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Review Essay

The Place and Space of Consumption in a Material World

Laura Oswald

Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption
Rob Shields, ed.,
(New York, Routledge, 1992)
239 pages; illustrated; hardcover

A Primer for Daily Life
Susan Willis,
(New York, Routledge, 1991)
185 pages, illustrated, hardcover

The twentieth century can be characterized by the intense movement of art, science and literature toward abstraction; and toward the reduction of the meaning of lived experience to a sign, a subject, or a system. One need only refer to the development of linguistics, poetics and semiotics from Saussure to Greimas to underscore the overarching priority given to formal system over content in the study of language and cultural production in our time. By the 1960s, this trend had reached its zenith: Roland Barthes (1976) announced the death of the author and reference of literature, structuralism reigned, and it appeared that all of Western culture would soon be minimalized to a set of abstract relations on a chess board. Derrida offered a way out of the structural labyrinth when he placed in question the rational, idealist foundations of sign, subject and system with a critique of the very metaphysical tradition from which structuralism stemmed. Yet Derrida's critique gave rise to even further abstraction, in the form of diacritical marks tracing the play of *différance* constructing / deconstructing meaning and being in language.

It then comes somewhat as a surprise that the 1990s should be witness to a proliferation of humanistic research devoted to the empirical study of daily life, replete with demographic and statistical grids, historical documentation and even field interviews. Whether symptomatic of a kind of *fin de siécle* decadence; of a breakdown of the intense theoretical work driving critical theory in the twentieth century; or a radical challenge to the intellectual elitism of the past twenty years; books such as *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption* and *A Primer for Daily Life* take theory "on the road" as they apply semiotics, psychoanalysis and the marxist critique to the study of culture and consumption. Their preoccupation with the

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meaning and function of consumer goods and services for the constitution of personal and social identity testifies to the growing awareness that modern life is being played out in the marketplace; and not in the theater, the political forum, or even the family. The market thus conceived is neither a place for the exchange of goods between producers and consumers; nor a symbol of the economic infrastructure shaping material life; but an imaginary / symbolic site for the staging of the subject in consumer culture.

Both *Lifestyle Shopping* and *Primer for Daily Life* indicate new directions for humanistic research, reminding us of Baudelaire's observation in "Les Correspondences" that the world is composed of signs, and social life is an endless performance of signs in culture. The essays included in *Lifestyle Shopping* are largely devoted to locating and analyzing the physical places of consumption; including shopping malls, museums and specialty shops as sites for the construction of personal, subjective "space." Rob Shields introduces the essays with an overview of the meaning of place for "space" for social scientists at the edge of the millennium.[1]

> This is a many-voiced text which attempts to look beyond sites and the physical architecture of shopping malls and city-center redevelopments. Our interest is the interface between media images, consumption sites and the personalities and tribes that form a social "architecture" of lifestyles and "consumption cultures." (Shields, 1)

Shields goes on to locate this research within the

> larger postmodern project of remapping and rewriting the classical schemas of the human sciences; which located the subject in an abstract space of the bourgeois individual, despatialized and unrelated to place and context; and canonized in the positivism of social science," a project which "lies at the intersection of contemporary cultural change and the political economy of commodity exchange. (Shields, 1–2)

Shields and the other authors in the collection write from the fields of literature and philosophy on questions of the subject of consumption, public space and social change.

Shields summarizes three themes shaping *Lifestyle Shopping*. First, the writers seek a theory of the "subject" of consumption by tracking the implications of public place for the constitution of personal "space" or lifestyle. Shields insists that the importance of the mall as site of communication and interaction has outstripped its functional attributes for increasing market volume.

> Purchases often represent very minor expenditures (for example, a cup of coffee) and the spending of money is not required in any case. (Shields, 5)

1 I borrowed this expression from Victor Margolin (1992).

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Second, the authors use their observations about the effect of public place on the constitution of subjective space in order to derive a model for social change. Malls and other consumption sites testify to the breakdown of [modernist] traditional distinctions among various spheres of value, including private and public realms of experience; between leisure and consumption; between culture and economy; and between secular and spiritual life. The erosion of dialectical oppositions signals a change from the rational order of modernism to the presumably irrational and unpredictable order of postmodernism. In other words, the change in the meaning and function of public place for the social subject implies profound changes in the nature of man.

> A de-centered selfhood has become a plurality of intermittent, disconnected, recognition-seeking spectacles of self-presentation. (Langman, in Shields, 40)

The third theme of the book concerns the conceptualization of a postmodern Utopia along the lines of the social (dis)order of the carnival. The authors frequently reference Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of "the carnivalesque" in *Rabelais and His World* as the source of this conceptualization. Carnival defines the periodic suspension of rules and social restrictions when all is permitted and, most important, the individual can hide behind the mask of his choosing.

The editor, Rob Shields, contributes two essays to the collection, including "Spaces for the Subject of Consumption" and "The Individual, Consumption Cultures and the Fate of Community." These essays form the high point of the book, inasmuch as they rearticulate questions of the subject of metaphysics in the framework of consumption and provide a new look at the constitution of personal and social identity by means of the real or symbolic acquisition of goods and services in the marketplace. The mall is not only or even primarily a site for commerce as much as for social and communication functions. Shields defines consumption as

> an active, committed production of self and of society which, rather than assimilating individuals to styles, appropriates codes and fashions which are made into one's own. (Shields, 2)

Shields emphasizes the force of looking to inscribe the shopper in mall culture, but is careful to distinguish the rather loosely connected, fragmented self of the shopper from the Freudian self. Freud builds the subject of psychoanalysis on the assumption of an original, unified core which transcends history and culture; while the postmodern self is built upon contingent identities whose origin has been lost in a play of reflections. In the phenomenological scheme of things, the gaze holds the subject in an illusion of closure with objects of perception. In mall culture, the fleeting, fragmentary and incomplete self is symbolized in the "decentered eye" pulled between a "plurality of intermittent, disconnected, recognition-seek-

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ing spectacles of self-presentation." Shields' interpretation of the subject of consumption also departs from the work of Erving Goffman (1959), whose research into the symbolism of consumer goods and the social self helped shape the disciplines of modern sociology, consumer research and marketing communications.

At the origin of Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is the assumption of a unified core of being responsible for choosing the various roles played out in social life. The inside transcends the outside, as it were. According to Goffman's interpretation of the self, consumers shop to enhance or extend a ready-made self.[2] According to postmodern interpretations of the self, consumers shop in the attempt to replenish and construct a self which is already and always lacking.

Lauren Langman, in another essay in *Lifestyle Shopping* entitled "Neon Cages," locates the postmodern subject in "amusement culture," where the construction of personal and social identity is played out by way of the subject's implication in a barrage of (brand) representations.

> The public expressions and presentations of socialized selfhood, the persona, are supposed to be the surface manifestations of an underlying unified core of the person. But with the influence of so many models in diverse realities, and the unending bombardment of media images, it seems more likely that identity is expressed in a variety of provisional templates or strategies for self-presentations in *specific* situations. (Shields, 57)

The authors are on to something important when they highlight the implication of seeing and being seen in this phenomenon, but they could strengthen their claims through rigorous examination of the notion of scopophelia, the passion to look, both in Freud and, specifically, the work of the French neo-Freudian, Jacques Lacan. Lacan's account opens a way for a theorization of the "decentered gaze" and its implications for the postmodern subject.

The scopic drive, the impulse motivating the desire to look and be looked at, is central to the intersection of the social and the psychological in mall culture.[3] Symbols provide imaginary gratification as substitutes for real objects of desire. Symbols, including eventually language, enable the individual to reexperience over and over in the imaginary/symbolic realm the primordial scene of separation, loss and recuperation of the original love-object, the mother. Inasmuch as the subject's drive for unity by way of symbols is always frustrated by the slippery relation of signifiers to signifieds through time, the subject is already and always lacking in its very constitution. Looking is fundamental to "lifestyle shopping" and testifies to the importance of the scopic drive for the psychological constitution of the subject of consumption.

2 The transcendental subject of metaphysics is implied but not directly stated in current "postmodern" approaches to consumer research as well. See Elizabeth Hirschman and Morris Holbrook (1992), Russel Belk (1988), Grant McCracken (1990), and David Glen Mick (1986).

3 Scopophelia constitutes a displacement of the erotic drive to possess and be possessed by the other from the genitals to the eyes. Scopophelia both underlies the subject's relation to itself in the narcissistic phase of development and its relation to symbolic representation in the Oedipal phase, the phase of language acquisition. While Freud discusses scopophelia somewhat narrowly within the study of perversions in general and voyeurism in particular, Jacques Lacan (1966) situates the scopic drive at the core of the development of personality. Lacan identifies the drama of self-individuation with a scene in front of a (symbolic) mirror. In the mirror phase, the infant, in the arms of his mother, is able to distinguish his mother as separate or Other; and to recognize his self as "other," as having an external dimension. The infant acquires self-consciousness as the ability to perceive his own reflection, and becomes conscious of boundaries separating the self from people and things in the environment. Interestingly, it is precisely at this stage that the drive to name objects—to use symbols to appropriate and internalize people and objects—comes into play.

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The spectacle of consumption constitutes an important arena for playing out the drama of self-formation, since as consumer goods are objects of desire. Shopping constitutes the legitimized practice of scopophelia: the shopper cruises the mall, fixing the gaze first on the objects displayed in the shop windows, then on the other shoppers gazing in their turn on shop windows. The pane of glass separating the object of desire from the shopper forms an imaginary screen not unlike the mirror, a surface for receiving and reflecting back the projections of the shopper both looking and being looked at. Since the psychological lack driving consumption cannot be forever satisfied, it guarantees the perpetual repetition of the shopping ritual.

In *Lifestyle Shopping*, shopping is frequently associated with film viewing, and the subject of consumption compared to the subject of cinema. For example, the mall resembles the controlled, isolated environment of the cinema which supports the shot-by-shot control of the spectator's gaze as he/she "moves" through the fictional film. The consumer/spectator is moved through the mall in a similar fashion by way of window displays, walkways and escalators; guiding him/her through a play of amusement which has less to do with the exchange of goods than then pursuit of pleasure via the gaze. In Shields, *et al* the subject of consumption lacks the theoretical depth demanded to prove such broad claims, and could have been improved by an understanding of the implications of Lacan's work for the semiotics of spectacle.[4]

Nowhere is the meaning of public place for private space as compelling as it is in the shopping mall, where an economy of desire shaping the self interfaces with the economy of supply and demand driving market forces. While Shields emphasizes the non-commercial aspects of shopping—"the spending of money is not required"—we are loathe to dismiss the actual purchase of goods from the shopping experience, since the exchange of goods for capital drives mall culture and marks the articulation of capitalism and desire in a consumer society. While the spectacle of consumption is played out to a great extent on the imaginary/symbolic plane of looking and being looked at, the actual purchase of a product/brand is necessary inasmuch as it marks the inscription of the post-modern subject in the inexhorable movement forward of the market, and explains why consumers are driven to repeat the ritual of acquisition. The purchase of goods, rather than be tangential to the spectacle of consumption, guarantees the perpetuation of a consumer economy founded on the whims of fashion, trends and ephemeral use-value.

In the mall, the spectacle of desire takes on social and semiological dimensions, since, for the most part, the "objects of desire" are not objects at all, but meanings or brands endowed with value by consumer culture. Kids buy Nikes, not shoes, and along with the acquisition of the brand goes participation in the Nike image and

4 In "The Imaginary Signifier," Christian Metz (1981) identified the importance of Lacan's subject for the implication of psychoanalysis, semiotics and cinema. He specifically addresses the relation between looking, film discourse and desire by theorizing the place of the spectating subject in the imaginary-symbolic realm of the film. The camera eye inscribes "I" or narrative point of view in cinema. Furthermore, the organization of the looks between characters in film time and space moves the spectator through the film by means of projective identification. Metz, referencing Lacan, positions the spectating subject in front of the film as a consumer of shadows and light; driven by the desire to hold, contain and internalize the play of presence and absence on screen. Metz claims that the compulsion to repeat this ritual drives spectators to purchase entry to the cinema over and over again. In this way, an economy of desire ensures the perpetuation of an economics of film production, and marks the articulation of the public and private spheres in the film medium. Thus Metz, following Lacan, provides the foundation for research into the subject of consumption which could have far-reaching implications for the current study.

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the Nike philosophy, "Just Do It!" The postmodern subject lacks an original core identity, constructed as it is by the image it projects for others in consumer culture: "I am what you perceive me to be." Consequently, the meaning of products, their "brand image," is central to the formation of personal and social identity. Products *cum* brands, in this sense, constitute signs and symbols whose meaning and value are inseparable from the role they play in economy of desire-driving consumption.

Since brand image is subject to the pressures of fashion and cultural change, a brand can lose its meaning and value as quickly as it earned it. The loss of brand value contributes to the incentive to repeat the consumption ritual, since the endless quest for an identity is tied to the endless acquisition of "image." The quest for the right image is insatiable. Just as the mythical Don Juan failed to satisfy his penchant for women by the physical possession of any one woman; condemned as he was to seduce and abandon one woman after the other without satisfaction; the postmodern subject is driven to recreate itself over and over again by brand consumption.

The circulation of goods/brands between producer, distributor and consumer is mobilized by the circulation of looks from consumer to brand, to other consumers looking, and back again. Consumer economy departs from capitalist economy because as the goods offered at the mall have long ago lost their value relative to the work which produced them. Brands replace use-value with image value, reduce goods to simulacra—stand-ins for the real thing. [5]

In this context, the display window replaces the "mirror" of Lacan's psychodrama since as it symbolizes the surface on which the formation of personal and social identity are played out by way of meaning production. In consumer culture, the self is already and always contingent upon the subject's participation in the spectacle of consumption; held by the gaze between its meaning for itself [the window as mirror] and its meaning for others [the window as opening]. Goods/brands provide material for the performance—masks shaping the subject's identity in the moment by moment spectacle of shopping. The subject, thus conceived, eludes the metaphysical hierarchy which grants originary status to the self, and secondary status to the roles it plays on the stage of life. The subject of consumption is nothing if not an actor in search of an identity. Rather than bringing a ready-made inner self to the mall for a change of clothes, the subject of consumption produces and is the product of styles, trends and marketing strategies.

While other essays in the book address thought-provoking topics including the tribal organization of consumer society, atrium mall culture, and the heritage site; they lack the rigor, precision and depth to convince the reader of the profound implications of these kinds of trends for the human condition. For example, references are

5 See Baudrillard on the simulacrum (1983).

6 Michael Silverstein (1988, p.1) makes similar observations about references to the dialogic in Bakhtin.

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made throughout the book to Bakhtin's notion of the "carnivalesque," without sufficient understanding of the meaning of this concept in its original, literary context.[6] Bakhtin (1984) used this term to define, first of all, a figure for narrative style in Rabelais, and secondarily, to describe the seasonal rituals allowing societies release from law and order. In *Lifestyle Shopping*, the authors replace the literary reference of "carnivalesque" with a vague and general term for any breakdown in the bourgeois social order, without an explanation for the epistemological leap from literary exegesis to sociology. Moreover, the authors neglect the ritualistic nature of the carnival. When authors such as Kevin Hetherington (in Shields, 90) imply that the postmodern consumer culture resembles a carnival because of the breakdown of the family, the community and the traditional marketplace, they overlook the fact that the Rabelaisian carnival was as important to the maintenance of the status quo as were the laws and social mores. This kind of imprecision casts the shadow of doubt on the seriousness of the book; even though the very study of malls, tribes and heritage sites holds the promise of great discovery.

Next, uncritical references to authorities such as Freud and Michel Foucault lend a teleological slant to the interpretations of culture in this book. Rather than employ theory to enlarge the intellectual framework of their findings, the authors frequently posit theories as unimpeachable ends in themselves. In his essay, "Watching the World Go Round: Atrium Culture and the Psychology of Shopping," Harvie Ferguson actually contradicts himself when he tries to frame mall-culture within Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. He declares, on the one hand, that nineteenth century theories which posit a unified, transcendental self at the origin of meaning production fail to explain the deconstruction of the phenomenological relationship of subject to object in atrium mall culture. The organization of shops around a focal center invites a displacement and decentering of the shopper's gaze, as well as the drive to possess the object of the gaze. In this sense, the subject of atrium culture confirms Derrida's interpretation of the self which is always and already divided, dislocated, and forever moving toward an unattainable unity in time and space. Yet Ferguson cites Freud, whose theories of the self are firmly grounded in nineteenth-century metaphysical (and biological) models of the subject; instead of Derrida, or even Lacan. When Ferguson attempts to interpret the subject of consumption in the light of Freud's theories of the drives and dream formation, he not only undermines his own argument, but leaves unanswered the question of the postmodern subject.

In the same essay, sloppy language fosters confusion and weakens the argument. Ferguson discusses at length [Jean Bernard] Foucault's pendulum hanging in the center of the Prince's Square atrium mall and its meaning for the postmodern subject. Several pages into the discussion, he abruptly begins discussing [Michel]

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Foucault's theory of surveillance as a model for mall culture. In neither case, does Ferguson clarify the reference for the name Foucault by giving first names or using transitions. The slide of the reference for Foucault between a nineteenth century physicist and a twentieth century philosopher unwittingly produces a kind of Proustian association between the two men and their worlds, and finally saddles the essay with carelessness. These kinds of problems diminish the importance of the questions raised in the book as a whole, and get in the way of our enjoyment of the very interesting topics discussed in *Lifestyle Shopping*.

In the other book under review, *Primer for Daily Life*, Susan Willis examines the icons of consumer culture in view of their meaning for the construction of personal identity. The book benefits from the narrow scope of its subject matter and the clean, witty style of the author. Willis provides a kind of primer for reading and deciphering the signs and symbols of consumption as they shape our experience of daily life. She frames her study within a Marxian critique of consumer economy, and its implications for the subject of consumption. Consumer economy distances production from consumption—we work in jobs that have little or no direct relationship to our means of survival. Rather than produce the food we eat; or use our hands to craft our lifestyles; we work away from home, earn money to buy products which, in turn, have been measured out, sanitized and packaged. Packaging symbolizes the separation between the meaning of goods in the market and their "use-value," a kind of ideal value derived strictly from the intrinsic usefulness of goods for the user; before the goods enter into the circulation of meanings and values driving the market. Thus, in commodity capitalism, both work and the products of work are abstracted and take on meanings which transcend their use values. Willis proposes that the yearning to recuperate an original, albeit ideal, use-value drives the consumption rituals of daily life and contributes to the transformation of material, economic production into social and cultural productions in contemporary American culture.

Willis delights the reader with her sense of humor and the candor with which she places her own everyday experiences as mother, shopper and spectator under the light of scholarly examination. Like Montaigne, who was able to wrap an interpretation of human existence around a study of his kidney stones, Willis weaves a discourse about the human subject in relation to the brands giving meaning to everyday life.

In "Unwrapping Use Value," Willis summarizes the various debates surrounding the commodity form, focusing on the split between the use value of the product, its intrinsic worth for the purchaser, its exchange value, and its worth relative to the labor which produced it. Willis, quoting Wolfgang Fritz Haug, a neo-Marxist, says:

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> The buyer 'values the commodity as a means for survival,' whereas the seller 'sees such necessities as a means for valorization. (Haug in Willis, 7)

Neo-Marxists such as Haug point out another dimension of the commodity, the appearance of use-value, which distances the relationship between production, consumption and survival even further. We all buy things which are not absolutely necessary for survival, but, because of messages conveyed via packaging and advertising. While the intrinsic value of such products as antiperspirants, for example, is dubious, the market in meanings persuades us of their necessity for social or emotional survival.

While Willis focuses on the actual wrapping used to package goods for distribution and sale, packaging, in a broad sense, could include everything which contributes to the semiotic aura surrounding goods. These include the brand legacy and the brand story produced by advertising, point of purchase displays and logos. Packaging constitutes the semiotic function of goods, their meaning for the consumer in relation to the meaning they hold for others in consumer economy. Consumers participate in consumption rituals the same way speakers participate in language, since as they must agree to some extent what the signifiers signify, and what values these meanings have relative to other meanings and goods. Though we speak of use-value as a frame of reference for discussing value in general, goods have no more intrinsic worth than signs have intrinsic meanings.

In consumer culture, use-value has almost come to stand for the symbolic value of brands to supply the emotional and social meanings of products. The semiotic function transcends the material, economic function of consumption. This means that the use-value of goods is no more absolute or tangible than the meaning we assign to linguistic signs. Furthermore, use-value has come to mean the semiotic or symbolic value of products rather than simply their functional value (to feed, clothe, or provide tools for work) for the consumer. As such, the relationship between commodities and use-value resembles the relationship between signifier and signified in the linguistic sign, since the meaning of goods, like the meaning of signs, are social and semiological productions rather than natural phenomena. It is precisely this semiotic dimension of use-value in consumer culture which Willis describes when she says that packaging creates use-value which is, in fact, the "anticipation of use value."

> Commodity capitalism fully develops the anticipation of use value, while use value, itself, seems to serve no other purpose but to create the basis for its anticipation. (Willis, 6)

Baudrillard points out that the Marxian notion of use-value suffers from the same metaphysical limitations as the Saussurian

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notion of the sign, because both obtain value with reference to meanings which transcend culture as such. In the beginning is a signified or use-value which is then represented by / exchanged for signifiers such as words or images. (Willis, 18–19) Though Willis is primarily interested in the challenge consumer culture poses for humanistic study, the world of goods she depicts has profound implications for philosophy and semiotic theory. In a literal sense, packaging defines the material envelope or wrapping used to market goods at the point of purchase (the real of consumption). The packaging also forms the surface representation of the product on which the anticipation of use-value is staged. Packaging gives the product its fetish value as a displacement for an unattainable object of desire. Commodity packaging symbolizes both the psychological screen separating the subject from the object of desire in the imaginary / symbolic realm, as well as an economic screen separating use-value from the appearance of use-value in consumer culture. The wrapping both seduces the consumer by attractive imagery, and teases the consumer by delaying the moment of possession.

If the packaging creates a kind of use-value which is, in fact, the anticipation of use-value; then what drives consumption is the consumer's participation in brand meanings created by the icons, symbols and logos on the package. In other words, the subject of consumption also is the subject of representation. Packaging does not simply reference or imitate its object (the commodity), but stands alone as a text whose meaning transcends the object it represents. Packaging constitutes a *simulacrum*, a stand-in which has become more important than the original commodity. As Baudrillard claims, in consumer culture, "the simulacrum" is "the truth" (Willis, 78).

Inasmuch as commodity packaging both separates the consumer from the use-value it conceals and, at the same time, constitutes, itself, as anticipation of use-value; commodity packaging resembles the hymen which both joins and separates; both perpetuates the tease and defers indefinitely the fulfillment of desire. Packaging constitutes the screen joining / separating use-value from the anticipation of use-value. Furthermore, representations of the package in advertising, especially in the media of photography and television, add yet another layer of skin to the play of appearances, since the mechanical reproduction of the copy lends an appearance of reality to the appearance of use-value; in other words, produces an imitation of an imitation.

"Contemporary mass culture," claims Willis, "yearns for the recovery of use-value," of an illusion of original continuity with the products of our labor. This explains the force of historical theme parks on the modern tourist. Theme parks such as the reconstitution of Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia revive the appearance of earlier, more direct relationships between production and consump-

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tion. The staff poses as actors posing as villagers, seized in daily life activities of another era. The modern tourist "performs" history, as it were; yearning not so much for knowledge about the past as for the apparent connectedness between work, goods and social bonds. The producers, the staff and the tourist play at recuperating the original sin of capitalism, which was to alienate production from consumption and, thus, alienate the self from itself and others. Ironically, since the theme park is, itself, a commodity fetish, a stand-in for lived experience and an appearance of an appearance of daily life; the consuming subject is caught once again in a hall of mirrors, grasping in vain for the ontological certainty of an origin.

Willis describes how commodities act as fetishes when they fill the void left by the absence of a real love object. In "Learning from the Banana," Willis reads Faulkner from this point of view. In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner depicts the passage of a Southern family from rural, agrarian culture to urban, consumer culture as they leave the land, bury the mother and migrate to the city. When the father remarries at the mother's gravesite, the children are left with an emptiness which drives each family member further into isolation from the others, since no one is supposed to talk about his or her pain. At each turn of the plot, consumer goods substitute for human bonds to heal conflict and loss.

Consumer culture primarily is a visual culture, so discussion of the role of narrative-driving consumption is tied to questions of the narrative organization of the icons of consumer culture. Willis focuses on relationships between brand logo and narrative in Disneyland. She begins with a discussion of a "purely visual mode of consumption," the theme park, where the product consists mainly of signs and meanings. Willis, like Shields in *Lifestyle Shopping*, defines visual consumption as the consumer's symbolic participation in worlds referenced by brands, whether fictional or real. Consumers pay for such participation because the brand references a fictional world or a world which surpasses the consumer's lifestyle. Furthermore, since brand logos condense the world and the consumer's participation in it into an icon, logos contribute a purely symbolic, semiotic value to products which bear their stamp. Willis, like Shields, claims that visual, or what I would call "semiotic," consumption does not require an actual purchase, but "may be achieved by watching TV." While I agree that, in consumer culture, use-value is inseparable from the circulation of signs and meanings among consumers, I disagree that visual consumption "no longer depends upon an actual purchase," since even television and theme parks depend on a steady flow of capital to perpetuate the ritual.

Willis discusses relationships between image and narrative with reference to the Mickey Mouse logo. At once, an abstraction of the Mickey Mouse character made famous by Disney cartoons and also an emblem for membership in Disney commodity culture, the

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Mickey Mouse logo symbolizes a rite of entry into the Disney "world." The logo motivates consumption when attached to watches, T-shirts and other commodities by way of a process I call "branding." Branding both shifts the concept of use-value from the actual product to its brand image, and also identifies the product relative to the chain of signifiers constituting its brand "family." (In the same way ranchers brand livestock with the sign of their ranch.) Products branded in this way offer membership in a kind of private club, where the only privilege offered is belonging.

Theme parks such as Disneyland move the consumer/spectator through imaginary worlds suggestive of other times and places: ancient Egypt, Caribbean pirates, the Orient, and the world of dinosaurs. Since the worlds created in the theme park are built on clichés about history prevailing in the popular imagination, the reference of the representation leads the visitor between two layers of fiction; between an appearance of reality and an appearance of an appearance. The consuming subject thus enters the park as a kind of Pirandellian character in search of an author, or a guide to shape the experience in the form of a tidy plot. For Willis, the Mickey Mouse logo serves as a guide because it holds together the play of appearances by means of thematic associations with the Disney organization.

While Willis opens up a rich area for study when she raises the question of relationships between the subject of narrative and the narrative of consumer culture, she avoids the "subject" altogether and focuses instead on the structure of meaning in Disneyworld. Willis uses the term "theming" to explain the organization of the consumer's experience in the theme park. She claims that themes in Disneyworld, for example, hold together various consumer experiences including spectating, eating, moving, and buying souvenirs.

> Theming re-creates in geographic space the same sort of effect produced in the movie theater; that is, it evokes a closed world and draws the viewer (that is, the visitor) into it. (Willis, 56)

Willis claims that the Mickey Mouse logo unifies the various themes or worlds included in Disneyworld, and guides the tourist as he/she moves through the park.

> The notion of theming rejoins the definition of the logo, for the logo represents a highly condensed form of theming. It pulls together what in Disneyland's environment is a vast array of thematic material, dispenses with the narrative glue, and gives the consumer everything in one eyeful. (Willis, 57)

Willis does not explain what she means by "narrative glue," and implies that the mere repetition of theme iconography pulls the

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"vast array" of thematic material together as narrative. While she gives example after example of exhibits which organize the movement of the tourist through the consumption site by means of stories (a pirate adventure, for example), she leaves important questions unanswered. For example, what drives consumer-spectators to participate in the game in the first place—to turn on the TV, to enter the theme park, or to enter the obviously artificial world of Disney with the enthusiasm of a believer? Moreover, how can we account for the narrative implication of the consumer in all kinds of consumption rituals from shopping at the supermarket to collecting dolls? And what, precisely, constitutes the relationship between the logo and the narrative, between the image and the story to which it refers?

I believe that "branding" activates a drive to possess the product because it both opens up in the realm of the real—and promises closure—in the realm of representation—the lost use-value of primitive economies; to experience a more direct, human relation between work, the products of work, and the relationships they both shape with others in society. Branding shifts the terms of commodity exchange from the realm of products to the realm of signs, and engages the consumer in the active production and exchange of meanings. Since "production" refers to sign production as the origin of use value in consumer economies, and "consumption" refers to the recuperation of lack and absence by way of symbolic representations; then branding heals the wound created by the real separation of production and consumption in consumer economies. In other words, what was lost in the realm of economic exchange is reclaimed in the realm of cultural / semiotic performance.[7]

The apparently natural, "motivated" relationship between logos and their meanings is, in fact, constructed somewhere in the communications between marketers and consumers. When we deconstruct the brand logo, we are able to uncover an original division of the sign and the human subject there; where the logo, the logos, promised a unity. Marlboro signifies the American dream but references, in fact, a people cut off from the land, from the products of labor, and from each other. For example, packaged cigarettes are many steps removed from the cultivation of tobacco and handmade cigarettes. Take away the Marlboro brand symbolism, and the product stands as a symbol of the alienation of work and consumption in American society. The Marlboro logo masks the meaning and experience of alienation inscribed in packaged cigarettes, by shifting the terms of use-value from the product to the meanings it has for the consumer.

The logo constitutes the site of entry into the world of the brand by transforming the product into a sign, a stand-in and a fetish for the lost use-value of production economies. The logo is not the entire picture, however, since the ability of the brand to transcend the original division between the semiotic and economic

7 Brand logos, the abbreviated symbols used to identify products with their meanings, recuperate a kind of logic of the sign inasmuch as they both signify (stand for) and reference (point to) the world of the brand, regardless of any pragmatic relation to real products. Moreover, they symbolize the direct relation between—sign—production and consumption in consumer culture. In this sense, the brand logo is tied to the philosophical notion of the logos, a term metaphysicians give to the fundamental logic of being which motivates the production of signs and meanings in human discourse. This explains the force of branding on consumers, who eventually come to believe in a natural, unconstructed relation between the signs of products and their use-value.

8 See, for instance, Grant McCracken (1990).

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meaning of use-value depends upon the consumer's investment in the brand "story." Sometimes, consumption narratives are built around products by marketers, as in the case of Marlboro or Disneyland. At other times, narrative evolves out of our own experiences with products, as products enter into social rituals such as gift giving or holiday meal preparation.[8]

Narrative, a literary form which grew up with the industrial revolution, was the vehicle for early versions of romance-consumption in the form of women's novels. The narrative form, as opposed to the epic, the dramatic, or the poetic; is characterized by the imprint of the narrator's voice on the story and, in turn, by the implication of the reader (or spectator, in the case of film and video) in the narrative point of view. Narrative serves capitalism well when it pulls the consumer into the market in the same way that it engages readers and spectators in novels, films and television. Branding forms a conjunction between image and story by bridging the gap between the meaning of the image or logo and the logic of the world in which the brand "lives." Narrative codes join the static space of the image to the movement forward of narrative through time, and determine the spectating subject's moment by moment investment in narrative discourse.

While both Shields et al and Willis reference cinema as a model for consumption spectacles, neither offers a persuasive explanation for the implication of image, narrative and subjectivity in the space-time of film and consumption narratives. The seminal theoretical work of Christian Metz and others on the constitution of the spectating subject in the space-time of cinema sheds light on the constitution of the subject of consumption. Metz (1981) explains the force of cinema on the spectator by exposing an economy of desire driving the spectator's shot-by-shot investment in the film. Figures for narrative closure in the film, such as the cross-cut linking a character looking off-screen to the object of the look, trigger the psychological drives of projection, introjection and displacement in the spectator, forming a juncture between the place of the fiction and the space of the spectator's imaginary. Never mind that, in reality, the film consists of nothing more than a flickering, discontinuous play of light and shadows on a screen. It is precisely by means of the absence of the production and performance of the fiction from the screen which allows us to project ourselves into the fiction.[9]

A theory of the drives also explains the force of brand communication on consumption. Branding fetishizes the product—transforms it from a figure of alienation and lack (relative to production) into a figure for the recuperation of lack (relative to meaning production). Narrative keeps the circulation of goods moving forward by sustaining the illusion that sign consumption will succeed where the actual purchase of the product fails; that is to deliver an immediate and pleasurable connection between consumption and the source of production. Commodity-fetishes hold their (selling)

9 Continuity editing, for example, which matches character point of view with camera point of view, "sutures" gaps opened by references to an (absent) place off-screen. The illusion of continuity in the signifier holds the spectator in a pleasurable experience of identification and unity with the fiction. The "suture-effect" moves the spectator forward in the space-time of the film by fetishizing the image; that is, by transforming the representation of lack and absence in the single image into a sign for the absent one, an object to be loved. Since camera point of view directs the spectator's gaze through film space-time, continuity editing holds the spectator somewhere between anticipation and fulfillment: the gaps opened by the cinema signifier are closed only to be opened again as the narrative moves forward in time and space. The movement between what I bring to the film and what the film gives back; between the drives of projection and introjection; forms a kind of economy of desire played out across the surface of film representation. See Stephen Heath (1981).

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power so long as they continue to hold their meaning for consumers, since meaning produces value in consumer culture. Narrative prolongs the meaning-life of commodities by holding the consumer/spectator there where the commodity "lives." Since the lack is internalized as a structuring principle of the psyche, no amount of consumption can heal it: the lack guarantees the producer's dream of limitless consumption.

Consumer culture testifies to the postmodern inversion of the metaphysical hierarchy, which locates a transcendental subject as the source of cultural production. While Descartes could claim for the subject of metaphysics a unity of thought and being: "I think, therefore I am," the subject of consumption claims no such unity: "I think, therefore I am taken up in an endless play of representations."

Spectacle has become the model if not the condition of lived experience in the twentieth century, and vision the medium in which the postmodern subject moves through the spectacle of daily life. Since looking skews meaning and being along the lines of an irreparable division between the outside—the external representation of meaning to others, and the inside—the internal presentation of representation to consciousness; the spectating subject can only be conceived as divided in its very essence, as a permanently seeking incompleteness. The books under review bring home the very important point that, in our time, the marketplace rather than the theater or the arena has become the stage on which the drama of self-formation and presentation is played. This shift in the social organization of Western culture testifies to Antonin Artaud's anticipation of the demise of theater as such. Artaud (1964) claimed that life imitates theater, not the other way around; thereby pulling down boundaries separating art from life, and high culture from popular culture. Consumer culture takes up where contemporary theater leaves off, placing the consumer *cum* performer/spectator at the heart of the endless ritual practice of shopping.

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