jewelry, housewares, and figurines). Similar-
ly, Viacom “converged” its six most popular brands—Nickelodeon (cable network), Nick at Nite (cable programming), MTV and VH1 (music TV programming), Paramount Pictures, and Star Trek—“under one roof in one retail environment” in a Michigan Avenue store in Chicago. As a merchandising point, the Viacom store was designed to sell videos, music, and souvenirs based on such vintage shows and films as *I Love Lucy, Happy Days, The Brady Bunch,* and *The Godfather,* as well as newer products such as *Cheers,* or *Forrest Gump.* The Chicago Viacom store was so successful after a first year that in 1998 the company announced that it would build seventeen more. But only a year later, Viacom announced that it was closing all its stores. The main reason is saturation of a relatively small market. Viacom had to compete with Disney, Sony, and Warner Brothers in an increasingly crowded and expensive bricks-and-mortar world. At the same time, as licensed merchandise has become more important to conglomerate profits and more closely tied to animated film promotion, the enormous retailers Wal-Mart, Target, and Sears will not be left out. They now carry essentially the same licensed toys and clothing. The studio stores have helped produce a glut, and their emphasis on the brand may have made them, paradoxically, too dependent on their own product.70

Although some have been unsuccessful, the remaining conglomerate-themed stores do triple duty for their owners. In addition to selling merchandise and creating an attraction, they are designed to promote the film, music, and television products of the parent company, and they serve as places for the massive enterprises to try out new products on customers. Importantly, they also “bomb the brand”—building familiarity and identification with the company itself—and this may be just as important in the long run as sales figures for any particular year.71

Retailers are intensifying profits by pushing space’s promotional possibilities to new limits. Shopping space is not for shopping alone: it is being filled more densely than ever before with all kinds of advertisements. Simon Properties now considers itself a brand—a brand of commercial space—and is inviting advertisers to rent kiosk and billboard space inside its malls.72 Video has potential for in-store and in-mall promotion, and it is widely used to fill time with ideas about what to buy and why, as anyone who has ever waited in line at a Sears knows. But there is room for more. *Advertising Age* reports that “marketers increasingly are realizing the potential of in-store entertainment fixtures, such as walls of TV screens, scattered TV monitors, or audio systems.”73 Polaroid, for example, has recently screened a commercial inside almost two thousand mass-merchandise malls around the United States. In fall 1998, country-music superstar Garth Brooks debuted a new album via a
live concert broadcast exclusively into hundreds of American Wal-Marts. Martha Stewart, a media mogul in her own right as well as a home and lifestyle maven, has injected a huge new revenue stream into K Mart via sales of her brand-name products, heavily promoted in her television shows, online shopping service, magazines, and books. Retailers have also discovered that they can sell video or audio time in their own stores, essentially renting the attention of their customers, and national mall-management chains are negotiating similar deals with television networks, as well as local television and radio stations. For example, Wells Park Group, a national mall manager, will offer “media partner[s] space in common areas or in stores in exchange for on-air promotions.” In such common commercial space, people will take shopping breaks to watch commercial television.

Global Dreams

Growth remains the central problem, and, for the dominant players, the discounters, the most important avenue to continued profits is international expansion. Shopping American-style is expanding globally. Because few places inside the United States remain Wal-Mart–free, Wal-Mart is now focused on “young populations in understored countries,” that is, on parts of the globe with sufficient disposable income to support American-style retailing. Between 1991 and 1997, Wal-Mart’s international sales rose from zero to $4.8 billion and Wal-Mart became the top retailer in Mexico and Canada. Europe has potential for superstores. In Germany, Wal-Mart has bought up well-established chains of “hypermarkets” in major population areas and is undercutting competitors by offering nearly wholesale prices; it is contemplating similar moves into France and England. In Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina the company is building new stores and acquiring existing networks of small grocery chains and bodegas. Whether or not Wal-Mart or Target or K Mart executives decide to acquire stores in any particular country, these companies are so large that even an expression of interest sets off a wave of price-cutting, as stores “gird for a price war.” Industry consolidation speeds up as companies look for partners to help them fend off a buyout.

Total Market Research

At home, market saturation puts ever more pressure on both mall and discount-store companies to sell more to their customers—and to do this they conduct endless research on shoppers. Since the early 1980s, computerized information systems have transformed the shopping world. Where
ordering, accounting, billing, and payroll once took place nearly entirely on paper, now computers can “collect and sift through mountains of data,” and telephone lines and satellites “transmit that data and . . . link stores, buyers, warehouses, and manufacturers in one vast web.” Again, Wal-Mart has been an aggressive leader of the general transformation. The company early on adopted the Universal Product Code (scanned bar-code) system and built its own private satellite network. These investments allowed Wal-Mart to move from old-fashioned warehousing to a “just-in-time” distribution system, in which merchandise is shipped on a short schedule from massive central distribution centers. This helps the company follow the classic precepts of frequent merchandise turnover and keeping inventory costs low. Retail Link, Wal-Mart’s proprietary sales data system, is designed to give the company’s own executives a complete picture, on any given day, of where goods are and how fast they are selling, from factory to checkout counter. But Retail Link has allowed Wal-Mart to demand that its biggest suppliers ruthlessly cut production and shipping costs, too. The point-of-sale data feeds into the executive offices of Wal-Mart’s suppliers, so that daily knowledge of what people are buying helps manufacturer and retailer coordinate more closely. For example, the CEO of Foster Grant sunglasses says, “We have been forced to become more efficient. We have to continuously get our costs down if we want to do business with Wal-Mart.” Computers are also used to track work hours, as is true in many other industries, to keep sales, warehouse, labor, and benefits costs down by holding workers to part-time schedules.

Computerized collection and analysis of sales data allows tastes and preferences for goods to be studied and store stocks customized to region and locality. Here, too, Wal-Mart arguably leads, but the rest of the industry has the same aspiration to know its customers totally. Moving from gross sales figures to a finer scale, Wal-Mart conducts “market basket analysis.” With a capacity of twenty-four terabytes in an “IBM-provided environment” of five thousand UNIX servers, Wal-Mart’s computer system makes possible the scrutiny of every item in the store, cart by cart and basket by basket. Wal-Mart can map the paths shoppers take through the store, and thus determine “the most effective location for displays of items on special promotions, and even what time of day an item is most likely to be purchased.” “We are actually finding out what is in each shopping cart,” says one executive. “If someone bought a Barbie doll, what else did they buy? Were there complementary items? Where did the customers walk in the store?” It is even possible, using video cameras, to track which part of the stores shoppers visit without buying anything. The resulting micromerchandising breakthroughs may seem trivial—putting the Barbie dolls near the chocolate bars greatly expands the sales of both, for
example—but the important thing is to enhance sales continually, square foot by square foot and product by product, in large part by encouraging impulse buying. As coldly instrumental as Wal-Mart’s computerized information gathering is, exactly the same process takes place within the neighborhood grocery store, the festival mall, and the elegant boutique. Unplanned and unneeded purchases are essential to the profits of American retailing.

The front lines of market research are now in stores, and research reaches beyond focus groups and phone surveys. Indeed, all of shopping is deeply shaped by processes of information gathering. Although information gathering is often cast as a service to the consumer—helping manufacturers understand the shopper’s needs better, respond to them more precisely, and offer better prices—a 90 percent failure rate for new products, as well as market saturation, drives data gathering. In-store researchers corner consumers right as they reach for the product on the shelf, accosting them to ask why they have picked out a particular tube of toothpaste, and sometimes paying them for answers.

Shopping, in short, has become the site of intensive scrutiny, even surveillance. Paco Underhill’s behavioral research firm, Envirosell, has developed a range of techniques for plumbing the interaction between “consumers and products, and consumers and commercial spaces.” As its name implies, Envirosell focuses on the role of the built environment in selling, which is not surprising given that Underhill studied with the late William H. Whyte, the noted analyst of urban public spaces. At the behest of a retailer or a manufacturer, Envirosell deploys “ethnographers” to track people, following them while they shop unawares. Small time-lapse cameras and real-time video cameras, both hidden, are good sources of information on spatial relationships and display problems. A data bank several decades deep provides more comparative information. Combined with attitudinal market research and the computerized data scanned from UPCs and credit cards, Envirosell claims that its detailed studies can tell, and reshape, why people buy. Again, the goal is to expand purchases from the planned to the unplanned, from the instrumental to the expressive.

Underhill’s research has convinced him that the store itself—whatever category it falls into—is an important medium for communicating messages about products and types of products. He teaches retailers to worry a great deal about the layout, lighting, sounds, and even smells of shopping space. “Signage, shelf position, display space and special fixtures all make it either likelier or less likely that a shopper will buy a particular item, or any item at all.” Underhill’s solutions usually sound microscopic and benign—they include, for example, moving doggie treats from a high shelf to a mid-level
one, because the elderly and children tend to be the ones thinking about buying Milk-Bones, or scenting the baby-products aisles with baby-powder perfume. And retailers pay huge fees to companies such as Envirosell to uncover such tiny but telling factoids. But such small considerations, multiplied billions of times, reveal that the store has become a field where the battle against boredom and stagnation are being fought.

**So, What Should We Do? Buy Nothing?**

This essay has purposely slighted the subjective experience of shopping and its positive dimensions—the sociable pleasures of people watching in seductively designed places, the enjoyment we get from beautiful arrays of goods, and the aesthetic exercise of the perfect choice or the skillfully found bargain. I have neglected these aspects because there have been many astute and critical discussions of the experience of shopping—and many more practical treatises on how to capture and delight more customers. Instead, I have focused on the broader social and economic relationships that have made the shopping world possible. One difficulty with experiential analyses is that they mainly are focused on individual experience—which, as we know, can seem endlessly variable—and pay much less attention to shopping as a social and collective experience. A common response to the view of shopping as an experience directed from outside ourselves goes like this: because shopping offers so much pleasure, it must be offering us what we want, and further explorations are only sour and fruitless exercises that insult all of us by treating consumers as dupes. In fact, the counterargument goes, people exercise choice, and they even exercise cultural resistance, because they actively make meaning when they shop.

What I have argued instead is not that shopping is not fun, or that it should not be fun, nor even that we all do too much of it and so should feel individually guilty. There is a long history of denigrating popular consumption styles. Women, for example, have been scolded for being too absorbed with shopping and appearances for a century, even while an enormous social apparatus has been mobilized to tell them that shopping is an important female activity and to demand that they be enthusiastic about it. At the same time, women’s avenues for real choice and control in life have been narrowly limited. Bashing consumers for consuming, creating guilt, is by itself useless. As we have seen, many people in the United States are left out of any discretionary consumption. When one in four American children live in poverty, and hunger is a growing problem for people of all ages, across-the-board tirades about excessive individual spending miss the point.
Moreover, social movements aimed at the reform of consumption through a narrow focus on individual change have inherent limitations of appeal and political effect. For example, the voluntary simplicity movement encourages its members to enjoy living adequately on much, much less. These movements are useful, perhaps, insofar as they offer to help the privileged understand something about economic constraints. But the privileged, of course, can always opt out of voluntary poverty. More important, voluntary simplicity does not explore the basis for the lavish consumption on which the wealthy can indulge. It has a weak theory of social transformation, arguing for change at the level of individual habits and tastes rather than taking aim at the way political economy limits our habits and preferences.88

Most Americans do not need to buy expensive books that tell them how to do without burdensome luxuries. Most people everywhere need to have their standard of living raised, not lowered, and this includes not just higher wages to pay for necessities, but shorter working hours under better conditions, job security, a safer and healthier environment, guarantees of housing and medical care, and a healthy diet. So, in a way, criticisms of hyperconsumption and celebrations of “downshifting” can be as much of a distraction as hyperconsumption itself, diverting us from confronting the social scale of waste.

If, as I suggest, we turn our attention from individual acts of getting and spending to the physical landscape of shopping, we are connected more closely to the political-economic system of distribution that produces shopping. We can see that the transitory and expressive phenomena of shopping are part of the cultural work that mobilizes massive resources—to plan, build, sculpt, and direct the physical world, and to predict and shape behavior. By pointing to the completely unnatural nature of the overbuilt retail landscape, I am not trying to overemphasize the controlled and manipulated aspects of our world, but rather to shed light on a long-term process of social decision making. In this process, consumers have been allowed only to receive the results of decisions, rather than actively make them. Understanding that a political process produces the shopping world is an important first step toward changing it.

It is worthwhile to ask what the shopping world itself produces besides profits. One product is an ideology and culture, as William Leach has explained. Deep economic resources and the best creative energies have been allocated in one direction: upholding consumption as a value unto itself. As Herbert Schiller pointed out in The Mind Managers, the world of goods offers endless choices, recombinations, and changes, while a world of militarism, economic exploitation, environmental destruction, and race and eth-
nic stigmatization is presented to us as unchangeable, cast in concrete.\textsuperscript{89} Imagining a different world means imagining a world based on values other than consumption.

The shopping landscape not only helps distract us from the enormous social segregation by race and class that the most privileged Americans find completely natural, it helps to reproduce this segregation. Again, this is not a question of what consumers do. As we have seen, entire industries are dedicated to carefully sorting people into niche markets, building private-public spaces in the form of malls and suburbs for these markets, and keeping others out. This has been, at least, a fifty-year process, and so interventions must take place on multiple fronts. Information collection and surveillance need to be seen not only as threats to individual privacy, but as the linchpins of a process of social engineering. Market research needs to be exposed as a pseudoscience and a source of social distortion, especially when it is a basis for community development decisions.

In environmental terms, the retail landscape produces enormous waste. Shopping malls and centers have resulted in uncontrolled exurban development, or “sprawl.” Sprawl, in turn, causes increased dependence on the automobile, loss of open space, and increased air and water pollution. Sprawl is often discussed as if it merely results from bad planning, rather than from its real cause—unchecked real-estate speculation. As we have seen, shopping malls and centers are viewed by industry analysts as seriously overbuilt, but this has not stopped building. Meanwhile, the policies and leaders supporting the growth machine of the private developers suck resources out of other, much-needed, kinds of construction, for example, schools and affordable housing.

Doing something about shopping’s political economy, in particular limiting speculative development, involves slogging through community development plans and environmental impact reports, and attending planning meetings. But it is worth the effort, because “redevelopers” sometimes act in violation of state and local laws, relying mostly on the public’s lack of awareness to do so. Thus, well-informed challenges are the ones that pay off. Putting up barriers to rapid exurban growth is prudent and conservative in a good sense, because the destruction of the natural environment and older social landscapes is not an easily reversible process. Along these lines, activists in many small communities are working hard to derail the coming of big-box stores and megamalls to their towns, albeit against the enormous odds of corporate wealth and behind-the-scenes politicking.\textsuperscript{90}

The overextension of shopping also helps to destroy cultural environments. The reverse face of the retail boom is the cumulative neglect of
spaces, places, and activities that cannot be penetrated by commerce or accommodated to personal consumption; in other words, it is part of what many now feel is the inexorable commercialization of more or less everything. Ultracommercialization has been under way since at least the 1980s, when the Reagan administration kicked off the dismantling or privatization of many public programs and governmental functions, but it has accelerated sharply in recent years. For-profit playgrounds and recreation centers are examples of this continuing shift, which at present may seem a logical and uncompromising development.

Doesn’t “the market” always do it better? The answer is no. Our physical landscape already pressures people to participate in high levels of consumption of goods; it also turns things that used to be free and widely shared into products for sale. Could we be building spaces and places that do not regulate life in this way? Yes. Some media reformers advocate strong limits on commercial television for children, and the provision of noncommercial alternatives. It is time to advocate an affirmative policy of creating noncommercial, promotion-free spaces and activities in every community, especially for young people. After all, does the new junior high school have to be built adjacent to the shopping mall and the McDonald’s?

Although this critique of the political economy of shopping has refused to embrace the ideals of consumerism or the practical realities of commercialization, it has shown the importance of analyzing consumption and production as parts of a single system. This is crucial for rethinking how activist consumers can shape demands for a more transparent shopping landscape—a clearer picture of where products come from and how they are made. There is abundant evidence that the same processes of capital flight, deindustrialization, and internationalization that have increased poverty, part-time work, and more stressful and unsafe working days have created the bounty that Wal-Mart, Target, and Westfield Villages celebrate. Indeed, megaretailers have played an important part in driving wages, job security, and working conditions downward for many people—and not just Americans—as they have helped flood the world with cheap goods. It is not really an improvement in the standard of living for Nike workers in Vietnam to earn twenty-seven cents an hour and have their lives threatened for trying to organize unions, although Phil Knight wants the American public to think that it is.

Imaginative campaigns led by trade unions (especially in clothing and footwear manufacturing, such as UNITE) work to raise consumer awareness of production/consumption connections. In addition, the 1998–99 campus campaigns against sweatshops, as well as the work of the National Labor Committee, provide inspiring examples of organizing, research, and public
awareness campaigns. We need real and serious restrictions, not PR gloss, on the ability of American and multinational companies to exploit starvation conditions in manufacturing. We also need to advocate for monitoring and full and accurate disclosure about a product’s country of origin and conditions of manufacture. (Wal-Mart’s claims that its goods are “Made in America” are notoriously often false.)

Finally, we need to recognize how the shopping landscape results from the overproduction of some kinds of spaces and goods, and the underproduction of others. In the end, the shopping world cannot imagine anything beyond itself. But we can.

Further Reading


Notes


3. Despite recent, small increases in the minimum wage, the floor of the economy, its real value has been eroded over two decades, so that many year-round, full-time workers cannot make enough to support a family of four at the federal poverty level. Recent statistical findings on wages, benefits, employment, insurance, and income inequality are summarized and interpreted in Marc Miringoff and Marque-Luisa Miringoff, The Social Health of the Nation: How America Is Really Doing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 92–109. On time starvation and debt, see Juliet B. Schor, The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting and the New Consumer (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 1–24, 72–74.


5. Ibid., 6.


7. Ibid., 6–7.

8. Leach, Land of Desire, 3.


16. Strasser, Satisfaction Guaranteed, 213.


19. Ortega, In Sam We Trust, 39–42.

20. New institutions such as the credit card were also designed to expand spending. For an overview of the history of personal credit, see Lewis Mandell, The Credit Card Industry: A History (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990).


22. Ibid., 279, 282–83. Bankers pushed retail mergers because they brought “growth.” In the words of one banker, “Retail mergers must continue because they offer management efficiency, overhead reduction and the economy of large purchasing volumes. Large-scale operations will be most effective . . . through the consolidation of existing stores and chains.” At the same time, other economists analyzed mergers as inefficient and irrational, pointing out that the formation of chains produced “a glut in the number of units, periodic layoffs, waste, economic volatility, excessive competition and irresponsibility and overissue of securities” (279).

23. See Lipsitz, “Consumer Spending as State Project.”

25. Ibid., 1088.
26. Ibid., 1083.

30. Immediately after this seemingly minor change in the tax code, the nationwide number of new retail projects shot up, and the size of shopping centers became larger. The tax code offered little incentive for upkeep and rehabilitation, so it fostered the now familiar pattern of sparkling new malls being built next door to faded old ones. Meanwhile, Hanchett argues, direct federal grants during the first ten years of urban renewal, aimed at alleviating the crisis of housing and jobs in the older downtowns, totaled only $712 million, “less than a single year’s tax expenditure for accelerated depreciation in real estate” (ibid., 1107).
31. Ibid., 1105.
32. Ibid., 1104–5.
33. Ibid., 1105. Investment in real-estate structures rose by 56 percent in the first five years of the Reagan administration, under which Congress enacted new tax shelters that reaccelerated the building boom. Worried by overbuilding, Congress in 1986 revised the tax law, changing back to “straight-line depreciation,” but, by then, a great deal of damage had already been done to urban shopping districts and small downtowns.
36. Cohen, “From Town Center to Shopping Center,” 1058.
37. Ibid.
38. This point is powerfully made in Cohen.
40. Jackson, “All the World’s a Mall,” 1114.
41. In some cases, clothing and millinery manufacturing took place on the upper floors of a store building, but still out of sight.
45. Particular mall textures are generated by “leases with clauses that cover and restrict
nearly everything.” Individually owned stores are offered only short leases and high rents so that mall managers can “constantly adjust the mix, using rents and leases to adapt to rapidly changing patterns of consumption” (Crawford, “The World in a Mall,” 12).

46. Ibid.
47. Underhill, Why We Buy, 31.
49. An example is Sears, formerly the world’s most important mass-market retailer, now floundering badly, pressed on both sides by specialty chains and the discounters. See Joseph B. Cahill, “The Softer Side: Sears Credit Business May Have Helped Hide Larger Retailing Woes,” Wall Street Journal, July 9, 1999, A-1, A-8.
53. Ibid.; Green, “IKEA, Lowe’s Costco Plan Mission Valley Outlets,” C-1, C-8. Green notes that San Diego County has more than 50 million square feet of retail space, up about 4 million since 1994, yet San Diego is not considered “overstored.”
62. Meryl Davids, “‘Tunnel Vision,’” Chief Executive 116 (September 1996): 20–21 (ABI/Inform online version, 3). Tests are under way to see if older children will use Discovery Zone centers on weekends.
63. Club Disney is being developed by Walt Disney Company’s Regional Entertainment Division, which is dedicated to working up “new entertainment concepts for urban and suburban locations around the world,” according to its president, Arthur Levitt III. See Richard Martin, “Disney Returns to Foodservice [sic] with Its Club Disney Prototype,” Nation’s Restaurant News 30:47 (December 2, 1996): 1, 81; online version via ABI/Inform database, 1–2.


72. Martinez, “Mall Owners Play the Name Game”; Pacelle, “Simon DeBartolo to Invite Wide Variety of Firms into Malls.”


79. Ortega, *In Sam We Trust*, 128.

80. Computers are also used to track cash flow and bank transactions (ibid., 128–30). Ortega notes that Wal-Mart’s use of computerized data gave it a decisive edge over K Mart and other discounters in the 1980s. In 1983, for example, K Mart spent five cents of every dollar of goods sold on distribution; Wal-Mart spent two cents (130). Wal-Mart had early on invested in a satellite system; by 1988, it owned the largest private satellite network in the United States, allowing the transmission of training videos and the tracking of individual delivery trucks. Satellite communication also allowed the formerly cash-only discounter to accept credit cards by speeding up authorizations.
and reducing fraud; in turn, the huge retailer’s business helped to vastly expand the use of plastic cards. The credit-card industry as we know it was incipient in the 1960s, and blossomed in the 1970s. Problems involved fraud, and the way authorization could stall checkout lines. A national authorization network was started up in 1973 (133).

84. Ortega, In Sam We Trust, 128.
85. Underhill, Why We Buy, 62, 201, 206. Underhill reports that 60 to 70 percent of purchases in supermarkets are impulse purchases (101).
87. Underhill, Why We Buy, 32.
Chapter Eight

The Web

Chad Raphael

In less than a decade, the advent of the World Wide Web has allowed millions to take full advantage of the Internet by offering a seamless way to browse linked documents, including text, graphics, audio, and video, and to send E-mail and transfer files. Yet, despite the Web’s apparent offer of cheap communication for all, it is a remarkably costly medium that is unlikely to reach the majority of the world in the near future. It is the Web’s affluent clientele and the new opportunities for marketing to them that have spurred corporations to transform the Web into a consumer medium. Today, it is difficult to surf without getting caught in an undertow of commodification. This essay charts the current political economy of the Web—from access to start-up to logging on to visiting the portal sites that have become our most frequent destinations—showing how our individual paths traverse cross-currents of public subsidy and private capital at each step. This structure aims to write links between our lifeworld experience of navigating the Web and the larger political economic system. It locates the Web in a broader historical process of the commodification of information, as the market extends and inserts its logic of wage labor and capitalist exchange of information goods into new areas of life.¹

The goal is not to reduce our multiple experiences of the Web (including lack of contact with it) to economic determinants, nor to dismiss the individual and social agency we may feel there as a simple exercise in corporate control. There are opportunities for organized, collective action at every level of our engagement with this new medium. Similarly, it would be foolhardy to assume that any map of the fast-changing Web can stay fixed for long. Rapid innovation in the social and economic relations of the online world, and in the technologies used to produce and access it, are likely. The best political economy avoids guaranteed predictions, showing us instead how to read the past and the present as a prologue for shaping a more democratic future.

Access

Political economy reminds us that the power to communicate in market-based societies is profoundly influenced by unequal access to the means of
media production, distribution, and interpretation. Inequality of access is structured in part by the costs of using a medium. Despite paens to the Web’s ability to lower communication costs and create an all-inclusive global village, it is probably the most expensive medium ever devised, and certainly the most costly available today. To those of us whose access is paid for by a university, corporate, or government employer, the Web seems to offer a cornucopia of free research, news, services, and diversions. But our ability to use the medium depends on long-term investments of time and money that are clearest if considered from the standpoint of the less-subsidized home user, and as compared with other media. Estimating these costs to the minute and the dollar would be a Sisyphean task, but the general thrust of the argument should be clear: the expenses associated with the Web suggest that it is unlikely to be as widely available to the global public as are print and broadcasting. Without public intervention, the Web threatens to reinforce inequalities of skills and knowledge, expression and consumption.

Granted, some of the Web’s costs are indeed lower than or comparable to these older media. In contrast to print, Web content generally appears cheaper, unless users subscribe to pay services (certain online newspapers, newsletters, etc.) or purchase online reports, images, or music. To the extent that advertising costs are passed on to users in higher prices for products, the small proportion of overall advertising budgets devoted to the Web also suggests that advertiser-supported online content is cheaper. Several other costs associated with using the full capabilities of the Web (text, sound, video, hyperlinks, as well as integrated services based on other technical protocols,

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<th>World Wide Web</th>
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<td>Literacy</td>
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<td>Electricity</td>
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<td>Local phone and Internet service</td>
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Note: Italicics denote investments in time and money that are unique to, or substantially higher, for Web users.

Figure 8.1. Individual costs of media.
such as E-mail and file transfer) are comparable to older media. As with broadcasting, one must be fluent in a language and have a source of electricity, and, as with print, one must be literate.

Nonetheless, the Web entails a number of unique or significantly higher costs to users. Basic computer literacy involves a long-term, continual investment of time and money in acquiring and learning software programs, from the operating system (the cost is typically hidden in the price of a computer, with which it is bundled), to the Web browser, to the numerous “plug-ins” that must be downloaded at present to show animations, sound, and different file formats on the Web. Frequent software updates encourage new downloads and retraining that far outstrip the time needed to keep up with the minimal changes made to TV sets since their invention. Despite the advent of sub-one-thousand-dollar personal computers with internal modems, and TV-based Web access, the hardware needed to exploit the Web’s full capabilities is still far more expensive than the cheapest TV sets. Given the rapid obsolescence of computers and modems, consumers are likely to replace them more frequently than TVs. Telephone and Internet service charges are unique to the Web. Consumers typically invest more time in getting technical support for computers (from computer and software companies, friends, coworkers) than for TVs. Because learning and using the Web require more resources, its users also incur higher opportunity costs, which are the amount of other goods or services that must be given up to obtain something. The skeptic may argue that the Web allows users to get hold of information and entertainment that combine and eclipse that which they previously got from print, TV, telephones, and other media, so that the Web is actually cheaper. But, at present, in the absence of evidence that consumers have abandoned other media in droves, the Web appears at best a partial substitute for, and more often an add-on to, prior media.

The social costs of the Web are equally difficult to estimate, but we can still see that public investment in the medium has been huge. It is especially important to appreciate this investment at a time when corporations challenge any public-interest regulation of the Internet as an intrusion into a pristine world built by private capital. Private innovations and profits depend on a half century of government subsidies in computing, networking, communications software, and the Internet. American taxpayers have been the first and largest source of risk capital for the Internet, and the federal government has been the medium’s main venture capitalist. An attempt to tote up the public investments in the Web and the technologies on which it rests could begin with the subsidies listed in figure 8.2.

Research and development in computing and networking have enjoyed
substantial public funding. In the 1950s, an average of 59 percent of spending by major corporations involved in computing research and development came from federal government sources, mainly military. Secure military markets provided low-risk incentives for companies to invest their own money in computing. In the 1960s, the U.S. military paid for almost half the research in semiconductors, and was the industry’s biggest customer, laying the groundwork for the microprocessors at the heart of today’s personal computers and Web servers. The Department of Defense’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) funded a number of foundational technologies for the hardware and software of the Web today. The agency paid for as much as 80 percent of artificial intelligence work in the 1960s and 1970s, and was a major supporter of research into networking hardware and software, graphics, and parallel processing. Most important, in 1969, ARPA contracted to build the ARPANET, the prototype of the Internet, and oversaw its growth for more than a decade.

Public ownership and control of the ARPANET, and of many other bedrock technologies, was crucial for the Internet’s growth. ARPA’s authority over the network allowed it to establish common protocols (most notably,
Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol) that allowed other networks to interconnect and share information. Had a private entity established a proprietary claim to the basic workings of the net, or a battle of incompatible standards ensued, it is far less likely that the medium would have grown as fast as it did. The common language established by ARPA allowed private networks (such as America Online) and corporate local area networks to connect to and use the public infrastructure in the 1980s. Similarly, the two critical inventions that led to the World Wide Web were funded with public money, and remained common property. The first was hypertext transfer protocol (http), developed in 1989 at the European Laboratory for Particle Physics, which created a common language for transmitting information over the Web. The second was Mosaic, the first graphical Web browser, developed in 1993 at the University of Illinois’s National Center for Supercomputing Applications. Mosaic, which became the basis for Netscape, popularized the Web by offering users an easier, more navigable interface.

Public investment in research and development and infrastructure continued to permeate the first stage of the Internet’s spread to university, government, and corporate users. Grants from all federal agencies for research in computer science from 1976 to 1996 amounted to more than $9.7 billion. In the 1980s, the National Science Foundation (NSF) replaced the ARPANET with the NSFNET, the main backbone that connected universities, research facilities, and private networks. Communication and information technology companies were also major beneficiaries of federal and state research-and-development tax credits. Between 1981 and 1996, the federal credit alone allowed corporations to recoup 20 percent of research-and-development costs, totaling more than $27 billion in foregone tax revenue. Either directly or through contracts or subsidies, the federal government supported governance mechanisms for the Internet, including assuring that a single body existed to assign unique domain names to individual servers. Netscape, the first widely available graphical Web browser, was based on technology developed with NSF funds at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications at the University of Illinois. Even after the NSFNET was dismantled in 1995, and corporations were permitted to build their own backbones (the much-celebrated “privatization” of the Internet), the impact of infrastructure subsidies persisted. The backbone laid in the 1980s and early 1990s to connect government and university researchers is still used for some commercial traffic today. The for-profit Internet access industry retained indirect technical support from federally funded university programs, which offered research and trained the next generation of engineering talent.
Corporate Internet users, Internet service providers (ISPs), and E-commerce companies wrung further subsidies from federal regulators. From the Internet’s beginning, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) exempted computer networking from regulations covering other telecommunications, allowing corporate networks to connect to the Internet without paying into the universal service fund that helped support rural and low-income phone users. The FCC also allowed Internet service providers, whose customers have mainly been corporations and affluent home users, to avoid both universal service contributions and customary charges for interconnecting with local phone networks. Local phone customers thus cross-subsidized ISP use, despite Internet users’ tendency to tie up lines interminably, putting a growing strain on local phone systems.10 Congress protected E-commerce companies from most sales taxes throughout the 1990s, giving online sellers a leg up on brick-and-mortar stores and Web consumers a tax break, while costing states $3.5 billion per year in lost revenues by 1998. If E-commerce keeps growing at existing rates, tax losses could reach $10 billion a year by 2003, depriving local governments of a major source of revenues for schools, parks, and other services.11 Even the FCC’s E-Rate program, which pursues the laudable goal of defraying schools’ and libraries’ telecommunication costs, is financed by extra charges to long-distance phone customers—another cross-subsidy for ISPs that also extends commercial Web sites’ reach into the nation’s classrooms and reading rooms.

Public education has pitched in as well. Huge investments have been made in outfitting elementary and secondary schools for the Internet, and in turning over higher education to narrow vocational training in the specialized skills demanded by high-technology companies.12 Nor should we forget the environmental and social costs of the Internet economy, which neoclassical economics conveniently banishes from the balance sheet as “negative externalities.” If the Internet allows teleworkers to use their cars a bit less, its growth has fueled demand for faster, more powerful computers, which are among the most chemical-, water-, petroleum-, and energy-intensive products ever created. The manufacture of a single personal computer can generate 139 pounds of waste, consuming 7,300 gallons of water and 2,300 kilowatt-hours of energy. Its rapid obsolescence dooms it to the landfill in a hurry, where it will join an estimated 150 million others by 2005 in the United States alone, filling a space equal to a football field stacked a mile high.13 If projections of a billion PCs connected to the Web worldwide come true, those machines could demand electricity equal to the total capacity of today’s U.S. power grid.14 Undoubtedly a case could be made for numerous social costs of the Web, but it is probably too early to tell yet. We can cer-
tainly speculate about the social-opportunity costs in a society where, in less than a year, a public debate over universal access to the Internet supplanted a debate over universal access to basic health care.

Given the economics of the Web, it is not surprising that its development, although rapid, has been highly uneven. By the end of 2000, the “global village” of Internet users encompassed less than 7 percent of the world. The average netizen was wealthy, educated, young, urban, and male. The developed world dominated the content of the Web. In 1999, North America possessed 64 percent of Internet host computers, and Europe had another 24 percent; there were more hosts in New York than in all of Africa. Seventy percent of all Web sites originated in the United States. English, which may be spoken by only 15 percent of the world, remained the overriding language of the Web, accounting for 78 percent of all sites and 96 percent of E-commerce sites. Of course, the quarter of the world that was illiterate was unlikely to find much use for the Web. Poverty and low telecommunications subsidies in much of the less developed world made Internet access seem far out of reach for the foreseeable future. The digital divide cut mainly between North and South, with most of the disconnected located in Latin America, the Middle East, India, and especially Africa, where the average Sierra Leonean would have had to fork over 118 percent of her year’s earnings for a month of Internet access. Dramatic regional disparities in access had emerged in Latin America, where about half of all Internet users were in Brazil, and Africa, where South Africans comprised almost all of the connected.

Even in the United States, where 41.5 percent of households were connected in 2000, hype about the exponential spread of access hid gross and still growing inequalities along race and class lines. The racial ravine between black households and all homes with connections reached 18 percent in 2000, widening by 3 percent over the previous two years, while the gap between Latino homes and all homes reached 17.9 percent, an increase of 4 percent since 1998. At the same time, the class chasm between households earning $75,000 or more per year with Internet access and all income groups below $50,000 widened by an average 5.6 points, reaching an average 49.2 percent.

In sum, the ability of a relative handful of the world’s privileged to enjoy the Web has come at great cost, much of it charged to the public, and most of it hidden from those who use the Web. In keeping with the logic of market societies, the costs have largely been socialized, while the profits have been privatized. Within the United States, inequalities of access have grown with the Web. In the underdeveloped world, the massive investments in
literacy, education, and telecommunication infrastructure needed to make the Web available to all but a sliver of the population seem a long way off.

**From the Interface to the Web**

Celebrators of the Internet economy claim that it is overthrowing the old dynamics of industrialism. Theirs is a world in which technology, consumer demand, corporate strategy, and industrial policy are pushing companies away from standardized production for national mass markets and toward flexible production of customized products that better serve individual needs on a global scale. We allegedly shift from centralized control within firms toward more nimble and democratic management styles. We move from vertically integrated companies toward horizontal, fluid networks that disperse power over markets through subcontracting and outsourcing production, joint ventures for financing and research and development, and marketing alliances. This analysis gestures at some real changes in the economic structure, many of them initiated and enabled by the communication and information industries. But its happy tale of consumer choice and dispersed control cannot account for how power is exercised in the markets that structure our journeys on to the Web.

Many of the claims made now about the Internet echo those made about the film industry by the “flexible specialization” theorists of the 1980s. According to this work, since the 1950s major film studios responded to antitrust action requiring them to sell their theater chains, and competition from television, which threatened to reduce and segment the market for filmed entertainment, by pursuing a strategy of product differentiation. The studios distinguished the filmgoing experience from television by experimenting with new wide-screen formats and innovative genres and films for more specific market segments around the world. They cut costs by subcontracting for production inputs, from talent to film processing. Cost cutting and product differentiation drove the studios to depend more on independent production companies, which could create more innovative and specialized fare. In the end, the vertical integration that characterized the industry until the 1940s gave way to a flexibly specialized network of large studios and smaller firms that collaborated to keep Hollywood’s economy vibrant.

However, as Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins have argued, Hollywood shows us that control over communication markets often stems more from financing and distribution than from production. The film industry, they maintain, is better thought of as an example of industrial dualism than of flexible speciali-
zation. On the one hand, small, independent firms absorb product risks and labor costs for the studios, scrambling to generate new films for niche markets. On the other hand, the large studios continue to command the lion’s share of markets and revenues by financing independent producers and controlling distribution channels. The studios’ power has only been strengthened as they have become part of larger, horizontally integrated entertainment conglomerates (AOL Time Warner, Sony, News Corp, etc.) that can provide financing and promote their products across many media outlets.

What does this have to do with PCs and how they access the Web? First, it draws our attention to control over finance and distribution bottlenecks as the key source of profit and power in media markets. Second, it helps us understand the intensity of current struggles for control over the computer desktop and Internet connection—the major choke points that distribute Web content to audiences, and audiences to the Web. Throughout the 1990s, Intel’s microprocessors (which run 80 percent of all PCs) and Microsoft’s Windows operating system (on 90 percent of PCs) have determined what most of us see when we start up our computers. At its zenith, the “Wintel” monopoly so dominated that the two companies claimed half the profits of the entire PC industry, reducing PC makers to what one journalist called “a value-added reseller for Intel and Microsoft.”

Wintel’s dominance cannot be attributed simply to consumer choice or technological superiority. Both companies gained their footholds in the PC market when IBM chose them to supply the microprocessor and operating system for its PCs in the early 1980s. By undercutting prices for the rival Macintosh computer, IBM (and the low-cost PC clone makers that followed it) grabbed the bulk of the market for business PCs. Throughout the 1980s, Apple offered a more user-friendly graphical interface than Microsoft, and at several points Intel’s competitors offered faster chips. But the large installed base of Wintel users created growing network effects, whereby the greater the number of users of a communication technology, the more valuable it becomes to each of them, because users can share information with more people. In response, more software developers began to create programs for the Wintel platform first, best, or only, reinforcing the platform’s market power. Over time, the cost to consumers of switching to a competing platform increased (including time spent exploring alternatives, retraining in new software, converting old files to a new standard), locking buyers into the Wintel standard. Microsoft also secured its dominance of the operating system by extending its grip over applications software, most notably the Microsoft Office suite. Microsoft’s applications developers exploited insider knowledge of numerous undocumented features of the Windows source
code (not shared with competitors), to ensure that Office programs ran more smoothly on Windows than other word processors, spreadsheets, and presentation software. Like the major film studios, Microsoft externalized risk by financing smaller software companies, and buying out rival technology that could be incorporated into its operating system or applications. Throughout this process, Wintel has controlled the pace of innovation more than consumers have. Wintel’s strategy has been to increase rapidly the speed and capacity of hardware, which is immediately consumed by more demanding and bloated software laden with new features that most people do not use, which again generates a need for faster hardware. Users often face what Gene Rochlin calls the “Red Queen’s dilemma” of running faster to stay in place. The industry’s ability to foster the perception of immediate obsolescence pushes consumers to retrain constantly in an attempt to master new software and deal with incompatibilities that make converting old files difficult. For the industry, “the net result is growth beyond the logistic curve, [market] saturation without maturity, [product] replacement without obsolescence, and instant obsolescence built in to every purchase.”

The Microsoft antitrust trial beginning in the late 1990s is, at its heart, a struggle over who will control the gateway to the desktop and the Web. Microsoft stands accused of using its monopoly over the operating system to gain an unfair monopoly over Web browsers. Caught by surprise by the fast growth of the Web in the mid-1990s, Microsoft feared that Netscape’s browser software could eventually replace the Windows desktop interface as the first screen that users see when starting up their computers. Microsoft quickly packaged its own browser, Internet Explorer (IE), with Windows 95 to stave off the competitive threat. By default, IE takes Web users first to the MSN page, the company’s portal site. The company also used the IE interface to steer users to “premier channels” in which Microsoft has an ownership stake, such as MSNBC (news), Expedia (travel services), and Investor (stock trading). Microsoft reportedly forced other companies that wanted their channels listed on IE to agree not to promote any service that used a competing platform or technical standards, such as Netscape’s, in order to deny them the most popular content and services. Microsoft quickly threatened to deny PC makers the Windows operating system if they offered new computers that failed to display Microsoft’s desktop. The company enforced similar exclusionary contracts on Internet service providers who offered their customers the IE browser. Microsoft also paid and pressured Web site developers to create content that can only be viewed fully by using IE’s proprietary features.

The trial’s metaphysical debate over whether the company bundled the
browser with Windows or integrated it with the operating system, creating a new product, is less important than understanding what is at stake: the ability to drive traffic to selected Web sites. Control over this distribution hub could give Microsoft the ability to charge Web sites for access to audiences, and audiences for access to Web sites. CEO Bill Gates raised the specter of Microsoft becoming the universal middleman of the twenty-first century when he announced that “this new, electronic world of the information highway will generate a higher volume of transactions than anything has to date, and we’re proposing that Windows be at the center, servicing all those transactions.” The company’s chief technology officer has said that it hoped to charge a “vig” or vigorish on every Web transaction that uses Microsoft technology. Equally disturbing, an unbridled Microsoft could use its power to shape the news and culture that Web surfers find when they follow the path of least resistance into cyberspace and end up at one of Microsoft’s sites.

Mergers between AT&T and Media-One, and America Online (AOL) and Time Warner, reflect another major bid to control Internet distribution, this time by locking up the emerging market for high-speed broadband service. Broadband connections, which can be made through digital subscriber line (DSL) via phone lines or cable modems, offer faster download times that enable interactive voice and television service. The two mergers involve telecommunication companies marrying the United States’ two largest cable providers, in part to extend their grasp over future broadband customers. Had American and European regulators not applied pressure and set conditions for the AOL Time Warner merger, the new company could have reduced competition drastically by combining the United States’ second-largest cable company with its dominant Internet service provider (ISP). In response to complaints from consumer advocates and competitors, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) required AOL to continue offering reasonably priced DSL services to customers in cities where Time Warner was also selling broadband access via its monopoly cable systems. The merged company was required to offer subscribers a choice of at least three ISPs besides its own on its cable systems, ending Time Warner’s practice of forcing its own ISP on cable customers. Finally, regulators demanded that AOL Time Warner not discriminate against rival interactive television providers who want to lease access to the company’s cable systems through discriminatory pricing or standards for connecting to its networks.

The tempest over instant messaging exemplifies the danger of dominant firms creating incompatible standards and exerting proprietary claims to the technology of the Web. Instant messaging, which lets users know when a
friend or business associate is online and exchange private messages with them in real time, is offered by most of the major portal sites and ISPs. Instant-messaging software, unlike the underlying protocols of the Internet and Web, was developed by commercial interests and thus offered as a proprietary service; users had to download specific programs for each service and could not communicate with users of a different one. Microsoft and Yahoo then created software that allowed their users to connect to America Online subscribers. AOL, which had used its dominance over the ISP market to gain leadership in the complementary market for instant messaging, responded by attempting to block outside users from its service.\(^{35}\) AOL's refusal to accept a common technical standard is a classic example of how leaders in technology markets sacrifice universal communication to bolster market share.

However, the extensive regulatory and media attention to Microsoft and AOL Time Warner obscures other concentrations of power in Internet-related markets (see figure 8.3.) Less noted are the grip of Cisco Systems over the routing computers that direct traffic on the net, five companies' oligopoly over backbones (the large trunk lines that carry high volumes of data), and the slightly larger group of portal sites that have emerged as the major confluences of users and advertising revenues. To the extent that any of these market leaders succeeds in using its control over distribution hubs to dictate proprietary technical standards, create incompatibilities with rival hardware or software, squelch price competition, or shape content, it can raise the costs of Web access and restrict users' ability to surf and communicate freely with others.\(^{36}\) When leaders in one market attempt to extend their reach into complementary ones, as Microsoft and AOL have done, these dangers grow. Of course, each market has its own peculiar dynamics, which are beyond the scope of this essay. Potential shifts in the way that users connect to the Web, through wireless and mobile devices (such as cell phones) or “thin clients” (such as stripped-down network computers or E-mail-only devices), could unsettle the grip of leading firms in some markets. Yet, the swiftness of the Internet's fall into the hands of a small group of companies is stunning.

The Portal Sites

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an “immense collection of commodities”; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity.\(^{37}\)
The wealth of information on the Web is increasingly also an immense collection of commodities, defined as “resource[s] produced for the market by wage labor.” Of course, users come to the Web, like any medium, with their own purposes in mind. But if we set out in pursuit of knowledge, pleasure,
or politics, we enter a medium under construction by capital. It is not that
our experience of the Web is “at its base,” or even in the “first” or “last” in-
stance, determined by market logic, but that it is increasingly always also
regulated by the process of commodification. At present, the portal sites
that offer a range of content and services to attract traffic are the Web’s para-
digmatic marketplaces where commodities are clustered. Portals garner the
largest audiences and the biggest share of advertising revenues. They are the
distribution centers of the Web, delivering users to advertisers and sellers.

At the level of the firm, the formation of portal sites is a strategy for re-
ducing risk. Bernard Miege has remarked on the uncertainty of valorizing
capital invested in cultural commodities, which leads corporations to spread
risk across a repertoire of products. A recording company, for example, can-
not always predict the popularity of a song or an artist, and therefore places
its bets across a list of recordings. This uncertainty is especially urgent on
the Web, given its relative newness as a medium, the vast number of sites
compared with more closed communication systems (movie theaters, cable
channels), and the multiple entrances and exits at each site that pose chal-
lenges for retaining user attention. Portals pursue and extend the repertoire
approach in three ways. First, they allow existing communication corpora-
tions to disperse risk across different media, while reducing it by controlling
distribution bottlenecks in each medium. The Web’s potential to reduce au-
diences for television, print, and other traditional media fuels the formation
and acquisition of portals by Disney (which owns the Go Network) and
General Electric (which owns NBC, the Snap portal, and part of the MSNBC
news service). The specter of Web-based software replacing PC and net-
working operating systems and applications partially drives Microsoft’s move
to create its MSN network of sites. The Web’s proven ability to sell com-
puter equipment moves Compaq, a major seller of PCs and installer of Web
servers, to buy the Alta Vista portal. Each company can then use its Web
presence to cross-promote and sell its other media products, whether these
are PCs, software, films, television programs, or magazines. Second, within
the confines of the Web itself, portals bring together previously distinct sites
and services—news, chat rooms, and so on—to entice users to visit a portal
first, and stick around longer to buy and form an audience for ads. Finally,
the portal represents a repertoire approach to exploiting the range of ways in
which the Web can commodify users’ interaction with media and with each
other. Like broadcasters, portals such as Yahoo, and ISP-portal combinations
such as AOL, find that their primary source of revenue is selling audiences to
advertisers. Like the print media, Web sites can also sell subscriptions to
content and services (such as AOL’s chat rooms, Dow Jones’s stock quotes,
and news sources such as the *Wall Street Journal*). Direct sales of products to visitors, or E-commerce, offer another revenue stream. And each click of the mouse generates detailed information that can be sold for customer profiling and other forms of market research.

Massive flows of speculative investment in the Web reflect hopes that the medium can be bent to serve the contemporary needs of capital, which are worth reviewing briefly. For most of the twentieth century, the commercial mass media played a crucial role in spurring and managing demand for products, through advertising and marketing, in economies prone to overproduction. Mass production requires mass consumption, and the media’s job has been to whet the appetite for buying. More recently, economic restructuring—variously theorized as inaugurating a regime of flexible specialization, flexible accumulation, or post-Fordism—has wrought changes in the role of the media in market economies. Although there are real differences in how these theories portray the causes, dynamics, and breadth of change, they point to some common features of the current economy that are especially relevant to the rise of the Web. First, the acceleration of economic activity reflects a need to produce and distribute products more quickly, cutting the turnover time between the investment of capital in production and the realization of profits in sales. These needs to accelerate turnover time and maximize sales also induce corporations to create ever more innovative products that must be replaced sooner. Second, there has been a qualitative leap in corporate efforts to extend markets into new spaces and times. This is typified by economic globalization, but also by a shift from mass production, based on exploiting economies of scale, to specialized goods for more narrowly defined markets around the world. Market extension can also be seen in the privatization of public goods and services (in government and education, for example). As Edward S. Herman puts it, “[t]he market can grow by reaching into new geographic territories or by seeking out new customers in already occupied space; by filling in product gaps with new products; and by converting aspects of life that were once outside the market into marketable products.” Market extension has a temporal dimension as well, which involves inserting new opportunities for selling and advertising into the workday, school day, and leisure time.

Finally, the information and communication industries assume a central role in the economy, facilitating the acceleration and extension of the market. The cultural industries (film, broadcasting, etc.) become prime sites of capital accumulation, because, as Rick Maxwell explains, they “produce objects with an incredibly brief shelf life, which cost almost nothing to store, however, or distribute, and which possess the obvious advantage that their
values are turned into profits almost instantaneously. Computer networks enable rapid and global coordination of production, distribution, marketing, and consumption, allowing each activity to be sited wherever skills are available, labor and materials are cheapest, or markets are most lucrative at any moment. Information services (market research, advertising, credit reporting) gain in value relative to durable goods, and increasingly shape decisions about product design and the production process. Selling customized products to globalized niche markets requires a shift from mass marketing to “relationship marketing.” This approach focuses on identifying spatially dispersed prospects, reaching them with distinct and targeted messages, converting them into customers, and retaining their loyalty to avoid the increased marketing costs of customer churn. It demands heightened surveillance of consumers, and increasingly specific information about their behavior and attitudes.

Returning to the portal, we can see how the Web exemplifies each of these trends toward risk reduction, acceleration, extension, and informatization of the market. Consider the home page of Disney’s Go Network portal. Disney mitigates the risks of losing audiences from its traditional offerings by integrating its portal tightly with the company’s other media holdings. The search engine is Disney’s Infoseek, and the “community” services (home page and chat room hosting) are from Disney’s WBS. The list of links to “partners” are all to Disney subsidiaries, as are many of the links to various services (the first sublink for news is, of course, Disney’s ABC News). Links to “Buy Go merchandise” and banner ads for the Disney Store Online beckon users to buy Disney products online. The range of opportunities for cross-promotion, advertising, and sales of Disneyana, including stock in the company (note the link to “Investor relations”), extends across every page of the Go Network. To give just one example, MrShowbiz.com, the Go Network’s source for entertainment “news,” features glowing reviews and background features on the stars of Disney films. Owning a portal also allows Disney to earn ad revenues from the new medium that may be lost from its traditional media.

The portal plays its part in the acceleration of the market as well. By incorporating news, sports, and stock quotes that change by the minute, the portal outdoes even twenty-four-hour cable channels in offering rapidly obsolescing content. Even more than cable, the Web speeds the rhythm of news, turning every report into a breaking story, in hopes of generating repeat viewership. Indeed, unlike a newspaper or a television program, many of the portal’s offerings can never be fully consumed because they are constantly changing. Chat rooms and newsgroups always have new postings. There is al-
ways something else to search for on the Web. From the portal companies’ perspective, a Web site is qualitatively different from the flow of television, because on the Web there is far less time wasted offering content that is not integrated with advertising, or that does not produce valuable consumer information. If, from this point of view, television programs are long interruptions of commercial time, there is less unproductive time on the portal because ads and marketing can be inserted on every page. This speeds the delivery of users to advertisers at every moment. E-commerce offers similar advantages in cutting turnover time compared to traditional media. Not only
can products be advertised before they are available, but orders can be taken, committing buyers to purchase in advance. Information goods (software, reports, images, etc.) can be downloaded immediately. Stocks can be traded in real time by small investors. Companies that sell primarily through mail-order catalogs can list new offerings on the Web faster, and begin generating sales in an instant. Unsold inventory can be repriced to move with a click of the mouse. Portals enter into alliances with such sellers, featuring links to their sites in exchange for referral fees on each sale that results (which accounts for the ubiquity of Amazon.com links throughout the Web).

The Web’s potential to extend the reach of the market is daunting compared with traditional media. Portals such as the Go Network reach out to the affluent across the globe, offering nationally based services in multiple languages (see the “Infoseek international” link). At the same time, these sites offer considerable customization, allowing users to create “My Page,” where headlines, weather, stock quotes, lottery numbers, and horoscopes reflect the individual’s location and interests. Of course, the aim is also to entice demographically desirable users to give over the personal information needed to customize their pages so that the portal can target ads toward them and make them the subjects of market research. I will have more to say on this later, but here it is worth noting how the portal is organized as a kind of miniature shopping mall. Of the Go Network home page’s twenty subject areas or “centers” (of what?), about half present opportunities to browse and consume specific products: autos, broadcast, computing, entertainment, food and drink, money (stocks), real estate, shopping, travel. Just two centers address the working world (careers, small business), one the domestic sphere (family), and one the body (health). The implied cyberflaneur is the male adult, because kids have their own link, as do women (and this half of the human race is construed as being interested foremost in family and beauty). The presence of the stock ticker also addresses the affluent user, because it is of little use to the half of Americans who are not actively invested in the stock market.

More significantly, the free services that act as loss leaders to suck traffic toward portals extend the market into previously uncommodified times and spaces. Turning to a free search engine rather than a library catalog to look for information turns users’ research into productive activity for the portal, because the search terms entered allow for customizing ads. These targeted ads sell for 50 percent more than general advertising on the Web. For example, when I searched the Go Network for articles on “post-Fordism” for this essay, I was greeted with ads for Ford trucks above my search results, because the company has bought this keyword from the portal, either for a
flat fee or on a per-ad basis. (Curiously, no one appears to have bought the keywords “Karl Marx” from the Go Network at this time, although a search on these terms did yield an ad that urged me to run my own business.) If Ford is a marketing partner with the portal, I may be offered additional links to the company’s Web site. If Borders or Amazon.com have partnered with the portal, I will also be asked to look for books about Henry Ford on their sites. As the pressure mounts to become profitable, portals such as GoTo.com have begun selling the top positions in their lists of search results. Yahoo! now sells expedited consideration for listing in its influential catalog of reviewed and recommended sites.

Reading the news, another loss leader, is even more penetrated by market logic on the Web than in traditional media. Marketers and journalists both testify that advertising and promotional content are not as clearly distinguished as in the print media, and using news to cross-market other media properties is more common. At small sites, journalism depends for its survival on its effectiveness in driving users toward affiliated online stores, and not driving them away with controversial or challenging reporting that can spoil the atmosphere for buying.48

Other free portal services extend advertising and market research into interpersonal communication in new ways. In exchange for free E-mail accounts, correspondents view ads as they compose notes to friends and family, and each E-mail they send, no matter how intimate its expression of ardor or pain, ends with an ad for the portal in its signature line (“Do you Yahoo?”). To the extent that we use E-mail instead of a letter or a phone call, this represents an additional opportunity for advertising to intrude into personal communication. Personal home pages hosted on portal sites launch new browser windows with advertising when visited, which insert themselves between the viewer and the personal expression of the page’s creator. Online gaming centers ensure that playing is accompanied by selling.

Chat rooms, listservs, and newsgroups, which once garnered praise as self-governing, noncommercial “third places” or public spheres, are now shot through with overt advertising and covert sales jobs.49 Spam, or unsolicited commercial messages, clog these online forums. E-mail-grabbing programs troll for users’ E-mail addresses so they can be put on additionalspamming lists. Commercial chat rooms interrupt the flow of talk with banner ads. A commercial site, Deja.com, now enables members to participate more easily in Usenet newsgroups, provided members accept that every message will be framed by ads customized to the newsgroup’s topic or demographics. For example, if you visit a cancer support newsgroup through Deja.com, where people often ask for advice about how to treat the disease, each posting is
framed by ads for pharmaceuticals and commercial sites devoted to health. If the task of marketing is to identify people with a common need or problem (real or perceived) and persuade them that a product can solve it, many of these online forums do the first half of the marketer’s job. Commercial sites increasingly create chat rooms and newsgroups to promote discussion of media commodities themselves, such as the latest Hollywood blockbuster. Web marketing textbooks include chapters on how to market carefully within newsgroups, which retain a hostility to bald advertising from the Internet’s days as a noncommercial medium. Techniques include using an alias to seed questions and requests for help, then using another alias to offer answers that lead readers to a client’s product or Web site. In addition to concealing the sales pitch, this kind of unpaid advertising can often drive traffic more cost-effectively than banner ads.50 Again, the market extends itself into once noncommercial forums. To the extent that we turn from friends, family, or neighbors to these forums for advice or companionship, we enter the clamor of the marketplace.

Increasingly, our movements in this marketplace generate their own value. The interactive nature of the Web is well suited to the intensified demand for market research. The medium offers a plethora of techniques for consumer surveillance, each of them exploited by the portal. Registering for E-mail or Web page hosting, or for a contest, provides personal demographics—the holy grail for the portals. One marketing textbook urges sites to use promotional offers and free services to “bribe users to give them the appropriate demographics, which can in turn be passed on to advertisers.”51 Cookies, or lines of code surreptitiously written into a file on users’ hard drives when they visit a site, can be used to track how often they visit and what they view there, in order to customize ads. Web logging software reveals where users enter sites from and where they are headed when they leave. Browsers reveal users’ technographics, including their Internet domain (transparent.com), operating system, browser, and IP address (which can sometimes be used to discern geographic location). This kind of detail allows online ad agencies such as DoubleClick to target ads far more precisely than can be done in mass media. Online agencies can customize ads for clients by site content (automotive, sports), time of day, geographic location (country, state or zip code), domain type (educational users, government users), employer name, employer industry, employer size, browser type, operating system, and Internet service provider. Advertisers get more fine-grained information about how users respond to ads on the Web as well, including click-through rates to the advertisers’ site by keyword purchased from a search engine, domain type, time, region, and so on. The abundance of infor-
mation generated by the clickstream means that companies can generate leads and target repeated appeals (in ads or E-mails) more cheaply and effectively than through direct mail or telemarketing.\textsuperscript{52}

But wait, as the late-night TV commercials tell us, there’s more. The Web lends itself to other forms of market research as well. Polls, surveys, and online forums devoted to particular products offer free focus groups, where entertainment companies figure out which soap-opera characters and potential plot lines appeal most to audiences, or software firms learn how consumers react to their latest release.\textsuperscript{53} Products and ads are constantly being tested. This underscores the Web’s enhanced abilities to produce what Vincent Mosco calls “cybernetic commodities.”\textsuperscript{54} For example, measurements of the Web user’s clickstream provide a first-order commodity—ratings—that can be used to sell space to advertisers based on audience size (number of page impressions, or click-throughs to an advertiser’s site). But these monitoring techniques can also be used as a second-order commodity—information about consumer attitudes and behavior—that can be used for further marketing and product design. For example, DoubleClick’s ad campaigns can be pretested to determine which kinds of banner ads generate the most interest. Once a client invests in a campaign, software can evaluate the performance of banner ads in real time, allowing advertisers to redesign campaigns on the fly, or redeploy ads to pages that deliver the highest response rates. Programs also assess editorial content on pages in real time, permitting advertisers to match their ads with “complimentary and appropriate editorial.”\textsuperscript{55} This flexibility is available far more cheaply and quickly than in broadcasting or even direct mail and telemarketing.\textsuperscript{56}

All of this underscores how commercial forces can take advantage of the Web’s interactivity to turn users’ pursuit of knowledge, community, and play to economically productive ends. How should we understand the nature of users’ contribution to value creation? This question raises one of the foundational debates in the political economy of communication, which can only be sketched out briefly here. Dallas Smythe and others have argued that the main commodity produced by the mass media is the audience, which is sold to advertisers. Smythe drew on Marx’s labor theory of value to argue that the value of a TV program, for example, is produced through viewers’ work of watching the ads, as audiences “self-market” advertised goods and services, and adopt the ideology of consumer culture.\textsuperscript{57} This led others to extend Smythe’s argument by casting viewers as exploited labor whose attention to ads produces surplus value for media companies, much the same as wage labor creates surplus value in the factory, which is appropriated by the factory owner as profit.\textsuperscript{58} The notion of “watching as working” is a compelling
metaphor, but a misleading one in the end. The meaning of our manifold experiences with the media, from articulating our identities to gathering news, cannot be reduced to an exercise in exploited labor. We have too many other reasons for engaging with the media, and too many other reactions to them, including ignoring or misinterpreting ads altogether. In addition, as Eileen Meehan and Rick Maxwell have argued, it is more accurate to see ratings as the main commodity produced in broadcasting.59 Ratings have a use value to broadcasters and advertisers alike, because they offer a standardized measurement and expression of audience attention (however inexact or even imaginary) that allows audiences to be exchanged for money. But the labor that creates ratings is performed within the ratings firms themselves, which produce the audience as an information commodity.

How, then, should we think about users’ role in valorizing capital on the Web? I suggest that it is best to consider Web surfers’ efforts as akin to what Miege calls indirectly productive cultural labor, or unwaged performances that serve as an adjunct to the commodification process.60 Miege’s sole example is that of an unpaid musical performance at a mall that helps draw customers toward the shops (and I assume that his musicians have other reasons for playing, such as self-expression or self-promotion). As we have seen, the Web provides many additional examples. When I participate in a chat room or newsgroup or create a home page on a commercial portal, I am also helping to provide the content that draws others in to form an audience for ads. When I use a search engine, I also generate information about my interests that an advertiser can use to target me, and a portal can use to charge higher ad rates. When I send an E-mail from a portal account, I also provide an audience for an ad while I write, and act as a promotional emissary of the site when I incorporate its commercial summons in my message. But it is the waged labor of Web marketers, advertisers, and portal operators that turns my activities into an advertising vehicle or information commodity. In this light, AOL CEO Steve Case is absolutely right (and refreshingly honest) when he says that “Our business is to package our subscribers and sell them back to themselves.”61 Indeed, it is their business. What we need to ask is what their business is doing to our communication.

Conclusion

By now, it should be clear that the dangers of the Web are the dangers of the current political economy. The first is growing inequality. A costly medium developed with large and often concealed public subsidies, the Web is likely to remain a province of the world’s privileged for some time, and could re-
inforce their privilege. Equality is also threatened to the extent that the Web is passing into the hands of those whose primary interest is constructing a great difference engine for sorting and segmenting consumers for marketing purposes, rather than bringing people together to engage each other in common pursuits, as citizens, neighbors, and friends. If these interests prevail, the medium will intensify the logic of market discrimination, or “the social construction of difference in the pursuit of profit and social control.” The continued quest for affluent niche markets will yield an overabundance of sites offering investment services, luxury goods, and news that takes pains not to discomfit the comfortable, but not many sites will be devoted to the lives and experiences of the demographically undesirable.

Second, as corporations attempt to lock up key distribution points and assert property rights over the basic technologies of communication, they threaten to wall off the Web into a series of impassable culs-de-sac. This would undo the very advantages of interconnectivity and public domain standards that allowed the Internet to grow in the first place.

Third, the extension of the market into new corners of our experience, especially interpersonal communication, is deeply troubling. Obviously, privacy is at stake here, and privacy is as socially necessary as it is individually desirable. Without it, it becomes impossible to experiment with new, unpopular ideas and lifestyles, and to act autonomously. It is clear that Americans know enough to worry about their privacy, but not enough about how their movements are tracked and what is being done with the resulting information to fight back effectively. The spread of advertising across the Web threatens the same effects that commercial support has had on the traditional media. These include the exclusion of material that undermines advertisers’ interests and prerogatives, that fails to create the right atmosphere for buying, that risks offending potential customers, and that appeals to downmarket groups. Advertisers push promotional material into news and entertainment through product placements, plugs, and public relations. They reduce the diversity of ideas, as Off-Road.com, an electronic magazine for motor sport enthusiasts, did when it pressured the Lycos portal to remove its links to EnviroLink, which the magazine accused of being a “radical environmental web haven” opposed to the capitalist way.

I have focused on those aspects of the Web that suggest the medium is more a creature of the current political economy than a savior from it. Nonetheless, there are contradictions, such as the widespread corporate reaction against Microsoft’s monopolistic practices, which seems to have spurred the U.S. Department of Justice to bring its antitrust case against the software behemoth. But even if the government does slay the monopolist, more
competitive markets will not solve the other problems discussed in this essay. More promising are the countercurrents to each of these dangers. Important work is happening in organized movements within the United States for universal access, for privacy, and for nonprofit community networks. However, these movements have yet to locate their efforts within a larger critique of the market’s influx into the Web. This is necessary. If we achieve access without privacy or community, then we may simply be extending more public subsidy to a marketing machine. If we secure privacy alone, then the affluent who use the Web will enjoy yet another benefit unavailable to users of other media, where privacy rights are also weak. The privacy movement has a compelling story about what practices should not be on the Web, but offers little positive vision of what we should be doing there. The noncommercial sector has shown that computer networks can be used to improve local communities, not simply distract us from them, but most of these networks were set up as short-term experiments and their funding is running out. Making the case for preserving local, publicly controlled, noncommercial space on the Web requires discussion of the global market’s indifference and even hostility to community and place. Access for whom, and on what terms? Privacy for whom, and on what terms? Community for whom, and on what terms? The answers hinge in part on recognizing that relinquishing the Web to the market threatens each of these goals.

Further Reading

Notes


4. Ibid., 64.


17. Ibid.


22. Ibid., 6.


25. The averages are derived from data in ibid.


32. ProComp, “The New Middleman.”

33. Ibid.


35. AOL also justified its action as an effort to protect its subscribers’ privacy and security, which did not appear to be threatened by connecting with other instant-messaging systems. See Deborah Kong, “Online Turf Battle Opens,” *San Jose Mercury News*, July 24, 1999, A1.


52. USWeb and Bruner, *Net Results*, 283.

53. Ibid., 40.


56. USWeb and Bruner, *Net Results*, 283.


Here is a social fact: those of you with children now growing up in English-speaking countries (and in quite a few other countries as well) will almost certainly come to know the characters and plots of Episodes II and III of *Star Wars* within a decade. And this is in a time when there is no telling on what kind of screen or format your children will encounter the movies, or even if they will see them on a screen at all. Your children inevitably will come to know the creatures, heroes, and villains of these films, even if only through the channels of playground role-playing and licensed merchandise encountered on the store shelves during random shopping trips. In a future rife with uncertainties—who knows for sure what will be the state of the global economy, the fate of specific nations, or technological developments ten years from now?—the *Star Wars* franchise stands out as a seemingly unshakable monolith. And it is a monolith built not out of control over technology or institutions, but out of a latticework of intellectual property.

In this essay, we seek to explain why the organization of contemporary media makes this so and what the resultant political implications might be. We live in a world that is at once roiling with change and uncertainty and at the same time more tightly organized under the umbrella of global capitalism than ever before in history. Some of that change and uncertainty is produced by the pressures of global capitalism itself, some by resistance to capitalism, and much of it by various contradictory mixtures of the two. Here we provide an analysis of media structure that tries to provide some insight into the specific constraints and opportunities that this situation creates for those of us interested in progressive political change. We seek to shed some light on what kinds of voices, mainstream and otherwise, are encouraged and discouraged, and how those encouragements and discouragements are generated. We argue that contemporary media structures, “neo-networks,” seek to replace the power of traditional broadcast networks—such as ABC, CBS, and NBC—with cross-channel branding strategies and new strategies for managing intellectual property. And we identify those areas within the current media environment where one might detect opportunities for challenging existing structures of power and dominance.
Beyond Media Monopolies

What does one need to understand about the contemporary media if one’s goal is to further a progressive agenda? Certainly, happy liberal nostrums like the marketplace of ideas or technophilic fantasies like Internet libertarianism cannot be taken at face value: whatever else one says about them, the media are products of and a crucial element in the dramatic concentrations of wealth and power characteristic of the global economy. But simply condemning media monopolies and blaming them for all of the left’s ills is not enough, for two reasons. First, by itself, the attack on corporate concentration offers little in the way of explicit solutions (and its implicit solution of breaking up monopolies has serious limitations). Second, corporate-dominated media are liberal media in the more philosophical sense of that term; they allow and in some ways require certain kinds of diversity and dissent, at the same time as they discourage or drown out other kinds. A useful understanding of current media landscape thus needs to come to terms with both of these issues.

The media are not a pre-given “thing” out there, but are themselves a politically constituted set of institutions that develop in response to a complex array of forces; any useful progressive politics of the media will not just react to what the media spew forth but will engage in the political struggles that make the media what they are in the first place. Acknowledging corporate concentration, that is, cataloging all the corporate mergers and tie-ins and consequent limitations on independent voices, is a crucial part of any analysis. But in and of itself it neither provides a full analysis nor tells us what to do about the problem. What exactly are we calling for when we attack corporate concentration? As Katha Pollitt observes, media conglomerates do not necessarily follow an iron logic of corporate integration. “If conglomeratization is the problem,” she asks, “how come Newsweek, which is owned by The Washington Post, is like a dumbed-down, hyped-up version of Time, and not [the Washington Post]?” Moreover, current patterns of consolidation, although cause for concern, are not really much different from prior forms of corporate behavior. “Was Time a more uplifting publication when it was run and owned by Henry Luce?” Pollit continues: “Hasn’t mainstream journalism, for well over a hundred years, been in the business of delivering readers to advertisers and ratifying the status quo? The attack on conglomeratization veers uncomfortably close to a celebration of the non-existent good old days.”

Even though media conglomeration bears careful scrutiny, it might not be the most important challenge that progressives confront. Moreover, it hardly sharpens our understanding to suggest that the corporate ambitions
of the Murdochs, Turners, and Eisners of our day can be likened to the totalitarian behaviors of a Joseph Goebbels during the Nazi’s rise to power in prewar Germany. The fact of the matter is that there are “alternative” voices out there, and not just in elite or marginal media. In a shrewd commentary essay, John Leonard notes that television, for example, displays a remarkable range of perspectives. “The surprise is that if you actually watch the stuff, it’s not as bad as it ought to be,” he writes. “And I’m not just talking about the remedial seriousness of public TV series like Frontline and P.O.V, Bill Moyers on Iran/contra, Frederick Wiseman on public housing, Ofra Bikel on the satanic-ritual-abuse hysteria, Eyes on the Prize and Tongues Untied.” After rattling off a list of more than a dozen documentaries that feature analysis of everything from breast cancer to homophobia to the rape of the Ecuadorean rain forest by U.S. oil companies, Leonard turns his attention to entertainment programming and concludes:

Commercial television, in its movies, dramatic series and even its sitcoms, has more to tell us about common decency, civil discourse and social justice than big-screen Hollywood, big-time magazine journalism and most New York book publishers. Seeking to please or distract as many people as possible . . . it is famously inclusive, with a huge stake in consensus. Of course, brokering social and political gridlock, it softens lines and edges to make a prettier picture. But it’s also weirdly democratic, multicultural, utopian, quixotic and more welcoming of difference and diversity than much of the audience that sits down to watch it with a surly agnosticism about reality itself. It has been overwhelmingly pro-gun control and anti-death penalty; sympathetic to the homeless and the ecosystem; alert to child abuse, spouse-battering, alcoholism, sexual discrimination and/or harassment, date-rape and medical malpractice . . . And television may be the only American institution outside public school to still believe in and celebrate the integration of the races, at least on camera.

What is not on Leonard’s list is telling: TV tackles medical malpractice but not the systemic inequalities in access to health care; overt racial discrimination, but not structural racism or discrimination according to wealth and social class; individual suffering, but not the social policies that contribute to it. The focus tends to be on the individual, not the structural; the specific manifestations of suffering, not the broad social conditions underlying them (with the significant exception of ecological issues). But Leonard’s point is still a crucial one: even the more craven and centrist of the commercial media can and do at times voice vivid criticisms of the current political
landscape. Any thorough criticism of the media must be able to take that fact into account.

So the challenge for a progressive agenda is not to simply bemoan concentration of ownership or (misleadingly) to contend that media diversity is a thing of the past, but to understand the logic of media production, regulation, and reception in the current era and to forge a progressive politics of the media that responds to changing conditions. This requires not only that we understand issues of ownership and diversity in a new light, but that we collapse the arbitrary distinction between information and entertainment in order to understand media as a cultural phenomenon that involves both knowing and feeling one’s place in the world and one’s relationship to the forces of history. Furthermore, we are challenged to move beyond economic and technological understandings of media in order to see them as sites for the production and circulation of imagery and ideas. This is perhaps the most important shift in the thinking of media executives who now understand that the stakes have shifted from the control of communication conduits to the control of intellectual property, or, as some would put it, a shift from hardware to software.

It is ironic that in an era of tremendous political, cultural, and economic upheaval, media corporations are forging innovative strategies to deal with this new era of flux, while many critics on the left continue to assail the fantom media moguls of eras past. At the same time that many critics on the left see a propensity toward concentration and homogenization, media executives are desperately trying to develop strategies that accommodate trends toward decentralization and fragmentation. Obviously, both tendencies exist at the same time, but, unlike corporate strategists, critics on the left have for the most part failed to develop an agenda that accounts for this double movement in the culture industries. This essay aims both to elaborate the logic of culture industries at the current moment and to propose an alternative agenda for responding to new trends in contemporary media.

From Networks to Neo-Networks: Edge and the Contemporary Logic of the Cultural Industries

Media industries’ efforts to adapt to the current media environment are evident in the way executives refer to products with “edge.” The word generally means media texts whose effectiveness is precisely that they do not soothe. The film *Reality Bytes*—itself a fairly “edgy” text—made fun of the term by having some of its characters work for a fictional music video channel that is described as “like MTV, but with an edge.” Yet there is a second,
interrelated meaning at work in such contexts: namely, products with edge sharply define the boundaries of their intended audience. They try to find a place in today’s bewildering proliferation of channels, programs, and audience cultures with what is imagined to be a demographically focused appeal. *Edge* is thus simultaneously an aesthetic category and an industrial strategy, a cultural/industrial effort to establish sharp distinctions, to delineate a path through the otherwise bewildering media landscape. Like most such media strategies, however, efforts to industrialize *edge* are in some sense an effort to work against the very structures that undergird commercial media. *Edge*, we will argue, is a symptom of trends that are crucial to understanding the political implications of today’s media.

There is nothing new about the capitalist media’s willingness to devour and reinvent itself in the search for the new, about its tendency to fragment, diversify, and explore alternative cultures. Alfred Hitchcock acerbically made fun of the commercials in his own television show in the early 1960s; this was during the hegemonic pinnacle of the Cold War/Madison Avenue dominance of U.S. cultural production, and well before the late 1960s counterculture roared through the United States, to a large degree on the backs of for-profit record companies and radio stations. The feature films and television programs that Hitchcock directed were renowned for their edge-like qualities long before the term became fashionable. If for no other reason than the pressure to expand profits and markets, capitalist media experience ongoing pressures to innovate and to call attention to the process of innovation.

Current patterns of media innovation, however, have their own distinctive character, which has evolved in response to changing institutional structures. A useful way to delineate these patterns of change is to examine in some detail the development of television in the United States, for it points to a major shift in the political economy of media and its subsequent impact on the production and circulation of ideas. The “classical” or “high network” era of television emerged during the early 1950s and lasted roughly until the early 1980s, when cable and satellite television began to siphon off significant portions of the audience. The classical era existed because the economies of scale of early TV production combined with an industry-fostered government licensing system that heavily favored the development of only three national broadcast services. When television first started, many other media companies, such as Time-Life and Paramount, wanted to establish networks of their own, and indeed, the technology was available. But during this early licensing phase, government regulators favored (not always intentionally) the existing radio networks and their lobbyists, thereby setting in place an officially sanctioned oligopoly. Yet no major objections were
raised at the time because of the widespread presumption that, given the heavy cost of developing the new technology, a few large broadcast corporations could best serve the needs of vast national and even international audiences.6

As with most monopoly corporations that are sanctioned by the government, the new television networks tried to legitimize their special status by promoting their services as offering something for everyone, combined with sporadic efforts to provide “public-service” programming such as documentaries. The “something for everyone” formula also had practical economic benefits, because the companies that purchased TV ads at that time were manufacturers of mass consumer goods. Thus, even though TV audiences of this period were fragmented along numerous axes (class, race, ethnicity, gender, political preferences, etc.), network executives aspired to represent them as a unified entity in ratings, marketing reports, and promotions. Moreover, they characterized the overarching mission of the networks as integrative: pulling people together, uniting various regions, forging ever-larger markets.7 Television was conceived as a mass, national medium, which engendered ongoing criticism of network television as a cesspool of homogeneous drivel, or, as FCC Chairman Newton Minow famously described it, a “vast wasteland.”

The operative principles of the classical network era still exercise a powerful hold on our imaginations, suggesting that power and control over national consciousness reside primarily in the boardrooms of a few major networks. Since the early 1990s, as we have witnessed the merging of gigantic media firms into huge conglomerates, many critics seem to assume that this concentration of ownership means greater control at the top of the corporate pyramid and an increasing standardization of cultural products. Yet the principles that guide the television industry have undergone significant change over the past two decades. Transformations in national and global economies have fragmented the marketplace, pressuring the culture industries to reorganize and restrategize. Television advertising is no longer dominated by firms that manufacture products or provide services exclusively for mass markets. Changing market conditions have led companies to target their advertising at particular demographic groups and to disperse their messages throughout a variety of media.8 Furthermore, transnational marketing has become increasingly popular as both advertisers and their ad agencies have sought out new customers around the globe.

As opposed to nationally based television corporations that prevailed during the classical network era, the current period is paradoxically characterized by both transnationalization and fragmentation. New technologies,
deregulation, and relentless competition have undermined national frameworks that once shaped the industry. Although mass markets continue to attract corporate attention and blockbuster media products are still a priority, industry discourse about the mass audience no longer refers to one simultaneous exposure to a particular program, artist, or event so much as a shared, asynchronous cultural milieu; that is, we less frequently experience something like the 1964 pop-rock “British invasion” by collectively gathering around the television set at eight o’clock on Sunday night to watch the Beatles’ first television performance in North America. Instead, trends and ideas now achieve prominence in often circuitous and unanticipated ways. Ed Sullivan, who was the consummate 1960s gatekeeper of popular entertainment, has no counterpart in television today.9

In part, this is because the culture industries exercise less control over the daily scheduling of popular entertainment; audiences time-shift and channel-surf or they pursue a myriad of other entertainment options. As a result, media executives strive instead for broad exposure of their products through multiple circuits of information and expression. They also seek less to homogenize popular culture than to organize and exploit diverse forms of creativity toward profitable ends.10 Besides their heavily promoted blockbusters, media corporations also cultivate a broad range of products intended for more specific audiences. Flexible corporate frameworks connect mass-market operations with more localized initiatives.

Two strategies are now at work in the culture industries. One focuses on mass cultural forms aimed at broad national or global markets that demand low involvement and are relatively apolitical, such as blockbuster Hollywood films, like Titanic, or broadcast television programs, like Frasier. Media operations that deal in this arena are cautious about the prospect of intense audience responses either for or against the product they are marketing. By comparison, those products targeted at niche audiences actively pursue intensity. They seek out audiences that are more likely to be highly invested in a particular form of cultural expression. Among industry executives, these are referred to as products with “edge.” A few decades ago they received little attention, but today product development meetings are peppered with references to attitude and edge, that is, references to products that sharply define the boundaries of their intended audience. Programs with edge—ranging from hip-hop comedies, like South Central, to gender-bending parodies, like Absolutely Fabulous, to teen horror-comedies, like Buffy the Vampire Slayer—can be marketed on cable, satellite, videocassette, or via the new networks started by Warner and Paramount.11 Such programs have even found their way onto broadcast TV, as the major networks attempt to respond to the new
competitive environment. For example, during the summer of 1995, Fox ran Michael Moore’s politically provocative *TV Nation* after an initial launch on NBC the previous summer, and ABC ran Ellen DeGeneres’s sitcom, *Ellen*, which explicitly revolved around issues of sexual orientation. Both series eventually succumbed to the residual pressures of classical network reasoning, but the fact that they survived two seasons on the national broadcast networks highlights the changes that have taken place since the early 1980s.

We are therefore witnessing the organization of huge media conglomerates around the so-called synergies that exploit these two movements between mass and niche marketing. This is what we refer to as the neo-network era, an era characterized by the multiple and asynchronous distribution of cultural forms, an era that operates according to the logic of what David Harvey refers to as a “flexible regime of accumulation.” Rather than a network structure anchored by a three-network economy, the neo-network era features elaborate circuits of cultural production, distribution, and reception.

This transformation is not a radical break with the past. Rather, both high network and niche network tendencies exist side by side, and probably will continue to do so for some time. Blockbuster films that appeal to a transnational audience are still the desideratum of major Hollywood studios, but the same conglomerate that may own a major motion-picture studio may also own a boutique film-distribution company, a specialty music label, and a collection of magazines that target very specific market niches. “As you get narrower in interest,” one media executive observed, “you tend to have more intensity of interest and [the consumer] is more likely to pay the extra money.” What makes a niche product profitable is that it can be marketed to consumers and sponsoring advertisers at a premium price. The key to success is no longer the ownership and control of a centralized and highly integrated medium-specific empire, like the classical networks, but the management of a conglomerate structured around a variety of firms with different audiences and different objectives.

Although the mass market is still attractive, micromarkets can be extremely lucrative, a realization that has engendered an intensive search for narrowly defined and underserved audiences. Race, gender, age, and ethnicity have now joined socioeconomic status as potentially marketable boundaries of difference. Despite the intensity of interest that these firms may find among a microaudience, a media company’s participation in a particular market is not based on a commitment to the material interests or political principles of the audience. Rather, these firms simply are following a marketing strategy that they characterize as strictly capitalistic and generally disinterested in content issues.
Ideally, a neo-network strategy will present opportunities whereby a micromarket phenomenon crosses over into a mainstream phenomenon, making it potentially exploitable through a greater number of circuits within the media conglomerate. Some rap artists’ careers obviously followed this trajectory, perhaps best represented by the success of a performer such as Will Smith, whose rap music career was leveraged into a hit television series and then into a leading role in one of the highest-grossing films in Hollywood history. But the converse is also true. A product that was originally a mass product can be spun out through a myriad of niche venues, which has been Viacom’s strategy behind *Star Trek*, one of its most profitable brands.\(^\text{17}\)

Most commonly, media moguls today find themselves chasing after audiences with a plethora of information and entertainment alternatives, resulting in the flood of material crying for attention. Consequently, promotion has become ever more important within the media marketplace where consumers confront a blizzard of options. One of the key strategies to address such confusion in the marketplace is the concept of “branding,” whereby such companies as Disney and Time Warner try to develop a collection of products that are linked across media. Disney’s films, cartoons, toys, and theme parks are the most obvious example. The look, feel, and packaging of Disney products give consumers a fairly good idea of what to anticipate from each item. Pursuing the same strategy, Time-Life magazines—the purveyors of *Time*, *Fortune*, and *Entertainment Weekly*—have recently developed television news magazines on CNN that are tied to the parent print publication, providing an archetypal example of synergistic relations between components of the Time Warner–Turner empire. One can furthermore assume that such brands will migrate to the new Internet services launched in partnership with America Online. In a neo-network environment characterized by overproduction rather than the artificially imposed restrictions of the classical network era, media conglomerates are trying—via the concept of branding—to help audiences make sense of the informational and cultural options available to them. Thus, the conditions of creative labor in the commercial media industries have changed dramatically since the 1980s and our tools for analyzing them must change as well.

**Neoliberalism’s Neoregulation: The Intellectual Property Grab and Its Contradictions**

The new environment is no longer primarily shaped by technological constraints, government regulation, or even corporate conglomeration. What binds today’s major brands such as *Star Wars* together are elaborate architectures
of copyrighted texts, trademarks, and licensing agreements. These architectures are based not on networks or technologies or government protected oligopolies (or, if the reviews of Episode I are any measure, artistic quality), but on intellectual properties. And this is not a politically neutral or economically inevitable development. It is instead an attempt to respond to an increasingly fragmented, cluttered, and diverse media environment.

In this era of supposedly tearing down walls, in at least one area, new walls are going up. On both international and national levels, the duration of copyright has been lengthened and its scope broadened. Most recently, for example, the U.S. Congress passed the “Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act,” which extended copyright in many categories by twenty years; as a result, Mickey Mouse, Showboat, The Jazz Singer, and tens of thousands of other copyrighted works that were bound to pass into the public domain in the next few years were essentially reprivatized until 2019. Besides lengthening the duration of copyrights, the legal system has expanded the realm of patent protection to include computer software, human genetic material, and plant varieties, which means that although most computer programs or new agricultural hybrids depend most crucially on things that they borrow from other products, these combinatory products can be owned by the company that puts them together. And, despite the expressed skepticism of the courts, lawyers are diligently attempting to copyright things previously uncopyrightable, such as compilations of facts in databases.

As a result, the public domain of freely available material is shrinking and new ticket booths are springing up throughout the culture. Scientists have to pay for information that they used to share with one another freely; intellectual property costs of university libraries in the United States have risen by more than 32 percent in the last several years;19 film and cultural critics find it increasingly difficult to reproduce images in their articles and books;20 and instances of corporations using copyright and trademark violation as a vehicle for silencing their opponents are on the rise worldwide.

Neo-network corporate strategies are central to this trend. Scott Sassa, the executive often credited with the success of the Fox TV network in the 1980s and now president of NBC Television, described his secret to success as making sure that “every copyright that starts out anywhere in the system gets leveraged every which way imaginable.”21 As corporate oligopolies have lost control over hardware because of the proliferation of channels with satellites, VCRs, and cable, they have shifted attention toward control over software, and sought to use expanded intellectual property rights to ensure that control. During the 1980s, both media and computer software corporations, furthermore, began to pursue a new strategy that emphasizes the
process of cornering and cultivating huge libraries of old films, programs, and similar software. Those libraries of, for example, Humphrey Bogart films and *I Love Lucy* TV episodes could then be integrated with product-licensing campaigns and media tie-ins, and continuously recycled through the ever-growing variety of communication channels.\(^{22}\)

Other factors have supported and encouraged this trend toward the expansion of intellectual property law as well. At the same time that the corporate world was developing new strategies in the 1980s, the U.S. government found itself lacking the funds to give out generous research grants to pharmaceutical and high-technology companies, and so got in the habit of giving out new property rights instead. During the 1960s, the government used to heavily subsidize aerospace and medical research; now it tells such high-tech companies that they must pay for more of the research, but the government will allow them much bigger profits in the future by allowing them to claim royalties from their inventions for much longer periods of time. The initial risks are higher, but the long-term paybacks are enormously greater. Also during the 1980s, under the influence of the law and economics movement, the judiciary gradually shifted the burden of proof in intellectual property cases concerning the boundaries of the public domain: where previously the assumption was that things in the public domain should stay that way unless a compelling case could be made for privatization, these days the assumption is the reverse, that things should be privatized unless a compelling case can be made not to. Finally, faced with deindustrialization at home and the realization that intellectual property was the last remaining area of clear-cut U.S. industrial domination, the U.S. State Department embraced these trends and took on the expansion of intellectual property rights internationally as a key foreign-policy goal.\(^{23}\) In sum, it is significant that executives such as NBC’s Scott Sassa no longer refer to popular programs, films, or songs when discussing media strategy. Instead, they talk about leveraging a copyright or purchasing a library of copyrights.

**The Author in the Law**

At the heart of these changes in intellectual property law is the notion that “ideas” belong to particular individuals (including “corporate individuals”) and can be sold to others who may want to use them for personal, political, intellectual, or commercial reasons. But what kind of ideas can be owned and marketed? What, if any, limits should exist over the mad scramble to control the creation and circulation of ideas? Given the rapid expansion of intellectual property law over the past decade, it is interesting to notice the
moment at which the U.S. Supreme Court apparently marked an important boundary in the law. In the “Feist” decision, the Court refused to grant copyright protection to the compilation of facts in an electronic database because, more or less, the compilation clearly involved an investment of time and labor by its creator, but not inspiration. Intellectual property, it turns out, is supposed to be “original,” and “originality” in the law tends to be understood as the product of something like artistic inspiration or genius. Absent that quality, courts are sometimes reluctant to grant intellectual property rights. Ironically, one of the linchpins that holds together the sprawling media corporations of the current era is the notion of individual creative endeavor.

Buried away inside the law is the notion of an author-genius that dates back to the romantic era of Western literature, a moment when many of the foundational precedents of Western law were first established. Inside legal cases concerned with decidedly unromantic topics such as computer databases and genetically altered cells from someone’s spleen, one can find invocations of something that looks very much like the shopworn literary figure of the romantic, isolated artistic genius working away in a garret. One way to address the idea of creativity invoked in the law is to denounce it as an illusion. Numerous historical and critical studies have, for example, traced the lives of particular ideas and inventions, showing how William Shakespeare’s “genius” was the product of collective creative activity among writers and performers in Elizabethan England and how Guglielmo Marconi’s invention of the radio was built on the research of dozens of experimenters around the world who were working on the very same scientific problems at exactly the same time. Critics can show how both Shakespeare and Marconi absorbed crucial ideas from their peers. Indeed, that is the way that most innovation works. We nevertheless tend to attribute innovations to particular people as a way of organizing them for circulation and social use. The author “functions” as an organizing name tag for the social production of ideas, but just as importantly it functions as an important rationale for the ownership and marketing of ideas. It was one thing to say that Marconi invented the radio; it was quite another to give him a patent that allowed his company to create an extremely powerful monopoly over the early development of the technology, which in turn established patterns of organization in the industry that are with us to this day. And here we begin to detect an important connection between culture and economics.

The way we commonsensically talk about inventor-geniuses powerfully affects the ways in which we organize the marketing and circulation of ideas. Under the current legal and economic regime, when we say that someone is
the author of an idea, we confer upon her or him significant rights of ownership. But our contemporary notion of authorship does not come from a divine source or a natural code of law. In fact, it is a fairly recent development in Western society, perhaps only two or three hundred years old. Some critics argue that it emerged during the industrial revolution and provided the groundwork for the rapid expansion of capitalism. As one critic puts it, “[I]n the domain of intellectual property, ‘authorship’ has remained what it was in eighteenth-century England—a stalking horse for economic interests that were (as a tactical matter) better concealed than revealed.”

James Boyle’s important book Shamans, Software, and Spleens is the classic example of this approach: he denounces what he calls the “author ideology” at work in the new digital media environment as a linchpin of the legal structures that are constraining free speech and democratic dialogue in the guise of protecting property rights.

Yet, as time has gone on, the all-out attacks on the author construct have become more complicated. On the one hand, as the Court’s database decision illustrates, at times courts have invoked the author construct to limit rather than expand intellectual property. On the other hand, there are times when it is pragmatically and even morally inadequate to treat the author construct as an illusion. The moment of individual self-expression is a widely valued and respected experience that cannot be easily reduced to a mere cog in the machine of corporate domination. The fact is, the author construct is not simply an idea or a legal principle, it is a historical force or condition. John Frow has suggested that the concept of the author, “is not a piece of ideology that can be demystified and then discarded. It is continuous with a millennia-long process of elaboration of the legal conception of the person, and it . . . corresponds in complicated ways to the imaginary forms of selfhood through which we experience the world and our relation to it.”

Frow concludes that our notions of what constitutes a person and a personal endeavor are in fact two of the most important topics of social deliberation and struggle over the last two hundred years. One version of those “imaginary forms of selfhood” of which Frow speaks is romanticism. The persistence of the author construct reflects the persistence of various forms of romantic individualism in the culture at large.

To pursue this, one has to look at romanticism, not as a set of texts or a period or a philosophy, but as a sociocultural pattern of organizing affect and everyday life that is peculiar to our era. There are various literatures that look at romanticism this way, but one place to start is Colin Campbell’s neo-Weberian book The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism. His general argument is a compelling one: that the consumer culture
is romantic in its structure, that the forms of individualism it encourages tend to be more about self-transformation and anticipatory pleasures—about what some call the desire to desire—than about the satisfaction of utilitarian needs. And he suggests that romanticism is both a necessary condition to capitalism as we know it and a common feature of many substantial movements of resistance to capitalism, the paradigmatic case being the 1960s counterculture, when many people pursued a form of individualism that desired to free the human spirit from the utilitarian conformity of modern capitalism.

In this view, then, the author construct, like the romanticism of which it is part, is related to capitalist property relations in what might be described as a tangential fashion. Because the author construct is based on a romantic, not a utilitarian, understanding of the self, it works neither in direct opposition to nor in perfect parallel with conventional property relations. In this light, the romantic individualist is not just a type of person or even just a way that people in creative positions sometimes understand themselves, but rather something like a discursive resource or a rhetorical trope that people learn to invoke (and to feel) in complex combination with other tropes or discourses, particularly managerial or industrial ones. In other words, authorship allows corporations to own and control the circulation of ideas, but it also provides people like Spike Lee, Michael Moore, and Ellen DeGeneres a resource for pursuing ideas that are sometimes controversial and even critical of the dominant social order. Indeed, such authors must constantly invoke creative and managerial discourses if they are to succeed in the world of Hollywood. They both use these discourses and are shaped by these discourses.

The Author at the Machine

The contradictory qualities of authorship suggest interesting possibilities for those who wish to challenge the expansion of corporate control over ideas and innovations. A good example of this potential can be found in the computer software industry, currently one of the most dynamic sites of creative labor and one of the most hotly contested arenas of intellectual property law. Today’s computer culture can be understood as a deeply contradictory but politically very powerful fusion of a 1960s countercultural attitude with a revived form of political libertarianism, a fusion that has been inscribed in the designs and organization of computers themselves and that is accomplished by a powerful, if naive, form of romantic individualism. This can be illustrated in a number of ways, including the ways that the countercultural compendium called the Whole Earth Catalogue evolved from being a radical
communications outlet for groups like the Black Panthers into a computer catalog that eventually provided much of the editorial staff of *Wired* magazine. One of the distinctive strains of thought in the computer community is a vision of the computer as a device for the manipulation of symbols, as a medium for personal *expression*, instead of as a calculating or thinking machine. This romantic individualism then became connected to the economic conservative movements driving neoliberal policies worldwide during the 1980s and 1990s. *Wired* is perhaps one of the best examples of this articulation, because it took a residual 1960s-influenced countercultural radicalism and harnessed it to the neoliberal politics of government deregulation, privatization, and commercialization. What was once a progressive form of romantic individualism became rearticulated to the politics of the “Reagan revolution,” which enabled an intensive period of government deregulation and corporate mergers, resulting in the growth of huge conglomerates such as Microsoft.

Yet the neoliberal romanticism in the computer culture during its heady growth years may be starting to change a bit, in part because of the Open Software movement. The Linux operating system is an important expression of this shift. Today, Linux is the only operating system that is gaining market share against Microsoft Windows. It has been created and maintained by programmers working over the Internet on a largely voluntary basis, and is legally organized by what people are calling an Open Software License, wherein one not only can use it free of charge, but one can have access to the source code for further modification and improvement as long as those improvements are published and shared.

Source code is at the heart of all forms of software. This is what companies and intellectual property lawyers fight so rabidly to protect and to market; it is the commodity par excellence of the so-called information economy. Linux, however, is the flagship of the Open Software movement, which sees itself in a struggle against the protection and marketing of source code. Open Software is in one view a kind of political movement against the commodification of information. And it has been making some significant inroads among computer users, which in turn has inspired emulation by some of the major firms in the industry. In 1998, executives at Netscape were persuaded by the Open Software arguments and released the source code for Netscape 5.0 under an open software license; Apple more recently has been inching in that direction as well. In part, they are responding to the fabulous success of a younger competitor. Linux has now become an installation option for computers ordered from Dell, Gateway, and IBM, and a number of purely Linux-based systems are available.
Ultimately, Linux may not topple the citadels of Microsoft power or change the dominant economic relations in the computer industry. But it is interesting in terms of what it introduces into the contours of public debate. In particular, the Open Software movement is, on the one hand, a marked departure from the economic libertarianism that so far has dominated the intersections of the computer culture with the worlds of law and business. On the other hand, the success of the movement so far has depended on an effort to frame open software in romantic individualist terms.

As usual, there are several overlapping strands of thought in the recent history of the Open Software movement. Software communitarians offer arguments that are frequently, but not always, of a fairly naive sort: software should be free because sharing is better than not sharing. And others support the movement because of a widespread (and in many cases somewhat adolescent) resentment toward Bill Gates, as if dethroning Gates would magically resolve the many exploitative forces at work in the computer industry. But another component of the movement’s success so far is a set of justifications and self-descriptions that frame the movement in individualist terms.

The core piece here is an essay by a movement leader named Eric S. Raymond. His essay called “The Cathedral and the Bazaar” has circulated beyond the Internet into the offices of key business executives and copyright lawyers, influencing policy at companies such as Netscape, Apple, and, by some accounts, IBM. It is important that its arguments are not communitarian; altruism is dismissed out of hand. The central rhetorical accomplishment of the piece rather is to frame voluntary labor in the language of the market: the core trope is to portray Linux-style software development as a bazaar, a real-life competitive marketplace, whereas Microsoft-style software production is portrayed as hierarchical and centralized—and thus inefficient—like a cathedral. The metaphor of the market is thus associated with voluntary labor and dissociated from conventional capitalist modes of production.

Part of what makes this curious reversal work is Raymond’s focus on programmers’ motivations. For an essay about such a dry and technical topic as the management of software development, it makes an awful lot of reference to the internal feelings, psychological makeup, and desires of programmers. Raymond presents a first-person account of his own experiences in software development, during which he tells the story of how he became converted to the Open Software model. This narrative of personal revelation is interspersed with numbered principles or aphorisms, the first of which is: *Every good work of software starts by scratching a developer’s personal itch.* Because Raymond’s audience is in the worlds of business and law, he imme-
diately sets out to reconcile his psychologically tainted portrayal of motivation with a utilitarian one. “The ‘utility function’ Linux hackers are maximizing,” he observes, “is not classically economic, but is the intangible of their own ego satisfaction and reputation among other hackers.” He goes on to draw analogies with fan subcultures, wherein the enhancement of reputation among the other members of the community is understood as a key motivation. Just as *Star Trek* fans or hip-hop fans want to be recognized by other fans as knowledgeable, contributing members of a community, so software developers pursue similar forms of recognition.

Raymond thus frames the motivation to write software as something born of a not entirely rational fascination or ambition, of a desire to have one’s accomplishments recognized not with money but with the psychological satisfaction of acclaim, and a desire to be open to transformations of self. One could, of course, criticize this as both an empirical description and a philosophical argument, but what is significant is, first, how the dream of having one’s “itch,” one’s inner passions, acknowledged by a community of the like-minded is a characteristically romantic structure of feeling, and, second, how much Raymond’s statement of the problem, whether or not it is philosophically coherent, has resonated with the computer culture at large and managed to take at least a few small steps into the larger business culture.

The first sentence of Raymond’s essay is, “Linux is subversive.” Of course, that is not true. Open Software is already being treated by many as just another business model, and by itself is unlikely to change things dramatically. That opening sentence and its absurdity nicely capture yet another example of the grandiosity of the computer culture. But it is not coincidental that there is something vaguely Byronic about that grandiosity: it is connected to a deeply rooted tradition of romantic individualism. And while there is truly something comic about the idea of men sitting at computer consoles imagining themselves as Byronic heroes, it is also telling. The story of Open Software offers some indication of the “intense social struggle” that John Frow suggests is embedded in the “legal conception of the person” and its complex connections to “the imaginary forms of selfhood through which we experience the world and our relation to it.” He goes on to argue that it is at the level of everyday life, that moment of experiencing the world, that the logic of the commodity and the logic of the gift interact most dynamically and contradictorily. The peculiar passions of the computer culture suggest a pattern on the level of everyday life, a structure of feeling, if you will, that plays an important role in the connection of people in the computer culture (and probably in many other areas of life) to the commodity form and its institutional supports in law.
The connection is a changeable one. With the rise of the Open Software movement, we have seen the appearance of a version of romantic authorship in an economically and legally significant community that seriously conflicts with existing structures of commodification. A few years ago, the computer culture was an important source of apologetics for an aggressive, neoliberal expansion of property rights. Today, if the Open Software movement has any authority at all, that seems to be changing. If Linux itself is not subversive, useful lessons about how real change might come can be derived from its popularity. In particular, it suggests that, in public political and legal arguments, focusing on the contrast or gap between the romantic vision of the author and the economic realities of our industries is, in many cases, likely to be a more fruitful approach than attacking the author construct itself.

In our lives, we will never displace the notion of personal authorship. It is almost impossible for us as a society to imagine creativity without the concept of authorship. It is simply too deeply embedded in the modern Western cultural tradition and too much a part of our everyday lives. We can, however, explore and hopefully transform some of the many assumptions that have been associated with authorship. For example, is it acceptable to author something that is based on the use of other related texts and then to claim sole commercial and cultural ownership of the resulting concoction? Or can one author an idea that has far-ranging social exposure and then use intellectual property laws to protect that idea from criticism, parody, or alternative use? Is the promise of economic reward through restrictions on others’ use of creative works really the best way to encourage innovation and personal expression? The Open Software movement provides no ready answers to such questions, but its notion of authorship leads in directions that are very different from those currently preferred by the powerful interests in the culture industries. It suggests that the desire to create is a social desire, not simply a wish to maximize personal wealth. It furthermore argues that personal, creative endeavor springs from a desire to participate, to share in a communal world of ideas. Whether these ideas can provide the basis for social activism and change is open to question, but they nevertheless have proven enormously popular with many people in today’s computer culture. Such popularity suggests that the concept of authorship is still alive as an active resource for those seeking social and economic change.

Short of a global revolution, it is unlikely that the capitalist relations of exchange that dominate creative labor will be transformed in the next couple decades. Yet change, even revolutionary change, is usually the product of elaborate and extended struggles over the ideas and social relations that govern capitalist industries, among them the culture industries. Marx, Gramsci,
and many other critical thinkers urge us to consider the realm of contradiction as the wellspring of social change. If, as we argue here, the unstable and dynamic terrain of romantic individualism is indeed a site riddled with contradiction, then it is worth considering as a potential site for contesting current patterns of corporate dominance in the culture industries.

Conclusion: Can the Left Have Edge?

What are the lessons for the left in all this? As any survivor of the 1960s counterculture is aware, the left certainly has experience with “edge.” There are many leftists, left movements, and left texts that in different ways offer a thrill with the promise that we stand apart from the despised, stifling, and plodding powers that be of the world. But, as with the Linux enthusiasts of today, there are serious limits to an approach that cloaks itself in the ethos of a simplistic romantic individualism that is most often associated with “edge.” One of the best critiques of what is wrong with the romantic individualism of the computer culture comes from journalist Paulina Borsook. Borsook describes what she calls the “diaper fallacy,” which rests on the observation that

making babies, or thinking about making babies . . . is fun. Considering the reality of how many times you will really have to change their diapers (or buy them or wash them or dispose of them or manufacture them or pay for those diapers), is not. . . . It’s much more fun to think Grand Abstract Thoughts about (Divine?) Providence providing Prosperity—than to be bothered to think about who wipes the noses and picks up the garbage and absorbs the collateral costs and damage for the outfit.\textsuperscript{41}

A left strategy needs to acknowledge the draw of romantic individualism, of the sociocultural power of “edge,” of the compelling quality of iconoclasm, of taking a dramatic stand against business as usual. But by itself that is not enough. It is impressive and politically significant that the major competitor to Microsoft Windows (the cash cow of the Richest Man in the World) was produced by volunteer labor and distributed for free, but most of the diaper changing in the world is done on an unpaid basis as well. The moral of Linux should be, not that software should be produced by volunteer romantic entrepreneurialism, but that most of the work of cultural creation, whether one is talking about Linux or Windows or movie scripts, is only tangentially related to the systems of rewards under capitalism. People sometimes work for money, and sometimes for passion, pleasure, or obsession,
and much of what gets done in the world goes unrewarded or marginally re-
warded; that has always been true. What is at stake is not simply the ques-
tion of whether big corporations are getting bigger, but whether they are
supporting or constraining the flow and creation of ideas. At times, media
conglomerates actually work in favor of innovation, and even in favor of crit-
ical thinking. But at other times they do not. And, most obviously, they tend
to work against politically progressive modes of thought when they attempt
to expand the domain of intellectual property beyond reasonable boundaries.

What is needed, then, is a more mature, less grandiose left approach to
the politics of media. Rather than simply focusing our energies primarily on
heroic challenges to media conglomerate or on the Byronic celebration of
the author genius, we should focus our energies on the diaper-changing as-
pects of promoting a more robust and diverse media environment. With this
in mind, we believe that at least three strategies are worthy of attention.
First of all, it seems important to support and expand the legal protection of
ideas as a public resource. Although such issues have largely been discussed
within limited professional circles, issues of creativity, critique, and even
comedy rely on an open circulation of ideas. Wherever possible, we need to
develop organizations that will explicitly foreground these issues not simply
as challenges to corporate conglomerate or media concentration but as
fundamental questions of value attached to cultural and historical traditions
of personhood. Although considered unfashionable in some intellectual cir-
cles, questions of selfhood are powerful motivating issues in societies around
the world. Given that romantic notions of the self crucially hinge on the
concept of creativity, it seems especially important to mount a sustained
movement to expand public rights in legislation and legal deliberations relat-
ed to the circulation of ideas.

Second, we must continue to work for the promotion of alternative cul-
tural resources and venues. As many critics have noted, public broadcasting
in the United States is a pale imitation of the much more robust services
available in countries around the globe. Instead of engaging in dramatic
David-versus-Goliath struggles over what gets on network TV (or does not),
it might be better to work toward developing more alternative resources. If
our society is to be truly innovative, then we need structural diversity in
media, media organized in a variety of ways, not just more and more outlets
that are all following the same principle of delivering audiences to advertis-
ers. Is one public television service enough? One community radio station?
Or one severely underfunded cable access station? We need to expand the
number of noncommercial services, wherever possible with a special empha-
sis on innovation rather than simply an expansion of existing services, many
of which have grown tame and bureaucratized over the past two decades as they have responded to budget reductions and intensive political attacks from the right.

A third strategy would be to take a leaf from the corporate world and build alliances under the rubric of particular “brands.” The *Whole Earth Catalogue* and its allied publications and products are one enormously successful example and REI (the outdoor products cooperative) is another. One may not agree with the politics of either of these organizations, but the strategy is one that works well in the current environment. People want information, enlightenment, and entertainment, but they also want to associate themselves with particular political agendas. They will do this through voting, petitioning, and protesting, but, perhaps ironically, they will also do it through the consumption of particular products. Some feminist and environmentalist Web sites now help net users make precisely these sorts of connections. As activists, we need to attend to the important work of building linkages that are flexible and far-reaching. The linkages also need to be intelligible to broad audiences. Tilting at Microsoft windmills may be less important than building a “brand” identity for politically progressive products and cultural resources. Some of these resources might be produced by progressive organizations, while others might be available from the very conglomerates who seem willing to cater to the interests of niche consumers. By helping citizens make connections between offerings in the cultural marketplace, we can enhance the availability and visibility of media texts such as *In These Times, Ms.*, and *Z*, as well as *Ellen, Bulworth*, and *TV Nation*.

Further Reading


Notes


4. Ibid.

5. Here we focus on television as a useful example of the changes that have taken place in mass media. Similar patterns of development can be found in the film and radio industries. During the classical network era, music and print publishing operated according to quite different logics, although the more recent convergence of media has made those differences increasingly inconsequential. An excellent analysis of music and publishing during the classical network era can be found in Paul Hirsch, “Processing Fads and Fashions: An Organization-Set Analysis of the Cultural Industry Systems,” American Journal of Sociology 77 (1972): 639–59.


8. This pursuit of demographically defined audiences actually began as early as the 1970s, according to Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, MTM: “Quality Television” (London: British Film Institute, 1984), and Todd Gitlin, Inside Primetime (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983). For an excellent analysis of the contradictory attractions of mass and niche markets during the 1980s, see Julie D’Acci, Defining Women: The Case of Cagney and Lacey (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

9. One gains a further sense of this difference by comparing the audience share of a program such as the Beverly Hillbillies, which averaged more than 30 percent of viewers throughout the early 1960s, with a 1990s hit comedy such as Seinfeld, which averaged audience shares in the teens.

10. It should be pointed out, however, that television (even classical network television) never attempted to “homogenize” culture so much as it attempted to organize and manage differences. See Michael Curtin, “Connections and Differences: The Spatial Dimension of Television History,” Film and History 30:1 (March 2000): 50–61.


14. For example, Interscope, an “independent” music company, is typical of a boutique music company whose success is predicated on its reputation for releasing edgy products. Despite its street credibility as oppositional, it nevertheless operates under the wings of huge conglomerates, sometimes to their consternation. Formerly owned by Time Warner, Interscope became very controversial in the mid-1990s because one of its niche labels, Death Row Records, most prominently featured gangsta rap artists like Snoop Doggy Dog and the late Tupac Shakur. After intense public pressure, Time Warner put Interscope up for sale, which quickly attracted the attention of Sony and MCA/Universal, with the latter taking control after a high-stakes bidding war. So, rather than actually going independent, the label is now racking up record-breaking sales in new niche markets that include punk-ska and gospel music. Interestingly, these recent shifts were reported in a niche insert of *Time* magazine called “Time Select, Show Business”; see David E. Thigpen, “A Sound Rebound,” *Time*, November 10, 1997, B2, and A. Sandler, “MCA Finishes Interscope Odyssey,” *Variety*, February 26, 1996, 62.

15. This quote comes from the transcript of a roundtable discussion with publishing executive Mark Edmiston in Ohmann et al., *Making and Selling Culture*, 137.

16. We have found this to be true in most conversations with media executives, but the pattern is rendered rather explicitly in transcripts of roundtable discussions with media executives published in *Making and Selling Culture*.

17. It should be pointed out that the trajectory of Smith’s career is what fascinates media executives who are building synergistically motivated conglomerates. They aspire to provide multiple venues for a star like Smith or a product like *Star Trek*. Yet these hopes have not yet been fully realized because performers and brands still jump from one company to another in many cases. Smith, for example, landed a popular television series with GE/NBC in the prime-time series *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, but then scored a film success with Sony/Columbia in *Men in Black*, which earned more than $500 million in global box-office revenues four months after its premiere, making it the tenth-highest grossing film in Hollywood history. See “Box Office,” *Variety*, October 27, 1997, 16, and Leonard Klady, “Sony Sent Soaring by ‘Summer,’” *Variety*, October 27, 1997, 16. Regarding Viacom’s strategy for the exploitation of product brands such as *Star Trek*, see John Batelle, “Viacom Doesn’t Suck,” *Wired* (April 1995): 110–15+.


20. Indeed, scholars who produce criticism of visual imagery often find themselves in the difficult situation of publishing critiques of images that they must describe in words because they are unable to get copyright clearance to reproduce the image within the context of their essays or books. The Society for Cinema Studies has been a leading organizer of efforts to resolve such issues and regular reports of its endeavors can be found in *Cinema Journal*.


22. For example, in addition to the development of CNN, the rise of the Turner cable television empire was predicated on the strategic acquisition of software, especially the purchase of the Braves baseball team and the acquisition of the MGM film library. Similarly, in anticipation that one of the most important elements in the future
development of the Internet will be control of visual imagery, Microsoft purchased the Bettman Archives, perhaps the world’s largest privately owned repository of photographic imagery.

23. This is a loose interpretation of the analysis presented by Robert Merges: “There are essentially three interrelated reasons for the growth in intellectual property commercial transactions. First, there is more intellectual property to include in transactions than there used to be, and it is worth more because it is more readily enforced by the courts. Congress, and to a lesser extent the state legislatures, are creating more intellectual property each year; where the United States leads in this area, other countries tend to follow. Second, the growth in intellectual property has increased businesspeople’s awareness of the intellectual property aspects of traditional transactions. Consequently, there is often now an intellectual property dimension to transactions that were conducted in the past without mention of these rights. Third, and most interesting to me, intellectual property rights make more feasible various organizational structures that firms and individuals are increasingly using to produce goods and services. Since these organizations are at least partially based on contracts, they provide a growing source of commercial transactions that necessarily include an intellectual property component.” (Robert Merges, “Expanding Boundaries of the Law: Intellectual Property and the Costs of Commercial Exchange: A Review Essay,” *Michigan Law Review* [May 1995]: 93 Mich. L. Rev. 1570).


31. Frow, “Repetition and Limitation,” 187. Rosemary Coombe, following Peggy Kamuf’s work on the signature, similarly emphasizes the double-jointedness of the notion of authorship, arguing that it contains within it its own alterity.


34. The essay “‘The Cathedral and the Bazaar’ originally circulated on the Internet. The version quoted here is available at http://www.tuxedo.org/%7Eesr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/cathedral-bazaar/. It has since been published with other material in Eric S. Raymond, The Cathedral and the Bazaar: Musings on Linux and Open Source by an Accidental Revolutionary (Sebastopol, Calif.: O’Reilly and Associates, 1999).

35. Raymond blithely asserts that the motivation of Linux hackers cannot be called altruistic because “this ignores the fact that altruism is itself a form of ego satisfaction for the altruist” (“The Cathedral and the Bazaar”).

36. Several more of these aphorisms refer to internal states. For example: “4. If you have the right attitude, interesting problems will find you,” and “18. To solve an interesting problem, start by finding a problem that is interesting to you” (ibid.).

37. The piece does in various ways acknowledge and elaborate the obvious values of cooperation and sharing, and thus has to somehow distance itself from the more simplistic forms of romantic individualism. But the idea of creativity is still very much heroic and Promethean. Consider this passage: “The only way to try for ideas like that is by having lots of ideas—or by having the engineering judgment to take other peoples’ [sic] good ideas beyond where the originators thought they could go. . . . Andrew Tanenbaum had the original idea to build a simple native Unix for the 386, for use as a teaching tool. Linus Torvalds pushed the Minix concept further than Andrew probably thought it could go—and it grew into something wonderful. In the same way (though on a smaller scale), I took some ideas by Carl Harris and Harry Hochheiser and pushed them hard. Neither of us was ‘original’ in the romantic way people think is genius. But then, most science and engineering and software development isn’t done by original genius, hacker mythology to the contrary. The results were pretty heady stuff all the same—in fact, just the kind of success every hacker lives for! And they meant I would have to set my standards even higher” (ibid.).


39. If not Byron himself, then more than a few of his readers were more often than not bored bureaucrats, people with relative material security suffering from alienation in their narrow, specialized, and technical professions. One might be able to trace a fairly direct line from some of the earliest masculine heroes of romantic literature—Goethe’s young Werther, say—onward to the protagonists of cyberpunk novels, who are inevitably proficient at computers, that is, they are people who have spent a large part of their lives sitting at computer consoles engaged in narrow, technical tasks.


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