# Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods

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Cultural meaning in a consumer society moves ceaselessly from one location to another. In the usual trajectory, cultural meaning moves first from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods and then from these goods to the individual consumer. Several instruments are responsible for this movement: advertising, the fashion system, and four consumption rituals. This article analyzes the movement of cultural meaning theoretically, showing both where cultural meaning is resident in the contemporary North American consumer system and the means by which this meaning is transferred from one location in this system to another.

Consumer goods have a significance that goes beyond their utilitarian character and commercial value. This significance rests largely in their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning (Douglas and Isherwood 1978; Sahlins 1976). During the last decade, a diverse body of scholars has made the cultural significance of consumer goods the focus of renewed academic study (Belk 1982; Bronner 1983; Felson 1976; Furby 1978; Graumann 1974–1975; Hirschman 1980; Holman 1980; Leiss 1983; Levy 1978; McCracken 1985c; Prown 1982; Quimby 1978; Rodman and Philibert 1985; Schlereth 1982; Solomon 1983). These scholars have established a subfield extending across the social sciences that now devotes itself with increasing clarity and thoroughness to the study of "person-object" relations. In this article, I propose to contribute a theoretical perspective to this emerging subfield by showing that the meaning carried by goods has a mobile quality for which prevailing theories make no allowance.

A great limitation of present approaches to the study of the cultural meaning of consumer goods is the failure to observe that this meaning is constantly in transit. Cultural meaning flows continually between its several locations in the social world, aided by the collective and individual efforts of designers, producers, advertisers, and consumers. There is a traditional trajectory to this movement. Usually, cultural meaning is drawn from a culturally constituted world and transferred to a consumer good. Then the meaning is drawn from the object and transferred to an individual consumer. In other words, cultural meaning is located in three places: the culturally constituted world, the consumer good, and the individual consumer, and moves in a trajectory at two points of transfer: world to good and good to individual. The Figure summarizes this relationship. In this article I propose to analyze this trajectory of meaning, taking each of its stages in turn.

Appreciating the mobile quality of cultural meaning in a consumer society should help to illuminate two aspects of consumption in modern society. First, such a perspective encourages us to see consumers and consumer goods as the way-stations of meaning. In this manner, we focus on structural and dynamic properties of consumption that have not always been emphasized. Second, the "trajectory" perspective asks us to see such phenomena as advertising, the fashion world, and consumption rituals as instruments of meaning movement. We are encouraged to acknowledge the presence of a large and powerful system at the heart of modern consumer society that gives this society some of its coherence and flexibility even as it serves as a constant source of incoherence and discontinuity. In sum, this perspective can help to demonstrate some of the full complexity of current consumption behavior and to reveal in a more detailed way just what it is to be a "consumer society."

## LOCATIONS OF CULTURAL MEANING: THE CULTURALLY CONSTITUTED WORLD

The original location of the cultural meaning that ultimately resides in consumer goods is the culturally

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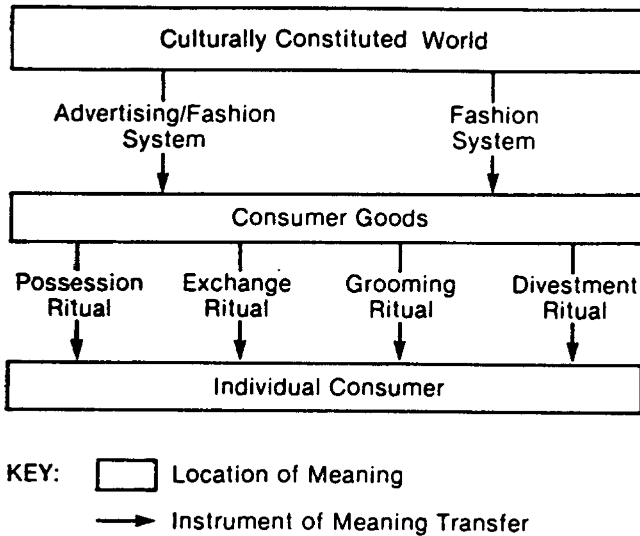
FIGURE

MOVEMENT OF MEANING




constituted world. This is the world of everyday experience in which the phenomenal world presents itself to the individual's senses fully shaped and constituted by the beliefs and assumptions of his/her culture. Culture constitutes the phenomenal world in two ways. First, culture is the "lens" through which the individual views phenomena; as such, it determines how the phenomena will be apprehended and assimilated. Second, culture is the "blueprint" of human activity, determining the co-ordinates of social action and productive activity, and specifying the behaviors and objects that issue from both. As a lens, culture determines how the world is seen. As a blueprint, it determines how the world will be fashioned by human effort. In short, culture constitutes the world by supplying it with meaning. This meaning can be characterized in terms of two concepts: cultural categories and cultural principles.

## Cultural Categories

Cultural categories are the fundamental coordinates of meaning (McCracken 1985a), representing the basic distinctions that a culture uses to divide up the phenomenal world. For instance, all cultures specify categories of time. In our culture these categories include an elaborate system that can discriminate units as fine as a "second" and as vast as a "millennium." Our culture also makes less precise but no less significant distinctions between leisure and work time, sacred and profane time, and so on. Cultures also specify categories of space. In our culture these categories include measurement and "occasion." Cultures also segment the flora, fauna, and landscape of natural and supernatural worlds into categories. Perhaps the most important categories are those that cultures create in the human community—the distinctions of class, status, gender, age, and occupation.

Cultural categories of time, space, nature, and person make up the vast body of categories, creating a system of distinctions that organizes the phenomenal world. Each culture establishes its own special vision of the world, thus rendering the understandings and rules appropriate to one cultural context preposterously inappropriate in another. A specific culture makes a privileged set of terms, within which virtually nothing appears alien or unintelligible to the individual member of the culture and outside of which there is no order, no system, no safe assumption, and no ready comprehension. In sum, by investing the world with its own particular meaning, culture "constitutes" the world. It is from a world so constituted that the meaning destined for consumer goods is drawn.

## Cultural Categories in Contemporary North America

It is worth noting that cultural categories in present day North America appear to have unique characteristics. First, they possess an indeterminacy that is not normally evident in other ethnographic circumstances. For instance, cultural categories of person are marked by a persistent and striking lack of clarity, as are cultural categories of age. Second, they possess an apparent "elective" quality. Devoted as it is to the freedom of the individual, contemporary North American society permits its members to declare at their own discretion the cultural categories they presently occupy. Exercising this freedom, teenagers declare themselves adults, members of the working class declare themselves middle class, the old declare themselves young, and so on. Category membership, which in most cultures is more strictly specified and policed, is in our own society much more a matter of individual choice. In our culture, individuals are to a great extent what they claim to be, even when these claims are, by some sober sociological reckoning, implausible.

We must note a third characteristic of cultural categories in contemporary North America: they are subject to constant and rapid change. The dynamic quality of present day North American cultural categories plainly adds to their indeterminacy. More important, however, this dynamism also makes our cultural categories subject to the manipulative efforts of the individual. Social groups can seek to change their place in the categorical scheme, while marketers can seek to establish or encourage a new cultural category of person (e.g., the teenager, the "yuppie") in order to create a new market segment. Cultural categories in contemporary North America are subject to rethinking and rearrangement by several parties.

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## The Substantiation of Cultural Categories

Cultural categories are the conceptual grid of a culturally constituted world. They determine how this world will be segmented into discrete, intelligible parcels and how these parcels will be organized into a larger coherent system. For all their importance, however, cultural categories have no substantial presence in the world they organize. They are the scaffolding on which the world is hung and are therefore invisible. But cultural categories are constantly substantiated by human practice. Acting in conformity with the blueprint of culture, the members of a community are constantly realizing categories in the world. Individuals continually play out categorical distinctions, so that the world they create is made consistent with the world they imagine. In a sense, the members of a culture are constantly engaged in the construction—the constitution—of the world they live in.

One of the most important ways in which cultural categories are substantiated is through a culture's material objects. As we shall see in a moment, objects are created according to a culture's blueprint and to this extent, objects render the categories of this blueprint material and substantial. Thus, objects contribute to the construction of the culturally constituted world precisely because they are a vital, tangible record of cultural meaning that is otherwise intangible. Indeed, it is not too much to say that objects have a "performative" function (Austin 1963; Tambiah 1977) insofar as they give cultural meaning a concreteness for the individual that it would not otherwise have. The cultural meaning that has organized a world is made a visible, demonstrable part of that world through goods.

The process by which a culture makes its cultural categories manifest has been studied in some detail by anthropologists. Structural anthropology has supplied a theoretical scheme for this study, and several subspecialties, such as the anthropologies of art, clothing, housing, and material culture, have supplied areas of particular investigation. As a result of this work, there is now a clear theoretical understanding of the way in which linguistic and especially nonlinguistic media express cultural categories (Barthes 1967; deSaussure 1966; Levi-Strauss 1963, p. 116; Sahlins 1976). There is also a wide range of empirical investigation into the areas of spatial organization (Doxtater 1984), house form (Bourdieu 1973; Cunningham 1973), art (Fernandez 1966; Greenberg 1975), clothing (Adams 1973; McCracken 1986; Schwarz 1979), ornament (Drewal 1983), technology (Lechtman and Merrill 1977), and food (Appadurai 1981; Douglas 1971; Ortner 1978). This study of material culture has helped to show how the world is furnished with material objects that reflect and contribute to its cultural constitution—how cultural categories are substantiated.

## The Substantiation of Cultural Categories in Goods

Goods may be seen as an opportunity to express the categorical scheme established by a culture. Goods are an opportunity to make culture material. Like any other species of material culture, goods allow individuals to discriminate visually among culturally specified categories by encoding these categories in the form of a set of material distinctions. Categories of person divided into parcels of age, sex, class, and occupation can be represented in a set of material distinctions by means of goods. Categories of space, time, and occasion can also be reflected in this medium of communication. Goods help substantiate the order of culture.

Several studies have examined the way in which goods serve in this substantiation. Sahlins' study (1976) of the symbolism of North American consumer goods examines food and clothing "systems" and shows their correspondence to cultural categories of person. Levy's (1981) study of the correspondence between food types and cultural categories of sex and age in American society is another excellent illustration of the way in which one can approach the demographic information carried in goods from a structuralist point of view. Both of these studies demonstrate that the order of goods is modelled on the order of culture. Both studies also demonstrate that much of the meaning of goods can be traced back to the categories into which a culture segments the world. The substantiation of class categories by consumer goods has been considered by Belk, Mayer, and Bahn (1981), Coleman (1983), Davis (1956), Form and Stone (1957), Goffman (1951), Sommers (1963), Vershure, Magel, and Sadalla (1977), and Warner and Lunt (1941). The substantiation of gender categories has been less well examined but appears to be drawing more scholarly attention (Allison et al. 1980; Belk 1982; Hirschman 1984; Levy 1959). The substantiation of age categories also appears to be receiving more attention (Disman 1984; Olson 1985; Sherman and Newman 1977–1978; Unruh 1983).

## Cultural Principles

Cultural meaning also consists of cultural principles. In the case of principles, meaning resides in the ideas or values that determine how cultural phenomena are organized, evaluated, and construed. If cultural categories are the result of a culture's segmentation of the world into discrete parcels, cultural principles are the organizing ideas by which the segmentation is performed. Cultural principles are the charter assumptions that allow all cultural phenomena to be distinguished, ranked, and interrelated. As the orienting ideas for thought and action, cultural principles find expression in every aspect of social life, goods not least of all.

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Cultural principles, like cultural categories, are substantiated by material culture in general and consumer goods in particular. It is worth observing that cultural categories and cultural principles are mutually presupposing, and their expression in goods is necessarily simultaneous. Therefore, goods are incapable of signifying one without signifying the other. When goods show a distinction between two cultural categories, they do so by encoding something of the principle according to which the two categories have been distinguished. Thus, the clothing that distinguishes between men and women or between high and low classes also reveals something of the nature of the differences that are supposed to exist between these categories (McCracken 1985c). Clothing communicates both the supposed "delicacy" of women and "strength" of men or both the supposed "refinement" of a higher class and "vulgarity" of a lower one. Apparently, the categories of class and sex are never communicated without this indication of how and why they are to be distinguished. The world of goods, unlike that of language, never engages in a simple signalling of difference. In fact, goods are always more forthcoming and more revealing. In the world of goods, signs are always, in a sense, more motivated and less arbitrary than in the world of language.

Cultural principles in contemporary North America have the same indeterminate, changeable, elective quality that cultural categories do. Such principles as "naturalism" can fall into disrepute in one decade, only to be rehabilitated and advanced to a new place of importance in another, as occurred in the 1960s. The principle of "disharmony" that the punk aesthetic finds so useful was once not a principle but merely the term for phenomena that had somehow escaped the successful application of another principle. The ethnographic literature on the meaning of objects as principle may be found in Adams (1973), Drewal (1983), Fernandez (1966), and McCracken (1982a). Substantive literature that shows the presence and nature of the meaning of objects as principle in contemporary North American society is not abundant. Levy (1981) makes passing reference to this question, as does Sahlins (1976), and the idea is implicitly treated in the work of Lohof (1969) on the meaning carried by the Marlboro cigarette. The idea also surfaces in the attempt of sociologists to make objects an index of status and class. For example, Laumann and House (1970) sought to establish the meaning of household furniture and resorted to the principles of "modern" and "traditional." Felson in his study of "material life styles" (1976) posited something called a "bric-a-brac factor" while Davis (1958) coined the term "Bauhaus Japanesey" to characterize a certain principle of interior design. The principle of "science" (or, more exactly, the concern for technical mastery of nature and the confidence that human affairs can be benignly transformed through technological innovation) was a favorite motif of the kitchen appliances and automobiles in 1950s and 1960s North America (Csikszentimihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, p. 52). Scholars in the material culture arm of American studies and art history have made the most notable contribution here (Quimby 1978; Schlereth 1982). Prown (1980) and Cohen (1982), for instance, have examined the principles evident in American furniture.

It is plain in any case that, like cultural categories, cultural principles are substantiated by consumer goods, and these goods, so charged, help make up the culturally constituted world. Both cultural categories and principles organize the phenomenal world and the efforts of a community to manipulate this world. Goods substantiate both categories and principles and therefore enter into the culturally constituted world as both the object and objectification of this world. In short, goods are both the creations and the creators of the culturally constituted world.

## INSTRUMENTS OF MEANING TRANSFER: WORLD TO GOOD

Meaning first resides in the culturally constituted world. To become resident in consumer goods, meaning must be disengaged from this world and transferred to goods. The present section proposes to examine two of the institutions that are now used as instruments of meaning transfer: advertising, and product design as practiced in the fashion system.

### Advertising

Advertising works as a potential method of meaning transfer by bringing the consumer good and a representation of the culturally constituted world together within the frame of a particular advertisement. The creative director of an advertising agency seeks to conjoin these two elements in such a way that the viewer/reader glimpses an essential similarity between them. When this symbolic equivalence is successfully established, the viewer/reader attributes to the consumer good certain properties s/he knows exist in the culturally constituted world. The known properties of the culturally constituted world thus come to reside in the unknown properties of the consumer good and the transfer of meaning from world to good is accomplished.

The mechanics of such a complicated process deserve more detailed exposition. The creative director is concerned with effecting the successful conjunction of two elements, one of which is specified by a client. In most cases, the client gives the director a consumer good, the physical properties and packaging of which are fixed and not subject to manipulation. The second element,

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the representation of the culturally constituted world, is constrained and free in almost equal proportions. The client, sometimes drawing on marketing research and advice, will specify the properties being sought for the consumer good. Armed with these specifications, the creative director now enjoys a wide range of discretionary control. Subject only to the negative constraints of budgetary limitations and the positive constraints of a continuous brand image, the director is free to deliver the desired symbolic properties in any one of a nearly infinite number of ways.

This delivery process consists of a lengthy and elaborate series of choices (Dyer 1982; McCracken 1984; Sherry 1985; Williamson 1978). The first choice is a difficult one. The director must identify with sufficient clarity for his/her own purposes the properties that are sought for the good in question. This procedure sometimes results in a period of complicated discourse between client and director where the parties alternately lead and follow one another into a sharpened appreciation of the properties sought for the consumer good. In any case, the advertising firm will enter into its own consultative process in order to establish clarity sufficient for its own purposes. The second choice in the delivery process is equally difficult but perhaps less consultative. The director must decide where the properties desired for the ad reside in the culturally constituted world. The director has at his/her disposal a vast array of possibilities from which to choose. Place must be selected, and the first choice here is whether the ad will have a fantasy setting or a naturalistic one. If the latter is chosen, it must be decided whether it will be an interior or an exterior setting, an urban or rural landscape, or a cultivated or untamed environment. Time of day and time of year must also be chosen. If people are to appear in the advertisement, their sex, age, class, status, and occupation must be selected and their clothing and body postures and affective states specified (Goffman 1979). These are the pieces of the culturally constituted world that can be evoked in the ad.

It must be noted that this selection process can be performed more or less well, according to the skill and training of the director. There is no simple route from the desired properties for the consumer good to the pieces of the culturally constituted world that can evoke them in the advertisement. As members of the advertising profession point out, this is a creative process where the most appropriate selections for the advertisement are not so much calculated as glimpsed. Imprecision and error in this creative process are not only possible but legion. It must also be noted that the process of selection, because it is creative, proceeds at unconscious as well as conscious levels. Directors are not always fully cognizant of how and why a selection is made, even when this selection presents itself as compelling and necessary (e.g., Arlen 1980, pp. 99, 119).

In sum, the director must choose from among alternatives that have been created by the network of cultural categories and principles that constitute a culture's world. The chosen alternatives will reflect those categories and principles that a director decides most closely approximate the meaning that the client seeks for the product. Once these two choice processes are complete, a third set of choices must be made. The director must decide just how the culturally constituted world is to be portrayed in the advertisement. This process consists of reviewing all of the objects that substantiate the selected meaning and then deciding which of these objects will be used to evoke this meaning in the advertisement. Finally, the director must decide how to present the product in its highly contrived context. Photographic and visual conventions will be exploited to give the viewer/reader the opportunity to glimpse an essential equivalence between the two elements of world and object. The director must bring these two elements into a conjunction that encourages a metaphoric identification of sameness by the would-be consumer. World and good must seem to enjoy a special harmony—must be seen to go together. When the viewer/reader glimpses this sameness (after one or many exposures to the stimuli), the process of transfer has taken place. Meaning has shifted from the culturally constituted world to the consumer good. This good now stands for a cultural meaning of which it was previously innocent.

Visual images and verbal material appear to assume a very particular relationship in this transfer process. It is chiefly the visual aspect of an advertisement that conjoins the world and the object when a meaning transfer is sought. Verbal material serves chiefly as a kind of prompt that instructs the viewer/reader in the salient properties that are supposed to be expressed by the visual part of the advertisement. Text (especially headlines) makes explicit what is already implicit in the image. Text provides instructions on how the visual part of the advertisement is to be read. The verbal component allows the director to direct the viewer/reader's attention to exactly those meaningful properties that are intended for transfer (cf., Barthes 1983, pp. 33–39; Dyer 1982, pp. 139–182; Garfinkle 1978; Moeran 1985).

All of this must now be successfully decoded by the viewer/reader. It is worth emphasizing that the viewer/reader is the final author in the process of transfer. The director brings the world and the consumer good into conjunction and then suggests their essential similarity. It is left to the viewer/reader to see this similarity and effect the transfer of meaningful properties. To this extent, the viewer/reader is an essential participant in the process of meaning transfer, as Williamson (1978, pp. 40–70) notes. The viewer/reader must complete the work of the director.

Advertising is a conduit through which meaning constantly pours from the culturally constituted world

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to consumer goods. Through advertising, old and new goods continually give up old meanings and take on new ones. As active participants in this process, the viewer/reader is kept informed of the present state and stock of cultural meaning that exists in consumer goods. To this extent, advertising serves as a lexicon of current cultural meanings. In large part, advertising maintains a consistency between what Sahlins calls the "order of culture" and the "order of goods" (1976, p. 178).

## The Fashion System

The fashion system is less frequently observed, studied, and understood as an instrument of meaning movement, yet this system also serves as a means by which goods are systematically invested and divested of meaningful properties. The fashion system is a somewhat more complicated instrument for meaning movement than advertising. In the case of advertising, movement is accomplished by the efforts of an advertising agency to unhook meaning from a culturally constituted world and transfer it to a consumer good by means of an advertisement. In the case of the fashion system, the process has more sources of meaning, agents of transfer, and media of communication. Some of this additional complexity can be captured by noting that the fashion world works in three distinct ways to transfer meaning to goods.

In one capacity, the fashion system performs a transfer of meaning from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods that is remarkably similar in character and effect to the transfer performed by advertising. The same effort to conjoin aspects of the world and a consumer good is evident in magazines or newspapers, and the same process of glimpsed similarity is sought after. In this capacity, the fashion system takes new styles of clothing or home furnishings and associates them with established cultural categories and principles, moving meaning from the culturally constituted world to the consumer good. This is the simplest aspect of the meaning-delivery capacity of the fashion system (and ironically, the one that Barthes (1983) found so perplexing and difficult to render plain).

In a second capacity, the fashion system actually invents new cultural meanings in a modest way. This invention is undertaken by opinion leaders who help shape and refine existing cultural meaning, encouraging the reform of cultural categories and principles. These are distant opinion leaders: individuals who by virtue of birth, beauty, or accomplishment are held in high esteem. These distant opinion leaders are sources of meaning for individuals of lesser standing. In fact, it has been suggested that the innovation of meaning is prompted by the imitative appropriations of those of low standing (McCracken 1985c; Simmel 1904). Classically, the high-standing individuals come from a conventional social elite: the upper classes. These classes, for instance, originated the "preppie look" that has recently trickled down so widely and deeply. More recently, opinion leaders have come from a group of unashamedly nouveau riche characters who now dominate television in evening soap operas such as "Dallas" and "Dynasty" and who appear to have influenced the consumer and lifestyle habits of so many North Americans. Motion picture and popular music stars, revered for their status, their beauty, and sometimes their talent, also form a relatively new group of opinion-leaders. All of these new opinion leaders invent and deliver a species of meaning that has been largely fashioned from the prevailing cultural coordinates established by cultural categories and cultural principles. These opinion leaders are permeable to cultural innovations, changes in style, value, and attitude, which they then pass along to the subordinate parties who imitate them.

In a third capacity, the fashion system engages in the radical reform of cultural meanings. Some part of the cultural meaning of western industrial societies is always subject to constant and thoroughgoing change. This radical instability of meaning is due to the fact that western societies are, in the language of Claude Levi-Strauss (1966, pp. 233–234), "hot societies." Western societies willingly accept, indeed encourage, the radical changes that result from deliberate human effort and the effect of anonymous social forces (Braudel 1973, p. 323; Fox and Lears 1983; McCracken 1985d; McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982). As a result, cultural meaning in a hot, western, industrial, complex society is constantly undergoing systematic change. In contradistinction to virtually all ethnographic precedent, members of such a society live in a world that is deliberately and continually being transformed (McCracken 1985b). Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that hot societies demand change and depend on it to drive certain economic, social, and cultural sectors in their world (cf., Barber and Lobel 1953; Fallers 1961). The fashion system serves as one of the conduits to capture and move highly innovative cultural meaning.

The groups responsible for the radical reform of cultural meaning are those existing at the margins of society, e.g., hippies, punks, or gays (Blumberg 1974; Field 1970; Meyersohn and Katz 1957). Such groups invent a much more radical, innovative kind of cultural meaning than their high-standing partners in meaning-diffusion leadership. Indeed, such innovative groups represent a departure from the culturally constituted conventions of contemporary North American society. They illustrate the peculiarly western tendency to tolerate dramatic violations of cultural norms. These groups redefined cultural categories, if only through the negative process of violating such cultural categories as age and status (hippies and punks), or gender (gays). The redefined cultural categories and a number of attendant cultural principles have now entered the cultural mainstream. The innovative groups become

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"meaning suppliers" even when they are devoted to overturning the established order (e.g., hippies) or are determined not to allow their cultural inventions to be absorbed by the mainstream, (e.g., punks; cf., Hebdige 1979; Martin 1981).

If the sources of cultural meaning are dynamic and numerous, so are the agents who gather up cultural meaning and effect its transfer to consumer goods. In the case of the fashion system, the agents form two main categories: (1) product designers, and (2) fashion journalists and social observers. Product designers may sometimes be the very conspicuous individuals who establish themselves as arbiters of clothing design in fashion centers such as Paris or Milan, and who surround themselves with a cult of personality. Other product designers, e.g., architects and interior designers, sometimes achieve a roughly comparable stature and exert an equally international influence (Kron 1983). More often, however, they are unknown outside their own industries (Clark 1976; Meikle 1979; Pulos 1983). The designers of Detroit automobiles are a case in point here, as are the product developers in the furniture and appliance industries. (Individuals such as Raymond Loewy are exceptions that prove the rule.)

The second category of agents consists of fashion journalists and social observers. Fashion journalists may belong to the print or film media and may have a high or a low profile. Social observers may be journalists who study and document new social developments—e.g., Lisa Birnbach (1980), Kennedy Fraser (1981), Tom Wolfe (1970), Peter York (1980), or they may be academics who have undertaken a roughly similar inquiry from a somewhat different point of view—e.g., Roland Barthes (1972), and Christopher Lasch (1979). Market researchers are beginning to serve in this capacity as well—e.g., John Naisbett (1982) Arnold Mitchell (1983), and possibly, John Molloy (1977).

These groups share a relatively equal division of labor. Journalists perform their part of the enterprise by serving as gate keepers of a sort. They review aesthetic, social, and cultural innovations as these first appear and then classify the innovations as either important or trivial. In this respect, journalists resemble the gatekeepers in the art (Becker 1972) and music (Hirsch 1972) worlds. Journalists are supposed to observe as best they can the whirling mass of cultural innovation and decide what is ephemeral and what will endure. After they have completed their difficult winnowing process, journalists engage in a dissemination process to make their decisions known. It must be admitted that everyone in the diffusion chain (Rogers 1983) plays a gatekeeping role and helps to influence the tastes of individuals looking for opinion leadership. Journalists are especially important because they make their influence felt even before an innovation passes to its "early adopters" (Baumgarten 1975; Meyersohn and Katz 1957; Polegato and Wall 1980).

When journalists have identified genuine innovations, product designers begin the task of drawing meaning into the mainstream and investing it in consumer goods. The product designer differs from the advertising agency director in that s/he transforms not only the symbolic properties of a consumer good but also its physical properties. Apart from fashion and trade shows (which reach only some potential consumers), the product designer does not have a meaning-giving context such as the advertisement where s/he can display the consumer good. Instead, the consumer good will leave the designer's hands and enter any context the consumer chooses. Product design is the means a designer has to convince the consumer that a specific object possesses a certain cultural meaning. The object must leave the designer's hands with its new symbolic properties plainly displayed in its new physical properties.

The designer, like the agency director, depends on the consumer to supply the final act of association and effect the meaning transfer from world to object. But unlike the agency director, the product designer does not have at his/her disposal the highly managed, rhetorical circumstances of an advertisement to encourage and direct this meaning transfer. The designer can not inform the consumer of the qualities intended for the object; these qualities must be self-evident in the object, so the consumer can effect the meaning transfer for him/herself. Therefore, it is necessary that the consumer have access to the same sources of information about new fashions in meaning that the designer has. The journalist makes this information available to the consumer so that s/he can identify the cultural significance of the physical properties of a new object. In short, the designer relies on the journalist at the beginning and then again at the very end of the meaning transfer process. The journalist supplies new meaning to the designer as well as to the recipient of the designer's work. In this way, both advertising and the fashion system are instruments for the transfer of meaning from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods. They are two of the means by which meaning is invested in the object code. It is thanks to them that the objects of our world carry such a richness, variety, and versatility of meaning and can serve us so variously in acts of self-definition and social communication.

## LOCATIONS OF CULTURAL MEANING: CONSUMER GOODS

That consumer goods are the locus of cultural meaning is too well-established a fact to need elaborate demonstration here. This is what Sahlins has to say about one product category—clothing (1976, p. 179):

> Considered as a whole, the system of American clothing amounts to a very complex scheme of cultural categories

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> and the relations between them, a veritable map—it does not exaggerate to say—of the cultural universe.

What can be said of clothing can be said of virtually all other high-involvement product categories and several low-involvement ones. Clothing, transportation, food, housing exteriors and interiors, and adornment all serve as media for the expression of the cultural meaning that constitutes our world.

That goods possess cultural meaning is sometimes evident to the consumer and sometimes hidden. Consumers may consciously see and manipulate such cultural meanings as the status of a consumer item. Just as often, however, individual consumers recognize the cultural meaning carried by consumer goods only in exceptional circumstances. For instance, consumers who have lost goods because of burglary, sudden impoverishment, or the divestment that occurs with aging evidence a profound sense of loss and even mourning (Belk 1982, p. 185). The possession rituals about to be discussed also suggest that the meaningful properties of consumer goods are not always conspicuously evident to a consumer, however much they serve to inform and control his/her action.

It was observed at the beginning of this article that the last decade has seen an outpouring of work on the cultural significance of consumer goods. Indeed, the wealth of this literature reassures us that the study of the cultural meaning carried by goods is a flourishing academic enterprise. None of this literature, however, addresses the question of the mobile quality of cultural meaning, and we may wish to make this question an operative assumption in the field. When we examine the cultural meaning of consumer goods, we may wish to determine where cultural meaning came from and how it was transferred.

## INSTRUMENTS OF MEANING TRANSFER: GOOD TO CONSUMER

Thus far we have tracked the movement of cultural meaning from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods and have considered the role of two instruments in this process. We must now address how meaning, now resident in consumer goods, moves from the consumer good into the life of the consumer. In order to describe this process, a second set of instruments of meaning transfer must be discussed. These instruments appear to qualify as special instances of "symbolic action" or ritual (Munn 1973; Turner 1969). Ritual is a kind of social action devoted to the manipulation of cultural meaning for purposes of collective and individual communication and categorization. Ritual is an opportunity to affirm, evoke, assign, or revise the conventional symbols and meanings of the cultural order. To this extent, ritual is a powerful and versatile tool for the manipulation of cultural meaning. In the form of a classic rite of passage, ritual is used to move an individual from one cultural category of person to another, where s/he gives up one set of symbolic properties, e.g., those of a child, and takes up another, e.g., those of an adult (Turner 1967; Van Gennep 1960). Other forms of ritual are devoted to different social ends. Some forms are used to give "experiential reality" to certain cultural principles and concepts (Tambiah 1977). Still other forms are used to create certain political contracts (McCracken 1982b). In short, ritual is put to diverse ends in its manipulation of cultural meaning. In contemporary North America, ritual is used to transfer cultural meaning from goods to individuals. Four types of rituals are used to serve this purpose: exchange, possession, grooming, and divestment rituals. Each of these rituals represents a different stage in a more general process by which meaning is moved from consumer good to individual consumer.

### Exchange Rituals

In contemporary North American exchange rituals—especially Christmas and birthday rituals—one party chooses, purchases, and presents consumer goods to another (Caplow 1982). This movement of goods is also potentially a movement of meaningful properties. Often the gift-giver chooses a gift because it possesses the meaningful properties s/he wishes to see transferred to the gift-receiver. Thus, the woman who receives a particular kind of dress is also made the recipient of a particular concept of herself as a woman (Schwartz 1967). The dress contains this concept and the giver invites the recipient to define herself in its terms. Similarly, many of the continuous gifts that flow between parents and children are motivated by precisely this notion. The gifts to the child contain symbolic properties that the parent would have the child absorb (Furby 1978, pp. 312–313).

The ritual of gift exchange establishes a potent means of interpersonal influence. Gift exchange allows individuals to insinuate certain symbolic properties into the lives of a gift recipient and to initiate possible meaning transfer. In more general terms, consumers acting as gift-givers are made agents of meaning transfer to the extent that they selectively distribute goods with specific properties to individuals who may or may not have chosen them otherwise. The study of gift exchange, well established in the social sciences (Davis 1972; Mauss 1970; McCracken 1983; Sahlins 1972), is already underway in the field of consumer research (Belk 1979) and deserves further study. Attention must be given to the choice process used by a giver to identify the gift with the cultural meanings s/he seeks to pass along to the recipient. Attention must also be given to the significance of gift wrapping and presentation as well as the context (time and place) in which gift presentations are made. These aspects of the domestic ritual of gift

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giving are vitally important to the meaningful properties of the goods exchanged.

## Possession Rituals

Consumers spend a good deal of time cleaning, discussing, comparing, reflecting, showing off, and even photographing many of their possessions. Housewarming parties sometimes provide an opportunity for display, while the process of home "personalization" (Hirschman 1982, pp. 37–38; Kron 1983; Rapoport 1968, 1982) especially serves as the occasion for much comparison, reflection, and discussion. Though these activities have an overt functionality, they all appear to have the additional effect of allowing the consumer to claim possession as his/her own. This claiming process is not a simple assertion of territoriality through ownership. Claiming is also an attempt to draw from the object the qualities that it has been given by the marketing forces of the world of goods. This process is most conspicuous when it fails to take place. For example, occasionally a consumer will claim that a possession—a car, house, article of clothing, or other meaning-carrying good—"never really seemed to belong to me." There are certain goods that the consumer never successfully claims because s/he never successfully claims their symbolic properties. The consumer good becomes a paradox: the consumer owns it without possessing it; its symbolic properties remain immovable.

Normally, however, the individual successfully deploys possession rituals and manages to extract the meaningful properties that have been invested in the consumer good. If the cultural meaning has been transferred, consumers are able to use goods as markers of time, space, and occasion. Consumers draw on the ability of these goods to discriminate between such cultural categories as class, status, gender, age, occupation, and lifestyle. Since possession rituals allow the consumer to take possession of the meaning of a consumer good, these rituals help complete the second stage of the trajectory of the movement of cultural meaning. As we have seen, advertising agencies and the fashion world move cultural meaning from the culturally constituted world into a consumer good. Using possession rituals, individuals move cultural meaning out of their goods and into their lives.

It is worth observing that possession rituals, especially those devoted to personalizing the object, almost seem to enact on a small scale, and for private purposes, the activities of meaning transfer performed by the advertising agency. The act of personalizing is, in effect, an attempt to transfer meaning from the individual's own world to the newly obtained good. The new context in this case is the individual's complement of consumer goods, which has assumed a personal as well as public meaning. Indeed, perhaps it is chiefly in this way that an anonymous possession—manifestly the creation of a distant, impersonal mass manufacturing process—is turned into a personal possession that belongs to someone and speaks for them. Perhaps it is in this manner that individuals create a personal world of goods that reflects their own experience and concepts of self and world. The meaning that advertising transfers to goods is the meaning of the collectivity. The meaning that personal gestures transfer to goods is the meaning of the collectivity as this meaning has been inflected by the particular experience of the individual consumer.

## Grooming Rituals

It is clear that some of the cultural meaning drawn from goods has a perishable nature. As a result, the consumer must draw cultural meaning out of his/her possessions on a repeated basis. When a continual process of meaning transfer from goods to consumer is necessary, the consumer will likely resort to a grooming ritual. The purpose of this ritual is to take the special pains necessary to insure that the special, perishable properties resident in certain clothes, hair styles, and looks are, as it were, "coaxed" out of their resident goods and made to live, however briefly and precariously, in the life of the individual consumer. The "going out" rituals with which one prepares for an evening out are good examples of this process. These rituals illustrate the time, patience, and anxiety with which an individual will prepare him/herself for the special public scrutiny of a gala evening or dinner party. Grooming rituals arm individuals who are "going out" with the particularly glamorous, exalted, meaningful properties that exist in their "best" consumer goods. Once captured and made resident in an individual, these meaningful properties give him/her new powers of confidence, aggression, and defense. The language with which advertisements describe certain make-up, hair-styling goods, and clothing tacitly acknowledge the meaningful properties available in goods that special grooming rituals release.

Sometimes, however, it is not the consumer but the good that must be groomed. This occurs when the consumer cultivates the meaningful properties of an object in the object rather than coaxing out the properties in him/herself. The extraordinary amounts of largely redundant time and energy lavished on certain automobiles is perhaps the best case in point here (Myers 1985, p. 562). This type of grooming ritual supercharges the object so that it, in turn, may transfer special heightened properties to an owner. Here again, the individual's role in meaning investment is evident. The importance to the consumer of cultivating consumer goods so that they can release their meaningful qualities is most strikingly highlighted by the behavior of aging individuals. Sherman and Newman report that the occupants of nursing homes who regard themselves as being "at the end of the line" engage in a process of "decathecting [removing the emotional significance from] the significant objects in their lives" (1977–1978, p. 188).

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In the field of consumer research, the study of ritual has been significantly advanced by Rook (1984), who has observed how much consumption behavior is ritualized and who has noted the value of studying consumption from a ritual perspective, and by Rook and Levy (1982), who have examined grooming ritual and grooming product symbolism. It is clear that grooming rituals are one of the means by which individuals effect a transfer of symbolic properties. In grooming rituals, the meaning moves from consumer goods to the consumer. Grooming rituals help draw cultural meaning out of these goods and invest it in the consumer.

### Divestment Rituals

Individuals who draw meaning out of goods come to view these meaning sources in personal terms, associating goods with their own personal properties. The possible confusion between consumer and consumer good encourages the use of the divestment ritual. Divestment rituals are employed for two purposes. When the individual purchases a good that has been previously owned, such as a house or a car, the ritual is used to erase the meaning associated with the previous owner. The cleaning and redecorating of a newly purchased home, for instance, may be seen as an effort to remove the meaning created by the previous owner. Divestment allows the new owner to avoid contact with the meaningful properties of the previous owner and to free up the meaning properties of the possession, claiming them for him/herself. The second divestment ritual takes place when the individual is about to dispense with a good, either by giving it away or selling it. The consumer will attempt to erase the meaning that has been invested in the good by association. In moments of candor, individuals suggest that they feel "a little strange about someone else wearing my old coat." In moments of still greater candor, they will confess that they fear the dispossession of personal meaning, a phenomenon that resembles the "merging of identities" that sometimes takes place between transplant donors and recipients (Simmons, Klein, and Simmons 1977, p. 68). Both rituals suggest a concern that the meaning of goods can be transferred, obscured, confused, or even lost when goods change hands (Douglas 1966). Therefore, goods must be emptied of meaning before being passed along and cleared of meaning when taken on. What looks like simple superstition is, in fact, an implicit acknowledgement of the moveable quality of the meaning with which goods are invested.

In sum, personal rituals are variously used to transfer the meaning contained in goods to individual consumers. Exchange rituals are used to direct goods charged with certain meaningful properties to those individuals the gift-giver supposes are needful of these properties. In an exchange ritual, the giver invites the receiver to partake of the properties possessed by the good. Possession rituals are practiced by an owner in order to retrieve a good's meaningful properties. Possession rituals are designed to transfer a good's properties to its owner. Grooming rituals are used to effect the continual transfer of perishable properties—properties likely to fade when possessed by the consumer. Grooming rituals allow the consumer to "freshen" the properties s/he draws from goods. These rituals can also be used to maintain and "brighten" certain of the meaningful properties resident in goods. Finally, divestment rituals are used to empty goods of meaning so that meaning-loss or meaning-contagion cannot take place. All of these rituals are a kind of microcosmic version of the instruments of meaning transfer that move meaning from world to goods, since these rituals move meaning from goods to consumer.

## LOCATIONS OF CULTURAL MEANING: INDIVIDUAL CONSUMERS

Cultural meaning is used to define and orient the individual in ways that we are only beginning to appreciate. It is clear that individuals living in a contemporary Western industrial culture enjoy a wide range of choice in the meaning they may draw from goods. It was observed at the start of this article that contemporary North American culture leaves a great deal of the individual undefined. One of the ways individuals satisfy the freedom and fulfill responsibility of self-definition is through the systematic appropriation of the meaningful properties of goods. Plainly this task is not an easy one, nor is it always successful. Many individuals seek kinds of meaning from goods that do not exist there. Others seek to appropriate kinds of meaning to which they are not, by some sober sociological reckoning, entitled. Still others attempt to constitute their lives only in terms of the meaning of goods. All of these consumer pathologies are evident in modern consumption behavior and all of them illustrate how the process of meaning transfer can go wrong, to the cost of the individual and society. In normal situations, however, the individual uses goods in an unproblematical manner to constitute crucial parts of the self and the world. The logic, imperatives, and details of this process of self- and world construction through goods are enormously understudied and are only now attracting rigorous study. Our culture has studied its own beliefs and practices with a thoroughness and enthusiasm unheralded in the ethnographic record. With the same thoroughness and enthusiasm it has also made material possessions one of its most compelling preoccupations. It is therefore doubly odd and unfortunate that the study of the use of goods in the construction of self and world should have suffered such prolonged and profound neglect.

## SUMMARY

Only recently has the field of "person-object" relations escaped the limitations imposed upon it by its

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founding father, Thorstein Veblen. The field has begun to recognize that the cultural meaning carried by consumer goods is enormously more various and complex than the Veblenian insistence on status was capable of recognizing. But now that the field has made this advance, it might consider the possibility of another. It might begin to take account of the alienable, moveable, manipulable quality of meaning. This article has sought to encourage such a development by giving a theoretical account of the structure and movement of the cultural meaning of consumer goods. It has suggested that meaning resides in three locations: the culturally constituted world, the consumer good, and the individual consumer. Advertising, the fashion system, and consumer rituals have been identified as the means by which meaning is drawn out of, and transferred between, these locations. Advertising and the fashion system move meaning from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods, while consumer rituals move meaning from the consumer good to the consumer. This is the trajectory of the movement of cultural meaning in modern developed societies.

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