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Contextual Studies Assignment 3

21st Century Consumption



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

Introduction

The role of the consumer permeates all aspects of early 21st century life. At a time when developed nations are largely divorced from the means of production that occupied much of Marx's analysis of capitalism, the very success of our economies is umbilically tied to our desire to shop. The tenuous nature of this system was recently exposed by the various lockdowns of the Covid pandemic while also rapidly advancing moves from physical to online shopping. It is unclear where these changes are heading and what they will do to society both economically and culturally, the only thing that is certain is that change is indeed coming.

The nature of consumption at this moment in time is the starting point for an exploration about the realities of today and the close links between how our role as consumers shape everyday life and even inform our identities. Much discourse about consumption sees it as a problem with the consumer cast as a pawn in the capitalist machine. Debord's (2010) notion of "The Spectacle" remains seductive if somewhat bleak - we are controlled by an omnipresent force which is overarching, controlling, and so tied to our very existence that we cannot escape it. This theme of the consumer as helpless cog in the machine of late capitalism is a common position, but also one that is too one dimensional to be ultimately compelling. Consumers are neither saint or sinner, dupe or sovereign - in practice our role as consumer changes at various points and is much more nuanced than is often given credit - we also possess much more power than is commonly recognised. Gabriel and Lang (2015) argue that for capital, the "Holy Grail of control" is to seek and anticipate consumer trends, while the consumer has come to symbolise modernity, equality and happiness, the way we are viewed as consumers is multifaceted. We can be sovereign, victim, explorer, activist, communicator, rebel, identity seeker or hedonist. Today's consumption however is defined by unpredictability, inconsistency and contrariness and the more consumers are typecast and pigeon-holed, the more they become "unmanageable, eccentric and paradoxical." (Gabriel and Lang, 2015: 226-235)

Ideology plays a large part in understanding how the consumer is viewed. One of the central characteristics of Neo-Liberalism is the concept of freedom and choice which is in turn allied to the belief that market forces should be the key economic drivers in society. This position translates directly to consumerism with freedom of choice being seen as not only a right for every citizen, but also something that defines our very identities. Featherstone (2007: 82) uses the term "consumer culture" to explain how commodities are central to understanding contemporary society both in a literal economic way through the accumulation of goods and symbolically due to how these material items act as "communicators". Marx (2000) posited the notion of commodity fetishism to explain how commodities become abstracted from their use-value and, in a similar way to a fetish object, become invested with illusionary, supernatural powers. (Macey, 2000: 67) While Marx was particularly concerned with the relationship between capital and production, his metaphor is perhaps even more relevant today with a product's brand name being one of the most important aspects of the commodity. Naomi Klein's (2000) case study 'No Logo' discusses the growth of this phenomena and the lengths that companies go to protect and advance the reputations of their brands - often with marketing budgets greatly outstripping the cost of production.

Baudrillard (1988) focuses on the semiotics of consumerism in his analysis focusing on commodity signs. He posits that commodities are defined by what they signify rather than their use and that this explains the seeming insatiability and dissatisfaction of consumers: "What people seek in consumption is not so much a particular object as difference and the search for the latter is unending." (Baudrillard, 1998: 7) The effect that marketing and advertising has upon the consumer is not as straightforward, effective and manipulative as is generally presented. Yet, despite the fact that the consumer is not mindlessly influenced by all of the marketing and advertising that are the reality of everyday life today, it is also naïve to suggest that these external stimuli have no effect.

In this paper I will explore and expand on some of the ideas introduced here - consumption and consumerism is much more nuanced and two-way process than is commonly suggested. Consumerism forms part of our everyday life and is virtually impossible to escape, in fact being constantly digitally connected

means it is increasingly so. We are at a point of change, and it is difficult to predict where this will lead us and the effect it will have on society. What is certain however, is that our role as consumers will shape this future in ways that the forces of capital cannot predict or control.

The Fetish of the Commodity

Harvey (1990: 100) describes Marx's notion of commodity fetishism as one of his most compelling insights as, "it poses the problem of how to interpret the real but nevertheless superficial relationships that we can readily observe in the market place in appropriate social terms." Today, the concept remains even more relevant when trying to understand the relationship between consumer and commodity, albeit, in a way that has advanced beyond Marx's intentions. 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 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 concepts such as empowerment, beauty and sexiness - often the fetish relationship between consumers and commodities is deeply personal.

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)

Debord's (2010) notion of 'The Spectacle' extends the Marxist concept of alienation, arguing that the reality we inhabit is a system of abstract generalised

forms, with the aim of producing abstract wealth for its own sake. This system of oppression is 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)

Commodities taking on the power and influence of fetish objects suggests a certain amount of docile compliance on the part of the consumer. Gabriel and Lang (2015, 108-9) make an obvious, yet often ignored assessment of the act of consumption: it is pleasurable. Not only that, once obtaining commodities is separated from survival or need, enjoyment becomes the only logical explanation for our need to attain material objects:

"Since the collapse of Eastern-style Communism, consumerism has emerged as a global hegemonic idea, underpinning capitalist accumulation, free trade and the riotous commodification of everything...As goods leave the world of production to enter the sphere of display, circulation and consumption, they become objects of fantasy and instruments of pleasure." (Gabriel and Lang, 2005: 109)

What we consume both shapes and sign post our identities. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of 'habitus' explores how the value of goods is cultural as well as economic - the symbolic value of commodities signify prestige, status and social standing which in turn allows distinctions to be made and judgements made about taste. This 'cultural capital' shapes our identities through the distinction of our taste and shows consumption to be rooted in a system of signs and symbols which is active rather than passive. (Mackay, 1997 :20)

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. McDonalds 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)

List of Illustrations:

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

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