Selected Topics in Business Administration:

Consumption: An Act of Creativity

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Opening lines

Contemporary conceptualizations of consumption evolve around the distinction between 'passive' and 'active' consumption. In the former case, consumption is a self-regulated and structured act according to Laclau (in Du Gay, 1996: 81), undifferentiated at the level of individuals, as well as massive and homogeneous, a global phenomenon. It is unchanging, simulated, governed by producers to serve their economic and political interests, it is thus predictable, measurable, and a priori to consumption. Simply put, the consumer is 'made up' by the producer (ibid: 75). In the latter case, consumption is a productive act of creativity, a 'poiesis' according to de Certeau (ibid: 86) involving the differentiation of signifying processes at the level of consumers, thus local. Moreover, it is authentic, changing, unpredictable, a priori to and separate from production.

Nevertheless, this active-passive binary representation of consumption as either 'structural pessimism' and 'heady romanticism (ibid: 7) is rigid since it fails to capture the dynamic complexity and interdependence between creative and created consumption as well as reduces consumption to any of the four solutions: either active or passive, or both at the same time or located along the continuum between the binary poles. In other words, fails to capture that consumption is a "live information system" (Gabriels & Lang: 53-54), that is, a meaningful practice that is enmeshed in relationships of power.

We therefore need to lower the artificial boundary between creativity and non-creativity in consumption, that is, see both domains as articulated moments of a 'cultural economy' (Du Gay, 1997a: 4-5). According to Laclau these are dislocated and relational semi-identities as they are not fully constituted objectivities (in Du Gay, 1997b: 289-290). Their exterior both denies and provides them with the conditions of existence at once and the same time: production (consumption) as a meaningful practice builds on consumption (production) as meaningful practice which allows or disallows the former's existence.

Thus, in what follows we shall examine consumption as an articulated and dislocated entity dependent, but not equal or reducible to production - and vice versa. Taking this thesis further, I would argue that dislocation constructs a field of signifying relationships that enables the simultaneous modelling of consumption and production in a framework to capture their articulation in relation to the various themes that underlie them. By way of examples taken mainly from the fields of music, media, and technology I shall show how this framework organizes this articulation without falling into the rigidity of the binary opposition active-passive consumption.

Framing Consumption and Production

Conceptualizing production and consumption as dislocated entities brings variability in both their composition and relationship as. We can thus consider them as open sets in the sense that their limits and elements are determined by the very persons subjected to the prevailing discourses that qualify each of these entities. This indicates that the way both variables are defined is a contingent and historical process - were they not contingent they would be fully defined, delimited, fixed set of meanings (1). Yet contingency determines a field of signifying relationships where both variables exist at the same time, that is, at the intersection of both sets. This is the point of junction where a particular discursive network links both entities, that of the 'consumer', and which tends to be hegemonic in the Gramscian sense (Du Gay, 1996: 76-77). This does not mean that all signifying practices have collapsed into a unique mode of representing reality. They are similar discourses in that they emphasize the 'consumer' but not identical as this would imply that both entities perfectly overlap, that is, are equal sets that disallow other discourses to form networks and eventually compete so as to prevail over the existing one. Furthermore, this approach is *not* tantamount to extracting from both consumption and production their common features as this would imply that they are separate and fully constituted objectivities.

To establish the elements that exist in the intersection of the two sets I am proposing to adopt a framework organized around five strategies (2). Firstly, determine the *teleological identity* of those elements that are consumed or produced, that is, understand what stories objects have been given to embody. Secondly, in considering consumption and production as a particular process, *the placing of ownership*, which involves bringing the teleological identity of the object within the sphere of the subjectivities of both the consumer and producer, examine how this process of mediation takes place through our senses, other individuals as well as technologies. Thirdly, attempt to find through *the cross-articulation of identities*, that between objects and subjects, a correspondence between the stories that objects carry and the self. Fourth, identify *articulational gaps*, that is, the degree to which the teleological identity fails from the actual identity as a cultural experience and a function of our narrative. Fifth, account for an *articulational convergence*, the attempt to close the gap by reconstructing identities through new explorations and transformational practices. Finally, in the course of applying the framework, establish how power is enmeshed during the process of cross-articulating identities.

We shall now proceed in examining and applying each point in turn.

Objects and Ideal Identities

To determine the 'teleological identity' of those elements that are consumed or produced we need to understand what stories objects have been given to embody.

The 'passive consumption' approach considers that objects according to Marx (in Slater: 108) have use-value, the substantive elements of the economy, and exchange-value, the mediated elements in the market depending on their use-value. These are seen to derive from needs which, despite their being unpredictable, are necessary for the existence and the expansion of the logic of capital (ibid.). It is a logic that is organized in a political economy, the structured distribution of political and economic power into two distinct classes, namely, a privileged class of owners and a subordinate consumer-worker class which is exploited by the system, since according to Adorno and Horkheimer (in Negus: 71), what underlies the logic of capital in the form of 'culture industry', is instrumental rationality, the tendency to dominate the natural world leading to logical calculations and empiricism. In other words, this critique follows closely Marx's claim (in Real: 26) that the material infrastructural base determines the superstructural social and cultural expressions of a society. It follows that needs are commodified, objects to be manipulated.

Transposing these arguments in the field of music would imply that the commercial base of popular music determines the consciousness of popular music consumers (Real: 26-27), in other words, that the major labels such as Universal or Warner would induce an individual to acquire those texts that contribute to the expansion of their capital. Although it is true that producers construct carefully-thought and managed aesthetic products with the aim to attract the largest audience possible, there is no guarantee that one should choose an artist produced by a major label (Real: 27-28) let alone acquire a CD by virtue of precise needs. Needs are variable, unpredictable, and whimsical that do not obey to rational laws not to mention that rationality is a variable in itself (Miller & Rose, 1997b: 25-26).

But needs are socially constructed for Bourdieu (in Johnson: 5-6) who sees in the 'habitus' a system of "durable, transposable dispositions" that structure social actions within a field, a determinant of taste and preference thus of consumption. Thus, the choice to acquire either a classical or popular musical text depends on the habitus and the field one is in, differences that construct and maintain class differences (Du Gay et al: 98). Yet this does not exclude that an individual chooses to listen both genres let alone that consumption may be gendered or generational (ibid: 98-102) transcending class relationships.

From these accounts we can see that a conceptualization or a typology of needs is problematic, a point made by Baudrillard when arguing against Galbraith who held that

without the system of production needs would not exist (Baudrillard: 41-42). For Baudrillard needs do not determine consumption since they are linked to objects whose denoted meaning is not substitutable: we only have connoted meanings which are changing and fleeting since they obey to a system of needs, and consumption "is a function of production and not a function of pleasures" (ibid: 46, original emphasis). Yet this view is not without its difficulties: although a connotation of comfort can be transferred from the washing machine to a garment, as Baudrillard remarks (ibid: 44), it becomes less obvious what connotation is transferred from one CD to another. To this Baudrillard would probably argue that since the relationship between signifier and signified is deferred to the extent that the meaning has become lost and the signified become self-referential, the boundaries between reality and representation have collapsed. And this is the case with the names of rock bands which are meaningless, entirely self-referential making a temporary impact on consciousness (Gabriels & Lang: 63-64). However, one can still find a loose association between names and genre of music, such as 'Scorpions' and 'heavy metal' as being part of the overall meaning the band conveys through performance, whether live or mediated, a collaborative meaning-making process as the result of the enacted self (Finnegan, 1997b: 138-139).

What the above accounts fail to capture is the contingency of 'teleological identities', that, although meanings may be induced and encoded from the outside, the producers and advertisers, their interpretation and reading are deeply personal, thus determined by the consciousness, the subjectivity of consumers (Real: 12). Yet a 'teleological identity' has a more complex dimension going beyond the connoted meaning into the stories that objects have been given to carry by highlighting their stereotypes, conventions (Gabriels & Lang: 76) and I would add myths, as well as their evolution in time.

Therefore, one can say that the 'teleological identity' that the logic of capital constructs is that of a value placed on objects as a result of class-determined material processes as well as needs and signs. However, value is determined by the identity the object is given in that it is a component of the whole story of the object and not its unique representation.

Owners of Identities

Once the identity of the object is established, we need to take it as our own, make it familiar and personal. To a certain way extract it from the outside and bring it into our inner self as able semioticians to read the different stories convey (Gabriels & Lang: 75). The 'placing of ownership' implies that the object is brought to us unconsciously, interpellated according to Althusser (in Woodward, 1997a: 42), which I would argue is a

learned capacity as well as it is consciously controlled since some individuals tend to occupy some positions rather than others. Ownership is a mental process independent from bringing and object to a physical place by purchasing it (3).

For the 'passive consumption' accounts, the process of consumption is pre-determined and fixed according to the way economic interests are best served. In other words, the 'placing of ownership' is because of the economic structure suggesting that there is a unique consciousness and that forces of capital are external to culture and society having their own momentum and trajectory: there is an a priori determination of the possible interpretations that consumers may make from reading the stories objects carry. It is us who however construct narratives for objects as well as have narratives for ourselves: the particular way we are subject positioned will also establish the particular object to be consumed or produced.

Thus, consumption and production should be seen as a process of narrating objects and subjects, using culturally developed resources to formulate identities and culture as well as enact them by constructing reality. In the same vein, a musical text as a narrative communicates certain meanings or structures, offers its audiences a worldview, a way or interpreting experiences according to Grossberg (in Real: 11-12). It is not the worldview of the producer, a point illustrated by the disagreements between producers and artists over the control of artistic work (Negus: 95-98). In addition, self-narratives are structured around conventions stressing the individual, 'I', the self-hero, who gives a sense of identity and control (Finnegan, 1997a: 85). Conventions have the purpose to coordinate not only productive activities, but also audience behaviors and even concepts about what music is, hence a plethora of conventions that determine a contrasting 'musicscape'. For instance, in classical music composition is prior to performance and musicians are formally taught to specialize in a specific instrument whereas in contemporary music formal training is not the rule and given that the core of compositions is constructed around a few chords, it is developed through performance (Finnegan, 1997b: 126-127). Thus, when audiences choose between a classical or contemporary performance, they know what conventions apply, thus know how to appreciate a text. However, a common complaint by rock stars is that audiences often expect the performance to be the perfect reproduction of the recorded text (Online 1).

Therefore, objects and texts are mediated by our senses, if one considers media as any communication relay (Real: 9). This I would define as a first-order mediation that links our self to our surrounding and the elements that compose it, the phenotype, an open set (4) where oneself is part of the surrounding of another self. Equally, one can also distinguish a second-order mediation, that takes place through other persons as well as the mass and interpersonal media. The effect of mediation, whether first, or second

order, is to place 'ownership', leading to the lowering of the boundary between private and public spheres, between self and 'phenotype' hence a dislocation. Fascination of a soap opera such as 'The Bold and the Beautiful' may be due to the similarity of paces between social and economic practices and that represented in the opera (Mackay, 1997a: 31) or because of 'textual poaching' according to de Certeau (in Real: 43-44), where receivers' appropriate texts for their purpose. An additional case in point is the adoption of relaxed and spontaneous mode of address and interactive styles in mass media with the aim to approximate the norms of ordinary and informal conversation traditionally associated with private interpersonal encounters according to Scannell (in Moores: 221). Yet this may be seen as a strategy to attract audiences where the use of informal language in broadcasting has given place to the 'conversationalization of public discourse' for Fairclough (in Moores: 224), whose key characteristic is 'synthetic personalization', the simulation of a personal relation between text and audience, a 'hyperreal' world (Baudrillard: 167) populated by 'pseudo-individual' artefacts according to Adorno and Horkheimer (in Negus: 75). However, not only are processes of standardization qualitatively different in the field of music from manufacturing for instance following Gendon (ibid: 82), but also contingency of identities undermines simulation and interchangeability.

To sum thus far, despite the feeling one gets that there is very little authenticity in the objects we consume to the extent of sometimes finding them boring, both the narratives of the subject and the object are variable and authentic.

The 'placing of ownership' involves ownership spatialization of identities - objects need not be physically in our proximate environment. Thus, the sense of place becomes the extension of us since "places form a reservoir of meanings which people can draw upon to tell stories about and thereby define themselves" (Thrift: 160). It is the linking space between the self and our 'phenotype', conceptualized similarly to Ingold's 'dwelling perspective' where place is seen as the condition for one's existence as it is constantly constructed through our interaction with others (ibid: 196). The self can thus be extended without limit.

Through new information technologies the self is globally spatialized leading to redefinitions of our sense of place and time, or rather to the loss of them owing to the increased information flow. For Giddens, in the transition from pre-modern to modern societies, social relationships have been progressively protracted from their traditional locales into larger geographical spheres resulting in 'disembedded' social systems and identities (in Moores: 238). However, one should distinguish between the fragmentation of mediated texts, and images as a result of their multiplication and that of identities: the former does not necessarily lead to the latter - if it did, the consumer would be assumed

to be a passive recipient. Neither does global visualization automatically lead to the construction of new forms of assembly and community as it is claimed to happen with the internet in enabling people to choose the community they want to belong to, a community of interest and shared meanings which is egalitarian and democratic following Jones (ibid: 290-291).

Rather, since there is no guarantee that either such a community will be recognized, let alone subscribed to, unless consciously ritualized and enacted (Real: 46), as fan clubs do, 'ownership spatialization' stresses individual processes that involve relationships of power. This conception fails to account for mobility as materially defined - it is the mobility of meanings and price is one constituent of the whole bundle of images (Eliade: 15). This does not mean that materiality represented by the price factor is unimportant. It is simply selective, identifying those objects which will eventually enter our space but one cannot exclude desires and fantasy: one can dream of possessing a Ferrari yet make do with using the bus! Furthermore, this space recognizes the construction of hybrid identities in that, following Bakhtin (in Bhabha: 58), it becomes the space of enunciation where two discursive formations produce a new speech act, a space of negotiation (not assimilation or collaboration) between unequal but articulated powers that do not seek cultural supremacy.

Meeting Identities in Power

It is 'cross-articulation' in the 'placing of ownership' that becomes the site of struggles because narratives are both order-maintaining and order-transforming since our subjectivity determines either the inclusion or exclusion of texts (Real: 4). 'Cross articulation' involves a double articulation where the object is, so to speak, caught in-between the articulations producer-object and consumer-object: the object becomes the bridge between the actual and the ideal following McCracken (in Gabriels & Lang: 95) depending on the prevailing discourses.

Discourses, according to Foucault (in Hall: 44), help represent, make use of, and organize the knowledge of a topic through language. Thus, not only do the discourses producers construct represent the topic of consumption in a particular way, but also their acceptance, which empowers their statements as true, creating a unique regime of truth (ibid: 49) which subjects consumers. It is a knowledge that can be applied for the regulation of social conduct according to Foucault (ibid: 47) and can thus be materialized in concrete experience through relations of power that have a discursive character as they are based on a particular language to structure and limit action through 'government' (Rose: 134). These are 'technologies' that "shape normalize and instrumentalize the conduct, thought and aspirations of others in order to achieve the

[desired] objectives" (Miller & Rose, 1997a: 326) which require the establishment of ideals, 'teleologies' (Rose: 133), and the ethical values attached to these ideals (ibid: 133). Thus, from the 'passive consumption' perspective the subjectivity of consumers becomes the object to be developed through technologies of conduct regulation by those who hold a positive knowledge of reality, the authorities' (ibid: 133), the owners of capital.

An example of such a 'technology of government' is creative advertising which works directly at the level of identity and desire (Nixon: 195), or put differently, promotion, a sign whose referent is the promoted entity. It is a dynamic process of exchange in a communicative process which, while being linked with packaging and design (Wernick: 221), involves cultural intermediaries whose role is to attach to products and services particular meanings and lifestyles with which consumers can identify according to Bourdieu (in Du Gay et al: 62). Promotion as a cultural force has brought culture and economy in a merger according to Baudrillard (in Wernick: 222), to the union of sign and commodity, but culture has lost in fact its autonomy against the dynamic of the market economy. As a result, mediated cultural goods are self-promotional while function as attractors of audiences towards the advertising material (ibid: 221-222), representing not the actual self of the consumer but an imaginary one (Du Gay et al: 26). The well-known Coca Cola motto 'you can't beat the feeling' conveys an ambiguity as it refers to feeling as emotion and as physical experience promising friendship, freedom, uncomplicated relationships by projecting an image of how teenagers experience their life and encourage youth to fantasize about an idealized 'lifestyle' that is appealing to the young (Gillespie: 55-57).

In parallel, advertisers seem to buy not time but audiences: commercial media are organized around the principle of 'delivering audiences to advertisers', hence the audience is commodified and sold to advertisers as well as doubly objectified, both an object of knowledge and an object of measurement by means of ratings that provide the industry with official audience profiles and productivity evaluations (Ang: 249). It is a system of 'surveillance' as an attempt by the industry to impose order in seemingly undisciplined and culturally-led viewing practices (Moores: 227). An example of such a system is the 'SoundScan' operated by ACNielsen (Online 2), a point-of-purchase information technology with the purpose to streamline marketing processes and reduce market uncertainty (McCourt & Rothenbuhler: 201). Despite its effect in consolidating control, it appears that the information it generates is partial since not all outlets are equipped with the system, and that it is not as effective in representing purchases (ibid: 213-214).

This shows that the very construction of 'technologies of government' attests of the

inability of producers to control consumption because of the variability in purchasing patterns. We can thus challenge the claim that promotion is a force that homogenizes culture as it constructs a web of discourses that is at once continuous, yet asymmetrical as it is counter-balanced by a semiological complexity (Wernick: 223), resulting from tendencies by global corporations to homogenize and standardize products by considering the world as one identical entity: global capitalism (Tomlinson: 125). However, following Pendergrast (in Miller: 33), it is consumers who decide about commodities and not corporations. In effect, in changing the formula of Coke drinks to respond to increasing competition by Pepsi, consumers felt betrayed and insisted that the company could not change the taste at will.

Consumers are then self-conscious cultural experts as they have the freedom to become what they wish to be (pleasures of consumption thesis), hence, an active and self-conscious consumption on the basis of bricolage (Du Gay et al: 104). Coke has been re-appropriated in Trinidad, for instance, under two categories, namely, the 'red' drinks associated with cane fields and roti as the main food of East Indian populations, and the 'black' drinks with more sophisticated and African connotations through the consumption of Coke in its own right or as a cocktail (Miller: 34-35). Yet entirely self-conscious consumption clashes with addictive consumption of alcoholic drinks, tobacco - even Coke - given that these may lead to serious health troubles. They also show that grasping the reasons for brand preference are problematic (Miller & Rose, 1997b: 26), undermining claims of advertising power and direct manipulation (ibid: 31). These accounts indicate that the global should be articulated with the local in that cultures "are becoming different in uniform ways" where the global system has become the common code whose purpose is to put forward distinctions, boundaries and disjunctures between local cultures (Wilk: 61).

From the above we can see that producer-construed 'technologies of government' that mediate the identity of an object in a particular way clash with how this identity is received: the production process places objects in one's 'phenotype' but they still have to cross the 'bridge' to ourselves! This is because the way these stories are mediated through our senses depends on the decoding abilities of persons, their cultural competencies according to Morely (in Moores: 230) and not really on the encoding abilities of producers. This is because transmitted messages are not unidirectional: they are polysemic and multireferrential according to Hall (in Real: 95). Listening for instance to a 'Madonna' text as a meaningful discourse, she can be positioned in various representations of womanhood such as the myth of the Virgin (Woodward: 248-251). Thus the 'placing of ownership' does not depend on structure but on subjectivity and knowledge, albeit partial, of the stories that objects carry.

Gaps and Change

There is an additional dimension in 'cross-articulation': a fault between the actual identity as experienced and the teleological identity, an 'articulational gap'. In everyday instances one would express this gap verbally or bodily as a function of satisfaction, a quest of whether an object is likely to be liked. It is this interrogation that the articulational gap captures. It shows that consumption and production are not static or structural, but dynamic and prone to change at any instance: changes in taste, in production processes, a continuous reshuffling of what we know and do. Thus, a reconstruction of identities and narratives intending to make the ideal and the actual converge through transformative enactments. This is what Giddens (in Gabriels & Lang: 86) has referred to as 'reflexive project', the monitoring of routine activities and choosing among different lifestyle options where the self is endlessly re-written as well as deferred.

What underlies transformation is exploration, the yearning for new objects, the quest for the unknown that can take place in the shopping malls in the form of bargain hunting for instance, as well as at home when reading catalogues. It is the attempt to differentiate oneself from the others which for Simmel entails the search for different ways of looking, thus experimenting with different interpretations (ibid: 69-74). A case in point is one's household, which one can qualify as a 'museum' with its 'poetics' and 'politics' of representation (Lidchi: 204-205), constructed from individual attempts to create a sense of 'home' a space and its objects one can relate to as specifically one's own. This takes place by appropriating and working on elements from the environment (Miller: 14-16), that is, transforming products of alienation into unalienated objects, the direct result of one's labor. Yet this is also a way of subscribing to an 'imagined community', which unlike the Internet, as a result of the enacted self.

Yet this is also a gendered activity (Miller: 16-17). Gender and generational structured relations are central in determining the way objects and technology are used since the household functions as a field with its symbolic power relations and struggles over conservation and transformation (Bourdieu: 22). Lull (in Moores: 234-235) has highlighted relational uses of technology determined as a result of discourse construction around the use of broadcasting objects or choice of programs. In addition, gender is not only involved in the construction of the machine but also in its very design, given that a technology cannot be separated from the cultural and organizational values it has been shaped resulting from encoding both an organizational culture and the designer's masculinity (Mackay: 270). We can thus see the interdependence of gender discourses in both the production and consumption spheres forming a network of meanings. Moreover, that technology is shaped by the social circumstances from which it emerges to which we can add material constraints: the private consumption of music

it is restrained by power supply (ibid: 269).

The above cases show that lifestyling becomes the function of contingent identification since it is a consequence of the dynamic aspects present in the culture economy. Not only do we search for new objects, but also new meanings and identities, signifying practices that constitute a cumulative momentum of semiotic practices providing the energy for the dynamics of a culture (Halliday: 3). We are witnessing constant movement as each discourse "contains speakers combining and recombing to form new patterns of discourse, as they jostle with their opinions and counter-opinions" (Billig: 20). Yet this takes place within cultural constraints, since meaning is contextualized (Lemke: 248), limits that are equally determined by the rules and regulations constructed by authorities (Thompson: 15-18).

Conclusions

Overall, one can say that seeing consumption and production as dislocated entities has enabled us to highlight firstly, the narratives of objects and subjects away from values, price, or needs as these are constituents of meanings and not the whole story. Secondly, the world that surrounds us is composed of vehicles, the most important of which is our self, that mediate meanings and identities, subjects as well as objects. A logical conclusion from the last point is that consumption and production exist within the space opened between the self and the 'phenotype'. Furthermore, the relationship between narratives of objects and subjects: what we consume and what we produce depends on what identity is placed within the subject's space. Thus the 'placing of ownership' is the precondition for consumption and production to occur since without this process objects cannot be given meanings - become purposeless. Fourth, that although there can be material constraints in the placing of an identity it is power that ultimately determines how subjects interact and lastly, that neither consumption nor production are fixed in time. Both entities are interdependent in an incessant and boundless attempt of one entity to prevail over the other and a tendency towards hegemony yet never attaining it. Therefore, consumption is an act of creativity and passivity at once and the same time dependent on how power will influence 'the placing of ownership', when an object has become one's own.

ENDNOTES

1 in other words, functions as usually represented in economics.
2 the framework is a metatheory since it also tells us something about the process of meaning making itself (Halliday: 2).
3 ownership seen in material and common sense terms is problematic in that the only object   that can become own in the sense of being brought to ourselves is food, yet it is thus consummated, destroyed and no longer owned - what we still own is a sensation; all the other objects, even though they can be in our immediate environment, are outside of us, thus not owned - what we own is a mental image of their existence

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