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Consuming Fiction: Stories about Consumerism, Shopping and Consumption

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Abstract: From a critical cultural studies perspective, this paper acknowledges the tension between culture and materiality, and asserts that opportunities for informal, critical adult learning are present in everyday life. It uses consumerism as an example of hegemonic ideology encountered in daily living, and presents two anti-hegemonic responses to it.

Introduction

Initially sidelined in critical scholarship, consumption has become a topic of great interest among both scholars and consumers. Consumerism exemplifies what Gramsci (1971) considers hegemonic ideology. This paper juxtaposes mainstream consumerist discourse with two counter-discourses. It illustrates how individuals encounter multiple understandings of and responses to ideologies and, as citizens and consumers, have to negotiate their way through them in the context of their own material circumstances. I focus on narratives found in three contemporary English-language novels. Their storylines and characters illustrate that individuals encounter and construct multiple discourses of consumerism and practices of shopping and consumption. I further relate this analysis to the contention of some adult educators that learning occurs throughout daily living and that reading fiction can spur critical exploration of social issues.

Theoretical Perspective and Concepts

Informed by a critical cultural studies perspective, this inquiry acknowledges the politics of everyday life. I use Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concepts of "hegemony," "ideology" and "common sense," as well as his ideas about the role of intellectuals in ideological production. For Gramsci, learning occurs not just in the formal school settings, but also in informal settings throughout an ideologically charged civil society. Using consumerism as an example of hegemonic ideology and the claim that the "free market" amplifies the democratic aims of choice and freedom as an example of common sense, I regard novelists as intellectuals whose works either reinforce or challenge hegemonic ideology and can encourage informal adult learning.

I complement these concepts with Raymond Williams' (2005) addition of two types of non-hegemonic responses:

There is a simple theoretical distinction between alternative and oppositional, that is to say between someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it, and someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light. (pp. 41-42)

Because hegemony incorporates multiple interests, it is flexible and accommodating – but not to such a degree that its central interests are lost. Those in positions of power will attempt to win over non-hegemonic forces; if this is not possible, it will seek ways to suppress them.

Finally, I relate these concepts to the field of adult education through the work of Griff Foley (2001). I find his concept of "incidental learning" which "has to be uncovered...[because it is] informal, incidental and embedded in other activities" (Foley, 2001, p. 77) especially useful. Foley focuses his research on the learning that emerges in the course of collective action;

I stretch his thoughts further, asking how unorganized and sometimes solitary activities – such as reading fiction or shopping – can also spur radical learning.

Methodology

Juxtaposing the characters and storylines of three novels, I borrow from semiotic and narrative analysis. I concur with cultural studies scholars who assert that intertextual analysis, which interprets a cultural text or image “in relation to the wider cultural and social panorama, consisting of other texts[,]... enables a more nuanced and better grounded analysis of a popular text than the formalistic semiotics or narrative analysis” (Saukko, 2003, pp. 103-104).

Other scholars have begun to think about writing as more than a way of conveying knowledge, extending it to a method of inquiry. For Laurel Richardson (2000), writing itself can be a process during which learning develops unpredictably. Extending that proposition, I ask this question: If writing can become a form of learning for the researcher, can reading – either fiction or non-fiction – similarly become a form of learning, in an informal, perhaps unpredictable way? My aim here is similar to that of Jane Dawson (2003) in her analysis of T. S. Eliot’s poem “Four Quartets” as an alternative to what has become the mainstream discourse of lifelong learning.

Following Christine Jarvis (2003), I suggest that a critical, emotional reading of fiction – getting to know and empathize with different characters, their stories and their points of view – can build awareness of social issues and encourage reflexivity in readers’ daily lives.

Increasingly influenced by neoliberal rhetoric of human capital development, educational studies commonly addresses reading in relation to literacy skills; however, as Jarvis (2003) notes,

reading is also a form of consumption, constructed by desire and aspiration. As such it is a space in which to practice ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu, 1984) as part of the construction of identity and identification. As Beckett and Morris (2001) demonstrated, lifelong learning is an ontological process; learners are engaged in becoming as much as in knowing. (p. 262)

Unlike Jarvis, who sets her study in a formal classroom, I limit my exploration here to my own analysis and response to fictional works.

Analysis

In my own reading of three novels dealing with consumerism, shopping and consumption, I find evidence of ideological narratives. In addition to a hegemonic consumerist narrative, exemplified by Sophie Kinsella’s novel *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, I explore what Williams (1980) might consider an alternative response, found in Douglas Coupland’s novel *Generation X*, and an oppositional response, exemplified by Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats*.

Narrative 1: Embrace of a Hegemonic Ideology

Don’t get me wrong. I like museums. I really do. And I’m really interested in Korean art. It’s just that the floors are really hard, and I’m wearing quite tight boots, and it’s hot so I’ve taken off my jacket and it’s slithering around in my arms. And it’s weird but I keep thinking I can hear the sound of a cash till. It must be in my imagination.

I’m sitting blankly, wondering if I can summon the energy to stand up again, when the group of Japanese tourists comes into the gallery, and I feel compelled to get to my feet and pretend I’m looking at something. I peer vaguely at a piece of tapestry, then stride off down a corridor lined with exhibits of old Indian tiles. I’m just thinking that maybe we should get the Fired Earth catalogue, when I glimpse something through a metal grille and stop dead with shock.

Am I dreaming? Is it a mirage? I can see a cash register, and a queue of people, and a display cabinet with price tags...

Oh my God, I was right! It's a shop! There's a *shop*, right there in front of me! (Kinsella, 2001, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, p. 103).

Confessions of a Shopaholic (Kinsella, 2001) introduces Becky Bloomwood, a young, college-educated, white woman working in London for a small financial publication. As the novel's title suggests, Becky is "addicted" to shopping. The novel is a compilation of stories about her daily experiences coping with a boring job and evading her creditors. Readers follow her as she is first wooed by a wealthy and aristocratic (but unattractive and socially awkward) man, and then as she falls in love with Luke Brandon, a successful public relations professional (and a witty and handsome man). The story turns when Becky is drawn into the financial problems of her parents' neighbours who have been misled by an investment company and lost a substantial amount of their savings. To earn extra money, she writes a newspaper article about their predicament and, enjoying the resulting publicity, appears on a television show. She brings the neighbours' case to the public eye and becomes, in the eye of her beloved, a person of intelligence and integrity – as well as feminine beauty and style.

For this heroine, it is consumption, rather than work or other activities, which leads to her success. It enables her to invent the persona and, ultimately, the life of her dreams – dreams which mainstream media and advertising imply that we all share. Becky has what really matters: style and an appropriately self-deprecating manner. She corresponds to the Western hegemonic stereotype of "woman" as an uncontrollable shopper who, ultimately, means no harm and balances "man's" obsession with work. By the novel's end, even she recognizes that shopping and acquisition are insufficient; she comes to realize that what she is missing is a romantic relationship. Luckily, she discovers that her attraction to Luke is mutual. Her story embraces hegemony in several ways: It presents consumerism as a path to social identity and status; it reflects idealized notions of gender, race and nationality; and its connection of consumption, gender, race, nationality and class reiterates hegemonic cultural values.

Narrative 2: The Birth of Cynicism

We live small lives on the periphery; we are marginalized and there's a great deal in which we choose not to participate. We wanted silence and we have that silence now. We arrived here speckled in sores and zits, our colons so tied in knots that we never thought we'd have a bowel movement again. Our systems had stopped working, jammed with the odor of copy machines, Wite-Out, the smell of bond paper, and the endless stress of pointless jobs done grudgingly to little applause. We had compulsions that made us confuse shopping with creativity, to take downers and assume that merely renting a video on a Saturday night was enough. But now that we live here in the desert, things are much, much better. (Coupland, 1991, *Generation X*, p. 11)

This is the novel which popularized the term "generation X." Readers meet narrator Andy, the other main characters, Dag and Claire, and an array of their friends, work acquaintances and family members. Andy, Dag and Claire have come from different places in the United States and Canada, "but where you're from feels sort of irrelevant these days ('Since everyone has the same stores in their mini-malls,' according to my younger brother, Tyler)," explains Andy (Coupland, 1991, p. 4). Having left behind middle class families and jobs, each of them now has a "McJob ('Low pay, low prestige, low benefits, low future')" (Coupland, 1991, p. 5), and lives in the same housing complex in Palm Springs, California.

As the excerpts above suggest, these three characters recognize the superficiality of their consumer culture. As the novel's title suggests, they are stand-ins for middle-Americans (and, by extension, Canadians) of their age (and, by implication, their white race). Having come of age in postmodern consumerist societies, they recognize the false promise of post-War consumerism, and the environmental and social problems that it has created. They articulate an unwillingness to embrace it. On the other hand, they do little more than belittle continued acceptance and enactment of consumerism, poking fun at the people around them and the society from which they have purposefully marginalized themselves. Their sarcasm is witty and clever, and often insightful; however, they are ultimately left with little more than cynicism about social and political structures and cultural institutions in general, and a lack of preferable alternatives to the status quo.

Narrative 3: Committed Resistance

My American Wife!

Meat is the Message. Each weekly half-hour episode of *My American Wife!* must culminate in the celebration of a featured meat, climaxing in its glorious consumption. It's the meat (not the Mrs.) who's the star of our show! Of course, the "Wife of the Week" is important too. She must be attractive, appetizing, and all-American. She is the Meat Made Manifest: ample, robust, yet never tough. Through her, Japanese housewives will feel the hearty sense of warmth, of comfort, of hearth and home – the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America. (Ozeki, 1998, *My Year of Meats*, p. 8).

At the centre of this novel is the character Jane Takagi-Little, a Japanese-American documentary filmmaker hired to produce a television series promoting the American beef industry to Japanese consumers. *My American Wife!*, the television series, uses "typical" American families in which women/wives/mothers buy, cook and serve meat-based dinners to men/husbands/fathers and their children. Working with her Japanese crew, Jane struggles to identify suitable families, even as she understands the impossibility of this task. Single and child-free, and herself an example of the racial and cultural hybridity characteristic of postmodernism and globalization, Jane personifies the gap between the imagined American woman and the reality of contemporary American demographics. The novel's complex characters and stories include Jane's colleagues and the family members whom she meets in the course of the series' production; her lover Sloan, a white, "dominant male" (Ozeki, 1998, p. 91) who plays saxophone in a jazz band; and the Japanese advertising representative handling this project, Joichi Ueno (who gives himself the nickname "John Wayne") and his unhappy wife, Akiko. Together, these characters and their stories both reflect and dispute hegemonic images of an America populated by white, middle class, nuclear, heterosexually-parented families living according to clear gender roles.

As Jane travels across America, encounters diverse families, corresponds with her supervisor in Japan and eventually meets Akiko, she clarifies the extent to which cultural images of gender, race, class, nationality and sexuality are socially constructed to meet certain ends. *My Year of Meats*, the fictional television series, has as its end the capitalist goal of commercial success for the American beef industry in Asia. *My Year of Meats*, the real work of fiction, is critical of that aim and the associated aims of cultural and racial imperialism. It exposes the damaging health and ecological consequences of cattle farming, beef production and meat consumption, as well as the insidious penetration and acceptance of ideological constructions in individuals' lives and society in general. By the novel's end, Jane is fired from the project, and sends copies of her film footage to members of the families most hurt by both the beef industry

and how the television series presented them. One family member explains what she wants Jane to do with the tape: “‘Spread the word,’ said Bunny. ‘Give ‘em your documentary. Nah, you ain’t got no money. Sell it to them. Whatever you want. The main thing is, people gotta know.’” (Ozeki, 1998, pp. 357-358). Twisting the original purpose of the footage, Jane edits it into a critical documentary which she sells to American and international media outlets, creating a resource for informal critical learning about the politics of consumption. In this way, she takes up what Williams (2005) refers to as an oppositional response, and engages in a creative form of committed resistance.

Discussion

These novels offer three examples of the various narratives of and messages about consumerism, shopping and consumption in contemporary Canada and other Western countries. In works of fiction, characters might adopt one or another of these messages. More complex narratives and characters make a simplistic response to hegemonic messages less likely. Of these three novels, the most simplistic is *Confessions of a Shopoholic* and the most complex is *My Year of Meats*. In the former, characters are recognizable but, at the same time, they are superficial and predictable. The lives of the lead characters, as well as the assorted peripheral characters whom we meet in this book, are consistent with hegemonic ideologies and common sense.

In *My Year of Meats*, characters represent a range of circumstances and points of view. Some seem familiar and sympathetic, and others seem more unfamiliar and extreme, depending on how we understand and relate to them. Learning does not necessarily involve adoption of one or another of the responses in the narratives; rather, it is individuals’ negotiation of multiple narratives as they engage in activities such as reading or shopping. Williams’ (2005) distinction between hegemonic, alternative and oppositional responses might imply that individuals act consistently in one way or another; however, material circumstances combine with cultural ideals personal histories to influence how people ultimately shop and consume.

Popular interest in these topics has exploded, indicated by these novels as well as documentary films, investigative non-fiction books and media stories. Relevant scholarship has expanded too, based largely in sociology, anthropology, cultural studies or home economics, to complement mainstream marketing work. Critical scholarship has tended to be conceptual and abstract rather than empirical, or to focus on historical case studies.

¹ Much of the existing empirical research has focused on children and youth, rather than adults. Within sociology, Sharon Zukin (2005) has studied shoppers, including how social characteristics relate to shopping practices; however, she stops short of asking how shopping can engage consumers in critical learning.

Within the field of adult education, interest in these topics is also emerging. Robin Wright (2006) has explored how media consumption can influence the development of critical analysis among viewers. Jennifer Sandlin (2005) has explored formal consumer education as well as informal anti-consumerist activities such as “culture jamming.” In outlining “three different reactions to consumer culture crafted by different forms of consumer education” (Sandlin, 2005, p. 174), she notes that some embrace consumption, others question consumerism on an individual basis, and still others organize collective anti-consumerist responses. The first reaction resembles the narrative of *Confessions of a Shopaholic* and tries to teach people how to be assertive shoppers. The last reaction resembles that of committed resistance found in *All Over Creation*. It is an example of Williams’ (1980) “oppositional” response and most likely affords an opportunity for Foley’s (2001) incidental learning. The second reaction differs from the cynicism found in *Generation X*; however, they share a postmodern, neoliberal, individualistic perspective on learning and consumption and are examples of Williams’ (2005) alternative response.

In this paper, I have presented examples of how incidental learning (Foley, 2001) might occur in daily activities such as reading or shopping. Still, the potential for an apparently mundane, often belittled activity such as shopping or a typically solitary activity such as reading to prompt critical learning remains largely unexplored. The realization that adult learning occurs beyond educational institutions, in the diverse, unpredictable lives of individuals, suggests that adult educators consider the potential for the activities of daily life to deepen understandings of social connections, adult learning and consumerism in the current era of globalization.

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¹ See, for example, Cohen's (2003) tracing of the development of the United States as a Consumer's Republic or Inderpal Grewal's (2005) discussion of the introduction of the Indian Barbie doll.

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