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Commodity Registers

Commodities mediate roles and relationships through discourses that formulate them as social indexicals. Discourses that typify commodities make indexical stereotypes widely known through their own dissemination, thereby linking commodities to registers of conduct. Phenomenally diverse objects (durable goods, forms of speech) readily come under commodity formulations, and many objects acquire distinct formulations in distinct phases of their social existence. The case of lifestyle formulations is discussed in some detail. Yet all commodity formulations and their fragments (products, services, discourses about them) are recontextualized and transformed through the activities of those acquainted with them. Many commodity formulations come to be treated as common culture. Others function as emblems of group differentiation, or of forms of individuality prized in liberal society. Commodities are thus cultural forms through which images of diverse social phenomena (persons, groups, ideals) become manifest in perceivable activities through which culture is transformed in social history. [commodities, registers, social relations, lifestyle, cultural change]

The central irony in Adam Smith's account of the commodity form (Smith 1776)—which Marx later adopted and refined—is that it was superseded by marketing methods before its was published. Smith's account presumes that commodities have an intrinsic "use value," a capacity to satisfy need or want, that precedes—and, indeed, provides a motive force for—their entry into the sphere of "exchange value." My goal in this paper is to discuss the ways in which commodities mediate social relations in contemporary life. Yet to speak of commodities today is to summon the living dead: The term "use value"—and the conception of "the commodity" it subserves—died a long deserved natural death in economics in the late 19th century, but survives today, oddly enough, in the writings of anthropologists. I begin with a term well lost not in order to revive it, but to draw initial attention to its status as a gaze-narrowing device: The idea that "use values" are intrinsic to commodities makes invisible the semiotic activities—including discourses about commodities—that articulate and disarticulate images of "use" and "users."

Such activities were already organized as marketing practices prior to the publication of the *Wealth of Nations*. For instance, in 1759, the English porcelain-maker Josiah Wedgwood (Figure 1) began to manufacture a cream-colored earthenware, which revolutionized the art of ceramics. In 1762, he presented Queen Charlotte, the wife of George III, with his finest "creamware" (Figure 2), a gift that so pleased her that she appointed him royal supplier of dinnerware and "Potter to Her Majesty." Wedgwood began to market this product to the general public under the brand name *Queen's Ware*. This method, soon generalized, became a cornerstone of his commercial success: Wedgwood would make things for the aristocracy, then market them to commoners as emblems of higher-status registers of consumption. In 1771 he sent "unsolicited parcels of his pottery" to members of the German nobility, and, in 1775, designed a collection of pieces for Empress Catherine the Great (Koehn 2001:32). The



Figure 1



Figure 2

Catherine Service Ware (Figure 3) was then displayed in sumptuous showrooms in London (Figure 4), where the retail display itself chronotopically recalled the ease, luxury, sumptuousness and elegance of aristocratic life.

Wedgwood's method of producing "value added" relies on *commodity formulations* that typify products as social indexicals of use and users. A glazed product is now simply the durable metonym of a commodity formulation; the personae to which the product is linked formulates its emblematic qualities; and the role gap between depicted personae (aristocracy) and target markets (commoners) imbues the formulation with performative efficacy. Wedgwood's method met with such resounding success in one segment of his target market, the rising European bour-



Figure 3



Figure 4

geoisie, that even the long established factories at Sèvres (France) and Meissen (Germany) found themselves to be imitating him; Meissen even marketed a glazed product called *Wedgwoodarbeit*.

Today, commodity formulations of things and activities are disseminated by a variety of institutional discourses. Advertising discourses formulate manufactured products as social indexicals, as objects whose use indexes attributes of users that differentiates them from others within frameworks of social classification. But advertising is simply one source discourse among many. Other institutions—which focus on labor inputs to manufacture (not products)—link task demands to pay scales (viz., skilled vs. unskilled labor), thereby formulating discursive and other activities as indexicals of socioeconomic opportunity and class position. By virtue of their own dissemination, such discourses make the indexical values they articulate known to a social domain of persons (a target market, a labor force), yielding social regularities of use and construal, or registers of conduct, in which commodity diacritics (perceived as things, or performed as activities) are treated as stereotypic indexicals of role and relationship by persons linked to each other through them.

Although such formulations have an addressee design that serves specific value projects (expanding sales, regulating manufacture), their fragments are available for uptake and recontextualization in other value projects and participation frameworks, whether by institutions that animate competing formulations (Wedgwood's competitors in France and Germany) or in participation frameworks of everyday life, where recycled variants mediate a far wider range of activities than the value projects of source discourses anticipate.

All commodity registers are recycled into activities more varied than those of commerce: Product emblems are available for uptake and recontextualization in

activities where no buying or selling occurs, where the display of possessions, or talk of commodities and users—including commodities one would never seek to own, and users one hopes never to become—mediate varied forms of interpersonal footing in everyday encounters; and commoditized skills mediate a far wider range of activities than manufacturing tasks, including aspirations to social mobility, jokes about job seekers, and forms of rebellion and peer-group bonding in schools (Willis 1977). From the standpoint of registers, commodities mediate social life not through the “circulation of things” but through the recycling of commodity formulations and their fractions—diacritics and emblems, products and possessions, discourses and their objects, skills and penumbral personae—across diverse activity frames that recontextualize and transform them. Yet received views of what a commodity is prevent any grasp of these possibilities.

One gaze-narrowing device proliferates many. Although both Smith and Marx define a commodity as lying at the intersection of use value and exchange value, neither has a theory of use value, and neither is troubled by this fact. Whether use value is intrinsic to things (Smith) or is some unknown work of history (Marx) is a matter of indifference—and its vagueness a convenience—to a tradition preoccupied with the miasma of exchange under manufacture-driven conditions of market expansion (Polanyi 1944); and a focus on “things that pass from hand to hand” during exchange, itself dubbed the “circulation of matter” (Marx 1967 [1867]:104), obscures the materiality of discourses that formulate commodities as social indexicals. Yet exchange is simply one kind of “use” among many; and commodities that merge use and users (such as skills) do not pass from hand to hand. In any exchange-centric and thing-focal view of the commodity, commodity formulations are replaced by their durable metonyms, and the metasemiotic practices through which models of “use” and “users”—including formulations of “exchange,” and figurements of “producers” and “consumers”—emerge in historically specific ways, become widely known, or change through the activities of those who know them, become invisible too.

These issues are best approached by observing that the capacity of commodities to index social roles and relationships—or, indeed, to be recognized and treated as commodities—depends on reflexive features of conduct itself.

Commodity Formulations

Nothing is always (or only) a commodity. Rather, things *acquire* (or lose) commodity formulations as they pass through criterial frameworks of semiotic engagement. Many objects come under exchange formulations in specific practices (like advertising and shopping) but acquire entirely distinct formulations (including the status of “noncommodities”) when deployed in other practices (e.g., as gifts, works of art, emblems of ethnicity, education, national belonging) where their users are understood as social categories distinct from consumers. Some objects routinely pass through distinct formulations over a cycle of uses that makes a person’s participation in their exchange phase a gateway to entry into other zones of social life. The formulation of a thing as an object of exchange implies a model of conduct for its users distinct from its formulation, say, as a work of art. The capacity of persons to orient to the same object under distinct formulations depends on their ability to read discursive and other signs that function as meta-signs in relation to it, typifying it as an object-sign (e.g., an object having a construable “use” or “users”) in that sphere of conduct. Commodity formulations thus involve a relationship between two kinds of perceivable signs, those that formulate them and those they formulate, which Marx’s “circulation of matter” does not.

The meta-signs that formulate images of use or users are always overt (perceivable) but not necessarily denotationally explicit. In the Wedgewood case, brand names (like *Queen’s Ware* and *Catherine Service Ware*) explicitly link certain ceramic wares to

aristocratic personae. Other metasemiotic practices neither deploy language nor describe what they typify. Indeed, visible signs having construable social values can imbue objects they frame with comparable values. Many features of the Wedgwood retail store display (see Figure 4)—the vaulted ceilings, the Doric columns, the wide aisles, the sumptuous cabinets—are effective ways of typifying ceramic wares as emblems of an aristocratic lifestyle. Such implicit formulations are ubiquitous today, as I show below.

The object-signs of commodity formulations—the things and activities we treat as commodities—are phenomenally more diverse than durable products; they include forms of speech, services, experiences, a set of future options, or some combination of these and other possibilities. Any of these can function as diacritics—or exponents—of register contrasts that differentiate persons having access to them. Yet the fact that phenomenally diverse signs function as diacritics of commodity registers has nothing to do with commodities as such. *All* register contrasts—whether they differentiate gender, profession, age, caste, class, race, or any other social category—involve a wide semiotic range of diacritics. A speech register is merely the special case where a register's diacritics include linguistic behaviors. In the general case, a register's repertoires may involve signs in *any phenomenal channel of perceivable conduct*. All attempts to reduce semiotic registers to speech registers deconstruct themselves, and for many reasons. One reason is that register models of *speech* conduct readily include *other* types of conduct among their sign-repertoires, likening linguistic and non-linguistic signs to each other in stereotypic effects, locating speech within a wider semiotic range of diacritics (Agha 2007a:ch. 3).¹

Defeasibility

In what follows, I consider commodity registers whose diacritics include consumer durables and commoditized speech, and discuss metasemiotic practices that formulate them as social indexicals of specific kinds. Yet *all* such diacritics mediate a wider range of semiotic activities than these formulations imply. Unlike the “use values” alleged to “the commodity” in the classical conception, the sign-values of commodity formulations, in my sense, are limitlessly defeasible within and across activity frames. Why? Two basic issues, discussed in more detail below, are worth sketching at the outset.

First, metasemiotic practices that imbue objects with sign-values do not necessarily efface sign-values that objects already have. They *lamine an increment to value* upon objects already having sign-values of other kinds, including formulations of use independent of the formulation at hand. A Wedgwood teacup is formulated as a diacritic of class when linked to an aristocratic register of consumption. But it is like every other teacup in another respect: It holds tea. Which among these formulations becomes salient (or irrelevant) to some interaction depends on cotextual framing by co-occurring signs (*viz.*, “One lump or two?”), not on any feature intrinsic to the object considered in isolation.

Second, metasemiotic practices that imbue objects with sign-values are *projects* in the sense that they may succeed or fail. Value projects invite forms of uptake, but insofar as they are *projects*, they may or may not be effective in securing the forms of uptake they invite. In practice, formulations that motivate register contrasts are susceptible to many forms of uptake: they may be codified as rules of conduct and become internalized in intuitions of correctness, authenticity or taste for some social actors; they may be eschewed by other social categories of persons, yet still serve as frameworks for construing the behaviors of those they meet; they may also be troped upon, hybridized, satirized, or otherwise manipulated in a variety of ways. And, indeed, the activities of those who respond to these projects may themselves constitute value projects that may be more or less effective, more or less widespread, and more or less transformative than the first.

Phase-Specific Formulations

Objects not only come under commodity formulations, such formulations are themselves reticulated into varieties that differ in the categories of actors they link, the models actors recognize as their own, and the institutions that formulate and disseminate them.

Objects may thus appear under different formulations of use and user in distinct phases of their social existence. For instance, many durable goods start out as products manufactured in a factory, become objects of advertising, objects of exchange or sale, then private possessions, and finally enter a post-use phase as rubbish or recyclables (Figure 5). The physical object is itself transformed across these phases, but so also are formulations of use and user. Consider the case of an automobile. In its manufacture phase, its components are object of engagement by specific social categories (designers, managers, factory workers, etc.) whose activities and skills (manual, discursive, intellectual) are themselves commoditized as human capital in a division of labor designed to yield the physical object as its precipitate. In its exchange phase, the automobile, now fully formed as a physical object, is given characterological and lifestyle formulations by advertisers, and thus formulated as a cultural object insertable into the social lives of potential buyers by crossing a point of sale. In its possession phase, the object is recontextualized into a vast variety of interpersonal projects—commuting to work, family vacations, status displays, going “green”—and enters into social relations not only as a vehicle for transportation but also as a sign-vehicle indexing features of persona, social role, and lifestyle commitment. Thus varied formulations of use and user—whether institutionally configured or emergent in interaction—differentiate roles and activities across distinct phases of its life-cycle.

Classical political economy (from Smith to Marx) views the commodity through a restrictive focus on phases of manufacture and exchange (and hence on “labor” and “exchange value”); and the sign-values of commodities across the entire range of their ideologically-inflected deployments in everyday life are brushed aside as “use value.” All of the ways in which phase-specific commodity formulations yield registers of conduct, and all of the semiotic activities through which they are recycled and transformed in social life remain obscure. Or, when commodities are viewed exclusively as objects of advertising and marketing, and linked to the decline of culture (Horkheimer and Adorno 1976 [1944]) or the public sphere (Habermas 1991 [1962]), commodity formulations relevant only to segments of their social lives are treated as accounts of what commodities in general are (or do), thus reducing commodities to their metonyms. Such views also reduce semiotic activity to its metonyms. The factory floor is indeed a place where muscular-caloric “labor” (Marx 1967 [1867:71]) is foregrounded as form-giving activity; and advertising practices have a characteristic semiotic form as well. But these activities—themselves simply the commoditized activities of institutional roles within specific practices—permit little insight into the range of semiotic activities that commodity registers mediate, enable, or displace.

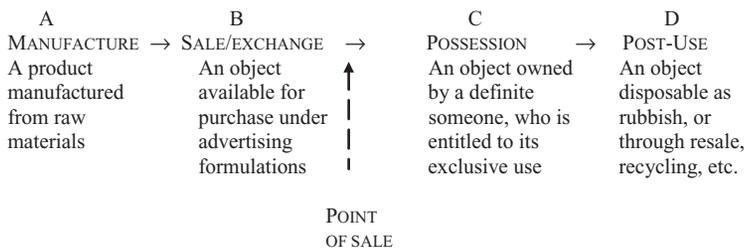


Figure 5
Commodity phases (consumer durables)

It is well known that a focus on exchange has historically helped segregate the market construct from the rest of culture (Polanyi 1944, Dumont 1977). When phase-specific commodity registers are not recognized for what they are, they appear to threaten the rest of culture. For instance, when discourses of product mensuration and quality control (designed to ensure identical product replicas) are not recognized as registers of the manufacturing phase, it is readily supposed that “homogenization” seeps across the point of sale and, through some magical efficacy, makes people who own these products (in the possession phase) replicas of *each other* in their everyday social lives, or, even worse, “commodifies” all of culture itself. In more totalizing conceptions, culture strikes back. When the market (as a whole) is imagined to be something outside of culture (as a whole)—e.g., markets are said to “homogenize” things and culture to “singularize” them (Kopytoff 1986)—two large and opposing forces seem to be locked together in Manichean conflict. Yet, as I show below, cultural models of everyday life are already presupposed in marketing efforts as felicity conditions on performative efficacy, and marketed models of conduct are merely inputs to recontextualization in the lives of those they reach, making the Manichean imaginary a side-show of the exchange-centric gaze.

In the classical conception, commodities are linked to a metaphysics of value.² In recent variants of this metaphysics (e.g., “Economic exchange creates value” (Appadurai 1986a: 3)), traditional preoccupations with exchange (viz., what sort of activity is exchange? how do economic and gift exchange differ?) avert attention from the fact that most semiotic activities in social life have nothing to do with “exchange,” and that fragments of commodity formulations—both object-signs and meta-signs—mediate social relations throughout. A narrow focus on object-signs makes changes in sign-values unintelligible.³ When commodity formulations are replaced by their durable metonyms it is even possible to imagine that the circulation of things is a model for the study of culture itself, now understood as something that circulates through “things.”⁴ But most commodities lack durable metonyms, and culture lacks the constancy and durability of “things” (Tsing 2005). It remains to be seen that the metasemiotic fragments of commodity formulations (quite part from durable metonyms, when such exist)—such as models of “use” and relations among “users”—are themselves transformed across activity frames, and such transformations are critical to the social life of cultural forms (including commodities).

Persons acquainted with commodity registers can deploy criterial diacritics in conduct to gradient degrees, and thus perform hybrid personae; or, by troping upon uses of diacritics, effectively inhabit social personae to which they are not otherwise entitled; or denaturalize personae stereotypically linked to diacritics; or, by shifting registers within the flow of conduct, transform the situation currently unfolding into a situation of an entirely different kind. Even widely enregistered and normatively regulated diacritics are subject to further negotiation—through processes of ratification, counter-valorization, and other forms of role alignment—in interpersonal activities in which persons encounter each other through them (Agha 2005). The commodity registers discussed below mediate all of these forms of social differentiation, as we shall soon see.

It is not surprising, then, that our encounters with commodity registers are fraught with misrecognition. To ignore metasemiotic formulations is to suppose that objects intrinsically have social values, but they don't. To confine our talk to a narrow range of objects (e.g., durable goods) is to lose sight of how our talk about commodities (e.g., talk of lifestyles and consumers) recapitulates institutional discourses that model our commitments to them. To mistake the value projects of phase-specific commodity discourses (such as advertising) for facts of “value” is to mistake institutional *efforts* to re-make the social world for *descriptions* of the way the world is. To ignore the performativity of value projects, their felicity conditions and fragility under conditions of uptake, is to allow anxieties about hegemony to infect moments of decontextualized reflection, even as our actual conduct remakes what we fear.

Advertising Chronotopes

One way of bringing manufactured objects into the sphere of personal value projects is to personify objects through metasemiotic formulations that link them to aspects of persons and their activities. This type of formulation makes commodities person-like in certain respects, imbuing them with social personae to which actual persons may then be linked through acts of usage or facts of ownership, personae that inform and augment their social relations with other persons. Ads personify products in order to insert them in a person's life. They bring products under commodity formulations designed to help them pass across a point of sale by inviting persons who encounter the ad to convert at least one token of the commodity into a personal possession. Yet if the ad seeks to convert its viewer/reader into the commodity's user/owner, the ad's overall formulation must engage with the social life of the viewer/reader. The ad requires a principle of indexical selectivity that will summon a reader as its addressee. The trope of personification is typically embedded within a chronotope of social life—a model of conduct saturated with cultural images of time, place and personhood (Agha 2007b)—that invokes and refashions models presupposed in everyday life.

Personifying Products

The simplest way of personifying products is to use a terminology of role designators—expressions normally used for talking about persons, including interpersonal attributes (demeanors, breeding, etc.), psychological propensities (emotions, habits, tastes, preferences, etc.), facts of group membership (ethnicity, occupation, avocation, class, gender, nation)—as a metasemiotic notation for characterizing the attributes of products. Institutional discourses make the link between role designators and diacritics widely available as embodied classifications (Agha 2007a:246–250). In the case of advertising, when forms of talk about persons are deployed in talk about manufactured products, the usage amounts to a trope of personification, likening attributes of products to attributes of their users, treating differences among things as diagrams of differences among persons.

The ad in Figure 6 explicitly formulates an inanimate product (stationery) as a speech participant in chronotopes of social interaction. In addressing a direct question to the reader—"How would you like to sound on paper? Formal? Friendly? Intimate?"—the ad locates its reader in a tableau of potential social interactions (with those to whom letters or notes must be sent), and faced, in each of them, with the task of creating or maintaining social relations through feats of self-presentation. In this simulacrum of epistolary communication, the content of what you write is less important than the paper on which you write because the paper itself speaks for you: Crane stationery itself "communicates your tone," "has only the best to say about you," "says you have a tasteful writing style," "says you're a stickler for quality," and so on. Different varieties of stationery index different social roles and relationships—some are "business-like," some are "warm and friendly," some convey "hushed whispers." Once personified, the stationery itself can be viewed as a coparticipant in the act of communication, one that contributes social-characterological attributes to the letter writer's persona, serving as an animator of social roles of which the letter writer is understood as principal in social interactions mediated by the product.

The interpersonal formulations of the perfume ad in Figure 7 are far more implicit. The reader is located in chronotopes of social interaction not by being explicitly addressed and described as narrated participant (as in Figure 6) but by the ad's central visual image, that of a woman in high spirits racing across the field of view. The reader is singled out by the woman's eye-gaze and smile, thus formulated as interactant. But what happens in this interaction? The text at the bottom is an impersonal description of two elements of this chronotope, a branded product ('Liz Claiborne fragrance') and a mental state ("A great mood to be in"). Since manufactured

How would you like to sound on paper? Formal? Friendly? Intimate?

Your stationery carries hidden messages. It communicates your tone, be it hushed whispers, business-like, or warm and friendly. Crane stationery has only the best to say about you. One look and Crane says you have a tasteful writing style. One feel and Crane says you're a stickler for quality.

Because all Crane paper is made of reclaimed cotton, the finest fiber available. Crane stationery is so revealing in attitude, that articulate people have been known to keep a range of Crane papers on their writing tables. To express the exact sentiments they wish to communicate. If you agree that you wouldn't talk

to your mother the way you'd talk to your barber, talk to the person at the stationery counter in the finest store you know. And ask to see the many voices of Crane. Crane & Co., Inc., Dalton, Mass. 01226.

Crane
We've been taking your words seriously for 182 years.

An advertisement for Crane stationery. The top half contains text about the quality and variety of Crane paper. The bottom half is a photograph of several envelopes and a pen. One envelope is addressed to 'Suzanne Berle Adams', another to 'Suzy', and one has 'SBA' written on it. A silver pen lies across the envelopes.

Figure 6

An advertisement for Liz Claiborne fragrance. It features a woman in a white, flowing outfit, smiling and holding long, colorful ribbons (yellow, blue, red) that trail behind her. In the bottom right corner, there is a red triangular perfume bottle and a box of Liz Claiborne perfume. The text at the bottom reads: 'Liz Claiborne fragrance. A great mood to be in.'

Figure 7



Figure 9

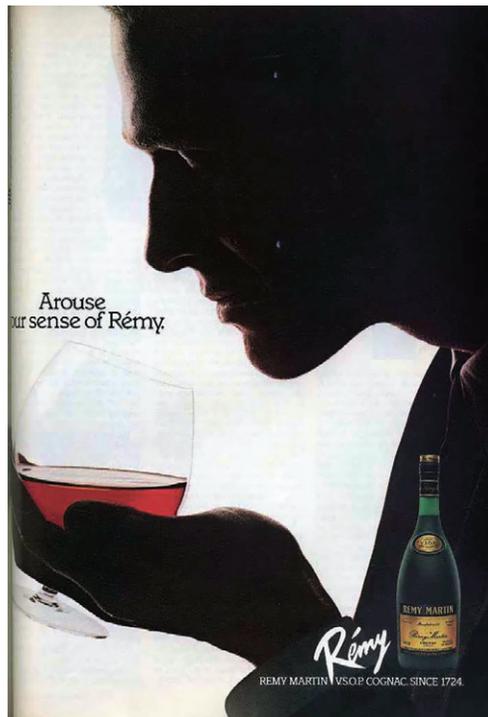


Figure 10

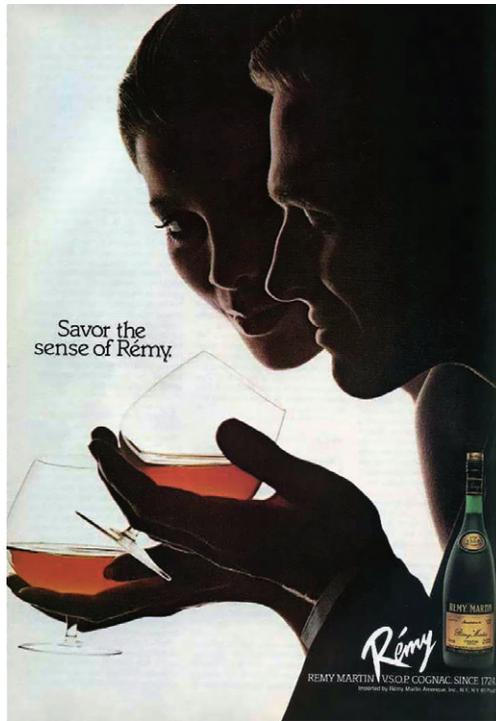


Figure 11

Cognac since 1724”), and its grapes are privileged by provenance (“Fine champagne cognac comes exclusively from grapes grown in the two best areas of the Cognac district of France”). The lesson for cognac drinkers is obvious. The ad implies that all who are connected to this product in any way—by drinking it, appreciating it, preferring it—are connected to its pedigree and provenance, and thus to the circle of the privileged few.

The next two ads elaborate the chronotope of use, where attributes of users, and relations among them, are given specific formulations. The ad in Figure 10 depicts the activity through which the privileged self is experienced and made manifest. The visual display highlights the activity of savoring the drink more than the act of drinking it, foregrounding the sensibility of the cognac drinker. Arousing your sense of Rémy involves intimacy with the cognac (whose first name is Rémy) within an olfactory encounter (eyes shut, snifter held close) where the privilege infuses you through your senses. In Figure 11, the privileged self is no longer alone. The properly infused, self-involved man becomes desirable to a similarly infused woman, whose eyes, however, are not closed. Her eyes are on him. She savors both Rémy and him savoring Rémy.

Lifestyle Formulations

We have been considering some examples of single-product ads that formulate individual products as prosthetic extensions of a user’s social self, available to buyers as diacritics of social role and relationship.

Lifestyle formulations personify commodities in more elaborate ways. Rather than focusing on single products, lifestyle formulations link individual products to many other diacritics, including other products, whose concurrent deployment in social interaction constitutes a *co-occurrence style* (Agha 2007a: 186). When such co-occurrence styles are metasemiotically typified as “lifestyles,” diverse perceivable

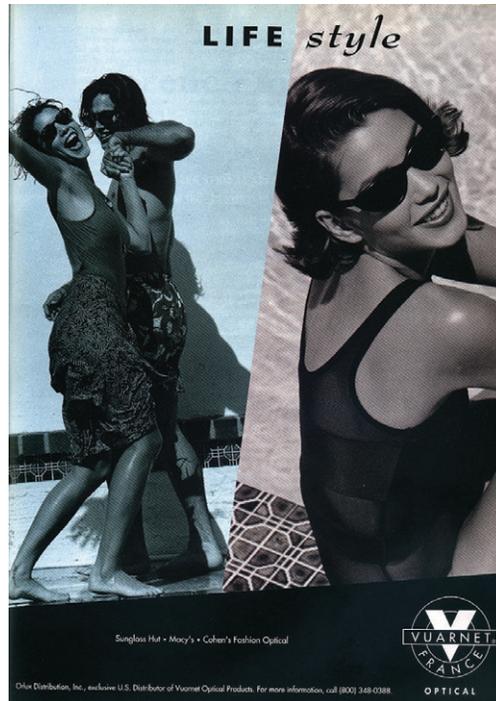


Figure 12

and performable diacritics in everyday social life, including commodities, are brought under unifying rubrics, and appear indexically congruent insofar as they imply the same lifestyle.

In the sunglasses ad in Figure 12, the terms “life,” “style” and “lifestyle”—all three occur here—function as metasemiotic frames for typifying elements of the pictorial display. But what exactly is being typified here? Do the Vuarnet™ sunglasses constitute the lifestyle? Or is it the activities of those who wear them? Or are sunglasses and the activities of their wearers now linked together in some intimate way? Notice that the ad tells you nothing about the design features of the sunglasses, such as UV protection, light polarization, and so on. Instead, the ad invites you to a style of living in which otherwise unrelated diacritics—sunbathing, attractive smiles, poolside frolicking, romance—are all of a piece. The sunglasses are simply elements of this lifestyle, a means to an end.

Lifestyle formulations can be linked to social aspirations both new and old, including links to social movements whose vanguard is a small but growing segment of society, or to long-established frameworks that define status position in ways linked to received tradition.

The discourse of “attitude” (Figure 13) converts a discourse of youthful rebellion, which is negatively valorized by incumbents of many adult social roles (schoolteachers, parents, etc.), into a positively valorized consumption lifestyle, where certain forms of public self-display are formulated as emblems of teenage and twenty-something lifestyles. If you’re told to “bring your own attitude” (vs. BYOB), the question naturally arises: How? Although the ad copy doesn’t answer this questions, the pictorial display presents a clothing line that can serve as part of the solution. And although this ad, which appeared in the 1980s, had a vanguard quality at the time, the category of “attitude clothing” is now very well established. A number of websites and consumer catalogs are now devoted exclusively to it. A great variety of brands contain lines of “attitude clothing,” often bringing several product lines under



Figure 13

unifying lifestyle rubrics with metasemiotic formulations like “streetwear,” “gothic clothing,” “rockability clothing,” and others.

By contrast, ad campaigns that employ classic or long-established discourses of distinction bring new products under familiar lifestyle formulations. The ad in Figure 14 invokes a discourse of “elegance,” which was a settled feature of advertising discourse even in the 19th century, but which this 1980s ad links to the “stark simplicity” of a wool strapless dress and the “fine-honed silhouette” of the one wearing it, her figure long, lean and bare, with “no detail to obscure it.” The ad makes the abstraction called “elegance” manifest in concrete diacritics of clothing and demeanor. Yet this ad is simply one of many. The term “elegance” is nowadays routinely linked to several different types of product lines and persona formulations, many of which directly compete against each other for partly overlapping target markets, promising glimpses of diacritics that concretize the abstraction, and of lifestyles to which market segments may seek to belong.

In Figure 15, the New Man[®] clothing line for men presents its products as “casual dressing for those who don’t take dressing casually.” The ad establishes its selectivity for this target market through several features of the pictorial display. The objects arrayed in the room—the single bed, the clothing strewn across it, the cigarette butts in the ashtray, the remnants of Chinese takeout on the floor—formulate anyone who lives there as a “casual” man, unmarried, young, and perhaps “available.” Tousled hair and a day’s growth of facial hair are implied, though not necessary. Yet the ad does something more as well. It differentiates a specific social category of person from all others, situating and embedding its “casual” persona within a field of known social types. And this field of contrasts, although implicit, establishes the ad’s central modality of appeal to a target market, which consists not just of bachelors, but all those who aspire to the lifestyle persona depicted in the ad.

Consider now the ad’s performative appeal across fashion cycles. New Man[®] clothing is expensive. Who, then, are the casual persons who “don’t take dressing

Elegance:
In Stark
Simplicity.
 Now, night seeks a
 fine-honed silhouette.
 The longer, the leaner,
 the bare—the
 better
 With form embraced.
 No detail to obscure it.
 Clamour will soar,
 uninhibited.
 See it dazzle with us,
 come Fall.
 Carolyn Roehr.
 Saks
 Fifth
 Avenue

Part of Nin collection, the black wool strapless dress, in Designer Collections.

Figure 14

CASUAL DRESSING FOR THOSE WHO DON'T TAKE DRESSING CASUALLY.
 NEW YORK CITY
 FOR MEN

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Figure 15

casually" in the sense relevant to the ad's work? Simply having a lifestyle recognizable to others as "casual" is not enough. Only those who are truly committed to maintaining a causal lifestyle in their public personae are likely to pay large sums of money for products that may be emblematic of that lifestyle for just the current season of the fashion cycle. And such commitments, once drawn into the theatre of consumption, can lead to repeat purchasing behaviors. When this happens, the activity of maintaining an indexically congruent lifestyle persona over several fashion cycles can itself become a lifestyle commitment.

Style and Lifestyle

Lifestyle advertising is now an element of a larger circuit of discourses of style and lifestyle, some of which involve institutions other than advertising, such as the marketing theories discussed below, while others comprise forms of everyday talk. Since several discourses now employ words like "style" and "lifestyle," and in rather distinct senses, we must recognize at the outset that each of these word-forms corresponds to several distinct lexemes in contemporary usage. Yet to say that there are several discourses of style/lifestyle today is not simply to speak of polysemy. We need, in addition, to recognize that distinct discourses of (life)style differ in their historical and institutional frameworks, the kinds of social actors that produce them, the audiences to which they are directed, and the value projects they pursue as their own.

For instance, although lifestyle advertising draws heavily on marketing theories of lifestyle, the two differ substantially in strategic goals, objects typified, and addressee design: The former typifies the commodity for the consumer; the latter typify the consumer for the former. And although lifestyle advertising operates in a social milieu in which terms like "style" and "lifestyle" are now commonplace in everyday talk (whether talk of consumption choices, aesthetic values, contrastive social standing, etc.; whether such talk occurs in sitting rooms or carpool lanes, whether its referents are the ones sitting or pooling together, or absent others) lifestyle advertising is far more unified in its institutional design and addressivity than is the everyday talk of lifestyles that its fragments infiltrate. The word "style" has also become important in many scholarly disciplines (including anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies), which tend to treat style as an analytic term for understanding diverse features of cotemporary social life, often without posing the question of how everyday orientations to "style" become available to the populations they study.

Any attempt to treat "(life)style" as a unitary construct therefore deconstructs itself. My goal here, however, is not to pursue a comparative discussion of these various discourses, but to focus on a more specific issue. In the pages that follow, I argue that many uses of the term "style" in marketing and advertising have transformed social life itself in ways not yet well understood, and that these transformations are intimately linked to commodity registers. In particular, I show how the cultural construct we nowadays call "style" acquires an enregistered link to *stereotypic personae* at the level of commodity types, and a *singularizing aura* at the level of commodity tokens, yielding a process mediated by figurements of style, which *dis-articulates and re-articulates* social life itself through the activities of those acquainted with them.

Psychographic Lifestyles in Marketing

The concept of "lifestyle" in advertising elaborates a theory of social types first developed in market research in the 1950s, then applied to advertising, albeit in a transformed way. Marketing theory and advertising practice differ, however, in the tasks they undertake as their own.

In market research, the term "lifestyle" is a technical term for an array of consumer activities, including patterns of product use, grouped under psychosocial labels. Early

formulations employ the term *personality*: "A consumer's personality can be seen as the peculiar total of the products he consumes" (Levy 1964:149). After the 1970s the psychosocial type is conceptualized through methods of *psychographic* profiling. Whereas older *demographic* methods of consumer profiling, used since the 1930s, classified consumers into social types by appeal to fixed positions within a social structure (age, gender, class), psychographic research, relying on motivation theory in psychology, conceived social types as something consumers produced reflexively through their own activities. Starting with survey data, a psychographic approach disaggregates consumer behaviors into many (often several hundred) variables or "factors", groups these factors into statistical "clusters," and personifies these clusters under psychological names (*emulators, trend-setters, inner-directeds, outer-directeds*, etc.). Consumer behaviors (including tastes and opinions) are now disaggregated and re-grouped within a taxonomy of psychographic types. Moreover, the consumption behavior of each psychographic type is held to be invariant *across* product types. That is, according to this theory of social types, a given psychographic "type" will consume clothing, food, and vacations in the same way (Nixon 1996:98).

An array of psychographic lifestyles is a model of social types that links mental states (beliefs, dispositions, purposes, preferences) to publicly perceivable diacritics, which, for each lifestyle, involves many products, including those that are functionally unrelated and occur in otherwise distinct types of activities. In later marketing theory, psychographic models were augmented by ethnographic methods into partly "social," not purely psychological types. But the link to motivation theory and a fluid and changeable conception of the nature of consumers remains.

Lifestyle Advertising

Lifestyle advertising treats such psychographic types as target markets to whom specific depictions of idealized behaviors can be addressed. With the shift from single-product advertising to lifestyle advertising a new type of indexical selectivity emerges in advertising discourse, where a psychographic conception of consumer types is presupposed from marketing theory, and the performative value project of lifestyle advertising seeks to incorporate more and more elements of social life into commodity-mediated registers of social conduct. Guided by the marketing theory view that a psychographic type will consume *many* products the same way, this type of advertising depicts a semiotic *array* of commodities and commoditized behaviors as elements of a unified lifestyle. One way of doing this is to link products to characterological figurements within social tableaux made palpable through multiple co-occurring signs, whose cotextual organization yield a composite sketch of a lifestyle. In Figure 17, *deluxe* cigarettes are linked to a luxury lifestyle, whose characters appear wealthy through dress, compartment, and appurtenances, as they check into a luxury hotel. The fact that no one is smoking hardly matters. If the ideal of luxury can be made visually concrete in a commodity formulation, the overall representation may suffice to make any of its commodity fragments (such as a brand of cigarettes) desirable as an emblem of that larger lifestyle.

Products are often linked to lifestyles through hybrid formulations, as in the Air France ad in Figure 18, where the product serves as a bridge between distinct spheres of commodity-mediated conduct. The couple is situated in two different commodity chronotopes, which are now superimposed upon each other. They are identified as occupants of "Seat 8A" and "Seat 8B" and thus represented as passengers in the chronotope of airline travel. But the pictorial display depicts an entirely different chronotope. The man and woman are seated on the side of a lake as lovers in a bucolic paradise and, with wine and cheese alongside, are now in "the best place on earth," far away from the rapid pace of the air travel which perhaps brought them to it. A cross-chronotopic narrative is implied: They met on an Air France flight but struck up a summer romance. In other words: If France = Love, Air France® = Air Love.



Figure 16

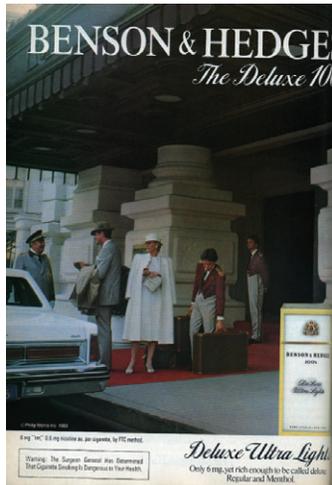


Figure 17

Guided by marketing surveys of target group attributes, lifestyle advertising seeks to link commoditized behaviors to the dream life of the target group itself. Commodities can be inserted into lifestyles through the depiction of “representative moments” of a stylized life, which can be disaggregated and re-aggregated in various ways. In the ad in Figure 19, Swatch™ watches are linked to the “Swatch™ Signature” collection of clothing and accessories. The young people shown are doing everything except telling the time. Although the line of clothing and accessories is “inspired by the great graphics and vibrant colors of the Swatch watches” the lifestyle consists not only of clothing, or accessories, or watches, but also of a series of interpersonal happenings, depicted in snapshots taken “on the fly,” in which personalities, relationships and forms of peer bonding are central. This is their lifestyle, and here is your Swatch™ of it.

The Possession Phase

We have been observing that *advertising* discourses seek performatively to attach value images to objects in the saleable commodity phase of their existence in order to move

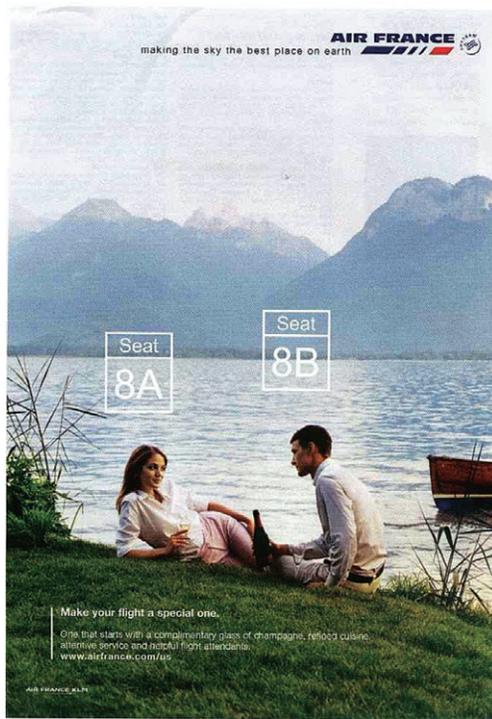


Figure 18

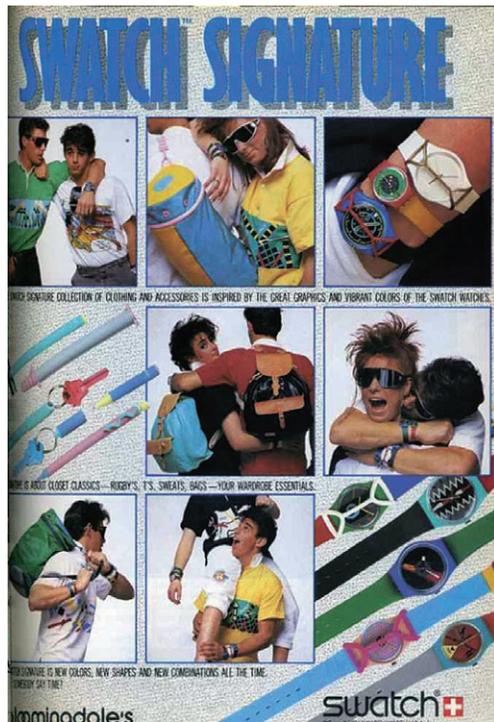


Figure 19

these commodities beyond the point of sale into the possession phase, where they become objects owned by individuals. *Lifestyle* advertising goes a step further. It brings objects under commodity formulations that imply *value projects in the possession phase itself*. A “lifestyle” in this sense is a framework for conducting value projects in one’s own personal life. In Figure 16, products lying separate on the right (on the “shelf”) are reassembled on the left in a person “on the go” (in a lifestyle). Here, a variety of commodities—garments, tote bags, accessories, climbing gear—are linked to a “real” person caught not only on the side of a cliff but in something like the Bakhtinian chronotope of adventure time.

If one is drawn to the lifestyle, the purchase of any single commodity is simply an initial step. Once it becomes your possession, the object is a gateway to a much larger sphere of activities, which may require other possessions too. The advertised lifestyle is thus a composite value project: It is made up of many elements that can be acquired individually through separate acts of single-purchase, but it is their aggregate possession (over a life cycle), and their concurrent deployment (in interpersonal encounters) that indexes a unified lifestyle.

Lifestyles as Value Projects

Lifestyle advertising has a proleptic semiotic form: It formulates *commoditized behaviors as lifestyles* for purchasers, and *lifestyles as value projects* for commodity owners. The first formulation, which links commodities to lifestyles, seeks to move objects from their saleable commodity phase to the possession phase. The activity on which this formulation focuses, and which it seeks performatively to bring about, is the act of purchase itself. The second formulation, which typifies lifestyles as value projects, seeks to organize the activities of persons beyond the act of purchase. The activities which this formulation depicts, and which it seeks performatively to organize, are the activities of persons who’ve already acquired the advertised commodity as a possession. Thus ads for specific commodities often contain explicit formulations of larger value projects which persons can pursue beyond the point of sale in the course of inhabiting diverse social roles as members of society. The range of possible value projects is of course extremely wide, as is the variety of formulations nowadays routinely employed in different types of ad campaigns addressed to different target markets. Yet despite this diversity, certain features recur across a great many cases. In order to approach this issue it is best perhaps to begin with paradoxes intrinsic to the use of lifestyle formulations in the age of mass production.

Style Singularization

In advertising discourse, people encounter commodities as types, not as tokens. That is, advertising formulates images of products that are often mass produced items, each a perfect replica of the other, hence identical and interchangeable. But what buyers possess in the possession phase is generally one token of the type, a single item with an indefinite number of identical replicas owned by others. This implies that in the possession phase of its existence—where an individual has acquired just one token of the product through a purchase—the fact that many other buyers have identical tokens makes all buyers indistinguishable from each other. There is no possibility of singularization or uniqueness. In the chronotope where “things” move “from hand to hand” does their “movement” make all hands alike?

The paradox, then, is this: While the absence of singularity is often held up as a virtue of mass manufactured *products* (viz., an index of uniform reliability through quality control), it is a potential problem in the *possession* phase (insofar as ownership of identical replicas indexes nonuniqueness of owners). In the interval between manufacture and purchase, where the object in question is amenable to various metasemiotic reformulations, lifestyle advertising attempts to overcome this



Figure 20

paradox—and its attendant anxieties—by formulating value projects that imbue the “lifestyle” frame with its own singularizing aura.

Walter Benjamin uses the term “aura” for that aspect of an object’s value that depends on widespread recognition of its uniqueness. In talking about the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin 1968 observes that works of art have lost their auristic value insofar as they are readily copied through processes of mass manufacture.

Lifestyle advertising attempts to re-introduce a singularizing aura into the commodity by linking the lifestyle formulation of commodities to forms of uniqueness that can be achieved through certain activities by an individual possessor of that commodity. This singularizing aura is typically formulated through at least three distinct metapragmatic formulations or levels of rhetorical appeal.

First, a “(life)style” is formulated as an attribute that comes to be possessed by individuals through their own singularized activities. Although the terms “style” and “lifestyle” are abstract nouns, they are routinely accompanied in advertising discourse by semiotic devices that link them to singularized selves. The collage in Figure 20 illustrates some common variants. The terms “style” and “lifestyle” often occur in possessive constructions, where the possessor is denoted by a participant deictic (viz., “my style, my life,” “your style,” “your lifestyle”), thus anchoring (life)style to discrete individuals, whether through indexical reference to a current addressee (“your (life)style”) or through forms of ventriloquated speech giving voice to the reader’s own anxieties about uniqueness (“my style, my life”). Agentive nominalizations (“Stylefinder”), which assign the reader a task to be carried out, or metapragmatic statements in the imperative mood (“Watch videos on mystyle café. Watch now.”) that invite the reader to enter chronotopes of lifestyle, one click at a time, and choose among them, are other forms of singularizing appeal. These formulations are premonitions of larger lifestyle projects available through possessions in the activities of those who possess them.

Second, lifestyle advertising formulates the labor of the consumer—the ongoing activity of consumption itself—as a singularizing value project. Although each possession may well be identical to things possessed by owners of other replicas, their possessors are still able to establish their uniqueness as persons by re-arranging,

adding to, and transforming the stock of their possessions. Whereas each garment or piece of furniture one owns is mass produced (qua token of a type), one's entire wardrobe or living room setting are not mass produced (qua arrays of objects, or token constellations). They are composed over a cycle of many acts of single purchase during the course of a lifetime, and thus may be unique in composition and arrangement (or displayed co-occurrence). Thus the objects one possesses can be transformed from *commodity replicas* (as individual items) into *singular token constellations* (in the aggregate) and, when displayed together, formulated as *co-occurrence styles* that index the biographic uniqueness of persons who possess or display them. In this discourse, therefore, "your style" refers to something that can be aggregated and re-aggregated through many acts of single-purchase. The persona of "uniqueness" is indexed not by any individual object but by the larger array to which it belongs. And this social persona can be reconfigured without limit through further token re-aggregations and co-occurrence displays. Lifestyle advertising typifies the *activity of constructing these token constellations* as emblematic of the *forms of individual freedom and uniqueness* prized in liberal society. It informs the consumer that the recurrent labor of acquiring commodities can produce unique co-occurrence *styles*, which index the uniqueness of their owners and their—now, indexically unique—*lives*.

Third, by virtue of its own dissemination, the metasemiotic discourse of style makes the project of style singularization itself widely known. Once "style" and "lifestyle" are stereotypic indexicals of uniqueness and individuality, a singularized style is itself a presumptive object of auristic value. Everyone may feel they have a unique lifestyle. But the goal of having a unique lifestyle is common to all. This fact transforms social life itself in interesting ways by making "style" and "lifestyle" widely known frameworks for appropriating commodities into personal value projects; and, as register formations typically do, naturalizes this appeal in a culturally local metaphysics (involving, in this case, ideas of individuality, limitless choice, self-expression, authenticity, uniqueness, freedom, eternal youth, attractiveness, desirability, and so on). The value project now proposes a modality of recontextualization that generates limitlessly many singularizing auras.

Uptake and Cyclic Recontextualization

Register models are, in general, principles for the construal of conduct, not constraints on the form of conduct. They serve as principles for the construal of conduct even when the form of conduct departs from stereotypic norms: Every register model generates limitlessly many forms of contrary-to-stereotype conduct, mediated by entextualized tropes, which are only intelligible to someone acquainted with the stereotype (Agha 2007a:159–165). The enregisterment of style is no different.

The idea that one's style makes one unique can be deployed in a large variety of ways in the activities of consumers. Uptake is not reducible to imitation. One can indeed emulate a marketed lifestyle with great fidelity to type. One can also combine elements of a readymade lifestyle with other objects in fractionally congruent ways, thus creating token constellations that trope upon one or more of several widely known alternatives (thus distinguishing oneself from other normalized selves). Or one can adopt an "anti-style" stance, thus making the very act of departing from the system an indexical partial of one's singularized self. Only in the first case is an advertised lifestyle replicated or animated-with-fidelity in the activities of consumers. But in all three cases the metasemiotic discourse of style serves as a framework of construal through which the value projects that individuals severally adopt as their own become intelligible to those they meet.

And troping on lifestyles is not something that only consumers do. There is, indeed, a further recursive logic here. Insofar as *the value projects of individuals* include commitments to indexicals of uniqueness that depart from or trope upon widely enregistered styles, such variation can be re-appropriated within *the value projects of advertising discourses* and remarketed in the next ad campaign as a tropically

distinct set of new lifestyle “types” (classic, retro, neo, “camp,” emo, ethnic, etc.). Such a system of enregistered styles can therefore convert the labor of the consumer into a factor of production for generating value added in the next fashion cycle.

Commoditized Speech

We have been considering speech as a meta-sign—a metasemiotic discourse—of the commodity sphere. But speech can also be incorporated in a commodity register’s object-signs. The fact that speech can be commoditized is unsettling to those who confuse the durability of artifacts with their materiality. Our common folk-theories of language suggest that only durable objects can be commodities: Teacups and utterances are different, our intuitions tell us; the former have materiality, the latter are “immaterial goods,” outside the sphere of the commodity form. But spoken utterances are hardly “immaterial.” They are merely evanescent, or nondurable, when they are experienced as audible sounds. An obvious way of making utterances less evanescent is to write them down. And, if you combine this with print—and, now, electronic—inscription, and also with the right kind of institutions of “training,” you have a much more interesting way of giving utterances a relatively constant and fixed form over events of their production. You can inscribe them in the *habitus* of a person. To focus on this type of case, we have to turn from manufactured goods to commoditized services.

Human Capital

We see commoditized speech in every part of the service sector of the economy. We pay lawyers, accountants, and tax consultants for discursive services. Unlike truck drivers and gardeners, the machines these service professionals drive are made entirely of language. Similarly, doctors, tour guides, computer programmers, stock-brokers, NGO workers, those who canvass door to door, telemarketers, pollsters, sales personnel, all go through periods of “register adjustment.” It takes a lawyer three years before becoming fully licensed to be the kind of human capital that a law firm seeks to acquire. The *Barista* at your local Starbucks is adjusted to the right register of speech and conduct within a few days of training.

In all of these cases, various features of discourse (lexemes, prosody, adjacency pairs, turn-taking mechanisms, topic schedules, idioms, formulaic speech, etc.) are given a highly delimited and differentiated form (officially linked to cognitive and interpersonal task demands). And these differentiated forms are formulated as enregistered styles designed to be animated by those whose activities constitute the transaction.

Labov’s 1972 discoveries about—what he calls—different “contextual styles” at Saks and Macy’s department stores are commodity registers in this sense of “commoditized speech,” although Labov lacks a theoretical framework for describing them as such. Such commoditized speech occurs in the participation framework of the retail encounter. It is animated by the sales clerk, is addressed to a potential buyer, and has a target market design. Different “speech levels” of commoditized retail talk formulate indexical selectivity for different socioeconomic classes of clientele.

Urciuoli 2008 shows that when models of commoditized speech are disseminated beyond the workplace, they readily serve as models of self-redesign by those who seek to enter the workplace. “Skills talk” is a register of commoditized speech which emanates from the commercial sector and disaggregates the worker’s commerce-facilitating abilities into a “skills bundle.” The discourse is used to typify a very large number of human activities and abilities (“everyone has about 700 skills”) and to reclassify them into discrete units of productive labor that can be quantified and ranked, and can themselves be priced when they are linked to pay scales. The discourse formulates the worker as a commodity by extending mensural discourses designed to reason about *product* manufacture and sales to the *labor inputs* that make

product manufacture and sale possible. And the discourse has a ventriloquistic design. It can be used by job-seekers to redescribe themselves in resumes and job interviews as a bundle of skills, and thus to reformulate themselves as quantifiable unit of human capital. In doing so, job-seekers employ the ventriloquated speech of the corporation in which they hope to be embedded as wage labor. Since workers can acquire "skills" through their own activities, and since these activities can also be commoditized, an auxiliary commercial sector of "job training" institutes has emerged where you can purchase books, courses, and diplomas from various "experts" who are there to help you in the endless task of "skills acquisition." And, as Urcioui shows, the treatment of business practices as models for educational practices have substantially re-organized curricular expectations and curriculum design in liberal arts colleges too.

Sourced Speech

A different type of case is one where the speech of one group is used to market commodities to a second target group. In this case the animator of sourced speech is some intermediary, such as the advertiser. A common case is now a type of "attitude" branding where the speech of various ethnic minorities (e.g., African Americans and Latinos in the U.S.) is linked to a brand personality and used to market products which, by association, are infused with the effervescence, energy, "oomph" and "attitude" of the ethnic group. Nike has used this strategy numerous times. Budweiser's prize winning "Whassup?" commercial, a major pop culture phenomenon in its own right, is another example. In such cases, the speech of minority groups is used to target products to mainstream populations.

In other cases, a particular source register contributes to product sales by simulating the speech of the target market itself, thus incorporating a form of indexical selectivity in the textual form of ad copy that is designed performatively to constitute the ad's reader as the one specifically and differentially addressed by its marketing pitch. We have seen numerous examples above, involving advertisements for manufactured products, where characterological images that are already familiar to readers addressed as potential buyers, are now formulated as personae which others will recognize as attributes of owners in the possession phase.

However, when such strategies are deployed in the service sector of the economy, the formulation of what exactly the commodity is and how it can be recycled beyond the point of sale are quite different. For instance, sourced speech is commonly used in marketing tourism. Tourism is an interesting case because here the commodity to be sold (a touristic experience) cannot be experienced directly before the point of sale. It can only be experienced indirectly through discursive and pictorial representations of the tourism site. Moreover, the commodity is neither a physically manufactured object, nor a consumer durable, nor can it become a "possession" (as in the class of cases described in Figure 5, and exemplified above). The commodity on offer is a service, and more than one service provider often collaborates in providing access to it (travel agent, tourism board, airline, etc.). Speech registers play a decisive part in the speech chain that precedes the sale. They are used to reframe the touristic experience by linking it to characterological images designed to make the commodity recognizable and desirable before the point of sale. The touristic experience, another matter entirely, comes later.

Dann 1996 gives playful names to several speech registers that are used to reframe the touristic experience. These include *hippie-hype*, which is not the speech of hippies, but a marketing pitch which employs "the register of the drifter" as a way of creating youth markets for tourism; or *adventure speak*, which employs the "lingo of the explorer" in a similar way; or *Ol' Talk*, the register of nostalgia tourism; or *Spasprech*, the register of health tourism; or *Gastrolingo*, primarily gourmet talk used to promote touristic consumption; or, *Greenspeak*, the promotional register of ecotourism, which employs the idiom of the Green movement to achieve indexical selectivity for its

target market. In such cases, the register fragments that are deployed in ad copy are simulacra of discourses with which a target market is presumed to be familiar. They are incorporated in ad copy in order to formulate indexical selectivity for that subset of the ad's readers who happen to belong to the social domain of the source register.

Institutional and Everyday Ventriloquation

Once we see that the social life of commodity formulations is mediated by reflexive processes—including personification, enregisterment, tropism, and ventriloquation—we can see that such processes unfold in every phase segment of a commodity chain. Focusing only on durable artifacts obscures the processes through which commodities acquire sign-values that are deployed, recontextualized, and transformed in the social lives of persons they link. What distracts is the durable metonym. Consider coffee. Coffee has never been simply a physical object but *a cultural form linked to specific activities* through metasemiotic practices. In 15th century Yemen, where the coffee plant was first domesticated (whence “Arabica”), coffee was linked by Sufi mystics to night-time prayer and, in a setting where alcohol is forbidden, formulated as an aid to spiritual practice and revelation. In Europe after 1900, coffee became available very cheaply as a “proletarian hunger killer” (Mintz 1979) adding warmth to a cold meal, and keeping workers alert in factories. And we have already met the Starbucks *Barista*.

Let us consider some additional cases involving coffee, and perhaps you.

Enregistered Diacritics of Coffee Use and Coffee Talk

Rosebury 1996 shows that the differentiation of coffee as a diacritic of class in the United States was shaped by marketing strategies responding to declining sales. Each year between 1957 and 1988 had seen a decline in the number of coffee drinkers, the number of cups drunk each day, and an age segmentation, whereby people in their 20's drank less coffee than older people, and increasingly identified mass marketed brands of ground coffee (Folgers, Maxwell House) with their parents and grandparents. Advertising and marketing firms proposed strategies of “niche marketing,” first differentiating varieties of coffee products (decaffeinated, instant, blended, flavored, the coffee bean) then bringing them under distinct chronotopic formulations of persona and lifestyle designed for distinct target markets, hoping thereby to expand overall sales; and, by treating the indexical selectivity of personae as “value added” (i.e., increments to value *for those addressed* by them) sought to increase sale price substantially above production costs, hoping thereby to expand net profit per sale. The coffee bean was formulated as emblematic of gourmet lifestyles, linked to “whole” and “natural” foods and those aspiring to them, and to images of class mobility. In gourmet food emporiums (vs. grocery stores), what was sold was the coffee bean (vs. ground coffee), laid out in barrels and burlap sacks (vs. tins), next to the smoked fish and cheese (vs. cornflakes), where the customer could also purchase expensive paraphernalia (grinders, espresso machines), and be waited upon by store clerks offering aid in grinding, instruction in the use of paraphernalia, and lessons in the names of coffee varieties and the geographic provenance of their referents. Once learned, such uses of coffee beans and forms of talk about coffee become available as enregistered emblems of distinction (taste, class, cosmopolitanism) in everyday life.

A more middle class register of “coffee talk” (Gaudio 2003) is associated with the activity of “going out for coffee” at Starbucks (and similar venues), where so-called “ordinary” conversation and appurtenances are incorporated within a composite emblem of class-and-generation-specific lifestyle. Starbucks lifestyles are expressed and experienced in co-occurrence styles—semiotic arrays involving many commodity tokens of “speech, dress, eating, drinking, interior design and other practices” (Gaudio 2003:685)—in which diacritics of coffee use and talk, appear “naturally” to fit with each other in indexically congruent ways. And, yet, however internally

motivated such commodity formulations may seem to those habituated to them, they are readily disaggregated and denaturalized in various forms of metapragmatic commentary by those excluded from the lifestyle, and by those who electively oppose it. Such counter-discourses and practices—mediated by referential alignments and denotational footings (Agha 2007a:96–103, 132–142)—animate class and ethnic differentiation, and oppositional political projects. As Gaudio 2003:684 observes, personnel in working class luncheonettes comment on the high prices at Starbucks; owners of smaller coffee houses speak of the young clientele (often students) as paying for the Starbucks experience with “Mommy and Daddy’s credit cards”; and Mexican-American teenage girls, who treat “coffee” as an eponym of this lifestyle, say “Coffee is for White Girls.” The vandalization of the Starbucks coffee store in Seattle by rioters at the World Trade Organization meeting in November 1999 makes palpable a recognition by political activists that this lifestyle is embedded in the commodity chains of “global capitalism,” a positioning of the lifestyle that denaturalizes the stereotypical figures of urbane aestheticism and European cosmopolitanism which are ventriloquated by marketing and promotional materials and happily inhabited by retail space regulars. All of the tropes of ownership and othering of diacritics, and dependent forms of regrouping, which are so familiar in other status-differentiating registers (Agha 2007a:176ff, 265–272), recur routinely—and unsurprisingly—in the case of commodity registers too, and in the social lives of those linked to each other through them.

Oppositional Enregisterment of Co-Occurrence Styles

When commodity tokens are recontextualized into new co-occurrence styles that trope on established ones, oppositional practices of strategic stylization are sometimes called “style” (in the folk sense), and the social domain of those who deploy the new register is sometimes called a “subculture.” For instance, the demeanor indexicals associated with British Punk personae (Hebdige 1979) consist of a variety of musical and clothing sign-fractions, organized in internally noncongruent co-occurrence styles in relation to their source registers: musical forms juxtapose elements sourced from a variety of previously commoditized musical forms (Glam rock, American Punk, Northern Soul, Reggae, etc.); and garments and corporeal appurtenances involve co-occurrence patterns whose elements are either never treated as garments by others (lavatory chains, safety pins on the cheek), or are treated as garments but never occur in comparable ensembles in the performance of mainstream institutional roles. Punk ensembles deploy internally noncongruent co-occurrence styles in order to trope upon and denaturalize institutional roles stereotypically linked to the animator’s age-set (school uniform fragments plus multiple external zippers), or animator’s gender (men wearing flagrant cosmetics, hair dye and mascara). A configurative object-sign—the performance of otherwise familiar commodity tokens in cotextually noncongruent styles—is given competing emblematic values: It is typified metasemiotically by Punks as an emblem of non-belonging to mainstream white elite culture through explicit discourses of joblessness and rebellion; and, when images of Punk lifestyle are recycled in the mass media, mainstream white elites describe it as expressions of a “nihilistic aesthetic,” positionally re-ventriloquating the emblem.

And yet emblems of Punk lifestyles establish forms of footing not simply against mainstream society but also against other enregistered styles of youth culture, and thus against Mod, Skinhead, Teddy Boy, Hipster and Beat personae. In some cases the differential appropriation of diacritics appears to approximate inverse icons (Agha 2007a:175) of working class positionality: If the Hipster is a “lower-class dandy” whose hyperstylization of ensembles of elegant comestibles (fine tea, jazz) indexes elite aspirations in British society (from which hyperstylization performs a degree of remove), the Beat is often a middle class college-boy drawn to ensembles whose

sign-fractions index a desire to live with “the people” in exotic locales (to which he never moves).

Such oppositional commodity registers metasemiotically formulate their diacritics as noncommodities in certain ways, especially through “spectacular transformations of a whole range of commodities, values, common-sense attitudes, etc.” (Hebdige 1979: 116). And yet, since individual diacritics are acquired through points of sale, it is their deployment in commodity arrays in the possession phase that produces singularizing auras, just as it does for everyone else. Uniqueness is common. What makes it “spectacular” to middle class viewers is its tropic relationship to their own modes of commodity deployment and lifestyle (a figurement that recedes from the standpoint of subgroups insofar as it is common to all). As uniqueness proliferates through group-differentiating commodity registers, the number of perspectives from which the “subculture” construct seems plausible shrinks asymptotically to one. What makes spectacular uniqueness most widely known is its recycling through mainstream institutions such as the media, whose search for large target markets rescales the social domain of those acquainted with its diacritics, and with their formulation as “spectacular,” providing inputs to forms of mainstream footing where the “subculture” formulation remains handy as long as it describes someone else.

Let us now observe that modes of institutional recycling differentiate indexical values of emblems through processes that are often indifferent to the motives of those that perform them.

Transforming and Recycling Emblems

The enregisterment of diacritics of social role and conduct is a historical process, often involving institutional projects that take as inputs the metasemiotic work of earlier institutions, whose goals may be entirely different, and transform the diacritics in repertoire characteristics, range of indexical effects, and the social domain of persons able to recognize or deploy them. For instance, British Received Pronunciation, a register initially formulated in the 18th century as a universal Standard of national pronunciation (and thus an emblem of national unity), was later transformed into an internally differentiated emblem of class distinction through a historical process that linked its diacritics to class personae (through novelistic depictions of London life) and to class-specific markets for products (through magazine ads) during the 19th century. The competence to speak the highest forms of this accent was replicated through increasingly expensive elite (vs. nonelite) schooling, where asymmetric access to schooling qua service-sector commodity made differently ranked forms of the accent available to different populations, differentiating several class-specific speech levels during the 20th century (Agha 2003).

In the case of Japanese women’s language (Inoue 2006), the late 19th century project of formulating a Standard Japanese as an emblem of national modernity formulated a deviant register, “schoolgirl speech” (the speech of school-age daughters of Westernized elites), as a danger to an authentically non-Western Japanese heritage. The existence of this register is presupposed by the growing lifestyle magazine literature of the early 20th century. The lifestyle magazine, which is itself a commodity, and which must find a readership to expand sales, employs this register as a way of achieving indexical selectivity for a target market, initially the growing number of schoolgirls (under conditions of expanding literacy), but soon also post-school-age young women who belong to the rising middle class. By the late 20th century, the speech diacritics of this register are recycled into stereotypic indexicals of several performable figures—normative femininity, propriety, cosmopolitanism, the “urban leisure housewife”—that can differentially be deployed to index roles and identities recognizable by others in specific routines and participation frameworks. Such figures now motivate a range of interpersonal footings through forms of differential deployment that include register avoidance, selectivity for participation frameworks,

and ventriloquistic tropes of hyperfeminization and speaking for another, which differentiate animators from the figures they perform.

Many young professional women avoid women's language in talking to male colleagues and to each other in the workplace. They prefer symmetric use of men's registers of address, indexing status symmetry in the workplace, in responding to male colleagues; and informal registers of peer-group speech, indexing "student-like playfulness," in speaking to each other. Yet these young office workers smoothly switch to pristine women's language (and high honorifics) in out-group speech—when answering phone calls from potential customers, for example—where they are speaking *for the company* (not for themselves), thus ventriloquating "propriety" as the voice of the company in participation frameworks of commodity transaction.

The figure of the "urban leisure housewife" is stereotypically linked to both women's language and consumption diacritics and thus can be animated by deploying either. Female office workers, who avoid women's language in routines of the workplace, readily employ it when they greet each other upon first arriving at work, and "check out" and comment on each other's make-up and choice of clothing for the day. In such routines, lexico-grammatical fractions of the leisure housewife register are deployed along with other indexicals of femininity—high pitch, prosodic elaboration, stereotypically feminine gestures—which cumulatively display *hyperfemininity*, denaturalizing the commodity register on which they trope. As with all entextualized tropes (Agha 2007: 159–165), the cotextual organization of these indexicals shapes the construal of the trope: Cues of hyperfeminization and humorous exaggeration suggest that it is not their own speech; the *topic* of talk (consumption) indexically selects the figure of the leisure-class woman, as now relevant; and the *setting* of the performance (a place of work) differentiates animators from performed figures of leisure lifestyle. Here, the figure of the leisure class housewife, who stereotypically does not need to work and devotes herself to consumption, is ventriloquated by animators who put it to good interpersonal use, while effectively differentiating themselves from the figure they perform.

Conclusion

The notion that there is something called "the commodity"—or "the commodity form"—of which a general theory can be given clings to the metonymic assumptions of classical political economy discussed earlier—the extraction of "exchange" (from interpersonal encounters), of durable goods (from commodity formulations), of "labor" and "use value" (from semiotic activity in general), of "value" (from value projects)—which together narrow our gaze to fragments of a social process that these assumptions cannot describe.

If, by contrast, we wish to understand the ways in which commodities mediate social relations in everyday life, it is necessary to consider, instead, relationships between sociohistorically specific commodity formulations and their uptake in the activities of those acquainted with them. Indeed, when commodities become widely enregistered under lifestyle formulations, as I discuss here, the kinds of social relations they mediate are altogether distinct from those mediated by enregisterment under other commodity formulations, such as post-1990s "brand" formulations of products and politicians, which I discuss elsewhere (Agha 2006), or, in the case of speculative capital, commodity formulations of "risk" through financial derivatives (LiPuma and Lee 2005). It is the relationship of commodity formulations to their outcomes that matters in all such cases, not the characteristics of extractable metonyms.

Although lifestyle formulations of commodities acquire an institutional efflorescence in the value projects of marketing and advertising after the 1970s, the forms of commodity typification on which these projects rely, and to which they commit as genres, can be found in more fragmentary ways in advertising strategies in other

times and places, including much earlier periods, as my opening example shows. But too fond a focus on advertising itself obscures the forms of uptake in which lifestyle formulations are recursively embedded as inputs to recontextualization.

The enregisterment of diacritics is a reflexive social process, which varies considerably in its details, depending on whether the diacritic is made of sound or of some other substance, or whether, as is often the case, of both; whether it is highly localized (lexemes, garments) or highly configurative (speech styles, lifestyles); whether it is enregistered widely or in a small social domain; whether or not it is appropriated by the one acquainted with it, and, if so, how it transforms the habitus of the one appropriating it; whether it is appropriated as a “type” or as a singularized token; and whether particular forms of appropriation (ethnic, gendered, subcultural, etc.) are recommoditized and remarketed, or not.

Institutions of the commodity sphere (product advertising, public relations, job training, etc.) employ such reflexive possibilities as instruments of ventriloquation, mediating forms of membership and exclusion from sociopolitical cohorts of every kind, including class, gender, ethnicity, and nation. Yet the results of these efforts rarely correspond to what institutions recognize as their goals. Given possibilities of everyday reanalysis, institutional projects are far more fragile, far less autonomous of uptake and response, than is generally supposed. Widely enregistered commodity values are often merely inputs to everyday activities that laminate additional sign-values upon accepted ones—through forms of recontextualization and reanalysis—in various social-interpersonal routines and spheres of conduct. Institutions simply provide inputs to massively parallel forms of recontextualization, coordinating fractionally congruent modes of sameness and difference at many demographic scales of social life.

Commodity registers are maintained, altered, or perish through reflexive activities, and are often translated into forms of “common culture” that are presupposed in practices unrelated to consumption. Indeed, widespread institutional formulations remain available as inputs to social life long after they have perished as projects. One may be committed to a lifestyle, but not recognize one’s commitments as precipitates of a marketing campaign treated by millions of others as emblems of their own uniqueness and individuality; or change one’s lifestyle in the face of such recognition. Yet presuppositions of lifestyle discourses, that consumption patterns index uniqueness and individuality, may persist as features of common culture even as specific lifestyles, their target markets and the institutions that address them disappear from sight.

The role category “consumer” has so consistently been used since the 1930s as a mode of address by institutional discourses (Cohen 2004) that it is regarded as a naturalized category of social life by those it addresses. Thus we are all said to be consumers now, to live in a “consumer society” (Bauman 2007). Yet no one who is a consumer is a consumer all the time. Social interaction requires persons to switch footings and roles across distinct practices. No one has so narrow a register range as to rely only on commodity registers as inputs to conduct. Indeed, no one’s actual conduct as a consumer is informed solely by commodity formulations. Contemporary anxieties about the consumer—that the citizen has been replaced by the consumer, or political legitimation by market desire (Bauman 1999)—conflate registers of conduct with actual conduct. But just as honorific registers can be used to veil aggression, and women’s registers in men’s displays of nurturance in every known society, we are not all Wedgewood customers now.

Notes

Acknowledgments. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association in November 2006, and at the Center for Language, Interaction and Culture, UCLA, in May 2008. The images I discuss in the first half of the paper are drawn from the following sources: Figures 1–4 from Koehn 2001; Figure 16 from the

lifestyle catalog, *Title Nine*, Winter 2006; Figure 18 from *The New Yorker* magazine, 2005; elements of the collage in Figure 20 from several web and magazine ads; all remaining advertisements are from issues of *Vanity Fair* that were published between 1983 and 1993.

1. The narrow special case of speech registers—and the even narrower special case of *lexical* registers—has led many to suppose that registers are *bounded* and *discrete* systems, much like paradigms of words on a page (whose tabulation and display comforts this intuition); or, that indexical values *inhere in* speech diacritics (as normative discourses often insist); or are *invariant for* all users (as Standard-setting institutions seek performatively to ensure). Such fantasies fail even for the exhibition case of lexical registers, whose metasemiotic treatment groups together a variety of perceivable diacritics within the register model—from discrete lexemes to gradient co-occurrence styles (cf. “speech levels”), and from linguistic to nonlinguistic signs (e.g., gesture, dress, appurtenances, corporeal demeanors, gait). The treatment of phenomenally diverse diacritics as indexicals of actors’ attributes (group membership, characterological “essence”) yields internally motivated diagrams of social difference that are employed cognitively in rationalizing social differences (Agha 1998), and invoked performatively in re-grouping ascribed identities, whether through expansion or narrowing of the range of diacritics, or through competing valorizations of indexical effects in use (Agha 2007a, ch. 5).

2. According to this metaphysics, an attribute called “value” is imbued into commodities through some specific activity—such as labor or exchange—which fixes this attribute for all other activities. As the varieties of “value” grow progressively more abstract during the 19th century—when homogenous quantities of labor-in-exchange are abstracted from specific varieties of work (Ricardo 2004 [1817]), when “exchange value” is *both* decoupled from observable price (Mill 2004 [1848]:417) and seen as the sole manifestation of “value” itself (Marx 1967 [1867]:39)—labor-in-exchange appears to fix value *in general*, whatever that is (it certainly isn’t price), and a large and lovely abstraction seems to link ideas about “science” to ideas about justice (Gide 1904:60). It is unseemly to quarrel with those excited by all this. My purpose here is to show, first, that the abstraction called “value” is not a possible object of investigation, since limitlessly many specific forms of it are conjured through semiotic activities in everyday life; and, second, that attention to the relationship between specific value projects and their uptake clarifies how persons and groups differentiated by this process become recognizable to each other as social types.

3. This is the problem of “last year’s hat” (Agha 2007a:3), or, more poignantly, the problem of “the thing doubly felt” (Agha 2007c). Last year’s hat is not reducible to the thing of felt, nor the thing you felt—neither the thing made of felt, nor what you experience when you touch it, the feeling of it, hence a thing doubly felt—but a cultural object, whose characteristics are articulated and disarticulated by metasemiotic practices (of fashion, advertising, taste, sumptuary distinction, lifestyle affiliation, etc.) and are thereby transformed as those practices change; which is why you can’t reduce the hat to the thing doubly felt; and, which is why last year’s hat is never the same hat this year, even if the thing doubly felt is exactly the same.

4. It is worth noting that the essays collected in Appadurai 1986b are not concerned with “things” as such (as the anthology’s main title suggests), which is why their utter neglect of the moons of Jupiter is not really a problem, but with commodities (as its subtitle makes clear), defined as things that come under exchange formulations at some point in their social existence. The metaphor of “things” has caught on more widely, however, than the phenomena to which the anthology calls attention, and talk of the circulation of things now appears as talk about culture. The term “circulation” is itself rooted in market ideology, which, as Marx realized—even within the limits of his labor theory of value—gives the appearance of invariant exchange to processes that transform the products of “labor” into differentiated semiotic forms (viz., commodities vs. capital). However, talk of the circulation of culture obscures a far wider range of changes in cultural forms, as I show in the discussion below.

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