AN INVESTIGATION OF COMMODITY THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION TO CRITICAL MEDIA STUDIES

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The Schmidt College of Arts and Humanities
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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April 1996

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Mike Budd, Department of Communication, and has been approved by the members of his supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of The Schmidt College of Arts and Humanities and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication.

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ABSTRACT

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Title: An Investigation of Commodity Theory and its Application to Critical Media Studies

Institution: Florida Atlantic University

Advisor: Dr. Mike Budd

Degree: Master of Arts

Year: 1996

The theory of the commodity is used by critical theorists to explain the general organization and development of capitalist society. It was originally proposed by Marx, and subsequently developed by Lukács and later Adorno and the Frankfurt School. Media scholars such as Dallas Smythe, Judith Williamson, Robert Goldman and Eileen Meehan have identified the commodity structure in several forms throughout the process of mass communication. Although commodity theory is not always articulated as a part of critical studies, it is useful for understanding the process of mass communication under capitalism. By investigating the dynamics of market processes and cultural innovation, this paper shows where the theory of the commodity fits into Critical Media Studies and suggests where some productive applications may be found.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

I. INTRODUCTION 1

II. THE INTELLECTUAL GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF COMMODITY THEORY 8

Use Value and Exchange Value

Estranged Labor

The Fetishism of Commodities

Georg Lukács and Social Reification

Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School

III. APPLICATIONS OF COMMODITY THEORY TO CRITICAL MEDIA STUDIES 39

The Infrastructure of the Media

Commercial Advertising

The Semiotics of Advertising

A Model of the Commodity Structure in the Media

IV. THE TENSION BETWEEN ECONOMIC COMMODITIES AND CULTURAL PRODUCTS 68

Contemporary Effects of Economic Commodification

The Extremes of Commodification

The Dynamics of Market Processes and Cultural Innovation

V. SOME BENEFITS & LIMITATIONS OF COMMODITY THEORY . 84

The Economic Approach to Social Theory

A Model for Using Commodity Theory

VI. CONCLUSION 101

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY 106

Chapter I.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research project is to identify, articulate and extend the theory regarding the mass media's role in the social and economic process of commodification so it can be used more productively as a tool for critical media analysis. It proceeds by organizing and analyzing the body of literature centered around the core of Karl Marx's formulation of commodity theory, known as "commodity fetishism." This theory which Marx originally employed to explain and analyze capitalist economic relations of production has since been developed and used by critical social theorists to address the social and cultural effects of mass communication.

Unlike "administrative" communication studies, Critical Studies diverges from the traditional undergraduate Communication curriculum designed to prepare individuals to work in the communication industry as employees of media companies. Rather than studying communication phenomena to improve its

efficiency and persuasiveness, the focus of Critical Media Studies is to produce constructive criticism of the media establishment in an effort to improve its structure and policies. Consequently, Critical Media Studies diverges from administrative studies, not necessarily in its subject, but in its purpose. Commodity theory provides a framework for approaching Critical Media Studies. It posits an explanation for the basic social motivations of 20th century capitalism. It is more than just an economic explanation of society; it is a framework for understanding social exchange from a variety of different perspectives under capitalism.

Commodity relations are a significant element of social control in capitalist society, and the power of the media as a means of entertaining and informing people promotes these relations. The mass media are recognized by large corporations and national governments as an effective means of social and political control. "In a fundamental sense, control over the means of informing people is the basis for political power."[1] The aim of Critical Media Studies is to find the structures and mechanisms of the mass media that affect the values and behavior of society. This involves recognizing that the media institution involves a material

[1]Dallas Smythe, "A Marxist Theory of Communications, "Counterclockwise: Perspectives on Communication, ed. Thomas Guback (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), p. 254.

infrastructure, an economic system of organization and a specially adapted apparatus for symbolic presentation. Consequently, it is shaped by material, economic and cultural forces.

Critical Media Studies has traditionally been approached from two perspectives: political economy and Cultural Studies. Each perspective reflects the academic tradition from which it evolved. Political economy is predominantly explanatory, proceeding from the general theory to the particular phenomena in the tradition of the social sciences from which it developed. Scholars trained in political economy tend to explain the media through the macro-institutional structure, class, and historical variables.[2] In contrast, Cultural Studies tends to be descriptive in nature. It proceeding from the particular to the general in the academic tradition of the humanities and qualitative social sciences from which it evolved. This approach seeks to describe and interpret the meaning of cultural practices and artifacts and the conditions surrounding the consumption of media messages.

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[2]Robert Babe, "Communication: Blindspot of Western Economics," in Illuminating the Blindspots: Essays Honoring Dallas W. Smythe, eds. Janet Wasko, Vincent Mosco, Manjunath Pendakur (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1994), p. 17.

Despite the differences in approach, scholars who are involved in Critical Media Studies are united around discovering "the nature, sources, uses, and consequences of power."[3] Most scholars would agree that no single theoretical model can account for the diversity and contradictions of economic and cultural practice in the mass media. They would also agree that although capitalism perpetuates many undesirable social values, media products always contain excess meaning beyond the intentions of their producers. Consequently, media products may be both exploitative and domineering, while providing pleasure and empowerment.[4]

This study incorporates both the macro-dynamic and a micro-dynamic perspective of social analysis; investigating both the political and institutional process of commodification, the semiotic construction of messages, and the structures of meaning associated with commodification. By explaining the theory of the commodity, investigating how media analysts have used it, organizing, comparing and contrasting with it with perspectives on commodity theory from other disciplines, the author hopes to position commodity theory within the academic discourse of Critical Media

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[3]Ibid., p. 16.

[4]Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies Vs. Political Economy: Is Anyone Else Bored with this Debate?" Critical Studies in Mass Communication 12 (March 1995): 76.

Studies, articulate its benefits and limitations, and suggest some productive areas for future research.

The following two chapters present the primary literature concerning the historical development and application of commodity theory within Critical Media Studies. First, commodity theory is presented as it was conceived by Marx and follows its development through World War II, just before the predominant influence of the mass media as a major social institution. Its development is explained as it progressed from Marx to Lukács to Adorno and the Frankfurt School. Next, chapter three describes how contemporary media analysts have applied commodity theory to media analysis from the two basic approaches to Critical Media Studies. This section represents the direct application of commodity theory to media studies and discusses the theoretical aspects relevant to its understanding and use. Chapter four is an attempt to enlarge the scope of commodity theory by investigating the tension between economic commodities and cultural artifacts. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate possible applications of commodity theory outside of Media Studies to get a better understanding of how it might be applied within the discipline. The final chapter contrasts and synthesizes the two primary approaches to Critical Media Studies around commodity theory in order to sug-

gest where the benefits and limitations of its use may be found. Here, the author introduces a general model for estimating the productivity of commodity theory to communication research. As a tool, this model suggests what kinds of problems and in what areas of study one can expect commodity theory to be most useful.

The chapters are arranged to present commodity theory as it developed chronologically as well as a structurally. This arrangement is considered appropriate since the genesis of commodity theory occurred before the predominance of the mass media. Although, excellent work and reviews[5] are available that rely on commodity theory to support key assumptions, most contemporary discussions do not review the development or justification for commodity theory. The noted studies by Leiss, Kline, Jhally, Ewen and Miller were the inspiration for this paper. These works reveal to the student of communication many of the irrational forces of capitalism on the mass media. Under the guidance of the author's thesis advisor, the author proceeded to investigate the theoretical aspects of the theory as it developed from

[5]John Harms and Douglas Kellner, "Critical Theory and Advertising," Current Perspectives in Social Theory, ed. Ben Agger (Greenwich, Connecticut:JAI Press, Inc., 1991), pp. 41-67.

Marx to Lukács to the Frankfurt School and its application to Critical Media Studies by Dallas Smythe.

This study began by using computer searchable indexes available through the library. It required research into a wide scope of academic work. Studies in Material Culture, Economic Anthropology and Sociology from a critical or Marxist perspective were important in developing chapters three and four. Some of the work important in these sections include Marshall Sahlins, Culture and Practical Reason (1976), Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood's, The World of Goods (1979), and selections in The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives by Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff (1986). Using this method the author proceeded to identify new sources of research until the primary citations began to consistently refer back to each other. This paper is a compilation and synthesis of the research just described.

Chapter II.

THE INTELLECTUAL GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF COMMODITY THEORY

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and explain the intellectual genesis and development of commodity theory conceived by Karl Marx, its extended application by Lukács, and its association with the "culture industry" by the Frankfurt School. It begins by summarizing the classical economic understanding of "use value" and "exchange value" and proceeds to explain Marx's conception of "estranged labor" and the "fetishism of commodities." Next it introduces Georg Lukács' conception of the reified mind, and then the contribution by Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School.

Commodity theory was conceived by Karl Marx (1818-1883) as the core of his critique of capitalism. The theoretical foundation for commodity theory is presented in the first section of, Das Kapital (Capital). Marx wrote in a time of great economic and social transition, in the midst of the rise of industrial capitalism. From this perspective, with a remarkable knowledge of classical economics, and a radically

transformed conception of Hegel's dialectic emphasizing the material basis of social relations, he produced a revolutionary theory based on conventional concepts of use value and exchange value.

Since Marx, others have made important contributions that have extended it far beyond the economic and material context of its genesis. In particular, Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno were instrumental in transforming and interpreting the theory of the commodity into a viable tool for contemporary Critical Media Studies.

Use Value and Exchange Value

The distinction between use value and exchange value is the foundation that Marx used to develop his original theory. The first principle is that use value and exchange value are completely independent. Use value is "limited by the physical properties of a commodity"[6] and exchange value is dependent on the human labor necessary to produce it. Although the concepts of use value and exchange value were commonly used by the classical economists of Marx's day, he used them to produce his most original contribution: the

[6]Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, ed. Frederick Engles (New York: Random House, 1906), p. 42.

concept of "commodity fetish." Following is the methodology that Marx used to develop the relationship between these two terms.

The use value of a commodity is its utility to satisfy human needs and wants, in whatever form they may take.[7] It is solely conditioned by the physical properties of the commodity and is independent of the amount of labor required to make it. For instance, the primary use value of water is its ability to satisfy human thirst. Whether it flows freely in a river, or must be carried across a desert, its utility remains the same. Use value is independent of human labor.

The labor that humans expend on transforming natural objects results in articles of social value. Unlike use value which is realized exclusively in use or consumption, exchange value is realized only in exchange. The exchange value of a commodity is dependent on the amount of labor required to produce it. According to Marx, human labor is the root of all social value between individuals. He demonstrated this by comparing two different goods of equal value. In order for two different types of goods to be exchanged, they must have a common quality. For corn and iron to be exchanged, there must be a third element common to both. Marx demonstrated how labor is the common element

[7]Ibid., p. 41.

that enables any commodity to be exchanged with any other. The exchange ratio of two commodities depends on the relative amount of labor required to produce each of them. Thus, the water carried across the desert (in the previous example) has a greater exchange value than water freely flowing in a river because of the difference in human labor associated with each. Consequently, the exchange value of a commodity can actually thought of as congealed or objectified human labor.[8]

Use value and exchange value are completely independent of each other; they have no natural or inherent relationship.[9] The discontinuity between use value and exchange value was well known in Marx's day. The most common example is the paradox of water made famous by Adam Smith. Water is a natural necessity for humans, it is required for life and is accordingly high in utility or "use value." But socially, water has little value as demonstrated by its small price or "exchange value." Diamonds, on the other hand, are hardly essential for life but valued more highly than water in exchange. His famous passage that Marx, no doubt, knew well is cited below:

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[8]Le Trosne cited in Marx, Capital, p. 46.

[9]Ibid., p. 45.

> The word VALUE, it is to be observed, has two different meanings, it sometimes expresses the utility of some particular object, and sometimes the power of purchasing other goods which the possession of that object conveys. The one may be called "value in use;" and the other, "value in exchange." The things which have the greatest value in use have frequently little or no value in exchange; and, on the contrary, those which have the greatest value in exchange have frequently little or no value in use. Nothing is more useful than water; but it will purchase scarce anything; scarce anything can be had in exchange for it. A diamond, on the contrary, has scarce any value in use, but a very great quantity of goods may frequently be had in exchange for it.[10]

Marx believed that the discontinuity between use value and exchange value is concealed by capitalism, and instead appears to have a natural correspondence. This is clear from the exchange of commodities. Exchanges appear to be based on the usefulness of commodities, yet commodities are actually exchanged based on the social mechanisms of the economic market. Marx reasoned that the mechanism of equilibrium was responsible for this illusion. According to him, the price or exchange value of a commodity varies with time and location because the amount of labor to produce it changes. The labor necessary to produce particular commodities varies due to location, natural conditions and technology. For instance, new technology can decrease the amount of labor

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[10]Adam Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd, 1893), p. 21.

required to produce iron from iron ore, and natural circumstances may increase the amount of labor required to produce agricultural products such as sugar. Consequently, the ratio of exchange between iron and sugar will vary, depending on the amount of labor applied to each commodity.[11] But over time, the ratio of exchange between kinds of commodities tends to stabilize. The equilibrium that develops over time makes the relation between use and exchange value appear to be a natural and inherent property of the commodity. "When these proportions have, by custom, attained a certain stability, they appear to result from the nature of the products . . ."[12] Consequently, when commodities are compared, they appear to have a natural relationship to each other, completely beyond the control of humanity, but in reality it is a social phenomenon, dependent upon human labor and social convention.

Marx believed that the existence of a commodity is a result of the transformation of a good's use value into exchange value. He wrote:

> The first step made by an object of utility toward acquiring exchange value is when it forms a non-use value for its owner, and that happens when it

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[11]Marx, Capital, p. 63.

[12]Ibid., p. 86.

> forms a superfluous portion of some article required for his immediate wants.[13]

In other words, the first step in the production of a commodity is the existence of something that was once useful to an individual but is no longer necessary to fulfill the immediate desires of him or her. Marx believed that commodities initially came into existence at the boundaries of primitive communities.[14] In primitive societies, one article is exchanged for another based on its use value alone. Estimates of utility are subjective and variable depending on the immediate circumstances the individuals involved. Here, the ratio of exchange is more a matter of chance than calculation, but gradually, after repeated exchanges, a convention becomes established between certain goods. After a standard becomes customary, the exchange ratio between commodities is no longer only determined by the individuals directly involved in the exchange, but is established by social standard. When a dependence develops for a particular foreign good, an excess amount of a domestic good must be produced for foreign exchange. Excess production has little use value within the community. For example, once enough hunting spears are produced to serve the immediate needs of

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[13]Ibid., p. 99.

[14]Ibid., p. 100.

a given community, additional spears have little value within this community. But when exchange value is established between communities, it also becomes an exchange value within the community,[15] so the spears become valued for the foreign goods that they are equal to in exchange.

> From that moment the distinction becomes firmly established between the utility of an object for the purpose of consumption, and its utility for the purpose of exchange. Its use value becomes distinguished from its exchange value. On the other hand, the quantitative proportion in which the articles are exchangeable becomes dependent on their production itself. Custom stamps them as values with definite magnitudes.[16]

At this point the commodity comes into being--an artifact produced specifically for exchange. Hereafter, the ratio of exchange is determined by the forces of the market. A product is then valued for what it can be exchanged for, instead of its unique personal utility. In this way "products are transformed into commodities, whose use values become the 'material depositories' of a new quality--exchange value".[17]

Money is the ultimate commodity. It represents the complete absence of use value and the archetype of pure

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[15]Ibid., p. 100.

[16]Ibid., p. 53.

[17]Ronald L. Meek, Studies in the Labour Theory of Value (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1973), p. 162.

exchange value. It is the "universal measure of value."[18] Through money, all commodities are immediately exchangeable. Since the mint of metal coins, money has become increasingly abstract and symbolic. As a malleable metal, coins can be rationalized as a use value since the ore has tangible material uses. But after the gold standard which backed paper money was abolished throughout most of the world in the 1960's, its symbolic character became more evident. Now with the proliferation of electronic money its symbolic quality is unmistakable. Its only utility is to serve social exchange and measure social power. Consequently, accumulation of money or other immediately exchangeable commodities is the overriding objective of individuals under capitalism. Capitalism is the accumulation of money.

Although the existence of money appears to be a necessary instrument to achieve the degree of equivalence required for capitalism, it does not guarantee the creation of capitalist markets. This is evidenced by the time differential between the introduction of money in Roman times and the appearance of capitalism nearly 800 years later. In addition to money, a sophisticated division of labor and a complement of social institutions are necessary to atomize consumers and mystify the creation of goods.

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[18]Marx, Capital, p. 106.

Estranged Labor

The concept of estranged or "alienated" labor is essential to understanding the commodity fetish of capitalism. Marx believed that individuals who are forced to sell their labor to produce a living are relinquishing a significant element of their human expression. He maintained that the transformation of nature, the way individuals produce their subsistence, is the essence of human existence. Marx based his dialectic on a radical transformation of Hegel's theory of cultural development that emphasized the material conditions of social relations in everyday life neglected by Hegel.

He wrote that social conditions evolve from the way humans produce their subsistence, and that the act of producing is the foundation of the social order. Humans appropriate and transform nature to survive. But unlike other animals that sustain a constant relationship with nature, humans continuously cultivate their relationship with nature.

> [Humans] begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.[19]

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[19]Karl Marx,"The German Ideology," Selected Writings, ed. David McLellan, (New York: Oxford University Press,

Subsistence for humans is more than just producing the rudiments to sustain life. The way individuals make their living is the way they express themselves. No absolute level of subsistence exists for humans as it does for animals.

> An animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young . . . whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need . . .[20]

Rather, the level of subsistence is determined by a combination of social relations and physical resources. What individuals produce and how they produce it is a consequence of their material conditions and social organization.

Man does not live by bread alone, and every community has minimum standards of living (beyond the most basic necessities) that constitute the level of subsistence. The mode and nature of subsistence varies among societies and historical periods. Subsistence and the material needs of people evolve the same way that culture evolves, by building upon its history. Utensils for eating and in-door plumbing, both of which were luxuries at one time, are now considered human necessities by most.

Once a worker sells his or her labor it does not belong to that person any more. It is external and alien to him or

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1977), p. 160.

[20]Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 trans. Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964), p. 113.

her, and therefore is no longer available to them for personal expression. Estranged labor is

> not voluntary but coerced; forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another.[21]

When an individual's labor is estranged from himself or herself, it also estranges people from each other.

> An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labor, from his life activity, from his species being is the estrangement of man from man. When man confronts himself, he confronts the other man. What applies to a man's relation to his work, to the product of his labor and to himself, also holds of a man's relation to the other man, and to the other man's labor and object of labor.[22]

When individuals sell their labor for wages they are forced to substitute an indirect form of human expression for an direct form: consumption for production. Only through consumption is an individual's productive labor returned, but it comes back in a devalued and alien form. The products

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[21]Ibid., pp. 110-111.

[22]Ibid., p. 114.

of human labor, traditionally a source of individual expression and social cohesion, are lost under capitalism.

Fetishism of Commodities

The fetishism of commodities refers to the mistaken belief that the value of a commodity is primarily concerned with its material form instead of the social circumstances surrounding its production. A fetish is the belief that an object has powers that it does not actually possess. This is not to say that the powers are not present, for this would be a "pure illusion," but rather that the powers do not actually belong to the object as a thing.[23] A fetish results when an object is mistakenly believed to be responsible for some action or reaction which it is not.

For instance, the individual with a sexual fetish cannot perform without the fetishized object. The object makes the sexual performance possible. But the object itself is not the source of any power, it is only a switch that triggers an erotic association previously established in the unconscious mind of the individual. The engine of association and the power to perform is within the individual.

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[23]Sut Jhally, Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 28.

The production of commodities transforms the actual social relations between individuals arising from the interdependence of their labor into a relation between the products of their labor.[24] Marx showed how the value of a commodity is a consequence of human labor and the social relations surrounding it. During commodity production, individuals are forced to alienate their labor, or objectify it into quantifiable units of value which appear to be transferred to the product of their labor. The structure of the commodity appears to be a "thing" because the value seems to be inherent in the product. Value "appears to be a 'thing' which flows 'physically' from the production of goods"[25] but in actuality, the value is a consequence of the social relations that exist around them.

The "fetish" character of a commodity transforms the actual social relations between individuals arising from the interdependence of each other's labor into a relation between the products of their labor. The fetishism of commodities "reifies" human labor into a thing. Marx explained that since

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[24]Marx, Capital, p. 83.

[25]Jean Grondin, "Reification from Lukács to Habermas," Lukács Today: Essays in Marxist Philosophy, ed. Tom Rockmore, (Dordrect, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co, 1988), p. 89.

> producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producer's labor does not show itself except in acts of exchange.

But

> when we bring the products of our labor into relation with each other as values, it is not because we see in these articles the material receptacles of homogeneous human labor. Quite the contrary; whenever, by an exchange, we equate as values our different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labor, the different kinds of labour expended on them. We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it.[26]

Marx referred to this phenomena as a "fetish" because the process of this transformation is so completely concealed that it takes on the character of magic. The production of commodities incarnates the social relationships between individuals, and the fruit of human relationships between individuals is magically transformed into a relation between things.[27] Sahlins summarized the mystical character of capitalist production as

> not merely a natural-material activity; for as it is the means of a total mode of life it is necessarily the production of symbolic significance. Nevertheless, because it appears to the producer as a great pecuniary gain, and the consumer as an acquisition of "useful" goods, the basic symbolic character of the process goes on entirely behind the backs of the participants . . .[28]

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[26]Marx, Capital, pp. 83-85.

[27]Grondin, p. 89.

[28]Marshall Sahlins Culture and Practical Reason (Chicago: University Press, 1976), p. 213.

The social conditions of capitalist production conceal the real conditions of human existence by disguising the relationship between people as a relationship between things. The capitalist market system reduces the efforts of every individual to a "thing" independent of himself or herself. This causes individuals to approach each other in terms of the market value of the goods they own or produce, instead of as sentient beings. The market system causes the value of things to diverge from their personal or social utility. Hence, the value system of capitalism conceals, distorts, and shifts the original value of things and people and replaces them with the values that result from market processes dependent on capital accumulation. The market system is a hierarchy of values and preferences that is independent of the social order of human utility. Although the values of each system sometime coincide, in general, they operate independently of each other.

Georg Lukács and Social Reification

Georg Lukács is known for his important contribution to commodity theory. In the early 1900's, he was able to show how the theory of the commodity and the concept of object-ification could be useful for social analysis beyond human labor. His

> concept of reification evolved from the assumption that in capitalist society, the economy dominates all other aspects of social life. In this situation, the relations of production affect the "interhuman relations as well, so that human beings are reduced to the merchandise they produce. The category of totality is lost sight of, qualitative values are transformed into quantitative ones, and people are reduced to the status of mere spectators."[29]

According to Lukács, not only is labor reified by capitalist relations of production, but so are the consciousness and social practices of the community. Once capitalism reaches a certain level, the effects of commodification become overwhelming and the process of reification begins to affect the entire character of society. When this occurs, the social consciousness of both workers and capitalists are subject to the same processes of commodification as the production of goods. "Subjectively, people in commodity capitalism experience the estrangement of their activities as these, too, become commodities."[30] He extended the concept of objectification of labor to subjective qualities of human personality, and the commodity structure to all spheres of capitalist society.[31]

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[29]Lukács cited in Lucien Goldman, Lukács and Heidegger: towards a new philosophy, trans. William Q. Boelhower, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), p. xix.

[30]Susan Willis, A Primer for Daily Life (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 7.

[31]Grondin, p. 90.

Lukács explained reification as both an objective and a subjective phenomena. Just as an individual's labor becomes alien and objective to him or her, so does the world of things and their relations in the market. Objectively, human activity reacts to the social conditions of the market in a coherent pattern. Market logic and probabilities are comprehensible to members of capitalist society and may be used to their advantage, but these forces appear "natural" and beyond human control.[32] Subjectively, reification affects the consciousness and personality of capitalist society through the alienation of human activity. Capitalism affects individuals in the same way that it affects objects in society. Individuals and human activities become produced and valued according to their value in exchange.

What Lukács says about reification closely coincides with what Marx wrote in his now famous, recently discovered, 1844 Paris manuscripts. In these papers, unknown to Lukács, Marx anticipated the extension of estrangement--from goods, to labor, to nature. He described a "three-fold alienation of the worker in capitalist society: alienation from the products of his labour, from labour itself as an act of

[32]G.H.R. Parkinson, Georg Lukács, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 55.

production, and from the very nature of man".[33] But Lukács' explanation of reification is significant not only because it was published before the discovery of Marx's 1844 manuscripts, but also because it deals with the total reification of society in a depth and detail neglected by Marx. According to Lukács, as reification expands the whole character of society changes. As the commodity relations become more universally dominant, individuals come to depend on them for more of their needs. The calculation of activity in terms of commodities enters every decision. Taylorization of work and leisure into discrete, measurable units drives individuals to a more fragmented and specialized existence. Details of individual tasks become greater and more dependent on others, and the image of the whole becomes less relevant and farther from comprehension. In his or her own specialized way, each individual develops an approach to all the problems of everyday life according to the same general laws of capital accumulation and socially constructed values of exchange. The hegemony of exchange value homogenizes and universalizes all human activity.[34]

> As the division of labor becomes more pronounced and more rational, this tendency naturally increases in proportion, for the more highly devel-

[33]Ibid., p. 56.

[34]Ibid., p. 90.

> oped it is, the more powerful become the claims to status and professional interests of the "specialists" who are the living embodiments of such tendencies.[35]

A universal reified mind appears. The conscious minds of all individuals become qualitatively identical in the way that all individual labor becomes qualitatively identical. He writes:

> The distinction between a worker faced with a particular machine, the entrepreneur faced with a given type of mechanical development,the technologist faced with the state of science and the profitability of its applications to technology, is purely quantitative; it does not entail any qualitative difference in the structure of consciousness.[36]

As the economy expands, the reification of the mind becomes greater and sinks deeper into the consciousness of society. The government and its law also conform to the structure of the commodity to achieve an increasing degree of harmony with capitalism.[37] The laws of the market become a unifying element of society.

The neoclassical economic theory of marginal utility is the alternative to the labor theory of value used by Marx.[38]

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[35]Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics, Trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1968), p. 103.

[36]Ibid., p. 98.

[37]Ibid., pp. 93-95.

[38]Modern economics has succeeded in eliminating the dialectic between use value and exchange value with the

It is an example of how science, in an effort to homogenize and consolidate all knowledge, conforms to the structure of capitalism. Since the movement of commodities cannot be explained in terms of their objective utility, the theory of marginal utility relies on probabilities that explain the subjective modes of human behavior. Lukács wrote that the theory of marginal utility starts

> from the 'subjective' behaviour on the market. But this simply shifts the question from the main issue to more and more derivative and reified stages without negating the formalism of the method and the elimination from the outset of the concrete material underlying it. The formal act of exchange which constitutes the basic fact for the theory of marginal utility likewise suppresses use-value as use-value and establishes a relation of concrete equality between concretely unequal and indeed incomparable objects.[39]

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theory of marginal utility. It defines the value of a good as the amount that an individual is willing to pay for the next unit of it. With a similar logic, economics distinguishes between wants and needs with an device called the Engle curve. It differentiates luxuries from necessities according to demand inelasticity. This logic defines necessities as goods that are purchased in the same quantities regardless changes in prices or incomes--food being the classic example. Although this achieves the aim of quantifying the issue, it neglects the qualitative aspects of commodification. The Engle curve essentially defines use value in terms of exchange value. Both of these concepts, typical of modern economic theory, are completely independent of the qualities of a good. They work by measuring the shadow of use value that is cast as exchange value.

[39]Ibid., p. 104.

The mechanical exploitation of individuals that occurs under capitalism is concealed by the barrage of details and conventions supported by an infrastructure of scientific rationality. In pre-capitalist societies the hierarchy of power and control was clear from the Emperors, Kings, and Lords at the top down to the peasants and slaves at the bottom. Capitalism conceals this hierarchy through the creation of the "free" worker. Only when labor is identified by an individual as his or her own sovereign possession can the process of alienation and reification occur.

The reified mind is impervious to any alternatives to the commodified relations of capitalism. Most individuals believe that the freedom to act within the confines of the economic system represents every possible freedom. The social reality that confronts each individual is experienced as a natural phenomena beyond question. Although Lukács saw the homogenizing effects of capitalism encompassing the entire society, he believed that it was at the root of class struggle. Competition necessarily produces winners and losers. The winners, capitalists, feel comfortable and "confirmed" by the effects of reification which they sees as their own instrument, while the working class feels alienated and "destroyed" by it.[40]

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[40]Ibid., p. 149.

Adorno and the Frankfurt School

The rise of fascism in the 1930's produced concern among intellectuals about the capitalist organization of society.[41] Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), Max Horkheimer (1885-1973) and other members of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in Germany built on Lukács' conception of the reified mind to account for what that they believed to be a fundamental change in capitalism: from free competitive market system to advanced monopoly market. They believed that a structural shift in the commodity form had accompanied a transformation to a more advanced form of capitalism.[42] According to them, the distinction between use value and exchange value had completely collapsed, and with it the cultural superstructure was collapsing into economic base. The importance of the Frankfurt School to commodity theory was to adapt Lukács' concept of reification to account for this shift, and expand it to take into account the compounding influence of the cultural superstructure.

The Frankfurt Institute was interested in the subjective aspect of the commodity form outlined by Lukács concept of reification. But for them, the "confrontation between

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[41]Lambert Zuidervaart, Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), p. 76.

[42]Ibid., p. 77.

humankind and nature replaced class struggle as the motor force of history."[43] According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the will to dominate nature developed out of a dreadful fear of the unknown.[44] The whole project of Enlightenment through the 19th century was humankind's effort to make the world comprehensible. But in the process, the basis of reason changed from objective to subjective. Horkheimer believed that the term reason has a different meaning today than it once had. When the ordinary person describes reason, a common definition is

> that reasonable things are things that are obviously useful . . . [and that] the force that ultimately makes reasonable action possible is the faculty of classification, inference, and deduction, no matter what the specific content.[45]

This is a fundamentally different conception of reason from that of the great Greek and German philosophical systems that were built on objective theory of reason.

> This view asserted the existence of reason as a force not only in the individual mind but also in

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[43]Joan Alway, Critical Theory and Political Possibilities: Conceptions of Emancipatory Politics in the Works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas, (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), p. 33.

[44]Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 3-4.

[45]Max Horkheimer, The Eclipse of Reason (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 3.

> the objective world--in relations among human beings and between social classes, in social institutions, and in nature and its manifestations.[46]

Adorno and Horkheimer believed that in an effort to be free from mother nature, humankind created a "new and more all-encompassing form of domination and repression."[47] Through science, humans have "succeeded in disenchanting the world . . . value, quality, subjectivity, feelings and aesthetics are banished from the realm of true knowledge.[48] "What men want to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate it and other men. That is its only aim."[49] The social conditions fostered by humans to expedite the transformation of nature produces a "second nature" to which individuals must submit. Humans are no longer the active agents of their conditions, but spectators to the conditions of their own making.

The "culture industry" epitomizes the second nature of humankind. They believed that the culture industry is not only an extension of capitalism, but that it actively rein-

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[46]Ibid., p. 4.

[47]Alway, p. 34.

[48]Ibid., p. 37.

[49]Horkheimer and Adorno, The Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 4.

forces and enhances the processes of commodification. They were, perhaps, the first to conceptualize the mass media in this way. The same mechanisms of carefully planned duplication that accompany mass industrial production are integral to the production of mass media content. In order for artist to prosper, his or her work must conform to the criteria that enable the culture monopolies to market it. To reduce the risk of failure, capitalists demanded adherence to standard formulas that ensured success.

The Frankfurt School followed Lukács' contention that commodity production was the unifying structuring principle of society affecting every aspect of life. Both criticized popular culture and the technology that distributed it, believing that the homogenizing effect of the commodity form reduced culture to its lowest common denominator. Because the production of culture is a function dominated by commercial industry it exhibits all of the homogenized and alienating qualities of traditional tangible commodities. Like the production line, the media isolated individuals and fostered atomized listening; and by emphasizing the familiar, it encouraged passivity in the masses.[50]

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[50]Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, "Introduction," Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies, eds. Mukerji and Schudson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 38.

In the Dialectic of Enlightenment, they argue that function of art and culture takes on the character of the economic infrastructure. Art and culture are no longer valued for what they are or what they mean, but only for what they can be exchanged for.

> Everything is looked at from only one aspect: that it can be used for something else . . . No object has inherent value; it is only valuable to the extent that it can be exchanged. The use value of art, its mode of being, is treated as a fetish; and the fetish, the work's social rating (misinterpreted as its artistic status) becomes its use value--the only quality which is enjoyed.[51]

Even the emancipating potential of art is subject to the same processes as other commodities.[52] In Adorno's seminal essay on contemporary music[53] he describes how the commodity character of music has evolved, and how this change is indicative of the basic shift in the commodity structure. He argues that, initially, music had both a use value and an exchange value. It was produced to be sold and then purchased to be enjoyed. Use value was originally linked to enjoyment. But with the development of advanced

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[51]Horkheimer, The Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 158.

[52]Zuidervaart, p. 78.

[53]Theodor Adorno, The Philosophy of Modern Music, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (The Seabury Press: New York, 1973)

capitalism, the use value of art, music and culture became increasingly a function of its exchange value.

> What might be called use value in the reception of cultural commodities is replaced by exchange value; in place of enjoyment there are gallery-visiting and factual knowledge: the prestige seeker replaces the connoisseur.[54]

He believed that the central contradiction of capitalism was the "non-identity" or real non-equivalence of use value and exchange value.[55]

The commercial mechanisms that bring art and culture to the public devalue its meaning. The mass media not only respond to the imperatives of capitalism, but the evolution of cultural commodity has changed the meaning and character of art. Traditionally, the commodity value of art and culture was reflected by is price: paintings, concerts and theater shows were sponsored by private interests. In this forum, content is intellectually discussed and critiqued with seriousness. But when culture is presented as a by-product of industry, or routinely delivered free of charge in the form of advertisements and advertiser supported media, they are the subject of much less criticism and

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[54]Horkheimer, The Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 158.

[55]Susan Buck-Morss, The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute (New York: The Free Press, 1977) p. 62.

scrutiny.[56] When it is distributed practically free, in a paradigm where significance is associated with price, little is expected of it. In this context art and culture can only be evaluated in terms of itself: the amount of technical skill or the cost of originality compared to the alternative forms. The purpose of art as an edifying and illuminating medium is lost when it is reduced to an exchange value.

The "mass" quality of the media provides the function of equivalence which is essential to the production of the commodities. Unlike prior social mechanisms, the mass media was ideally suited to the production of the cultural commodity. In the absence of a material vehicle, the mass media is instrumental to the commodification of culture. It makes it possible create cultural icons on demand. Cultural forms no longer have to be slowly assimilated by the populace via word of mouth. New cultural forms can quickly be created and distributed on a mass scale. By side-stepping the traditional mechanism of cultural production, it no longer functions as a vehicle of social truth. The dominance of exchange value, obliterates the objective "truth" value of cultural forms and practices. When the only thing about culture that matters is its social exchange value, consumers of cultural products actively pursue them regardless of whether or not

[56]Ibid., p. 161.

they represent a deceptive form.[57] In this way the cultural environment, dominated by the mass media, integrates debilitating elements into a potentially enriching structure.

By collapsing the distinction between the base and superstructure, and production and consumption, one implies that the consumer's alienation is the same as the laborer's.

> That is, the consumer's work is pure exchange value. . . [and] the cultural object is pure exchange value, with no use value whatsoever, except perhaps . . . ideological.[58]

Marx's conception of commodity theory was the result of the synthesis between a radical adaptation of Hegel's dialectic of objectification and the classical economic labor theory of value. With these ideas, he produced the concept of commodity fetishism which has become the basis of commodity theory. He believed that the theory of the commodity not only explained the economic relations of capitalism, but also the social relations. Georg Lukács extended the context commodity theory beyond Marx's application to human labor by suggesting the human mind and social consciousness are also subject to the effects of the commodity fetishism. Lukács' work paved the way for Theodor Adorno and the Frank-

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[57]Ibid., 167.

[58]Lawrence Grossberg, "Strategies of Marxist Cultural Interpretation," Critical Perspectives on Media and Society, eds. Robert K. Avery and David Eason (New York: The Gilford Press, 1991), p. 131.

furt School to use commodity theory in the construction of the concept of the "culture industry." Through the contributions of the Frankfurt School and their dependence on Lukács' theory of reification, commodity theory was adapted to address cultural institutions from beyond an economic perspective. The idea of a culture industry made it possible to theorize about the production of culture from a Marxist perspective in a new way. This, together with the maturity of the media industry, combined to make commodity theory an attractive tool to a group of successful media analysts who are the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter III.

APPLICATIONS OF COMMODITY THEORY TO CRITICAL MEDIA STUDIES

This chapter presents contemporary applications of commodity theory to Critical Media Studies. It describes several applications of commodity theory, the economic approach by Dallas Smythe, and the semiotic approach used by Judith Williamson as well as important contributions by Leiss, Kline, Jhally, Goldman, Wilson, Meehan and others.

Media analysts have successfully applied commodity theory to mass media from both the macro-dynamic and the micro-dynamic perspective of Critical Media Studies. The macro-dynamic perspective approaches media analysis from an historical perspective which identifies advertising and mass communication as an integral part of modern capitalism.[59] This approach considers the market institution as one of the most important factors for mass media analysis. The influence of political economy and institutional economists such as Thorstein Veblen are evident in works by Herbert Schil-

[59]Harms, p. 41.

ler, Mass Communications and American Empire (1971) and Stuart Ewen, Captains of Consciousness (1976). The first section will examine the work of Dallas Smythe and investigate how he has applied commodity theory on a macro-dynamic scale to critical issues in mass communication.

In contrast, the micro-dynamic approach is the Cultural Studies perspective This approach builds on an academic tradition much influenced by the Arts and Humanities. It has been successful in the application of commodity theory by employing semiotics and content analysis to the analysis of advertising communication. Work in this area has revealed the rhetorical structure of commercial advertising and suggests how it produces the persuasive and manipulative effects on consumers. This study will introduce work by William Leiss, Steven Kline and Sut Jhally, Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products, and Images of Well Being (1986), Robert Goldman, Reading Ads Socially (1982), and Judith Williamson, Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertisements (1978). Commodity theory is an important element in each of these studies.

The final section of this chapter examines some of the work by Eileen Meehan, a student of Smythe. By combining her work on the "audience commodity" with Williamson's theory on advertising rhetoric, one can see how the commodity form

appears on two distinct levels in the mass media. One level is the objective level which is best understood from a macro-dynamic perspective, the second level is the subjective level which is best understood from the micro-dynamic perspective.

The Infrastructure of the Mass Media

The commodity form appears in both the structure of the modern media and its products. Contemporary media analysts have identified it in both the financial economy and the cultural economy of the media. Since the work of the Frankfurt Institute, much of the emphasis in communications research has focused on the message-based analysis of communications. The traditional communication conception of use value was approached by examining the meaning of the message content.[60] Dallas Smythe (1948-1992) reawakened the contemporary expression of the Marxist school of political economy of communication in 1977 with "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism."[61] He claimed that the commercial communication media should be studied as an integral part of the infrastructure of capitalism rather than as an ideological

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[60]Jhally, p. 68-69.

[61]Dallas W. Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory vol. 1, no. 3 (Fall 1977): 1.

element of the cultural superstructure. According to Smythe, the question that had been long neglected in mass communications studies was "what economic function for capital does the mass communication system serve?"[62] He replied: "The prime purpose of the mass media complex is to produce people in audiences who work at learning the theory and practice of consumership . . ."[63] In other words, the mass media is like any other business; it produces a commodity for exchange. The media's product is its audience that it cultivates and sells to corporate advertisers.

The blindspot of communication studies is that it has mistaken the messages, information, images, meaning, entertainment, orientation, education, and manipulation as the "commodity form of mass-produced advertiser-supported communications" instead of the audience.[64] Smythe contends that TV shows are merely an incentive for audiences to watch commercials.

> The information, entertainment and "educational" material transmitted to the audience is an inducement (gift, bribe or "free lunch") to recruit

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[62]Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory, p. 1.

[63]Ibid., p. 20.

[64]Ibid., p. 2.

> potential members of the audience and to maintain their loyal attention.[65]

Media programming exists to cultivate an audience to support the interests of advertisers and their messages. They sell the viewing time of specially cultivated audiences to advertisers. The media are paid not only for providing the infrastructure to reach the audience, but also for the programming management that organizes audiences into appropriate demographic categories for advertisers. "As collectivities these audiences are commodities. As commodities they are dealt with in markets by producers and buyers (the latter being advertisers)."[66]

Market segmentation "is recognized within business as one of the most important and influential marketing concepts of the twentieth century."[67] The media commodifies the audience for the advertisers by representing "lifestyle" categories from the styles, forms, and contexts of the programming. Demographic segments created by marketers represent an integral part of the process of commodifying the commercial media audience. They are devised according to consumption patterns that benefit marketers. The participa-

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[65]Ibid., p. 3.

[66]Ibid., p. 4.

[67]Jhally, p. 123.

tion of the mass media popularizes the categories so they can be used by consumers to identify and distinguish themselves within the mass market.

Smythe shows how the development of the mass media in the United States follows the economic imperatives of the capitalist agenda. According to Smythe, the media institution was developed to meet the specifications of American industry to promote conditions favorable to the consumption of mass produced goods through the development of commodity relations.[68] He claims that the primary function of the mass media is unique compared to other institutions. Unlike other institutions such as the family or the public education system which have specific functions of nurturing or technical indoctrination, the media institution functions primarily to legitimize and direct the economic imperatives of capitalism.

Smythe explains that capitalism occupies the populace with its agenda. Despite all the contradictions, people spend their daily lives dealing with the demands that agenda requires. Most people spend much of their efforts involved in capitalism's "wage/price squeeze." They learn about the specifics of the daily agenda through contacts at work,

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[68]Dallas W. Smythe, "A Marxist Theory of Communications," p. 247.

through government officials, education and other social organizations.

> But for virtually all of the people, all of the time, the agenda which directs their attention is that which, perhaps mostly in their so-called leisure time, comes to them from the consciousness industry. Priorities in their agenda tend to be set by the priorities assigned to the topics or themes in the mass media. The informal daily education of the population is conducted by the mass media, which tends to select some and not others, and frame contexts and select content all according to standards which perhaps owe more to custom than to malevolent design, and more to unconscious synchronization of decisions than to conspiracy. Because it is the special institutional function of the mass media to produce their hourly/daily/weekly quota of what, for lack of better words, we still refer to as "news," "entertainment," and "information," the unique function of the mass media of communications stands first among equals amidst other institutions in the business of reproducing a particular kind of human nature.[69]

In this way the media teaches the populace to have corresponding values, while it prepares them to be dutiful consumers. The portions of media content that are not actual advertisements, such as TV programs, are primarily an inducement to keep the media audience members from wavering their attention. This results in an audience predisposed to respond to specific advertising messages. Consequently, audience segments are packaged and offered by the media

[69]Ibid., p. 248.

companies for sale to advertisers in order to complete the marketing cycle for their clients.

According to Smythe, the media system in the United States was developed by industrial concerns to fuel their continued expansion. Therefore, the most important item of the media's agenda is "to produce people in markets motivated to buy the 'new models' of consumer goods and services . . ."[70]

He argues that technology is a cultural product. Although it is often misunderstood, technology is not an autonomous, apolitical phenomenon beyond the control of society. Even though under capitalism, the universal reification of technology appears natural, technology is the selective application of science mediated by corporate, political and cultural interests. New knowledge developed by science is expected to be applied to social problems.[71] It is a goal-oriented process. The decision to fund certain scientific inquiries and develop particular technologies in capitalist nations is a matter of the "policy and organization of capitalist society."[72]

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[70]Ibid., p. 250.

[71]Dallas Smythe, "After Bicycles, What?" Counterclockwise: Perspectives on Communication, ed. Thomas Guback (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), p. 234.

[72]Ibid., p. 236.

Commodities have ideological content that reflects the purpose for which they were developed. The technology developed by capitalist countries is the calculated result of a business agenda in response to the economic conditions of society. In capitalism those decisions are governed by the potential to generate a profit. Social consequences are not of primary consideration.

> It is important to emphasize that the consumer goods and services to be mass produced under capitalism are designed, made and sold not primarily to serve the people, but to keep the people in a "rat race" in which they work as hard as they can to buy as many consumer goods as they can so that they generate the necessary profits to satisfy the system and retain their jobs so that they can work as hard as they can.[73]

Smythe uses the development of transportation technology as an example. The development of private automobile technology is the capitalist solution to the problem of human transportation. This solution is consistent with the tendency of capitalism to encourage people "to be selfish, aggressive, hedonistic individuals."[74] The alternative solution of public transportation was not developed because it is less harmonious with the values inherent to the capi-

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[73]Ibid., p. 240.

[74]Smythe, "Technology is Highly Political," Counterclockwise. p. 220.

talist social system. So, by adopting a particular technology, one also promotes its values.[75]

The media infrastructure is the product of technology developed for surveillance and control of military personnel during World War II. It was subsequently appropriated and modified into a one-way system to accommodate the corporate agenda of its financiers and sponsors. Alternative systems of mass communications permitting two way interaction, which could have served a more democratic function, were not pursued because they did not directly benefit those financially responsible for its construction.

While every artifact exhibits social values to some degree, Smythe maintains that social values are especially pronounced in media products. On a continuum where commodities are arranged from the least value-laden to the most value-laden, the most concrete and unprocessed artifacts such as agricultural, mining and fishing products appear at the least value-loaded end of the spectrum, while at the other end appear the most abstract forms of communication such as poetry, painting and music.[76] Also at this end of the spectrum are the advertisements, programs and promotions typical of the mass media.

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[75]Ibid., p. 119.

[76]Ibid., p. 224.

Commercial Advertising

Contemporary media analysts have found commodity theory especially useful in studying commercial advertising. One significant trend in evolution of advertising is the transition from promoting the material utility of goods to the construction of symbolic meaning. Leiss et al. traced the development of print advertising from the late 1800's to the present and identified a progression in persuasion technique. Each advance emphasized a higher degree of a products symbolic and abstract characteristics.

Early advertising focused on a product's use value. Rational appeals were used to describe its function and price. Leiss et al. show how the appeals of advertising have become increasingly less concerned with the product itself, and more focused on creating a social meaning for it. Since the introduction of radio in the 1920's, appeals that reflect the symbolic properties of products have dominated the mass media.[77] Rather than claiming the value of a product is derived solely from its inherent physical properties, symbolic appeals are emphasized. Metaphor and analogy are used to suggest that social meaning constitutes a significant

[77]William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally, Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Images of Well-being, 2nd ed. (Ontario: Nelson Canada, 1990), p. 329.

part of a product's quality. In the 1920's "automobiles were expressions of modern outlook, soaps of family integrity and caring, shoes of sobriety and status."[78] The introduction of non-rational appeals marked an important deviation from earlier solicitations based on use value. Whereas before, a product's value was presented as pure use, symbolic appeals abstract the product from the process of production, and imbue it with often irrelevant symbolic social powers. The tendency to fetishize commodities are no longer derived solely through the process of physical manufacture. The innovation of sophisticated advertising produces the same effect in the domain of culture and leisure.

Goldman and Wilson believed that this evolution represents a "qualitative change in the commodity form."[79] Commodities no longer need to have fixed meanings determined by their utility, nor are they limited simply by their value in exchange. Advertising has created a new layer of meaning called the "commodity-sign."[80] The commodity-sign is an arbitrary unit consisting of a signifying unit and a signified meaning, much like Saussure's concept of the linguistic

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[78]Ibid. p. 334.

[79]Robert Goldman and John Wilson, "Appearance and Essence: The Commodity Form Revealed in Perfume Advertisements," Current Perspectives in Social Theory 4, 1983: 122.

[80]Ibid., p. 122.

sign.[81] In their study of perfume advertising, Goldman and Wilson emphasize how little attention in national brand advertisements is devoted to the use value of products. "Modern advertising teaches us to consume, not the product, but its sign. What the product stands for is more important than what it is."[82] They also found that the actual smell of a perfume is rarely mentioned in advertising. Instead, the advertisement serves as conduit for a sophisticated transformation of value from one image to another.

Goldman and Wilson explain the logic of modern advertising in terms of the commodity form: a process of abstraction, equivalence, and reification. Abstraction is to empty of content[83] or detach from its natural origin. Just as human labor must be conceptually detached from the individual who possesses it in order to be considered for exchange, the concept of perfume as a possession is detached or abstracted from its scent. Perfume marketers often associate a fragrance with a mood or a fantasy in order to commodify it or package it. The process of abstraction masks the history

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[81]Ferdinand de Saussure. Course in General Linguistics, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959)

[82]Goldman, p. 123.

[83]Ibid., pp. 126-129.

and real conditions of production by substituting the symbolic element of exchange.

Equivalence is the characteristic of commodities that make them comparable to all other commodities. Once a product is abstracted, its equivalence with all other commodities immediately overwhelms it. Everything is suddenly related to everything else by virtue of its exchange relationship. Exchange value becomes the dominant characteristic, subordinating use value. Human experiences "such as joy, wonder, peace, sexual pleasure and fulfillment" appear to be as reproducible and as tangible as the perfume.[84] In this way, people become serially related to one another through their possessions.

Reification is the final stage of commodification. It is the transfer of human social qualities to objects. Human labor is recognized as a quantitative part of the commodity, rather than a quality of it.

> [W]hen labor becomes a commodity, its value appears to be a property of the commodity itself rather than a relation of which labor now forms a part."[85]

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[84]Ibid., pp. 127-135.

[85]Ibid., p. 126.

It occurs because we "forget" the part that our own activity plays in producing the social world.[86] When reification occurs, the correspondence between social relations and objects is reversed. Individuals define themselves through the characteristics of the mass-produced goods that they consume. In the perfume study, the possession of a particular scent is seen as a method for acquiring the human qualities that advertisers associate with them. As capitalism expands, and more and more human qualities are drawn into the orbit of exchange, commodities become the primary means of personal expression.[87] Social skills are expressed as shopping skills.[88]

Commodities are the result of goods that leave the factory void of meaning.[89] Knowledge about how, where, who and under what conditions a good is produced are absent from most modern commodities. Even the composition of commodities is usually only divulged when government regulations require it (like food and toxic chemical labels). The fractured process of production, specialized division of labor, and

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[86]Ibid., p. 135.

[87]Leiss, p. 323.

[88]Goldman, p. 129.

[89]Jhally, p. 50.

sophisticated manufacturing techniques obscure the development of coherent histories of individual commodities. Often the manufacture of a product is broken up into several processes that take place at different locations and by various individuals who may not know exactly what the end result of their work will be. The production of commodities has become so sophisticated that often only the very top level managers understand the reasons why a product is manufactured in the particular way that it is. The rationale behind many decisions cannot make sense to an individual in the middle of the operation who is unaware of the entire process.[90] Since very few people understand the social or technical conditions under which a commodity is produced, the story of its meaning remains an uncompleted ritual. When a commodity rolls off the production line it "is" only what it "does," it has no meaning. Only a portion of its use-value has been addressed. The social meaning has yet to be created.

"Unlike goods in earlier societies, they [commodities] do not bear the signature of their makers, whose motives and

[90]Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 48.

actions we might access because we knew who they were."[91] When a commodity was produced by an independent artisan in a shop, the actual story and process of its manufacture as a commodity came with it when it was sold. The purchaser knew who made it, who else it was made for, and most of the circumstances surrounding its production.

Bridges of knowledge due to geography, culture, and distribution channels have traditionally created gaps in meaning to be filled with myth and fabrication. Exotic imports and far away tourist vacations yield an ideal opportunity to create a mystique, precisely because the origin and indigenous meaning are unknown. Today, many of the conditions that lead to the appearance of a commodity are better left concealed.[92] The underhanded rivalry between competitors, the exploitation of laborers, the products prone to cause accidents, and the greed of the company owners may not reflect a social meaning that will ultimately enhance the marketability of a product. Consequently, often "[t]he production knowledge that is read into a commodity is quite different from the consumption knowledge that is read from the commodity."[93]

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[91]Jhally, p. 50.

[92]Ibid., p. 51.

[93]Appadurai, p. 41.

Products devoid of meaning create an opportunity for marketers to enhance their product by carefully choosing the most highly exchangeable qualities for their particular good. In fact, Jhally maintains that "[o]nly once the real meaning has been systematically emptied out of commodities does advertising refill this void with its own symbols."[94] This demonstrates how product marketing promotes the commodity form in the mass media and how the media institution supports the capitalist values of commodity accumulation. The next section investigates commodity theory from a micro-dynamic perspective.

The Semiotics of Advertising

Judith Williamson published one of the most successful semiotic analyses of advertising in Decoding Advertisements.[95] In her book she illuminates the structures of meaning that advertisements create. She contends that the structures of meaning set up by advertisements constitute an ideology that conceals the real social distinctions between people.

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[94]Jhally, p. 51.

[95]Judith Williamson, Decoding Advertising (London: Marion Boyers, 1993), p. 12.

> [I]n our society, while real distinctions between people are created by their role in the process of production, as workers, it is the products of their own work that are used, in the false categories invoked by advertising, to obscure the real structure of society by replacing class with the distinctions made by the consumption of particular goods. Thus instead of being identified by what they produce, people are made to identify themselves with what they consume.[96]

Her interpretation of advertising suggests that the structure of advertisements perpetuate the status quo by encouraging people to construct a social reality that is in harmony with the interests of those already in control of the economic power.[97]

She claims that advertisements are based on false assumptions. We give meaning to products "on the basis of an irrational mental leap invited by the advertisement."[98] The difference between the rational use of goods (what they do for us--use value) and the irrational use (their meanings added by marketers), is part and parcel of where advertising fits in.[99]

The construction of meaning occurs within each one of us. According to her analysis, advertisements set up a

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[96]Ibid., p. 13.

[97]Leiss, p. 31.

[98]Ibid., p. 43.

[99]Ibid., p. 24.

relationship in which we create meaning for the commodity. We take meaning from the commodity, we are created by the commodity, and we create ourselves in the advertisement.[100]

She applies and develops commodity theory by showing how meaning is transferred between two meaning systems: the meaning of the product being sold, and the meaning of the person or thing that it is being associated with. The connection between the two is made within the consumer. This correlation "between two series, one natural, the other cultural,"[101] closely resembles Marx's original concept of commodification.

She shows how the process of interpreting a modern advertisement follows the structure of the commodity form. A modern advertisement involves three primary components: the image of an object or person whose social qualities are well-known "A"; the advertiser's product "B"; and the prospective buyer "C". During the process of interpretation, the rhetoric of the ad semantically transfers the desirable qualities from one representation to the other. The meaning of representation "A" is associated with product "B," through subject "C" (assuming that subject "C" believes that

[100]Williamson, p. 41.

[101]Ibid., p. 46.

one will acquire the qualities by purchasing the product--the commodity fetish). Williamson contends that the transfer of meaning from one system to the other requires the subject to "work" on interpreting the ad. Successful interpretation requires that the subject be familiar with the meaning systems, able to follow the semantics of the ad, and willing to suspend rational judgement on the appeal.

Williamson's analysis suggests that a division of labor exists to "work" on advertisements in a way which complements the market segmentation engineered by advertisers and manufacturers. Modern marketing strategies have matured to more effectively utilize the participation of individual audience members. Advertisers use audience segments to match the particular rhetoric of non-rational appeals to the particular market segment most willing and able to respond to them.

Unlike program content designed to produce pleasure, advertisements require work. "Despite the fact that huge amounts of money (much more than programming) are spent on producing attractive commercials, people do all they can to avoid them."[102] It is apparent that the rhetoric of advertising is interpreted fundamentally different than program content. This is evident in the disdain that most people

[102]Jhally, p. 88.

feel toward advertising. Interpreting an ad is alienating work. "Boring" or "uninteresting" are qualities rarely used to describe commercials. Rather, people become irritated, tired, uncomfortable and hostile toward commercials the same way one feels when a break from "work" is desired. This is because advertisements are not consumed, but produced. Individuals expend effort to interpret ads in order to produce the consumer demand desired by advertisers analogous to the way that workers produce surplus value for the owners of capital.[103]

By avoiding advertisements, audience members may not produce consumer demand for specific products, but the entire flow and content of the advertiser-supported media environment enhances consumer desire for commercial products in general. Programs designed to attract the best consumers generally reinforce the lifestyle qualities that make them valuable as consumers. In this way, the media continually cultivates its most valuable commodity--the most productive audiences.[104]

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[103]Jhally. p. 128.

[104]Eileen Meehan, "Commodity Audience, Actual Audience: The Blindspot Debate," Illuminating the Blindspots: Essays Honoring Dallas W. Smythe, eds. Janet Wasko, Vincent Mosco, Manjunath Pendakur (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1994), p. 388.

Audience segmentation is a cost-efficient way for networks to increase audience productivity. It produces scales of efficiency that parallel division of labor. Audience segments consist of aggregates of individuals who identify with (fetishize) similar types of objects. Networks produce audiences by creating programs designed to appeal to specially designed market segments. Audience segments permit advertisers to customize their message for the greatest impact, thereby maximizing return on their advertising efforts.

Most people have the ability and willingness to make product purchases depending on a wide variety of individual and demographic characteristics including sex, income, age, and education. Social circumstances encourage individuals to identify with particular lifestyle groups articulated by marketers. These abstract categories enable marketers to maximize the value and exploit the naivete and sophistication of particular audiences. Media rating companies use market and audience segments to measure the potential productivity of audiences. "Ratings are the tangible 'proof' that the network's intangible commodity--the audience--exists."[105] The ratings industry sells information about

[105]Eileen R. Meehan, "Conceptualizing Culture as Commodity," Critical Studies in Mass Communication 3 (December 1986): 450.

commodity equivalence. It measures the composition of different audiences so they can be quantified, graded and exchanged.

Marketers are interested in particular audience segments in order to produce consumer demand for specific products. Once viewers are segmented into production units, networks organize audience members according to decoding skills and tolerance to advertising.[106] Those with the least sophisticated decoding skills and the highest tolerance to advertising (children) get the most frequent and explicit advertisements, while the most sophisticated and least tolerant to advertising are provided with less alienating work (advertisements that omit explicit "calls to action" such as commercial public TV sponsors). Consumer demand seems to be produced on an individual level, each according to his or her own ability.

A model of audience segmentation is graphically represented below. At the bottom, networks organize viewers into audiences constituted by established market segments. Viewers are drawn to specific programs according to their social and psychological inclinations. The cumulative process of "tuning-in" to a specific channel results in a mass audi-

[106]Mike Budd. "Television and the Commodity Form," (Unpublished paper. Presented at the Society for Cinema Studies. New Orleans conference, 1986), p. 19.

ence. Networks produce desirable aspects of media programming to segment the audience. Then advertising is introduced or "injected" into the program mix. Just as raw materials are provided for workers in a factory, advertisements are provided for viewers to process. At his or her "work station" in front of the TV, radio or newspaper, each viewer proceeds to decode the advertiser's message, making an objective contribution to consumer demand and subjectively reinforcing a fetishism of commodities in themselves.

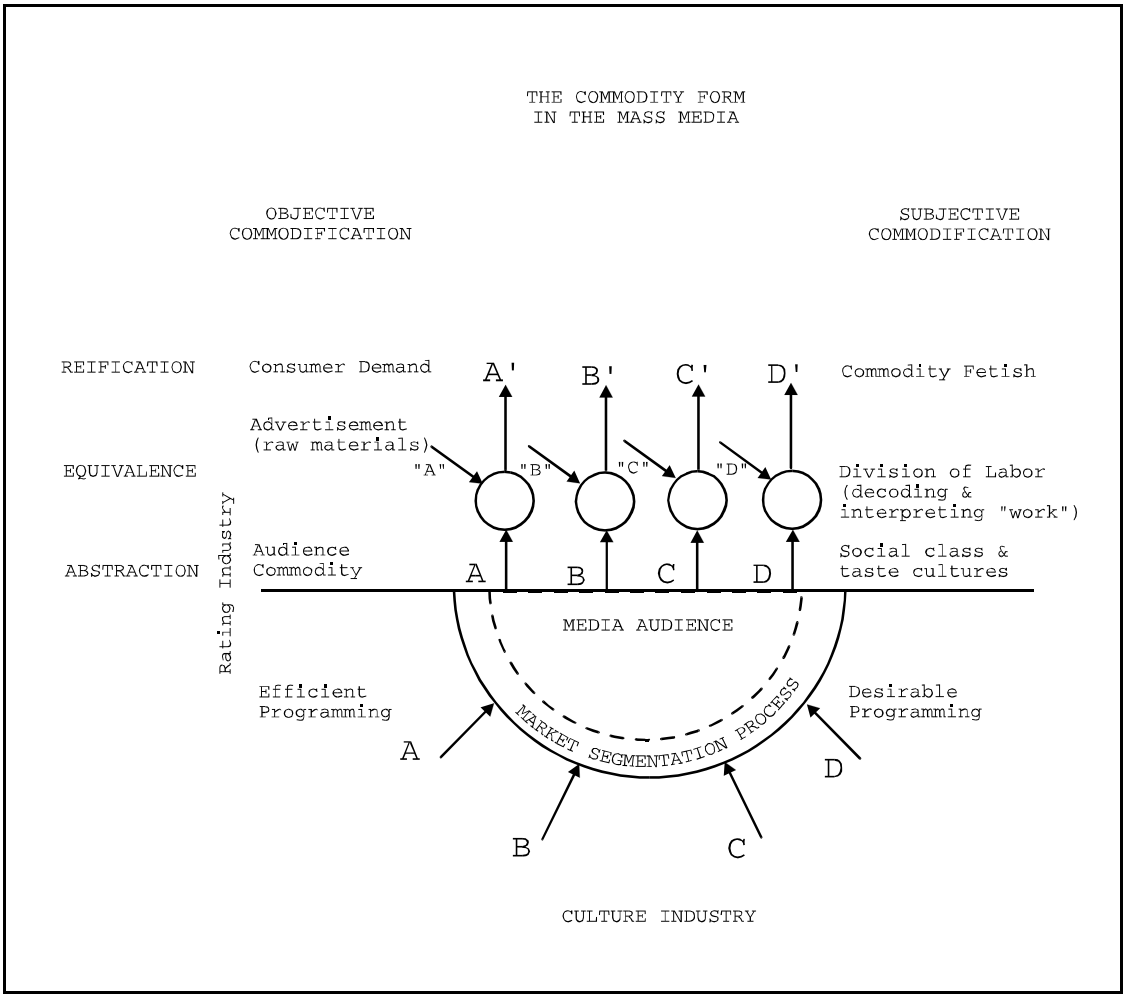

Figure 1

In this process the raw materials (advertisements and programming), are combined with the labor (viewers), and organized by management into efficient production units (audiences), to produce consumer demand and commodity fetish--the output of the commercial media system.

In this model, the commodity form appears in two parallel structures. On the objective level, the media consuming populace is the object of commodification by the networks and media businesses. Their interest is in organizing the most valuable consumers in the audience so they can be "packaged" for sale to advertising interests. Audience segmentation is the abstract assemblage of individual media consumers for advertisers. Within the framework of each audience segment, a complementary combination of programming and advertising reinforces and educates the consumer to the values of importance to its sponsors. In particular, each sponsor attempts to position its product at the highest possible level in the hierarchy of value that equates all commodities. This function is one primary step in the formation of a commodity: establishing equivalence. Success is obtained when a sufficient amount of demand is produced to justify the costs of "educating" the consumer. Consumer demand is the reification of success for the program sponsor

and the intentional purpose of the commercial media system as a whole.

On the subjective level, artists and cultural producers are interested in making presentations and statements that attract the desire of their respective audiences. Consumers of specific cultural products tend to form around social class, interest and taste cultures. The social organization of individuals are the basis on which marketers chose audiences to exploit. These abstractly defined audiences form a division of labor that translates into specialized levels of message decoding preferences. Marketers use an understanding of these preferences and social conditions to organize a suitable the mix of programs and advertisements. The interpreting work performed by the audience is a process of understanding that requires, in the case of advertising, putting the component parts of the advertisers message together to arrive at the intended meaning. This process of producing value for the sponsor's product depends not only on the media programs to deliver any audience, but a more specialized audience for a more specialized product.

The subjective process of commodification generally occurs unintentionally and without the consent of its participants. Because the elements cannot be quantitatively measured like those in the objective process they are often

given less credibility and acknowledgment. How can one predict the desirability of a cultural product, the amount of work required to arrive at the preferred meaning of a media message, or exactly when a new commodity fetish is established? These are the qualities that marketers, sociologists and communication specialists have vigorously attempted to quantify for the past 150 years with only marginal success. (Of course, in the business world a definitive solution is unnecessary since success can be obtained by being only marginally better than one's competitor.)

Contemporary media analysts have identified the commodity form in mass media structures and applied commodity theory from two primary perspectives. Dallas Smythe used commodity theory to study and explain the media infrastructure from an economic perspective. Judith Williamson used commodity theory to study and explain commercial messages from a semiotic perspective. The former uses commodity theory in a macro-dynamic mode, the latter uses it in a micro-dynamic mode. Although each applies commodity theory from a different perspective, they both are concerned with commercial communication, as are the other media analysts introduced in this chapter.

The commodity form appears in two parallel structures. On the economic production level, viewers are the object of

commodification by networks, and on the symbolic consumption level, viewers are the producers of commodity value. In the first instance, networks and media companies make investments in capital equipment and programs to attract and organize aggregate viewers into valuable audiences so they can be "packaged" for sale to advertisers. In the second case, individual viewers become active participants in the process of commodification by "working" on the advertisements to produce consumer demand. The following chapter investigates alternative perspectives for considering commodity theory.

Chapter IV.

THE TENSION BETWEEN ECONOMIC COMMODITIES AND CULTURAL PRODUCTS

This chapter examines the tension between economic commodities and cultural products in an attempt to enlarge the scope of commodity theory. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate possible applications of commodity theory outside of Media Studies to get a better understanding of how it might be applied within the discipline. After identifying some effects of economic commodification today, this study examines what alternatives to commodity exchange could be like. This involves contrasting modern economies with primitive "gift-giving" economies. Much of the work in this area has been pioneered by scholars in Anthropology and/or Cultural Studies. Three studies, one by Nicholas Thomas, Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific (1991), one by Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value" (1986), and one by Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodification as Process" (1986) are examined. These

studies give a cultural perspective to commodification and identify how cultural artifacts differ from and oppose modern economic commodities.

This perspective of commodification is followed by a discussion on the dynamic between market processes and cultural innovation beginning with a description of how the "fashion system" destroys the uniqueness of cultural innovations. Finally, the last part of this chapter discusses applications of this perspective to media studies.

Contemporary Effects of Economic Commodification

The commodification of goods into new and previously unpenetrated aspects of social and personal life seems nearly inevitable. Over the past 200 years, commodification has become a part of almost every human activity. In the 1840's, a typical family may have had to go to market only a few times a year. Today, one can hardly move without either producing or consuming a commodity. Everything from eating to leisure activities solicits the use of commodities. The market has grown from supplying basic raw materials into a global social structure addressing almost every conceivable activity. The time and resources of almost everyone are spent either cultivating wants in others or satisfying wants created by others in themselves.

Today one can see how the natural environment is being commodified. As forests and undeveloped land become more valuable, their enjoyment is becoming a privilege afforded only to those willing or able to pay for it. Essentially, what is now freely available may soon be available only as a commodity, "naturalized," classified, and graded according to its exchange value.

The same is happening to children as the market extends into the family. Currently, children are spending less and less time under the influence of their family. Aside from the breakup of the extended family that took place at the beginning of this century and the separation of parents due to divorce during the last 20 years, children today are institutionalized at increasingly earlier ages as commercial day-care facilities assume the responsibility of nurturing toddlers.

Although the expansion of commodification appears inevitable, commercial markets take the path of least resistance. Nicholas Garnham has pointed out that capitalism does not suddenly appear and then "sprout a social formation like dragons teeth."[107] Rather, a social formation conducive to capitalism must precede its development.

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[107]Nicholas Garnham, Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information, ed. Fred Inglis (London: Sage, 1990), p. 36.

Not all social formations make equally productive markets. None seem to be as productive as the United States. Its astonishing growth and productivity over the past century was possible primarily because of its own internal demand for goods. Other industrial countries like Japan have also profited from the high level of consumption in America. But American businesses have not been able to enjoy the same level of success around the globe that they have had at home. Although many factors including political, economic and logistical are responsible for lower commercial productivity elsewhere, Japan is a good example where the cultural tradition is partially responsible resisting intense American exploitation.

This situation was recently articulated by the chairman of Federal Express. After many years of doing business with the Japanese, he arrived at the conclusion that the most formidable barrier to his and other American companies is the Japanese society itself. According to him, one of the most remarkable aspects of Japanese society as it relates to international trade is its respect for social relationships built on centuries of tradition.

> While the relationships that are embodied in that cultural heritage are perfectly understandable with the context of Japanese society, for people wishing to do business in that country, whose relationships often provide very challenging and formidable barriers. There is in Japan a theme

> that is manifested in daily life over and over again, and that is the attempt to achieve harmony in relationships.
>
> Activities that are designed to achieve this goal often create intractable impediments to doing business within Japan . . .
>
> . . . These relationships, logical as they are in Japan, can create a very difficult set of market problems.[108]

Foreign markets that have not embraced commodity relations in exchange for traditional social values are not very productive to capitalism. Those societies where exchange is seen as a community experience with social consequences beyond individual monetary gain make poor capitalist markets. What are sometimes considered "barriers to exchange" and unfair trading practices are often not intentional obstacles to competition, but rather represent a disparate value system with divergent expectations of exchange. What American business executives often mean when they call for a "level playing field," is the unfettered promotion of commodity relations: the formation of the social attitude and values that are conducive to an unquestioned and unregulated practice of capital accumulation.

The Extremes of Commodification

[108]Frederick W. Smith, CEO, Federal Express Corporation, "Doing Business in Japan" (Unpublished presentation to the Economic Strategy Institute, June 26, 1995 broadcast by CNN.)

Every society must reproduce the values conducive to its social structure. The primitive islanders studied by Malinowski and Mauss utilized the gift exchange rather than commodity exchange as a form of resource allocation and social control. In the absence of money, exact equivalence is rarely possible. So when articles were exchanged as gifts there remained, with one party or the other, an excess which was accounted for socially by a kind of reciprocal indebtedness. In this relationship, the "giver acquires some sort of superiority over the receiver."[109] Thus, giving is socially more important than receiving. Unlike commodity exchange, the exchange relations of gifts is one directly between individuals. Commodities alienate people because they abstract relations between individuals. Gifts are inalienable because they foster associations between people by producing a web of "rights and obligations."[110] While commodities are valued for their equivalence with other things, gifts are valued for the standing they establish with other people. This kind of exchange fosters social interdependence and trust. In a sense, individuals concentrated on who to invest in rather than who to exploit. Primitive economies foster

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[109]Nicholas Thomas, Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific. (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1991), p. 14.

[110]Ibid.

transactions with those whom better personal relations are desired, while commodity exchange maintains "a preference for transactions with relative strangers."[111]

Igor Kopytoff explains the tension between the economic and cultural aspects of production by suggesting the two extreme circumstances of commodification. He proposes that all societies fall between two extremes of commodification depending on the interaction between the economic and cultural forces of a society. At one extreme everything is perfectly exchangeable with everything else, and at the other extreme everything is singular, unique and unexchangeable. All real economies exist between the two poles of the perfectly commodified world and the perfectly decommodified world.[112] This suggests that all societies exhibit some level of commodification. Some create "spheres of exchange" to regulate the flow of cultural artifacts. He contends that in all societies, the influence of the economy tends to break down spheres of exchange and commodify to the limits that technology will allow,[113] while cultural forces

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[111]Appadurai, p. 25.

[112]Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodification as Process," The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 70

[113]Ibid., p. 85.

tend to create singularities in order to escape commodification. The tendency to resist the market forces of commodification is a basic character of cultural products.

The internet is unique compared to other mass media because it developed without substantial influence of market interests. It shows how one non-commercial communication media has resisted the market forces of commodification. The internet infrastructure originally developed beyond the bounds of typical market forces. It was funded and designed primarily by non-commercial government interests to expedite the movement of information between various government bodies, defense contractors, and universities. Without pressure from conventional business demands to act as a vehicle for commodification, it developed a distinctly non-commercial character eventually valued by many of its users. Not only were advertisements absent, but communications in general lacked the non-rational, enthematic form associated with persuasive modes of discourse. Although much communication on the internet was initially in the form of person-to-person transmissions such as electronic mail, newsgroups constituted a popular forum accessible to many internet users. Newsgroups are public exchanges between people with specialized interests on thousands of topics. To a business person, newsgroups resemble audience segments. But

those marketers who attempted to exploit these potentially valuable social formations received an unexpected and unwelcome response. Within the newsgroup forum, insincere and detached focus of advertising is strikingly apparent. Newsgroup participants vehemently resisted commercial posting, complaining of their distracting, obtrusive and wasteful qualities. Although marketers do participate in newsgroups, it has been successful in ousting direct solicitations. Because of the lack of control that businesses have on the internet, they have scrambled to channel development in their favor. The rhetorical and dramatic emphasis of the multi-media interface of the internet called the World Wide Web is a result of this effort.

The Dynamics of Market Processes and Cultural Innovation

The "fashion system" is an example of how cultural innovation figures into the expansion of commodification. Georg Simmel originally wrote of this is 1904. Cultural innovations are essential to the process of commodification because they initiate the cycle of mass production.

Simmel,[114] like Veblen,[115] described the rapid progression of fashion as the result of an attempt by the social aristocracy to distinguish themselves from their subordinates. Clothing is an example of a rank signifier. It is a symbol of distinction and a badge of social class membership. The most fashionable innovations in style or technology allow those who can afford it to acquire an apparent eminence from those who can not. The establishment of the "look" is a badge of social standing. As subordinate social groups seek to adopt the fashion of those above them, cultural innovation "trickles down" the social ladder. On its way down, it is reproduced in larger quantities, replacing the previous social standard and providing great benefit to the economy. This principle is the functional basis behind the self-perpetuating cycle of change which drives the adoption of mass innovation.

Technological innovation follows a similar cycle. Technological aids are introduced to the market as a means

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[114]Grant McCracken, Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Goods and Activities, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 93.

[115]Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918), p. 117.

to save time, space or energy.[116] The benefits that they provide in efficiency permit competitive advantage and status to those who are first adopt them. But as rivals are forced to appropriate the same technology in order to stay competitive, the innovation loses its relative advantage. As with a rank signifier, it eventually becomes a standard of comfort or necessity as "part of the normal technological base from which all consumption activities proceed."[117]

Cultural innovation is essential for the growth of the economy. In the process of adopting innovations, commodification destroys the uniqueness that initially makes it desirable as a commodity. Commodification ravages and homogenizes cultural innovation though the mechanism of mass production.

Mass media products are usually carefully designed to circulate in the market. The symbolic nature of many media products are often adapted in order to enter the market. Intangible products require special considerations in order to be exchanged as a commodity. Unlike material goods, it is often difficult to account for information transferred in an exchange. The mass production of speech was initially linked

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[116]Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, The World of Goods (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 112.

[117]Ibid.

to writing which required a material medium, but copying technology and electronic communication have disintegrated this material association. Legislative controls such as copyrights, licenses and trademarks are now important devices to conserve the exchange value of many kinds of information.

Media news producers rely on the effects of mass distribution for a continually renewed demand. Since the commodity value of information depends in large part on its exclusivity, daily media distributors ensure its decay by rapidly circulating it. Daily newspapers specialize in supplying daily news, a commodity which is never in short supply. Once the front page stories and sports scores are common knowledge they have little further value. Consequently, the "shock" value of daily information is an important consideration for media vendors.

The institutions of capitalism restrict cultural innovation to forms that can be successfully commodified. Eileen Meehan's analysis of the television medium shows how economic institutions of TV affect its content. She sees the medium of television as both an "artifact and a commodity that is both created and manufactured."[118] And just like any

[118]Meehan, p. 449.

other product of the "culture industry," the form and content of television must conform to a set of economic imperatives.

> In advanced capitalist countries, the creation of cultural artifacts is primarily an economic activity subject to the bounds of profitability, cost efficiency, oligopoly, and interpenetrating industries. Processes of production and distribution tend to be centralized, rationalized, and routinized . . .[119]

She explains that innovation occurring within television is primarily the result of competition between networks for viewers. When a network schedules "an innovative series or an expensive special or a serious documentary that includes controversial material" it is always the result of a business strategy intended to increase the quality of its audience for the sole purpose of increasing profits. Innovations in network programming are capital investments to enhance the price that they can charge to advertisers.

Meehan's approach to media innovation assumes that "television is first and foremost a business."[120] But she realizes that not every aspect of media content is intentional. All cultural products contain excess meaning beyond the intent of their producers. In addition, even the most carefully planned presentation can be interpreted in more

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[119]Ibid.

[120]Ibid.

than one way. The preferred meaning of a message is not always attained.

Art and science are the primary modes of cultural expression today.[121] Each of these categories produces a distinctive type of innovation. Max Heirich explains that the artistic mode of cultural expression seeks to expand the realm of individual expression that can be collectively shared. It elevates human understanding by enlarging our collective awareness of reality.

> In contrast, the scientific mode of activity aims at simplifying the experience of reality by discovering principles of relationship that organize the complexity we see all around us. . . . The task of the scientist is not the discovery of new areas of experience, but the organization of experience in terms of more abstract symbolic constructions."[122]

Today the scientific mode of cultural innovation dominates the artistic mode. Radical artistic innovation is tolerated, but technical innovation thrives. If every society fosters the mode of expression most consistent with its structure, then it makes sense that scientific inquiry

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[121]Science has overtaken religion in this respect.

[122]Max Heirich, "Cultural Breakthroughs," Production of Culture. ed. Richard A. Peterson (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1976), p. 24.

should be well suited to the reductive processes of commodification.

Commercial innovation must be achieved within the bounds of the market system. It is therefore limited to the enhancement and acceleration of consumption. Instead of operating to expand the range of collective social experience as art does, commercial media often simplify and reduce cultural expression to a practical science. Really radical ideas are usually unsuitable. As one advertising executive expressed "[a]t seventy degrees [from the norm] you're crazy, but at four degrees--that's creative."[123] Capitalism depends on a narrow range of social expression focused on the economic imperatives of commodification.

The advertising industry epitomizes the creative focus of capitalism. Here, creativity is achieved by finding a new ways to commodify existing experiences. The objective is to fabricate a unique image to differentiate otherwise indistinguishable products. The most highly rewarded innovations within capitalism are those that spawn new industries by expanding commodification to a realm of human experience previously beyond the scope of commodification, either because they were technically impossible, or socially restricted.

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[123]Leiss, p. 177.

The advance of sexual suggestiveness on TV and the proliferation of video pornography demonstrates the gradual breakdown of both social and technical barriers to sexual commodification. Future innovations in electronic distribution and media legislation are sure to impact the speed and extent of commodification facilitated by the media infrastructure.

By examining the tension between economic commodities and cultural commodities discovered through research outside of conventional Media Studies, it is possible to get a better understanding of the commodification process. The concept introduced here shows how market processes depend on cultural innovation to prosper and how commodification ravages and homogenizes these innovations. These same processes occur within the mass media and enhance the understanding and scope of commodity theory.

Through this process a pattern emerges that, while not necessarily intentional, nevertheless reproduces a way of social organization that advances specific social values and agendas and discriminates against others. The following chapter suggests how this perspective is valuable to the application of commodity theory.

Chapter V.

SOME BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF COMMODITY THEORY

This chapter examines the theoretical benefits and limitations of commodity theory as a tool for social theory in general and Critical Media Studies in particular. The first section identifies some of the weaknesses of commodity theory by highlighting some of the problems of applying economic theory to social problems, including an instructive example from communication studies by Joohoan Kim (1993). The second part of this chapter introduces an original model for understanding the benefits and limitations of commodity theory. By contrasting commodity theory to other methods of discovery such as artistic or scientific inquiry, the author is suggests that the place of commodity theory can be better understood. It shows some of the theoretical advantages and limitations to using commodity theory for social analysis and coordinates some of the assertions concerning the opposition between economic and cultural artifacts made in the previous chapter. The last section of this chapter applies the newly introduced model to a discovery made by Roland

Barthes in the 1960's regarding the linguistic structure of commercial advertising messages.

The Economic Approach to Social Theory

Economically, cultural products are structurally similar to any other commodity. Compare money to advertising. Each embodies the ideal of pure exchange value. Neither money nor advertising has any productive value outside the market. From this perspective, neither has any use value. This can be demonstrated by investigating the productive value of each. It can be shown that increasing the amount of money in an economy produces no lasting social benefit.[124] The result of this action eventually dilutes the value of the existing monetary fund causing inflation. The use value of money functions solely to facilitate exchange. It has no other social benefit. Similarly, advertising occupies a position at the top of the exchange hierarchy. Its reified form is found in the tokens of the trademark and brand name. It is criticized because, like money, it has no productive value outside of the market.[125] The purpose of modern adver-

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[124]William H. Peterson, The Austrian Case for the Free Market Process, Edited by Israel Kirzner (Nashville: Knowledge Products, Audio Classics Series, 1988) Ludwig von Mises, Tape 1, Side 2.

[125]John K. Galbraith, The Affluent Society, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., Mentor Books, 1958) p. 125-126.

tising is solely to foster exchange. Like money, it is a tool of the market and it is used as an effective way to manipulate it. Corporate advertisers use it to influence consumer demand comparable to the way monetary policy is used by the Federal Reserve Board.

Joohoan Kim contends that every commodity, whether it is a product of traditional industry or the culture industry, can be understood from the same theoretical perspective. According to her thesis, all human products whether automobiles or Hollywood films are the result of a similar process involving material properties and social meaning. "The value of a commodity is determined by two kinds of labor: one material labor which produces material products, and the other is communication labor which produces demand power."[126] Blue collar workers are the source of material labor in factories and white collar workers produce meaning through communication labor in offices. In this respect, commercial communication is no different than any other commodity.

By reducing human products to commodities, use value diminishes and exchange value dominates. The specific quali-

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[126]Joohoan Kim, "From Commodity Production to Sign Production: A Triple Triangle Model for Marx's Semiotics and Peirce's Economics," Paper presented at the 79th Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association. ERIC: ED 364 920, 1993, p. 13.

ties of products are ignored. Use value is treated as a common denominator that can be factored out, the same way that the common factors of fractional numbers are eliminated to reduce them to their simplest form.

Economists have always preferred to think about commodities in terms of exchange value rather than use-value because it contributes to a simpler model.[127] Everything must be quantified and calculable. Although modern economic theory has gradually assimilated more elements of consumer behavior into its economic models, it is still dependent upon quantifiable factors and limited to explicitly rational problems.

Early industrialists discovered that consumer demand does not always obey the rational laws of economic behavior because consumption is a social process. Individuals do not consume in isolation, and use-value is largely a cultural creation. Douglas and Isherwood explain:

> There is no justification in traditional utility theory for assuming anything about physical or spiritual needs, still less about envy. The theory merely assumes the individual to be acting rationally, in that his choices are consistent with each other and stable over the short time that is relevant. It says that his tastes should be taken as given, that he responds to a fall in prices by readiness to buy a larger quantity and to a rise by buying less, and he responds in consistent

[127]Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, The World of Consumption, (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 21.

> fashion to changes in his income. As he gets more of a particular good his desire for additional units of it weakens".[128]

The model of the rational consumer has gradually evolved "beyond the simple parameters of the rational economic individual to encompass, in principle, almost any physiological or emotional need, impulse, motivation or behavioral hypothesis."[129] But only after the study of marketing and psychology created a science of human behavior could economic theory expand the notion of the rational consumer to encompass social or emotional elements that could now be explained.

> "In short, rationality tends to become linked with what can be explained or with what has been encompassed within theory and, as such, tends to become more inclusive over time. The incorporation of affect, for example, allows the role of feeling in purchasing to become a part of rational behavior."[130]

Modern political economy addresses some of the limitations of orthodox economics. Many of the economic problems that were once neglected or assumed away because of lack of a rational model, like consumer tastes and preferences and the unequal distribution of resources are issues that con-

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[128]Douglas, p. 19.

[129]Fine, p. 55.

[130]Ibid., p. 58

cern political economists.[131] The critical advantage that political economy has over traditional analytic economics is its treatment of the market. Instead of treating the market as an institution beyond human control political economists treat the market as a human institution, and "like other institutions, it can be modified to achieve different results.[132] It identifies the institutional and legal factors of the market as the paramount issue concerning distribution of power and resources. Many communication scholars concerned with how the media infrastructure constrains and shapes message production have found political economy useful for this reason.[133] But all information produced by the market is in terms of exchange value. This is the fundamental limitation of any kind of economic analysis. The quality of use value is foreign to economic analysis.

As an economic theory, the theory of the commodity cannot provide specific knowledge concerning the quality of the products that commodities represent. It can make only

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[131]William H. Melody, "On the Political Economy of Communication in the Information Society," Illuminating the Blindspots: Essays Honoring Dallas W. Smythe, eds. Janet Wasko, Vincent Mosco, Manjunath Pendakur (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1994) p. 64.

[132]Babe, Communication: Blindspot of Western Marxism, p. 31.

[133]Ibid., p. 17.

generalizations based on the structure of the commodity form, whether material or communicative. In order to understand the qualitative properties of commodities, they must be seen from another perspective.

A Model for Using Commodity Theory

Use value has always been understood as a combination of objective and subjective qualities. Science is the traditional authority regarding the objective qualities of goods. It studies the natural world from the material realm by explaining the material qualities of life, as well as the instinctual and physiological qualities that shape the way we initially encounter it. Products of nature originate from the tangible material of the earth. Objectively, individuals can agree upon its form and composition. The most basic natural materials are universally essential to human life. Science is the methodology that organizes consent around the properties of natural materials. Water is a naturally occurring material that humans universally recognize as useful. It is singular and without substitute in its capacity to maintain life. The understanding of its life-sustaining qualities are the concern of science.

At the cultural extreme, use value is completely subjective. It can be of great value to some, and of no value

to others. Art is the expression of the cultural value of human artifacts and customs. It can be the most sincere, reasoned and enduring form of inter-human communication; the concepts nearest to truth and justice that humans are capable of understanding. Art, music and philosophy might be considered to be the purest form of cultural expression. Music is a product of human experience. When an individual produces music for himself or herself, its use value is personal pleasure. The subjective value is music is evident by the range of value that a piece of music may be judged by any individual. A rock and roll song may provide unequalled enjoyment to one individual, but be vehemently detested by another.

All human products fall between the completely natural and cultural artifacts exemplified by water and music. Some are essential to human life, but often subjective. Food represents both of these qualities. What is considered edible varies widely between cultures.[134] Because the use value of natural and cultural products is fundamentally different, they are studied from specialized perspectives. The market produces, together with science and art represent the three important perspectives of reality under capitalism. Graphically, they can be arranged forming the shape of

[134]Sahlins, p. 245.

a triangle: cultural and natural phenomena at opposite ends of the base, and market phenomena at the top. (See figure 2)

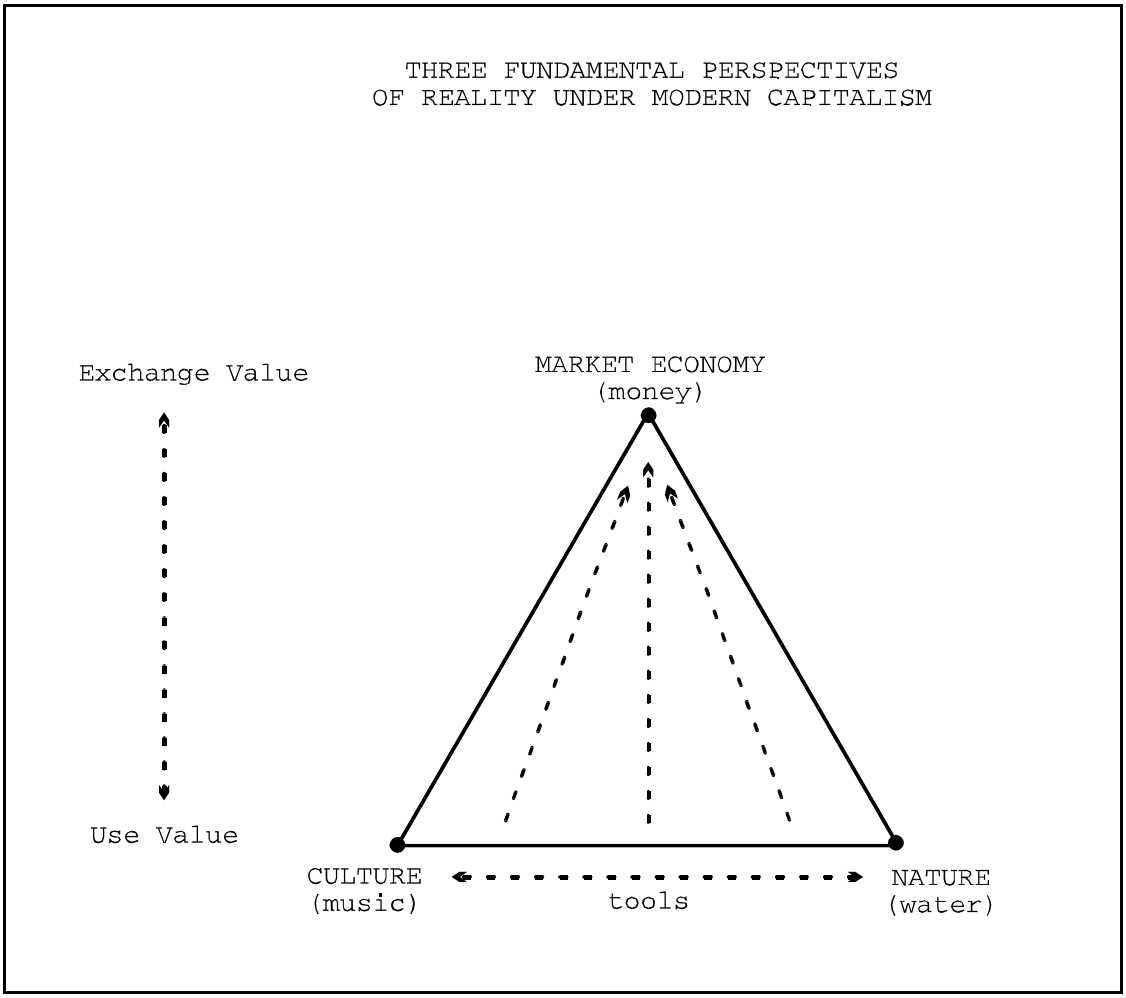

Figure 2

The value of human products is dependent upon the perspective from which they are understood. Economics is limited to studying the value of products that have economic value: commodities. The market economy usurps both natural and cultural artifacts into its orbit by transforming them into commodities. Both material objects and cultural prod-

ucts go through a process of abstraction, equivalence and reification. The primary difference is that "natural" commodities begin as physical phenomena, while cultural commodities begin as individual expressions of experience like art or literature. Labor is the means of expression for traditional commodities. Communication is the means of expression for cultural products. This perspective aligns three fundamental elements of human experience that society seeks to understand: the natural environment that science seeks to discover; the cultural foundations that the arts and humanities seeks to describe; and the market economy that labors to reduce both to commodities.

Water becomes a commodity by acquiring exchange value. This can occur by adding human labor through transportation, purification, combination with other materials, or the addition of meaning through communication. Art becomes a commodity when the artist considers the demands of the market in producing the work. Writing is a product that combines both natural and cultural elements. Publishing transforms the product of writing into a commodity. The material elements of the manuscript are transformed to conform to the technology of mass production, and the cultural content of the manuscript is edited to be economically attractive in the market.

This model suggests that human communication exists as both an art, a science, and a business, each providing a different perspective on reality. Pure science and art are primarily descriptive. Each seeks to describe reality in its own terms. Art seeks to describe and communicate the reality of human emotion through the primary senses: verbally through poetry and prose, visually through painting and sculpture, musically through song and instrument, or as a multimedia combination of these elements. The metaphor and analogy are the principal devices of artistic expression. In contrast, science seeks to explain nature through the logic of reason. Facts that can be repeatedly verified by experimental methods are the cornerstones of scientific inquiry. One communicates in either an artistic or scientific way by adopting the appropriate method.

Business communication combines elements of artistic and scientific inquiry to build the consensus necessary to support the commodity system. Scientific systems based on rational methods are the bases of business bookkeeping, accounting and methods of production. In contrast, non-rational and emotional techniques are essentials of the commercial demand management system. The metonymy is one of the most important rhetorical forms of modern public busi-

ness communication contributing to the proliferation of the commodity form.

Barthes discovered how the metonymic construction of meaning surrounding the presentation of objects in advertising functions to manipulate consumer choices.[135] His analysis of the fashion system demonstrates how bodily adornment is structured like a language along the primary axis of meaning: choice (semantics, metaphor), and order (syntax, metonymy).

> According to Barthes the instrumental manipulation of the fashion system, which accompanies the commodification of daily dress, operates through the text of talk shows, magazines, advertisements, designer shows, and everyday discourse.[136]

In contrast to the metaphor which works through association as in poetic or artist symbolism, the metonymy works through continuity of form "by using a part or element of something to stand for the whole."[137]

Metonymys form a relationship between two otherwise unrelated signs. Each representation adds to the meaning of the next. The advance of modern art reflects the dominance

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[135]Mark Gottdiener, "The System of Objects and the Commodification of Everyday Life: The Early Baudrillard," Baudrillard: A Critical Reader. ed. Douglas Kellner (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), p. 27.

[136]Ibid., p. 28.

[137]Tim O'Sullivan et al. Key Concepts in Communication (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 139.

of the metonymy over the metaphor. Unlike classic art where the metaphorical form dominates and each piece is a work on its own, what is considered modern art is often a metonomic element. In this case, a work is part of an ensemble. For instance, the value of a picture painting is usually considered in relation to the design of a room. How does a picture of a landscape change the ambience of a room? The result is an estimate of its value. This is why much of what modern culture produces as art is more often recognized as "decoration."

> Metonymys work syntagmatically: we construct the rest of the "story" from the part that we have been given, in the same way that we construct the rest of a sentence if a speaker finishes in "mid-air". But they tend to work invisibly: metaphors draw attention to themselves by their artificiality and by the imagination required to decode them.[138]

The metonymy is the dominant rhetorical form of the modern advertisement. The association between the two primary elements of an advertisement (the product for sale and the form representing the desired qualities) is primarily metonymical and not metaphorical. In the modern advertisement, the qualities of the secondary form generally overwhelm the commodity being offered. The secondary form is manifest in the entire artistic design: the set, stage,

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[138]Ibid.

casting, props, camera technique, music, etc. Each element, which individually might be metaphorically associated with a commodity is combined metonymically in what appears to be a "natural" ensemble that goes unnoticed.

David Lodge summarized the basic forms of metaphor and metonomy of communication from Roman Jakobson's classic work. Below is a selection relevant to this discussion.

METAPHOR	METONOMY
Paradigm	Syntagm
Similarity	Continuity
Selection	Combination
Drama	Film
Montage	Close-up
Surrealism	Cubism
Poetry	Prose
Lyric	Epic[139]

The metonymic form is contiguous. The value of an ensemble depends on the combined contribution of each element. It is a continuous form. As such, the metonymic form encourages conformity. McCracken refers to this as the Diderot effect. According to McCracken, Denis Diderot, the philosopher and writer, wrote about how consumer goods are linked to one another by the way they complement each other. In Diderot's essay, "Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown," he describes how a gift of a new dressing gown was the impetus for a project that ended with the remodeling of

[139]David Lodge, The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonomy, and the Typology of Modern Literature, (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p. 81.

his entire study in order to conform to the elegance of his new robe.[140]

In the media, those forms of expression that do not conform to the system and complement it are ignored. The metonymical form is consistent with the way that capitalism expands and colonizes: Not by leaps and bounds or any significant intentional paradigmatic change, but by gradual expansion and synthesis, advancing and reproducing specific social values and agendas and ignoring and discriminating against others. This is the rhetorical signature of the commodity form. In this way, the commodity form can be recognized by the dominant method that it employs to construct meaning.

The metonymic link is also evident on a large scale between commercial programming and advertising (advertising-supported media). As a whole, the TV shows, message spots, magazine editorial assist in the rhetorical presentation of the sponsors product. This is especially evident when one considers the dubious social value of media programming. But when considered together with advertising, it performs a vital function for the economic and ideological structure of society.

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[140]McCracken, p. 119.

The model introduced here indicates that the value of human products is dependent on the perspective of reality from which they are evaluated. Identifying the three fundamental perspectives of value prevalent under capitalism permits one to use commodity theory as a framework to better understand mass communications. It suggests that commodity theory is valid for investigating market exchange, whether material or communicative. There exists a gradient through which commodification occurs. The closer communications is to the ideal commodity form the more valid commodity theory should be. The greater the departure from perfect market conditions and the commodity form, the less reliable one should expect commodity theory. Therefore, one can expect that using commodity theory to investigate commercial communications occurring within a competitive market conditions should yield valid conclusions about the intent, consequences and general quality of the communications without explicit analysis of specific messages. Explanatory conclusions, typical of economic theory, may be valuable in the realm of public policy where estimations for controlling and manipulating the market are regarded highly. But beyond the scope of the market, commodity theory is not directly applicable to Critical Media Studies. Questions concerning the subjective or technical qualities of communications must be

understood from another perspective. Science and cultural inquiry can provide this perspective.

Chapter VI.

CONCLUSION

The pursuit and development of commodity theory within Critical Media Studies offers the advantage of an explanatory theory. The theory of the commodity is a critical framework for understanding the commercial mass media. Although it was developed to explain the economic dynamics of capitalism, its nucleus is the fetish, a basic psychological human inclination with applications in several disciplines. Since its conception, others have extended it to encompass the cultural dynamics of capitalism through the idea of "social reification" and the "culture industry."

Contemporary media analysts have identified the commodity form in commercial mass media communication and found commodity theory useful on both a macro-dynamic and micro-dynamic level of analysis. From an economic perspective, the infrastructure of advertising supported media reflects the commodity structure in its organization. This application of commodity theory posits that the audience is a quantified element in the commercial process of media production. On a micro-dynamic scale, commodity theory has been successfully

applied to semiotic analysis of advertisements. This application depends on commodity theory to explain and predict commercial media process of audience manipulation. The former sees the audience as an abstract element in the circulation of media capital, the latter explains how individual audience members contribute to media capital.

Commodity theory explains the process of capital accumulation of cultural and technical products as one of homogenization and reduction. It is exemplified by the fashion system where a narrow range of cultural and technical innovation are continuously fostered, transformed and reproduced by the economic forces of capitalism. Commercial Media products fall within the scope of this process and are subject to its discrimination and transformation. Understanding the process is important for explaining media innovation and predicting what kinds of change are likely to occur. In this respect, media products are no different from any other commodity.

The weakness of commodity theory lies in the fact that it only considers the exchange value of media products. Use value is not addressed in any purely economic theory. Therefore, commodity theory provides a significant, but only a partial explanation of commercial media phenomena. A more comprehensive explanation requires input from a qualitative

perspective such as art or science. Nevertheless, the quantitative strength of commodity theory provide a valuable complement to any qualitative study of the mass media.

Considering commodity theory in the light cast by this thesis, the author concludes that productive applications may include its use as a model to explain and predict the advancing direction and transformation of media innovations. If cultural innovation is the source of paradigmatic social change, "real" media innovation are the product of culture. Studying how the economy "reforms" cultural innovation is essential to understanding and predicting changes in the media. Therefore, fruitful applications may be found through the further exploration of the tension between economic and cultural forces in the media.

Productive applications may also include using it as a detector to locate and highlight discontinuities in the market. The commodity fetish is a basic element of our social unconsciousness. Most of the decisions that we make as individuals and as a society are made in relation to the commodity value of products without any cognition of their fetish character. The character of commodities only become suspicious at the fringes of the market where exchange value often dwindles in relation to use value. The irrational aspect of commodities becomes visible with one's most per-

sonal possessions, private collections, and intimate relationships.[141] Productive applications of commodity theory may be found at the fringes of the market where tension between economic and cultural forces exists. Exceptions to the theory of the commodity often mark fertile ground for critical theory, particularly within cultural studies. Those cultural phenomena that have escaped commodification represent a discontinuity, and frequently demonstrate the irrational side of capitalism. In these respects commodity theory is valuable in qualitative analysis such as Cultural Studies, as well as quantitative applications in Critical Media Studies.

This project has explored commodity theory and its application to Critical Media Studies from the two major perspectives of social theory. In doing so, several accomplishments can be identified. First, the theory of the commodity was introduced as a major theoretical perspective, critical of the primary foundation upon which the entire structure of modern commercial mass media organization stands. Second, it was established that commodity theory is more than a narrow economic explanation of exchange, but as a system of social exchange, it is linked to a profound

[141]McCracken, p. 44.

aspect of individual behavior and the cultural foundation of a major social institution. An important product of this system of exchange is the "culture industry" in which the institution of the mass media developed. Third, the commodity structure was identified in two primary forms that coincide with two primary approaches to Critical Media Studies. The work of several contemporary media analysts was compared and analyzed in relation to their application of commodity theory. Fourth, the tension between the circulation of commodities and conventional cultural products was explored in order to understand commodity theory from a perspective beyond Marx's primary argument dependent on the labor theory of value. This perspective also draws on descriptive evidence often used to support arguments from a Cultural Studies perspective. Fifth, the benefits and limitations of applying commodity theory were outlined and a model was introduced to coincide with these claims.

Forming a critical perspective on communications requires that one see the present formation with as wide a view as possible so that one can attempt to understand how all the parts are interrelated. Understanding commodity theory is a fundamental step because it permits one to see the media system in relation to one of the most powerful social institutions: the market.

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