

Michael Millmore

Student No.: 497132

Contextual Studies Assignment 2: Literature Review

Wordcount: 2185 (approx.)

Consumerism, Consumption and Commodity Culture



Figure 1: Michael Millmore, Top Shop, Metro Centre Gateshead, May 2021

Introduction

The concepts of consumerism and consumption permeate everyday life, they are an intrinsic reality for citizens of late capitalist societies. While I will discuss some of the theories I have encountered during my research in this literature review, I can only scratch the surface of this vast subject. Much of the writing I have encountered comes from an anti-capitalist, and therefore anti-consumerist position. The consumer is often portrayed as a victim of the machine of capitalism. Positive views do exist, but they tend to operate on the opposite end of the spectrum celebrating individual choice and freedom. Paterson (2006: 6) describes the consumer in binary terms, as either 'savvy' or 'sucker', either free and autonomous or duped and passive. Gabriel and Lang (2015) take a more nuanced view, ultimately arguing that the modern consumer is "unmanageable." Their assertion is that we are unable to escape or opt out of being consumers, yet it is possible to be simultaneously active, passive, sovereign and victim as we engage in consumption. Despite ever increasing attempts to understand, coerce, constrain and control consumers, they act in ways that are unpredictable, inconsistent and contrary:

In this uncertain world, the consumer must now be deemed *unmanageable*, claimed by many, but controlled by nobody, least of all by consumers themselves. (Gabriel and Lang, 2015: 232)

The complex, dialectical nature of this argument appeals to me, and I suspect that *The Unmanageable Consumer* will be the key text for my extended essay. Indeed, the contradictory nature of consumption as an act of both agency and inertia is the driving idea behind my Body of Work, through which I aim to explore the contemporary retail landscape - currently in an accelerated state of change and uncertainty. As the form of this project takes shape, I anticipate so will the subject of my dissertation. I will explore some potential ideas for my proposal for this in the conclusion to this essay.

Some definitions of consumerism...



Figure 2: Dawn of the Dead (1978)

Williams (1983: 78-9) states that the etymology of 'consume' is almost always unfavourable: "to destroy, to waste, to exhaust" which could explain the negative connotations that the term consumerism implies, "the using up of what is going to be produced." The terms 'consumer choice', which suggests the appearance of autonomy, and 'consumer society', retain this negative association while suggesting how widespread this model of capitalism extends into everyday life. Puritanical suspicion of modern consumption led to phrases such as 'conspicuous consumption' (Veblen, 1899) and critiques of the increasing commodification of capitalist societies in the early to mid-twentieth century by Frankfurt School theorists and the New Left. This view of consumerism as wasteful and meaningless with connotations of self-interest and vulgar materialism contrasts with a more optimistic view originating from the USA that associates consumerism with abundance and prosperity. Linked to concepts such as consumer sovereignty, consumer rights and consumer choice this challenges the elite view that consumption is a wholly negative activity. Ultimately, the debate about consumption is much more nuanced than being simply positive or negative, an example of this is the way the interests of consumers in late capitalist societies override

the interests of the producers of goods and services, predominately in the developing world, leading to complex ethical and political questions. (Bennet et al., 2005: 57-9)

Baudrillard (1988) adopted the term 'consumer society' as a way of describing the purchasing of material goods as a socially valuable activity in its own right. He argued that the post-World War II economic boom meant a change from production to consumption as the primary source of economic growth. Combined with the availability of cheap credit, this led to a shift in mind set away from 'save then buy' to 'buy now pay later' meaning the accumulation of objects was no longer justified by need but by want. (Buchanan, 2010: 97)

Jameson (1991: 47) describes the evolution of late capitalism dialectically, "as catastrophe and progress together." Paterson (2006: 7-9) extends this to refer to what he calls "the paradoxes of consumption": the great freedoms offered by consumer capitalism must literally be bought into, requiring both the exchange of wealth and the knowledge that our tastes and desires are being engineered by mass media to some extent.

Commodity Fetishism and economic critiques of consumerism



Figure 3: Paul Reas, from the series 'I Can Help' (1988)

Despite being written over 150 years ago, Marx's concept of the fetishism of the commodity still resonates. Marx (1867) viewed commodity fetishism as an extreme form of alienation induced by the structures of commodity exchange in capitalist society. In his analysis, commodities have both a use-value, which relates to the quantity of labour that is embodied in its making, and an exchange-value, which is abstract and bears no relation to the labour used to produce it. The commodity therefore takes on properties similar to a fetish object and is invested with illusionary, supernatural powers. (Macey, 2000: 67) Buchanan (2010: 93) uses the example of the value of a diamond, which despite being rare, does not explain why it should be prized so highly - the obscure hierarchy of value created means that the diamond, despite serving no clear purpose, can be prized more highly than fresh water. The capitalist

system is designed towards the drive for profit and is therefore compelled to expand the commodity form wherever it can and has now advanced into areas unforeseen by Marx such as sport and culture. (Bennet et al, 2005: 46-7)

Sturken and Cartwright (2009: 280-1) argue that the nature of use-value has changed significantly since Marx wrote *Capital* and that the concept of what is and is not useful is highly ideological incorporating notions such as pleasure and status. Arguably, the estrangement between producer and consumer has grown ever greater due to global capitalism as has the process of mystification which empties commodities of the meaning of their production and fills them with abstract meanings such as empowerment, beauty and sexiness - often the fetish relationship between consumers and commodities is deeply personal. In *Mythologies* (2009) Barthes applied semiotic analysis to various forms commodities and forms of commodity culture and this could be relevant to my dissertation along with Klein's polemic against the power of branding, *No Logo* (2000).

The enigmatic and mysterious qualities of commodities arise from hidden social relations which rely on the manipulation of the consumer through practices of packaging, promotion and advertising, described by Adorno (1974) as commodity aesthetics. This process fixes a mask of meaning onto material objects in the form of symbolic codes that consumers cannot resist. Sahlin (1976) describes this as a 'godlike manipulation' which explains the rapid, and seemingly insatiable, increase in consumer demand. (Lury, 1996: 41-2) Baudrillard (1988) uses the term 'consumer culture' to describe consumption as a system of signs rather than a source of use-value, with consumers engaging creatively in an active way with items of mass consumption, sometimes even subverting their dominant values and norms. (Bennet et al., 2005: 57-8) These concepts could require further investigation for my extended essay.

Another economic concept that could be useful are the notions of Fordism and post-Fordism. Gabriel and Lang describe the "Fordist Deal" as an unwritten and pioneering agreement which offered increased standards of living for Ford factory workers as "compensation" for the "de-skilling control and alienation" that was imposed on them in the workplace. Henry Ford recognised that his workers were also potential customers, hence, "the producer is also the consumer, the consumer is also the

producer." Post-Fordism, which is defined by unpredictable employment, perhaps explains the seemingly erratic nature of modern consumption - Fordism offered "methodical mass consumption" through stable employment, the transient nature today's job market, with the notion of a 'job for life' being meaningless, makes consumption patterns unpredictable and ephemeral. (Gabriel and Lang: 2015: 10-19)

Strategies such as 'built in obsolescence' mean that products no longer reach saturation point - repeat purchases are encouraged and consumption becomes aligned with identity and lifestyle. Ritzer's 'McDonaldization' thesis (2011) explores the homogenisation of global capitalism and the influence this has had on both everyday consumption and social lives. McDonald's business model of "ruthless efficiency, calculability, predictability and control" has led to much of life experience becoming standardised with quantity and efficiency being prized over quality and attainment and a "I want it fast, I want it now, I want what's next" everyday life. (Paterson, 2006: 63-5)

Consumerism and Everyday Life



Figure 4: John Kippin, *Pepsico* (1997)

Theorists such as Lefebvre, Bourdieu and de Certeau refute the assumed position that there is anything 'natural' or inevitable about everyday life. Extending this way of thinking to consumption, it is argued that a series of both conscious and unconscious processes take place in what could be thought of as banal or routine activities. These actions reveal very complex dialogues and transactions concerning identity, status, aspiration, cultural capital and position within a social group. (Paterson, 2006: 7)

In *Society of the Spectacle* (2010), Guy Debord presents a series of opaque, enigmatic, non-linear theses which critique post war capitalist society. The spectacle is an extension of Marx's concept of alienation with Debord arguing that the reality we inhabit is a system of abstract generalised forms, with the aim of producing wealth for its own sake. A system of oppression rooted in the commodity form: "The spectacle is

the dictatorship of social life by the economy. We are reduced to its passive 'spectators'." (Hemmens and Zacarias, 2020: 149-152)

De Certeau (1984) posited that consumer capitalism can neither contain nor suppress the spontaneous and imaginative energies of the people. That consumption is a form of cultural production and can be creative when an object is bought and used for a purpose other than its intended one. (Paterson, 2006: 7) Using dramatic language and military analogies, de Certeau terms this 'guerrilla consumption.' Paterson (2006: 158) criticises this approach as being romanticised and leading to naïve and unrealistic claims on the importance of these acts.

The internet is not only transforming everyday life but also the way we consume. Zuboff (2019) provides a chilling, detailed description of this describing how the large tech companies are processing huge amounts of data with the aim of monetising all aspects of our lives. This new 'age of surveillance capitalism' makes Debord's notion of the spectacle appear prescient and could be useful to explore further.

Conclusion and Dissertation Proposal



Figure 5: Michael Millmore, Toys 'R' Us, Metro Centre Gateshead, October 2021

My decision to explore consumerism as the subject for my contextual studies project evolved from my research into theories of everyday life. Highmore (2002: 17) describes everyday life as ambivalent and contradictory "characterized by ambiguities, instabilities and equivocation." Commonly, the everyday has connotations with tedium, but is also often described as marvellous and extraordinary - something that many theorists recognise dialectically: that the everyday is both "extraordinary and tedious", "self-evident and taken for granted". This analysis, which chimes with that of Gabriel and Lang, is one that I find fascinating, and it is these seeming contradictions and oppositional positions that I want to explore in both my Body of Work and dissertation.

I want to investigate consumerism at this moment in time. The majority of work I have researched for this literature review, although interesting, is dated. Potentially, the ideas in these texts will still be relevant, however, I suspect that I am still to find the key works that will inform my extended essay. The way we consume is changing at an incredible rate and in a way that is difficult to predict. Physically space is changing with the decline of the traditional high street now advancing into the shopping malls that caused their downturn, long established chains are collapsing and many shopping centres have more empty than occupied retail space. It seems unlikely that online shopping will replace physical stores completely. The stores that are most likely to survive are those that capitalise on experiences that cannot be replicated online. Shopping and leisure have always been closely aligned, and the balance seems to be shifting closer to recreation. There appears to be an insatiable appetite for smaller, boutique experiences which oppose the dominance of the large, homogenised corporations. Often using terms such as 'artisan' and 'bespoke' these are usually expensive and exclusive; this is part of their appeal but also means they are unattainable to people on lower incomes - another example of our economically divided society. There are also environmental concerns about the effect that our throwaway society is having on the natural world. There is a cost to being ethical however and buying into this can be a lifestyle choice and form of virtue signalling that is not available to everyone.

Having established a theme and conducted a broad area of research, I now need to go back to these sources in a more forensic way in an attempt to refine and form the basis of the questions I wish to interrogate through my dissertation. *The Unmanageable Consumer* (Gabriel and Lang, 2015) is the key work for me so far, reapproaching and rereading this could provide a good starting point. Focusing on the tension between large corporations and smaller businesses could be a way of allowing me to explore a number of oppositional positions from which a viewpoint, and dissertation question, may appear.

List of Illustrations:

Figure 1. Millmore, M. (2021) Top Shop, Metro Centre Gateshead, May 2021

Figure 2. Dawn of the Dead (1978) [Film Still] At:
<https://memegenerator.net/img/images/72744351.jpg> (accessed 31st October 2021)

Figure 3. Paul Reas, from the series *I Can Help* (1988) At:
<https://www.paulreas.com/portfolio-1/project-one-s5c7l> (accessed 31st October 2021)

Figure 4. John Kippin, Pepsico (1997) At: <https://johnkippin.com/images-2/27-2/>
(accessed 31st October 2021)

Figure 5. Millmore, M. (2021) Toys 'R' Us, Metro Centre Gateshead, October 2021

Bibliography:

- Barthes, R. (2009) *Mythologies*. London: Vintage.
- Baudrillard, J. (1998) *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage Publications.
- Bauman, Z. (2007) *Consuming Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bennett, Tony; Grossberg, Lawrence; Morris Meaghan (Eds.) (2005) *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Buchanan, I (2010) *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press inc.
- De Certeau, M. (1988) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Debord, G. (2010) *The Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red.
- Evans, J. and Hall, S. (eds.) (1999) *Visual Culture: The Reader*. London: Sage.
- Fisher, Mark. (2009) *Capitalist Realism*. Winchester: Zero Books.
- Foster, H. (ed) (1998) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. New York: New Press.
- Gardiner, M. (2000) *Critiques of Everyday Life: An Introduction*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Gabriel, Y. and Lang, T. (2015) *The Unmanageable Consumer (3rd Edition)*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Harvey, D. (1993) *The Condition of Postmodernity: Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.
- Hemmens, A. and Zacarias, G. (eds.) (2020) *The Situationist International: A Critical Handbook*. London: Pluto Press.
- Highmore, B. (2002) *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Highmore, B. (ed.) (2002) *The Everyday Life Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Highmore, B. (2011) *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Jameson, F. (1991) *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Klein, N. (2000) *No Logo*. London: Flamingo.

- Lee, M. J. (ed.) (2000) *The Consumer Society Reader*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Lefebvre, H. (2014) *Critique of Everyday Life*. London: Verso.
- Lury, C. (1996) *Consumer Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Marx, K. (1887) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I. Book One: The Process of Production of Capital*. At: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/index.htm> (accessed 9th August 2021)
- Marx, K. (2000) *Marx's Capital: A Student Edition*. Electric Book Company. At: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucreative-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3008611#> (accessed 9th August 2021)
- Paterson, M. (2006) *Consumption and Everyday Life*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Ritzer, G. (2011) *The McDonaldization of Society* 6. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.
- Roberts, J. (2006) *Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory*. London: Pluto Books.
- Shields, R. (1991) *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity*. London: Routledge.
- Shields, R. (ed.) (1992) *The Subject of Consumption*. London: Routledge.
- Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L. (2009) *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vaneigem, R. (2012) *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Oakland: PM Press.
- Williams, R. (1983) *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana Press.
- Williamson, J. (1978) *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*. London: Marion Boyars.
- Zuboff, S. (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books.

