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# John Fiske
# "Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power, and Resistance" (1989)

Shopping malls are cathedrals of consumption—a glib phrase that I regret the instant it slides off my pen. The metaphor of consumerism as a religion, in which commodities become the icons of worship and the rituals of exchanging money for goods become a secular equivalent of holy communion, is simply too glib to be helpful, and too attractive to those whose intentions, whether they be moral or political, are to expose the evils and limitations of bourgeois materialism. And yet the metaphor *is* both attractive and common precisely because it does convey and construct *a* knowledge of consumerism; it does point to one set of "truths," however carefully selected a set.

Truths compete in a political arena, and the truths that the consumerism-as-contemporary-religion strives to suppress are those that deny the difference between the tenor and vehicle of the metaphor. Metaphor always works within that tense area within which the forces of similarity and difference collide, and aligns itself with those of similarity. Metaphor constructs similarity out of difference, and when a metaphor becomes a cliché, as the shopping mall–cathedral one has, then a resisting reading must align itself with the differences rather than the similarities, for clichés become clichés only because of their centrality to common sense: the cliché helps to construct the commonality of common sense.

So, the differences: the religious congregation is powerless, led like sheep through the rituals and meanings, forced to "buy" the truth on offer, all the truth, not selective bits of it. Where the interests of the Authority on High differ from those of the Congregation down Low, the congregation has no power to negotiate, to discriminate: all accommodations are made by the powerless, subjugated to the great truth. In the U.S. marketplace, 90 percent of new products fail to find sufficient buyers to survive (Schudson 1984), despite advertising, promotions, and all the persuasive techniques of the priests of consumption. In Australia, Sinclair (1987) puts the new product failure rate at 80 percent—such statistics are obviously best-guesstimates: what matters is that the failure



rate is high. The power of consumer discrimination evidenced here has no equivalent in the congregation: no religion could tolerate a rejection rate of 80 or 90 percent of what it has to offer.

Religion may act as a helpful metaphor when our aim is to investigate the power of consumerism; when, however, our focus shifts to the power of the consumer, it is counterproductive. Shopping malls and the cultural practices, the variety of shoppings that take place within them, are key arenas of struggle, at both economic and ideological levels between those with the power of ideological practice (Althusser), hegemony (Gramsci), or strategy (de Certeau) and those whose construction as subjects in ideology is never complete, whose resistances mean that hegemony can never finally relax in victory, and whose tactics inflict a running series of wounds upon the strategic power. Shopping is the crisis of consumerism: it is where the art and tricks of the weak can inflict most damage on, and exert most power over, the strategic interests of the powerful. The shopping mall that is seen as the terrain of guerrilla warfare looks quite different from the one constructed by the metaphor of religion.

Pressdee (1986), in his study of unemployed youth in the South Australian town of Elizabeth, paints a clear picture of both sides in this war. The ideological practices that serve the interests of the powerful are exposed in his analysis of the local mall's promotional slogan, which appears in the form of a free ticket: "Your ticket to a better shopping world: ADMITS EVERYONE." He comments:

> The words "your" and "everyone" are working to socially level out class distinction and, in doing so, overlook the city's two working class groups, those who have work and those who do not. The word "admits" with a connotation of having to have or be someone to gain admittance is cancelled out by the word "everyone"—there are no conditions of admittance; everyone is equal and can come in. (p. 10)

This pseudoticket to consumerism denies the basic function of a ticket—to discriminate between those who possess one and those who do not—in a precise moment of the ideological work of bourgeois capitalism with its denial of class difference, and therefore of the inevitability of class struggle. The equality of "everyone" is, of course, an equality attainable only by those with purchasing power: those without are defined out of existence, as working-class interests (derived from class *difference*) are defined out of existence by bourgeois ideology. "The ticket to a better shopping world does not say 'Admits everyone with at least some money to spend' . . . ; money and the problems associated with getting it conveniently disappear in the official discourse" (Pressdee 1986: 10–11).

Pressdee then uses a variation of the religious metaphor to sum up the "official" messages of the mall:

> The images presented in the personal invitation to all in Elizabeth is then that of the cargo cult. Before us a lightshaft beams down from space, which contains the signs of the "future"; "Target," "Venture"—gifts wrapped; a table set for two. But beamed down from space they may as well be, because . . . this imagery can be viewed as reinforcing denial of the production process—goods are merely beamed to earth. The politics of their production and consumption disappear. (p. 12)

Yet his study showed that 80 percent of unemployed young people visited the mall at least once a week, and nearly 100 percent of young unemployed women were regular visitors. He comments on these uninvited guests:

> For young people, especially the unemployed, there has been a congregating within these cathedrals of capitalism, where desires are created and fulfilled and the production of commodities, the very activity that they are barred from, is itself celebrated on the alter of consumerism. Young people, cut off from normal consumer power are invading the space of those with consumer power. (p. 13)

Pressdee's shift from the religious metaphor to one of warfare signals his shift of focus from the powerful to the disempowered.

Thursday nights, which in Australia are the only ones on which stores stay open late, have become the high points of shopping, when the malls are at their most crowded and the cash registers ring up their profits most busily, and it is on Thursday nights that the youth "invasion" of consumer territory is most aggressive. Pressdee (1986) describes this invasion vividly:

> Thursday nights vibrate with youth, eager to show themselves—it belongs to them, they have possessed it. This cultural response is neither spectacular nor based upon consumerism itself. Nor does it revolve around artifacts or dress, but rather around the possession of space, or to be more precise the possession of consumer space where their very presence challenges, offends and resists.
>
> Hundreds of young people pour into the center every Thursday night, with three or four hundred being present at any one time. They parade for several hours, not buying, but presenting, visually, all the contradictions of employment and unemployment, taking up their natural public space that brings both life and yet confronts the market place. Security men patrol all night aided by several police patrols, hip guns visible and radios in use, bringing a new understanding to law and order.
>
> Groups of young people are continually evicted from this opulent and warm environment, fights appear, drugs seem plentiful, alcohol is brought in, in various guises and packages. The police close in on a group of young women, their drink is tested. Satisfied that it is only coca-cola they are moved on and out. Not wanted. Shopkeepers and shoppers complain. The security guards become agitated and begin to question all those seen drinking out of cans or bottles who are under 20, in the belief that they *must* contain alcohol. They appear frightened, totally outnumbered by young people as they continue their job in keeping the tills ringing and the passage to the altar both free and safe. (p. 14)



Pressdee coins the term "proletarian shopping" (p. 16) to describe this window shopping with no intention to buy. The youths consumed images and space instead of commodities, a kind of sensuous consumption that did not create profits. The positive pleasure of parading up and down, of offending "real" consumers and the agents of law and order, of asserting their difference within, and different use of, the cathedral of consumerism became an oppositional cultural practice.

The youths were "tricksters" in de Certeau's terms—they pleasurably exploited their knowledge of the official "rules of the game" in order to identify where these rules could be mocked, inverted, and thus used to free those they were designed to discipline. De Certeau (1984) points to the central importance of the "trickster" and the "guileful ruse" throughout peasant and folk cultures. Tricks and ruses are the art of the weak that enables them to exploit their understanding of the rules of the system, and to turn it to their advantage. They are a refusal to be subjugated:

> The actual order of things is precisely what "popular" tactics turn to their own ends, without any illusion that it will change any time soon. Though elsewhere it is exploited by a dominant power . . . here order is *tricked* by an art. (de Certeau 1984: 26)

This trickery is evidence of "an ethics of *tenacity* (countless ways of refusing to accord the established order the status of a law, a meaning or a fatality)" (p. 26).

Shopping malls are open invitations to trickery and tenacity. The youths who turn them into their meeting places, or who trick the security guards by putting alcohol into some, but only some, soda cans, are not actually behaving any differently from lunch hour window shoppers who browse through the stores, trying on goods, consuming and playing with images, with no intention to buy. In extreme weather people exploit the controlled climate of the malls for their own pleasure—mothers take children to play in their air-conditioned comfort in hot summers, and in winter older people use their concourses for daily walks. Indeed, some malls now have notices welcoming "mall walkers," and a few have even provided exercise areas set up with equipment and instructions so that the walkers can exercise more than their legs.

Of course, the mall owners are not entirely disinterested or altruistic here—they hope that some of the "tricky" users of the mall will become real economic consumers, but they have no control over who will, how many will, how often, or how profitably. One boutique owner told me that she estimated that 1 in 30 browsers actually bought something.

Shopping malls are where the strategy of the powerful is most vulnerable to the tactical raids of the weak. And women are particularly adept guerrillas.

## CONSUMING WOMEN

Bowlby (1987) takes as a premise "Women shop." Within this condensed truism, she finds a number of problems to do with the socially produced definitions of both women and shopping and with the connections between the two. While pondering some of these problems, I was browsing through a shop (where else?) selling cards and gifts. Three items took my eye. One was a bumper sticker proclaiming "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping"; the second was a birthday card that said, "Happy Birthday to a guy who's sensitive, intelligent and fun to be with—if you liked to shop you'd be perfect"; the third was a card designed for no specific occasion whose front cover showed a stylish, modern young woman and the words "Work to Live, Live to Love, and Love to Shop, so you see . . ." the dots led to the inside and the words "if I can buy enough things I'll never have to work at love again."

These slogans are all commodities to be bought, and while from one perspective they may be yet more evidence of the power of consumerism to invade and take over our most personal lives in that they are seducing us to abrogate our ability to make our own utterances to a commercially motivated producer—the ultimate incorporation—we must recognize that these are not only commodities in the financial economy but also texts in the cultural economy. The meanings that are exchanged are in no way determined by the exchange of money at the cash register. Culturally all three are operating, with different emphases, in two semantic areas—those of gender difference and work versus leisure—and are questioning the distribution of power and values within them.

Each slogan is a feminine utterance, and each utterance depends for its effect upon its foregrounded difference from patriarchal norms. The bumper sticker sets its user apart as different from the "normal" (i.e., masculine) user of the saying's normal form—"When the going gets tough, the tough get going"—so as to distance her from its competitive masculinity (it is used typically to motivate sportsmen, soldiers, and, by extension, businessmen). In so doing, it manages simultaneously to mock such masculine power and to transfer it to a female practice, so that success in shopping becomes as much a source of power as success in sport, war, or business. Shopping entails achievement against a powerful oppositional force (that of capital) and the successful shopper is properly "tough." The user of such a slogan would pronounce "Women shop" in a quite different tone of voice from that used by, for instance, a dismissive patriarch. Shopping is seen as an oppositional, competitive act, and as such as a source of achievement, self-esteem, and power.



The uses of the message's masculine original deny the difference between work and leisure: masculinity is appropriately and equally achieved in sport, war, and work, and conflates these into the single category of the public domain, which it colonizes for the masculine, implicitly leaving the domestic or private for the feminine. Its feminine appropriation, then, speaks against the confinement of femininity to the domains of nonwork, nonpublic, and the "meaning" of the household, the meaning of the domestic, as the place of leisure, relaxation, and privacy—all of which are patriarchal meanings in that they deny the social, economic, and political meanings of the unwaged labor of women in the house.

Opposite the card shop was one selling kitchen equipment; hanging prominently in the window was an apron (the sign of women's domestic slavery) bearing the slogan "Woman's place is in the mall." Of course, one reading of this positions women as mere consumers in patriarchal capitalism, but the slogan also opposes "mall" to "home," and offers up oppositional meanings—if "home" means for women domestic slavery and the site of subordination of women to the demands of patriarchal capitalism exerted through the structure of the nuclear family, then the mall becomes the site of all the opposite, liberational meanings. The mall is where women can be public, empowered, and free, and can occupy roles other than those demanded by the nuclear family. Later on in this essay I will summarize Bowlby's arguments that the department store was the first public space that could legitimately be occupied by respectable women on their own, and Williamson's that buying can bear meanings of empowerment. Both of these arguments are clearly relevant to understanding the contradictory meanings of this apron and its slogan.

But my attention has wandered from the greeting cards. Both of the cards described above link shopping and romantic love as practices in which women excel and men are deficient. Even the "sensitive, intelligent" (i.e., nonjock) male recipient of the birthday card is incapable of understanding shopping. And for the other card, shopping has become, defiantly, the way to solve the problems faced by women in both work and love in a culture that patriarchally attempts to organize both in the interests of men. The conclusion, "If I can buy enough things I'll never have to work at love again," is nonsensical; it deliberately uses the logic of patriarchal capitalism to come to a nonsensical conclusion, the pleasure of which lies in exposing the nonsense for women of the dominant (i.e., patriarchal, capitalist) senses of commodities, work, and love.

The connection made by the two cards between shopping and romantic love may, at first sight, seem odd. But as capitalism developed throughout the nineteenth century it produced and naturalized first the nuclear family as the foundation social unit, and second a new and

specific role for women within this unit and thus within the social formation at large. The woman became the domestic manager of both the economic and emotional resources of the family. The romance genre developed as a form of emotional training of women for their wifely role within the capitalist nuclear family. The development of the feminine as the sensitive, emotional, romantic gender was a direct product of the capitalist economy, so there are clear historical reasons for the interlinking of the romantic and the economic within the definition of the feminine that we have inherited from the nineteenth century.

The popular TV game show *The New Price Is Right* shares many characteristics with the slogans on the cards and bumper sticker. Most obviously it takes women's skills as household managers, their knowledge of commodity prices, and their ability to assess relative values, and gives to them the power and public visibility that patriarchy more normally reserves for the masculine. These skills and knowledges are taken out of the devalued feminine sphere of the domestic, and displayed, like masculine skills, in public, on a studio set before an enthusiastic studio audience and millions of TV viewers. In "normal" life, deploying these skills meets with little acclaim or self-esteem—the woman is expected to be a good household manager and all too frequently her role is noticed only when she is deemed to have failed in it. On *The New Price Is Right*, however, her skills and successes are not just acclaimed, but receive excessive applause and approbation from the excited studio audience. The excess provides a carnivalesque inversion of the more normal silence with which such skills are met in everyday life. Such silence is, of course, a means of subjugation, a form of discipline exerted by patriarchy over the feminine; their excessively noisy recognition is thus a moment of licensed liberation from the normal oppression, and women's pleasure in it derives from a recognition that such skills and knowledges can produce positive values despite their devaluation in the patriarchal everyday. *The New Price Is Right* and "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping" are both cultural resources that can be used to speak and assert the feminine within and against a patriarchal "normality." Similarly, the inadequacy of the sensitive, intelligent birthday boy when it comes to shopping would debar him from success on *The New Price Is Right.*

Successful contestants on the show receive expensive commodities or cash as their prizes. In another carnivalesque and therefore political inversion, the women's skills are rewarded not by spending less of the family money (i.e., that earned by the man), but by money or goods for *her*. Feminine skills do not just *husband* (sic) masculine earnings and thus benefit the family, but actually produce rewards for the women. Similarly, in the "live" versions of this and other games sometimes played in shopping malls, the entry "ticket" is typically a receipt from one of the shops in the mall. The proof of having spent opens up the



chance of winning. The receipt as money is a carnivalesque inversion of economic subjugation.

The deep structure of values that underlies patriarchal capitalism now needs to be extended to include earning as typically masculine, and, therefore, spending as typically feminine. So it is not surprising that such a society addresses women as consumers and men as producers. We may summarize the value structure like this:

| THE MASCULINE | THE FEMININE |
|---|---|
| PUBLIC | PRIVATE (DOMESTIC AND SUBJECTIVE) |
| WORK | LEISURE |
| EARNING | SPENDING |
| PRODUCTION | CONSUMPTION |
| EMPOWERED | DISEMPOWERED |
| FREEDOM | SLAVERY |

Bowlby (1987) makes some interesting points about how shopping enables women to cross the boundary between the public and the private. In her history of the Paris store Bon Marché and its origins at the end of the last century, Bowlby notes that the "diaries" the store gave to its customers as a form of promotion contained detailed information about how to reach the store by public transport:

> That this should have been practically available to the bourgeois lady marks a significant break with the past: department stores were in fact the first public places—other than churches or cathedrals—which were considered respectable for her to visit without a male companion. But this also signified, at another level, a stepping out from domestic bounds. (p. 189)

The value to women of a public space to which they had legitimate and safe access is not confined to the late nineteenth century. Ferrier (1987) makes a similar point about contemporary malls:

> For women there may be a sense of empowerment from their competency in shopping operations, their familiarity with the terrain and with what they can get out of it. The space is designed to facilitate their shopping practices, and in our built environment there are few places designed for women. The shoppingtown offers public conveniences, free buses, parking, toilets, entertainment, free samples, competitions. In the shoppingtown, women have access to public space without the stigma or threat of the street. (p. 1)

She goes on to associate the freedom malls offer women to reject the gendered opposition of public versus domestic with the equal opportunities to reject the gendered opposition between work and leisure, and the economic one of for sale (i.e., public) versus bought (i.e., private):

> The shoppingtown, with its carnival atmosphere, seems set to collapse the distinction between work and leisure. . . . The consumer is allowed to wander in and out of private space to look at, handle and try out products that she does not own. In a department store it is possible to wander through privately owned space, holding or wearing someone else's property as if it were your own, without asking to do so, often without even having to go through the usual social intercourse appropriate to being a guest in someone's place. Boundaries between public and private become ambiguous. (p. 2)

Women can find sources of empowerment both in "their" side of the structured values that patriarchy has provided for them (see above) and in their ability to escape the structure itself. Similarly, Bowlby (1985) finds evidence that spending the "man's" money can be a resisting act within the politics of marriage. She quotes a typical piece of advice given to a congressman's wife by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her lectures in the 1850s:

> Go out and buy a new stove! Buy what you need! Buy while he's in Washington! When he returns and flies into a rage, you sit in a corner and weep. That will soften him! Then, when he tastes his food from the new stove, he will know you did the wise thing. When he sees you so much fresher, happier in your new kitchen, he will be delighted and the bills will be paid. I repeat—GO OUT AND BUY!

Bowlby comments:

> Significantly, the injunction to buy comes from woman to woman, not from a man, and involves first bypassing and then mollifying a male authority. To "go out" and buy invokes a relative emancipation in women's active role as consumers. (p. 22)

This is an example of de Certeau's (1984) dictum that subordinated people "make do with what they have," and if the only economic power accorded to women is that of spending, then being a woman in patriarchy necessarily will involve feminine "tricks" that turn the system back on itself, that enables the weak to use the resources provided by the strong in their own interests, and to oppose the interests of those who provided the resources in the first place.

In the same way that language need not be used to maintain the social relations that produced it, so too commodities need not be used solely to support the economic system of capitalism, nor need the resources provided by patriarchy go solely to the support of the system. The conditions of production of any cultural system are not the same as, and do not predetermine, the conditions of its use or consumption.

The gendered structure of values given above constitutes not only a way of constructing the social meanings of gender and of inserting those meanings into social domains, but also a means of discipline through



knowledge. The "knowledge" that, for instance, femininity finds its meanings in the domestic, in consumption, in leisure, in the disempowered, is a means of disciplining women into the roles and values that patriarchy has inscribed for them. Yet shopping, while apparently addressing women precisely as disempowered domestic consumers, may actually offer opportunities to break free not just from these meanings, but from the structure of binary oppositions that produces them. So Ferrier (1987) can argue:

> It seems that the successful consumer system must have ambiguous boundaries; between leisure and work, public and private space, inside and out, desire and satisfaction, to attract consumers and to make shopping pleasurable. The shoppingtown is in some ways an extension of the consumer's domestic space, and at the same time a totally separate "new world." As Hartley (1983) points out, power resides in the interface between individuals in ambiguous boundaries. In the ambiguous boundaries of the shoppingtown, there is space for fantasy, for inversions, for pleasure. The pleasure and power are linked with the acts of transgression that are sanctioned. (p. 4)

## COMMODITIES AND WOMEN

Judith Williamson (1986a) incisively analyzes the problems that left-wing cultural critics face when grappling with what she calls "the politics of consumption." She argues that in our society the conditions of production are ones over which people have no control, no choice about if or where to work, or about the conditions under which to work; consumption, however, offers some means of coping with the frustrations of capitalist conditions of production. It thus serves both the economic interests of the producers and the cultural interests of the consumers while not completely separating the two. The cultural interests of the consumers are essentially, Williamson argues, ones of control. Mainly this is a sense of control over meanings: "The conscious chosen meaning in most people's lives comes much more from what they consume than what they produce" (p. 230). Consumption, then, offers a sense of control over communal meanings of oneself and social relations, it offers a means of controlling to some extent the context of everyday life. The widespread use of VCRs is a case in point. In Morley's 1986 study of lower-middle- and working-class families' use of TV, he found that every household, even those with no wage earners, owned a VCR, which was used both to time-shift TV programs and to play rented films: in the first case the VCR allowed control over scheduling, in the second it allowed control over programming.

Williamson (1986a) argues that in a capitalist society buying and ownership not only offer a sense of control, but form the main, if not the only, means of achieving this:

> Ownership is at present the *only* form of control legitimized in our culture. Any serious attempts at controlling products from the other side—as with the miners' demand to control the future of *their* product, coal (or the printing unions' attempts to control their product, newspaper articles, etc.) are not endorsed. Some parts of the left find these struggles less riveting than the struggles over meanings in street style. Yet underlying *both* struggles is the need for people to control their environment and produce their own communal identity; it is just that the former, if won, could actually fulfill that need while the latter ultimately never will. (p. 231)

It is also worth noting not only that the pleasures of control are found in the ownership of commodities through which people can create or modify the context of everyday life and thus many of the meanings it bears, but also that the consumer's moment of choice is an empowered moment. If money is power in capitalism, then buying, particularly if the act is voluntary, is an empowering moment for those whom the economic system otherwise subordinates. And any one single act of buying necessarily involves multiple acts of rejection—many commodities are rejected for every one chosen, and rejecting the offerings of the system constitutes adopting a controlling relationship to it. The following anecdote related to me by a woman shopper is both typical and significant:

> When I was a girl my mother would sometimes take me to the shopping town to go shopping for shoes. She'd spend hours in the shoe shop trying on dozens of pairs, having the assistant running backwards and forwards nonstop. Eventually she'd choose one pair to take home, but I knew she wouldn't buy them, she'd always return them next day saying they didn't fit or weren't right or something.

My informant's apparent embarrassment at the "exploitation" of the shop assistant indicates that she understood the relations between her mother and the assistant at the personal level; her mother, however, was operating on the level of the system, the relationships were those between consumer and producer/distributor, and her pleasure was caused by her empowered position in this relationship. These shopping expeditions were "tactical raids" (de Certeau 1984) upon the system, or a highly developed form of "proletarian shopping" (Pressdee 1986).

But there is another dimension of meaning to this anecdote that can also be traced in Williamson's comparison of the context of production with that of consumption, and that is one of class meanings. The woman telling me the anecdote also characterized her mother as traditionally middle-class, so part of her lack of embarrassment over her treatment of the shop assistant can be explained in terms of mistress-servant class relations, and thus appears less politically acceptable than when it is seen as a tactical raid upon the system.

This raises the suggestion that production may be essentially proletarian and consumption bourgeois. The attempt to control the context of production poses a radical threat to capitalism because it positions proletarian interests in direct, naked, uncompromising conflict with bourgeois interests; it thus invites (and receives) the full weight of the bourgeois ideological and repressive state apparatuses to control and ultimately squash it. The social allegiances formed when aligning oneself with those subordinated by the conditions of production are with those most severely subordinated by capitalism, and therefore those whose struggles are least likely to succeed.



Consumption, however, is more a bourgeois act; it appears to support, rather than threaten, bourgeois values, and by forging these social allegiances, the weak do not invite the repressive attentions of the strong, but can catch them "off guard," as it were. Guerrilla tactics are often most successful when the guerrillas do not wear the uniform of "the enemy." Shopping can never be a radical, subversive act; it can never change the system of a capitalist-consumerist economy. Equally, however, it cannot be adequately explained as a mere capitulation to the system. Williamson's (1986a) key point here is that commodities are furnished by market capitalism, and in themselves cannot be radical; but, she argues, traces of radicalism are to be found in the way they are consumed and the needs that underlie their consumption: "What are potentially radical are the needs that underlie their use: needs both sharpened and denied by the economic system that makes them" (p. 232).

Stedman-Jones (1982), in his study of the culture of the London working classes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, gives us further evidence of this use of commodities not to express radicalism itself, but to meet a need that is potentially radical:

> More generally, evidence about patterns of spending among the London poor suggests that a concern to demonstrate self-respect was infinitely more important than any forms of saving based upon calculations of utility. When money was available which did not have to be spent on necessities, it was used to purchase articles for display rather than articles of use. (p. 101)

The need for "display" is a need for self-esteem and respect that is denied by the conditions of production, but that may be met by the conditions of consumption. This display may involve the purchase of "middle-class" commodities, and thus give the appearance of buying into middle-class values and the social system that advantages them, but Stedman-Jones takes pains to point out that this is not so:

> For the poor, this effort to keep up appearances, to demonstrate "respectability" entailed as careful a management of the weekly family budget as any charity organizer could have envisaged. But its priorities were quite different. "Respectability" did not mean church attendance, teetotalism or

> the possession of a post office savings account. It meant the possession of a presentable Sunday suit, and the ability to be seen wearing it. . . .
>
> It is clear from these and other accounts that the priorities of expenditure among the poor bore little relation to the ambitions set before them by advocates of thrift and self-help. (p. 102)

The meanings of a respectable suit for the poor are quite different from those for the affluent, even though the appearance of the poor man's suit may derive many features from that worn by his "social betters." The point is that the meanings of commodities do not lie in themselves as objects, and are not determined by their conditions of production or distribution, but are produced finally by the way they are consumed. The ways and the whys of consumption are where cultural meanings are made and circulated; the system of production and distribution provides the signifiers only.

In his ethnographic study of Bostonian Italians in the West End, Gans (1962) found similar patterns of consumption. He found that display of self through clothes was as common among West Enders as among other working-class groups, and that they were adept at making their own fashions out of what the fashion system provided:

> At the time of the study, for example, the "Ivy League" style was beginning to be seen among the young men of the West End. Their version of this style, however, bore little resemblance to that worn on the Harvard campus: flannel colors were darker, shirts and ties were much brighter, and the belt in the back of the pants was more significant in size if not in function. (p. 185)

Gans's description of this style as "informal and jaunty" points to its "display." It would seem that self-display is, for those denied social power, a performance of their ability to be different, of their power to construct their meanings from the resources of the system. It has within it elements of defiance and of pride in self- and subcultural identities, and it is pleasurable insofar as it is a means of controlling social relations and one's cultural environment. There is a sense of freedom underlying display, and it is this that frequently attracts the disapproval of the middle classes, who are prone to label such performance as vulgar or tasteless. Gans finds that the car contains all these cultural meanings and pleasures for the West Enders:

> The automobile, for example, serves as an important mode of self-expression to the male West Ender—as it does to many other working-class Americans: it displays his strength and his taste. When the man has the money—and the freedom to spend it—he thus will buy the most powerful automobile he can afford, and will decorate it with as many accessories as possible. The size of the car and the power of its motor express his toughness; the accessories, the carefully preserved finish, and chrome are an extension of the self he displays to the peer group. (p. 184)



The complexity and subtlety of the roles played by commodities in our culture are all too easily dismissed by the concept of a "consumer society." In one sense all societies are consumer societies, for all societies value goods for cultural meanings that extend far beyond their usefulness. In this context, Marx's distinction between use-value and exchange-value is less than helpful, for it suggests a difference between a "real" value, that of the material and human labor in goods, and a "false" value that society gives to commodities as it exchanges them.

Baudrillard (1981) claims that the ultimate effect of capitalism, certainly of its late variant in which we currently live, is to confuse the relationship of use-value and exchange-value, and, in fact, to turn a system of use-values into one of exchange-values. Exchange-values are culturally useful: "Through objects, each individual and each group searches out his-her place in an order" (p. 83). The function of commodities, then, is not just to meet individual needs, but also to relate the individual to the social order. Consumption is not just the end-point of the economic chain that began with production, but a system of exchange, a language in which commodities are goods to think with in a semiotic system that precedes the individual, as does any language. For Baudrillard there is no self-contained individual, there are only ways of using social systems, particularly those of language, goods, and kinship, to relate people differently to the social order and thus to construct the sense of the individual.

Sinclair (1987) points out that Baudrillard's poststructuralist account of the meaning of commodities differs from the more structuralist and Marxist ones of Williamson in an earlier work (1978) and Leiss (1978), both of whom conceive

> of a system of persons on one hand made to correspond to a system of goods on the other, with individual subjects finding it increasingly difficult to maintain a coherent sense of unified identity as the satisfaction of their needs becomes ever more fragmented by greater product differentiation. (Sinclair 1987:55)

Williamson's later work reserves this emphasis, and traces ways in which people can make meanings out of the commodity system, rather than, as here, having their meanings of themselves made for them by that system.

The semiotic function of goods is stressed even more strongly by Douglas and Isherwood (1979), who argue that "consumption is the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape" (p. 57), and that goods "are needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture" (p. 59). They conclude:

> Enjoyment of physical consumption is only part of the service yielded by goods; the other part is the enjoyment of sharing names. . . . Physical consumption involves proving, testing or demonstrating that the experience

tices seems to me to be guilty of a disrespect for the weak that is politically reprehensible. This is particularly the case in certain strands of Marxian or feminist scholarship that end up in the position of despising—or, at least, looking down on—those for whom they attempt to speak, and those whose sociopolitical interests they claim to promote. Similarly, studies of popular culture that are optimistic and positive, rather than pessimistic and negative, frequently celebrate the ritual functions of popular texts and thus deny or ignore the ability of disempowered groups to make their popular culture, often by oppositional practices, out of industrially provided and distributed cultural resources. Such work has traditionally drawn upon anthropological models (those of Turner or Lévi-Strauss) or rhetorical ones (e.g., Burke) to reveal and explain the ritualistic structures of popular culture. In this approach the shift of emphasis from structures to practices has resulted in the move from structural anthropology to cultural ethnography.

## CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

One of the commonest practices of the consumer is window shopping, a consumption of images, an imaginative if imaginary use of the language of commodities that may or may not turn into the purchase of actual commodities. This "proletarian shopping" is closely bound up with the power of looking. As Madonna controls her "look," that is, how she looks to others and therefore how they look upon her, so the window shopper searches a visual vocabulary from which to make statements about herself and her social relations. Looking is as much a means of exerting social control as speaking. Elsewhere, I have argued that shopping malls are a visual feast, a plethora of potential meanings, palaces of pleasures offered particularly to women (Fiske et al. 1987). The connections among femininity, women's subordination in patriarchy, and looking have been well theorized, particularly in regard to film and advertising. In patriarchy, the woman has been constructed as the object of the masculine voyeuristic look, which places him in a position of power over her and gives him possession of her, or at least of her image. Women's narcissistic pleasure, then, lies in seeing themselves as idealized objects of the male gaze; a woman is always the bearer of her own image, sees herself through the eyes of the other. While there is much evidence, particularly in cinema, to support this theory of the gender politics of looking, its ability to explain the pleasures of shopping, of the use of commodities to construct images of self, is more limited.

Despite the fact that the language of fashion shows strong patriarchal characteristics as it swings its focus around the female body—now emphasizing the bust, now the buttocks, now the legs or the waist, but always guiding the eye toward the eroticized areas—the meaning of fashion for women cannot be reduced to such political simplicity, nor



can the pleasures offered to women by their own bodies be adequately explained by the giving of pleasure to the masculine other. The pleasure of the look is not just the pleasure of looking good for the male, but rather of controlling how one looks and therefore of controlling the look of others upon oneself. Looking makes meanings; it is therefore a means of entering social relations, of inserting oneself into the social order in general, and of controlling one's immediate social relations in particular. Commodities are the resources of the woman (or man) who is exercising some control over her look, her social relations, and her relation to the social order. The Madonna "wanna-bes" who buy fingerless lacey gloves are not buying the meanings these items would have, for instance, at a Buckingham Palace garden party—they are buying a cultural resource out of which to make their own meanings, to make a statement about their own subcultural identity and thus about their relationship to the social order. It is unhelpful to denigrate such a visual speech act by saying that it is pseudospeech or severely limited speech, in that the language of commodities only allows all the fans to say the same thing.

A number of points need raising in response to this criticism. The first is that if commodities speak class identities rather than individual identities, this does not mean that they are necessarily an inferior language system; such a criticism derives from the ideology of individualism and denies, first, the extent to which individual inflections of class meanings can be made within the commodity system (see the discussion on taste and style below), and, second, the extent to which class meanings are spoken by verbal language, however "creatively" or "originally" it may be used. All language systems relate the user to the social order and thus to others who share that or a similar relationship, at the same time they allow concrete and specific differences in their use by each person. The pleasures of linguistic control traverse the realms of the personal and the social. The pleasures and meanings offered by the plenitude of goods in shopping malls are multiple, and bear the dominant ideology while offering considerable scope for cultural maneuver within and against it. On the economic level such glittering excess provides a daily demonstration that the capitalist system works, and on the ideological level that individualism can flourish within it. A wide consumer choice is not an economic requirement, but a requirement of the ideology of individualism. But exercising choice is not just "buying into" the system: choice also enhances the power of the subordinate to make their cultural uses of it.

Two people wearing the same clothes, or furnishing their houses in the same way, are embarrassed to the extent that they feel that their similarity of taste has denied their individual differences, for the centrality of individualism in our ideology gives priority to these meanings rather than to ones of social or class allegiance. It is not surprising, then, that one of our commonest ways of marking the difference between

capitalist and communist societies is by the commodity system and consumer choice. Westerners typically mythologize communist societies as providing very limited consumer choice, and, therefore, of producing a gray, undifferentiated mass of people, instead of the vibrant individuals of the West. The "sheeplike" nature of such people, which leads them to accept such a totalitarian social system, is mapped out inconically in their monotonous grayness, resulting from the lack of consumer choice. Because style and taste have, according to this capitalist myth, no role in a communist system that denies its people the language of commodities as it denies them individual "freedom," then the people in such a system have no control over their social relations, no way of varying or determining their points of entry into the social order.

It is therefore essential for capitalist shopping centers to emphasize the plenitude of commodities—goods tumble over each other in a never-ending plethora of objects, a huge cultural resource bank. Of course, such a plenitude of differences can exist only within an overall similarity—all the goods are, after all, produced at the same historical moment by the same capitalist society—but any sense of individuality is constructed, as are all meanings, upon the play of similarity and difference. Similarity is the means of entry into the social order; difference negotiates the space of the individual within that order.

The difference between style and taste is never easy to define, but style tends to be centered on the social, and taste upon the individual. Style then works along axes of similarity to identify group membership, to relate to the social order; taste works within style to differentiate and construct the individual. Style speaks about social factors such as class, age, and other more flexible, less definable social formations; taste talks of the individual inflection of the social.

Such an interplay of style and taste is given spatial representation in Sydney's Centrepoint. Its three levels are class determined, but within each level is a huge variety of commodities. Individuality is a construction of the social, of language, of gendered experience, of family, education, and so on; commodities are used to bear the already constructed sense of individual difference. They are no truer and no falser than our idiolect, our accent, our ways of behaving toward others in the family, and so on. All such markers of individual difference are social, commodities no more and no less than any other. So the class-differential levels of Centrepoint are used by people whose identity already, necessarily, contains class meanings, and riding the escalators through them becomes a concrete metaphor for class mobility. In late capitalist societies blue-collar workers can earn as much, if not more, than white- or pink-collar workers, so style and taste displace economics as markers of class identity and difference. And insofar as style/taste is symbolic and clearly arbitrary, with little of the material base of the economic, it becomes less determined, more open to negotiation: class identities based on economics offer little scope for negotiation; those based on style are not only more flexible, but also offer the consumer greater control in their construction.



In an earlier study, my colleagues and I argued that in Centrepoint class markers are found in the location of shops within the overall structure and in their design, both of which are spatial metaphors for social relations (see Fiske et al. 1987). The most "democratic" shops—those with low-priced goods that appeal to everyone, such as news agents, card shops, and pharmacies—are on the lowest level and tend not to have windows, but open fronts so the boundaries between their territory and the public concourse are leaky; their goods spill over into the pedestrian areas, minimizing the distinction between the public-democratic and the private-exclusive. On the "middle-class" level—that of the medium-priced, trendy fashion shops selling clothes, shoes, bags, and accessories—the shops mark their boundaries a little more clearly, but not exclusively. They have windows, but racks of shoes or T-shirts often push out onto the concourse. And the windows are packed full of goods, tastefully arranged according to color and style, but bursting with them. They offer a plenitude of differences, a bottomless cup of resources for individual tastes to draw upon. These windows, too, reveal the shop: the multitude of goods in the windows never obscures the even greater number of goods within the shop itself. The lighting of both the shop and the windows is bright and cleverly designed to give an identity to the shop that differentiates it from others and from the concourse. As different individuals construct their images within the similarity of fashion, so different shops construct their identity, frequently by the use of lighting and color, within the overall stylistic unity of the shopping center. Window shopping involves a seemingly casual, but actually purposeful, wandering from shop to shop, which means wandering from potential identity to potential identity until a shop identity is found that matches the individual identity, or, rather, that offers the means to construct that identity. The windows and lighting of these middle-range shops create an identity for them that differentiates them from each other and from the public areas, but then opens them up; their brightness invites the gaze, invites the browser inside.

The "democratic" shops do not stress their own identity, do not differentiate themselves so clearly either from each other or from the public areas. The "middle-class" shops identify themselves as different, but as available to all who have the taste to want the identity they offer. The importance of individual differences increases as we ride the elevators up the class structure. So the "upper-class" shops are individualistic to the point of exclusivity. Their windows have fewer goods in them, signaling the opposite of mass availability; their lighting is more subdued, with highlights on the individual commodity, and the shop behind the window is much less easily seen—sometimes, indeed, it is invisible. The

contrast in lighting styles between the middle- and upper-class windows is a contrast in class taste and social identity. The highlight on the exclusive commodity, a fur coat or a haute-couture dress, suggests that the wearer will be in the spotlight, picked out from the others. The overall bright lighting in the middle-class windows suggests that the wearers of the commodities within them will be members of the group that shares that style and taste. In theatrical terms, it is the difference between lighting the star and lighting the chorus line. The windows of these upscale shops exclude the mass viewer and signal the limited availability of their commodities, and thus of the identities they offer.

Centrepoint uses vertical differentiation to materialize class difference, a typical instance of the bourgeois ideological practice of conceptualizing classes as though they existed in a spatial, rather than a social, relationship to each other. So the upper-class shops are "naturally" on the highest floor, the "democratic" ones "naturally" on the lowest. This is a good example of how language constructs rather than reflects social reality, for there is no logical reason, if we wish to conceptualize the relationships among classes in spatial terms, that we should not use, for example, *right, center*, and *left*. There may not be a logical reason for our culture's selection of the metaphor here, but there is, of course, an ideological one. Using right, center, and left as a metaphor would suggest both the arbitrary nature of class differences and their political dimension, whereas using upper, middle, and lower grounds these differences in material reality and makes them appear natural. It also gives them a natural value system—as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have shown, *up* in our culture is good (it is, after all, where God is) and *down* is bad. The spatial up-down metaphor that we commonly use to express moral and social values has been (literally) made concrete by Centrepoint's system of levels.

## PROGRESS AND THE NEW

A key feature of the styles on offer is newness, and shopping malls emphasize newness over almost any other characteristic. The plethora of shiny surfaces, the bright lights, the pervasive use of glass and mirrors all serve to make both the commodities and the center itself appear brand new, as though minted yesterday. In Centrepoint (Sydney) and Carillon (Perth) everything is squeaky clean, never a smear or finger mark on the acres of plate glass, never a dull patch on the shiny walls or ceiling. It all adds up to an overwhelming image of newness, a space with no place for the old, the shabby, the worn—no place for the past, only an invitation to the future. So the publicity for Centrepoint and Carillon is dotted with words like *trend, new, fashion, now, today*; newness and "nowness" mark the threshold of the future, not the culmination of the past.



Newness, of course, is central to the economic and ideological interests of capitalism: the desire for the new keeps the production processes turning and the money flowing toward the producers and distributors. The fashion industry has been frequently and accurately criticized for creating artificial newness and therefore artificial obsolescence to further its own economic interests, and, implicitly, to work against the interests of its consumers. Such a criticism, accurate as far as it goes, does not go far enough, for it fails to question why consumers, largely women, continue to want the new, if this desire is totally against their own interests. The "cultural dope" theory would have to work enormously, not to say impossibly, hard to offer a finally convincing explanation of this.

The desire to be up to date, and there is plenty of evidence that it is a common desire, cannot be created entirely by slick publicity, for advertising can only harness and shape socially created desires, it cannot create them from scratch. At the ideological level, the origins of the desire for the new can be traced back to the ideology of progress that has pervaded the economic, political, and moral domains of post-Renaissance Christian capitalist democracies. Such Western societies see time as linear, forward moving and inevitably productive of change. The forward movement of time and the changes it brings are then made social sense of by the concept of progress, improvement, and development. Other societies in which time is seen as circular rather than linear give a quite different value to the relationships among the past, the present, and the future, and make a quite different sense of newness.

But, of course, ideologies do not suit all groups in a society equally well; indeed, it is their function not to do so. The sense of pleasure or satisfaction occasioned by progress achieved is not equally available to all; rather, it is most "naturally" accessible to the mature, white, middle-class male, and becomes progressively less available as social groups are distanced from the ideological norm. The life opportunities available to, for instance, a young, black, working-class female offer limited chances of experiencing the pleasures of progress achieved, yet people of such a group experience the same ideology of progress as do the "successful."

There is, I suggest, an inverse relationship between the possession of a job that offers the pleasures of progress achieved and the seeking of alternative inflections of these pleasures in trendy fashions and the desire to be up to date. Chodorow (1978), for instance, has argued that men's jobs in patriarchy have tended to be goal-oriented and to offer a sense of achievement, of a job done. Women's jobs, on the other hand, tend to be repetitious and circular, of which domestic labor is the prime example and secretarial labor the commercial equivalent. Chodorow's emphasis on gender difference, however, leads her to neglect class, age, and race differences within men (and women)—so it is the mature, white, middle-class male who is most likely to have the sort of job that

Chodorow characterizes as men's. It is also likely that such a man will have conservative tastes in fashion, and will not find pleasure in up-to-dateness; indeed, he will often avoid it. For women, on the other hand, who are likely to have the nonprogressive, nonachieving job of wife-mother, or, if in the workforce, are likely to be in more routine, more repetitive jobs, it may be that participation in fashion is their prime, if not their only, means of participating in the ideology of progress. And because progress and the new have been masculinized, the pleasures they offer can receive public acclaim and validation. The stereotype of the dowdy housewife who has "let herself go" is encumbered with negative values partly because she is seen to have missed out on both the progressive and the public.

For a woman in patriarchy, commodities that enable her to be "in fashion" enable her to relate to the social order in a way that grants her access to the progressive and the public. Such a move may not be radical in that it does not challenge the right of patriarchy to offer these pleasures to men more readily than women, but it can be seen as both progressive and empowering insofar as it opens up masculine pleasures to women. Just as the department store was the first public space legitimately available to women, so the fashionable commodities it offers provide a legimated public identity and a means of participating in the ideology of progress.

Similarly, many youth subcultures, for both genders, are characterized by a strong desire for up-to-date tastes, in dress and music particularly. Those whose position in the social system denies them the sort of goal achievements of middle-class jobs frequently turn to style and fashion both as a source of pleasure and as a means of establishing themselves in a controlling rather than dependent relationship to the social order. By the imaginative use of commodities, young people can and do make themselves into icons of street art (Chambers 1986). Commodities provided by an industrialized culture can be used for subcultural, resisting purposes (Hebdige 1979).

So the greeting cards discussed earlier in this chapter are not merely silly. In "Work to Live, Live to Love, and Love to Shop," the female speaker recognizes that working, loving, and shopping are all ways of forming social relations; the utterance inside the card—"If I can buy enough things I'll never have to work at love again"—recognizes that patriarchy's grip on working and love is tighter than its grip on shopping. Thus it is that buying commodities offers a sense of freedom, however irrational, from the work involved in working and loving under patriarchy: working and loving are conflated as chores from which shopping offers an escape.

PART SIX

# The Tendency of Capitalism to Commodify