CULTURAL MARKETS AND THE SHAPE OF CULTURE

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The second half of Kafka's story 'The Great Wall of China' (Kafka 1971) is concerned with 'one of the most obscure of our institutions', the empire itself. Its obscurity is linked to its spatial extent: 'so vast is our land that no fable can do justice to its vastness, the heavens can scarcely span it—and Peking is only a dot in it, and the imperial palace is less than a dot'. This overwhelming power of distance directly affects what the people know about the Emperor: certainly he is venerated, even worshipped; but it is not clear which Emperor this is, for 'how should we know anything about that—thousands of miles away in the south—almost on the borders of the Tibetan Highlands? And besides, any tidings, even if they did reach us, would arrive far too late, would have become obsolete long before they reached us'. Indeed, although he is described in terms of immortality, the Emperor has the taint of death about him:

The Empire is immortal, but the Emperor himself totters and falls from his throne, yes, whole dynasties sink in the end and breathe their last in one death rattle. Of these struggles and sufferings the people will never know; like tardy arrivals, like strangers in a city, they stand at the end of some densely thronged side street peacefully munching the food they have brought with them, while far away in front, in the Market Square at the heart of the city, the execution of their ruler is proceeding.

The relation that binds the subject to the Emperor is, then, one of unknowing, of an ignorance that at once reinforces the devotion felt by the subject and ties it to a power which is remote and entirely inaccessible.

A parable is told to convey some sense of the impossibility of communication between Emperor and subject. The story it tells is that the Emperor 'has sent a message to you, the humble subject, the insignificant shadow cowering in the remotest distance before the imperial sun; the Emperor from his deathbed has sent a message to you alone'. He whispers this message in the messenger's ear, and the messenger sets forth. But even to
leave the immediate presence of the Emperor is an almost impossible task, so thick are the throngs around his chamber. After immense efforts, 'still he is only making his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he get to the end of them'; and then he must fight his way through the stairs, and then across the courts, and after the courts the second outer palace,

and once more stairs and courts; and once more another palace; and so on for thousands of years; and if at last he should burst through the outermost gate—but never, never can that happen—the imperial capital would lie before him, the centre of the world, crammed to bursting with its own sediment. Nobody could fight his way through here even with a message from a dead man. But you sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself.

The parable tells of the hopeless desire with which the people spin theories about the unknown centre of imperial power, not knowing which Emperor nor even which dynasty is currently reigning. 'Long-dead emperors', writes the narrator, 'are set on the throne in our villages, and one that only lives on in song recently had a proclamation of his read out by the priest before the alter'. All the stories told in the village, as though of recent happenings, are stories of events that have perhaps taken place in an immemorial past, and the living Emperor is confused with all the dead ones.

This profound spatial and therefore temporal lag has equally profound political consequences: as the narrator says, 'If from such appearances anyone should draw the conclusion that in reality we have no Emperor, he would not be far from the truth. Over and over again it must be repeated: There is perhaps no people more faithful to the Emperor than ours in the south, but the Emperor derives no advantage from this fidelity'. The fault may in part be that of the government, which 'has not yet succeeded in developing, or has neglected to develop, the institution of the empire to such precision that its workings extend directly and unceasingly to the farthest frontiers of the land'; it may also be that of the people themselves, the fault of 'a certain feebleness of faith and imaginative power' that prevents them from bringing the empire to life. But it is this very weakness, this failure to interiorize the centralized command structure of the empire, which is 'one of the greatest unifying influences among our people; indeed, if one may dare to use the expression, the very ground on which we live'.

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To speak of the globalization of culture is to speak in the first instance of the globalization of *capitalism*, and hence of a globalization of the commodity form which is expressed in a fully internationalized, interdependent and interlocking market. The achievement of this world system is the culmination of a long process of world trade (that is, a long process of exploitation, colonization, slave-trading... the process of modernity has been one of a violent and ruthless expansion of the markets in raw materials and resources, including people, on the one hand, and in manufactured goods, including informational and cultural products, on the other). Above all, however, this is a market in capital itself, which allows political control within the capitalist world system (and this is now everywhere) to be exercised through (the threat of) disinvestment, and makes possible the structuring of the conditions of weaker regional markets by the more powerful world market. As David Harvey has written (1989: 165), since the breakdown of the Bretton Woods agreement in 1971-1973, 'all nation states have been at the mercy of financial disciplining, either through the effects of capital flow (witness the turnaround in French socialist government policy in the face of strong capital flight after 1981), or by direct institutional disciplining' (for example, of Britain by the International Monetary Fund in 1976).

My interest in this paper is in the incorporation of culture into this generalized market—that is, in the progressive *commoditization* of culture, and in the tension between these two terms. I take globalization to be a secondary effect of the expansion of the commodity form to include immaterial goods. Before specifically discussing the globalization of culture, however, I want to discuss the more general international control and flow of information. Let me propose two models of how this happens.

The first is a model of neo-imperialism, and concerns the global dominance of advanced countries and multinationals. I shall use the example of two of the struggles that took place within the context of the debates within UNESCO over a New World Information and Communication Order, of the Report of the MacBride Commission (MacBride 1980), and of the US withdrawal from UNESCO in 1985, specifically over the issue of the so-called 'free flow of information'.

My first example is that of the 1977 World Administrative Radio conference, held in Geneva and sponsored by UNESCO. This conference became the focus for many of the tensions bound up with the stark asymmetries of the international information
order, and revolved around three major issues, which Lent (1982: 10) has defined as follows:

1. High frequency broadcasting, which is the most crowded part of the radio-magnetic spectrum, where international broadcasting, shortwave radio and amateur citizen bands are found. The United States pushed for enlarging the spectrum for their uses, while Third World nations were opposed because to do so would cut into the lower ranges of shortwave essential for their intra-country communications. The result was a compromise, allocating more frequency, but in the higher ranges that are of limited utility with present technology (cited from the *Chronicle of International Communication*, January, 1980: 3);

2. Space satellite service. The Third World sought reservation of places for their future satellites, while the more developed countries argued for the present 'first come first served' formula, saying that the advancing technology would guarantee developing countries access later. The equatorial countries claimed they have sovereign rights to geo-stationary orbits over their land. The issue was left unresolved and a special WARC on space services was approved for ... 1984;

3. Remote sensing, radio astronomy and meteorological services.

The key arguments at the conference were over the HF (shortwave) band, which is essentially suitable for long-range broadcasting, but is also allocated for 'ship-to-shore and ship-to-ship radio, domestic broadcasting, aeronautical and land mobile services, as well as space research, amateur radio and even the new amateur satellite service' (Smith 1980: 123). The crowding of the HF band causes 'spectrum starving' in Africa, where local signals have to compete on the same spectra with more powerful European transmissions; the band is particularly important for African domestic radio, since its broadcast spectrum

is an ideal means for reaching large poor and dispersed populations without having to erect and service a large number of expensive transmitters. It is perfect for linking remote regions to distant transmitters for long-distance policing, for organizing social services across great deserts and for general administrative work in difficult conditions when expensive equipment is not available. (Smith 1980: 124)

At the same time, the band is being claimed in the West for an expanded range of uses—most recently, mobile phones. The core of the problem, then, is that whilst the West is wasteful in its
use of this resource (having a claim on many frequencies which are not in current use, for example), for the Third World access to the HF spectrum is a basic necessity. Thus at the 1979 conference, France returned a bundle of HF frequencies which were no longer of use and which had for the most part been replaced by other information media. The United States, by contrast, handed back very little—not because the frequencies it owns continue to be of central importance to relinquish a resource which is for the most part owned by private corporations.

In this context, the advanced industrial world's argument that the development of new mobile services would ultimately benefit the Third World tended to look rather hollow. Similarly, its contention that problems of frequency-distribution could be solved by expert planning and by sophisticated technological innovation ignored the fact that the experts tend to be all on the one side and that such proposals make the Third World even more dependent on imported technology. The proposal by the United States to move from double-sideband to single-sideband transmission, which would double the capacity of the HF band, likewise played down the considerable cost of this move and the special problems that it creates for tropical regions.

My second example is that of transborder data flows. Developments in telecommunications in the post-War period have meant that all the information gathered and deployed by governments and by corporations can be stored, retrieved, and transmitted electronically rather than in hard form. The mass of data on which the workings of the economy, of the military forces, and in general the organization and circulation of knowledge depend is constantly moving back and forth across national borders. Control of the international flow of data is a virtual impossibility, and yet at the same time is a precondition of national sovereignty. As Smith (1980: 128) puts it:

Modern systems for ferrying data carry the medical, criminal, employment and credit records of individuals; they also carry the data necessary for modern industries, including credit data of private and public companies; they carry the information required by government to plan development. The strands are inextricable and the companies which control the manufacture of the equipment (which are very few in number) hold the key. There is no longer such a thing as national autonomy without control over data flow and informatics. However much a nation—or all nations—desire to reverse the inequalities in the flow of international news, their
intentions are doomed without autonomy in the field of informatics.

It is impossible, for example, for a Third World country to control electronic data on which it depends, and which it may legally own, if it is stored in the United States or bounced off US satellites, or if it passes through an ISD system. Electronic data is not necessarily 'stored' within national borders, or indeed in any one place. Information which is restricted in one country (such as credit information, access to which is restricted in order to protect personal privacy) may be held off-shore in such a way as to be legally retrievable within the country where the legislation applies. In general, then, 'it is not the case that all data has a final resting place like files on a shelf. It defies territoriality, however hard national governments may seek to pin it down' (Smith 1980: 131).

Let me cite (again from Smith) a couple of specific examples of the ways in which national sovereignty may be restricted by the private or foreign ownership of information systems. The first is that of information collected by NASA's Landsat satellites, especially information about resources such as minerals or harvests, where there is no obligation on NASA or the US government to communicate the information to developing nations, although the information may be readily available to US corporations. Another is that of electronic banking, where rapid and unregulated currency transactions have the potential to devastate national currencies, without any recourse by the countries concerned. And Smith gives some more specific examples:

The airlines' booking systems for internal domestic flights of many European countries (including Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia) depend upon a computer sited in Texas. All the information requirement by the fire departments of Sweden is kept in a special database in Florida. The personnel records of most transnational companies are held in the country where the company has its headquarters. (Smith 1980: 129)

In the last few years there have been arguments, by the French government amongst others, that information crossing national borders constitutes a commodity like any other and should be subject to customs imposts in the same way as physical commodities. A tax on information would be levied on the commercial value of the data. The political opposition to such proposals has, however, been fierce, citing amongst other arguments the problem of how 'value' is to be assessed, and the
near-impossibility of physical control of, for example, data transmitted across national borders by satellite. Joseph McCann's carefully argued polemic (McCann 1986: 153-4) is representative of the US response. The strategy of international product integration, he argues, in addition to making possible the optimal balancing of the flow of payment between countries, also provides for scientists and engineers in many countries to participate in the design and manufacture of computers. This results in building a technology base in several nations, but at the expense of dependence upon a transborder information flow of great magnitude and in real time. This is so, because rapid response of communication between countries is so essential that there is no time for government intervention or control procedures. Permission must be a prior blanket approval for the uninterrupted flow of data. There is no way to envision a requirement to license each transmission.

McCann then goes on to specify two particular difficulties in the application of duties beyond the value of the medium used:

First, the mere transmission of data from France to Italy, via Switzerland, would mean an entry and exit tax merely for transiting Switzerland. This hardly seems to make any kind of economic sense. Second, in order for a government to classify the value of content of the data being transmitted, the owner would be exposed to disclosing proprietary data or perhaps secret design information. This could create horrendous problems for the information provider as well as the government employees to whom the information is disclosed. Therefore, any change in present practices should be discouraged.

This sort of response represents, I think, the dominant form of argument in the West, and it has massive institutional force since the restructuring of UNESCO after the United States' withdrawal and subsequent re-entry on its own terms and conditions (cf. Roach 1990).

This neo-imperialist model—which seems to me perfectly appropriate for talking about certain kinds of market domination in relation to scarce informational resources—is a model of undirectional control, of a simple hierarchical relation of power (between the powerful and the powerless), and of a binary relation of possession to dispossession. Its simple linear structure does, however, begin to fall apart to the extent that it develops
the paradox of a struggle to assert territorial sovereignty over a structure of information which may have no territorial or even spatial fixing.

The second model that I want to develop is that of the post-Fordist decentralization of production and the flow of information. This is a model of multi-directionality, of a constant shifting between the global and the regional, the central and the peripheral, and its force is that it undoes the identity of separate territorial entities directly equated with a power differential. Castells (1983: 7) writes: 'The new space of a world capitalist system that combines the informational and the industrial modes of development is a space of variable geometry, formed by locations hierarchically ordered in a continuously changing network of flows: flows of capital, of labour, of elements of production, of commodities, of information, of decisions, of signals'. In addition to the various processes of decentralization there is a countervailing restructuring of space by multinational information networks, and the phenomenon of localization is thus dependent upon simultaneous processes of delocalization.

In a general sense this has perhaps always been true of the capitalist mode of production; the qualitative difference marking the post-Fordist phase is that 'on the basis of new information and communication technologies, capital can now be described as hypermobile and hyperflexible, tending towards deteritorialization and delocalization' (Robins 1989: 149). Perhaps the best example of the complex effects of this hypermobility is the international production and marketing network for film and television. Since this is the subject of several other papers in this volume, let me mention only what I take to be the salient points:

(1) the development or the increased capacity of regional production centres—Mexico (cf. Sinclair 1990), Sao Paolo, Cairo, Hong Kong, Bombay—and of the European system of co-production; the consolidation of regional markets through cooperative financing and through appeals to cultural commonality;

(2) the expansion of 'local' industries, often driven or sustained by cultural nationalism, but also by the expansion of programming in absolute terms by the VCR, cable, and pay television, satellite television, and the deregulation of channel ownership;

(3) at the same time, the continued concentration of production in traditional centres, especially Hollywood, with the proviso, however, that this centre serves both a 'local' and a 'global' market, and may therefore target different, and differentiated,
localities, and may do so differently for different kinds of programming. As well, US productions may be financed through complex networks of capital aimed at targeting non-US audiences; or, conversely, 'local' productions from the periphery may be targeted at the US market either in the first instance, or as the financially crucial supplement to the local market.

It is in this sense that 'the spatial matrix of capitalism in the period beyond Fordism is one that, in fact, combines and articulates tendencies towards both globalization and localization' (Robins 1989: 149). It is structured on 'the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization' (Appadurai 1990: 5), rather than being the one-way flow of cultural imperialism. This model of multi-directionality has its limits, however, which have to do with the fact that the flow of capital is always asymmetrical, and that post-Fordist production permits no relaxation in the centralization of financial control. As David Harvey (1989: 159) puts it, 'Capitalism is becoming ever more tightly organized through dispersal, geographical mobility, and flexible responses in labour markets, labour processes, and consumer markets'.

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I turn now to the flow of culture, which I have distinguished from information. Culture (the term is of course used in its broadest, ethnographic sense here, as the symbolic order in general and as the multiplicity of spaces in which individual and group effects of identity are worked out; it includes but is not restricted to aesthetic practices) can partly be imagined in the same terms (as a commodity flowing in at least two directions, as native export and as high-technology import), and discussed in terms of a set of comparable policy problems (issues of protectionism, tariffs, regulation and deregulation—of the 'free flow of culture' and its effects in relation to the dissemination of the flow of financial and cultural power). The domain of cultural practice is similarly organized by a tension between integrative and disintegrative movements; it is characterized by various forms of outworking, by a 'regionalization' of production, and by discrepant degrees and interactions of technical, financial, aesthetic, and distributional control. In this sense the two informational models remain valid to describe it.

In another sense, however, the concept of culture must be differentiated from that of information insofar as it is understood as an interactive process rather than as a self-contained commodity. In what follows I want to explore the thesis that an economic vocabulary is finally inadequate fully to understand
the paradox of the commoditization of culture, and in particular to understand the reception, the use, and the effects of cultural texts.

At the simplest level, this process of commoditization is a process of appropriation of cultural objects into a global market: that is, a flow from the periphery to the centre. Harvey (1989: 300) gives the example of the globalization of food-marketing, so that 'the whole world's cuisine is now assembled in one place in almost exactly the same way that the world's geographical complexity is nightly reduced to a series of images on a static television screen'. This is the metaphor of the global supermarket, where you'll find Israeli oranges next to Alaskan smoked salmon and French cheese, Korean ginseng and Moroccan dates; or it's the metaphor of that museum without walls in which the most heterogeneous images with the most diverse provenance become immediately available.

More generally, this process is rooted in a historical transformation of the relations between economic and cultural categories. Post-Fordist and Regulation School theorists speak of a markedly increased integration of culture to economic exchange, the centrality of cultural categories to the design, display, marketing, and consumption of commodities, creating a situation in which, as in the case of that promise of sexual gratification that's metonymically grafted on to the packaging of so many commodities, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the consumption of real and of imaginary goods.

On the other hand, however, the flow of cultural commodities also goes in the other direction, from the centre to the underdeveloped periphery. One of the central theoretical problems here is that of the nationalist framework within which the notion of globalization is usually thought, and which is linked to a political practice of the defence of national rather than international labour markets: that is, to a displacement rather than a contestation of exploitation.

One of the generative metaphors for and within this Imaginary is that of the comprador. The comprador is a figure of foundational ambivalence: perched on the rim, buying from the interior on behalf of the colonial power, but in turn representing and attempting to impose an imported and alien culture, and opposed in turn to the figure of whatever counts as culturally authentic. It's a sterile set of metaphors, because of its unmediated and reflexive dichotomization of the relation between the interior and the exterior. The reality is that the daily cultural fare of ordinary Australians (if I can set aside for the
moment the problem of the normativeness of this category) is an often indistinguishable mix of imported and local texts—where these terms too reflect a particular conceptual instability as soon as we ask what defines the local: is is financial control? distribution? aesthetic control? distinctively national or local formal or thematic structures? The problems with any sharp distinction between the indigenous and the imported are that genres of textuality are not necessarily culturally specific; that the above criteria may be mutually contradictory; and, conversely, that import culture, far from being read as alien, may be cathedt as the emblem of a desired modernity in relation to which the national or the local will seem historically superseded.

On the other hand, the instability of the opposition between the imported and the local comes from the market value of authenticity itself. This is to say that under the particular conditions of a globally integrated cultural market it is precisely whatever can be taken to be fully authentic—a market of local specificity and integrity, of non-integrability—that can most readily be sold on the export market. Appadurai (1986: 45) explains the historical formation of a market in authenticity as follows:

In a general way, we can suggest that with luxury commodities like oriental rugs, as the distance between consumers and producers is shrunk, so the issue of exclusivity gives way to the issue of authenticity. That is, under premodern conditions, the long-distance movement of precious commodities entailed costs that made the acquisition of them in itself a marker of exclusivity and an instrument of sumptuary distinction. Where the control of such objects was not directly subject to state regulation, it was indirectly regulated by the cost of acquisition, so that they stayed within the hands of the few. As technology changes, the reproduction of these objects on a mass basis becomes possible, the dialogue between consumers and the original source becomes more direct, and middle-class consumers become capable (legally and economically) of vying for these objects. The only way to preserve the function of these commodities in the prestige economies of the modern West is to complicate the criteria of authenticity. The very complicated competition and collaboration between 'experts' from the art world, dealers, producers, scholars, and consumers is part of the political economy of taste in the contemporary West.
Another example of this process is given in Silverman's book on Bloomingdales and the aristocracy of taste in the Reagan years. Writing of Bloomingdales' Chinese exhibition in 1980, she says:

Bloomingdales acted quickly on the new [1979] United States-China trade agreement and set to work establishing ties with Chinese craft manufacturers who would fill their orders. The items commissioned were designed by Bloomingdales' artists in New York, who projected their fantasies of the opulent, mysterious empire and ordered accordingly. This, then, was the origin of the 'authentic' Chinese imports, envisioned in New York by Bloomingdales' designers and then custom-made in China, with labels stating in both English and Chinese, 'Made in China for Bloomingdales'. If their production by sweated craft labour belied the handmade character of the Chinese items, their supposed 'rare' and 'unique' qualities were subverted by their very plethora. (Silverman 1986: 24, 29)

The figure of the comprador and of the class of the comprador bourgeoisie—a figure which has always been particularly important to the opening up of China to trade—does have the advantage of indicating that patterns of import and export are themselves never global, are always mediated by class, by racial and ethnic hierarchies, and so on. But this too is complicated in the changed conditions of postmodernity, when the singularity of the hierarchy of cultural distinction breaks down into a plurality of regimes of value without any necessary overlap between them. Thus Jim Collins (1989: 2) writes that 'cultural production is no longer a carefully co-ordinated "system", but provides a range of simultaneous options that have destabilized traditional distinctions between High Art and mere "mass culture". In postmodernist theory 'culture does not have one centre, or no centre, but multiple, simultaneous centres', and the issue is then the reorganization of the entire field of cultural authority.

In order to get away from the problematic of nationalism and the expressive relation that it sets up between the domain of cultural practice and some putative self-identity of the national, I want to reframe the question of globalization in terms of the logic of the commodity form. In particular, it seems to me crucial to ask how monolithic the logic of commoditization actually is.

The concept of commoditization is one of the key categories in any discussion of modernist and in particular postmodernist culture. It involves not just a quantitative argument (since after all books and paintings have been produced for sale in the
marketplace for hundreds of years), but a qualitative one: that
the logic of the commodity form shapes the possibilities of
meaning and of action of cultural texts. Characteristic examples
in the recent literature would be the video clip, with its
dissolution of the distinction between performance and
advertisement, or, more generally, the very thorough integration
of rock music, including its most apparently 'subversive' forms,
into the capitalist reward system.

My argument here is double: first, that commoditization is never
a completed and closed process but only ever a state in the
career of an object or text; on the other hand, however, that it is
precisely those forces and forms that seem most successfully to
resist the process of commoditization which manifest the
greatest potential for integration into it.

The initial stages of my argument closely follow that of
Appadurai and Kopytoff in The Social Life of Things (Appadurai
1986). Kopytoff proposes a necessary tension between
commoditization and culture when he argues that 'the
counterdrive to [the] potential onrush of commoditization is
culture. In the sense that commoditization homogenizes value,
while the essence of culture is discrimination, excessive
commoditization is anti-cultural' (Kopytoff 1986: 73).

Within the framework of their broadly anthropological
definition, the commodity form is not restricted to capitalism. It
is fully distinct neither from barter nor from the gift, insofar as
there is a 'calculative dimension in all these forms of exchange'
(Appadurai 1986: 13). If the commodity is defined in terms of a
situation, in which 'its exchangeability (past, present, or future)
for some other thing is its socially relevant feature', then all
things are potentially commodities. Objects can therefore move,
under the appropriate circumstances, in and out of the
commodity state (that is, between use value and exchange
value). Hence the notion of a 'career' of social things, with
commodity status representing a possible stage in a career
related to a particular kind of context (that of exchange).

The notion of a movement out of the commodity state entails a
certain mechanism of explanation, a logic of de- or anti-
commoditization. In every society, some things are precluded
from this status: in state societies there are restrictions on the
disposal of state property (such things as 'public lands,
monuments, state art collections, the paraphernalia of political
power, royal residences, chiefly insignia, ritual objects...'); there
may be a highly delimited and specialised domain of objects
available to be exchanged; or there may be some form of
'terminal condition, in which further exchange is precluded by fiat': personalized or prescription medicines would be one example; indulgences sold by the Catholic Church would be another. In general, however, 'the fact that an object is bought or exchanged says nothing about its subsequent status and whether it will remain a commodity or not'. Thus slaves will not necessarily remain so, or necessarily do degrading work (they exist as pure commodities only at the moment of sale) (Kopytoff 1986: 74-76).

Unless they are formally decommoditized, however, 'commoditized things remain potential commodities—they continue to have an exchange value, even if they have been effectively withdrawn from their exchange sphere and deactivated, so to speak, as commodities'. If, as Appadurai argues, 'it is typical that objects which represent aesthetic elaboration and objects that serve as sacra are, in many societies, not permitted to occupy the commodity state (either temporarily, socially, or definitionally) for very long', this is because there is a 'perennial and universal tug-of-war between the tendency of all economies to expand the jurisdiction of commoditization and of all cultures to restrict it' (Appadurai 1986: 23, 17).

The crucial question this raises is of what, in our society, resists commoditization; of the extent to which the logic of the cultural is able to restrict the logic of the economic; and of the possibilities of movement out of the commodity state. To what extent, for example, can the cognitive, the ethical, the affective, and the aesthetic resist commoditization (the commoditization of knowledge in science; of ethical decision in professional or commercial relations; of affect in service industries; of the aesthetic in commercially available works of art)? And what sort of value judgement should be made of these processes? Does commoditization 'scar' the object? Is a 'valuable' artwork always and under all circumstances stigmatized by its exchange value?

Capitalist societies are defined, not just by the segmentation of knowledge but by the fact that knowledge itself is commoditized, since, 'though even in the simplest economies there is a complex traffic in things, it is only with increased social, technical, and conceptual differentiation that what we may call a traffic in criteria concerning things develops. That is, only in the latter situation does the buying and selling of expertise regarding the technical, social, or aesthetic appropriateness of commodities become widespread' (Appadurai 1986: 54). It has now become difficult to separate the commoditization of goods from that of services, including the knowledges and feelings. Certainly there are still firmly defined non-commodity spheres in our society (marriage, social exchanges, exchanges of personal or
professional favours are all non-monetized, although this exemption is in many ways illusory: the status of women in marriage, for example, is hardly to be thought outside of a model of property); and there is certainly a culturally specific moral concern in the West 'about the commoditization of human attributes such as labour, intellect, or creativity, or, more recently, human organs, female reproductive capacity, and ova' (Kopyttoff 1986: 83). At the same time, however, there are a number of areas of increasing uncertainty, including that of the aesthetic, especially in its growing integration into advertising and marketing. A different kind of example would be the ambivalent status of blood, which in different countries can be acquired for medical purposes either by donation or by sale. It is perhaps this ambivalence, or this sense of a tension between countervailing forces, which now most precisely characterizes the status, midway between the private and the publicly saleable, of that set of attributes of 'the person' and the personal which have defined in our society the protected domain of the human.

In this respect Kopyttoff has pointed to cultural strategies of singularization (for example of sacred objects) or resingularisation as one of the key mechanisms for movement out of the commodity state. One of the distinctive features of complex societies, he writes,

is that their publicity recognised commoditization operates side by side with innumerable schemes of valuation and singularization devised by individuals, social categories and groups, and these schemes stand in unresolvable conflict with public commoditisation as well as with one another ... There is clearly a yearning for singularization in complex societies. Much of it is satisfied individually, by private singularization, often on principles as mundane as the one that governs the fate of heirlooms and old slippers alike—the longevity of the relation assimilates them in some sense to the person and makes parting from them unthinkable. (Kopyttoff 1986: 79-80)

It is on this principle that the collection, or the valorization of old objects such as cars or houses, function as singularizations which move their objects out of their commodity status. The odd result of such moves, however, is that the process of singularization may result in an increase in the object's exchange value. It is the singularity of the signature that guarantees aesthetic value and, by direct extension, monetary value. By analogy, the gentrification of degraded housing stock can be understood through an ideology of personal, as opposed to financial,
investment, and conceived as a positive aesthetic or historical project; but it tends to result in the paradox that this personal investment may well turn out to have constituted a shrewd financial speculation, thereby undermining precisely that singularity which justified the project in the first place.

Appadurai gives a number of other examples of the diversion of objects back into the trajectory of the commodity. These include economic hardship (leading to the commoditization of heirlooms, antiques, memorabilia); war and plunder (which function as the inverse of trade); and theft. A somewhat different example is that of tourist art, 'in which objects produced for aesthetic, ceremonial, or sumptuary use in small, face-to-face communities are transformed culturally, economically, and socially by the tastes, markets, and ideologies of larger economies' (Appadurai 1986: 26). But perhaps the most interesting examples from contemporary culture of the diversion of commodities from their original nexus can be found in the domain of fashion, domestic display, and collecting in the modern West. In the high-tech look inspired by the Bauhaus, the functionality of factories, warehouses, and workplaces is diverted to household aesthetics. The uniforms of various occupations are turned into the vocabulary of costume, in the logic of found art, the everyday commodity is framed and aestheticized. These are all examples of what we might call commoditization by diversion, where value, in the art or fashion market, is accelerated or enhanced by placing objects and things in unlikely contexts. It is the aesthetics of decontextualization (itself driven by the quest for novelty) that is at the heart of the display, in highbrow Western homes, of the tools and artifacts of the 'other': the Turkmen saddlebag, Masai spear, Dinka basket. In these objects, we see not only the equation of the authentic with the exotic everyday object, but also the aesthetics of diversion. Such diversion is not only an instrument of commoditization of the object, but also of the (potential) intensification of commoditization by the enhancement of value attendant upon its diversion. This enhancement of value through the diversion of commodities from their customary circuits underlies the plunder of enemy valuables in warfare, the purchase and display of 'primitive' utilitarian objects, the framing of 'found' objects, the making of collections of any sort. In all these examples, diversions of things combine the aesthetic impulse, the entrepreneurial link, and the touch of the morally shocking. (Appadurai 1986: 28)
These examples, and many others, constitute a fable about the power of the empire of the commodity to enclose even and especially that which resists it. Although I've spoken of the resistance of the cultural to commodification, this story is ultimately rather more like that of the neo-colonial control of the international order of information and communication.

Against this story, however, let me set that other fable of empire with which I began. In Kafka's tale the Chinese Empire is at once all-powerful and ineffectual; it has the characteristic of any excessively powerful and excessively complex system of an exponentially increased vulnerability. It seems clear that Kafka attributes this to a kind of unconscious efficacy on the part of the people themselves: a mixture of veneration and disbelief, such that even reports about the distant dynastic powers which might possibly be true are treated with a mocking disdain. At the same time it is a fable about the relation between information systems and entropy.

Its central point, I take it, is this: that the Emperor has sent a message to you alone, but that there is never any chance that you will receive it, and even were this by some miracle to happen, the sender would have been long dead. He dies in his bed, surrounded by the tiered hierarchies of princes and potentates, or he is violently executed in the Square at the heart of the city; while you stand like a stranger in the city, in a densely thronged side street, peacefully munching the food you have brought with you.

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Author/s:
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Title:
Cultural markets and the shape of culture

Date:
1993

Citation:

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34283

File Description:
Cultural markets and the shape of culture

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