

Reality by Design: Advertising Image, Music and Sound Design in the Production of Culture

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Music in the Graduate School of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation explores creative music, sound design and image production in the context of consumer culture (as defined by how its participants socialize in late-capitalist culture using commodities). Through the stylization of image, music and sound effects, advertisers communicate an abstract concept of a brand, and instantiate the brand through an audience member's heightened experience of the brand via the ad. Facilitated by socialized and mediatized frameworks for brand communications, branding is an embodied practice that relies on the audience member's participation with the brand through her/his real experience with an (audiovisual) advertisement. The effect of making the abstract brand tangible relies on successfully executing advertising objectives to create "impact" through stylized and often hyperreal representations of reality. At the same time, audience members' encounters with ads and branding practices represent bona fide experiences for them within American-capitalist cultural practices, and audience members take part in these practices as part of social participation and general making-sense of their everyday lives.

In late-capitalist consumer culture, the idea of the "consumer" operates within the liminal space of constructions of hyper-reality and the self. Through advertising, corporate interests mediate how people relate to and through commodities as consumers. Through ads, producers communicate an idea of a brand, that is, the collection and stylistic design of specific visual and sonic symbols, and the associated ideas, values or emotions that project an identity or persona about a company and its products or services. In attempts to increase the efficacy of their ads, ad producers fashion image, music and

sound design specifically in ways they believe will generate “impact,” that is, a physical, physiological or emotional response to audiovisual stimuli that are infused with symbolic meanings and values.

In their attempts to create effective ads, ad producers circumscribe identities of people based on demographics, behavior metrics, or a host of other measures intended to define what the industry calls “target audiences.” With the belief that target audience members share wants, needs and values, ad producers build constellations of audiovisual signifiers that they believe will resonate with target audience members. These signifiers borrow from cultural narratives and myths to tell stories about brands and products, and communicate how people’s lived experiences might be transformed through consumption practices.

With meticulous formulation of image, music and sound design, ad producers create a “hyperreality,” that is exaggerated, heightened or stylized representation of reality. Through these carefully produced audio and visual artifacts, ad producers (re)circulate cultural narratives they believe communicate meaning and ideas of value, and make those abstract beliefs tangible through the audience member’s sensorial experiences. With hyperreality grounded in an audience members’ body and emotions, ad producers believe they can shape and direct audience members’ ideas about their personal identities, and that of others and social groups. Additionally, ad image, music and sound design contribute to the naturalization of the ways people can socialize around branded identities and interconnect through commodities.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	IV
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	VI
OPENING THOUGHTS ON “REALITY BY DESIGN”	1
CHAPTER 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO MARKETING IDEOLOGIES, AD PRODUCTION AND CONSUMER CULTURAL PRACTICES IN LATE CAPITALISM.....	14
DEFINING AUDIENCES	30
MUSIC, “INVOLVEMENT,” MUSICAL GENRE AND LISTENING PRACTICES.....	39
PRODUCERS ARE PEOPLE, TOO: MEDIATIZATION AND THE POWER OF THE PRODUCER IN THE MANUFACTURE OF CULTURE	49
PLAYING THE SENSES: THE REAL/HYPER-REALITY, IMPACT, AND THE BRAND EXPERIENCE	57
AD PRODUCERS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS.....	73
CHAPTER 2: REPRESENTING REALITY, DELIVERING “THE REAL” THROUGH IMAGE-SOUND MEDIA	84
PRODUCERS AND POLITICS	89
EMBODYING AN AD: A CLOSE READING OF “BRISKET BLOW’D UP”	91
DEFINING “TARGET AUDIENCE,” FORGING REAL IDENTITY	102
FASHIONING THE REAL THROUGH SET, LIGHT AND SHOT COMPOSITION	112
BUILDING A HERO: THE BREAD CRISIS AND THE FOOD STYLISTS.....	119
“MORE MEAT”: LABORIOUSLY PERFORMING THE REAL.....	125
VOICEOVER (VO): TALENT, DELIVERY, AND TIME	130
MUSIC: FASHIONING CHARACTER WITHOUT WORDS.....	139
THE MAKINGS OF A MAN: SEEKING APPROVAL	146
CHAPTER 3: MUSICAL GENRE, POETICS, AND LISTENER EXPERIENCE IN THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING	152
INITIAL CLIENT FEEDBACK: VOICEMANAGER, SPORTS BAR, NOT- I.T. GUY	157

SPORTS BAR, DEMO 1, TAKE 1: “WE’RE GONNA DE-COUNTRIFY WHAT YOU DID...”	161
SPORTS BAR, DEMO 1, TAKE 2: IMAGE AND MUSIC	170
SPORTS BAR, DEMO 2: “MELLOW OUT THE AC/DC...”	173
NOT I.T. GUY: BUILDING “SOPHISTICATED” THROUGH SOUND	177
VOICEMANAGER	182
VOICEMANAGER, DEMO 1, VERSION 1: “SOPHISTICATED JAZZ, ON THE BLUESY SIDE OF FUNK”	184
VOICEMANAGER, VERSION 2—“CONVENTIONAL JAZZY...IS THAT TOO SMOOTH JAZZY?”	191
VOICEMANAGER, VERSION 3—“THE COLDPLAY VERSION”	200
CHAPTER 4: SOUND DESIGN, “IMPACT” AND REIFICATION OF VALUES.....	207
THE ECHO BOYS AND COX BUSINESS SERVICES: RELATING THROUGH THE REAL	215
VERISIMILITUDE AND ORDER: BROKERAGE	215
“ALL HELL’S BREAKIN’ LOOSE”: PERRY	227
THE BRAND AND THE SOCIAL: SPORTS BAR	236
SONIC DRAMA (WITH A WINK): DRIP	239
THE ECHO BOYS AND HARLEY-DAVIDSON	244
BLENDING MYTH AND THE REAL	244
BLAZING MUSIC AND SOUND: FORMING FANTASTIC—HOW <i>NOT</i> TO RELATE TO AN AD...	258
LOWE’S FOODS	258
XYIENCE	262
COMMODIFICATION OF EXPERIENCE THROUGH SOUND.....	267
CHAPTER 5: THE REAL, THE CONSUMER, AND THE SELF: ADS IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE	269
CLOSE READING, EVOLUTION	287
CLOSE READING, ONSLAUGHT	291
MAKING SENSE OF THE REAL: COMMENTS ON IMAGE, MUSIC, SOUND DESIGN.....	296
SPOTTING THE ORIGINAL: DEMONSTRATING CULTURAL PROWESS AND VALUES THROUGH MUSICAL KNOWLEDGE	310
SILENT SOUND DESIGN	315
THE REAL, SOCIAL BEHAVIOR, CORPORATE ETHICS	317
PUBLIC EXPRESSION, PERSONAL PAIN.....	325
THE SECRETS OF BEAUTY ADVERTISING REVEALED...	329
HUMAN NATURE VS. CAPITALIST CONDITIONING.....	334

CLOSING REMARKS FOR “REALITY BY DESIGN”	341
REFERENCES.....	349
BIOGRAPHY	365

Opening Thoughts on “Reality by Design”

After completing an undergraduate degree in Biology and English, I reflected on my career aspirations like this: I wanted either to be a naturalist and educate the public on issues of wildlife conservancy, environmentalism, and the beauty and spiritual satisfaction that I found in nature...or I wanted to make money. Choosing money, I began a career in sales with a medical products manufacturer in Minneapolis. Much of my sales training took place informally—with my company’s limited budget, I attended few formal sales training seminars (and, unlike many large pharmaceutical or medical manufacturers and distributors, the company had no formal training program of its own). I learned some of my sales skills by reading an occasional self-help marketing book, but much of my training happened on-the-job as I watched and listened to experienced colleagues. These mentors taught me strategies and techniques for gathering information about current and potential customers, and using that information to guide customers toward making decisions to purchase our products.

One piece of advice molded not just my sales abilities, but my entire worldview: the distinction between “product features” and “product benefits.” As my mentors explained to me, many salespeople tend to sell based on product features, that is, the fact that our medical tapes measured as a particular adhesive value, or that our cardiac electrodes functioned at a level of sensitivity to conduct the heart’s electrical trace with a specific measurement. Rather, I was taught to sell based on benefits—which could generally be framed in terms of time, money, self-esteem and lifestyle. Medical aides could save precious time (and money) by not having to re-stick or replace tape or

electrodes that came loose; nurses could feel good about nurturing neonatal patients by using one of our gentle-adhesive electrodes on tender infant skin; marketing and sales directors from our corporate, private label accounts could surpass their own management objectives (thereby building on their status within their own companies) by increasing their overall revenues and profit margins through a complete line of cost-effective disposable medical products that included our medical tapes or electrodes. By way of illustration, one mentor explained to me that car commercials might communicate the availability of a particular engine size, a particular fabric on the seats, or a particular stereo system. Behind each feature, however, lies some benefit that might be meaningful to the customer: a V-8 engine may indulge a driver's desire to feel power or prestige; leather seats may suggest comfort, but also hint at socio-economic status; a nice car audio system may fulfill pleasure needs for audiophiles, but may also represent cultural cache in terms of taste or technical expertise for some customers. While product features represent what a commodity might *do*, product benefits represent what a product might *mean* to a prospective buyer. I learned a belief system wherein people buy—or, more accurately, I could increase my sales—based on how a product resonates with a person's values, feelings, or lifestyle aspirations.

“Reality by Design” explores the relationships between commodities and values, identity constructions and personal experience, reality and media representation, producer and consumer. Within these putative binaries, I explore numerous questions: How do consumer cultural practices contextualize advertising image, music, and sound design at the turn of the twenty-first century? What kind of thinking goes into marketers' efforts to

fashion ads that they think will attract potential consumers of their products or brand? What presumptions do marketers make of audience members as they design ads that might entice audience members? What role do ad music and sound design play in consumer culture? With questions like these, I think through how we think about music, sounds, and images as historical, social and cultural constructs. Rather than taking “knowledge” as a natural construct, that knowledge is objective, I contribute to scholarly efforts that consider how knowledge is formed historically, socially and culturally.

I argue here within a framework of postmodern thought and late-capitalist logic that positions the idea of the “consumer” in the liminal space between what I call The Real and the self. Through the stylization of image, music and sound effects, advertisers communicate an abstract concept of a brand, and instantiate the brand through an audience member’s heightened experience of the brand via the ad. Facilitated by socialized and mediatized frameworks for brand communications, branding is an embodied practice that relies on the audience member’s participation with the brand through her/his real experience with an (audiovisual) advertisement. The effect of making the abstract brand tangible relies on successfully executing advertising objectives to create “impact” through stylized and often hyperreal representations of reality. At the same time, audience members’ encounters with ads and branding practices represent bona fide experiences for them within American-capitalist cultural practices, and audience members take part in these practices as part of social participation and general making-sense of their everyday lives.

The historical grounding for this project is marked by what Fredric Jameson frames as postmodern or late-capitalist thought, and the increasingly obscured boundaries between institutional frameworks, and national economic and social systems. With ethnography that runs from 2006 through 2008, I consider ways that knowledge is constructed within late-capitalism, which is marked by globalized economic systems, and blurred delineations between institutions like government, corporate interests and culture. As a reaction against a modernist sense of isolation and anxieties, postmodern thought breaks down the idea of the self into constituent parts. With influences ranging from the ruminations of Sigmund Freud, artistic contributions from the likes of Rene Magritte, Samuel Beckett and Albert Camus, and disillusionment from the horrors of two devastating World Wars, ideas of the self became decentered, rife with complexity and contradiction. The fragmented self can be dissociated from its grounding, parsed out, and interchanged as people find solace from modernist isolation and express themselves in daily life. In this new order, everyday experiences can become commodified. Separated from a historical base, representations of reality are aestheticized, heightened and made more engaging than life experiences themselves. Herein I refer to these heightened realities, or hyperrealities, as constructions of The Real.¹ Following Jean Baudrillard's theorizations of late capitalism, The Real in this thesis *refers* to real experience, but it's not *anchored* in any real experience; rather, it's grounded only in circulating signifiers

¹ As I elaborate in Chapter 1, my construct of The Real does not follow Roland Barthes and his modernist aesthetic project using the concrete detail to reclaim art from classicist idealism and ground the artwork in everyday experience. Rather, I follow Jean Baudrillard's critiques of capitalist structurings of hyperreality, and the obfuscation of delineations between real and (what I call) Real, or hyperrealist representations of reality that perform marketing strategies and make the abstract brand palpable through an ad's impact.

already existing in consumer culture. Cultural symbols and signs once grounded in history and culture become separated from their sources—the stories told through advertising are affixed not to history or experience, rather only the branding strategies they represent and the myriad of other narratives circulating without source.

Within this rootlessness that makes it possible for people to experience themselves in fragment, marketing strategies abound. Marketing and branding practices today rely on audience members seeing parts of themselves through identities and values represented through ads, and acting out their identity and value preferences through branded commodities. With value systems propagated by messages in ads, participants in consumer culture build loyalties or affinities—that is, relationships—with otherwise the inanimate, abstract concepts that are stylized and defined as brands. As brands are constructed to function like personae, with philosophies and values, marketing strategies invite audience members to engage with brands through the commodities they represent. Imbued with values, brands are designed to represent aspects of an audience member's own sense of identity, and resonate with her/his personal values. Moreover, people come to recognize the brand preferences of other people as markers of other people's values—in many cases, people find resonance and even build communities with like-minded people who prefer similar brands. These are the practices of late-capitalist consumer culture in the United States. As I study image, music and sound design at this historical moment, I choose to look at capitalism like an ethnicity based not on geography or skin tone as many of us conceive as “culture,” but rather as a system of practices for relating and building community. With regard for music programmed for shopping malls,

Jonathan Sterne writes, “If all music is ethnic music, then the ethnicity of programmed music is capitalism.”² Similarly, I pursue this study with the presumption that the creative work of advertising corresponds with its ethnic traditions.

Though it may seem uncommon to think of capitalism as an ethnicity, I see ways in which capitalist consumer practices function as culture. Iconography associated with ads, for instance, carries meaning, circulates ideas and ideologies, and teaches people appropriate behavior within consumer society. The folklore, stories and myths disseminated through ads (and other media) show us heroes, entertain us with fables, and advise us on moral conduct. Throughout these pages I examine processes of constructing those stories through image, music and sound, and consider ways we all incorporate those stories in the expressions of daily life.

The stories that ad producers tell are framed within corporate interests, particularly sales, revenue generation and profitability. To maximize their ad investment (minimizing costs and optimizing returns), advertisers are interested in using their ad dollars as efficiently as possible, communicating their messages to those people most likely to purchase a particular product. An old advertising adage, often attributed to marketing maestro David Ogilvy, has the marketer saying, “I know I’m wasting half my advertising dollar—I just don’t know which half.” In their efforts to maximize the potential efficacy of their ads, ad producers are meticulous about shaping their narratives. Ad story-telling relies first on representing a story teller. By designing a brand identity,

² Jonathan Sterne, “Sounds like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space,” *Ethnomusicology*, 41, no. 1 (Winter, 1997), 45.

marketers proffer a persona whose values and identity they hope will resonate with particular audience members who might find interest in their products. Next, to communicate brand messages to audiences who might be receptive, marketers construct what they call “target audiences.” Often defined through demographics, a target audience identity is sometimes built upon market research. More often than not, however, the practice of target audience definition seems to be built on marketers’ imaginations and presumptions of who might be interested in a particular product, how they might use a product, and—most importantly—what the product might mean to the buyer.

Within these conventions, the coding and decoding of meaning in ads lies at the heart of my study. I argue that the dissemination of meaning and values through advertising relies on an institutionalized framework that defines and habituates practices of reading media texts. As Andrew Wernick attests, the “mediatization” of brand messages is a glaring aspect of late-capitalist cultural practice. This systematic positioning of branded messages through image and sound media facilitates the reification of values and commodification of experience. To say it another way, otherwise abstract notions of identity or value are materialized through image and sound, then presented to audience members associated with commodities that come to symbolize those identities or values. As audience members read ads, they draw upon their life experiences with multiple media forms, including film, radio, television, and print, in making sense of what and how ad image and sound mean. As audience members engage with ads, they participate in the discourse presented by the ad (by discourse I mean ways

of organizing and exchanging knowledge and ideas within a particular cultural context using language accepted within that context).

In the minds of ad producers, ad efficacy relies on building ads that generate “impact.” I deconstruct impact as the result of the stylization of symbols in ad image and sound in such a way as to prompt an emotional, physical, or even physiological response from the audience member based on the audience member’s sense for identity, values, and meanings that resonate with her/him. Impact serves to embody the otherwise abstract idea of the brand in the audience member, making tangible the ad experience. Once the ad experience is in the body, so to speak, the ad experience can be linked with an audience member’s wants or needs (whether those be grounded in the audience member’s life experience or contrived through marketing strategy). That experience is then repackaged with a product that promises to fulfill the audience member’s desires for life satisfaction, and returned to the audience member for the sake of profit.

As I analyze ads, I approach them as image-sound units rather than parsing music from sound design (i.e., sound effects), both of which are often treated distinctly from image. Paul Théberge argues that analyses of film sound must happen with all kinds of sound in concert—including dialog, music, sound design, and silence—and that these must be considered together with narrative, technology, generic conventions and culture at large.³ Théberge may have inadvertently omitted image from his method; nonetheless, I’ll supplement his argument by observing that visual images influence how we hear

³ Paul Théberge, “Almost Silent: The Interplay of Sound and Silence in Contemporary Film and Television,” in *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound*, ed. Jay Beck and Tony Grajeda (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008),51-67.

sounds in audiovisual media, and all sounds affect how we read images (as Michel Chion and others have argued).

To help make sense of audiovisual media, however, I do separate out constituent elements for analysis in order to consider how they help me read the ad as a whole. For that reason, with Chapters 3 and 4 in particular, I focus my lens, so to speak, on music and sound design, respectively. Doing so also helps me make sense of the creative labor of my research participants. Even though all of them approach multimedia ads as audiovisual units, at times they isolate elements in order to sculpt and refine them into tools that either meet their client's expectations or communicate the client's message more effectively (as some of my informants indicate, these goals aren't always one and the same).

Sometimes oversimplified through the media and scholarship, the relationships between cultural producer and audience member are complex and mutually informative in the process of creating and circulating cultural discourse. As a practice taken for granted by many of us in the early twenty-first century, brand messaging through mass media establishes a power relation between corporate interest and audience member. Because many corporations have access to talent, capital, and distribution resources generally unavailable to the lay person, corporations maintain a kind of power in late-capitalist discourse unavailable to many audience members. The systemized and institutionalized dissemination of brand messages through media channels maintains this power relation in the circulation of cultural discourse. At the same time, as the work of scholars like Michel de Certeau and Janice Radway exemplifies, audience members can

and do appropriate ad messages in the process of managing and making sense of their everyday lives. Concurrently, ad creatives themselves operate as both producer and consumer as they contribute to ad content. By looking at the complex interconnections, roles and relationships that make up the creative practice of ad coding and decoding, I take into consideration the agency as well as the limitations of ad producers and audience members alike.

To gain intimate access to the processes of coding and decoding of ads, I engaged in ethnographic research with men (mostly) who contribute creatively to ad content. I interviewed them, worked along-side them, observed them as they molded and sculpted ad content in the studio. I witnessed ad construction in pre-production, production, and post-production. I watched and listened to my participants as they shared their knowledge about ads and perspectives on the world. In the process I made many friends, several of whom are represented in these pages. With their gracious willingness to participate in my study, I learned about their incisive creativity, their professionalism in the face of corporate politics and bureaucracy, and their passions for artistic expression. This dissertation is an homage to them as much a dissection and scrutiny of their efforts.

Finally, I'd like to define what this dissertation is *not*. This dissertation is neither advocacy nor defense of consumerist practices, often represented with euphemistic ideas like some of those that arise herein: "voting with your dollars," "solving problems" with products, or showing love and care for people through commodities. I see my own value system interwoven with consumerist practices, and this project sets out neither to

condemn nor encourage consumerist practices or capitalism as a whole. Rather, I am enjoying the process of learning about audiovisual media production, about what I hear and why I hear it, and about the various roles enacted within communities of musicians, creatives, and thinkers in the context of late-capitalism. At the same time, I admit my hope that projects like this one will contribute to a raised consciousness and thoughtfulness about how each of us chooses to participate in consumer cultures.

Chapter 1 offers theoretical framing for “Reality by Design,” and connects theory with ethnographic evidence for how my research participants think about image, music, sound, ads, and marketing strategy generally. By laying out this scaffold, I position this project in conversation with scholarship from multifarious disciplines, including music and sound studies, film, media studies and mass communications, marketing and advertising. At the same time, it connects my informants directly with scholarship—while much scholarship remains disconnected from practice, this project seeks to link theory and practice at junctures based on common materials and thought processes.

In Chapter 2 (“Representing Reality, Delivering ‘The Real’ through Image-Sound Media”), I demonstrate the ways in which the members of MSA and Bright Idea Studios think of music, sound design and image functioning in tandem to communicate meaning. With my participation in and observation of the production of a Subway sandwich commercial, I examine how cultural myths and narratives are borrowed and stylized to promote marketing messages, brand identity, and circumscribed audience identity. Additionally, I recognize how the producers’ own embodied responses to the media they create (an ornamental slide in a blues tune, the drip of barbeque sauce in a moving image

of a sandwich) reflects the sensorial or even sensual responses they hope to evoke from their target audience members.

Chapter 3 (“Musical Genre, Poetics, and Listener Experience in the Production of Meaning”) concentrates specifically on music and the discourse of musical genre. As the Echo Boys work on a series of commercials for telecommunications provider Cox Communications, I examine how the Echo Boys shape ad music using the language of genre. Their discursive tools (i.e., poetics) and ideas about genre bring to the fore how imagined identities are associated with genre delineations. Genre categories help contextualize boundaries of both brand personae and target audience identity, and materialize identities through music.

With Chapter 4 (“Sound Design, ‘Impact,’ and Reification of Values”) I focus specifically on sonic elements commonly referred to as “sound design,” the placement and enhancement of sonic effects, which may or may not include musical effects. In this chapter I discuss the importance of sound design in the minds of ad producers, how they perceive sound design affects the efficacy and “impact” of an audiovisual advertisement, and the role of sound design in perpetuating consumer practices. The post-production stylization of sound is a complex process mediated by producers’ ideas of target audience identities and value sets associated with those identities. Here I explain connections between commodities and reified identities and values, and processes of materializing identity and value concepts through sound.

Chapter 5 (“The Real, the Consumer, and the Self: Ads in Public Discourse”) explores two viral ads as examples of viral or social network marketing strategies, and

expands my discussion in several ways. First, the chapter examines viral ads distributed through the internet to demonstrate how my analyses of the effects of image, music and sound apply to audiovisual media other than television commercials. Additionally, blogs and posts dedicated to internet ads provide ways of exploring discourse around audiovisual ads among audience members and between audience members and producers. Through these ads I demonstrate how ad image, music and sound, and the reification of identity and value, all coalesce in the process of building social discourse around commodities. Moreover, it demonstrates ways that social relations and communities can be formed around commodities. With this chapter I demonstrate how the idea of “the consumer” operates within the liminal space between The Real and the self. Through ever-shifting layers of r/Real in both the ad medium and in the discourse around advertising perpetuate consumer culture by keeping people engaged in the mysteries of advertising and in the deconstruction ad messages.

I’ve changed the names of most of the participants represented here out of respect for their current positions and practices.

Chapter 1: An Introduction to Marketing Ideologies, Ad Production and Consumer Cultural Practices in Late Capitalism

When Joseph Kerman argued in 1985 for musicologists to grant themselves freedom to explore musical aesthetics and criticism, I'm not certain he'd have imagined the kind of project I propose: a topical focus on advertising; a methodological emphasis on ethnography to explore the materials and processes of cultural production through ads; and an interdisciplinary, tripartite concentration on image, music and sound design as equal and interrelated implements in the production of cultural discourse in audiovisual media.¹ Since 1985, of course, the realm of music studies has exploded, and the range of acceptable topics and methods grown exponentially. Even with the expansion of popular music studies, however, it seems that sonic influences from advertising, perhaps the most ubiquitous source of music today, remains understudied as an aesthetic influence, conveyor of meaning, and shaper of values.

Among the scholars who've approached music and corporate marketing interests, I find diversity in terms of historical perspective, theme and method. For example, in "Commerce and Poetry Hand in Hand," Linda Tyler uncovers how American department store merchants at the turn of the twentieth century sponsored live or recorded classical music performances for the retail floor to attract customers and encourage sales.² Through these sponsorships, merchants associated burgeoning

¹ "When the study of music history loses touch with the aesthetic core of music, which is the subject matter of criticism, it can only too easily degenerate into a shallow exercise." Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 19.

² Linda Tyler, "Commerce and Poetry Hand in Hand": Music in American Department Stores, 1880-1930," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 45, no. 1 (Spring, 1992), 75-120.

American consumer behaviors with the class distinctions and perceived European sensibilities already tied to music composed by the likes of Wagner, Rossini, Haydn, or Verdi. Tyler's archival research lends a historical frame of reference to ways that music has been used to communicate ideas of identity, and invite potential patrons to identify with a particular retail establishment through music. Timothy Taylor's multi-faceted oeuvre includes the study of genre categories and the communication of identity, meaning and values. In "World Music in Television Ads," Taylor observes that the industry-fabricated genre of "world music" contributes to the formation of identities and constellation of values based on "global informational capital," which lends prestige to audiences defined as having the savvy of adapting rapidly to globalizing world economies in the late twentieth century.³ In "Music and Meaning in the Commercials," Nicholas Cook hermeneutically analyzes specific television commercials, bringing his personal cultural perspectives to a Citroen ad that uses Mozart's *Figaro* overture, and custom music composed for a Walkers snack chip commercial, a Prudential ad, and a Volvo spot. In the process, he acknowledges ad producers' political, bureaucratic and ideological constraints in communicating a meaningful (and readable) sales message within an ad's strict time constraints. For Cook, music in ads can offer "a *potential* for the construction or negotiation of meaning in specific contexts...music is never 'alone.'"⁴ As an audience member "reads" ads, Cook might argue, her understanding of emotion,

³ Timothy D. Taylor, "World Music in Television Ads," *American Music* 18, no. 2 (Summer, 2000), 178.

⁴ Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Media* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 23. Emphasis in original.

meaning or value through music is always based on a lifetime of emotional and sensory experiences that frame one's reception. Music's "potential" rests on the audience member's experiences with music and knowledge of how different musics mean, particularly in the context of other ad signifiers.

A handful of studies press further into understanding the sociocultural make-up of ad producers and the influences that help them decide on ad content. Because of scholarship like this, I see that understanding the beliefs of cultural producers and the social milieus in which they create help me understand why I hear the sounds I hear, and how ad producers think sounds convey meanings and values. In "How Did Electronic Music Get into Television Commercials," Taylor explains ways that the aesthetics and values of different generations of ad producers have shaped ad content. As younger generations of advertising producers enter positions of influence, Taylor writes, previously non-mainstream musical styles like electronica entered mainstream cultural discourse through television ads. Through this article, Taylor demonstrates that the life experiences of social groups in positions of power in ad production bear authority in defining the sounds heard through advertising, and through their work can direct cultural discourse. Emphasizing the relationship between cultural production and the life experiences of cultural producers, Taylor argues that the "advertising industry is populated by real people on whom structures act, just as they have the ability to influence structures themselves, bringing their taste for underground music to the mainstream..."⁵

⁵ Timothy Taylor, "The Changing Shape of the Culture Industry; or, How Did Electronic Music Get into Television Commercials?" *Television and New Media* 8 (2007), 253.

Because of work like Taylor's, I can pursue ad music and sound design as cultural artifacts that help me understand late-capitalist consumer practices in the US.

Considering of the ubiquity of advertising in the daily lives of most Americans (and, arguably, people throughout much of the world), I see this project contributing to understanding creative sound production as a vital artistic and practical expression in everyday life.

I choose ethnography as my primary research method as a way of marrying theory with practice, and bridging the gulf that still seems too often to demarcate the so-called intellectual and the quotidian. From 2006 through 2008, I conducted interviews with dozens of marketing professionals, including marketing and art directors, and spoke with creative contributors like film directors, set designers, graphics artists, sound designers and musicians. In 2007, I completed an internship with Bright Idea Studios, the audiovisual production arm of North Carolina-based advertising agency MSA. Later that year, I completed a second internship with Echo Boys Music, a music production studio and sound design firm in Minneapolis. My proximity to and occasional involvement in the creative process of ad production offers me insight into the creative, bureaucratic and political challenges for practitioners who play roles in the coding and decoding of cultural narratives present in the United States's culture today.

Like so many other academic efforts that tread intellectual margins, this dissertation is situated in the interstices of disciplinary bounds. As I reflect on the experience of my study participants, many of whom I think of fondly as my friends, I recognize that their everyday lives and creative contributions to media don't subscribe to

disciplinary bounds. At the same time, my attempts to unravel the complexities of cultural production through the lens of American television advertising require the combined wisdom of my mentors in fields like musicology and ethnomusicology, film studies, mass communication and media studies, cultural anthropology, and, of course, marketing and advertising.

Several thinkers inside and outside of the academic community have critiqued capitalism's destructive effects on humanity. Perhaps offering a representative commentary, Simon Frith laments that

[p]op is a classic case of what Marx called alienation: Something human is taken from us and returned in the form of a commodity. Songs and singers are fetishized, made magical, and we can only reclaim them through possession, via a cash transaction in the marketplace.⁶

Though Frith's politics resonate somewhat with my own, I also recognize that his critique paints a partial picture of cultural production in late capitalist society. This project explores the complexities of the everyday practice of advertising production in the context of the postmodern experience. It involves the ways that the advertising and media production industries shape cultural discourse and subjectivity. At the same time, it considers the agency of actors who pour creative energies into ad production, and those who invest creative energies in ad reception. As a result, this dissertation contributes to a dialog on the means and processes of cultural production, whether that be through film, television, radio or other mass media, for the purposes of advertising, politicking,

⁶ Simon Frith, "The Industrialization of Popular Music" in *Popular Music and Communication*, ed. James Lull (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1987), 54.

propagandizing, or other story-telling methods. I see this investigation contributing to a scholarship invested in the production and circulation of cultural narratives by those who seek to shape opinions, influence behaviors, and build economic and political power.

This introduction consists of six sections—all connected and sometimes interwoven—to articulate how my experiences working with advertising professionals have influenced my thinking on American consumer cultural practices. Throughout each section I engage with my intellectual mentors and interlocutors as well as my research participants as I tackle questions of how we construct and read audiovisual media, and how we understand meaning and values in everyday lives of late capitalist American society:

- Defining consumer culture
- Defining audiences
- Music, “involvement,” and listening practices
- Producers are people, too—mediatization and the power of the producer in the manufacture of culture
- Playing the senses—The Real/hyper-reality and “impact”
- Ad producers and their discontents

Defining consumer culture

Here at the turn of the twenty-first century, several theorists speak of the influence of capitalist ideologies on global social and economic paradigms. Observing shifts since the 1950s away from what he dubs high modernist thought, Frederic Jameson sees “postmodernism” as a re-ordering of knowledge constructs under new socio-economic

and political circumstances.⁷ Analyzing this new stage in the expansion of so-called First World capitalism, Jameson's assessment of this "multinational" or global capitalist structure is marked by an intertwining of government, big business and culture.⁸ These new institutional structures accompany new thought paradigms in terms of how culture is produced, disseminated, received, and used.

Jameson distinguishes postmodernism as a reaction to the construction of the modernist ego. As Jameson sees it, modernist rebellion against nineteenth century societal norms resulted in a sense of alienation and isolation of the individual. This theorist observes that "when you constitute your individual subjectivity as a self-sufficient field and a closed realm, you thereby shut yourself off from everything else and condemn yourself to the mindless solitude of the monad, buried alive and condemned to a prison cell without egress."⁹ In reaction to this kind of modernist isolation and anxiety, postmodern thought brings about what Jameson calls a "shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology" resulting in a fragmentation of the individual subject, and a shattering of the

⁷ Frederic Jameson refers to "high modernism" throughout several of his writings, including "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" (1983), reprinted in *Film Theory*, ed. Philip Simpson, Andrew Utterson, Karen J. Shepherdson (London: Routledge, 2004), 192ff. He also argues that what he calls postmodernism could in fact be a transitional period to some new political and economic order. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 193-4; see also his "Introduction," in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), xii.

⁸ "...[N]ot only is [*late capitalism*] something like a literal translation of the other expression, *postmodernism*, its temporal index seems already to direct attention to changes in the quotidian and on the cultural level as such. To say that my two terms, the *cultural* and the *economic*, thereby collapse back into one another and say the same thing, in an eclipse of the distinction between base and superstructure...is also to suggest that the base, in the third stage of capitalism, generates its superstructures with a new kind of dynamic...it seems to obligate you in advance to talk about cultural phenomena at least in business terms if not in those of political economy." Jameson, "Introduction," xxi. Emphases in original.

⁹ Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 15.

modernist notion of the (bourgeois) individual. Contrary to the idea of the centered monadic self, the fragmented individual can be broken down into parts smaller than the whole self, and detached from historical grounding. Jameson argues that this results in the “‘death’ of the subject itself,” and a lack of individualism that marked modernist aesthetics.¹⁰

With late-capitalism, corporate globalization contributes to a lack of variety and uniqueness that marked place and person in modernist terms: today one can find a Starbucks coffee shop on nearly every corner of major metropolitan areas in the US and abroad, where customers can be reasonably assured of getting exactly the same drink and experience in a Seattle Starbucks as they would in a Beijing or London shop. Jameson critiques the dystopia of the postmodern human condition, saying that it not only brings an end to the modernist bourgeois belief in the individual ego, but

it means the end of much more—the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke (as symbolized by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction). As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling.¹¹

While postmodern cultural logic may liberate Starbucks patrons from the anxiety of purchasing a coffee product they might not enjoy (and perhaps feeling a tourist’s isolation in a foreign land), it may actually alienate them from other feelings of their own

¹⁰ Jameson, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” 15.

¹¹ Jameson, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” 15.

definition; rather, feelings can be defined by people's experiences with ever-present branded commodities, whose (brand) identities are based on a series of otherwise empty visual and sonic signifiers stylized for the sake of the brand, increased sales, and profit. Corporate interests mediate this new ordering of everyday coffee-enjoyment practices—through the stylization of the coffee product and the brand, advertisers aestheticize everyday experience, co-opting it and selling it back to coffee patrons at the cost of a \$5 latte.

Jameson observes this recent cultural adaptation as “an immense and historically original acculturation of the Real, a quantum leap in what [Walter] Benjamin still called the ‘aestheticization’ of reality...”¹² In the new order, in which the self is dissociated from its historical grounding, culture and everyday life experiences can become commodities in and of themselves.¹³ Through branding and advertising, culture and life experiences become separated from the individual subject, aesthetically stylized, re-packaged, then projected back to audiences. With these new turns Jameson observes “a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation...in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum...”¹⁴ In other words, in late capitalist thought, knowledge constructs and stories that help people make sense of their society are no longer grounded in society and its history. With the new global order, marked by the enmeshment of corporations, government and culture, cultural narratives can be created without grounding in lived

¹² Jameson, “Introduction,” x.

¹³ Jameson, “Introduction,” x.

¹⁴ Jameson, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” 6.

experience. One way these stories circulate is through advertising. Ad image, music and sound design function as signifiers that direct audience members' attention toward something signified, an idea based presumably on their own experiences of reality. The dissociation of signifier and a historically-grounded signified results in the possibility of constructing of stories without historical grounding. Signifiers (images, sounds) are free-floating, and can be employed with brands in countless ways, depending on the message the producer desires to communicate. In a culture of images divorced from their referents, according to Jameson, "the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but the past: the imitation of dead styles...the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts."¹⁵ Rather than communicating through signifiers infused with meaning, Jameson argues,

[m]eaning on the new view is generated by the movement from signifier to signifier. What we generally call the signified—the meaning or conceptual content of an utterance—is now rather to be seen as a meaning-effect, as that objective mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of signifiers among themselves.¹⁶

With continuous recirculation of referent-less images, all we have left are stories and the re-telling of those stories, which can be stylized so as to aestheticize everyday life.¹⁷

¹⁵ Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 17-8.

¹⁶ Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 26.

¹⁷ For Jameson, the creation of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, evinces this with the promise of providing patrons "a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city...[and introduces] a new mode in which individuals move and congregate, something like the practice of a new and historically original kind of hypercrowd." Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 40.

Such (stylized) simulations of reality come to stand in for reality, simulacra for which no original exists.

Some marketers recognize their role in saturating signifiers with meaning. David, Vice President and Creative Director of Raleigh advertising agency MSA, observes that one of the primary objectives of an ad campaign is to infuse the graphic and sonic logos with meaning. By extension, David associates meaning with his clients' products and services. Dealing with otherwise empty signifiers, David sees his job as defining and shaping meaning for his clients' products and services in ways that not only will guide audience members to understand select meanings in relation to the products and services, but also will present the products and services in terms that David believes audience members will understand within their understanding of similar products or services:

...[E]specially in this business, so many things are empty symbols until we bring something to them...Just recently we were doing this project for [a Chapel Hill-based health education services provider]. We were doing a logo for them and there's kind of no context in a way around that [company's] name in a way. [The public] doesn't have any preconceived notion of what an [David spells out the anagram representing the company's name] is. Any meaning we bring to it is really a work of imagination, and we just build from there. But we make sure that it is something that reflects what they are and what their audiences expect [from the kinds of services that company provides].

As a marketer, David recognizes his role in cultural production: he builds brands based on a client's preferences for self-representation, strategic marketing goals, and what he believes will "make sense" to audience members. Until he creates a social and historical context for the idea of a brand, none exists. Even then, the context he creates is a

simulacrum of context, a representation of reality, but not grounded in any lived experience.

More than the products themselves, the promises of what a product could mean to a user comprise the true consumables promoted by each ad. This project critiques television advertising for the ways in which the industry defines identity or subject positions for audiences, calls upon audience members to assume those prescriptions, and employs image, music and sound designs to reinforce marketers' presumptions about identity, audience members' wants and needs, and how audience members respond to media. At the same time, this study illuminates agency on the part of people who contribute creatively to ad production, and non-producers who engage with audiovisual media like television ads. As co-contributors to the production of culture, ad producers and audience members shape and define meaning through their interactions with ads during this fragmented, dystopic, rich, and fluid postmodern period.

One concept critical to marketing strategy is "branding," that is, the collection and stylistic design of specific symbols that associate ideas, values or emotions with a company and its products or services. Besides differentiating a company from its competition, branding is a process of formulating, developing and expressing a persona for an otherwise inanimate organization and its wares. For marketers (and those who teach marketing), a brand represents

the promise, the big idea, and the expectations that reside in each customer's mind about a product, service or company. People fall in love with brands, trust them,

develop strong loyalties to them, buy them, and believe in their superiority. The brand is shorthand. It stands for something.¹⁸

According to marketer Stan Richards, “We don’t just want people to buy a brand, we want people to buy into a brand, to make it part of their lives.”¹⁹ By creating brands they think spark people’s emotional attractions and loyalties, marketers invite consumers to build social relations with the company through its products or services. According to some industry practitioners, effective branding encourages people to identify with a company much like joining a social club. For them, effective branding encourages consumers to relate with the brand as well as with other consumers who share common interests in the brand or the products represented. An advertisement, then, is an expression of the brand and an extension of corporate identity. More than that, an ad is an invitation to consumers to engage in relationship around the commodities presented with the brand. As such, advertisements are performances of brand identity.

As invitations to participate in the brand, ads can shape how people self-identify. John Fiske argues that, in a society in which resources and social power are distributed unequally, parties with economic resources and social transmission networks like the advertising industry also have the power to shape social discourse, and audiences participate in meaning-making as they read media texts (Fiske 1987). With every ad, the advertiser calls upon its audience members to agree to certain prescribed identities; Louis

¹⁸Alina Wheeler, *Designing Brand Identity: A Complete Guide to Creating, Building and Maintaining Strong Brands* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2006),4.

¹⁹ Quoted in Robin Landa, *Designing Brand Experiences* (Clifton Park, NY: Thomson Delmar Learning, 2006), 9.

Althusser refers to this process as “interpellation” (Althusser 1971). The process of defining target audiences are efforts toward interpellation: marketers reconstitute audience members’ responses to branded products into a generalized subject position or identity. The process involves interactions between the industry as addresser and its audience as addressee. By responding to an advertisement, the perceiver assumes the ad’s definition of the perceiver’s identity. As Fiske observes, “[i]n responding to the call, in recognizing that it is *us* being spoken to, we implicitly accept the discourse’s definition of ‘us,’ or, to put it another way, we adopt the subject position proposed for us by the discourse” (Fiske 1987, emphasis in original). Subjectivity, then, is shaped by our interactions with numerous social agents like ads. Consequently, interpellation obscures the numerous, complicated, sometimes contradictory subject positions we actually hold. Even as we identify ourselves as, for example, mothers, Asian Indians, educators, Muslims, or 18-year-olds, those subject positions represent diverse experiences. Despite the range of real experience, institutions with social agency, like the ad industry, impress specific definitions upon these identities depending on particular character traits they believe might resonate with audiences and encourage them to purchase a product. Through the process, social discourse also inscribes ideas about members of society that are taken for granted as self-evident or so-called “common sense” (Fiske 1987). This process repeats everyday as we watch films, read magazines and, indeed, view television commercials.

Simultaneous with my observations of ad producers as arbiters of culture, I frame their efforts (and, in Chapter 5, the efforts of their audience members) in the context of

their everyday lives, their efforts to find career satisfaction and build rewarding life experiences in the context of capitalist culture. Following Michel de Certeau, I consider people's experiences in the processes of ad production and reception as part of the complexities and contradictions of the quotidian.²⁰ While some theorists like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue convincingly for the ways that cultural producers like advertisers shape the trajectory of cultural discourse through their access to socio-economic resources and capital, I observe that individuals, too, can express agency through their interactions with these cultural arbiters.²¹ Even the term "consumer," when used either by marketing practitioners or by cultural theorists, can do disservice to our understanding of the social processes of media production and reception. Often the idea of the "consumer" still seems to represent more an idea of an individual who feeds passively and mindlessly on products and cultural constructions, and less of a person who builds a life through her/his interactions with people and cultural processes—in fact, my observations of people's production and consumption behaviors suggest that the dichotomy glosses over the richness and dystopia of American-capitalist culture at the

²⁰ "Analysis shows that a relation (always social) determines its terms, and not the reverse, and that each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determinations interact. Moreover, the question at hand concerns modes of operation or schemata of action, and not directly the subjects (or persons) who are their authors or vehicles...The purpose of this work is to make explicit the systems of operational combination (*les combinatoires d'opérations*) which also compose a 'culture,' and to bring to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society (a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term 'consumers.' Everyday life invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others." Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xi-xii. Emphasis in original.

²¹ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (New York: Continuum, 2000; 1972), 120-167.

turn of the twenty-first century.²² This project continuously negotiates ideas of the cultural producer as consumer, and of the consumer (whether “producer” or “audience member”) as participant in the production of culture. No linear logic will lend insight into the social practices of what I call here “production” and “consumption” (of media, of commodities, of culture itself). Rather, I seek to parse out of the tangle some salient events and experiences that help me understand people’s everyday practices of generating meaning, making sense of their milieus, and building communities through commodities.

Certeau distinguishes between cultural producers and their audience members through concepts like “strategy” (in which an entity or institution with socio-economic or cultural resources can shape or direct cultural discourse and individual actions) and “tactic” (representing the “weak” or “other,” the actions of those not in positions of power but make use of the resources made available to them through strategy).²³

Elaborating on the behavioral characteristics of each, Certeau suggests that strategies “conceal beneath objective calculations their connection with the power that sustains them from within the stronghold of its own ‘proper’ place or institution.”²⁴ In contrast,

²² Certeau argues that the process of reception of cultural products, like reading, constitutes “an ‘art’ which is anything but passive...Imbricated within the strategies of modernity...the procedures of contemporary consumption appear to constitute a subtle art of ‘renters’ who know how to insinuate their countless differences into the dominant text.” Certeau, xxii. Of course, Stuart Hall similarly in terms of audience agency in the reception of media communications, as in “Encoding/Decoding,” *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-38. See also Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner, and Eva-Maria Warth, “Introduction,” *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power*, ed. Ellen Seiter et al. (London: Routledge, 1989), 1-15, and their article in the same volume, “‘Don’t Treat Us Like We’re So Stupid and Naïve’: Towards an Ethnography of Soap Opera Viewers,” 223-47.

²³ Certeau, xix.

²⁴ Certeau, xx. By “proper” I understand Certeau to mean the space or institution that entrenches or fixes the strategy.

tactics have no clear base for operation, fragmented among the actors engaged.²⁵ Borrowing from Certeau, I argue that many contributors to ad production are both strategists and tacticians, diffused throughout the environment of production and consumption, acting as consumers of culture even while producing media that channels cultural discourse. Though some scholars may argue from the premise that cultural producers bear a separate and agented social position compared to receivers, my field experience shows me that the lives and creative work of cultural producers is more complex than this dichotomy suggests. In the practice of consumer culture at the turn of the twenty-first century, people who contribute to the production of advertising circulate cultural narratives both as producers and consumers themselves. Despite efforts ranging from cultural theorists to marketing scholars to distinguish “producer” and “audience,” delineations of power and agency aren’t so easily parsed.

Defining audiences

Labeling distinct identity groups helps develop a logic that marketers often use to frame the creative process of ad production within marketing objectives. This section demonstrates how many marketing practitioners conceive of audiences. Additionally, it explains early attempts to define audience identity during the rise of radio, and how a discourse of audience identity circulates culturally and is shared among producers of various media. In addition, this section raises examples of how some producers use the discourse of musical genre as a tool to define an audience identity and ostensibly attract

²⁵ Certeau, xx.

the attention of members of that prescribed group. Audiovisual media events like ads represent moments of mediation constructed by producers who circulate their own ideas of audience and individual identity through their creative artifacts. As consumers of culture themselves, their concepts are shaped by representations of identity through cultural narratives exchanged among media, including print, radio, film and television programming. In the process of developing and broadcasting ads, producers participate with (other) audience members in defining and disseminating ideas of identity using commodities, and social relation through commodities.

Defining consumer groups helps “quantify” groups into measurable units, a preliminary step in the process of constituting audiences whose attention can be sold to advertisers. Through market segmentation and demographic analysis, many marketers seek to access targets statistically in order formulate strategies for increasing an ad’s sales potential. Theoretically, marketers rely on demographic statistics to concentrate their efforts and improve the chances that an ad will reach potential consumers who are willing, able and ready to purchase a particular brand or product. Defining these “target audiences” for ads, they believe, will concentrate their efforts, and optimize their ad investment by improving the ad’s efficacy. In 1990, for example, *American Demographics* identified particular target audiences as growth markets for the 1990s. Among those categories are Parents, Children, Teenagers, Fathers, Empty Nesters, The Very Old, The Fit, The Unfit, Asians, Hispanics, Activists, Downscale (characterized as the “poor,” “near poor,” and those interested in helping these groups), Upscale (or affluent), The Middle Class, Women in Charge, Workers, Students, Fun Seekers and

Housewives (Linneman 1991). This truncated list elucidates the point that the subject positions delineated by marketers overlap with one another, and likely prescribe characteristics that may or may not reflect people's complex everyday experiences.

Though a language of demographics still seem to play a key role in the practice of ad production, many marketers write about audience construction and consumption practices in terms of complex behavioral, relational and social actions that characterize capitalist culture. Since the 1990s, practitioners like Michael Solomon have written about their work in terms of how social relations can be built around commodities because of the ways audiences have learned to stylize their everyday lives through their consumption practices. In *Conquering Consumerspace*, Solomon articulates his ideas about consumer behavior in ways that suggest that these practices are simultaneously processes of self- and group-identification. Moreover, he seems to suggest that these are universal, normative behaviors in consumer culture, ways that participants in that culture define who they are, with whom they associate, and how they want to be perceived presently and in the future:

Brands carry meaning largely because they place us in social categories. Contrary to "rational" economic perspectives on purchase decisions that dominate the calculus of many firms, choosing Brand X over Brand Y is about more than a careful calculation of a cost-benefit ratio. It is a statement about who one is and who one is not. Group identities, whether of devotees of a musical genre, extreme athletes, or drug users, gel around forms of expressive symbolism. The self-definitions of group members are derived from the common symbols system to which the group is dedicated. Sociologies have described these systems with such labels as *taste public*, *symbolic community*, and *status culture*.

Understanding symbol systems and exploring their contents is more than academic, however. This discovery process goes to the heart of *lifestyle*

marketing strategies that build a collection of brands with a common appeal to a certain type of person...The brands we buy place us in social categories. We use these cues to place others (and ourselves) with consumers who we believe will share similar lifestyles and values. Lifestyle marketing strategies recognize the potency of these bonds. They build a brand portfolio that enables members of a category to express their underlying identity in a variety of concrete ways, from food to apparel to music.²⁶

Brands help us to make sense of the world and to decide where we fit in it. We use evidence gleaned from observing others' choices of leisure activities, cars, clothing, music, food, and so on to determine our compatibility with them. Consumers view brands as having personalities and prefer those marketing offerings that are similiar [*sic*] to how they see themselves or to the type of person they want to become.²⁷

Solomon's claims resonate with many marketers I interviewed. Free-lance art director Jack believes that companies that define their corporate identities as a brand succeed in creating something like a club that people can choose to join or not join using their consumer dollars as membership dues. He sees consumers' choices as unconscious expressions of their belonging needs. From Jack's perspective, the development of corporate brand identity might be looked upon as a capitalization on people's psychological needs for belonging to a group. With no intended tinge of irony, Jack sums up how he sees the public responding to corporate invitations to participate in their "clubs": "List the stores where you shop and that'll tell you who you really are, how you identify yourself." Jack's off-hand comment on brand and consumer identity astutely demonstrates corporate assumptions about how individuals develop relationships within a

²⁶ Michael Solomon, *Conquering Consumerspace: Marketing Strategies for a Branded World* (New York: AMACOM, 2003), 20-21. Emphasis in original.

²⁷ Solomon, 24.

capitalistic context: participants use purchasing power to produce and express personal identity through the associations they create between themselves, the brand identity marketed by each company, and branded products. Additionally, the comment may reveal the essence of American consumerist culture. While advancing the idea that we can find ease and personal satisfaction through product consumption, corporations and consumers engage in social networks linked by beliefs about identity expression and community building. Those beliefs include how identity is represented through image and sound, and how advertisers believe consumers express identity through their associations with products or companies.²⁸

Though some marketers might find security in statistical analyses of audience identities, some ad creatives claim that in practice a methodological gulf separates people involved in marketing strategy and ad production. On one hand, marketers rely on sales statistics and market analyses to justify requests to fund their strategic plans, including the advertising involved. On the other, sound designers, musicians and art directors claim that their choices of sounds, music and artwork depend upon some “sense” of what

²⁸ In Chapter 5, I explore the concept of social networking in detail—while some marketers express anxiety about ways that social network marketing strategies can decrease the marketer’s sense for control over the brand, many marketers are intrigued and excited by the strategic potential represented by new networking platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Since the original drafting of this thesis, marketers representing Skittles used Twitter in an experiment to empower users to generate marketing content for the Skittles directly. Though the rewards and disadvantages are debated by marketers, the concept created significant “buzz” among marketers, which is enough evidence for many marketers to deem the Skittles experiment a success. In another example since the original drafting of this project, marketers for Domino’s Pizza had to put out a firestorm of internet and media attention when two Domino’s employees posted YouTube videos in which they purposefully tainted pizza ingredients and then built pizzas with the exposed food products. In an attempt to salvage the brand’s reputation, the President of Domino’s USA Patrick Doyle posted a response on YouTube in which he denounced the employees’ behaviors, and spelled out Domino’s legal actions against the employees, the shutting down of the respective franchise, and the company’s revised hiring practices.

seems appropriate for the ad, its target audience and the emotional response desired. According to free-lance art director Jack, the process of collecting market data is an attempt to quantify audience members with neat, objective criteria, often to present a quantifiable justification for an advertising budget to corporate higher-ups. Though he rarely collects marketing statistics himself, the data frequently becomes central to the bureaucracy of ad production, and defines his creative process:

A lot of [the market research] happens before I ever get involved [with an ad]... You somehow have to take this linear, formulaic process and turn it into something... that appeals [to people]. The first half is just all clinical and statistical and unemotional. It's a process and now we want to turn it into something that is all emotional... Understand that within the corporate world, most of the people I end up dealing with are, like, MBAs. Coming out as MBAs, it's all very literal, analytical, process-driven. Their job is to go through all of these analyses of data and statistics in order to go to their Board of Directors to say, I need \$2.7 million to run this ad campaign. And then the Board of Directors, or president, vice president of the company says, so, this demographic that you've selected—how much do they spend on competitors' products? It's all very numbers-driven. They all want to know that before the project is started. They want to guarantee success as much as possible. And so they live in this world of analysis. And then they make this huge leap to this world of art and music and emotion and passion... and I often find myself helping them bridge this gap... [It's about negotiating] the right brain and the statistical left brain. With the people I'm dealing with, I have to make their left brain really comfortable, that we're doing the right thing...

While justifying the necessity and strategy of an ad or campaign, many marketers believe that target audience delineations facilitate their efforts to design ads they believe will resonate most clearly with audience members who might be attracted to their products or services. Accurate or not, the belief often frames the creative process and outcomes of ad production.

The circumscription of target audience is grounded by historical efforts to define audiences in other media. With radio, for instance, Antoine Hennion and Cecile Meadel reveal the complex process of how “radio and its audience reciprocally construct one another.”²⁹ By imagining particular relationships between demographic categories and music, then by inviting audience members to participate in constructing those categories through their votes or requests for particular songs or artists, radio programmers for the French station RTL design radio schedules in order to deliver specific audiences to advertisers.³⁰ As RTL listeners respond to music programming suggestions, they contribute to the negotiation of audience identity. In other words, radio programmers define audience identity, then find assurance of the validity of the identity through their interpretations of audience responses. These ideas of audience identity circulate among producers and consumers of media, including those of television commercials. Ever-shifting and mutable, these socio-cultural negotiations resist pat theoretical strictures for Hennion and Meadel, who argue that they

are far from possessing that fixity of theoretical principles beloved of sociologists, economists or semioticians. Rather they are formed on the job, in negotiation, at points which are always empirical, provisional and various.³¹

Susan Smulyan points out that radio stations began offering specialized musical formats as a way to compete with television’s immediate overwhelming popularity.³²

²⁹ Antoine Hennion and Cecile Meadel, “Programming Music: Radio as Mediator,” *Media Culture Society* 8, no. 3 (1986), 281.

³⁰ Hennion and Meadel, 294-8.

³¹ Hennion and Meadel, 299.

The radio formatting system evolved through the combined influence of advertisers, radio stations and their consultants, and record companies as a way of defining a radio station's identity, and delivering targeted audiences to that station's advertisers.³³ Some scholars observe that the development of radio formats was influenced strongly by the recording industry's constructions of genre categories for the sake of music marketing. Keith Negus explains that radio formatting "enables radio stations to have a clearly defined identity that is attractive to advertisers, and at the same time it makes it logically easier to market music..."³⁴ Timothy Taylor notes that the moniker "World Music" (and subsequent sub-categories) came about as a way to categorize music to facilitate the sales of recordings, and that musicians identified as of the "World" were defined by their ethnicity or non-Western-ness rather than the sounds or musical styles they produced.³⁵ Taylor recognizes "the limitless ways capitalism constructs centers and margins," that is, the ways capitalist thought relies on constructions of identity categories that include or exclude based on marketing strategies.

³² Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 159-160.

³³ See Simon Frith, *The Sociology of Rock* (London: Constable, 1978); Ken Barnes, "Top 40 Radio: A Fragmentation of the Imagination," in *Facing the Music*, ed. Simon Frith (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 8-50; Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997); Jody Berland, "Radio Space and Industrial Time: Music Formats, Local Narratives and Technological Mediation," *Popular Music*, 9, no. 2, 179-192; Eric W. Rothenbuhler, "Commercial Radio and Popular Music: Processes of Selection and Factors of Influence," in *Popular Music and Communication*, ed. James Lull (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1987), 78-95; and Rick Sklar, *Rocking America, an Insider's Story: How the All-Hit Radio Stations Took Over* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984).

³⁴ Keith Negus, "Plugging and Programming: Pop Radio and Record Promotion in Britain and the United States," *Popular Music* 12, no. 1, 59.

³⁵ Timothy Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2-17.

Like Taylor, Hennion and Meadel describe how marketing strategies mediate ideas of identity and how people relate through commodities. They add, however, that the process of building definitions of target audience identity is complex, a practice shared by an industry with capital and cultural resources, and audiences who participate with the system. They argue that analyses of media like radio provide entry to systems of negotiation that allow us

to read, behind the systematic contrasts by means of which the professionals distinguish their roles, the unity of a collective process which tries to obtain agreement among the world of subjects about the world of objects. Mediation is first the operation which allows us to circulate between these dual spaces where desires and meanings are ceaselessly reciprocally defined in terms of each other.³⁶

As moments of mediation, ads allow producers to circulate their own ideas of audience and individual identity as they invite audience members to participate in the dialog. As consumers of culture themselves, producers' own concepts are shaped by representations of identity developed through other media, including print, radio, film and television programming.

Image, music and sound design comprise tools that ad producers carefully select and stylize to invite and re-invite audience members to participate in the practice of identity construction and social relation through commodities. Several studies demonstrate ways that images and texts in print advertising have already been shown to mediate consumer subjectivity, that is, intervene in the ways we see ourselves and others (Williamson 1978, 1995; O'Barr 1994). I add that, as in film, audiovisual ads rely on

³⁶ Hennion and Meadel, 301.

image and sound that create constellations of signifiers that encourage audiences to identify with protagonists or subject positions promoted by the medium (Gorbman 1987; Kalinak 1992; Kassabian 2001). It is in part the interrelation of audio and visual codes that enables audience members to interpret signifiers, assign meanings, and assume the subject positions defined by ads. Interpretation and identification processes are intertwined, and film producers maintain some control over the identification process, thus reproducing predictable audience responses (Kassabian 2001).

Music, “involvement,” musical genre and listening practices

For advertisers, accessing a closely-defined target is only one of several hurdles. In the minds of marketers, successful advertising must not only reach its prospective audience, but also engage its audiences and sway audience perception of the brand positively. Accordingly, scholarly marketing studies attempt to address diverse marketing objectives related to brand recognition, brand recall, a subject’s affective associations with a brand, and a subject’s interest level in or “involvement” with a commercial. Music has been cited by marketing scholars as a tool for potentially influencing consumer involvement and brand recall (Macinnis and Park 1991; Yalch 1991; Kellaris, Cox and Cox 1993; Olsen 1995) and consumer moods or attitudes toward brands (Park and Young 1986; Alpert and Alpert 1990; Bruner 1990). Ultimately, advertisers seek to influence consumer behavior by motivating the willing, able and ready prospect to commit the act of purchasing the promoted product (Gorn 1982; Alpert, Alpert and Maltz 2005).

In approaching these problems, particularly in consideration for how to use music effectively in ads, marketing scholars assume various methodological approaches. Before the 1990s, marketing scholars seemed to espouse methodologies that relied on psychological assumptions and statistical data. The most common involve classical conditioning, affective response studies, or a combination of the two (see Gorn 1982; Bruner 1990; Alpert, Alpert and Maltz 2005). These methods presume universal responses to musics, and still dominate marketing literature. Since the 1990s, however, several marketing studies emerged that drew from semiotics and cultural studies (Scott 1990; Murray and Murray 1996; Harvey and Evans 2001; Hung 2001). In contrast with research based on classical conditioning, these studies believe musical experiences to be culturally variable. For those studies relying on psychological and statistical methods, music seems to be an object in itself, and responses to music universal. For those who consider music a cultural artifact, the object of study shifts toward the relationship between the sounds and the cultural affiliations of the sounds' producers and receivers. In the latter case, culturally variable musical responses represent an expression of the relationship between producer and consumer, and that relationship seems to be couched as the object of opportunity for marketers.

The presumptions of marketing mavens can be analyzed from their own writing and advice to fellow marketers. Searching through the archives of the John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising and Marketing History at Duke University, I noticed an article saved in the J. Walter Thompson Company's corporate files that, presumably, someone at JWT found worthwhile as a reference. Written by Horst Stipp, then Director

of Social and Developmental Research for the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), the article elaborates on traditional conceptions of market demographics that seem still to influence marketers' thinking.³⁷ Throughout the article Stipp presents claims and arguments that presume natural associations between marketing-defined demographic criteria and the kinds of musics people enjoy. For instance, Stipp claims that “[e]veryone knows that Southerners like country music, blacks buy rap and soul, and Hispanics go for salsa,” and “[w]omen tend to prefer softer music than men.”³⁸ Drawing on his personal observations and reputation as a marketing statistics expert, however, Stipp proposes to reveal an angle that he thinks the industry overlooks. Specifically, Stipp points to age as the “most important factor determining people’s musical tastes . . .”³⁹ His argument revolves around psychological arguments on the developmental time period when musical tastes are forged. Based on his observations and empirical analyses, Stipp argues that

[t]he music of our adolescence can have a profound impact on our musical tastes for the rest of our lives, because these are the formative years for music preferences...The connection between age and popular music preferences is so strong that a fan's age can be predicted from his or her favorite oldies...Music

³⁷ Horst Stipp holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from Columbia University. Today Stipp is listed among faculty at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Business where he teaches on audience measurement models. See <http://www4.gsb.columbia.edu/cbs-directory/detail/5811667/Horst+Stipp>, accessed 1/4/09, and Monty Metzger, “NBC Universal: Dr. Horst Stipp,” <http://www.manager-tours.com/2008/03/12/nbc-universal-dr-horst-stipp.html>, accessed 1-4-08. These sources also cite Stipp as Senior Vice President of Strategic Insights & Innovation in the Research department of NBC Universal, where he oversees strategic marketing and consumer research for NBCU, including NBC, News, Sports, USA, SciFi, Bravo, NBCU Digital and other digital platforms.

³⁸ Horst Stipp, “Musical Demographics,” *American Demographics* (August 1990): 48-49.

³⁹ Stipp, 48.

evokes memories of a specific time or lifestyle to its audience. This makes ‘musical demographics’ a useful tool for many businesses.⁴⁰

Insisting that adolescent preferences reveal a way of constituting musical audiences more reliable than geography or ethnicity, Stipp volunteers his presumptions underlying the supposed usefulness of market demographics. In a side-bar graphic of this 1990 publication, Stipp (or his editors) proclaim that oldies station “WCBS-FM . . . Knows that Even 38-year-old Stockbrokers are Hippies at Heart.”⁴¹ Perhaps unaware of the history of radio format construction (which might explain his own circular reasoning), Stipp points out that “strict segregation [of the radio station format] is reflected in the age of the listeners. Fans of oldies stations tend to be aged 35 to 44.”⁴² Perhaps oblivious to the fact that radio formats impose definition upon listeners as audience members, Stipp takes for granted the naturalized relationship between age demographics, so-called oldies stations, and listeners.

As Chapter Three of this dissertation demonstrates, the discourse of music genre is one way the Echo Boys borrow from and re-circulate imagined associations between music and identity. In “Toward a Popular Aesthetic,” Simon Frith argues that by looking at the language of genre

⁴⁰ Stipp, 49.

⁴¹ Stipp, 49.

⁴² Stipp, 48.

we can begin to document the different ways in which music works materially to give people different identities, to place them in different social groups...[D]ifferent musical genres offer different narrative solutions to the recurring pop tensions between authenticity and artifice, sentimentality and realism, the spiritual and the sensual, the serious and the fun. Different musical genres articulate differently the central values of the pop aesthetic—spectacle and emotion, presence and absence, belonging and difference...What music does (all music) is put into play a sense of identity that may or may not fit the way we are placed by other social forces.⁴³

The Echo Boys's working dialog illuminates ways that ad producers conceive of musical genre within ever-shifting discourse of how sounds mean and evoke identity constructions. Using a language peppered by musical genre categories, the Echo Boys include and exclude sounds and musical styles that they and their clients believe will represent a specific identity for the brand, resonate with particular target audiences, and communicate desired messages about particular brands and products.

Working within pre-circulating ideas about musical genres like classic rock or jazz, the Echo Boys frame their creative work within what Steven Feld calls interpretive moves, especially associative and evaluative moves. The Echo Boys don't imagine their ad music as communicating directly. Instead, music in each of their ads creates a vibe, a feeling that directs the listener's attention, and guides the kinds of interpretations they hope their listeners will make. Their interpretive moves help define the kinds of sounds they want to develop and those they seek to eliminate in order to create a desired vibe. According to Feld, these kinds of interpretive moves

⁴³ Simon Frith, "Toward a Popular Aesthetic," in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 275-6.

do not fix a singular meaning; instead they focus some boundaries of fluid shifts in our attentional patterns as we foreground and background experience and knowledge in relation to the ongoing perception of a sound object or event.⁴⁴

By steering the listener's attentional patterns, advertisers can (re)circulate naturalized associations between sound and identity. While momentarily "fixing" ideas about how performers fit within generic categories, the encoding and decoding process simultaneously maintains a fluidity of genre categories that enable the dialog between producer and listeners to remain ever-changing, and always open to interpretation by the listener based on the listener's experience.

Ad music is critical to building that relationship because the musical listening process draws from people's social and historical knowledge about music. Music creates opportunities for advertisers to incorporate the idea of a brand within a listener's life experience. Feld explains that

the sound event draws my interpretive attention to the circumstances of meaning through the general features of being contextual and contextualizing. These features of the way we listen involve form-content and musical-extramusical dialectics. In the simplest sense what takes place in the experience of a piece of music is the working of some features of momentary experience into the context of prior and plausible experiences to interpret what is going on.⁴⁵

Because the listening process calls for interpretation on the part of the listener, the listener actively engages with music by drawing on her/his musical and extra-musical experience. It is this engagement with experience that can make advertising effective.

⁴⁴ Steven Feld, "Communication, Music, and Speech about Music," in *Music Grooves*, ed. Charles Keil and Steven Feld (Tucson: Fenstra, [1994] 2005). Reprinted from *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 16. (1984), 93.

⁴⁵ Feld, 85-6.

The human process of relating what we see and hear with other things seen and heard, other things historically and socially contextualized, creates a site for linking fictitious brand identities with real human experience.

Key to this issue is the way listening processes engage a person's individual knowledge base and experience, and how listening practices situate listeners within a community of listeners. Particularly with advertising, where its producers project a personified brand identity, audiences are encouraged to relate with the brand. In that sense, communication between audiences and virtual personalities like brands may enable audience members to participate in virtual communities with brands. Music can help promote the listening practices of a consumer culture in the sense that we presume that our understanding of musical meaning situates us within a culture of other listeners (or virtual, branded personae) we believe may share our responses to music and interpretations of meaning. Feld theorizes that

[c]ommunication is a socially interactive and intersubjective process of reality construction through message production and interpretation... Whether or not we think we know what things, events, or sounds are about, we assume, not infrequently, that they display the subjective intentions of others. We understand that these intentions may or may not be explicit and refined in the minds of the others; they may be equally vague and ambiguous to both actor and receiver, equally transparent and obvious to both, or at different levels of clarity with relation to each other. To the extent that we apprehend scenes as meaningfully organized, we assume that others share our sense of reality, as well as our more specifically situated and finite sensibilities. At the same time we recognize that we might not all have the same idea, the same "take" on what is going on and what it means. We guess about what others are up to, what is on their minds. We guess about what they intend or whether they mean to intend...⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Feld, 79.

Perhaps advertising is most effective when an audience member makes assumptions that the brand “apprehends [music] as meaningfully organized,” that brands “share one’s sense of reality,” and has “the same ‘take’ on what is going on and what it means.” That seems to be many advertisers’ goals. As McDonald’s marketing executive Ben explains to me, the music in their ads helps the McDonald’s corporation communicate with its audience members a shared understanding of McDonald’s customers self-identification. With the five-tone McDonald’s jingle and other ad images, musics and sounds, Ben asserts that “we want them to know we understand who they are and what they need.” Through the ad, marketers like Ben communicate brand identities with which they hope consumers will build relationships. Concurrently, ad music can help reinforce consumer practices by situating the listener within a community of consumers who might attend to musical meaning in ads similarly.

Complicating this relationship-through-listening model, producers’ presumptions of how their target audiences listen inform their decisions on how they choose music for ads. In one example, the ad producers’ assumptions result in the selection of music from a local alternative rock band to represent their pre-defined “youth market.” Shaun, the Director of Broadcast Production for ad agency MSA, considers his greatest professional challenge—and primary responsibility—to be understanding how members of a target audience think so that he can design ads that influence audience members’ thinking.⁴⁷ To understand their thinking, Shaun strives to “look through their eyes” and, ostensibly,

⁴⁷ Scott has left Bright Idea Studios (BIS) and MSA since this interview and my internship in order to pursue his own media production company.

listen through their ears. In doing so he believes he can contribute a marketing strategy that encourages that audience to “think what I want them to think, remember what I want them to remember.” For a regional Subway sandwich commercial, Shaun’s work demonstrates that he also tries to hear how audience members listen—or, perhaps, how he imagines that they listen.

Building an ad for broadcast throughout North Carolina’s Piedmont Triad area, Shaun and his production team filmed a story of four people who were on a post-college graduation road trip around the region.⁴⁸ Their adventure was tied together by all the convenient Subway stores they visited during their journey. To complete the assignment, Shaun emphasizes that he needed to approach the project through the eyes and ears of the “youth market.” After casting three young men and a young woman to play the roles—all happened to be Caucasian—Shaun and his team filmed a rough cut and looked for an appropriate song to fill the soundtrack. They decided that selecting music from a local band contributed to the marketing strategy in numerous ways. On a quest to find “upbeat” music that would appeal to the targeted “youth audience,” Shaun and his team believed the audience would also value the authenticity represented by a band without national recognition. According to Shaun, “[members of the youth market] are burned out on big, oversold stuff—they value authenticity.”

In the process of selecting a band, Shaun and his associates opted away from country and hip hop, considering those genre categories “too focused” to hit the broadest

⁴⁸ North Carolina’s Piedmont Triad region includes the area within and surrounding Greensboro, Winston-Salem and High Point, and is served by as many as eight local television affiliates. Scott defines the “youth market” as “college-aged” people.

segment of the youth audience. Instead, they settled on the song “Leaving and Waving” by the Winston-Salem group Monday in London, concluding that the group’s alternative rock sound would “[hit] most of the target audience.” Furthermore, according to Shaun, that song’s tempo (at about 160 beats per minute or bpm) provided “the right pace to edit to” and the “right feel” to supplement the storyline about four young adults enjoying a post-graduation road trip. With a target audience generalized as “youth” and specialized geographically, Shaun and his team select music that reflects their own beliefs on how their audience members listen: with an ear for some version of authenticity; with affinities for particular musical genres; with expectations for how an ad should “feel.” Presumptions made by Shaun’s marketing team involve definitions of who listens to particular musical styles, how those people interpret music in an ad, and how those people inter-relate. As Simon Frith has argued, sound and music enable experiences of idealized identity constructs.⁴⁹ Frith suggests that music is a powerful conduit for identity expression, postulating that identities are always-already ideal constructs, and that music provides “real experience of what the ideal could be.”⁵⁰ In this case, perhaps, the “youth market” may represent a specific set of identifiers that comprise an idealized version of youth in the minds of Shaun and his team: early twenties, college-educated, slender, active and white. The selection of a musical track that “hits most of the target

⁴⁹ Simon Frith, “The Meaning of Music,” in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 249-268.

⁵⁰ Simon Frith, “Toward a Popular Aesthetic,” in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 274.

audience,” and audience of “youth” in the North Carolina Piedmont, may have been mediated by the team’s idealized conception of a target audience.

Producers are people, too: mediatization and the power of the producer in the manufacture of culture

This section considers the complex position of ad creatives in cultural production. Since the turn of the twentieth century, the dissemination of branding strategies through mass media has become a staple of capitalist culture. The capital, distribution networks and cultural resources maintained by the advertising industry are generally unavailable to much of the population. Over time, the industry came to wield considerable control over cultural discourse through branding. At the same time, the industry per se is made up of people, participants in a capitalist culture who build lifestyles with commodities and social relations through commodities. Although their stations within the advertising industry may grant them some authority in the selection, stylization and dissemination of cultural narratives, ad producers are also audience members surrounded by messages in print, radio, television, film, and other media. My ethnography shows that ad producers’ creative intuitions are shaped by their own experiences as cultural consumers.

In his analyses of historical marketing strategies of Wedgewood crystal products, Andrew Wernick argues that the institutionalization of brand communications through the media establishes a power relation between producer and audience members. He offers that this “mediatization” of brand messages through advertising facilitates the circumscription of consumers’ needs, wants and desires as well as audience members’ fantasies for how particular goods or services could meet their needs, wants and desires.

With the term mediatization, I understand Wernick to frame the systematic situating of brand messages in audio, visual, and audiovisual media, for the purpose of affixing select ideas of what particular products could represent to audience members. Because of their access to talent, capital and distribution channels, advertisers have the ability not only to associate products with the kinds of cultural and aesthetic meanings they think will increase sales, but also to reiterate and reinforce those associations in ways generally unavailable to audience members. As Wernick explains, though advertising might be playing “exactly the same function as the come-ons, street cries, and haggling that swirled round the stall of a medieval market or, still today, a Cairo bazaar,” ad producers’ capital and cultural resources remain unavailable to many audience members. Similar to Certeau’s observation of the power hierarchy between strategy and tactic, Wernick’s argument points out that the institutionalization of ad dissemination is woven into the fabric of everyday social practice:⁵¹

The marketing of Wedgwood’s innovative produce still involved oral salesmanship at the local point of purchase. However, this was now orchestrated as part of a system which was organized from above; and in that system’s dispersed communicative reach the flow of product information was anything but face-to-face. It was, that is to say, mediatized, i.e. converted into fixed forms which could be mass disseminated from a distance...but also, tacitly, through the use of stylized and standardized goods...as a mass medium in itself. [...] An important corollary of mediatization was that promotional discourse was set free from the immediacies of buying and selling to develop a life of its own. And on this basis, as advertising, packaging, and public relations, promotion became more systematically involved in the definition to consumers of what the proffered goods were. In turn, this opened up the possibility of pre-defining what needs and

⁵¹ Andrew Wernick, *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression* (London: SAGE Publications, 1991), 17.

desires they might satisfy, and what, through the inescapably fictive process of representation, they could be taken to mean. In sum: by becoming a distinct and strategized level of business practice, by becoming unilateral and communicatively detached, and finally by re-involving itself with production through product design, promotion was able to become an independently acting force in the social construction of commodities on their whole symbolic side.⁵²

According to Wernick, the systematization of ad dissemination facilitated the circumscription of audience identities and social relations by advertisers. The fact that marketing discourse itself was “set free from the immediacies of buying and selling” helped embed marketing strategy as a marker of American society through the twentieth century. Just as Jameson explains with the dissociation of signifiers and their socio-historically-grounded signifieds, wants and needs could be pre-defined through the mediatization, liberated from people’s everyday experience of wants or needs. Mediatization has become part of the practice of consumerist culture by institutionalizing the discourse of branding.

Jean Baudrillard describes mediatized brand discourse as a sign system that structures a new, postmodern practice of people assimilating brands into their daily lives. For Baudrillard, “consumption is an active mode of relations (not only to objects, but to the collectivity and to the world), a systematic mode of activity and a global response on which our whole cultural system is founded.”⁵³ He explains that the sign system, established through a culture of consumption, enables people to personalize commodities

⁵² Wernick, 17-8.

⁵³ Jean Baudrillard, “The System of Objects,” from *Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 21.

based on ideals defined through a constellation of signifiers that are assigned to the commodity:

Consumption is *the virtual totality of all objects and messages presently constituted in a more or less coherent discourse*. Consumption, in so far as it is meaningful, is *a systematic act of the manipulation of signs...In order to become an object of consumption, the object must become sign*; that is, in some way it must become external to a relation that it now only signifies, a-signed *arbitrarily* and non-coherently to this concrete relation, yet obtaining its coherence, and consequently its meaning, from an abstract and systematic relation to all other object-signs. It is in this way that it becomes “personalized,” and enters in the series, etc.: it is never consumed in its materiality, but in its difference... We can see that what is consumed are not objects but the relation itself—signified and absent, included and excluded at the same time—it is *the idea of the relation* that is consumed in the series of objects which manifests it.⁵⁴

As marketers build brands, communicating an identity or persona associated with a company and its products, their projection of that brand through audio, visual, and audiovisual media enable people to relate to the brand. Brand identities and their relational possibilities circulate through culture, and audience members may come to identify with other audience members with whom the same brands resonate. As art

⁵⁴ Baudrillard, “The System of Objects,” 22. Emphases in original. He continues:

“If consumption appears to be irrepressible, this is precisely because it is a total idealist practice which has no longer anything to do (beyond a certain point) with the satisfaction of needs, nor with the reality principle; it becomes energized in the project that is always dissatisfied and implicit in the object. The project, made immediate in the sign, transfers its essential dynamics onto the systematic and indefinite possession of object-signs of consumption. Consequently, it must transcend itself, or continuously reiterate itself in order to remain what it is: a reason for living. The very project of life, segmented, dissatisfied, and signified, is reclaimed and annulled in successive objects. Hence, the desire to “moderate” consumption or to establish a normalizing network of needs is naïve and absurd moralism.

“At the heart of the project from which emerges the systematic and indefinite process of consumption is a frustrated desire for totality. Object-signs are equivalent to each other in their ideality and can proliferate indefinitely: and *they must* do so in order continuously to ful-fill the absence of reality. It is ultimately because consumption is founded on a *lack* that it is irrepressible.” (25)

director Jack explains with his metaphor of belonging to a club, people can practice consumerism not just in their shopping habits, but also in the ways they identify with other people with similar product or brand preferences. As a result, the identities and value sets associated with products through branding become reified—that is, these otherwise abstract qualities become materialized through image and sound, associated with commodities, then sold back to consumers through branded products.

While scholars like Wernick and Baudrillard help explain some of the institutional effects of marketing in the postmodern era, Barry Dornfeld observes the roles of media producers in the practice of cultural production. Through his ethnographic work with public television documentary production, Dornfeld recognizes ways that producers “prefigure...acts of consumption” by predetermining audience identity, ad reception and consumption practices:

Producers’ projections about their audiences greatly affect the selection, encoding, and structuring of the media forms these institutions distribute, whether they are mainstream television programs, commercials, feature films, or educational documentaries.⁵⁵

At the same time, Dornfeld reminds us of the complex roles that ad contributors play in the production and consumption of brand discourse. Dornfeld points out that media producers themselves are audience members, too, (re)circulating cultural myths and narratives based on their own world views. In the practice of everyday life, media producers have jobs and engage with media just like other people practicing consumer

⁵⁵ Barry Dornfeld, *Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 13-14.

behaviors. Dornfeld submits that we might rethink ad producers as cultural agents with complex roles as both producers and consumers:

The very separation made between “audience members” and “producers” is an artifact of the history of mass communications scholarship tied to an industrial model of communications research...[W]e can see *television producers as viewers*, and more generally, *cultural producers as consumers* in the broad sense: as interpreting, active agents, who decode ‘texts’ (both material they generate in their production work and a variety of material they consume outside the work context) within their own complex of tastes, preferences, and practices.⁵⁶

With Dornfeld’s observation of the role of communications scholarship in perpetuating a dichotomy between audience member and producer, he observes that media producers decode cultural texts even as they contribute to them. Although ad producers may participate in a system privileged with capital and cultural resources, they, too, play out their lives by getting jobs, providing for their families, engaging with their respective cultural milieus, and interpreting cultural narratives.

In my own ethnography, I note that the practice of producing advertising media is grounded in creatives’ dual role of producer and consumer. Despite the fact that market research runs abundant, artists, musicians and sound designers seem not to draw upon demographics, psychographics and the like to define identities of the audiences listening to their wares. Instead, as several creatives attest, they select image, music, and sound effects based on what “seems right” to them based on their own interpretations of circulating cultural codes. At the same time, it seems that that “sense” is bounded by how the client defines its need, the audience identity the client defines as the target, and

⁵⁶Dornfeld, 14, 16. Emphasis in original.

both client's and advertiser's imaginations about what that identity represents. For freelancer Jack, describing that "sense" is a difficult undertaking. Part of his explanation reveals that many ad producers rely on audio and visual conventions already circulating in American film industries and other commercially available media:

I don't know, you just draw from all your experiences, stuff you see, stuff you hear...A lot of times I think the real sense [comes from], you know, you're sitting there drawing about what emotion you're trying to capture...If you want a romantic spot then you start to reference things like, well, what music would be really romantic to me? Can I remember a scene in a TV show or movie or something...What was the music like?... Then the person you're working with is like, oh god, did you see this movie, and then it's like, oh god, what was that song? That was amazing! One I remember because it was so powerful was in *Good Morning, Vietnam*...They're bombing this whole section of forest and then it's Louis Armstrong over the top singing "What a Wonderful World"... The contrast between the beautiful music and this horrific scene was so powerful...it always comes up [when I'm working with someone], like, think about that contrast. What would be some music we could get that contrasts what you see on screen that would be more impactful? You know, it's like an irony.

Echo Boy Tate describes a similar approach to his sound design work. Acknowledging that he and his entire team are movie buffs, he pays attention to films and television programs and draws from historical and recent audio-visual production trends. Along with his own music and animation backgrounds, these inform his intuition, life experience and personal preferences for his sound design decisions. The result is his trust in his own "feel" for what the sound scheme should contain in order to communicate the appropriate message to the appropriate audience:

I guess I start by just thinking 'oh, what would work with this'... you know, we put a rockabilly track on that [commercial for adhesive bandages] just 'cause the energy of it all just felt right...you know, it felt like reckless abandon, and I like rockabilly music, and it seemed right, you know...There was no thinking in my

head, like, rockabilly music will sell south of the Mason-Dixon line. There was none of that thinking going on in my head. Just what seems right to me to go with...

Similarly, Jack relies on personal experience to inform his creative decisions:

I look at the thing and analyze it all, then I have to step back and say, OK, they're talking to women that are about my wife's age, so what would my wife do? What would she like? Or I'm looking through the magazines where they might be advertising and I have to put myself in the shoes of a customer. I think, OK, what might be going on in her life? And I see if I can stumble across some little piece of emotion or understanding from an emotional place so that I can springboard off of that so I can communicate [the client's message]. So when you're watching TV and looking at ads, you saw it and thought, it'd stop you. You're like, oh, god, this is exactly what I'm interested in, this is me, or someone you know maybe.

By relying on their "sense," commercial artists recycle myths and beliefs that tie behaviors to sonic elements like music. For Tate, the music he created for an adhesive bandage commercial represented the "reckless abandon" he intuited from the images given to him by his client: shots featuring a young barefoot water skier with an obviously dogged bandage on his big toe. Tate could not elaborate on why the music he wrote sounded like "reckless abandon." The music just "seemed to fit" the images and mood he perceived in the character portrayed in the scenes. Additionally, his personal preference for that musical style perhaps made it readily accessible repertoire. Likewise, both Jack and Tate borrow from conventions circulating through film and other media for inspiration.

One day in the Echo Boys's studio, Tate and Allen comb through dozens of sound files from the Echo Boys's sound library (made up of hundreds of musical pieces that

were composed as demos but never selected for an ad). They received a rough video edit for a children's hospital marketing campaign, and they're looking for what they call reference music, music demos that they can easily, quickly edit with the developing ad . They'll return the video demo with several musical clips in order to gauge the client's preferences, particularly for musical style. After reviewing the client's video storyboard and rough edit, Tate and Allen comment on each potential demo. To facilitate their exchange of creative ideas, they use language that positions demos within the context of their personal experiences and humorous critiques of music in the media:

“That's Elfman-esque...That one is, too. Elfman wrote everything. He wrote *The Nutcracker*, didn't he?”

“That feels Mr. Rogers-ish—and maybe that's OK. That might be too obvious to them but maybe it'll be OK...”

“That's a little too Barney. It's like a church tune when they just changed the words and made a new song out of it. That's it—church is the new Barney...”

Borrowing from already existent ideas already associated with music in current media, Tate and Allen communicate with one another about how to shape the soundtrack in ways they think their client might find suitable for the project. In Chapter Three, I explore how the Echo Boys's own acculturation in the language of genre contributes to their selection of musical styles they imagine might resonate with clients and audiences.

Playing the senses: The Real/hyper-reality, impact, and the brand experience

With Chapter Four, I argue that the often overlooked practice of sound design is a critical feature of audiovisual media production that speaks to production and listening

traditions in the context of late capitalism. Specifically, I submit sound design contributes to a heightening of a listener's physical and emotional experiences of audiovisual representations of reality. Through the manipulation of timbre and effects, sound design plays a significant role in generating what the industry informally refers to as "impact," that is, a physical, physiological or emotional response to the audiovisual stimulus infused with meaning understood by target audience members. Ad producers hope that "making an impact" on targeted audiences will increase the potential for audience members to relate to a brand, and purchase a featured product. Marketing analyst Thomas Mucha reports on one Toronto sound design firm whose clients seek brand-identifying sonic logos. As Mucha explains, a sonic logo crafted by artists at Boom Sonic Branding for a conservative client involves a complex layering of sounds that they believe communicates identity constructs and values to both clients and its potential audiences:⁵⁷

Recently, Boom was hired by a company about as buttoned-down as they come: a global credit rating agency. "They wanted to communicate the thoroughness, comfort, and expertise you'd expect from a blue-chip financial firm," says Boom's managing partner Bill Nygren . . . For that project, Boom settled on the sound of a "stamp of approval." What does that sound like? A lot of things, it turns out. Engineers at Boom mixed the familiar ka-chick of a supermarket pricing gun (the core of this sonic identity) with the clicking of two old-time adding machines (to suggest movement). On top of that, they layered the sound of someone typing on a computer keyboard (for a touch of modernity), as well as several low-end tones (for added depth and authority). Finally they tacked on a three-note (short, easy to remember) ascending major arpeggio (positive and secure). The mix of organic and inorganic sounds is the secret: "It's not

⁵⁷ Thomas Mucha, "The New Sounds of Selling: Forget Full-Blown Jingles," *Business 2.0* 6, no. 4 (May 2005), 58.

necessarily important to use real sounds,” explains Frank Lauraitis, Boom’s production director. “Instead, you try to create a hyperrealistic mix that is instantly recognizable to the target consumer.”⁵⁸

This “hyperrealist mix” is a key component to advertising and, I argue the production of meanings in postmodern, late capitalist society. By hyper-reality (and later I’ll refer to “The Real”), I mean a media representation of reality that points to reality through images or sounds that might be familiar to audience members, but isn’t based in any reality. In fact, constructions of the hyper-real are intended to shape or even heighten the audience member’s ideas of reality through the stylization of images and sounds that refer to reality. In the case of Boom Sonic Branding’s credit agency logo, many of the individual sounds may refer to real adding machines or computer keyboards, but the stylization of each sound through effects, and the relations built between sounds by their layering is grounded in nothing but the story the ad producers are trying to tell about the client.

In the postmodern story-telling process, Boom’s sonic amalgam serves several functions. First, as a whole, the signifier offers a nearly instantaneous sensorial experience that communicates an identity for the brand. Second, the sonic components level layers of values and meanings deemed advantageous in attracting particular audience members with whom those resonate. Third, the icon is repeatable and distinct, which enables its users to habituate audiences with associations between sounds and meanings via any medium with audio capabilities. Finally, according to production

⁵⁸ Mucha, 58.

director Frank Lauraitis, the logo successfully presents a hyper-realistic sound mix, resulting in a sophisticated representation of reality that is somehow exaggerated to heighten the listening experience. I argue that these larger-than-life representations of reality distinguish sound production in the late twentieth century. As Chapter Four demonstrates, crafting sound designs is a complex process mediated by how ad producers imagine target audiences' identities, how those audience members might hear sound effects, and the values that sound effects might imply.

Under-studied until recently, studio processing techniques provide audience members information on how to interpret music and sound. Studio manipulations impress upon listeners conventions for how music should sound and the spaces in which it sounds. For instance, processing audio timbre or mix by increasing or diminishing reverberation, delay or volume provides the listener with a spatial signature consistent with the film producers' desired soundscape (Altman 1992). Other scholars have demonstrated that post-production sound processing techniques, like manipulations of sound processing techniques like reverb, delay or flange contribute to identity constructions and genre definitions, making heavy metal "heavy," country music "sincere," or Zulu music "Zulu" (Berger and Fales 2005; Porcello 1996; Meintjes 2003). These studies suggest that studio processes can directly correspond to assumptions about musical styles and the subjectivities of listeners who privilege certain styles. Louise Meintjes examines the studio manipulation of musical style as a way to understand the construction and expression of values and identities. She explains that

[i]n-studio sound mixing is a process of negotiation for control over the electronic manipulation of style. If style is conceived as a performed and multilayered sign that expresses, constructs, and reproduces the sensibilities of the artists, then recording and mixing is a dramatized struggle over signs embodying values, identities, and aspirations.⁵⁹

With my observations in Chapter Four, I, too, demonstrate that the studio serves as a site for identity and values construction. In the case of my research, however, I show how sound designers consider identity and values in the layering and mixing of sound effects. Though seemingly simple—one might think sound effects more banal than music—sound design elements often represent artists’ attempts to manifest values they believe their (imaginary) target audiences to hold. In the post-production studio, my interlocutors designed sound they believed reflected their audience members’ values, and resonated with audience members’ passions, wants and needs.

In designing ads that resonate, many ad producers strive to make an “impact,” a critical yet informal marketing concept that marks an ad’s efficacy in grasping audience attention, penetrating audience members’ imaginations, and motivating them to purchase featured products. “Impact” encompasses several goals in the ad’s role in producing product sales, including attaining audience attention, connecting with audience members emotionally, and inspiring them to purchase a product or service (specifically the commodity featured in the ad). Free-lance art director Jack attributes much of this to an ad producer’s objective for cutting through the glut of capitalist communiqués:

⁵⁹ Louise Meintjes, *Sound of Africa! Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 8-9.

In our world there's so much clutter, we're barraged with [messages]... Your brain just filters out 99% of everything that's coming at you, your brain can't process it. I think I read that in the course of a day your brain can take in something like 100 messages. So when you think about that number and you think about how many signs and ads and commercials and web banners, things you see and hear every day that you're unaware of... So my job is that first of all to make you aware of [the ad in] a way that you can connect more clearly, either with words or pictures or a combination, so that you remember it and it solves a problem for you.

It seems that cutting through the clutter involves arresting audience members' attention through their emotional and embodied experiences of audiovisual media. Sound design, while seemingly subtle, appears to be a critical element in the minds of many ad producers for the ways it can seize attention and garner involvement. In the opinions of many of my participants, a well-crafted sound design engages audiences without obtruding in the ad's primary aim in delivering the brand or sales message. At the same time, it contributes to the ad's impact on the audience member.

In Jack's mind, creating impact in an ad involves knowing his target audience, and making connections with them based on feeling in a way that hopefully triggers their purchasing behaviors. As Jack describes his concept of impact, he explains that impact differentiates ad design and a generalized concept of graphic design—the difference lies in motivating someone to purchase a product:

The difference between advertising and graphic design, just as a definition... I think of advertising as designing for impact. You want to put a message out there that's going to have an impact within the community. That people are going to hear and [it will] connect with them and motivate them to take an action.

While trying to make one ad visible and audible over the voices of the overabundance of brand messages in American culture, ad producers seek ways not only of grasping

audience attention, but also connecting with audience members on an emotional level to inspire them to act on a purchase. Jack recalls one project for which he was especially proud in making an impact on his audience:

We were working on a project that was going to be sold in the classroom to schoolteachers. It was a kit of materials that was designed to help teachers manage their students, manage the classroom. A way of getting the students involved in helping take care of the classroom... Teachers were spending so much time disciplining and controlling their students that that's all they did. And the good students didn't get enough attention because they were spending all their time with the problems. One of the lines we came up with was "Welcome back to the reason you became a teacher." And we thought well, that's kind of a cool line. And we showed it to a few people who happened to be ex-teachers and they like sit back in their chairs and were like, oh my god, that's exactly what this is about... It really spoke to the real need they had. That was the thing that teachers were frustrated with—most of them get into teaching kids because they want to make the world a better place and they love kids. They get excited about working with them and want to see them meet their highest potential... But then they get into teaching and all they're dealing with red tape and government regulations and discipline problems and setting up meetings with parents because their kids aren't coming to class, or there's some other problems going on in the kid's background... It becomes this social kind of problem solving rather than the Joys of Math or How to Write Well or things you're really passionate about. And I didn't really understand that, but that was a line that came up—it was like, oh my god, that was really cool. Once we figured that out then it really drove all the stuff that was created beyond that. It was working to understand some key point about your consumer.

Touching upon teachers' frustrations, Jack designed an "impactful" and successful campaign. Though he stumbled onto this advertising solution almost unawares, he communicated a message that sparked an emotional connection with his targeted audience ("teachers"). In the process, he built a rapport between the branded product and

prospective buyers who might see the product as bringing them relief from their anxieties.

For motion picture sound editor David Yewdall, impact involves affording audience members a memorable experience through his concept of the Big Sound. Yewdall describes Big Sound as “a philosophy, an art—an understanding of what sounds good together to make a bigger sound.”⁶⁰ The craftsmanship lies in knowing exactly which kinds of sounds to put together to create a particular effect, or as Yewdall calls it, a Big Sound. Describing a sound design experience with a Finnish film making team, Yewdall frames his sound design motives as artistically marking the cultural and even nationalist flavor he detects in this Finnish film:

The production recordings were extremely good, but like most production tracks, focused on spoken dialog. In a picture filled with men, tanks, airplanes, steam trains, and weaponry, much of the sound effect work still had to be done. The potential sound design grew within my head—my imagination started filling the gaps and action sequences. If any picture cried out for the Big Sound, this was the one. *Talvisota: The Winter War* was the true story of the war between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1939. It proved one of the most important audio involvements of my professional career. It was not a question of money. It was an issue of passion—the heart and soul of a nation beckoned from the rough work-in-progress video.⁶¹

For Yewdall, Big Sound seems to be a heightened representation of reality intended to amplify an audience member’s experience through her/his physical and emotional responses. In the process, he connects meanings and values through sound. In this case,

⁶⁰ David Yewdall, M.P.S.E., *The Practical Art of Motion Picture Sound*, 2nd ed. (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Science, 2003; 1999), 201.

⁶¹ Yewdall, 201.

he sees his sound design summoning nationalist fervors and war mythologies that he believes will affect his listeners.

Presuming audience members' expectations of sound in today's media seems key to Yewdall's sense of success—he explains that “[r]eality...is not necessarily the focus of sound design. There is reality, and there is the perception of reality.”⁶² Heightening an audience member's emotional experience of reality through the film seems to be the primary focus of his sound design artistry. Specifically, he points to timbre as the key quality marking the efficacy of his work:

Properly designed sound has a timbre all its own. Timbre is the violin—the vibration resonating emotionally with the audience. Timbre sets good sound apart from a pedestrian soundtrack.⁶³

Like Yewdall, the Echo Boys and Blazing Music + Sound build and timbrally process sounds to achieve particular effects, especially for the purpose of steering an audience member's physical or emotional experiences with ads. By building sound that heightens the audience member's encounter with the brand, ad producers can situate a brand experience within the audience member's body and emotions.

According to Yewdall, the Big Sound model is unique to United States media production practices. Privileging his concept of Big Sound as a marker of American quality and ascendancy, this sound artist endorses Big Sound as a key characteristic of American storytelling through film:

⁶² Yewdall, 212.

⁶³ Yewdall, 202.

Sound as we have seen it grow in the United States has distinguished American pictures on a worldwide market. Style, content, slickness of production, rapidity of storytelling—all make movies produced in the United States generally better, but the sound on American pictures is far superior to that of a vast majority of pictures made anywhere else in the world. Most foreign crews consider sound only a background behind the actors. They have not developed the Big Sound concept.⁶⁴

I'd like to add that the repetition and habituation of audience members' sonic expectations characterizes the ways that cultural narratives are produced, circulated and understood in late capitalist society. Yewdall's association of the Big Sound concept American film resonates with Umberto Eco's assessments of American consumption practices. Exploring what he calls "travels in hyper-reality," Eco sees in American culture a hunger for representations of the real to provide experiences that move, stimulate, provoke, even shock.⁶⁵ In Eco's mind, this consumer demand reverberates throughout advertising rhetoric:

We can identify it through two typical slogans that pervade American advertising. The first, widely used by Coca-Cola but also frequent as a hyperbolic formula in everyday speech, is "the real thing"; the second, found in print and heard on TV, is "more"—in the sense of "extra." The announcer doesn't say, for example, "The program will continue" but rather that there is "More to come." In America you don't say, "Give me another coffee"; you ask for "More coffee"; you don't say that cigarette A is longer than cigarette B, but that there's "more" of it, more than you're used to having, more than you might want, leaving a surplus to throw away...⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Yewdall, 202.

⁶⁵ Eco discusses the popularity and provocative exhibits of wax museums and spectacles like Ripley's "Believe It or Not!". Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 12-21.

⁶⁶ Eco, 7-8.

Likewise, the Big Sound in film and advertising is providing audiences with “more” of a sonic experience, a bigger sound that’s more (R)real than real, more arresting, more stimulating. Sound design provides not just an experience of real, but a Real stylized for a heightened experience of real. In Chapter Four, I explain how sound designs built by the Echo Boys and Blazing Music + Sound exemplify advertisers’ efforts to educate audience members’ involvement in ads, and attempts to engage audience members physically, physiologically and emotionally. Ad producers design sound with the purpose instilling physical and emotional feeling in listeners, and associating feeling with products or brands—in American consumerist culture at the turn of the twenty-first century, that requires not just sound, but big, effected, processed sound.

Several film scholars explore this phenomenon of engaging with the reality and irreality presented in audiovisual media. Vivian Sobchack explores fiction films that borrow from documentary, considering how production and reception practices account for the ways in which

we engage the cinema as both fiction and documentary—very often in relation to the same film and often regardless of those institutional regulations of spectatorship that cue and fix our engagement with what we see on the screen. . . . I want to emphasize here the fiction film’s intersections with documentary—and its quite common arousal (purposeful or not) of what we might call the viewer’s “documentary consciousness”: a particular mode of embodied and ethical spectatorship that that informs and transforms the space of the irreal into the space of the real.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 261.

Like Sobchack, I'm interested in the advertising industry's play between ideals of reality and what I'm here calling The Real. On one hand, cultural and legal practices in the US circulate ideas of "truth in advertising."⁶⁸ On the other, ad producers laboriously stylize products, sets, images, sound effects and music not only to present the products and brands most attractively, but also to meet the expectations for audiences' idealized expectations for how things *should* look or *should* sound.

While several literary theorists articulate constructs they call "Real," my understanding arises from an ethnographic object. I use the phrase to refer to the ways that media producers fashion image, music and sound to re-present reality and embody the idea of the brand through impact, all of this particularly positioned within an early twenty-first century socioeconomic and American cultural milieu. Several questions arise for me in the process—for instance, what do media producers mean when they refer to "real" sounds, images, feelings or experiences? What is at stake when they deliberate on meanings and sounds they consider "real" or as a more effective representation of

⁶⁸ As demonstrated by the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) policies, the federal government maintains guidelines for handling consumer protection matters, particularly with consumer complaints and lawsuits against food marketers. Additionally, the ad producers take seriously the industry's self-regulation of advertising values. For example, as the food stylist for Chapter Two's Subway ad explains to me, in an ad for a McDonald's chicken breast sandwich, the chicken breast in the image must be the same chicken product a patron would receive upon actually buying that sandwich in a McDonalds. However, if the ad producers wanted the breast to seem like a thicker, more generous portion, the food stylist could glue and toothpick two breasts together. For more information on FTC regulations on food advertising, see the FTC's Enforcement Policy Statement on Food Advertising, <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/policystmt/ad-food.shtm>, accessed 8-13-08. According to my telephone conversations with FTC personnel, however, these (albeit limited and often vague) guidelines were established to hold food marketers accountable only for nutrition and health claims. It remains unclear to me whether formal standards for food stylization exist, or if the industry has imagined a set of standards believed to be the limits of reality exaggeration that still afford the advertiser credibility.

“real” than others? Inquiries like these represent the point of departure for my exploration of the trafficking of versions of the real in advertising.

To elaborate, I compare my understanding of The Real as constructed by media producers with Roland Barthes’s challenge to classical concepts of “real” and his articulation of “reality effect.”⁶⁹ Barthes’s modernist aesthetic project comprises reconstituting an approach to the concrete detail from aesthetics arising from the ideals of classicism. In his writing he focuses on the detail (of a narrative, of an image) as a way of desublimating the artistic work. Barthes sees an erotic element to the detail, and through his aesthetic paradigm he grounds the detail in the body.⁷⁰ In other words, rather than elevating the artwork as sublime, as had been done within the frame of classicist ideals, Barthes seeks to demystify art within a modernist frame, and to critique classical aesthetic principles that consider art to be—or that art ought to be—detached from everyday experience. While Barthes argues that it is through visual and narrative detail that meaningful sensation is conveyed, I bring to the fore the equivalent aural role played by the timbral detail. Whereas Barthes attends especially to the visual detail made accessible through the technology of the camera, I focus on the aural detail finessed through the electronic recording studio. Within my conception of The Real, aural details are historically grounded within postmodern sensibilities, framed within capitalistic

⁶⁹ See Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 141-48. For a nice summary of Barthes’s aesthetics, interest in the concrete detail, and articulation of the “reality effect,” see Naomi Shor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 79-97.

⁷⁰ Shor, 95-97.

social and economic objectives, and ethnographically situated in the creative work and ideas of advertising production teams.

Besides borrowing from Barthes's aesthetic critique, I follow Jean Baudrillard's idea that consumers respond to simulations of the real as if they were real. With that observation, my construct of The Real also demonstrates a functional role of advertising creative output that fosters the viability of advertising efforts, and employs the audience member's experience to do so. Within a postmodern paradigm, the artwork is already detached from the self—rather than considering their creative products sublime, however, and in keeping with profitability strategies, advertisers work to associate their artful representations with bodily experience through impact. I'm interested in the ways that advertisers represent reality, specifically by idealizing representations of products and brands through image, music and sound, and then designing the artwork for impact, that is, to make idealized representations physically or emotionally tangible. Advertisers fabricate a Real that's better than real, and effect impact potential throughout The Real in order to make the abstract concept of the brand material. In the process, as Baudrillard might say, the distinction between real and Real is no longer evident.⁷¹ Advertising strategies can thrive within this socio-cultural, economic-political structure.

⁷¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1-2: "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—*precession of simulacra*—that engenders the territory...[It is with] imperialism that present-day simulators attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their models of simulation. But it is no longer a question of either maps or territories. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference...No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept...[The real] no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational."

Media producers invest creative efforts in evoking physical and emotional responses to image and sound precisely because of ways audience members engage with these stimuli. Sobchack argues that film audience members experience the medium specifically through their sensorial and sensual responses. She writes that

...we might wish to think again about processes of identification in the film experience, relating them not to our secondary engagement with and recognition of either “subject positions” or characters but rather to our primary engagement (and the film’s) with the sense and sensibility of materiality itself. We, ourselves, are subjective matter: our lived bodies sensually relate to “things” that “matter” on the screen and find them sensible in a primary, prepersonal, and global way that grounds those later secondary identifications that are more discrete and localized.⁷²

In other words, our sensorial responses to audiovisual media comprise the foundation for conscious comprehension. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who argues that meaning making happens through perception, Sobchack asserts that we make sense of audiovisual media through sensorial experiences that “[make] meaning before [making] conscious, reflective thought...the film experience is meaningful *not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies.*”⁷³ By saying this, Sobchack confronts scholarly disavowal of phenomenological arguments by pointing out that audiovisual experiences are grounded in subjectivity and substance, which for her means embodied sensation (as opposed to so-called objective intellectual theorizations “to the side of” the body). Miriam Hansen adds that popular Hollywood films, like slapstick comedies, easily became global

⁷² Sobchack, 65.

⁷³ Sobchack, 59, 60. Emphasis Sobchack’s. For Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological perspective, I submit his *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1962), especially his first chapter, “The ‘Sensation’ as a Unit of Experience,” 3-12.

commodities because of ways they stimulate the senses. In fact, Hansen argues that cinematic production techniques like fast cut rates and close framing provided sensorial experiences that marked films as American. With their “focus on action and thrills, physical stunts and attractions; their tempo, directness, and flatness, their eccentricity and excess of situations over plot,” classical Hollywood films “traded in the mass production of the senses [and] provided an aesthetic horizon for the experience of industrial mass society.”⁷⁴ Film production techniques that provided heightened sensorial experiences fostered a spread of sensibilities considered unique to American capitalist society.

I supplement theorizations like Sobchack’s and observations like Hansen’s with ethnography. Given that ad producers are also consumers, my ethnographic observations reveal that the reading of audiovisual media is an embodied practice for ad creatives invested in the production process as well as audience members. By examining ways that ad producers conceptualize their creative work through their own bodies, I demonstrate that practices of meaning-making through audiovisual media are grounded historically, socially and culturally. Ad producers shape image and sound with objectives of engaging with audience members sensorially and, at times, sensually, precisely because the producers experience their creative work that way themselves.⁷⁵ Through the process of engaging with audience members’ senses and their material bodies, producers make

⁷⁴ Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999), 61, 70.

⁷⁵ Wheeler asserts that “[w]hen brands speak to the mind and heart, brand identity is tangible and appeals to the senses... You can see it, touch it, hold it, hear it, watch it move.” Wheeler, 6.

tangible their ideas about brands and the already-circulating discourses they rely on to communicate ideas of the brand.

I argue that constructing and circulating The Real is a key practice in American consumer culture.⁷⁶ Capitalist rhetoric suggests that buying and consuming products leads us toward satisfying our fantasies about our lifestyles, social status and wealth—the fulfillment of the twenty-first century version of the American Dream. In the case of the Brisket sandwich ad featured in Chapter Two, image and sound materialize idealized values—perfect sandwiches, meticulously crafted sets and lighting, a stylized strong male “Texas” voiceover, and music and sound design all must harmonize within pre-circulated ideas of consumer practices, food products, and identities of the young masculine adult. Ads mediatize and (re)circulate ideas about identity and the Real, fixing in image and sound ideas about idealized products, representations of personal identity through the construction of “target audience,” and fantasies of wish fulfillment. Image and sound translates through audience members’ sensorial and sensual experiences of ads, which help make tangible the idea of the brand.

Ad producers and their discontents

⁷⁶ As George W. Bush’s infamous “go shopping” encouragement has revealed, capitalist consumerism is grounded in ideas of wish fulfillment and even patriotism. With the looming threat of recession in late 2006, Bush encouraged consumerism as patriotic, the mark of good American citizenry. In a December press conference address, Bush pronounced that “[a] recent report on retail sales shows a strong beginning to the holiday shopping season across the country—and I encourage you all to go shopping more.” “Press Conference by the President,” <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/12/20061220-1.html>, accessed 8/1/08.

In his observation of documentary production in public television, Dornfeld notes that media producers' frameworks are also shaped by the local organizational culture in which they work, be it a non-profit documentary film house (as in Dornfeld's work), advertising agencies, or other agencies like music and sound design firms that support the ad industry.⁷⁷ Certainly, the creative work of my study participants is often negotiated with financial, political and bureaucratic constraints. This section sets a stage that acknowledges practical limitations and social biases that influence who conducts creative work and how.

In both film and advertising, these representations of identity are negotiated within hierarchical power structures and also inflected by ideas about creativity. Ad agencies strive to maintain their reputations as purveyors of creativity while handling numerous other tasks for clients that are considered non-creative, such as conducting and analyzing market research, or coordinating special sales events. In order to meet their clients' varied and changeable requests, advertising firms need to be accommodating and adaptable (Moeran 1996). Regardless of the producer's creative inclinations or marketing savvy, the client's needs and expectations are always prioritized. Furthermore, negotiations both external and internal to the firm contribute to ad production. Externally, relations between the agency and client, and agency and media broadcasting company affect ad types and contents. Internally, Account Managers, Creatives (typically writers or graphic artists, but generally ad concept-generators), Executives and

⁷⁷ See especially his Chapter 2, "*Childhood on the Contested Territory of Public Television in the United States*," 35-60, in which he discusses financial, political and bureaucratic limitations that affect the production process.

administrative staff contribute to ad production in various ways, and the structure, function and organization of advertising agencies directly influences agency output (Moeran 1996; Nixon 2003). We see in Chapters Two, Three and Four that the expectations of clients or of agencies upper level management typically trump creatives' intuitions. More than any other staff functions or skills, however, notions of creativity mark an agency's own identity and its claims to service client needs better than competitors. As Sean Nixon demonstrates, industry definitions of creativity are linked to youth and masculinity. Although public images of many firms tout meritocratic and unbiased hiring and promotion practices, the industry actually privileges youth, whiteness and masculinity, particularly in positions considered creative (Nixon 2003).

Though often disguised, issues of age, gender and creativity seem prevalent throughout the ad industry. My interviews with personnel from the Echo Boys's business partner in post-production video and graphics services brought this home to me. The senior administrative personnel for Crash+Sues (read Crash-and-Sue's) are all women: Hannah acts as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Vice President; Debra's title is Executive Producer; Karen functions as Crash+Sues's Scheduler and the Echo Boys's Executive Producer. Each of these positions involves sales, marketing and project management—Heidi's position includes added responsibilities in coordinating administrative and financial operations for the individual and shared assets of these partnered audio and video business entities.

While these women influence the daily workings and administration of the two companies, most of the creative activities are carried out by men. One exception to the

industry bias is Sue, one of the co-founders of Crash+Sues. Sue's work as colorist involves what the industry calls "color correction," or the stylistic manipulation of video color in post-production. A colorist's job may involve correcting "flaws" in filming or lighting that leave the picture seeming less true-to-life in the ad producer's opinion, or to heighten the effects of color for stylistic effect. Often sitting at a massive, multi-screened, multi-million dollar color correction station, Sue often works with agency creatives sitting at a table behind her, watching her creative work and offering input throughout the collaborative process. Now in her 50s, Sue has a national reputation for a discerning, creative eye, and touts some major, current national campaigns on her creative resumé. In my interview with Heidi, however, the CEO expressed concern about the future of Sue's career and, because of Sue's business draw, the future of the company. Heidi shared with me that the agency creatives in charge of ad projects—that is, Crash+Sues's primary points of contacts influencing their own revenue—are mostly "young guys" in their 20s or early 30s. Recently Heidi has sensed increasing reluctance on the part of these ad creatives to use Sue's color correction skills. Apparently it's become less attractive to some agency creatives to work with Sue—according Heidi, in an industry charged by youth, masculinity and sexual politics, "These guys don't wanna sit behind their mom." Despite the industry's claims on creativity, social (and increasingly institutionalized) age biases influence work relationships.

While perhaps not marked with the same gender issues as Crash+Sues, the Echo Boys have experienced their share of age bias. According to Executive Producer Karen, she and lead Echo Boy Tate have discussed challenges to their ability to attract and

maintain their client base as the core members of the Echo Boys advance into their 50s. At times when their services have been declined, Tate has asked Karen, “It’s because I’m old, isn’t it?” Karen has even noticed that some clients request the services of certain Echo Boys seemingly because of age. In one case, a client requested the services of Echo Boy Allen, a composer in his late-20s with a burgeoning reputation as composer, classic good looks and a knack for networking. According to Karen, however, the job was for sound design, and “Allen doesn’t *do* sound design. He’s never done sound design. He doesn’t want to do sound design. That’s Tate’s domain.” Frustrated, Karen surmised that the client gravitated toward Allen’s youthfulness and, perhaps, away from Tate’s age despite Tate’s excellent reputation for sound design.

Tate himself acknowledges that the industry thrives on intense working conditions, youth and celebrity. As a self-described “old guy,” Tate still enjoys playing the same Beatles covers he played as a young adult—but admits that others in the industry might think he’s not too hip if they knew his age. Also revealing the industry’s masculine bias, he sees the advertising industry as “a young guys’ game...for people in their 20s and 30s.” He suggests that if clients knew his age, they might think he’s not hip enough to serve within an industry that’s developed its own celebrity character:

The whole celebrity around commercials seems to have grown more and more Hollywood...[The industry] has turned an ad guy or ad person into rock and roll stars of the ad biz. There’s this posturing...It might have always been this way and I never knew it...but it has this side of these personalities where you’re dealing with a lot of royal treatment, flying around the world: I’ve gotta go to South Africa to do this and Australia to do that, I’ve gotta work with [specific celebrities]... I think it’s a great deal if you’re in your early twenties, flying around the world, getting treated like a rock star...Where I am in life, I wouldn’t

want to do it...From our biz standpoint, it's definitely taken a bite into it, as far as the actual production of music for commercials...This town [Minneapolis] grew up in the '80s where smaller agencies turned into huge agencies and all of a sudden they have [clients like] United Airlines and huge world-wide accounts and then come the budgets...and they're off, and the guys you used to work with are off with their Hollywood friends...You get some of that...

Tate's age and lifestyle choices are beginning to leave him at odds with the ad industry's culture. As with Sue in the video post-production side of the partnership, Tate sees these industry idiosyncrasies affecting his business despite the quality of his work.

In over two decades that the Echo Boys have existed, Tate has seen changes in the demand for his team's newly-composed music. In many cases agencies still want originally composed music as a way of associating a unique sound with the ad, and avoiding the perceived trap of sounding too commercial.⁷⁸ In other instances, clients have clear expectations for how their finished advertisements should sound. In some cases, clients borrow from other corporate ventures like films or other advertisements to inform the content for their ad soundtracks. Especially since the 1980s, issues surrounding borrowed music and music rights have become more prominent. Echo Boy Tate recalls a specific instance in which he realized that the industry's approach to soundtrack production and musical borrowing was changing his business. Recollecting from early in his career that the composer or sound designer maintained authority over much of a soundtrack's development, Tate recognizes that marketing personnel recently began circumscribing the process by suggesting sounds and music already circulating in

⁷⁸ For a discussion of "production music" and avoiding sounding "canned" or "commercial," see my Chapter Three, and also Robert Fink, "Orchestral Corporate," *Echo: a Music-Centered Journal* 2, no. 1 (2000). Accessed April 5, 2008. <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/echo/volume2-issue1/fink/fink-article.html>

popular consciousness. The current trend of borrowing indie music is just one recent step in that history:

That's changed the biz from the music standpoint, too, in the last four years or so...the ad biz figuring out, well, I can just go get [the rights to] those songs from Stereolab and use those instead of getting someone to try to make something in the vein of it...I remember the day when...There was a time when that never came up at all, that somebody brought in their favorite song and said 'I want my commercial to sound like this.' I remember the day that that happened and it was like, what? Huh? ...God, [one example] was something stupid, too. I remember *Top Gun* was out—it was a stupid song from *Top Gun*. I went into an edit and I was confused. We'd have these meetings where we'd talk about what music to do here, and that [*Top Gun* single] was already up there against whatever was going on in the picture...“Danger Zone”? Was that [part of that soundtrack]?...Up to that point I'd never seen that happen before. It was kind of like sacred ground where you wouldn't just taint what it [the ad soundtrack] should be [by associating pre-recorded music with the visuals]. And then you get used to that...it's like nothing sounds right because I've listened to this now 800 times with that song on it, and then you're pre-programmed, not me, but the people who are used to it...And they can't have it, of course, they never had any intention of buying it [the song rights]. It was a real creative noose that developed at that point, hijacking the musical direction before you even get the music company involved.⁷⁹

While reflecting on historical changes to the creative process, Tate recognizes ways that people are habituated to how things ostensibly should sound owing to recent industry practices like licensing popular music for ads.

Jack corroborates the industry's recent practice of recycling music from popular culture, and adds insight to the musical sources with which the industry chooses to identify. Additionally, Jack illuminates the financial and political implications of

⁷⁹ “Danger Zone,” recorded by Kenny Loggins, is part of the *Top Gun* soundtrack (Columbia/Legacy CK 65554, 1986).

licensing music. Decisions buying song rights from indie groups (or hiring the groups to record something new), or working with a sound design firm all boil down to budgetary constraints and gambles that clients are willing to make for the sake of the ad soundtrack's popular appeal:

One factor is an economics factor. They couldn't go out and get a group that's really popular and buy the rights for that song without spending like millions of dollars...this always comes up in meetings. If we can find someone that's on the verge of becoming popular before they become popular we can pay them a small amount, get the music, use it as a track, and...hopefully while it's in our commercial the song becomes popular and we get a million dollars worth of value and we only had to spend \$50K to get that value. That's a pretty common thing. And so [we might] look for artists that are on the verge of becoming well known...And even if they don't get well known the music's still pretty cool anyway...A lot of times stuff gets chosen because there's a popular song [that we'd like to use] but we can't afford that...we'd have to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to get it. But I can go to a music guy and have him do it for \$5000 and he'll come up with something that's original but sounds kind of like it. And we can use it, it's ours...You'd be surprised how often you decide that music's going to be a major part of the thing but then you're only going to spend \$5000 to have this major part of the campaign created....Again it goes back to that linear approach to how things get created. Many times it's just not as thought out...The rationale is not as clear cut as you might have thought. There might be something else completely that's driving [the decisions]...It's just that there's not enough money in the budget...⁸⁰

These comments from Jack and Tate corroborate some of the political, bureaucratic, and sometimes seemingly arbitrary creative decisions made by my participants. Functioning

⁸⁰ Regarding the numerous factors affecting decisions to license music, Jack adds that "we'd consult with people on [which unknown artist] fits into these categories. And sometimes they'd just pull music that they think would be good. There's a lot of reasons that music gets chosen, like we need something with a powerful meter because of what we need to edit. It has nothing to do with an artist, we just need something we can edit to and so we're pulling music and sound...just as a way to inspire things. I like that, oh, I don't like that. It just gets chosen very randomly sometimes because it's more of a functional thing more than we're trying to choose a particular artist because of who that artist is or other qualities of the sound."

within the context or corporate culture, in which the logic of profit margins reigns supreme, these artists create by adhering to corporate hierarchies and appealing client expectations.

The career pathways of many of my ethnographic participants are remarkably similar, and demonstrate what some might consider the crisis of capitalist culture's failure to value artistic endeavors. While pursuing artistic careers, several of my interlocutors had aspirations in the arts, but chose career routes in the advertising industry for the sake of a steady paycheck that supported their desired lifestyles. Echo Boy Tate began a career as an accomplished rock musician in his twenties, accomplished in the sense that he was in a number of bands that did happen to make some money performing. He had some visions of making a living in music. Failing that, of course, he had a back-up plan: he'd gone to school in graphic design to develop his interests in animation. Eventually leaving his band for a "real job," he found a position with an animation house where he met his current business partners. Ironically, Tate's business does enable him to fulfill his dream of making it in a band. Tate thinks of the Echo Boys as a band, a group of guys that enjoys playing fun, happy music together—and they can make a living from it. Tate admits that his career track was unplanned, and, for him, completely fortuitous:

[Making commercials] is definitely something that lets me be creative and make a living...when I stumbled into this biz it was like, really? I can do what I like doing and make a living?...At the time, I was like, you're either gonna have to make it in a rock band, or illustrate or draw pictures...And luckily I stumbled into this whole world that I never pursued, I never even knew existed really...It was a heaven-send for me, I mean, what a great refuge for people that want to be creative...because I know a lot of creative people who didn't get this fortunate

turn of events that are just flustered...So I guess I've got that going—I'm not gonna knock this biz because thank god I found it...What would I be doing otherwise? Of course there's people saying, well, if you wouldn't have found it then you'd be doing real art, you would've stuck with your original band...You know, being an older guy, I'm going, like, even if I did do that, I wouldn't want to be doing that anymore anyway. I enjoy doing this. I really do.

Jack, a free-lance art director who formerly worked for ad phenom Fallon (and still consults with Fallon), the path to the ad industry was also forged by financial practicality. He, too, pursued an early career in the arts—he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Minnesota. He chose his major because that he excelled in the visual arts in high school—and that was what he loved—thinking that maybe he would pursue a career selling his artwork and perhaps teach. Like many college students, Jack needed a job to support himself while in school. While his colleagues took up evening jobs like bartending to make ends meet, however, Jack enjoyed his first job with the advertising department at his university's student newspaper. Not only did it provide him with a lifestyle that worked for him, he found the work interesting. His chosen path in commercial arts enabled him to enjoy a lifestyle different from many of his fellow artists:

What I was studying in school was fine arts, I wasn't going to be in commercial art at all. I was studying painting and print-making and drawing just because that's what I was good at and liked to do, it was what I was good at in high school and I decided this was what I wanted to pursue. I thought I'd try to make artwork and try and sell it as an artist, be in galleries and maybe teach and sell artwork as well. And some of that is the culture you get in the university. But when I was in school it was like I needed to get a job and so it made more sense to use the skills I was developing...I could've been a bartender, but [advertising] was a lot more fun and the hours were better and it was more creative...And there were a lot of ... art majors, fine arts people [who] would go to school during the day and then

at night they'd go tend bar somewhere, and that's how they paid for their school and paid for their apartment, and they were always in this struggling place and I just wanted to take a different path. It just made more sense...I don't know, initially it was just a fun way to make money, but then I actually found it to be interesting. Eventually it ended up being my whole career which really had not very much to do with what I went to school for.

Similarly, Shaun of Bright Idea Studios got into the ad production business not because of an affinity for ads, but rather because he loves movies and film production. Much like Jack, however, Shaun recognized difficulties in being a full-time film maker and maintaining a lifestyle with a secure income and the schedule of his choosing. Though he pursued free-lance work before joining MSA and Bright Idea Studios, Shaun opted to pursue a stable paycheck through full-time employment with advertising agencies. He finds his creative drive constrained significantly by the demands of advertising, including the limitations of branding and politics both within the agency and in dealing with clients. A few projects, like the Brisket project discussed in Chapter Two, provide him opportunities to flex his creative muscle in ways he finds rewarding—even then, however, the bureaucracies of ad agencies and clients often restrict some of his most satisfying work from being released to the public. As Shaun said to me over lunch one day, “I don't care about advertising—I hate advertising. It's intrusive. I just wanna make movies.”⁸¹

⁸¹ As mentioned in an earlier footnote, Scott resigned from MSA/BIS to pursue self-employment as a media production specialist in 2008.

Chapter 2: Representing Reality, Delivering “The Real” through Image-Sound Media

In 2005, conglomerate Unilever launched its “Campaign for Real Beauty” in support of its Dove soap products line. Featuring women whose bodies ostensibly reflected those of “real women,” not of the hyper-thin models commonly featured in ads, the campaign claims still to “provoke discussion and debate about today’s typecast beauty images.”¹ Unfortunately for Unilever, the promotion was called into question during a 2008 debacle in which a premier image retoucher boasted in a *New Yorker* interview that he was involved in photoshopping the images “to keep everyone’s skin and faces showing the mileage but not looking unattractive.”² As the Dove campaign reveals, ideals for realism stand in conflict with culturally circulating imaginings of how one’s reality could or should be. More exactly, mediatized representations of reality present a unique world based on idealized constructions of the real.³ Advertisers rely on recycling these fantasy constructions to advance the idea that their products can fulfill people’s needs, wishes and desires.

¹ “Campaign for Real Beauty: Mission (2008-03-14),” [http://www.dove.us/#/CFRB/arti_cfrb.aspx\[cp-documentid=7049726\]](http://www.dove.us/#/CFRB/arti_cfrb.aspx[cp-documentid=7049726]), accessed 8-14-08.

² The values behind the campaign were challenged with breaking news that the images for the “Real Beauty” campaign were “photoshopped” to remove perceived imperfections. The lead airbrush artist bragged to the *New Yorker*’s Lauren Collins, “Do you know how much retouching was on that?...But it was great to do, a challenge, to keep everyone’s skin and faces showing the mileage but not looking unattractive.” Lauren Collins, “Pixel Perfect, Pascal Dangin’s virtual reality,” *New Yorker*, 12 May 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/05/12/080512fa_fact_collins, accessed 8/12/08.

³ Here I use the term “mediatized” to refer not only to representations of reality through image, sound or even additional sensory stimuli; I also use the term to specify that these representations rely on a circulating knowledge of a particular historical moment that can be read and understood only by audience member familiar with the audiovisual languages and cultural mores of that moment. As Andrew Wernick argues, this can be possible owing to the institutionalization of brand identities disseminated through the media. See Wernick, *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression* (London: SAGE Publications, 1991).

Even as ad producers represent “real products,” they seem to play with ideas of reality and what I call The Real, specifically, various image, sonic, identity or narrative constructions. Audience members are able to read The Real in film, television and other media owing to their prior media-habituated experiences with those kinds of impressions or stories. Constructions of The Real make possible communication about products, brands, identity stereotypes and fantastical worlds of perfect wish fulfillment because of themes and representations that already circulate widely throughout the media. Representations of reality in advertising (as in films and other media) often don’t need to convey actual authenticity; rather, those depictions merely have to be read as Authentic according to culturally circulating knowledge of The Real.⁴ The production of this quasi-reality-based context for brand presentation is negotiated creatively, politically and bureaucratically among producers.

As I examine the encoding and decoding of The Real, I follow Michel Chion (among other scholars) in arguing the importance of approaching film and other audiovisual media as image-sound complexes that simulate reality coded by technological, social and historical constructs.⁵ Rather than relegating sound as subordinate to image—or isolating aural from visual and justifying that they ought be

⁴ I capitalize “Authentic” as I do “The Real” in order to denote that this authenticity is a construction.

⁵ See especially Chion’s chapter “The Real and the Rendered,” in which he makes points like “when the spectator hears a so-called realistic sound, he is not in a position to compare it with the real sound he might hear if he were standing in that actual place. Rather, in order to judge its ‘truth,’ the spectator refers to his memory of this type of sound, a memory resynthesized from data that are not solely acoustical, and that is itself influenced by films. Naturally, criteria for auditory verisimilitude differ according to the specific competences and experience of the individual.” Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 108.

studied apart from another—Chion argues that “films, television and other audiovisual media...place their spectators—their audio-spectators—in a specific perceptual mode of perception, which...I shall call *audio-vision*.”⁶ He argues further that sonic verisimilitude depends upon “codes established by cinema itself, by television, and narrative-representational arts in general, [rather] than to our hypothetical lived experience.”⁷ In this chapter, I demonstrate how ad producers approach their creative work as audio-visual units, and some of the codes by which they seem to abide. Moreover, this chapter helps establish a bridge between work like Chion’s and that of phenomenologists who argue that an audience member’s experience of The Real is grounded in embodied sensations prompted by the aural and visual.

Several film scholars articulate that our embodied interactions with these media are common or even expected. Richard Dyer suggests that all film constitutes a “cinema of sensation,” and that cinema can fulfill desires shared among audience members for an “underlying pattern of feeling, to do with freedom of movement, confidence in the body, engagement with the material world...to which all humans need access”:

The celebration of sensation movement, that we respond to in some unclear sense ‘as if real,’ for many people is the movies...We generally want the exhilaration and rush embedded in a fiction. Such fictions situate the thrills. They refer us to the world. They do not usually pretend to show us the world as it really is, but they point to that world. They offer us thrills and elations we might seldom have, might think it impossible really to have, but they relate such imaginings of elation

⁶Chion, xxv. Emphasis in original.

⁷ Chion, 107.

to the human co-ordinates of the real world: the environments we live in, the social categories in which we have our being.⁸

Dyer suggests that our sensorial experiences with audiovisual media like film may fulfill our desires for experiences we may never have in reality, and that those experiences are encoded by the social categories to which we've been habituated. Critiquing action films as part of a cinema of sensation, he argues further that this underlying pattern of feeling

is coded as male (and straight and white, too)...To feel that it is OK to be unrestrained, to kick against what surrounds you, to thrust out into the world is what boys learn, not girls. To see women strain against the world may be inspirational, but also at some psychic level unbelievable. Heroes of action who are other than male and white (and straight and able-bodied) are still going to feel exceptional for some time to come.⁹

Dyer's observations are particularly useful as I examine the ad for Subway's Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket sandwich. Acrobatic camera swings around a delectably-crafted sandwich with steam added as a post-production composited image, together with select sound design, music, and a "Texas-style" voiceover, are intended to entice audience members with idealized sensations of what her/his sandwich experience might be. Because of my ethnography, I can contribute that producers of this Subway sandwich ad intended for—and presumed that—audience members engage with ads sensorially. In fact, during my work and interviews with ad producers, they frequently reveal ways in which they conceive of their craftsmanship through their own bodies, and shape image

⁸ Richard Dyer, "Action!" *Sight and Sound* 4, no. 10, 9. Vivian Sobchack challenges Dyer's "loss to explain [the] very existence" of the film experience, that film spectators approach audiovisual media "*in some unclear sense* 'as if real'..." (emphasis here is Sobchack's, 58). Her own writing seeks to elaborate on the somatic experience in a way she feels Dyer falls short.

⁹ Dyer, 9.

and sound with regard for the sensory experiences they hope their audience members have upon engaging with their ads.

The process of constructing The Real also speaks to ways that ideas of identity are naturalized in their associations with brands and products. As this study will show, the marketing campaign for the sandwich is actually what defines audience identity for the product. Through the specific ways these ad producers emphasize the meatiness of the sandwich, and carefully design sets, lighting and shots that they believe will attract men, the ad producers engender the product themselves. While some strategists may use market research to define target audience, it seems that its authority and prevalence in informing ad image and sound is something of a myth.

As I unfold layers of meaning and meaning production through this Subway ad, it is equally important to contextualize the ad's production with its political and bureaucratic framework. As Barry Dornfeld argues, media creation contributes to culture production, and ethnography provides means of examining the social contexts that infuse the continual encoding and decoding of meaning in the media by those who produce it.¹⁰ Following Howard Becker, I probe the advertising production process as an art world, a complex social system in which the creative producers constantly negotiate creative impulses with social, political and economic constraints within the agency itself as well as with a host of outside constituents.¹¹ Power relations within the production agency, between the agency and Doctors Associates, Inc. (a.k.a., DAI, the Subway trademark

¹⁰ Barry Dornfeld, *Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 7-8.

¹¹ Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008; 1982).

owner), and among Subway/DAI and franchisees all influence the exact images selected for the ad, and thereby the kinds of impressions disseminated and stories told about (ideas of) Texas culture, men, and sandwiches. The impressions (re)circulated by the Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket commercial are inherently linked to the politics and profitability goals of the advertising and production agency, Subway franchisees, the sandwich meat vendor, and Subway/DAI.

Producers and politics

In Spring, 2007, a North Carolina advertising agency called MSA (f.k.a., MarketSmart Advertising) produced a television commercial featuring a new sandwich for Subway Restaurants. The television spot features a new sandwich offering to be rolled out in Subway franchises in select markets throughout the US during the summer of 2007. Called the Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket sandwich, this new product and ad corresponds to a point of conflict between Subway's franchisee network, Subway/DAI, and its advertising providers. Despite its national and international success, on-going litigation ensues between Subway founder Fred DeLuca, Subway trademark owner DAI, and Subway restaurant franchisees over control of advertising content and placement.¹²

¹² Subway touts itself as the second largest quick-service restaurant chain in the world—with 29,486 restaurants in 87 countries, Subway ranks second only to McDonald's in reach. <http://subway.com/subwayroot/index.aspx>, accessed 7/9/08. SFAFT is suing "to block Subway founder Fred DeLuca and DAI from seriously diminishing the control that Subway franchisees currently have over where and how their advertising contributions are spent on advertising and marketing programs that help grow the business...[through this litigation] we wanted DAI to change the Franchise Agreement language back to the way it was before April 1, and agree not to make additional changes in the foreseeable future. Despite these efforts, DAI would only agree to honor SFAFT's status until April 2007. For reasons that are not clear, it appears that Fred ultimately wants to assume control of SFAFT. We do not know why Fred

Franchisees also find frustration with Subway/DAI's decisions in fixating on low profit margin product line (sandwiches that result in extremely slim franchisee profits), and super-saturating local geographic markets in ways that force Subway franchisees to compete with one another. This new sandwich excites franchisees: meaty sandwiches translate into a broader customer base and higher profit margins. Additionally, the production of this particular ad becomes a symbol of minor rebellion among several franchisees against Subway/DAI.

This ad is also important politically within MSA and in the agency's relationship with DAI. DAI hires its own advertising agency to produce national ads.¹³ However, with Subway/DAI's Adopt-a-Concept program, ad agencies like MSA that already represent Subway franchisee markets can submit their own locally produced and broadcast ads for selection as national publicity spots (a very profitable opportunity for small agencies like MSA). Despite having won ADDY awards that evince their quality, MSA's Subway ads apparently never get picked up for national exposure.¹⁴ According to MSA personnel, MSA's President finds a way to forward his own agenda using the franchisees' on-going clashes with Subway/DIA, most particularly, franchisees' requests for more profitable sandwiches that expand their customer base. DAI's national agency

would want to do this now, 16 years after his original agreement with franchisees." "SFAFT Litigation: Frequently asked Questions," <http://www.sfaft.org/publicfile/faq.pdf>, accessed 6/5/07.

¹³ As testament to working with Subway/DAI, several MSA employees point out that the parent organization has hired and fired several agencies in the past five to seven years.

¹⁴ The ADDYs are a multi-tiered award program supported by the American Advertising Federation, an ad industry professional association. Known as the world's largest ad award program, ADDYs are awarded on local, regional and national levels. Winning an ADDY at a lower level qualifies it for competition at the next highest level.

produced an ad for the Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket sandwich, but several franchisees (and MSA personnel) harshly criticize the ad and branding strategy it represents. Because of the on-going conflicts between the franchisees and DAI, the President finds support to act on his own contentions with Subway/DAI, and solicits funding from the meat supplier to build a new ad called “Brisket Blow’d Up.”¹⁵

I interned from March through June of 2007 with Bright Idea Studios (BIS), MSA’s media production arm. During the internship I witnessed the production of the Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket television spot from conception through broadcast, and participated in the process by completing administrative tasks before and after the production shoot, and acting as Script Supervisor/Production Assistant during the shoot itself. Throughout my experience, I observed the creative and political negotiations among the agency’s executive staff, art direction, copy writing and production units, and considered the production of this ad within the contentious relations between Subway/DAI, Subway franchisees, and (somewhat in the middle) MSA.

Embodying an ad: a close reading of “Brisket Blow’d Up”

David (MSA Vice President and Creative Director) and Brad (Senior Art Director/Chief Strategist) function as the Creative team for the project as copy writer and art director, respectively.¹⁶ David and Brad have met, generated concepts for the

¹⁵ Even with this coup, some friction even between franchisees and MSA remain unclear—one MSA employee comments that “some markets won’t use our spot anyway...it’s a sore subject...”

¹⁶ Since my internship Brad has resigned from MSA—I’m not clear on the reason nor his current employment.

campaign and begun work. David writes a voiceover (VO) script, imagining it being delivered with a voice style representing a male Texas rancher. Brad creates a storyboard, a graphic representation of the images to be shown as the script is read by the (never-seen) Texas rancher. Depicting extreme close-ups of sandwiches, the storyboard images focus almost exclusively on food, all surrounded by warm hues like reds, browns and yellows. These images are intended to inspire the production team, who will plan the filmic capture of stylized sandwiches and sets, all of which woven together with music, sound design elements, and a VO reading based on David's copy:¹⁷

Guy with BIG Texas accent:

Lemme tell you 'bout the NEW Texas Smoked BBQ brisket sandwich from Subway Restaurants...

These Subway boys figured if they were gonna do brisket, they were gonna do brisket right...

This sandwich is loaded...I mean LOADED...with tasty, tender, barbeque beef brisket...

...piled so high it looks like it's explodin' right out of that fresh-baked bread...

They's [sic] only one way to describe...it's barbeque done BLOW'D UP!

Your [sic] lookin' at the new Texas Smoked BBQ Brisket from Subway Restaurants. And if you don't get yourself some of it, well, you're just not livin' right.

¹⁷ Eventually both television and radio ads will air—in pre-production, they work with the television script to generate and confirm a plan or trajectory for designing images and sound.

Through copy and storyboard, David and Brad design a general concept for the commercial to communicate several ideas to audience members: the Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket sandwich from Subway Restaurants is a warm, meaty, gourmet-delectable sandwich inspired by ideas of Texas cowboys and ranchers with big appetites. Having designed storyboards and written copy in the pre-production process, David and Brad pass the creative baton to Shaun, BIS's Director of Production, and his Associate Director, Peter.¹⁸ Based on the script, storyboard and consultations with David and Brad, Shaun and Peter generate ideas on how to execute their concept through motion photography and sound.

The collective Creative and Production teams establish goals for the shoot: to make this a “bigger, larger than life, meaty sandwich,” to make the product look “substantial, meaty, appetizing, big, heavy, [with] lots of meat.” To add some artistic flair to this meat directive, Shaun and Peter envision creative, sophisticated shot constructions that connote Western stylings, like stylized shots of a lone cowboy hat or creative ensembles of props like lassos, fence posts and spurs. Having researched ad footage from restaurants they hope to imitate, Shaun and Peter come up with a “windowing idea meant to emulate Ruby Tuesday's spots.” They'd like to add a perceived Western essence and a unique visual style to the spot with window insets that position, say, a skillfully composed, artful shot of a saddle or cowboy hat in front of a

¹⁸ As mentioned in the previous chapter, Scott has since left MSA/BIS to pursue self-employment in media production.

beauty shot of the meaty sandwich.¹⁹ According to Shaun, such an inset “adds Western window dressing,” and gives the moment a distinctive and Western feel while prominently featuring the product. Additionally, the windows associate this fast food sandwich with restaurants like Ruby Tuesday, a sit-down restaurant considered of a higher caliber than a restaurant whose offerings are typically labeled “fast food.”

Peter, the Associate Director on the spot, also acts as Editor. As part BIS’s four-person team, Peter and all BIS employees wear several hats: each team member takes on a range of responsibilities and tasks that would each be managed by multiple individuals if they were a larger company or had a larger budget. Editing the ad in post-production, Peter reviews all the images designed and produced during the production shoot, arranges them, and intermixes them with a music track, sound design elements (sometimes referred to as “sound effects”), and graphics. The editing goes through nine iterations over a period of about ten days before a final or “master cut” was approved by MSA higher-ups.

Building eight additional rough cuts before having a master edit approved, Peter swaps shots in and out, designs and edits the window insets that the BIS team hopes will contribute Texas stylings with artistic flair, and ensures that the commercial feels right to him in terms of visual pacing, conveys the meanings they imagined within the thirty-second limit of air time they’ll be able to buy to broadcast the piece.²⁰ All Peter’s editing

¹⁹ “Beauty shot” is an industry term identifying that the image and product are stylized to represent an ideal, attractive sandwich.

²⁰ Peter points out to me that “30 second TV spots are really 29-and-a-half seconds...”—you want “just a beat” between your commercial and those before and after so that they’re “not right up on top of each

decisions must also respond to the expectations and objections of the Creative and Art directors, the final decision makers (notwithstanding approval from Subway/DAI).²¹

Throughout the creative process of editing, Peter marries music and camera motion to give the ad a unique feel.

The thirty-second ad comprises eight shots with music, VO, graphic effects and sound design.²² Opening with a shot featuring a complicated motion-controlled camera move, Peter not only establishes the sandwich as the central element of focus, but also

other,” to carve out space for your own, so it doesn’t seem like your commercial runs into the one before or after.

All creative work for television and radio advertisements are constrained by the media buy, specifically by the organization of time for purchase. In the US today, in the organization of time with many half-hour television programs, eight minutes are available for advertising in the half-hour span. Any combination of 15-, 30- or (more rare today) 60-second spots could air in those eight minutes.

²¹ Of course, DAI has final veto over any spot representing the Subway brand before it’s broadcast—even despite the fact that DAI has no financial investment in the project (the MSA president solicited funding from the meat supplier for that sandwich). At one point Peter comments on the incongruity of working for the meat vendor in some sense (because the vendor is footing the bill), but being beholden to Subway/DAI’s regulations and final OK.

²² The VO for the master cut sounds as follows:

I’m here to tell ya ‘bout the new Texas-Style Smoked Beef Brisket Sandwich from Subway Restaurants

Well those boys figured if they were gonna do brisket, they were gonna do brisket right

This sandwich is loaded with tasty tender barbeque beef brisket

There’s only one way to describe it

It’s barbeque done blow’d up

The new Texas-Style Smoked Beef Brisket Sandwich

If you don’t get yourself some of it

Well—you’re just not livin’ right

Subway—Eat Fresh.

infuses the first seconds of the ad with a relaxed yet lively pace. As the camera moves from long shot to extreme close-up on the hero, it captures the entire sandwich with a complex motion-controlled boom down with a combination dolly, pan and roll from left to right around the sandwich.²³ The first shot is also processed with an initial speed ramp—that is, Peter increased the speed during the initial second of the shot—to evoke a Spider-Man-like swinging feel immediately into the spot.²⁴ True to the concept Shaun laid out in the Creative meeting weeks earlier, the speed ramp seemingly swings the camera from long shot quickly toward the sandwich, and then slows as the camera’s eye gazes upon the meat perfectly stuffed in the bread loaf in extreme close-up. The music sounds with the first shot, animating the opening shot with a tempo around 106 beats per minute—orchestration including blues harmonica and rhythm and solo guitars. During the third second, a three-note descending slide guitar motive enters as the newly-appeared “Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket” graphic appears then rotates to reveal the “Subway Eat Fresh” logo. Peter purposefully times the final long, held note of the slide guitar with the Subway logo. In doing so, he initiates associations that make the slide guitar particularly meaningful, particularly since Peter experiences the slide guitar’s motifs physically himself.

²³ “Hero” here doesn’t refer to a kind of sandwich, but rather to the camera-ready artistic creation made of food products like bread, brisket, and vegetables. As discussed in the section below labeled “Building a hero: The bread crisis and the Food Stylists,” the term “hero” is borrowed from the film industry’s convention of labeling a lead actor the hero of the film. Similarly, various sandwich “stand-ins” are built to approximate the size, shape and coloring of the hero to assist the director, camera crew, and light and set designers in setting up shots.

²⁴ In a Creative meeting, discussed later in this chapter, Scott describes constructing shots that make the sandwich look “as big as a skyscraper” with camera motion that feel like Spider-Man swinging around the sandwich. Scott’s referring to Sam Raimi’s popular *Spider-Man* film series (2002, 2004, 2007).

Peter says he uses motives from the slide guitar and harmonica in particular for establishing a feel for the ad, a feel that engages the body through the coordination of music and image. Comparing the composed music track to the original temp (or temporary) track (a production music demo called “Memphis”), Peter explains that the newly composed track

...actually uses more of the up beats [than the temp track they’d used in early post-production] and fewer of the down beats—uh-uh-da-na-na. Your rhythm track’s on the downbeats, but a lot of the harmonica ins and [slide] guitar riffs are on the up beat leading into the next phrase like four-*and-one* [he sings, melodically scooping his voice on *and-one* like the music track]...There’s a lot of dissolves [in the images] in here, and if this was a cuts-only edit, without any dissolves, I’d probably want a piece of music that was probably more heavy on the downbeat, on one....While it has that rhythm track, it also gives me the pick-up notes so I can *dis-solve* [he sings as he did with *and-one*]. It allows me an audio cue...to stretch that transition over the “and” on four and the one. And *ooone* [he sings again using the same pattern].

With his expression of “*and-one*,” Peter physically moves his body. On *and*, he lifts his torso slightly, preparing for a physical emphasis on *one*. With *one*, he dips his shoulders and head slightly, then lifts his hand and extends his arm. Peter’s physical execution demonstrates not only his own embodied response to the image-sound complex he’s creating, but also the response he (consciously or not) imagines from the audience member.

The transition between Shot 2 (the fork-lifting-meat shot) and Shot 3 (a left-to-right dolly across the hero in extreme close-up) best demonstrate Peter’s work. As the first association between gourmet food preparation and the hero, these shots transition via a dissolve that is synchronized with an upward guitar slide. The slide guitar and dissolve

help construct an embodied sense of ease, an effortless release of one image as the next unfolds before the eye. Together, the slide guitar and dissolve help affix a sense of comfortable motion, a relaxed, laid-back transition that materializes the confident, relaxed rancher-persona through image and sound. For Peter, the slide guitar with the dissolve carries meaning that he feels in his body.

The moment carries meaning for me as well. In my own close analysis, I notice that the slide-guitar-dissolve complex is roughly synchronized with a brief pause in the VO. The dissolve begins as the VO states *Well those boys figured if they were gonna do brisket...* With the hero's entrance, the VO continues confidently, *They were gonna do brisket right.* In a matter of four seconds, all within the first third of the thirty-second ad, Peter edits to assign a confident feel to images already evoking warmth, succulence and strength. The extreme close-ups on the meat fork in Shot 2 and the hero in Shot 3 make the Texas Style sandwich seem big, larger than life. The stable and effortless rise of the meat fork, laboriously executed during the shoot, eliminates any sense of uncertainty while projecting a feeling of confidence and security. The extreme close-up on the hero maintains a focus on the warm red and brown hues of the beautifully-draped meat with just minor color accents from the golden bread loaf, green lettuce, red onion and white cheese.

As Peter elaborates, the harmonica is another key sonic tool that inspires his editing decisions.²⁵ In fact, he uses the harmonica similarly to how he uses the slide

²⁵ The solo harmonica is long-established in film as marker for the cowboy. For instance, in the so-called spaghetti western *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), Charles Bronson plays the stoic character actually referred to as Harmonica, and thematized with Ennio Morricone's scoring for the character's haunting

guitar. With a hard cut from the third shot to the fourth—a beauty shot depicting a chef’s knife slicing meat from a slab—a throaty harmonica wail soars in the highest register of the music track (sounding at a flat-three scale degree). The edgy solo pierces the abrupt visual transition between Shots 3 and 4, jolting the audience member’s attention toward the stylized meat slab and the slice dramatically falling in slow-motion. The slab fades away as a window showing a new meat-stacked hero dissolves in on the left third of the screen, then dissolves in on the right to fill the screen completely as Shot 5.²⁶ Like the Shot 2-to-3 sequence with the meat fork and hero shots, the meat slab and subsequent hero shots associate ideas of gourmet preparation with the sandwich. The warm hues and steam composited in Shots 4 and 5 emphasize the warmth of the food.

The exit ramp at end of Shot 5 initiates a new energy build-up toward a complex shot that Peter calls the high point of the commercial. As the leisurely left-to-right dolly shot across the hero in Shot 5 suddenly speeds up, I feel a rush of energy like I’m heading into the initial descent of a rollercoaster ride. The feel of the exit ramp in Shot 5 continues with an entrance ramp in Shot 6 as the camera booms in, dollies toward, and tilts up toward yet another massively-stacked hero.²⁷ The ramp ends as the camera

harmonica motif. Indeed, the harmonica-playing cowboy has become such a familiar film trope that Mel Brooks’s western spoof *Blazing Saddles* (1974) borrows it to authenticate a campfire scene. In the ad, the harmonic borrows from this easily-recognizable symbol of the lone cowboy.

²⁶ This windowing visual effect calls to mind a Ruby Tuesday ad for its Triple Prime Burger. The spot uses similar windows and dissolves. Similarly, MSA/BIS’s insistence on the gourmet preparation associations also links the Subway sandwich with Ruby Tuesday (a so-called sit-down restaurant considered more refined than a quick-service establishment like Subway). The Ruby Tuesday ad features man in chef’s attire with a chef’s knife, cutting beautiful vegetables as he describes the burger as a product that “eats like steak, and cuts like butter.”

²⁷ “Hero” is an industry term not referring to a sandwich specifically, but to the product as an actor in the production. Just as with actors in films, the lead character (the beautifully-stylized sandwich in this case) is

approaches the sandwich, and the final camera tilt motion continues at an unhurried, deliberate pace. With the slow tilt, graphics reading “BBQ Done Blow’d Up!” fly in from the left side of the screen (as if from the viewer’s left) and land with a flourish. An added “crash” sound effect exploring the mid- and higher-frequencies contributes combined sounds of wood and possibly hard plastics impacting, all processed with slight reverb. The words “Blow’d Up!” zoom out of the screen as the VO recites the words

[It’s barbeque done] Blow’d Up!

The play between the images and the music at this point in the ad are deemed critical in the producers’ quest to engage the audience member. As Peter explains, he and Shaun asked the composer to modify the newly-composed music track to make that moment in the ad more emphatic:

I think he added the dow-nee-now-nee-now-now [with] the ramp down [on our request]...What we’re doing here, this is where the ramp-down to the sandwich and the “Brisket Blow’d Up” [logo] flies in...It’s kind of the climax, the peak of the commercial, where we reached the summit, so really wanted something musically to delineate that. And the first track we got [from the composer] was the same as the rest [i.e., had no uniqueness at that point in the track], so we’re adding a few flourishes here and there to set it apart, I guess you could say...I think we compensated by flying in a graphic and putting [in] some sound effects, you know, the impact sounds. And I think between the two of them I think it works pretty well. I think that point of that section is even more emphasized being that the next musical phrase really drops out, you know? Here’s the peak, now we’re gonna recap, kind of thing, musically. And I think that works—I like that.

accompanied by “stand-ins,” that is, sandwiches built to approximate the look and size of the main actor, but don’t require the same prep time.

Peter alludes to several key sonic elements that heighten the energy of this climactic moment. They requested “a few flourishes” in the music revision for that moment in the ad, and the composer added some instrumental passages to help dramatize the experience. With the “BBQ Done Blow’d Up!” graphics entrance, the bass guitar also flies in with a new articulation, an instantaneous ascending-then-descending slide with a sharp attack on the “and” of three that peaks around tonic on beat four. This bass riff gives way an acoustic guitar melody depicted in Example 2.1, what Peter calls the “dow-nee-now-nee-now-now” that begins on beat one of the next bar.



Example 2.1

An extension of guitar solo riffs established earlier in the track, the “dow-nee-now-nee-now-now” riff is higher than earlier colorations from that instrument. As Peter sings it, he uses the nasalized diphthongs of “dow” and “now” to portray slightly bent pitches, stylistic ornamentations that help evoke a country and blues feel. These guitars complement another wailing harmonica solo, this time higher than the last (on scale degree four), and with an added tremolo. For me, the combined effect results in an onslaught of aural and visual stimulation: speed ramps enter and exit with graphics flying and zooming carrying sound effects clacking and crashing reverberantly while the harmonica and the guitars wail and flaunt masterful instrumental brilliance all at the same

time as the hero seems to loom confidently, deliberately, colossally out of the screen toward me.

This climactic action sequence seems to subside as the image fades completely to black and the musical texture drops to only a solo harmonica wail eventually falling off scale degree two. From the blackness fades in an image of a wooden platform or table, and a sandwich drops into the frame from nowhere in slo-mo, dramatic fashion.²⁸ A thunderous low-frequency and high-reverb “boogghhh” sound effect with a slow attack and very long decay emphasizes the weightiness of the sandwich as it contacts and settles on the platform. The effect results in the sound being *felt* as much as *heard*.²⁹ Much like today’s so-called action films, high-intensity scenes are often extended unexpectedly in this way—just when my expectations that the audiovisual bombardment has ceased, yet another dramatic event occurs that further exhausts me. The massive thud of the sandwich emphasizes its weightiness, that it’s a solid sandwich packed with hefty sums of meat.

Defining “target audience,” forging Real identity

²⁸ Ironically, the sandwich drop shot does more than associate a heaviness or weightiness with the sandwich that BIS believes will be attractive to young men—the shot also re-associates Subway with Hardee’s and its recent marketing campaign for large, premium quality hamburgers. Of course, BIS’s shot avoids the “sloppiness” previously critiqued in the Hardee’s footage.

²⁹ This sound effect, familiar to action film go-ers, indexes a far-off but nameless explosion—the extremely low, seemingly pitchless frequency, slow attack and long decay evoke an event of monumental proportions, yet refer to no specific kind of explosion in particular, nor any of the after-effects of debris, etc. The reverberation shaping the sound supports a gradual decrease in sustain or volume while promoting the very slow release of a massive sonic event at a far-off distance.

As part of MSA’s administrative and creative upper echelon, David and Brad both have long-standing careers in the ad industry working on widely popular brands. Like many ad execs, they tout a litany of instantly-recognized brands as evidence for their confident assessments of target audiences for their projects—they assert that their “experience” qualifies them to assign and define customer bases. In fact, many of their estimations are based less on market research, as many outsiders might presume, and more on their personal industry-supported assumptions. Instead, their conceptions of target audiences like that for the Brisket spot are derived from ideas circulating within the ad industry about who buys which products, when and for what reasons. Despite popular conceptions of advertising—that target audience identity is circumscribed by detailed, painstaking market research—many ads are built with no reference to specific marketing data at all. For ad execs, allusions to market demographics and target audience identity may be rhetorical tools useful in persuading their corporate clients of their expertise in the field, an expertise also marked by the status and financial power of brands on the advertiser’s resumé. Additionally, references to market demographics solidly position otherwise subjective, creative work within one of corporate culture’s most-prized realms: “common sense.”

No market study was done to characterize a target audience expressly for the brisket sandwich project. Referring specifically to the sandwich, Vice President and Creative Director David readily asserts that “it doesn’t take market research to understand that that sort of product’s gonna appeal to a certain demographic.” While conventional wisdom suggests that marketing data directly informs decisions around creating ad image

and sound, David in fact eschews some well-known marketing tools like focus groups as ineffective or irrelevant.³⁰ It seems more common in practice that advertisers draw on their personal experiences with cultural beliefs and identity constructions to inform their conceptions of target audiences. According to David, industry experience like his can

sort of transcend demographics. Have you ever seen—or I'm sure you've heard of that old, old commercial from Wendy's about 'Where's the Beef??' Those hamburgers that Wendy's are selling are not for elderly people, but the main character in that commercial was an 84-year-old woman. This person I was working for at the time—I was working on McDonald's at the time—and he said, 'You know Wendy's isn't trying to sell hamburgers to 83-year-old women.' But there is something that kind of transcends any sort of market research that, you know, we can all share in. Just having somebody completely off-the-wall like that 84-year-old woman say 'Where's the Beef?'—it may go against all research. But because it goes against the research it's more memorable...But sometimes it's hard to sell that sort of idea—which can be very effective—on the basis of market research. Because there is no basis in research except, again, experience, that people are gonna find this funny.

In David's mind, creative intuition trumps marketing stats when it comes to creating effective advertising. In fact, he sees little use for market research in the creative work itself. Rather, allusions to market research may be more useful when he wants to rationalize an off-the-wall, creative concept—that is, “sell that sort of idea”—to corporate clients. Quoting industry maven David Ogilvy, David maintains that “Too often people use research the way a drunk uses a lamp post, for support rather than illumination.”

While oblique references to market research can be powerful rhetorical moves to

³⁰ David: “Well, increasingly, actually, a lot of advertising doesn't go through focus groups...the good stuff, anyway. Because what tends to happen—this is how it was described to me once, anyway—that focus groups are kind of like fabric softener. In other words, people want to look at it [the study results] and they want to make some sort of comment, they want to have some sort of criticism, so they make it and someone says oh, yeah. And it [the critique] slowly sort of tamps it down and evens it out and [a useful observation from the study] becomes kind of unnoticeable.”

rationalize creative work for a corporate client, David dismisses it as a way of objectively informing his creative work.³¹

Just as rhetorical use of market data can help rationalize creative output for corporate clients, an advertiser's industry experience (a long résumé listing work with several internationally-known, profitable brands) authenticates an ad producer's expertise and lends credibility to her or his assessment of target audience identity. David reiterates a common perspective I hear among ad executive and creatives about how their experience in the industry gives credence to their marketing decisions:

Well, a lot of [my decisions in script writing for the Brisket ad are] influenced just by a long history of working in fast food, you know. I worked for a long time in McDonald's advertising before I got here. So that obviously influences it a lot...[Effective advertising] really is, from my perspective, really [matching] the product and the audience—because whenever we do something, we try to make sure that the work we do kind of syncs up not only with what the audience might expect, but the history of the product. In other words, for example, for this brisket product, you know that it's not going to appeal to 40-to-55-year-old women. That's just kind of the nature of the product. It's going to skew more toward what they call the "heavy user" of fast food, the 18-to-24-year-old male in particular. So you start thinking in a way about how you best reflect that product to an audience. So it really is kind of a combination of what makes sense from the perspective of the product and the audience.

What "makes sense" for David isn't subject to justification by the detailed, expansive and expensive marketing reports one might imagine constantly generated within the advertising industry. In fact, no marketing data was used to conceive of or justify how MSA defines its "target audience" for this project. It simply "makes sense" in David's

³¹ In fact, in the numerous instances I've asked directly and indirectly for specific examples in which he's personally used market research in his work, David dismisses the question consistently.

life experience that certain people will desire this sandwich—specifically men aged 18 to 24. He’s equally convinced that certain people—specifically women aged 40 to 55—will not. What he considers the “nature of the product” compels David to eliminate women, especially 40-to-55 year old women, from his scope for presenting the product. In particular, the fact that the sandwich’s featured ingredient is brisket will attract (young) men and put off women.

Moreover, David recognizes that much effective advertising plays on “what the audience might expect...what makes sense from the perspective...of the audience.” Astute to the value of cultural narratives circulating through media, his work is filtered through his own understanding of cultural conventions, relationships between identities and images and sounds, and other media representations of The Real to communicate brand through his ads. Creating context for the new brisket sandwich starts with the product’s name: the Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket Sandwich from Subway Restaurants. Pre-production—including copywriting and storyboard production—begins with creative stirrings around the ad producers’ ideas of Texas, and connotations surrounding what a smoked beef brisket sandwich is in the Creatives’ minds. Just as important are the Creatives’ imaginative prescriptions of who might buy that sandwich: namely, the 18- to 24-year-old male coveted by Subway as a “heavy user” of fast food, but may not frequent Subway restaurants. Several MSA Creatives presume that Subway’s brand of “healthful sandwich choices” don’t attract the 18- to 24-year old male who, according to the Creatives’ common sense, love meaty and weightier sandwiches.

Presumptions like these provide a basis for engendering the food and the associations made with it in the ad.

With his own twenty years in the industry, Senior Art Director/Chief Strategist Brad touts experience working with brands like Volvo (trucks specifically), Blue Cross and Blue Shield, McDonald's, and Honda. Like David, Brad doesn't seek market research to justify market reception for a new steak sandwich; rather, Brad observes recent strategies of Subway's Quick Service Restaurant competition, and sees an opportunity to increase Subway franchisees' sales and profitability.³² Fervently, Brad looks to entice the 18-to-24 year old male and his ostensibly natural craving for beef, rationalizing that young men desire this sandwich because Subway's quick-service competitors have expanded their own premium burger offerings:

We know that there is demand out there because other quick-serve restaurants are selling more meat, more beef, in bigger portions than ever. All you need to do is look at all the burger-boy places out there, OK? This is not necessarily a trend as much as a recognition of our human desire to consume beef, in whatever form that is...Subway feels that each of the burger places has become incrementally more and more profitable by offering these sandwiches...So Subway thought, 'we need to offer up that highly-flavored beef steak sandwich to an audience that is already conditioned to want that.' We are all basically carnivores, we all want that kind of stuff.

Brad explains that much of his advertising work relies on solving perceived problems for his clients. From Brad's testimony, Subway franchisees aspire to attract a more youthful clientele than currently frequent their restaurants.³³ As David alluded,

³² "Quick Service Restaurant" or QSR is the industry moniker for a fast food joint.

³³ Brad: "In a lot of cases the client comes in with a need or a problem that needs to be solved, and that probably where at the basis of most client-agency relationships, that's the root of it all. I'm a client. I

Subway franchisees aren't interested in the disposable income of 40 to 55 year olds, despite the fact that that age group doesn't represent the majority of its patrons—instead, they seek to associate the Subway brand with a more youthful identity. As Brad sees it, a change in branding and specific menu options is the only way to meet the franchisees' wishes for a younger clientele they perceive as providing profit opportunities. This desire to capture the attention of young men provided the impetus for fabricating and promoting the Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket sandwich:

The franchisees were saying we're under-serving a profitable—I guess you've gotta boil it down to that—a profitable target audience out there, we're under-serving them, and we're missing out on the opportunity to draw money from them because they perceive Subway is this place you go to have healthy choices and healthy sandwiches and cold cuts and stuff.

Defining a target audience is grounded in profit motive, and involves thinking of people as statistics or oversimplified consumers—with that mindset Brad can more easily rationalize his strategic advice and advertising decisions. By borrowing from popular beliefs on how young men nourish themselves, and by relying on his own imagination, Brad associates an identity of a young man with the sandwich.

Rationalizing that a young man's diet is “more capable of handling a premium sandwich,” Brad conceives of his target audience based on one specific 18- to 24-year old male, notably his own son:

expect this kind of thing to happen. It's not happening...Advertising professionals, can you help me figure this out? And so we'll sit down with them and we'll say, first of all, you've got...an audience right now, a sort of reliable, renewable audience, that's much higher in age group than the target you're really looking for in this case. You're up here, [attracting people aged] 24 to 39, and part of you desires to still get that 18 to 25 or 18 to 29 segment, and you're not going to be able to do it with these products up here.”

...[I]n order to sell these kinds of meatier sandwiches, or more indulgent premium sandwiches? You're going to have to skew these things much younger. Certainly a person my age—I'm much older—I can enjoy that sandwich, but I'm less likely to allow myself to make that choice because my metabolism is not what it used to be. I have to work harder to work off an indulgent choice. Now, I've got an 18-year-old son who can eat those things all day. But he works out, he's muscular and lean and he can handle that. And his metabolism is that of an 18-year-old. And he loves these bigger, meatier sandwiches.

In order to tap into this market—or, to put it another way, in order for Subway to meet the needs of its under-served customer base—MSA and Subway decided that they needed a product that satisfies what Brad calls one's "human desire to consume beef, in whatever form that is." While meeting Subway franchisees' desires for a younger male patronage and higher profits, Brad rationalizes that his work simultaneously fulfills the wants, needs and desires of his target audience. In fact, he believes that that's the primary service of marketing:

As I was coming up in the business, I realized that it was fun to design, it was fun to create and do all these other things, but I was much more intrigued by the part of the business that was listening to consumers' needs, recognizing their wishes, dreams, desires, aspirations, all those things, and realizing that we have clients that we can match up [with] their wishes, dreams, wants, desires. Our job is to connect those somehow...It's just kind of like helping these two parties connect on some kind of intellectual level and emotional level so they can benefit from each other. That's the part of it that got me going. Just recognizing that most people don't consciously make a decision about something without being influenced by something that persuades or motivates them to take that action, whether they necessarily realize it or don't realize it.

According to Brad, his personal job satisfaction arises from meeting his corporate clients' needs by overtly or covertly influencing people's purchasing behaviors through his advertising artwork—in this way he facilitates a relationship between his client and

potential consumers based on what he perceives to be individuals' wants, needs and desires.

For Brad, attracting young men, with their wants, needs and desires, to the Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket sandwich relies on meat. He believes displaying what the industry calls “beauty shots” of the brisket elicits for audience members an automatic desire or craving for meat, and an urge to chow down a beefy Brisket sandwich:

[W]e just wanted to get the meat as big on-screen and to fill the TV screen as much as possible, knowing that in most cases, amongst the target we're aiming this at, it'll kind of flip the switch.

Brad's and David's rationales for their art designs could represent the kinds of persuasive rhetoric required in corporate settings to justify advertising strategy, not to mention the need for it at all. Conceptions of target audience—who will buy this sandwich, how the product complements or influences audience behaviors and for what reasons—help validate creative decisions in advertising. By situating the artwork within a rational, even scientific frame in which “audience” is reduced to measurable statistics, advertisers can more easily justify creative decisions and the value of their work.

As Brad explains at length, however, drawing the desirable 18-to-24 male to Subway franchises could yield complicated backlash for the Subway brand.³⁴ Especially

³⁴ Brad: “In a lot of cases the client comes in with a need or a problem that needs to be solved, and that probably where at the basis of most client-agency relationships, that's the root of it all. I'm a client. I expect this kind of thing to happen. It's not happening. There's some sort of problem or impediment or barrier to my wanting this to happen. It's not happening. Advertising professionals, can you help me figure this out? And so we'll sit down with them and we'll say, first of all, you've got...an audience right now, a sort of reliable, renewable audience, that's much higher in age group than the target you're really looking for in this case. You're up here, [attracting people aged] 24 to 39, and part of you desires to still get that 18 to 25 or 18 to 29 segment, and you're not going to be able to do it with these products up here. But you can if you slide down here and offer these products which may be a little outside of your comfort zone—because Subway has sort of a healthy, it's kind of a healthy choice sort of message that they try to

since 1998 and the weight-loss transformation of spokesperson Jared Fogle, who lost 245 pounds using a diet of almost exclusively Subway sandwiches, Subway's primary branding strategy has promoted "Seven sandwiches under six grams of fat." While Jared's story and Subway's FreshFit[®] menu choices have distinguished the Subway brand as providing a more healthful alternative to typical fast food options, the Brisket sandwich diverges from that menu as a "heart attack on a roll" (as one MSA employee

put out there...But in order to sell these kinds of meatier sandwiches, or more indulgent premium sandwiches? You're going to have to skew these things much younger. Certainly a person my age—I'm much older—I can enjoy that sandwich, but I'm less likely to allow myself to make that choice because my metabolism is not what it used to be. I have to work harder to work off an indulgent choice. Now, I've got an 18-year-old son who can eat those things all day. But he works out, he's muscular and lean and he can handle that. And his metabolism is that of an 18-year-old. And he loves these bigger, meatier sandwiches."

"So that's what we're trying to do. Subway's [the corporate entity is] over here saying, we've got all these products, but the store owners—not necessarily Subway as a whole, but the store owners—are saying, we're OK to continue to serve what you want us to serve to the audience that loves this, but we're missing a core...Another part of our audience remains underserved...The franchisees were saying we're under-serving a profitable—I guess you've gotta boil it down to that—a profitable target audience out there, we're under-serving them, and we're missing out on the opportunity to draw money from them because they perceive Subway is this place you go to have healthy choices and healthy sandwiches and cold cuts and stuff. Whereas they're much more—they're younger, more active, they're more capable of handling premium sandwiches, if they're priced right. But Subway has a problem with offering those so, what, conspicuously, because they've got a message over here and that would be fighting that message. So they're not quick to put that message out there, hey, we sell these big, meaty, juicy, highly-caloric, high-fat sandwiches. It conflicts with their message. But at the same time they do want to be able to serve them because, when you think about it from a purely mathematical intellectual standpoint, what Subway's saying is make healthier choices, i.e., eat less. Well, if you're eating less then you're purchasing less. So if I go to Subway and I'm gonna have this small, affordable salad, well, it's an affordable salad, I'm not getting anything big, so I'm not paying a lot of money for it. Therefore, the franchisees aren't making very much money. I'm not saying we expect to send a lot of over-sized people into Subway in hopes that they buy a bunch of double-meat, 12-inch sandwiches. But certainly, if we did, the franchisees and store-owners would make out much better. That's who we serve as this agency. We're not like the national Subway agency, whose job is to build the brand. Our job as local store marketing folks is to make each and every store as profitable as they can be. So one of the biggest opportunities that we see is to take this group just underneath where their audience usually is, and offer those people the sandwiches that they want, which is higher profit sandwiches for the store, and it begins to draw more people in because it allows them to recognize that Subway is more than this [restaurant offering] 'seven sandwiches with six grams of fat or less.' People have that feeling about [Subway] because they've worked very hard to get that message out there. Healthy choices. Jared's favorite sandwiches. 'Seven sandwiches with six grams of fat or less.' All that kind of stuff. It's worked against them from the standpoint of selling bigger, meatier sandwiches. They're capable of doing it, they just don't sell very many of them."

called it). Though the sandwich appears to be a marketing risk, franchisees and MSA find the Brisket attractive—Subway’s foundational product line neither provides the profit margin nor draws the broad clientele that franchisees crave. Franchisees are willing to risk such contradictions in the Subway brand’s narrative if they might improve on their bottom lines.

Fashioning The Real through set, light and shot composition

Brad’s focus on the meat demonstrates how he wants to engage 18- to 24-year-old men sensorially. He and David believe presenting beauty shots of meat-stuffed sandwiches will engage physical cravings in the audience. For them this sandwich is not merely about satisfying hunger, but about carnal, sensual desires:

Brad: We’re going to fill the frame with meat... The juicier, the better...we’re gonna try to get people to think of Subway as a place to get a lot of meat... We want people lusting after this sandwich.

David: It’s like a guilty pleasure.

Brad: With this sandwich we want to make some overture to our audience that they’re [i.e., Subway is] not just about cold cuts.

Drawing from other media practices, the team’s pre-production preparation—from shot construction to set and light design to food styling—centers on associating energy around perfect sandwiches to engage the audience member sensorially. Borrowing from action film shot design, Director of Production Shaun plans to add drama and excitement to the visuals by contracting a motion control (MoCo) camera and crew. MoCo is an elaborate, expensive technique featuring a camera affixed to a large hydraulic rigging, supported by a dolly or track, and synchronized with a turntable. By programming motion through an

elaborate computer program, the apparatus facilitates very complex camera movements, like combinations of tilt, pan, boom and dolly (a.k.a., tracking), while the subject of the composition sometimes revolves on the turntable. These dexterous technical synchronizations can result in complex shots that appear acrobatic, extremely dramatic and highly stimulating.³⁵ Shaun describes one shot he has in mind in which the camera pans from the side of sandwich to the front, then executes a “quick whip” to a low angle looking up at sandwich face. Later Shaun associates the camera work to that in some contemporary popular film, explaining that camera work like this makes it seem like Spider-Man whipping around the sandwich. They plan to shoot with a wide angle lens that can operate very close to the sandwich and “makes it look massive...like a skyscraper,” and “make [the sandwich] pop out at you.”

During a Creative meeting, at which most of the production crew creative leaders are present, Shaun articulates that this production shoot is about featuring the meat product in sandwich—this spot is “all about food.” As their conversations show, however, this ad is about more than just food. MSA would like to suggest a new branding strategy to Subway/DAI that several at MSA think will attract young men to Subway restaurants. To accomplish that, MSA believes that a new brand image, emphasizing darker, warmer colors, and perhaps low-key light designs, will attract that demographic. Currently white backgrounds and high-key lighting mark Subway’s

³⁵ Just as importantly, perhaps, MoCo makes these complicated shots repeatable, so that the exact same motion can be executed repetitively without the possibility for human inconsistency (a common pitfall with complex motion photography). Automating the camera movement allows the crew to capture the same motion with slight variations in set design or lighting, or even perfectly reverse the motion if desired.

branding. Developed at a time when filming technologies couldn't tolerate high light contrast well, high-key lighting often uses three light fixtures to reduce contrast and shadow effects significantly, and is often used to connote lightheartedness or an upbeat mood (sit-coms often use high-key lighting). Low-key lighting, on the other hand, is often used to connote moodiness or artistic flair. A shift in lighting and set design would mark a shift in brand strategy for Subway that borrows more from dramatic popular films rather than the conventions often used in Quick Service Restaurant advertising.

Further developing their visions for Subway's new look, the Creative team wants to include warm colored props and items that imply gourmet food preparation, like a meat fork; a wooden cutting board with a "cherry look, or a little red or dark oak"; a table cloth and napkin with browns and reds.³⁶ Shaun emphasizes that they plan for "everything to be hot, steamy, warm—[this sandwich is] not a cool, crisp thing..." The Creative team members use the artwork Subway has already commissioned as ballast for their re-branding ideas. The general consensus around MSA/BIS is that the national agency's artwork doesn't represent the Brisket sandwich in an interesting or even appealing way, particularly for young men. The national artwork features a footlong Brisket sandwich on a table in an outdoor setting, sitting on a blue-checkered tablecloth.

³⁶ In creating this "gourmet look," Scott asked me to find cheese in blocks or rounds that looked like the American cheese that would be available in Subway franchises. Ironically, I learned from grocery deli personnel that American cheese isn't generally available in block or round, that it comes to retailers pre-sliced—so I was instructed to look for any cheese in block or round that resembled the color of American. Ultimately the idea is scrapped. Even though Scott would've liked the way that a cheese round would signify a gourmet-ness for the sandwich—not to mention the variety of shape, color and texture it would provide his creative eye—he has to let go of the idea completely.

Several members of the Creative team contribute their critique of the Subway national spread:

Carson (the set designer): [The Subway national print art is] the wrong tonality. It's a big, meaty sandwich for guys, and this looks like a picnic.

Mike (lighting director): The meat is [cut so the edges are] all jagged...it isn't pretty...

Carson: You wanna see the juice run down.

David: We want the whole Texas smoked barbeque feel...warm, inviting...

Brad: This has too much white—

Carson: This looks like a cool sandwich...

Brad continues: —we want dark, warm, inviting, rich...a sandwich exploding with beefy flavor.

Carson: ...A cook-out feel, not this Martha Stewart business.

Everyone agrees. Definitely not Martha Stewart. Martha Stewart connotes femininity, particularly a femininity older and with a different cultural cache than the 18- to 24-year-old demographic MSA and Subway franchisees desire. By eliminating what they consider Martha Stewart-like connotations from their artistic design, these ad producers reinscribe ideas of masculine identity. Warm sandwiches, a cook-out feel, a huge Texas-sized barbeque sandwich exploding with beefy flavor: these are markers of the masculine. Cool, white Martha Stewart designs are eliminated as ways men might find the sandwich appealing.

In addition to warm hues and meaty sandwiches, Shaun imagines specific prop shots to render the Texas connotations David evoked with the copy. Shaun mentions set props he has in mind: “an iron pot, a [meat] fork, a grill.” He plans shots with soft focus background and the props featured in the fore. Envisioning these props appearing in windows around the screen in front of beauty shots of the sandwich, Shaun believes these

will help relay a “Texas barbeque feel without just showing the sandwich.” He wants Carson to make word sign “Brisket” out of something metal, something that looks “Texas-like.” A discussion ensues—Carson envisions it to look “like a branding iron” and begins talking through how he might achieve that. Similarly, Shaun and BIS graphic designer Brian discuss the animated images to be completed in post-production. The graphics should have “an iron look” with a sense of photo-realism, “like objects in a set.” Shaun imagines the iron look of the graphics to resonate with the gritty, unpolished undertones provided by set props like fence posts, lassos and spurs. For me, the prop and graphics discussions evoke set designs from so-called spaghetti westerns like Sergio Leone’s *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) or *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), each starring tough guy Clint Eastwood. It’s clear that metal, wood, and props with rough textures or burned edges make up the materials for connoting the idealized Real of the Texas rancher. Later Carson shows off a cutting board made of a ruddy-colored wood, and with feet so the board stood up from the table. Carson comments that that’s “very masculine-looking.” Brian, being cynical and observant, quietly replies that that’s “as opposed to a plate. Plates are feminine.”³⁷ Interestingly, Brad’s storyboards are completely devoid of any the kinds of Western stylings Shaun mentions, and neither Brad nor David comment on Shaun’s prop shots throughout the entire meeting. Brad and

³⁷ Eventually Carson collects an array of set props and materials to give Scott great versatility in creating the kinds of looks he wants to achieve: a saddle, lassos, sawhorse, sheets of variegated metal, cowboy boots and spurs, an iron star set inside an iron circle styled to look like braided rope; canteens; iron fry pans; assortments of sauces and flawless vegetables with beautiful rich colors; serapes and hand-woven cotton blankets; a cowboy hat.

David seem to have little interest in saddles, spurs or serapes—but they do perk up when discussing juicy, saucy, succulent mountains of meat.

Shaun addresses Mike directly about lighting: “What looks cool” in his imagination for this spot is edging, not backlights—“hot edges that make it pop...Can we keep colors dark and warm with a hot edge?” Shaun wants the light design to make the food look rich and deep in color while highlighting edges around each item to emphasize shape and texture. Mike gives that a nod, then comments on particular lighting techniques to make the sandwich and meat look distinctive. Shadowing effects within the beautifully-draped meat accentuate the warm colors while dramatizing the meat. Low-key lighting effects like these are used in many action films like Christopher Nolan’s recent Batman series (*Batman Begins* [2005] and *The Dark Knight* [2008]). Low-key lighting in films like these often accentuate shadow effects in the main character’s face, relaying the simmering stoicism of a masked crusader who uses his strength, intellect, acrobatic prowess and extraordinary high-tech gadgetry in protecting the world from evil-doers. In this case, low-key lighting may recall familiar cultural narratives, reinforcing patriarchal dramas about exceptional, athletic, mysterious men who protect the world from vice, immorality or evil.³⁸

³⁸ Practically speaking, this production features a sandwich, and it seems a stretch that any audience member might interpret this as a “moody” or “patriarchal” sandwich. My point here is to recognize the constructs that lighting can convey, namely the playfulness or shallowness often associated with high-key work (as in a sitcom) compared with the ways that low-key lighting can connote complexity and depth. At the same time, as several sources listed in the next footnote show, there is a complicated relationship between the use of the cowboy as a do-gooder and the representation of the sandwich (see William W. Savage, Jr., *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* [Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979] and Michael Kimmel, “The Cult of Masculinity : American Social Character and the Legacy of the Cowboy,” in *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power and Change*, ed. Michael Kaufman [Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987], 235-49).

Throughout their planning, the Creative team also has to consider bureaucratic constraints in terms of what Subway/DAI might accept in terms of branding strategy. Because MSA looks to this commercial to convince Subway to shift its image and marketing strategies, they painstakingly debate seemingly minor prop, set or lighting decisions. For instance, Brad wants to use a meat fork in some of the shots “even though you’ll never see a fork like that in a Subway.” But advertising isn’t about representing food, fast food restaurants or corporations with the kind of authenticity one might actually experience with this sandwich in a Subway restaurant. Rather, the agency looks to project an idealized version of the reality of the Brisket sandwich and the Subway restaurant experience. All of this is to attract the coveted young male demographic. Brad comments that it’s “hard to get younger guys to come in” to a Subway—they’re not attracted to Subway’s offerings (he believes), and MSA (notably Brad and David) thinks that changing the branding campaign through color and props could change the way males aged 18 to 24 think about Subway.

Only briefly does Shaun turn the group’s attention specifically to sound. His only comment on any sound for the piece throughout the entire meeting suggests that he has very clear ideas about the soundtrack—and assumes that everyone else has the same ideas: “When you think about what the voice sounds like and what the music’s gonna *have* to sound like...”—Shaun trails off, but there presumably isn’t much room for experimentation. Clearly Shaun’s imagination has isolated particular kinds of music and sounds that will make this spot communicate their story about masculinity, Texas

cowboys and the Brisket sandwich.³⁹ Shaun's comment suggests that the Brisket story must be told not just with images, but through a complete audiovisual experience.

With the close of the Creative meeting many of the project goals are on the table. Juicy meat that appears as big as a skyscraper within the frame. Acrobatic camera movements that wrap and swing the audience member's eye all around the sandwich. Warm colors and something of a gourmet look to the set props. Light design that emphasizes warm, deep colors while giving the food a hot edge. A non-Martha Stewart feminizing look—something of a masculine and gourmet sensibility. And Brad, in particular, is intent on showing meat. Piles of beautiful, saucy meat.

Building a hero: the bread crisis and the Food Stylists

³⁹ For more on associations of the cowboy as a marker for masculinity in American society, see, for instance, William W. Savage, Jr., *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 20, 23: "If the cowboy functions as spokesman for the people, he is in a real sense First Citizen of the Republic, a guardian, a righter of wrongs, or, at the very least, a perceptive and philosophical observer of the human condition...[W]e could tell by their faces—they were not confused. They knew exactly what to do and when to do it, whether the task was to win the lady or save the day. And they could overthrow evil by any of several techniques drawn from their arsenal of cowboy skill. Deprive them of sidearms, but no matter. They would first outwit and then outpunch any enemy. It occurred to Americans, between boxes of popcorn, that brains were the cowboy's most potent weapon." See also Alf H. Walle, *The Cowboy Hero and its Audience: Popular Culture as Market Derived Art* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2000), in which he traces the image of the cowboy-hero from the 1820s and James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, to 1960s popular films. He uses this to argue for a method of tracking consumer responses to popular cultural trends initiated perhaps by cultural arbiters like film-makers and advertisers. Finally, see Michael Kimmel, "The Cult of Masculinity : American Social Character and the Legacy of the Cowboy," in *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power and Change*, ed. Michael Kaufman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), 235-49. Kimmel argues how the cowboy myth has propagated in American culture as a primary marker of American identity, and as a nation the US has enacted that identity historically in its choices of public officials and policy decisions. Interestingly, with this edition published in 1987, Kimmel suggests that "Ronald Reagan is the country's most obvious cowboy-president. And he may also be one of our last. The limitations of the cult of masculinity in American politics are slowly being revealed." Kimmel, 247. I imagined Kimmel cringed (or worse) from around 2000 through 2008.

Projecting The Real in food advertising requires meticulous planning and lofty standards for how food should look for the camera. Though the FTC may litigate to insist on “truth in advertising,” those truths are often highly stylized to reflect an idealized Real-ity that corresponds with brand strategy and the kinds of images advertisers believe people will find attractive enough to influence their consumption behaviors.⁴⁰ Throughout the three-day shoot, various members of the production crew irreverently critique the perfect sandwiches and sets built for the camera, commenting that “You’ll never see that in a Subway restaurant,” or perfecting their shot constructions by noting that “the gag is showing.” With most of them wielding extensive experience shooting television commercials, they’re familiar with the machinations and exertions that go into representing the ad industry’s Real world of idealized products and perfect wish fulfillment.

For the Brisket shoot, BIS team member Jenna has invested hours researching how to select perfect bread loaves that meet Subway’s specifications for how food should look on-camera. She and Laurel, one of the Production Assistants dedicated to

⁴⁰ As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) maintains guidelines for handling consumer protection matters, particularly with consumer complaints and lawsuits against food marketers. Additionally, the ad producers take seriously the industry’s self-regulation of advertising values. For example, as the Food Stylist for explains to me, in an ad for a McDonald’s chicken breast sandwich, the chicken breast in the image must be the same chicken product a patron would receive upon actually buying that sandwich in a McDonalds. However, if the ad producers wanted the breast to seem like a thicker, more generous portion, the food stylist could glue and toothpick two breasts together. For more information on FTC regulations on food advertising, see the FTC’s Enforcement Policy Statement on Food Advertising, <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/policystmt/ad-food.shtm>, accessed 8/13/08. According to my telephone conversations with FTC personnel, however, these (albeit limited and often vague) guidelines were established to hold food marketers accountable only for nutrition and health claims. It remains unclear to me whether formal standards for food stylization exist, or if the industry has imagined a set of standards believed to be the limits of reality exaggeration that still afford the advertiser credibility.

supporting the Food Stylist duo, met with Subway staff via conference call at one of the stores. They learned some of the keys to baking the perfect loaf:

- “don’t overscore,” that is, ensure that the cuts atop the unbaked loaves are not too deep—and make certain there are four scores per twelve-inch loaf (which is the standard number of scores per twelve-inch Subway loaf)
- obtain the freshest dough—the age of the dough affects its rising ability
- bake loaves for 14 minutes and achieve a particular shade of golden brown
- ensure the loaves are plump, with plumpness evenly distributed above and below “the line” (that is, the horizontal line in the bread formed by the top edge of the silicon loaf pan)
- make all slices horizontally through the bread just above the line

Our pre-shoot Wal-Mart shopping list included special plastic boxes with lids (designed to allow for under-bed storage) to transport the bread without the risk of crushing any of the loaves even slightly. The boxes are long and shallow, allowing for a few dozen loaves to be carried in the most manageable manner. Despite Jenna’s careful planning, we run into a predicament almost immediately. Jenna had ordered over two hundred loaves of bread from two different Subways for the first day of the shoot—but less than five percent were deemed worthy by the food styling team, not nearly enough to carry them through even the first day of the three-day shoot. Most of the freshly-baked bread is deemed unusable. Too wrinkly, not ideal.

This becomes a major project for Jenna and Laurel, especially Jenna. The pair identify yet a third Subway store for baking bread, supervise the baking themselves, and—when those options proved inconsistent—they brought frozen dough to the studio to bake on-site (the Food Stylist Assistant boasted she could bake it better herself—unfortunately the bread behaved the same even under her care). Eventually they decide

to use the best loaves available and be extremely delicate with how they treat them. They can't afford to waste any more time achieving perfect specimens.

BIS has hired a two-woman professional food styling team from New York City to design sandwiches and collect food props for the shoot. Food styling is painstaking work as the designers select the perfect ingredients and build perfect specimens for the camera. Gathering information about her work over the phone during pre-production, Shaun interviews the Food Stylist (FS) on her food-art craftsmanship to get a sense for how much of her time he'll have to purchase. He seems impressed by the FS, noting that she plans to "go through a head of lettuce like an archeologist" to find the perfect leaves. But the FS's responsibilities comprise more than finding crispy lettuce or unblemished tomatoes. The FS will build several sandwiches throughout each day of the shoot, including multiple sandwiches for each individual shot. Borrowing from film production slang, where the lead actor is frequently the continuous point of focus, the camera-ready sandwich is referred to as the "hero." Similarly, FS will build "stand-ins," that is, sandwiches that approximate the look, size and shape of the hero, but take less time to prepare and are close enough to perfect to allow the crew and director to set up shots. Building each hero and stand-in for a shot sequence requires careful timing in order to flow with the demands of a tight shooting schedule—designing a camera-ready sandwich takes at least two hours, which requires meticulous planning and coordination between the food stylists and directors.

I ask FS and the Food Stylist Assistant (FSA) if they'd be willing to take a few questions as they worked. I explain my interest in hearing what techniques they were

using in this particular shoot, and about other experiences they've had preparing food for television. Initially FSA is more than willing to share with me. FS chimes in quickly with reluctance:

FS: Don't use my name...don't associate me with any client names...

FSA seems a bit less concerned: Academia is so different [from the press].

FS: I don't know, [but] with the web and everything...

FS recounts the experience of another food stylist whose career was destroyed because she commented on her experience working with a particular client's food products, and her words showed up in the press. FS doesn't want her name or her association with any of her clients to be made public in any way. I assure both of them that I won't use their names in my writing, nor risk revealing their identities by associating them with any clients.

With that guarantee, both food stylists seem more than willing to share their knowledge and experiences with me. I look around their kitchen station and make note of the tools at their disposal: An electric stove with an oven, three refrigerators. The bread, brisket, and vegetables dictated by Subway specifications for the sandwich. A clothes steamer. Vegetable shortening, marmite, a soldering iron, skewers. I invite them to share some knowledge: "I'd love to know how you could possibly use Corn Husker's Lotion in food prep." FSA responds that they use it to soften and moisturize bread—"It keeps it from wrinkling—you know, we had all those problems...?" We both nod our heads knowingly. She and FS trade comments on how they use different tools, the tricks of their trade. Armor-All products—silicon-based cleaners and protectants advertised to keep car tires shiny—help hold up tortillas and pancakes during long periods. The recipe

for TV ice cream is shortening, corn syrup and confectioners' sugar. Meat dries out under hot lights, so they frequently use a small brush to paint cooking oil on the meat to index the meat quality as juicy and fresh. A specially-formulated mixture of marmite, teriyaki sauce and select spices is painted onto the brisket for color. They use a clothes steamer to heat and moisturize meat so they can control the coloring process—the steam allows the color “to stick.” Saltpeter (often used as fertilizer or other oxidizing reactions) serves to keep meat from turning dark and sometimes to “quiet down directors,” according to FS. Everyone laughs.

FS gestures toward Laurel, their PA/assistant: “Now *she's* doing something really interesting—you should see what she's doing.” Laurel's making an extra-thick gelatin mixture that will eventually be used as a food adhesive. We have a shot coming up in which the sandwich will be physically dropped onto the set in extreme close-up (mimicking a sandwich drop in a currently running Hardee's ad), and the sandwich must hold together during the free-fall and ensuing impact. Laurel's paste will keep the sandwich intact. FS turns away momentarily, and FSA approaches: “It's clear so you won't see it...it keeps things static but let's things move...This is my favorite glue—it won't kill the actors, you know, when they bite into it.”

FS returns and explains some of the rules of food styling: “There's no such thing as truth in advertising...” She gestures toward me. “That—I can't let that come back to me being said.” She continues. Advertisers have to use the actual product advertised in any advertising. If ice cream is featured, you have to use that company's product—but if you add chocolate sauce, it can be any chocolate sauce. Referring hypothetically to

McDonald's products, FS explains that if you want to represent a chicken sandwich as a sandwich that includes a big, thick slice of chicken, and the McDonald's chicken isn't thick enough, you can't use another vendor's chicken. However, you can put two of McDonald's chicken products together to offer the illusion of one thick chicken patty or slice. These tricks of the trade enable the advertiser to present an idealized product, with alluring colors, inviting shapes, and large food portions.

“More meat”: laboriously performing The Real

Verisimilitude is critical when portraying The Real. As Dyer argues, idealized representations of products and scenarios must point to the real world—if the Real world of the advertisement breaks social codes that define “real-ness” in audiovisual media, the ad will be dismissed by audience members, and the brand's reputation may be tarnished.⁴¹ Shaun and Peter have carefully planned out each image with set design they hope to capture, taking into account that each shot will have multiple takes in their efforts to secure the most real-looking yet attractive image possible. Before the shoot, Shaun and Peter composed the shots they wanted to coordinate with different parts of the script, and they labeled each shot numerically (101, 102, 103; 201, 202, etc.). Each shot may have multiple takes (e.g., 109/Take 1, 109/2, 109/3...) as the crew experiments with

⁴¹ “The celebration of sensation movement, that we respond to in some unclear sense ‘as if real,’ for many people is the movies... We generally want the exhilaration and rush embedded in a fiction. Such fictions situate the thrills. They refer us to the world. They do not usually pretend to show us the world as it really is, but they point to that world. They offer us thrills and elations we might seldom have, might think it impossible really to have, but they relate such imaginings of elation to the human co-ordinates of the real world: the environments we live in, the social categories in which we have our being.” Dyer, 9.

designing the perfect set-up for each image. Producing *The Real* requires great patience on the part of all crew members.

Brad and David stop by the studio periodically to see how things are going. During a set change between Shots 201K and 201L, Brad reviews shots from the day before. During yesterday's Shot 109, Brad had directed the Food Stylist specifically to add droplets of sauce to specific parts of the sandwich to offer more aesthetic appeal to the eye. Reviewing the shot, he seems sensually moved. Speaking to no one in particular, Brad gushes immodestly,

Oh, that one little drip of sauce is perfect, when the eye wants something to focus on...Oh, that's great...that's great...Yeah, you see way more meat than bread—that's what we tried to get done. That's great.

Shaun approaches and Brad invites him in his gratification: "That one [shot] where you approach on the diagonal—you barely even see the bottom of the loaf. You see way more meat. That's great." Brad's reaction to the shot is completely visceral—he nearly salivates as he sees the sandwich and imagines the young men attracted to the meat on the screen. Apparently satisfied, Brad sees a look on-screen that he thinks will entice young men's lustful cravings for the sandwich.

Shot 105 is intended to display meat randomly (but beautifully) dropping onto the bottom loaf of the sandwich. After a few rehearsals, Carson and Shaun come back to say that FS needs to create a new hero, this time open-faced with a top loaf as well. During rehearsals, the meat isn't staying on the sandwich when dropped—the sandwich needs to be bigger so the meat has more room to fall and look natural and attractive. Shaun calls out to the set designer:

“Carson, I want more meat. Lots of meat.”

Each rehearsal has problems: the meat looks sloppy as it falls; the meat falls off the sandwich; the meat falls in inconsistent or unappealing patterns. After a couple of inadequate passes, Shaun modifies his direction—he wants someone to follow immediately behind Carson, dropping more meat in a second pass. Shaun wants not only more meat, but also the additional movement in both the foreground and background to attract the eye and make a more aesthetically pleasing viewing experience. Jenna is recruited as a second pair of hands, and she, Carson, Shaun and the camera crew rehearse the shot several times before actually committing it to film. Shaun’s dogged decision to perfect the shot is costly in a number of ways. After several rehearsals Peter acts out his role as Assistant Director and points out that they’re running behind the shooting schedule—again.⁴² Additionally, film stock is expensive, and several of the shots they designed use fast film speeds which take up more frames per second (fps), that is, use more film—they risk running out of film stock. Shaun continues to work. After nearly an hour of rehearsals and direction changes, Shaun still hasn’t gotten off a shot. He calls for “fresh hero meat” to replace the product that’s lost luster and shape through rehearsal. Venting frustration in his relaxed way, Shaun smiles and exhales: “They’re never gonna let us use this shot. We’ll put it on our demo reel though.” Later I ask him why he thinks he won’t be allowed to use the shot. In Shaun’s mind, the bureaucracy of

⁴² Running behind shooting schedule risks that they won’t complete their objectives in the time they allotted when reserving studio space by-the-hour, and chances having to pay more in personnel fees (also by-the-hour, or possibly overtime) not to mention confront complicated union regulations. Peter and Scott compensate by revising the shooting schedule for the remaining days of the shoot.

retail restauranteuring and food safety come into play: “When the [SFAFT] lawyers look at this they’ll be like, it doesn’t look like they’re being very careful [in the process of building a sandwich]. We’ll get that from time to time.”

For Shot 102, Shaun had envisioned in pre-production that a meat fork would enter the frame and lift some meat dramatically and gracefully from the cutting board. To execute the move, Carson plans to hold the fork personally, move it into the view of the lens, and then lift it in concert with the moving camera. Most tricky is coordinating Carson’s human hand motion with the camera’s pre-programmed mechanical action. After moving the fork into the viewable frame, Carson has great trouble physically lifting the fork with the automated timing of the machine. That won’t be acceptable—Shaun needs the shot to appear as though the camera is following the fork in a steady, stable manner. The rehearsals are taking up time we’ve already spent—we’re again behind schedule. Peter paces and constantly points out to Shaun that they don’t have time to accomplish what Shaun wants. Carson rehearses forking meat. Shaun decides it’s “too much trouble” for the fork to enter the frame and instructs Carson to pre-set the fork: “stab some and set it up.” With each attempt to set the fork, Shaun offers more direction: “More meat, and it can’t drape...OK, that’s enough meat, and it’s not falling [or draping off the fork], but it doesn’t look pretty right now.” He directs the Food Stylist to design a meat-laden fork for the camera, and they continue their attempts to achieve a perfect rendering.

Take 1. The fork bounces throughout the shot from the abrupt camera motion. Shaun and Simon (the lead camera operator) quickly decide on a solution. Simon calls

out the order: “OK, our fantastic gripology folks. What we’re gonna do is we’re going to attach the meat to the lens.” Thomas (Simon’s assistant) echoes: “We’re gonna attach the [unintelligible] to the lens.” Besides the fact that a bouncing fork looks sloppy and calls attention to the mechanics of production, it doesn’t portray the sense of steadiness and assuredness they need to project through the spot. The grip team quickly outfits a C-stand to attach the meated fork to the camera. Simon: “The best thing to do is position the meat beautifully in the frame and I’ll adjust the camera [for focus]. Now, folks on the knuckle [a joint on the C-stand], on the very right of the frame I’m seeing the knuckle.” Thomas: “On the very right of the frame we’re seeing the knuckle.” To promote a sense of verisimilitude, the tools of production can’t be readable by the audience—they have to change the set-up so the C-stand knuckle isn’t visible within the frame. The team readjusts the stand so the joint is outside the lens frame, and they rehearse the shot.

Take 2. Now that they’ve figured out how to make the fork-lift shot work, Shaun wants to capture the same shot, this time with some real-looking steam that appears to be arising from the presumably hot sandwich. Carson has planned a chemical effect to simulate steam for this shot. He slips tiny chips of a substance on the cutting board so it’s hidden behind the loaf. A small syringe loaded with water initiates the effect. Not enough steam. Take 3. Shaun calls out, “Try smoking the crap out of it this time.” Carson reloads and executes, but the smoke is gone in a split second. Take 4. They need more chemical, so they pile more meat on the set to hide it. Take 5. Tons of steam. Take 6. Take 7. Shaun, to me: “Take 6 is the best. Call those ‘more steam,’ ‘middle steam,’ and ‘less steam.’” That’s how he wants the notes to read for Takes 5, 6 and 7,

respectively. Later Shaun will consider my notes as he reviews the shots and decides which might be most acceptable. The steam needs to be visible to the audience member, but there can't be so much that it appears unrealistic.

Voiceover (VO): talent, delivery, and time

In the early stages of building the character of the Texas Rancher, Shaun requests several recorded voiceover (VO) auditions to find the right voice and delivery for the spot.⁴³ Having sent copies of the script to talent agents (who might represent several actors) as well as to individual talents, Shaun receives about a dozen digital recordings with several different performances of the script.⁴⁴ Over the course of two or three

⁴³ Though the label for the character has developed from a “cowboy” to a “rancher,” some research suggests that the morphing of these images has occurred throughout American cultural history. Again I turn to Savage, who observes that The Dude Ranchers’ Association long ago recognized the value of drawing upon images and narratives of the cowboy in order to promote tourism. Savage, 58-9.

⁴⁴ Reproduction of television VO script (italicized words subject to cutting):

V/O GUY WITH A BIG TEXAS ACCENT:

You hear ‘bout the new Texas Style Smoked beef Brisket Sandwich from Subway® restaurants?

Those boys figured if they were gonna do brisket, they were gonna do brisket right.

This sandwich is loaded...*I mean LOADED... (optional line)*

with tasty, tender, barbeque beef brisket...

...piled so high it (optional line) looks like it’s explodin’

right out of that freshly-baked bread.

They’s [sic] only one way to describe it: It’s barbecue done BLOW’D UP!

You’re lookin’ at (optional line) the new Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket Sandwich *only at SUBWAY® restaurants (optional line)*

And (optional line) if you don’t get yourself some of it, well...you’re just not livin’ right.

SUBWAY EAT FRESH®

weeks, Shaun narrows his preferences to three, then ultimately decides on one voiceover artist to perform the role of the Texas rancher written in the copy. Shaun wants the target audience to be attracted to the persona depicted by the VO—as Shaun describes the character, this Texas rancher is stoic, in control, with a “kind of big Texas voice.” Shaun’s rancher is “a smart guy, too...He’s the CEO of a big ranch, not a rodeo clown...He didn’t graduate from the third grade...He’s educated, he runs a big operation, he’s a business person.” He likes that in a couple of the demos the voice talent chuckles—“you want that...it makes it [the VO] sound real...” Shaun stresses that our Rancher says things like “yep,” yet at the same time he wants the VO not to represent anyone “too redneck...not a yahoo family farmer kind of guy.” In fact, he criticizes and eliminates one of the demos for evoking that quality. He wants his Rancher character to sound “laid-back, genuine...Fast speech is salesy—slow speech is more genuine.” He rules out several demos for sounding “too much like announcers...I want someone that sounds like a real guy, right off the ranch.” Shaun’s paradigm for the VO is Sam Elliot in the film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969),

where Sam Elliot seems like a smart guy, but he’s definitely got that drawl. So he’s not too country...He’s got some authority, he speaks with authority, he’s a straight-talkin’ kinda guy, but on the same token when [the Rancher character says] that ‘the boys called it barbeque done blow’d up’ he’s got that little chuckle in there...

Note: Optional lines are expendable if copy is running long.

Elliot has provided voice talent for the American Beef Council, and, since 2007, Toyota Tundra truck ads. He's also provided voice talent in TV commercials for Ford and Chevy trucks, and the Union Pacific Railroad. For Shaun, Sam Elliot brings together notions of the smart Texas rancher who represents things manly. Elliot is not a native Texan—one might argue that his “cowboy accent” has nothing to do with any of the many inflections and drawls one might hear throughout Texas. The actual authenticity of the Texan accent doesn't matter, however; it only matters that audience members can read the voice as that of a Texan rancher based on their media-influenced imaginings of what a masculine Texas rancher might sound like, and the associations with a *Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket*. Consciously or not, this seems to Shaun's primary focus—he seems to have an idea for how the VO should sound so that it can be read as Texan, not that it represents vocal inflections that might actually hail from that geographic area.⁴⁵ Just as important is to deliver a VO that portrays an air of relaxed confidence and self-assuredness. Shaun looks to create these effects through his direction of the VO recording.

Through an ISDN telephone line, Shaun can acquire digital transmissions of voice from virtually anywhere (that is, from any studio that also has an ISDN line).⁴⁶ In this case the Talent is in a recording booth in Ashville, NC, a mere four hours from MSA's

⁴⁵ In fact, it seems important that the character's vocal quality should refer to Texas, but not be Texas-specific so as to seem too regional or elicit any bias against “redneck” or other class stereotypes that would work against the goals for the ad. Borrowing media conventions that, as Dyer argues, “point to” a Real Texas as delivered in film and popular memory allows the voice of the Texas rancher to be relatable by more general audiences. Dyer, 9.

⁴⁶ ISDN stands for Integrated Services Digital Network, and allows digital voice or data transmission over ordinary telephone copper wires.

corporate base in the Raleigh area. Shaun purchased one hour of the Talent's time for recording VO for radio and television spots. Within that hour, Shaun looks to direct the Talent's delivery, drawing out a particular persona that Shaun imagines will fit his and MSA's ad design and attract their target demographic to the ad and the product. Within that hour, Shaun and the Talent must craft the character within the constraints of time and corporate bureaucracy. The Texas Rancher must tell the tale of the Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket sandwich within sixty seconds for the radio ads, and thirty seconds for television; additionally, DAI requires particular language within a Subway script, which limits copy editing. After selecting this Talent's audition, Shaun provided the Talent with new copies of the 60-second radio and 30-second television scripts with some of the text italicized. From Shaun's experience, excising copy is inevitable, and he's italicized several words and phrases that he believes could be omitted for the sake of time.

Shaun opens the recording session with obligatory small talk. He hasn't worked with this Talent nor the recording engineer, so he establishes rapport with them before they launch into recording. After re-orienting the Talent to the kind of personality he'd like for the Texas Rancher, they begin recording the radio script. Shaun isn't happy with the first couple of takes:

That read was way too fast—we're not gettin' to play with the character enough...I'd like to get more into the richness of the character...Let's just cut out all the italicized lines—I wanna give you some room to really work on this character.

Having omitted the words deemed expendable, Shaun decides the next few takes still don't convey the essence of the Texas rancher that he imagines. Shaun is concerned that

some reads are “goin’ a little fast and [get] a little salesy.” Earnestly he explains to the Talent again the kind of attitude and color he hopes to project through the VO, particularly through the delivery of the more “colorful phrases” in the copy:

I just feel like this guy is—he’s not a hyper guy. He’s a confident guy, and he talks slow and authoritatively, and he’s gonna stand there and say what he’s gonna say, and if it takes him all day it doesn’t matter. He’s in no hurry to get this out. I think that’s a way that somebody would talk...There’s a few of those colorful phrases in there that could use a little pause or a little thoughtfulness or a little more time spent on ‘em...I think it’s at the beginning where it feels like it zips through a little quick.

With a few more takes the Talent performs readings that are closer to Shaun’s expectations—unfortunately the team is finding itself running short on time within the limits of the 60-second ad. Having already decided they need to record the script at around 51 seconds in length to accommodate the required tags and disclaimer, the team realizes that shaving even one second involves creative negotiations in reworking the script, delivering the copy, and editing the recording in-studio. Quickly they discuss the fastest and easiest solutions to this common problem:

Recording Engineer: While you guys are examining copy [for more cuts] I’m gonna take Take 12 and pull out the pauses and breaths and we can bring it down that way...

Shaun, to me: Everybody overwrites copy—always...Plan on writing about three words and you’ll be about right...

Talent, examining the script for further trimming: There’s really not a lot of fat here.

Shaun: No, in the copy, no there isn’t. I don’t even really like saying ‘Subway Restaurants figured’—that’s really, that’s kind of awkward.

Talent: Uh-huh.

Shaun: I don’t know how else to do it though. The benefit to that is that it gets the word ‘Subway’ in there again.

Talent: [inaudible]

Shaun: And unfortunately, stupid as this is, Subway makes you say ‘Subway Restaurants.’—which is so awkward. But, you know [we’re] stuck with that.

Talent: Yeah, McDonald’s is the same way with saying, uh, ‘sandwich...’

Shaun: Yeah...

Talent: ...You have to say ‘whatever such-and-such *sandwich.*’

Shaun, to me: David’ll kill me. David, I left five of your words in there. [To the talent and recording crew] My boss wrote this so...

Recording engineer: Pulling out all pauses and most breaths and buttoning it up so it really doesn’t sound all that relaxed and I only got it down to fifty-four [seconds].

Shaun: OK, well, we pulled out some words there—why don’t you slam through the disclaimer and see what we can save there.

Engineer: Alright—Take 13.

The time constraints of the 30- and 60-second media spots again oblige Shaun toward evaluating copy and editing the script. Limited by DAI’s legalities and advertising conventions, like saying “Subway restaurants” instead of simply “Subway,” Shaun and the Talent recognize that very few lines can be excised at this point.

Ever shaping the character, Shaun steers his direction not just toward the attitude that the VO’s pacing can project—he takes aim at specific words and phrases. Shaun believes that particular conveyances will educe a characteristic Western lore while adding flavor or color to the Texas rancher’s character. He coaches the Talent:

And then the *boys down at the ranch* line, that’s definitely a ‘yeah, ya know, back when I was a kid one of the boys down at the ranch...’ That’s a story-telling kind of a phrase, you know, so...make sure there’s a lot of imagination going into that part of the read...It’s just ***boys*** down at the ***ranch***...just a little more on that...

While delivering information about the sandwich itself, the VO associates the sandwich with ideas of Texas folklore while establishing a lore around the sandwich itself, a kind

of sandwich history so intriguing that the *boys at the ranch* discuss it in community. Through the delivery of that single phrase, the VO performance projects ideas of male relationships and relating that Shaun hopes will attract their targets, eliciting ideas of how men tell stories as they interact with one another.

By Take 23 they're finally moved from the radio to the TV script. Before Take 1 Shaun had coached the Talent to his delivery to be subtly more emphatic, but by Take 23 the Talent's performance has strayed from projecting nuanced ideas of masculine experience and knowledge:

You lost the kind of sage roughness...he's always gotta have that toughness, that edge... It's [the voice must be] deeper, maybe a little more Southern, and maybe I talked you out of that in the beginning...I think overall it just needs a bit more heft. But just a tiny bit. And I think it comes out on certain words, like when you say *explodin'*—*explodin' right out*—just a little more strength. But I mean just a tiny bit—it's really, really close.

Shaun's direction to emphasize the percussiveness and long vowel sound of *explodin'* meets two goals: first, while heightening the drama the word provides with percussiveness and the long /o/ sound, Shaun creates an audiovisual link between the word and the extreme close-up (XCU) on the sandwich that will eventually be paired with the phrase (although some editing has begun, the specific shot accompanying this phrase hasn't been determined yet). During the preproduction shot design meetings, words like *explodin'* helped Shaun and Peter decide specifically to shoot multiple XCUs with the expectation that the word would be accompanied by an XCU of the sandwich. Second, Shaun's looking for an emphasis on *explodin'* that captures an idea of a masculine "sage roughness" or "toughness." These characteristics promote a familiar

stock masculinity: the perceptive and judicious cowboy. Like Clint Eastwood's character in *The Man with No Name* trilogy, this cowboy says very few words, but is always keen, aware, resilient, and wise. It is this recognizable persona these producers want to associate with the Brisket sandwich and Subway—this, they believe, will attract young men.

As they continue laboring over this VO effect, however, it's apparent that Shaun and the Talent have different conceptions for how much emphasis the Texas Rancher's speech should include:

Talent: I think the more pulled back—personally I feel that the more pulled back and less expression is the way to go with this particular character.

Shaun: [Pause] Yeah, I know what you're saying—because he's a no-nonsense kind of a guy.

Talent: He's not gonna be a salesman.

Shaun: No, right, right, right, of course. We definitely wanna keep away from anything that sounds salesy. I'm trying to fit that with my other thought. Yeah, I think what I'm sayin' is really, really subtle...

Shaun wants to avoid a “salesy” VO completely—“salesy” doesn't read as an authentic cowboy. In fact, “salesy” inflections would call attention to the fact that this Texas Rancher is a construction, and that Subway is trying to sell sandwiches through this ad. This VO needs to be read by audience members as an authentically Real persona. In Shaun's mind, anything else would be ineffective—and could mar his reputation by hinting at a lack of production quality standards.

Shaun continues crafting the Texas rancher persona with a return to the opening line: *You hear about the new Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket Sandwich from Subway Restaurants?* In Shaun's mind, the pacing of the opening line establishes the confidence,

authority and Texan-ness of the character with an unhurried sensibility—he encourages the Talent to try additional takes in which he pauses between words or drags out certain words. Similarly, Shaun wants to fashion a more colorful, authentic human character with gestures that he imagines are communicated through vocal inflection:

Shaun: On the *blow'd up* in [line] 107—I think that could have the slight chuckle to it, just slight. But he's got a smile when he's sayin' that. Um, I was thinking about that opening line. It may be after the word *new*—*new* might be the word that gets drug out. Like *You hear about the neew*—maybe that's where that slight hesitation is there....Let's read it again.

Engineer: [Take] 28 comin' up. Rollin'.

Shaun still isn't getting exactly what he hears in his mind's ear. Unfortunately, as the Recording Engineer gently points out, they're running out of time for the session, and the Talent has another session immediately following this one. Squeezing everything he can from his resources, Shaun asks for more time and wrings four more takes out of his Talent and Recording Engineer. His continuous battle between shaping a relaxed delivery, including all pertinent copy, and keeping the total within each ad's time constraints has much to do with the rapport and mutual agreement he has with the Talent, not to mention additional copy and visual limitations defined by Subway and DAI.⁴⁷

With thirty-two takes total for radio and television, Peter and Shaun decided to borrow from both the radio and television reads to create the TV spot's VO track,

⁴⁷ Scott: "I felt like he and I weren't totally in tune. Like, he had an idea for the character—and it was a good idea and it worked well—but it wasn't flexible in a nuanced way. Like he could do something completely different—but then it was wrong. It was hard to put a little more of this in or a little more of that in, and that's just hard to do, you know, it doesn't always work out. But I think we got really good stuff there...What I'm thinkin' is he just reads his last line with a picture of the sandwich...he just reads his last line and a picture of the sandwich and [the] "Subway-Eat Fresh" [logo] just flies in while he's readin' his line. I *think* we're allowed to do that..." According to Peter, Subway typically presents its logo at the end of any commercial on a blank white screen with no other text or visuals.

depending on which delivery they preferred. For example, with the troublesome first line, they opted to borrow from the radio read instead any of the numerous television script takes in which they repeatedly rehearsed the line. They judged that that particular radio read was “much more conversational” and established the persona immediately in a way that the first line recorded for TV doesn’t. Peter explains that that has to do not only with the Talent’s delivery, but also the copy (the radio script saying *I’m here to tell you ‘bout...* as opposed to the TV script’s *You hear about... ?*).⁴⁸

Music: fashioning character without words

Shaun must decide whether to have new music composed for the Brisket spot or draw from a production music library, but forestalls that painful inevitability. Given the way he chose to allocate his budget, apportioning significant resources toward the MoCo system and food stylists, Shaun set himself up with a slim music budget. At this point Shaun isn’t certain that his financial resources will allow for a single newly composed music track, which would make a much larger dent in his slim budget than a one-time

⁴⁸ Though they receive extremely high-quality recordings from their studios, Scott will sometimes equalize VO tracks so that they leap out to his ear. Specifically, Scott prefers an equalization preset he designed with a slight peak at 2.2 kHz. He says it “seems to make the voice kinda crisp...It helps [the voice] slice through, makes it jump out a little more [compared to other sounds on the track].” SR explains further that many spoken (English language) consonants manifest in the mid- to high-frequency range. By losing the bass and boosting the mid- to high-frequencies slightly, the diction seems more clear and has greater “presence.” As he explains during a later interview, Scott points out that their ads must compete with “psychological and physical noise in the environment” in which people observe commercials as well as the “noise” of incalculable competing advertisements. With the idea that the words of the VO project the most significant information about the product and brand featured, Scott believes it essential that the VO stand prominent in the mix. His equalization preference represents one of his efforts in making that happen. In the final mix, Peter levels the VO as foremost in the mix, music immediately below that, and sound design slightly below music but still prominent enough to add color and drama to the audiovisual complex.

library music purchase or even a subscription. Buying time until he decides his budget will or won't pay for a composer, Shaun begins narrowing down his musical decisions using library tracks: "If the music is perfect or we have no money, we'll go with the library. If not we'll try to get a cheap composer." He'd prefer to have original music composed for this ad—a composer could see the footage and custom-build music nuanced to heighten dramatic moments while shaping character within the ad. For instance, Shaun explains, if one shot had a "boom to the sandwich, something emphatic happens [in the image], a composer would choose to do something emphatic [in the accompanying music]." In Shaun's experience, a composer can listen to Shaun's expectations, read the images for key climactic events, and customize music that lends a character that can't be acquired with production music. As with the VO, freshly-composed music can contribute a unique flavor to the spot. While production music might point toward musical style, a composer can inflect musical stylings for specific emphasis, feel, and nuance. Just as Shaun looked to avoid a "salesy" or announcer-like feel in the VO, newly composed music can provide sonic inflections that contribute toward a unique, Real persona for the product and brand.

To streamline his initial music decisions, Shaun first reviews a favorite on-line production music library for music samples.⁴⁹ Shaun says that "library music is a good place to start as a reference point..." Because he hasn't yet clarified his concept for issues like musical style, tempo, or instrumentation, Shaun can borrow production music library demos in multiple styles to help narrow his options. After downloading select demo

⁴⁹ These selections can be heard at www.firstcom.com.

tracks, Shaun can insert the demos into the rough edit, interchanging music demos and VO recordings to decide which combination of music and VO comes closest to matching his roughly-imagined notion of how the spot should look, sound, and feel to be most effective. For Shaun, the right musical feel will help construct The Real in this ad by borrowing from media-circulated ideas about which musical styles might be read to represent the stoic Texas Rancher's identity Authentically, and appeal to Shaun's idealized target demographic (and how he believes they'll read the ad).

Production music libraries do serve small and large media production companies in several ways. First, libraries help the end-user (BIS, in this case) to navigate complex copyright and royalties legalities by offering what are known as licensing or synchronization rights—with this blanket authorization, BIS has permission to synchronize purchased music tracks to film, video or other audio. Second, a library provides ready access to innumerable musical styles, all of which categorized for seeming ease of searching. Because reviewing music tracks must be done in real time, Shaun uses the written descriptions accompanying tracks to weed through the thousands of demos available: “Some descriptions reveal that it’s just not right...” At the same time, Shaun feels confident that even hearing the opening notes can help him expedite decisions: “You can listen to one second and tell it’s totally wrong...One nice thing about library music unlike popular music is that it doesn’t change styles in the middle of [the track or song].” The stylistic consistency within each production music track is essential for library users, who often rely on maintaining a consistent mood or style throughout the media presentation. A consistent production music track can help save them painful,

time-consuming post-production sound editing problems in trying to fabricate a lengthier musical track in the style they desire by copying, pasting and processing snippets of the production music track. In situations where mood or inflections need to change, then ad producers look to originally composed work that fits the spot (or other creative solutions with library demos, especially if the producers have the tools and skills to manipulate music within industry quality norms).

Third, library music allows Shaun to experiment cheaply and quickly with musical styles he may not have considered on his own. He knows he “can narrow this down by tempo—I don’t want anything too upbeat for this.” That might distract from the laid-back, confident persona they’re devising for the Texas rancher depicted in the spot. At the same time, Shaun considers several musical styles that weren’t on his radar previously. He listens to one demo featuring a full orchestra that reminds me of the Copeland “Rodeo” theme borrowed for American Beef Council’s commercials. Shaun likes the ideas that the music conjures up, but feels ambivalent about recycling an over-used theme. After flipping through a few more tracks he discovers one called “Western Panorama.” Another orchestral piece, this track delivers a rhythmic motif remarkably similar to the famous syncopated *Magnificent Seven* (1960) theme along with a smooth, soaring string melody: “There’s something about that that’s good. If we could just get a little of it—it’s a little cliché, just a little over the top.” A John Sturges remake of Akira Kurosawa’s *The Seven Samurais* (1954), *The Magnificent Seven* features manly stars like Yul Brynner, Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson, Robert Vaughn, and James Coburn as gunmen hired to save a poor Mexican village from harassment by no-good banditos. I

recognize the rhythmic motive from the American film's theme as a common marker for cowboys, especially those invested in noble causes.

Shaun pulls up another search he conducted with “country” and “blues” as keywords.⁵⁰ He pulls up a demo called “Memphis” whose description promises a “down home country blues” style. He listens: “that bluesy sound is kind of nice.” After listening to a handful of demos in this style, Shaun returns to his top three VO picks “to get the characters back in [his] ear.”⁵¹ Shaun's considering the impression left when the images, music and VO are presented simultaneously—he wants to borrow from certain stereotypes or cultural myths, but doesn't want anything that could be read as hackneyed. He observes that “there's so much cliché in these voices [VOs] that we don't want much in the music...we can tone down the voice a lot and have it [the desired Western rancher flavor] in the music and you'll pretty easily get it.” In other words, Shaun feels confident that audience members will pretty easily read the Texan flavor he's trying to convey with the appropriately nuanced music and VO tracks. He listens to another demo featuring a similar *Magnificent Seven*-like rhythm, and expresses some caution toward the commonly used theme: “You can almost make a little wink-wink joke out of it, but that

⁵⁰ Savage notes that “country” and “blues” became markers of cowboys musically by mid-twentieth-century through film: “By the time the singing cowboy hero and his B-film vehicle expired in the 1950s, the cowboy image was firmly fixed in American popular music, and the musical genre that had once been labeled ‘hillbilly’ had become known as ‘country and western.’ Country music had formally acquired its western flavor in the 1930s and 1940s partly because of the crooning of cinematic cowboys, but the union received most of its impetus from the performances of white string bands in the rural Southwest. Groups like the Light Crust Doughboys, Gray's Oklahoma Cowboys, and Bob Wills's Texas Playboys wore cowboy costumes and played sophisticated renditions of an admixture of traditional cowboy tunes, Negro blues music, and popular songs...” Savage, 82.

⁵¹ At this stage Scott has narrowed his voiceover artist selection to his top three picks, but hasn't selected a finalist nor recorded the VO.

can easily backfire.” Shaun makes a short list of demos that seem to work in his mind, made up of a handful of orchestral pieces, a few that could be labeled as “country,” and several that have distinct “country” and “blues” inflections.

A few weeks later, after selecting a VO Talent and delivery, Shaun makes another pass through his short list of production music demos. By this time he’s pared his short list down further in terms of the musical stylings that help project the kind of persona he wants for the Texas Rancher—he’s decided that

blues works well for this...a faster tempo [than he’d considered before] works well to edit to...something laid-back...bold, gutsy...dramatic...We want men to be attracted to this character, [someone who’s] stoic, in control...

Experimenting, Shaun inserts “Memphis” in the rough cut—“it’s fairly gutsy,” he says, which seems to suggest that it’s his favored track at this point. Keeping his options open, Shaun watches the rough cut with several other music tracks: the label accompanying “As It Rains” says that that track offers “Descriptive electric and acoustic slide guitars, light percussion support.” “Route 66” claims “Layers of slide, rhythm and processed guitar create a rich but lonely vibe.” With “Oh Big Moon,” described as “Texas swing/blues, featuring steel guitar, Shaun comments: “This would give [the spot] a whole different character.” Pulling up the rear are “Western Panorama” with its *Magnificent Seven* idioms, and a piece called “Requiem,” labeled as “Calm, elegiac.” Shaun’s attracted to “Requiem” because its long, meandering string motifs, minimal percussion and minor tonality would “run contrary to the stereotype” of the Texas rancher—yet it’s apparent that “Requiem” doesn’t satisfy Shaun’s imagination for how the spot should sound. Eventually Shaun negotiates a deal with a popular local Composer whose well-

established reputation composing for the advertising and gaming industries also makes him extremely busy—but BIS “caught him at a good time...and he’ll do it within our budget.” To give the Composer a sense for tempo and style, Shaun hands over a copy of “Memphis.”

The Composer borrows a number of elements from “Memphis” in designing the first of three mixes (the third being the mix used in the master cut of the ad). Though he shifts the tonal center of this blues-inflected piece from A to D, he makes use of similar orchestration, including harmonica, slide guitar, solo acoustic (steel-stringed) guitar, rhythm guitar, bass guitar, drum kit. He even borrows from a solo guitar rhythmic motif that dances around the tonic chord.⁵² To customize the music, however, the Composer alters the instrumentation slightly. While “Memphis” presents a high-hat in the upper frequency range near the track’s opening, the Composer infuses tambourine throughout the entire track, which brightens the texture. Additionally, the track is mixed to emphasize a warm, deep bass guitar sound (absent from the beginning of “Memphis” and not heightened much throughout) while highlighting the shimmering tambourine. The changes in instrumentation and mix help give the newly composed track a feel that’s more solid and seems thicker in texture than “Memphis,” but also takes up more aural space with the emphasized low-frequency bass and sparkling tambourine.

Over the course of about a week, the Composer updated his mix twice to accommodate Shaun’s and Peter’s editing decisions. With the second mix, the Composer created a stronger presence for the solo (acoustic) guitar, adding more entrances in

⁵² Both tonic chords make use of a downward-inflected third scale degree.

keeping with the syncopated motif borrowed from “Memphis,” including the “dow-nee-now-nee-now-now” that Peter found helpful in his editing. The additional guitar ornaments breathe energy into the track, creating a playful interaction between the harmonica and guitar. Peter comments that this interplay helps “keep [the track] fresh” with energy and motion:

I find the music to be interesting because...you have your drums, you have rhythm guitar, you have a lead slide guitar, and you have a lead harmonica. And the lead slide guitar and the lead harmonica interchange as to who’s taking the lead. So you don’t know what’s coming next—it’s a little bit of a call-back, answer thing...So it keeps it fresh throughout. We’ll get a lot of things that are one lead guitar and it’s one rhythm and it’s a variation on that rhythm throughout the entire thing—but it’s just one lead. Where [...] the harmonica [he sings] dun dun da na wah wah—it’s a little dance they play.

Unlike production music, which Shaun explains must maintain consistency throughout the track to save users time, freshly composed music can be revised to add nuance and inflection that can correspond to the Authenticity of the Texas Rancher. Additionally, original music can contribute energy and what Peter calls “freshness.” With the third rendition, the Composer sonically heightens what Peter calls the climax of the piece in which the huge hero is super-imposed with the “Barbeque Done Blow’d Up!” graphics careening in from the viewer’s left. Further accentuating the event, the Composer adds a harmonica tremolo and the growly bass guitar gliss. As with Shaun’s direction of the VO recording, the musical revisions are designed to shape sonic inflections and nuances that build character for the product and Subway brand.

The makings of a Man: seeking approval

With nearly every new edit Shaun invites David, Brad and MSA's President to screen it. On one hand he'd like their feedback sooner than later if his vision strays significantly from theirs; on the other hand, these screenings give him an opportunity "to get everyone to buy into it." Though David, Brad and the President ultimately sign-off on the final edit, Shaun negotiates in each meeting for his own creative vision, and has to justify any editing to copy (David's work) or the artistic design (Brad's). In nearly every meeting Shaun defends against Brad's aversion for the cut-aways to prop shots—Shaun explains that he and the BIS team would like to include the cut-aways because "we had to give the [Rancher] guy a sort of romance." Dismissing Shaun's attempt to build lore around the Rancher and sandwich with props, Brad thinks the props distract from the sandwich footage:

Subway didn't have anything that was just thirty seconds of food footage. We wanted to feature the food. I didn't want any cowboys or anything to distract from that... We want people to be enticed by the big, warm, meaty sandwich... The sandwich is so appealing that they're [the audience members are] reaching toward the screen saying 'don't go, don't go.'

Likewise, Peter explains to David why they removed a line about the meat *explodin' out of that freshly baked bread*—time constraints required some cutting, and, Peter rationalizes, that line established a clear redundancy between *explodin'* with *blow'd up*. Brad asks about *Piled So High* copy and graphics he'd planned in the storyboards—Peter again indicates time constraints. Discussion proceeds over the translucency of the word "Smoked" in the "Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket" graphics (that is, while the outline of each letter is clearly demarcated, the viewer can see through each letter to the sandwich in the background—this was an extremely time-consuming post-production

project for Brian). Shaun and Peter like the translucency within each letter, but David thinks the word “doesn’t pop,” especially with the bright, neon Subway logo that will eventually follow it. They toss about some solutions: Shaun suggests they fill in “Smoked,” Brad suggests smoke or steam comes off the logo. In the final edit the word “Smoked” appears filled in with white. David mentions that they need the “Texas-Style Smoked Beef Brisket” logo to return at the close of the commercial. Peter reminds the team that DAI usually puts the Subway logo over a blank screen at the end of commercials. Brad interjects: “We’re already assuming how somebody else wants it—let’s do it how we want it.” With Brad’s and David’s consent, the final cut features the logo flipping around itself near the bottom left corner in front of the final boom shot on the hero. Once David and Brad agree that the spot’s “in the ball park pacing-wise,” they close the meeting and return to editing with new information.

One day the President approaches Jenna’s desk. “Hey, Jenna, can someone run that Brisket spot for us? I got the [meat vendor] rep here and I wanna show it to him.” Brad and David shuffle quickly into Edit Room 1. Shaun hears the conversation and excuses himself from a meeting he’s holding in his office. He’d lamented just an hour earlier about how no one at MSA communicates with him about when the rep is in the office—Shaun’s never actually met him. Shaun joins Brad and David and waits. After several minutes, the President brings Dwayne, the representative of the meat vendor that financed the spot, into Edit 1 to review the rough cut of “Brisket Blow’d Up.” We view the clip in silence—Dwayne has a big smile on his face. “That’s good. That’s a real good spot,” he says as soon as the screen goes to black. “That slab looks great,” he

comments, referring to the beef prep shot. Accolades suddenly circulate the room. The President remarks: “I think that [meat slab shot] was Shaun’s idea.” Shaun raves briefly about the Food Stylist’s skills. The conversation ensues around a recent Adopt-a-Concept meeting. The Adopt-a-Concept is Subway’s gesture toward its regional agencies to submit their commercials for national broadcast. The President comments that their competitor agencies skewed their submissions toward “entertainment value” and showed little food footage. The President looks at David. “David, tell ‘im what you said when we walked away from that.” David smiles quizzically: “You tell him. How did I phrase that?” The President turns back fully to Dwayne: “He said that if a franchisee saw that, they’d be pissed off.” Dwayne concurs. “Well, ya gotta show ‘em what you’re sellin’ ‘em,” Dwayne drawls, emphatically gesturing toward the LCD monitor mounted above the work station:

They wanna see what they’re buying. Here we’re showin’ ‘em the food, we’re showin’ ‘em the meat. We’re showin’ this to young people—they’re young, so they still wanna be entertained, but they’re old enough that they wanna see what they’re gettin’. We’re showin’ this to males. Males wanna see what they’re buyin’. They wanna see what they’re gettin’ for their money. They wanna see they’re gettin’ *meat*. We’re showin’ ‘em the meat.

Dwayne’s on a roll. “This is better than what they wanna show up in the Northeast—have you seen that?” He’s talking about the spot called “Sophisticated Cowboy,” produced by DAI’s national ad agency—it features actors outdoors dressed as cowboys speaking with heightened language and poorly-Britishized accents, saying things like, “I say, this is one marvelous sandwich...” The President responds. “Didn’t I tell you this? [Franchisees] don’t like it—they’re talking about paying us to use our spot.” Dwayne’s

enthused: “Well, that’s a good idea—that’s a real good spot there.” The master version of the Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket spot features none of the Western-style prop images composed by Shaun and Peter; rather, it presents shot after shot of athletic camera swings around humongous foot-longs, all to the delight of Brad, David, The President, Subway franchisees, and the meat vendor. Through Edit 1’s flat panel LCD and high-end speaker system, they read increased sales and profitability on-screen.

As Dwayne’s comments illustrate, the impact of a screen-ful of meat is deemed crucial for getting the attention of this demographic. Dwayne presumes that male consumer practices comprise a constructed rationality based on a visual logic, that men want to see a product’s features in order to deduce its value to them. The producers presume that by filling the frame with meat—and, as Brad stated in the Creatives’ meeting and on-set, by minimizing the appearance of the bread or vegetables dictated by the sandwich specifications—young men will find the sandwich enticing. However, as demonstrated by their creative amalgam of Texas Ranchers, warm hues, dramatic lighting, cameras swinging, blues wailing, graphics crashing, and massive mounds of meat, the producers hope young men buy these imaginings of masculine identity and consumer power.

Finally, Dwayne’s comments reveal beliefs in a kind of visual logic that maintains cultural primacy. Declaring that “[t]hey wanna see what they’re gettin’ for their money,” the vendor discounts the multifarious ways people are moved by, stimulated by, and

drawn toward audiovisual media, commodities and brands.⁵³ By specifying that “[m]ales wanna see what they’re buyin’,” Dwayne further promotes stereotypes of men and women. Taking for granted a valuation of a kind of objective, rational logic, Dwayne lauds the ad producers for their efforts in presenting the meat objectively, rationally. Likewise, presuming that this trait is inherently masculine, he reinscribes ideas of masculine authority. Finally, Dwayne’s remarks expose ways in which capitalist logic situates people as consumers. Owing to revenue and profitability goals, capitalist logic reduces people to targeted statistics who respond to commodities for wish fulfillment, identity construction and personal expression within cultural constructs (re)circulated and (re)inforced within an intricate econo-politico-cultural system. Thusly commodified and abstracted, the idea of the “consumer” is positioned between constructions of The Real and people’s everyday lives.

⁵³ As Vivian Sobchack observes, “vision is not isolated from our other senses. Whatever its specific structure, capacities and sensual discriminations, vision is only one modality of my lived body’s access to the world and only one means of making the world of objects and other sensible—that is, meaningful—to me. Vision may be the sense most privileged in the culture and the cinema, with hearing a close second; nonetheless, I do not leave my capacity to touch or to smell or to taste at the door, nor, once in the theater, do I devote these senses only to my popcorn.” Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 64-5.

Chapter 3: Musical Genre, Poetics, and Listener Experience in the Production of Meaning

Simon Frith has long examined musical genre categories for the ways genre is used “to organize music making, music listening, and music selling...”¹ Though he acknowledges the dialogic basis for generic boundaries, which he describes as “loose *agreement*” among production industries, musicians and listeners, Frith observes that corporate interests make genre categories particularly powerful in the production of culture.² To advance objectives for marketing efficiencies and profit (by delivering audiences to advertisers), says Frith, the record and radio industries create idealized, fantasy identities for music listeners, and rely on genre categories to circumscribe what different musics mean to listeners.³ I contribute to Frith’s argument that idealized meanings and identities communicated through genre can contribute to the construction of The Real in ads. As I learned through my research, ideas of generic boundaries help producers filter and select musical sounds to communicate the idealized identity constructions for brands and target audiences; additionally, genre discourse helps producers decide how best to communicate meanings and values through brand messages.

¹ Simon Frith, “Genre Rules,” in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 88.

² Frith, “Genre Rules,” 88. Emphasis in original.

³ “...what is going on here is an idealization, the creation of a *fantasy* consumer...As fantasies, then, genres describe not just who listeners are, but also what this music means to them. In deciding to label a music or a musician in a particular way, record companies are saying something about both what people like and why they like it; the musical label acts as a condensed sociological and ideological argument.” Frith, “Genre Rules,” 85-6. Frith sees these categories built demographically, “in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, disposable income, leisure habits, and so forth.” Frith, “Genre Rules,” 85. Emphasis in original.

In the process of building music for ads, the Echo Boys contribute to a Real world of imagined target audiences constructed for the sake of focusing marketing efforts. Taking for granted (as many of us in capitalist culture do) the relationships between (constructed) identities, values, and musical sounds—and owing to their business sense for pleasing their clients—the Echo Boys sonically re-instantiate ideas of identity and values through their music tracks. Focusing on the working relationships between Echo Boys Tate, Allen, Rob, and free-lance musician Eddie, I document the process of music track revisions based on how these musicians conceive of music that reflects brand identities; that they believe will resonate with audience members while carrying (or without obstructing) ad messages; and that caters to the musical tastes of their constituents. For the Echo Boys, ideas of musical genre—and even individual performers or groups—facilitate their sophisticated molding of music tracks. The careful construction of an ad’s music track can help momentarily fix otherwise fluid musical meanings that advertisers think may attract (idealized) target audience members. At the same time, ad producers build character for an otherwise inanimate brand that might draw audience members to relate with the brand. In a culture in which industries, critics and audience members circulate impressions of musical categories and musical meanings, the discourse of genre becomes a useful tool for the Echo Boys in shaping musical sounds.

For the Echo Boys, musical genre discourse is important to ad production in two ways. First, it can help give life-like energy or establish a persona for the otherwise inanimate brand. According to William Foley, linguistic forms like genre index the personhood of a speech act and mark the social role of the performer, in this case, the

imagined persona of the brand.⁴ As the (otherwise inanimate) brand performs through the ad, the (musical, sonic and visual) text of the ad can mark the brand with social standing and power, and position the brand in relationship with the audience member.⁵ In this way, ad producers fashion a capacity for sociability with the otherwise inanimate brand. According to Foley, the listener relies on her experience of music and meaning to frame and interpret the meanings associated with the ad through the music.⁶ By connecting her knowledge of culturally-circulating associations of genre and identity, the audience member may co-contribute to fashioning identity for the brand.

Second, the language of genre can be a useful tool in the process of fine-tuning an ad's music track—I witness the process of this fine-tuning through the communication strategies and discursive tools (i.e., poetics) the Echo Boys use to plan, evaluate and execute their work. As Thomas Porcello's work has shown, the dialog of studio practitioners—their poetics—reveals their strategies for shaping musical sound.⁷ Here, the Echo Boys's conversations reflect their ideas about how to build music they believe will do the work necessary to advance the Agency's and client's strategic goals. As the

⁴ According to linguist William Foley, “the actual text performed will creatively index aspects of the wider ongoing discourse, social relations between performer(s) and audience, or between performers, within the audience itself, and within wider social or cultural issues.” William Foley, *Anthropological Linguistics: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 359.

⁵ Foley, 371.

⁶ Citing the work of Bakhtin, Foley explains that the idea of genre is “not so inherent in the text forms themselves, but in the frameworks and interpretive procedures that verbal performers and their audiences use to produce and understand these texts.” Foley, 360.

⁷ “The object of auditory knowledge emerges through interplay between a domain of targeted listening and a set of discursive practices played out in the context of specific sound-engineering activities.” Thomas Porcello, “Speaking of Sound: Language and the Professionalization of Sound-Recording,” *Social Studies of Science* 34, no. 5, 734. See also Thomas Porcello, “Sonic Artistry: Music, Discourse, and Technology in the Sound Recording Studio,” Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, Austin, 1996, 145-79.

Echo Boys build music tracks for the Cox spots, they play with genre categories using several discursive tools, including metaphor, onomatopoeia, and vocables, that is, vocalizations or singing that mimics the kinds of sounds desired. Prominent among their communication strategies are what Steven Feld has dubbed interpretive moves (Feld [1984] 2005). According to Feld, interpretive moves draw upon listeners' experiences of musics they've heard, and can divulge ways that music is meaningful to people, ways that music makes sense to them. Interpretive moves reflect ways that speakers dialog about sound within sociocultural contexts that shape our listening and thinking.

Of the five interpretive moves Feld describes, two in particular, associative and evaluative moves, are key tools for the Echo Boys in shaping the sound from a consumer mindset.⁸ Associating sound with popular musicians or generic categories creates a common frame of reference that situates the desired ad sound within a broader musical, social and historical discourse.⁹ Evaluative moves signal aesthetic preferences for particular sounds, designating acceptability of those sounds within the specific context of the ad. With the Cox spots, the Echo Boys's associative moves serve to frame the range of ideas listeners might associate with the Cox music tracks by emulating specific popular performers through the track. Their evaluative moves communicate decisions to

⁸ Feld identifies five interpretive moves that reveal attentional shifts and dialectics that emerge in speech about music: "Locational, categorical, associative, reflective, and evaluative discourse attempts to identify the boundaries that sound objects and events present in their structure and social organization. Interpretive moves in talk, then, are attempts to recreate, specify, momentarily fix, or give order to emergent recognitions of the events that take place so rapidly and intuitively when we experience musical sounds." Steven Feld, "Communication, Music, and Speech about Music," in *Music Grooves*, ed. Charles Keil and Steven Feld (Tucson: Fenstra, 2005 [1994]), 93. Reprinted from *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 16. (1984), 1-18.

⁹ Porcello summarizes this nicely in "Speaking of Sound," 747 and fn.

excise or reconstitute sounds to meet the Agency's and client's expectations. Interpretive moves help situate the music tracks historically, socially and culturally while directing the audience member's attention based on the client's marketing objectives.

Using interpretive moves, the Echo Boys play with alternate fluidity and fixity of meaning through musical categories. By associating certain genres or musical styles with the ad, the Echo Boys hope to tap into listeners' wide ranges of experiences of music within a social context. In this way, they can direct listener experience with the brand with fluidity—that is, while the Echo Boys's music may suggest meanings, audience members can contribute their own range of meanings to the ad. By isolating and eliminating other musical sounds, the Echo Boys fix certain kinds of meaning as outside the realm of acceptable messages for the ad—these sounds are reconstituted or even eliminated. As mutable classifications, genre categories can call into the audience member's mind culturally-circulating associations between musics and meanings. Drawing from their own cultural savvy, the Echo Boys situate the engagement process for viewers and listeners of advertising within a web of discourse delimited by the producers' branding strategies.¹⁰

Woven throughout the complexities of building music tracks that represent brand identity, resonate with target audiences, and communicate meaning, the Echo Boys must complete their creative work within the frame of their client- and Agency-representatives'

¹⁰ See also Porcello, "Speaking of Sound," 746: "Sonic wave forms become meaningful inasmuch as they are juxtaposed with linguistic metaphors, verbal performances and imitations of drum sounds, the imagined sounds of other drums, of other drummers, of other recordings of drums, and with technologies of synthesized and computerized drums."

expectations for what musics mean. Often the client or Agency personnel have biases or beliefs that limit the Echo Boys's creative experiments, and result in numerous revisions to shape music that advances marketing objectives without antagonizing their patrons' sensibilities. Porcello points out that moments of conflict, when workflow in the studio ceases to run smoothly, are moments most deserving of attention and analysis.¹¹ For the Echo Boys, the moments in which the music conflicts with the Agency's or client's preferences are critical moments in learning how producers shape sound to represent brand and foster relationship-building between audience members and brands. The Echo Boys often flex their creative muscles most when the client objects to some part of the track, when there's a so-called problem to fix in a demo they've offered a client. Through the language of their negotiations, the producers reveal that their approach to sound production is that of both producer and consumer. While they often use vocables, metaphors and proscriptive language characteristic of studio practitioners, they also frequently use associative references to other performers and groups as they shape sound with a consumer's perspective in mind. With these communication tools, they carefully craft sonic artwork for ads that communicate meanings, offering both fixed and fluid boundaries through which audience members relate with brands and understand ad messages.

Initial client feedback: VoiceManager, Sports Bar, Not- I.T. Guy

¹¹ Porcello, "Speaking of Sound," 740.

The Echo Boys received a job from one of its Agency partners: music and sound design for a six-spot campaign representing Cox Business Services, a large telecommunications firm whose network stretches throughout several regions from coast to coast in the United States.¹² With this campaign, the Echo Boys face issues common in the advertising industry. They acknowledge that their ad music must accomplish several deeds. First, the music helps establish a mood, an energy, and a tempo or pacing for the ads. Second, the musical style must complement (or at least not clash with) the personality of the Cox Business Services brand, particularly within the context created by the storyline or specific characters, that is, the “testimonial spokespeople” written into the spots. Finally, the music must convey something that the producers believe will reflect the identity of their target audience, inviting the audience member to identify with the ad. At the same time, the music must resonate with audience member, encouraging the audience member not only to identify with the ad, but to become involved with the ad’s sales message. Although the Echo Boys were given no demographic or descriptive information on the target, the target audience seems to represent decision-makers who purchase telecommunications services and equipment for small, medium or large businesses. From that, I surmise the target audience comprises college-educated, so-called white-collar workers. Multivalent missions like the Cox campaign frequently create quandaries for the Echo Boys. How does one soundtrack accomplish all these

¹² Cox Communications is the third-largest cable services provider in the US. Its Business Services unit covers cable and telecommunications markets in states peppered throughout the continental US, ranging from California to Idaho, Oklahoma to Virginia, and Connecticut to Florida (“About Cox,” <http://www.cox.com/about/>, accessed 6/20/07).

aims, particularly as they constantly negotiate ideas about sound with those of the Agency and the client?

While Tate is on vacation, Allen corresponds with the Agency Producer on the client's response to demos submitted for the six Cox spots. Three spots, all VoiceManager ads, will use the same music—though they submitted multiple demos for each spot, the Echo Boys will ultimately build four music tracks for the six ads (three with unique music, three that share one music track). To facilitate clear communication, the Echo Boys and Agency loosely dub these three demos VoiceManager, Sports Bar, and Not-I.T. Guy, respectively. The Producer communicates client concerns to Allen over the phone, then recapped their conversation via e-mail:

Hi, Allen:

Thanks for chatting about the Cox spots. To reiterate...

- The client requested a more “sophisticated” track for the Voice Manager spots. Pat [the Agency Editor for these spots] has put a different track on those spots and Greg [the Agency Copywriter for these spots] apparently liked it. I'm going to run it by the Account Services team to see if they think it's satisfactory to show the client based on their input. I'll let you know if we need anything more on that.
- For “Sports Bar” (DR TV), the client has requested more of a “rock” tune. They think the current track has too much of a country twang to it. Do you have anything in your arsenal that might be more to their liking and doesn't interfere with the dialogue??
- For “Insurance/Non-I.T. Guy” (DR TV) the client felt that the original track was too slow and made our hero guy seem kind of dorky. Shep [the video editor and producer] has put a different track on the revised cut, but I listened to it today and I think it might be worse. It's more up tempo, but there's a silly quality to it that doesn't feel right. Any thoughts??¹³

¹³ Agency communication with the Echo Boys, 7/2/07. According to Kathy's 8/6/07 e-mail to me, DR = Direct Response, another Cox Communications product offering like VoiceManager.

In response to this feedback, and with Tate on vacation, Allen sets himself up for listening again to the original demos they sent, then going through the Echo Boys music library for new tracks. He plays for me the original demo they'd presented to the client, a piece featuring piano, drums and bass at about 88 bpm:

So now I'm just trying to listen to these Cox spots to see [how to approach the Agency's concerns]...This is the old music [for Not-I.T. Guy]. He thought that was a little slow—kinda makes him seem less intelligent, a little too goofy maybe. And here's the new one that the client hasn't heard yet [acoustic bass, drums and guitar in a two-beat feel at around 80 bpm]...Definitely makes him seem even a little more goofy [Allen chuckles]. So they want me to find something that's a little more, I guess, serious or sophisticated. So we're gonna do a music search, hopefully find something that does that stuff. Then for this other one, Sports Bar, they want something that sounds a little less country or rockabilly than this.

Allen plays "Sports Bar" for me, and I ask Allen if he can explain the Agency's or client's concern for what Tate has called the track's rockabilly music style:

Well, it just sounds too regional. So they want it to sound more generic, just more like a rock thing without a country twang.

Allen flips through demos like pages in a clip art book. He acknowledges knowing a lot of the tracks already, and even remembers for which projects the tracks were originally built. He probes the Echo Boys library, listening to only one or two seconds of some demos, then clicking on expediently to the next. The Echo Boys work quickly, often delivering original demos and revisions within a day or less. The client's directives are intended to give the Echo Boys guidance on how to re-design the music in ways that the client and Agency believe will entice listeners to engage with the ad and, by extension, with Cox Business Services products and brand. In this case, the Echo Boys are charged with removing the "country twang" from the music in a spot called Sports Bar, making

Not I.T. Guy seem less “dorky” (by recomposing for the “silly quality that doesn’t feel right” to the Agency), and infuse “sophisticated” into three VoiceManager spots (which all use the same music). The Agency’s directives launch the Echo Boys’ efforts to create music that “feels right” for the producers as they situate the sound within a web of discourse with meanings and associations that the client and Agency consider appropriate for the Cox Business Services brand and appealing to their target audiences.

Sports Bar, Demo 1, Take 1: “We’re gonna de-countrify what you did...”

For the client, the ideas circulating around a “country vibe” produce an array of connotations that the client doesn’t want associated with the brand. In the process of revising the sound to meet the client’s expectations, the Echo Boys illustrate through their conversation ways that they fix ideas of “country music” as outside the realm of acceptable sound while including fluid ideas of “rock” within the bounds of appropriate sound. The fixity and fluidity of generic categories enable the Echo Boys to attempt to influence ideas associated with the music in the track. By minimizing “country” elements and emphasizing “rock” sounds, the Echo Boys effect possibilities for listener interpretation within a particular network of discourse based on the client’s preferences while playing down ideas associated with country music that the client finds objectionable.

The spot they call Sports Bar features a testimonial from a fictitious sports bar manager who is also a satisfied Cox Business Services customer. An initial Agency memo describes the setting as follows:

SCENE IS AN UPSCALE SPORTS BAR WITH VIDEO MONITORS PROMINENT ALONG THE WALL, PLUS A COUPLE OF COMPUTER MONITORS AND THE USUAL PHONES IN THE BACKGROUND.

To this memo, Tate added notes from his conversations with Agency personnel saying that the main character in the spot is an “Ex-Jock,” and that there would be “People in [the] Bar.” The actor in the ad recites the copy (which is heard as he speaks on-camera and as voiceover):

*In our business you gotta make your customers feel welcome
Show ‘em thatcha care
That’s why we like Cox Business
They’re our communications partner
They take care of our digital video, our business phone, our high-speed internet
But with their friendly service and fast response, you’d think that they were in the
hospitality business
We scored on the pricing, too, and that really helped
We’re going with the local team—Cox is it¹⁴*

The Echo Boys provided several initial demos to the Agency, and Agency personnel selected one to align with the edited images and share with the client. As is often the case, the Echo Boys follow-up on client feedback on the demos by revising demos, sometimes extensively. Tate, who functions as the music track producer, works with a sound engineer (Rob) and a musician (Eddie) in a first-round revision of Sports Bar:

Tate: So, Eddie, we gotta tweak this—we got four of ‘em we gotta tweak here.

Eddie: OK.

Tate: I have this idea to rock this one up. What we’re gonna do is [work on] the one you did—for some reason they’re getting this country vibe from it. So we’re gonna de-countrify what you did...

¹⁴ Transcribed from the final completed spot.

Rob plays a portion of a music track Eddie composed. The drums play through the break that they carefully aligned a moment earlier.¹⁵ The kick drum hangs over in the temporal region that will be a musical break. Tate directs Rob to remove this extraneous part of the drum track: “Then we’ll just get rid of the boomp-ba-doop-ba-doop-ba-doop-ba drum there...”

Rob continues playing through the sequence through to the end. Tate realizes that the bass line he laid out the day before ended a measure early, that the music wouldn’t last until the end of the commercial.

Tate: Yeah, I probably shoulda went one more [bar] then, huh?

Rob: Well, there wasn’t enough...

Tate: Drums either?

Rob: ...drums either, so...

Tate: So I’ll let you re-play this bass, too, Eddie, ‘cause it’s kinda sloppy what I’m doin’...

Eddie: Alright.

Eddie picks up a guitar, plinks around. Tate begins a conversation about a guitar melody line to help change the character of the music to fit what he thinks might please the Agency. Rob is still working, playing parts of the track as he re-shapes it through re-alignment in the Pro Tools session.

Tate: Yeah, I don’t know what to tell ya tone-wise—I think sort of a Stones-type tone or something...

Rob plays the bass and drum lines.

¹⁵ The “break” in this case refers to a shift within these ads, which follow a fairly conventional formal construct. These ads begin by telling narratives using fictional testimonials. Then there’s a “break” as the images, music and sound design shift from the conventions of (film and television) narrative to a sales pitch. This break often is accompanied by a break in the music, often marked by some combination of musical elements like a V chord, sudden decrease in dynamics, or other dramatic musical gesture.

Tate: I was thinking some kind of guitar thing over that going berr bemp, bah beh deh deh berr deh damp...

Tate sings loose melodic and rhythmic references to a syncopated ascending minor arpeggio. Eddie listens and responds: “OK.” He plugs his guitar into the amp and plays pitches and rhythms based on Tate singing. Tate responds: “You know, it doesn’t have to be that, but a little more behrm behm beh...” “Sure.” Tate thinks through Eddie’s experimenting and directs him further.

Tate: Now, I don’t know if there’s kind of a chordal way to do that, too...

Eddie: Do you want major or minor?

“I think minor.”

“OK.”

Eddie continues his noodlings in the parallel minor.

Tate: I guess I’ll have to hear it, I don’t know. Major might sound too Doobie Brothers, but maybe that’s a good thing. I don’t know...Well, see what you think, if you wanna get the Pod goin’...¹⁶

“ Sure.”

To expunge the country feel or vibe—that is, to “de-countrify” the sound—Tate first re-frames Eddie’s guitar “tone” or timbre through an associative move. Coaching Eddie’s performance, Tate first frames the guitar timbre by referencing the Rolling Stones. By borrowing from the Stones Tate reconstitutes the web of discourse associated with the track, shifting the center of the discourse from something that might be considered “country” toward ideas already socially and historically linked with

¹⁶ Marketed by a company called Line 6, The Pod is a multi-effects processor for the electric guitar, facilitating quick and easy timbral manipulations.

performers like the Rolling Stones. In doing so, Tate shapes the range of ideas listeners might associate with the sound as they engage with the ad. When Tate talks about wanting to “rock this one up,” “de-countrify” the track, when he’s looking for a “[Rolling] Stones-type tone” for the guitar that can’t sound too “Doobie Brothers,” Tate establishes boundaries to guide the creative sound work as well as the web of meanings the sounds might prompt for listeners.¹⁷ The Stones are inside the bounds. The Doobies are out. These associations position the advertisement musically, socially and historically within the meaningful context of rock and roll bands and musical generic boundaries.¹⁸ Through associational moves, the Echo Boys capitalize on musical knowledge they share with other music consumers.

At the same time, the Echo Boys engage in an evaluative move in determining that the “country vibe” was something to strike, thereby communicating the client’s aesthetic preferences within the American sociocultural dialog on music and taste. According to Feld, interpretive moves may frame “highly patterned aesthetic orderings” for the sake of suggesting preferred modes of interpretation, communicating sameness or difference, or naturalizing subjective perceptions of the world.¹⁹ Eliminating allusions to country music suggests the producers’ preferred modes of interpretation by re-centering the web of discourse away from something “country” toward something “rock.” At the

¹⁷ By the mid-1970s, the Doobie Brothers had already incorporated the jazz and R&B stylings of Steely Dan alums Jeff Baxter and Michael McDonald along with their soul and country inflections and multi-part vocal harmonies. Tom guides the frame within which he believes listeners will derive meaning from the sounds.

¹⁸ Porcello, “Speaking of Sound,” fn.

¹⁹ Feld, “Communication, Music, and Speech about Music,” 90-1.

same time, the effort may communicate a sense of sameness between the client (or, rather, the brand) and the target audience. The client may imagine that the target audience might appreciate something more “rock-like” than “country-like.” By including likeable music in the Sports Bar, the advertisement might communicate ideas of synergy, assuming that audience listeners might be more attracted to a fictitious brand persona that seemingly has similar taste in music. In this way, advertising dialogically asserts aesthetic claims about music within American culture, and naturalizes ideas like biases against country or acceptance of rock within specific contexts.

While associative moves (like references to the Stones or Doobie Brothers) help frame the sound, vocables, singing and onomatopoeia isolate specific elements and communicate the Echo Boys’ ideas about pitch, rhythm, and timbre as meaningful sonic indexes. To amend the electric guitar wash, Tate first suggests that he “was thinking some kind of guitar thing over that going berr bemp, bah beh deh deh berr deh damp...” (see Example 3.1a). With these vocalizations Tate communicates a nasal and mildly guttural sound using his nose and throat. Additionally, several of his articulations, the “bah,” “beh” and “deh” vocables, for instance, communicate an abrupt decay with each melodic note. These vocalizations convey an edginess to the sound using the syllables “berr bemp,” perhaps to counter any possibility of warmth-with-twang often associated with guitars in country music.

Moments later Tate instructs that “it doesn’t have to be that [berr bemp, bah beh deh deh berr deh damp...], but a little more behrm berhm beh...” (see Example 3.1b). With this clarifying comment, Tate communicates similar pitch and rhythmic

information, but softens the line timbrally with slight changes in the vowel and consonants as he reiterates the third bar of his melody:

Example 3.1 a, b

Part a: berr bemp, bah beh deh deh, berr deh damp, bah beh deh deh

Part b: behrm behrm beh

Example 3.1 a, b

Still maintaining something of the edginess that he wants associated with the track with nasal and guttural qualities, Tate’s second iteration constitutes an evaluative move that carefully moderates his first demonstration. As he fine-tunes his aural concept, Tate reinterprets “berr deh damp” in his third measure (Example 3.1a) with a more open vowel sound using “behrm berhm beh” (Example 3.1b). In addition, softer attacks and releases connect one note with the note prior in a more legato style. With the second set of vocables, Tate uses the “behrm” syllables to communicate decays that blend the tails of the first two notes in particular with the attacks of the ensuing notes. The concluding /m/ in “behrm” flows more smoothly into the /b/ of the next vocable than the concluding /rr/ sound in the related vocables of first iteration. At the same time, Tate sings the second “behrm” longer than its corresponding “deh,” indicating a more connected style. Similarly, Tate reconstitutes “damp” as “beh” to complete the basic melody. Compared to “damp,” “beh” features both a softer attack and release. The abrupt “damp” in Tate’s first vocalization features a sharp attack and abrupt release with no sustain—with “beh,”

Tate still stops the sound abruptly, but with nasality and glottal stop rather than the closed-mouth “damp,” resulting in a comparatively softer release. Through these vocables Tate may be circumscribing the sound within the discourse of what one might call “classic rock” and avoiding other generic categories the client might consider too harsh or transgressive. Along with the Rolling Stones associative move, timbral references, syncopated rhythm and ascending minor chord arpeggio, Tate recontextualizes the sound within generic categories and introduces sonic referents that shift the center of discourse associated with the sound toward a classic rock sensibility.²⁰

David Samuels’s work explains how sound patterns in guitar communicate ideas of identity. In his field experience on the San Carlos Apache reservation, Samuels witnessed tensions surrounding the vocal “twang” often associated with country music, and his informants’ efforts to avoid introducing twang into their performance of country music songs—the performers didn’t want to “sound like a redneck.”²¹ According to Samuels, vocal speech patterns “act as indexes of regional, class, ethnic, gender, or generational group membership or identity.”²² He adds that timbral flexibility of vocal utterance results in “sonic differences [that] carry social differences...and also culturally meaningful senses of contextual propriety and proper style.”²³ Electric and electronic

²⁰ At the same time, Tom is careful to soften the sound strategically in keeping with his cognitive and intuitive knowledge of the client. Later discussions of “sophistication” and “mellowing out the heavy metal” reflect Tom’s experience with this and other corporate clients.

²¹ Steven Feld, Aaron Fox, Thomas Porcello, and David Samuels, “Vocal Anthropology: From the Music of Language to the Language of Song,” in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Alessandro Duranti (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 339.

²² Feld et al., 333.

²³ Feld et al., 334.

instruments can exhibit the same kind of timbral flexibility and sociocultural evocativeness. For that reason, the Echo Boys are tasked with eliminating, minimizing, or replacing sonic elements that evoke associations with country music. As Aaron Fox observes, the construction of a “redneck” is woven among the commodified stereotypes associated with country music along with the markings of a “lack of sophistication” and implications of “danger and violence, ignorance and arrogance.”²⁴ The client’s objection to a “country twang” in the music may reveal ideas of cultural identity they want excised from the music track and thereby disassociated from the brand. The reshaping of the guitar line, and the evaluative vocables that soften the line, illustrate Tate’s efforts to shape the articulation of the guitar’s utterance in a way that speaks in a culturally meaningful sense of contextual propriety and proper style—all of this is framed within the client’s preferences and the Agency’s campaign strategy. Through the evaluative move, the ad producers naturalize ideas about what kinds of sounds are appropriate in the context of the ad. “Country” is out. Select ideas about “rock”—in this case, classic rock and a “behr nehr neh” guitar—are acceptable.

The Echo Boys’ mingling of these discursive tools demonstrates a different discursive practice than other scholars have witnessed in the production of meaning through the music studio. In Thomas Porcello’s observation, associative moves are less common in the production studio among experienced professionals. Porcello writes that

seasoned engineers and producers in professional settings rarely talk about music in associative terms. To do so is to speak like a consumer of music (one whose

²⁴ Aaron Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 97. See also 24-27.

knowledge of music is of the commodity), not like a producer or engineer (whose knowledge is also of the labor and technology behind the commodity).²⁵

The Echo Boys—and especially Tate—probably use these communication strategies for a number of reasons. First, they interact with Agency and client personnel who often have none of the formal or even informal musical and technical training shared among the Echo Boys. At the same time, the Echo Boys need to satisfy the expectations of the Agency and client who approach soundtracks not only as music consumers themselves, but also with their intended audiences in mind. Their language reveals the complex approach the Echo Boys must adopt in developing advertising music. The Echo Boys rely on maintaining excellent professional relationships with the Agency and client, and they need to communicate effectively with untrained musicians from the Agency and client who have their own subjective assessments of music and musical meaning. At the same time, the Echo Boys function as part of a production team with the Agency and client that recurrently attempts to imagine the mindset (or, perhaps, the listening-set) of the ad’s target audience. This mixed approach melds language of both music consumers and music producers, and illuminates their competence in working with their clients, Agencies and audiences in mind. A blended strategy helps the Echo Boys conceptualize their products as musical consumers while shaping specific melodic, rhythmic or timbral elements as producers.

Sports Bar, Demo 1, Take 2: image and music

²⁵ Porcello, “Speaking of Sound,” 749.

As the Echo Boys refine the revision to this demo, they draw inspiration from the images edited by the Agency, and creatively play with other associative moves and vocables. Tate has left Rob's room to take a call. Eddie re-tunes, then experiments a bit with a lick he heard Tate sing earlier. Eddie, to Rob: "What is this for?" Eddie still isn't clear on which ad they've been working on. "The Sports Bar one? It's a bar. You can see it." Rob plays the session as he's set it up for recording: one bar of click track, then the image and soundtrack kick in.²⁶ Drum riff, enter bass. Two bars into the track, Eddie signals an understanding about how the musical style and images function to represent the character in the ad: "Aaah, OK."

Here the Echo Boys highlight image as a significant factor that informs how they shape the soundtrack. In earlier interviews, Tate affirmed that the look of the spokesperson character can dramatically alter his approach to the soundtrack. Speaking of his approach to another spot in this series, Tate confirms that the look and attitude of the characters in the ad influences his creative sound work. He reviews the spokespeople for a wide range of identifiers, including gender, age, ethnicity, social status, and personality. Throughout much of his communications with clients and co-workers, Tate often relies on popular culture references to convey ideas about identity—these, too, help him configure identity through sound. With regard for one Cox spot featuring a female brokerage firm manager, Tate explains to me that

²⁶ A click track is essentially a metronome used often with moving images that helps musicians build music. Typically the "clicks" sound in regular rhythm to help the musicians perform without (unintended) rubato.

...[the soundtrack will] depend on what she [the figure in the image] looks like... You know, [the office setting in that spot is] supposed to be busy—she's like 'OK, I'm down to business, I'm busy,' but if I get the picture and she looks like Cyndi Lauper or something, then it'll be a whole different deal.

Eddie's visual orientation to the Sports Bar setting and bar manager/spokesperson triggers his intuition for the kinds of musical styles and elements that might make sense for that setting and character within Eddie's purview. With the pictures in mind, Eddie can consider sonic decisions that he feels will best represent the spokesperson and, by extension, the Cox Business Services brand.

Rob plays the sequence again, this time stripped down to percussion and bass. Eddie improves along with the bare soundtrack. He recalls earlier discussions centered on the revisions planned for the music tracks: "So is this at all supposed to sound like what they play at ball games?" Rob: "No, that's the other one, the old one you did..." Eddie's confusing this demo with another old demo that hasn't been selected, one that parodied a melody from a song that's played often during sports events. Tate re-enters the room. "Well, you think that's the stupidest song you ever heard, Eddie? ["Nah, I like it."] You're a liar." Eddie continues play, and Tate comments. "Yeah, that's about right. It's almost got a little bit of brr-nr-nrrr-nr-HEY..." Tate's singing the parodied melody Eddie and Rob dismissed moments earlier.

Eddie: Yeah, we were just talking about that.

Tate: But we won't do that.

Eddie: OK.

Tate: It's almost more of a Grand Funk song, with foot-stompin' music or something—boom ba boom ba. In between Grand Funk and Uriah Heep.

Using additional associative moves, Eddie and Tate continue refining the sonic frame. Tate refers to a tune that's frequently played at sporting events, explaining that the ad soundtrack should have "almost...a little bit of" that tune, but not really that tune. This almost-not-quite directive suggests that Tate wants the musical sound to point in a direction toward certain sounds without referring to them directly. These associative moves further tweak the sociocultural framework shaping the sound, drawing from his perceptions of his listeners' experiences with music in different venues, like sporting events. At the same time, the associative moves index the track within the discourse already circulating in popular society around classic rock, which might be appreciated by a white-collar group whose work life has eventually taken them to middle-management, and whose age and life experience may have familiarized them with what Tate calls the "foot-stompin'" stylings of a Grand Funk Railroad or classic rock of Uriah Heep. In other words, Tate shapes the soundtrack in the context of how listeners may derive meaning from the sounds through their life-long listening experiences. As a framework for the creative process of shaping the sound, the Echo Boys approach the task as they imagine a music consumer or critic may hear the track. They creatively meld ideas about music associated with sports, and the sounds of different 1970s rock groups that use blues-based harmonic and ornamental idioms.

Sports Bar, Demo 2: "Mellow out the AC/DC..."

Besides revising the original demo to eliminate the "country vibe," the Echo Boys offered a second demo option they hoped would please the client. The alternate demo

seems to have pleased the client with some exceptions. In Tate's notes from his conversations with the Agency, he wrote that they needed to

... MAKE ENDING MUSIC NO [*sic*] SO HEAVY METAL...FIGURE OUT A WAY TO MELLOW OUT THE END A BIT....

This poses a problem for the Echo Boys. They have this demo available as a mix (which they offered the Agency and client), but the Echo Boys can't locate the session tracks. In other words, they have no way of processing individual instrument tracks. Tate and Rob discuss the dilemma as they prepare for their next recording session with Eddie:

Tate: With Sports Bar they're using the rock and roll one. But they don't want it so heavy-metal at the end and I can't remember what the heck—we ended up finding everything in that session *except* the guitar?

Rob: Uhhh...(Rob plays the demo) You mean that one?

Tate: So that ending—we need to mellow it out...[Inaudible]

Rob: That was the one that didn't have the guitar in the session.

Tate: Oh, it is. So we could turn down that nrr-nrr-nrr-nrr? We could replace that guitar at the end?

Rob: Yeah.

Tate: So what's left then, just bass and drums at the end? I guess what I'm tryin' to get at is a way to turn down the AC/DC-ness at the end.

As in the recording session on the first demo, the producers' conversation is framed within associative and evaluative moves that contextualize a problematic "heavy metal" and "AC/DC-ness" the client perceives in the track. The references to genre and a specific performance group isolate for elimination a contextual element that the Agency or client believes may distract listeners from the client's desired message, or deter listeners from engaging with the track altogether. To solve the problem, Tate approaches

the task using metaphor (“mellow it out”) and proscription with vocables (“turn down that nrr-nrr-nrr-nrr”).

Interestingly, the fact that Tate wants to “turn down” the effect and not “turn off” the sound suggests that the AC/DC-ness may actually do some work for the track that Tate desires. The perceived edginess (“that nrr-nrr-nrr-nrr”) of the distorted guitar may provide an energy that Tate may like personally or he may feel drives the soundtrack. Nonetheless, following the client’s directive, Tate recognizes a need to sculpt the sound further through Eddie’s talents. Tate speaks to Eddie over the mic as Eddie sets up in the sound booth on an acoustic guitar: “Ya there, Eddie? [“Yep.”] The end there gets a little more, god, I don’t know, Doobie Brothers more than AC/DC. So it’s the same chords and everything but...”

Eddie: It should get more Doobie Brothers?

Tate: Eh, I shouldn’t—I can’t think anything else in my head right now. Just not as heavy as AC/DC.

Eddie: Alright.

Tate: But definitely not country.

Tate has Eddie double the acoustic guitar in the section after the break.

Tate: Cool, then I think we’ll put a little electric, sorta U2-ish stuff on here. Then there’s a little melodic-y piano [that’s] gonna go with it. I think that’ll work, right, Rob?

Rob: Yeah...

Tate: I’m thinkin’, maybe...double the acoustic with not as brashy of a sound...But somethin’ like that.

In their efforts to remove or reduce the “AC/DC-ness” in the track, Tate establishes clearly some boundaries for their work. As with “country” and “Doobie Brothers” on the

first demo, “heavy metal” and “AC/DC” are marked as outside the perimeter of the kind of sound considered appropriate for this track. The reason for the exclusion may have to do with associations between the category and ideas of social contravention. Robert Walser comments on these associations between heavy metal sounds and social rebellion, noting that early metal bands developed sounds that would eventually come to define those attitudes and the genre, specifically “heavy bass and drums, virtuosic distorted guitar, and a powerful vocal style that used screams and growls as signs of transgression and transcendence.”²⁷ According to Walser, distorted guitar in particular functions as a key signifier. He explains that “heavy metal guitar sounds became well enough known to be used in all sorts of contexts, to evoke danger, intensity, and excitement...to construct affective intensity and control.”²⁸ Walser even notes a 1980s U.S. Army advertisement featuring metal guitar “in a kind of subliminal seduction: military service was semiotically presented as an exciting, oppositional, youth-oriented adventure. Rebel, escape, become powerful: join the army!”²⁹ For the Sports Bar project, minimizing the effects of the distorted guitar may diminish the likelihood that the track will conjure ideas of mayhem or rebellion. These may be reasons why the client considers the apparently heavy metal sounds outside the scope of what’s appropriate for this track.

Adding to the classic rock sounds still freely floating within the bounds of acceptable sound for this track, Tate molds the sound further when he calls for doubling

²⁷ Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 9.

²⁸ Walser, 15.

²⁹ Walser, 15.

the “AC/DC” guitar with some “sorta U2-ish stuff.” Tate’s imprecision suggests that the sound doesn’t have to reproduce the sound distinguishing U2’s guitarist The Edge, but rather call to mind the shimmering, bright timbres that provided sonic contrast during the heyday of dark, heavy metal power chords and helped make U2 an international icon. By continuously sculpting the sound timbrally, the Echo Boys hope to direct listeners’ attention away from what Tate called “brashy” heavy metal and its sociocultural connotations.

Not I.T. Guy: building “sophistication” through sound

For a second spot, referred to as “Insurance/Non-I.T. Guy” or “Not I.T. Guy,” the Agency memo described the visual setting as a

TYPICAL WHITE-COLLAR OFFICE OF AN INSURANCE AGENCY. OUR SPOKESPERSON IS THE OWNER/PRESIDENT AND WEARS THE ADDITIONAL HAT OF TRYING TO FIGURE OUT THE COMPANY’S COMMUNICATIONS.

The copy:

*I know the insurance business inside and out
But when it comes to technology, I don’t have a clue
We partnered with Cox Business
They know what they’re doing, and they made it a point to know what we’re doing
They give us business-grade phone and high-speed internet
With bandwidth that’s scaleable
That’s a technical term
Their special offer helped our budget, too
We don’t need I.T.—Cox is it*

With the original demo for the spot called Not I.T. Guy (whose spokesperson represents an insurance office manager, another satisfied Cox customer), the Agency informed the Echo Boys that “the client felt that the original track was too slow and made our hero guy seem kind of dorky.”³⁰ Additionally, the client complained that the VoiceManager spots seemed to lack “sophistication.” With that the Echo Boys work to blend the metaphor of “sophistication” from the VoiceManager ads while avoiding the client’s criticism that the demo makes the ad spokesperson “dorky.” To address these concerns, the Echo Boys frame their revisions mostly using generic categories, contextualizing their work within the construct of a “jazzy” and “bluesy” original demo.

Tate starts things off: “Well here’s the deal with this one.” Eddie moves to the Korg keyboard in the corner of the room. “They liked this but they thought the end was a little kinda rumpy-dump clowny so I’m hopin’ we can put some jazz piano or something into this one, which is kinda the Cialis one.” Rob plays the demo.

Tate: I think it’s most when it gets bom-bom-bom—maybe we change that bass part a little so it isn’t...? [Tate trails off.]

Eddie: Yeah.

The track continues after the break—the guitar enters with a strummed motive, comping chords.

Tate: And then—di—di-di-di-di-di, somethin’ a little bluesier here...

Eddie: Maybe a little slide guitar thing at the end...

Tate considers and dismisses: Ah...I think, they keep talkin’ sophisticated, so I’m thinkin’, like, probably just a piano—not piano though. But I don’t know, if you add the bass part ...Well maybe it’ll be OK...

³⁰ Agency e-mail to the Echo Boys, 7/2/07.

Eddie experiments on the keys.

Tate: I kinda think the end gets sort of Ramsey Lewis-ish, you could...I don't know what to tell ya. It's a blues song—you can be as jazzy as you can with it.

Eddie pounds out a few close-spaced minor-inflected blues chords. “I'm sensing some latency [in the keys]...OK. I guess punch me in at the end and I'll see how it goes.” Rob sets the Pro Tools mark to begin recording directly into the same audio track featuring the keyboard recorded earlier.

Tate: And you might be able to sprinkle a little something at the front, too, I think, a little poke...

Eddie: OK.

Rob sets the marker to record at the beginning of the track. Eddie improves with the other pre-recorded tracks.

Tate: Yeah, the stuff in the front almost makes it—I guess that should just be comped chords up in the front every once in a while. But the thing you were doing at the end felt pretty cool.

Eddie improves on his own, working out ideas for the next take. After a moment, he lifts his head. “OK, I'll try some stuff in here.” Rob restarts the track and they record a second pass. Eddie comps a bit before the break, and tries some new ideas after the break.

Tate: I guess I like the end, what you were doin' a step ago, but the front sounded good. So I'd just pick it up at the hole [Eddie improves with the idea he used at the beginning]...that kind of thing.

Eddie: OK.

Eddie runs the end one more time. “I don't know, what do you think? Kinda weird?”

Tate: No, I don't think it's weird. I'm just wonderin' if there's *enough* activity goin' on or do we do it with some-m else. A little blues guitar leads along with that or some-m maybe?

Eddie: Can I hear it one more time? [Rob complies.]

Tate: There are kinda jazzy chords being played there already at the end...Not the piano...I'm just wonderin' if there's some-m else we should do. You know, almost like jazz box guitar stuff at the end along with that or something.

Eddie: Yeah, I mean, we've got that acoustic...

Tate lifts his eyes, thinks through the sound he wants: Ching-ching-ka-ching-ching...You know, just a couple, like, jazzy lead notes or something.

Eddie: Octaves or something? Like Wes Montgomery?

Tate: Yeah, that's the guy's name. That's what I was lookin' for.

Eddie: Sophisticated.

Tate: That's right. Means octaves.

We all chuckle.

To frame the agenda for revision, Tate immediately associates “rumpty-dump clowny” with another commercial bearing memorable music—an ad for Cialis, a prescription medication for male erectile dysfunction.³¹ This associative move not only reveals the dialogic relationships between advertisements themselves, but also helps frame the sonic issues to which they need to attend. With the Cialis campaign, the ads' music and association with male sexual problems circulate as a joke in American culture, perhaps arising from an American skittishness with sex among the middle-aged or older, discomfort with sexual physiology, or drug claims specifying that erections under the drug's influence can last as long as four hours. Tate frames Not I.T. Guy using the joke in order to set the agenda for soundtrack revision, not surprisingly with Cialis outside the

³¹ Some writers in the blogosphere believe the song in the original Cialis commercials is "Naked Checkers" from Hayes Carll's album *Flowers & Liquor*—from the clip I've listened to online, I'm dubious but can't corroborate definitively.

bounds. Most notably, Tate draws on references to blues music and jazz icon Ramsey Lewis. While blues and jazz allude to harmonic, timbral and ornamental complexities, the Ramsey Lewis reference also connotes class and prestige. Known as “The Great Performer,” Lewis’s work is marked by his classical piano training as much as for his jazz renown. These references help the Echo Boys steer away from “rumpty dump” and “dorky” toward “sophisticated.”

Even working within these generic frames requires that the Echo Boys identify what aspect of the imagined “blues” category supports their project. Upon considering a “blusier” guitar, Eddie suggests they add slide guitar. Tate immediately nixes the idea—in his mind, a slide guitar conflicts with the metaphoric “sophistication” Tate perceives the client imagines for the project. Based on his intuitive reading of the client’s preferences and subjective definition of “sophistication,” Tate declines slide guitar.

Instead, Tate asks for “jazzy lead notes” and approves Eddie’s referral to an octave-doubled jazz melody in the vein of Wes Montgomery. By referencing a canonical master guitarist, the Echo Boys frame their approach to their task in a way that they believe remains faithful to the client’s demand for “sophistication.” In the process, they call attention to their seemingly impossible efforts toward reading the client’s subjective definition of “sophistication,” joking that sophistication means octaves. Acknowledging that their efforts toward “sophistication” involve stab-in-the-dark experimentation and guesses at what will satisfy the client’s expectations, the Echo Boys recognize the problematic of attempts toward any natural sonic realization of a metaphor like

“sophistication.”³² The gag calls attention to the futility of imagining a literal or direct relationship between sound and meaning without context.

VoiceManager

Three remaining Cox spots will share the same music track; however, the demo supplied to the client was met with some feedback that confounded the Echo Boys.

Planning revisions on the three VoiceManager spots, Tate takes note of his conversation with Agency representatives:

VOICE MANAGER ENDINGS..SAME TEMP AND RYTHYM [*sic*] ...MAKE TRACKS MORE ORGANIC ACOUSTIC SOPHISTICATED...CLIENT FEELS IT’S TOO NEEDLE DROPISH [*sic*] NOW.

Although the Agency provides some language to help guide the revision—“organic,” “acoustic,” and “sophisticated”—the key criticism leaves Tate stumped. He has difficulty imagining which aspect of the track leads the client to hear it as “needle-droppish.” In other conversations Tate also refers to the offending style as “canned,” or “like an infomercial.” As with the “country” reference in Sports Bar, the client fixes this category of “needle-drop” as one that must remain outside the realm of acceptable sound for this music track. For some advertisers, needle-drop is a derogatory term referring to production music, that is, music (often electronic) produced specifically with uncomplicated themes that can be presumably can be easily “read” semiotically by a

³² This could also be a commentary on the fact that a musical concept as seemingly simple as octaves could render such complicated meaning when associated with ideas of “sophistication.”

listener; it is often considered unoriginal, lifeless.³³ Production music is cataloged to facilitate listeners' quick navigation through massive collections of music for quick and easy importation into the media producers' needs. Robert Fink observes that "libraries of production music are sold fully indexed, with the promise of what will seem to most music scholars impossible levels of semiotic control."³⁴ Fink goes on to say that

[i]n effect, what is being sold is the sonic equivalent of clip art; and, just as with clip art, indexing is key...Unlike visual images, which are 'naturally' organized by their manifest representational content, music, especially instrumental (abstract) music, provides us with no obvious hooks upon which to hang our categories...semiotic clarity is now a key selling point.³⁵

As the "sonic equivalent of clip art," production music may evoke other implications undesirable to the Echo Boys' client. Like clip art, production music carries connotations of being "produced," like something churned off a mechanized production line, and not "organic," like something made by a human craftsman or artisan. Much production music is constructed with uncomplicated transitions, and rhythm foundations (including bass and drum) that enable a user to easily tear down and revise the track by excising or re-assembling it into a seamless final product. Like many mass-produced commodities, production music is often associated with cheapness, minimal quality, or lack of originality or uniqueness.

³³ Borrowing from an era when vinyl records abounded, the term "needle-drop" likely refers to the fact that a listener could "drop the needle" or begin the track at any point and hear the same theme throughout—no other themes would appear to complicate the musical recording. Production music tracks often maintain a single particular style throughout the track for the sake of providing a musical product that the user can marry to an image without having to modify to eliminate stylistic discrepancies or complications.

³⁴ Robert Fink, "Orchestral Corporate," *Echo: a Music-Centered Journal* 2.1 (2000). Accessed April 5, 2008, par. 2. <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/echo/volume2-issue1/fink/fink-article.html>

³⁵ Fink, par. 10-11.

Because Tate has difficulty isolating the sonic elements evoking “needle-dropness” for the client, Tate’s solution for the VoiceManager demo is to offer three new demos, each based on the percussion tracks of the original demo. By offering three options, Tate hopes at least one will resonate with the Agency and client. These three examples demonstrate the Echo Boys’ discursive tools and skills as they test new sonic solutions. Additionally, these examples demonstrate how the Echo Boys rely on their intuitive sense or feeling for a particular track or sonic experiment. Particularly when they struggle with finding words that help them conceptualize the problems they’re trying to solve, the Echo Boys allow themselves to be guided by intuition and trust sounds that “feel good” to them.

VoiceManager, Demo 1, Version 1: “Sophisticated jazz, on the bluesy side of funk”

Tate, Rob and Eddie meet again in the recording studio to attend to the “needle-drop” quality the client perceives in the VoiceManager spots. Because the Agency likes the tempo and rhythm of the original demo, Tate decided to strip the original demo down to the percussion track, and layer new instrumental tracks over the percussion. The Echo Boys plan to return to the Agency three new demos with the hope that one will resonate with both the Agency and the client.

Tate begins explaining the problem to Eddie: Well, I’d say, you wanna start? I’ll show you what we’re doin’...the client thought it sounded too, like, needle-droppy, infomercial music. But the Agency still likes the tempo [Eddie: “OK.”], so we’ve sort of turned things off. [“Did I do the ending?”] I’d sort of like to hear where it started. No.

Rob plays the original sequence for the VoiceManager spots. Tate tries to reason through which aspect of the track triggers the client's objections.

Tate: So I don't know if it's just the Rhodes-y, fusion-y-ness of it all? ...So we did—here, I'll show ya. We just put a bass on it. If you can work with it, great—if you can't...

Rob plays it again, this time with the bass line that Tate laid the day before. Eddie jams along quietly on his un-amped guitar.

Tate: You know, I think it'd almost be a percolator-y part. The words they used were kind of like more sophisticated...I'm kind of at a loss... I guess we don't wanna do what they had. But I don't think it should be a real funky thing, either. So I'm almost thinkin' there should be an acoustic somethin' ...I mean it sort of seems like it's screamin' for some sort of percolator part...

Eddie picks out a new lick on the guitar, a single-string rhythm guitar riff in the key of the spot they're working on.

Tate: Well, let's roll it.

Rob: Alright.

Rob plays the track with Tate's new bass line. After the four-beat click track, Eddie enters with the single-string ostinato he'd picked out moments earlier, a syncopated bit subdivided at the sixteenth-note level.

Tate: That part feels good. Whatever you wanna do to perfect that—but that seems like the right kind of thing.

Eddie's tinkering, perfecting the track: "OK." Rob starts the sequence again. Eddie continues with rhythm guitar through the break in the score where the music completely drops out.

Tate: And you'll just leave that hole open, cut it out there.

Eddie: Is that what the bass is doing? [Eddie replays the last two measures.]
Tate: That's it.

In this rhythm line, Eddie builds a descending line that doubles the bass to the final tonic (scale degrees 9-8-b7-5-1), and experiments with the last chord, which lands on the first beat of the last measure. Eddie isn't entirely satisfied with his work.

Eddie: Argh. Is that too jazzy?
Tate doesn't think so: Mm-mm. Sophisticated jazz is good, I think.

Tate says this with a hint of irony in his voice—he seems to feel that he's grasping at straws, trying to guess at the client's real objection in the sound, trying to meet the elusive, subjective definition of “sophistication.”

Eddie: Uh, OK, I'll try it again.
Rob: Alright.

Rob plugs him again, and he and Tate seem satisfied with the results. Tate solicits Eddie's creative intuition on shaping the track further.

Tate: OK, cool. What other jazzy—sophisticated-jazzy bits could you put in there? Or would you rather do a piano thing or something?

Eddie noodles on the guitar while he thinks about how to build the track further.

Tate: It's so weird...They want it 'sophisticated-jazzy' but a lot of times you go that way and it starts to sound needle-droppy to me...
Eddie: Really...

Eddie strums a little rhythm guitar. Tate likes what he hears.

Tate: Try something like that, then maybe we can do a little piano thing with it.
Eddie: OK.

Take 1—Eddie's dubious. “Mmm...a little too funky or something?”

Tate: Uh...I don't think so...I guess I'd lean towards the bluesy side of funk if you were to...

Eddie: Sure...I'll try one more thing.

Rob: Alright.

Take 2—Tate seems to be OK with it.

Tate: I think at the end if we add little piano riffs...

Eddie: Sure.

Tate: ...but I think that'd be all the electric stuff... We've got like three versions of this goin' just because I'm not sure what in the hell they want for sure. Now the next one I was thinkin' is a little more maybe conventional-jazzy, if it's possible with this beat.

Eddie: OK.

Early in renegotiating the sound for this version, Tate is still trying to evaluate and isolate the objectionable sounds from a proscriptive and categorical approach: is it the timbre of the Rhodes keyboard? Or some “fusion-y” quality the client doesn't like? With these associative moves, the Echo Boys attempt to frame and diagnose the offending sounds. Later Tate makes another attempt at framing the problem by processing his thoughts aloud and proposing that the sound shouldn't be “a real funky thing, either.” Tate doesn't seem to find satisfaction in his associative moves in this case—he admits that he's “at a loss” in targeting the client's objections.

Framing their attempts to pacify the client's objection to the track, Tate draws a complex relationship between the qualified generic category “sophisticated jazz” and the informal industry slang “needle-drop.” In doing so the team mixes discourses, borrowing from the language of genre to ameliorate a quality defined by informal industry parlance. As a way of differentiating between jazz and needle-drop, Tate is quick to further qualify

“jazz” as “sophisticated jazz” (“What other jazzy—sophisticated-jazzy bits could you put in there?”). Not only does Tate oppose “needle-drop” with “jazz,” he counters the offending style with a subset of “jazz” he dubs “sophisticated.” Despite his musing that his idea of “sophisticated jazz” comes dangerously close to what he imagines is the client’s “needle-drop,” Tate finds the generic relationships he’s created useful for shaping this first alternate demo. Having already worked that day through the Ramsey Lewis reference in the Not I.T. Guy spot, the Echo Boys have cognitive structure for working through their representation of “sophisticated jazz.” Articulating a dichotomy between “needle-drop” (an industry moniker) and “sophisticated jazz” (a generic category further limited by Tate), Tate defines a mutually-exclusive relationship between these imagined qualities.

Once articulated, “sophisticated jazz” creates a fluid space for the Echo Boys’ experimentation with musical styles that employ complex harmonic and ornamental vernacular in hopes of countering the client’s perception of a “needle-drop” or production music feel. Responding to Tate’s lament that ““sophisticated-jazzy’ ...starts to sound needle-droppy to me,” Eddie experiments with something that, perhaps, will assuage Tate’s concerns for sounding like lifeless production music—and Tate encourages his experiment. As Eddie noodles with a new rhythm guitar bit, Tate likes the feel of it and invites him to “try something like that.” After a take, Eddie’s concerned that his idea may be “a little too funky or something.” Tate reassures him, and maneuvers Eddie to work “toward the bluesy side of funk” with his ideas. The fluidity of genre categories enables the Echo Boys to borrow bits from different ideas of what constitutes a genre

sonically. The language they use to negotiate the sound—from “too jazzy” to “sophisticated jazzy” to “the bluesy side of funk”—illustrates their attempt to borrow from circulating ideas of sound categories as they shape a sound that represents “sophistication” without “needle-droppishness.” Borrowing harmonic and ornamental idioms from jazz, blues or funk help keep the music sounding “organic,” unlike the ideas the client inferred from the “needle-drop” demo.

To further eliminate any perceived production music quality, Tate and Eddie apply metaphor as they experiment with a “percolator-y part,” something that differs from the original demo. The invented adjective “percolator-y” illustrates the Echo Boys’ skill in employing metaphor and onomatopoesis to communicate musical ideas.³⁶ With reference to timbre, Porcello explains that metaphor is one of a number of discursive tools useful to studio personnel in communicating abstract ideas about musical sound.³⁷ Likewise, Feld highlights metaphor as a way to “systematize abstract ideas and provide verbal means for expressing the structure of musical experience.”³⁸ For the Echo Boys, the newly-created idea “percolator-y” communicates ideas about rhythm, feel, and energy like that of something that percolates, say, a coffee pot, for instance.³⁹

³⁶ Porcello comments that creating adjectives out of onomatopoeic lexemes is a common practice among studio professionals. See Feld et al., “Vocal Anthropology: From the Music of Language to the Language of Song,” in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Alessandro Duranti (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 326.

³⁷ See Porcello, “Speaking of Sound,” 743-7; Feld, et al., 325-8.

³⁸ Feld, “‘Flow Like a Waterfall,’: The Metaphors of Kaluli Musical Theory” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 13 (1981), 22.

³⁹ Perhaps the tactile sensation of heat also plays a role here.

“Percolator” also functions as onomatopoeically, helping the Echo Boys communicate ideas about articulation and rhythmic feel.⁴⁰ With emphasis on the first syllable and the quick, rhythmic steadiness of the three syllables that follow, the sounds of the word “percolator” help Tate and Eddie communicate about articulations that may help infuse energy into the spot. Responding to Tate’s direction for “a percolator-y part,” Eddie submits a repetitive, syncopated single-string guitar bit that emphasizes an insistent sixteenth note subdivision (represented in Example 3.2).



Example 3.2

This repetitive electric guitar figure interacts with the bass guitar, which pops out two pointed eight notes on tonic on beat one of each measure before the break. The line seems to simmer underneath other guitar and keyboard lines, producing a subtle rhythmic energy beneath the track’s surface. Trusting his intuitive response to the result (“That part feels good”), Tate relies on his ability to listen simultaneously as musical producer and consumer. Tate’s ability to respond to the sound through his intuition and feeling reveals his ability to listen with a sense for the complexity, array and types of meanings that Eddie’s single-string guitar riff can allow.⁴¹ With this skill, Tate can correlate

⁴⁰ See Porcello, “Speaking of Sound,” 743-7; Feld, et al., 325-8.

⁴¹ “The significant feature of musical communication is not that it is untranslatable and irreducible to the verbal mode but that its generality and multiplicity of possible messages and interpretations brings out a special kind of ‘feelingful’ activity and engagement on the part of the listener, a form of pleasure that unites the material and mental dimensions of musical experience as fully embodied. It is in this sense that we

experience, knowledge and feeling with the values and identities determined by the client and Agency.

VoiceManager, Version 2—“Conventional jazzy...is that too smooth jazzy?”

Up until this point, the Echo Boys define “needle-drop” only by what they think it isn’t: “sophisticated jazz.” With the second alternate demo, the team comes closer to characterizing the undesirable sound. In the process, they introduce a valuation of the genre category “smooth jazz” as they associate it with the unwanted “needle-drop” quality. Additionally, the work on this demo illuminates the subtle politics of working relationships among the Echo Boys. Though seems that Tate welcomes and considers all creative ideas put forth through the studio sessions, his recording engineer shares few opinions when Tate’s in the room. Even when Tate exits briefly, Eddie, the free-lance studio musician, assumes the leadership role and makes valuative judgments for shaping the sound.

For this demo (again, the team is building instrumental lines above the drum track shared by all three demos), Tate had recorded a walking bass line prior to this session with Eddie, and describes to Eddie the kinds of sounds he imagined with it:

Tate: ...Now the next one I was thinkin’ is a little more maybe conventional-jazzy, if it’s possible with this beat.

Eddie: OK.

might speak of music as a metaphoric process, a special way of experiencing, knowing, and feeling value, identity, and coherence.” Feld, “Communication, Music, and Speech about Music,” 91.

Rob plays another sequence with the same percussion, but a different bass line. Tate talks through the bass line, explains what's happening harmonically, then describes what he imagines timbrally: "B...sorry, B, G, A. So it's across that d-minor thing, then just a G-A thing...Maybe some ringy chords with the electric, but maybe you could do sort of a choppy thing on the acoustic on this one..."

Eddie: Sure...OK.

Tate: Be jazzy, Eddie.

Rob starts up the sequence and Eddie plays along, weaving in occasional single strummed chords to resonate from the electric guitar, and allowing one arpeggiated chord to ring and decay freely.

Eddie: Something like that?

Tate thinks through his options: Yeah... Maybe some ringy chords, but some would wanna be sorta comped... Maybe like a ringy chord thing like this, but then sort of a Wes Montgomery couple of fiddle bits through there, too.

Eddie: Sure I'll do a couple more of these... OK.

To begin revising the second demo, Tate again employs metaphor to focus on musical elements for the "conventional-jazzy" demo: he'd like "ringy" chords from the electric guitar, something "choppier" from the acoustic. In Tate's idea of "conventional-jazzy," a percussive, rhythmic bed grounds the track with forward-moving energy while reverberating harmonies float above. Soon, Tate adds another associative component, this time evoking master jazz guitarist Wes Montgomery. Unlike early associative moves, however, this one ultimately fails.

Tate leaves the room to take a call. As Tate leaves, Eddie assumes leadership in the session and begins working with Rob directly. Interestingly, when Eddie and Rob

interact, they use fewer associational moves than Tate—rather they speak in more mechanistic terms, and language derived from their traditional music training.⁴² Eddie talks to Rob about moving a chord he played to the ‘and’ of a beat, using a language infused with the rudiments of music theory. When Eddie requests information from Rob, he communicates frequently in harmonic terms (“Could I hear the bass line from the IV chord?...Does that go V- IV-I?”). To some degree this corroborates Tate Porcello’s experiences in the studio. Again, while I can attribute this to Tate’s informal music training, I also see it as part of Tate’s years of experience and skill in understanding the musical language and know-how of clients, Agency personnel, and a generalized audience that hears musical meaning. Tate certainly understands and engages in the formal language of music theory and harmony, but, especially since he’s the producer and the boss, the team doesn’t use this discourse as much in his presence.

After another take, Eddie’s happy so they move on: “Do you think he wanted those noodley bits on the electric or acoustic?”

Rob: Probably on the electric...

Eddie: OK, I’ll try something...

Rob: OK.

Take 1 on a second guitar track for this sequence. Eddie isn’t happy with his first attempt at a melody line doubled at the octave—he tries a second take: “I think that’s cool, I don’t know. [Rob: “Yeah...”] I’m getting there on the ‘and’ and then I hit that chord on the one.” Eddie’s referring to hitting the chord on beat one of the four beat measure—he

⁴² Eddie and Rob both have music training with undergraduate degrees from formalized music programs—Tom’s training comes from years of playing in bands and listening to a broad array of musics.

demonstrates, singing the melody he's working on. "Baahm baahm bah bah bahm..." Eddie plays the chord on the 'and' of the beat with his final 'Bahm'. "It'd be cool to move that second chord to the 'and' as well..."

Rob: Sure.

At Eddie's suggestion, Rob effortlessly moves the chord from the comp track half a beat earlier and plays the sequence. Eddie plays along, stomping his foot as he practices the octave-doubled melody line.

Eddie: Yeah...Kind of sounds smooth jazzy, doesn't it? Does that sound sophisticated enough, or does that sound like smooth jazz?

Rob: I don't know, we could save that...Is there another thing, like an octave thing you could do or [another] rhythm...?

Eddie runs his fingers around the fret board as he muses over Rob's suggestions, then snaps out a new melody line doubled at the octave. "Yeah...I think it's just those octaves that sound smooth...OK." Rob fires up the sequence yet again, and Eddie inserts the new doubled melody line.

Rob: Yeah, I don't know, I like that better.

Eddie: OK...cool...So we're just doing a multiple of these...with different guitar approaches, different bass lines? Is that Tate playing bass?

Rob: Yeah. And then we want to do something pretty similar to the original but just different instrumentation.

Rob plays the original again. Eddie fiddles along.

Rob: Well, he wants to see something with the original bass part, and then either redo a new marimba part or something like that on guitar.

Eddie: OK. That marimba's cool.

Tate returns to the recording studio: “Let’s hear what we got goin’ there, Rob.” Rob plays the last sequence again. Tate seems at a loss at how to judge the piece from the client’s perspective. Rob’s preference for the octaves isn’t mentioned again—and Tate’s dubiousness confirms Eddie’s instincts that his octave-doubling experiment fails.

Tate: Well, I guess...God, you know...Now does that sound more like needle-drop than what we’re comin’ from?

Eddie: Sounds a little smooth-jazzy to me.

Tate: Yeah—you think this Wes Montgomery stuff...?

Eddie: I think once you start playing octaves on electric guitar over that kind of beat it’s just like—

Tate: It turns ‘Cities-Lite’? Nyah, let’s not do that, I guess. You got any other...or something to contemporize it or something?

Eddie: We could try some blues thing...[He kicks out a few licks using blues scales and ornamentations.] Still might sound like that...

Tate: It is kind of what it is. There is a third version that I wanna do...it’d be like the closer-to-Coldplay version, if there is such a thing, with the echoey guitars and stuff. The one they never wanna do is, for some reason, country is the worst thing that could possibly happen to these people.

Eddie: Really?

Tate: Yeah. I don’t know why.

Eddie plinks out a little riff that could be described as “country,” a little boom-chick motive with a bass turn-around through scale degrees 1-5-1-5-6-7. We all chuckle quietly with Eddie’s nose-thumbing at the client’s prejudices.

Like associative moves discussed with other demos, the reference to Montgomery is an attempt to frame a preferred sound within a particular sociocultural web of discourse evoking highly renowned jazz performers; in contrast with the Ramsey Lewis reference for Not I.T. Guy, however, the associate move fails. When Eddie attempts an octave-doubled guitar melody a la Wes Montgomery, he associates the results with “smooth

jazz.” Considered by some as the a founder of “smooth jazz,” Montgomery’s 1967 and 1968 recordings featured instrumental re-makes of contemporary pop songs like “Eleanor Rigby,” “I Say a Little Prayer” and “Scarborough Fair.”⁴³ Corroborating Eddie’s fears, Tate wonders aloud whether the sound will meet the client’s expectations (“Now does that sound more needle-drop than what we’re comin’ from?”). The idea of smooth jazz, with its pop influence and commercial stigma, elicits the same critique that the client associated with “needle-drop.” For the Echo Boys in this instance, smooth jazz connotes a hackneyed, unoriginal, commercial form that doesn’t maintain the depth, complexity, sophistication or “organic” quality for which the Agency calls.

Additionally, smooth jazz as they’ve conceived of it references something outdated. Tate’s mention of “Cities-Lite” may be an oblique reference to the Twin Cities radio station Cities-97, which had a Sunday morning program called “Acoustic Sunrise” that featured “new age” or “adult contemporary jazz” in the 1980s and early ‘90s. At Tate’s suggestion to “contemporize” the current take, Eddie replaces his earlier Wes Montgomery, “smooth jazzy” option with noticeably blues-inflected guitar solos. The grassroots-ness, grit and earthiness often associated with the blues is channeled as a way for the Echo Boys to counter the smooth, lifeless, overproduced associations with “needle-drop.”⁴⁴

⁴³ These are from the albums *A Day in the Life* (1967), *Down Here on the Ground* (1967), *Road Song* (1968).

⁴⁴ See David Grazian, “The Symbolic Economy of Authenticity in the Chicago Blues Scene,” in *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 31-47; Stephen A. King, “Memory, Mythmaking, and Museums: Constructive Authenticity and the Primitive Blues Subject,” *Southern Communication Journal* 71, no. 3 (2006), 235-250; Charles Keil, “People’s music comparatively: Style and Stereotype, Class and Hegemony,” *Dialectical Anthropology*, 10, no. 1-2 (July 1985), 119-130.

In the midst of their efforts to (de)construct “needle-drop” and its antitheses, Tate laments the client’s narrow musical preferences, particularly its distaste for “country music.” The moment presents an opportunity for the Echo Boys to express their talents for and enjoyment of a broad array of musical styles while poking fun of the system within which they produce music. Eddie’s country lick seems to allude to a simpler and more sincere expression than the Echo Boys are designing per the client’s and Agency’s dictates, an ordinariness that counters the machinations of the advertising establishment.⁴⁵ That Eddie would dare speak “country” as the Echo Boys work to satisfy the client’s expectations, especially in the midst of a project calling for “sophisticated” musical stylings, seems a minor rebellion against the valuation of certain musics, and the pretense of distinguishing product and brand identity within the noise of competitive products, the advertising field, and mass media as a whole. The gag highlights the irony of manufacturing music that ostensibly conceals the mechanics of branding strategies. The moment calls attention to the incongruity of their situation, that these excellent musicians, well-voiced in and appreciative of multiple musical styles, intently fabricate sounds to appear “organic.”

Rob begins the track with the second bass line again, Eddie improves some jazz lines that are noticeably blues-inflected both in melodic scale and ornamentation. Tate

⁴⁵ Several texts discuss the trope of sincerity in country music: Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Thomas Porcello, “Music Mediated as Live in Austin: Sound, Technology, and Recording Practice,” in *Wired for Sound: Engineering and Technologies in Sonic Cultures*, ed. Paul D. Greene and Thomas Porcello (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 103-117; Curtis W. Ellison, *Country Music Culture: From Hard Times to Heaven* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995); Jimmie N. Rogers, *The Country Music Message* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1989). See also Fox, 229-231.

encourages Eddie to experiment freely, but cautions the guitarist to keep his blues stylings subtle given that Tate imagines using a few keyboard tracks to fill out the sound. Eddie experiments with one of the riffs he just played. “OK.” Rob starts the sequence for recording again, and Eddie performs—he uses the same idea, but simplifies it ornamentally and melodically. He’s experimenting. “OK, yeah, I’ll try that again.”

Tate is ever-encouraging while steering Eddie toward the kind of performance that Tate finds pleasing: “I like that stuff at the front...” Eddie’s playing around with a few new musical ideas: “Ah, let me do something...” He dials up a slightly different timbre on the Pod, retunes a bit and messes with a few little blues riffs. “...OK.” Rob hits record. Eddie doesn’t come in for the first few measures, and as soon as he does he groans with disappointment.

Tate: Maybe I liked the tone better before—maybe it feels a little Santana-y to me or something...

Eddie adjusts. Next take. Eddie throws in just a few little fills.

Tate: Be kinda nice, too, at the beginning to hit that fall-off chord at the stop.

Eddie: Sure.

Rob has answered the phone: Do you wanna take a call from Jim [surname inaudible]?

Tate: I’ll have to call him back.

Rob, into the handset: He’ll call him back. Alright.

Eddie’s ready to try another take. He takes another stab at filling out the sequence, and he falls off the chords at the stop and at the end. Tate: “I think that was cool—are the notes from the G to the A thing working right there?” Rob plays through the second part

of the recording Eddie just made, after the break. Eddie: “I’ll take it after the break.”

Rob: “Alright.” Rob punches Eddie in again to re-record the track post-break.

Tate: “OK. Let’s go to version three.”

Rob: “Alright.”

After the initial failure with the Wes Montgomery octaves (and Eddie’s tension-lifting joke), their work on this second version is almost exclusively proscriptive. With a brief exception (an associative move restricting a “Santana-y” guitar timbre outside Tate’s acceptable tone color), the Echo Boys rely mostly on their intuitive experimentation and general references to “some piano stuff goin’ on” or very specific ornamentations or notes (“Be kinda nice...to hit that fall-off chord at the stop...” or “are the notes from the G to the A thing working right there?”). Without a satisfying associative framing reference to guide their work, the Echo Boys drive forward on Eddie’s creative intuition. Through their discourse, the Echo Boys build a relationship between “needle-drop” and “smooth jazz” that devalues the generic classification of smooth jazz, and sociocultural associations with the genre. Like “needle-drop,” “smooth jazz” is dubbed mutually exclusive of “sophisticated jazz,” and thus relegated to the periphery, outside the realm of acceptable musical style. Given the minor setback with the “Wes Montgomery” move, the team draws on other musical instincts for fabricating ad music that feels “organic”—as in Version 1, they rely on a blues-inflected style to counteract the smooth jazz problem that arose in the course of revising Version 2. Because of their talents and understanding for how ad music functions, they build tracks that point to “real” music-making as a creative, pleasurable, shared experience, but

consciously construct their music tracks in keeping with the client's and Agency's objectives. Their complex commentary on the client's bias against so-called country music brings into relief their consciousness of the machinations of their craft.

VoiceManager, Version 3—“The Coldplay version”

For their third alternate demo, the Echo Boys decide to shape the music within a frame they believe is clearly not “needle-drop.” With an associative move borrowing from the British group Coldplay, the Echo Boys frame their work within the context of a single, critically-acclaimed but mainstream alternative rock sound and the discourse surrounding that popular sound. Unlike the blues-styled Versions 1 and 2, the Coldplay reference positions the track solidly within a sound deemed by popular culture as original, complex, and non-commercial. Tate and Eddie have worked with each other on an earlier project with which they used Coldplay as a referent, an ad for Qdoba Mexican Grill called “Kaleidoscope” featuring intricate, kaleidoscope-like images of food. The higher registers stand prominent, especially in the first two-thirds of the music track, with sparse percussion and a subtle bass line grounding the sound. Because of their experience together, their language is laced with a few proscriptive directions, but most often they try out musical lines and seemingly rely on their prior knowledge and trust in working together:

Tate: ...There is a third version that I wanna do...It'd be like the closer-to-Coldplay version, if there is such a thing, with the echoey guitars and stuff...

Rob plays through the foundation he's left in the sequence—the marimba part stands prominent, defining the melody line. Eddie immediately picks up on it and doubles it on guitar.

Tate: Alright, on that one I think I'd like you to play that lick on the acoustic, but is there some sort of jangly sort of thing that could happen with this?...

Eddie: Sure... [Eddie retunes.]

Tate: ...Almost in the vein of that Qdoba thing you did that time...I don't know if you remember that. It was kind of an echoey kind of...I don't remember what it was tryin' to be in the first place—I wanna say a Coldplay kind of a thing...

Tate's referring to work Eddie did for another Echo Boys project, a spot for the fast food chain. With this reference, Tate not only draws Eddie's attention to work they've completed together previously, but also associates this Cox spot with another ad that connotes a light-hearted, relaxed feel through image and music.⁴⁶ They build on this as they fill in timbres, harmonies and melodies that feel light and relaxed to them.

Eddie readjusts the guitar's timbre using the Pod, finding a lightly reverberant timbre with delay that allows higher frequencies allowed to reverberate. In just the first few bars, Eddie tries out a couple of rhythm guitar riffs, including a tonic-to-predominant rhythm guitar line with a pedal bass. Tate and Eddie discuss that the marimba line skews the sequence toward minor.

Eddie: Do you want—

Tate: ...Cuz it's all minor, isn't it—

Eddie: --It's in minor, so—

Tate: --Maybe we should make this a major version of it or somethin' ...Should we just turn the bass off for now?

⁴⁶ Though the Qdoba ad promotes a fast food restaurant—a completely different industry and brand from Cox Business Services—Tom nonetheless can draw from the attitude or feeling projected through the ad.

Eddie: I think it's just that marimba that's making it sound minor.

Tate: OK—well, we can pull the marimba out—we don't need that...

Eddie practices his tonic-predominant rhythm lick. Rob starts the sequence to record again and Eddie plays along.

Eddie: I guess the bass is, too...

Tate: Yeah, I think it'd be good to—we'll just put a new bass on it. Sounds wrong in minor. Be good to have a major one of these, I think.

Eddie: Yeah, I think it's the bass...

He's working out the chord progression he wants to put on the sequence—when he's ready to record again, he signals to Rob, who re-starts the sequence. Eddie lays down his new chord progression: “Uh, let me take it after the break.” Rob punches him in thrice more.

Tate: You think an extra higher melody to go...wherever you think...?

Eddie plucks out a new little riff: Yeah, I could actually do a couple of things...

He continues with the second melody based on chord arpeggiations with added ninths (e.g., scale degrees 5-1-5-2-1...). “I'll do that, then a little high thing, too...” Rob punches him in at the beginning, playing the sequence with the original percussion and new rhythm guitar, with the marimba and Tate's bass line muted.

Tate: Cool.

Eddie: Then I'll do a higher melody...

He takes a moment to play around with a few ideas. “OK.” Rob punches him in. Take two—Eddie seems satisfied with that.

The team decides to re-record the bass line to support the new efforts toward a major tonality, and thicken the texture with keyboard tracks. Tate addresses Eddie as he

situates himself behind the Korg. “Yeah, maybe this one could use a little Rhodes thing on it or something.” Eddie warms up on a synth piano sound with a riff that swings slowly from I to V and back to I, finishing with a plagal cadence. Tate: “I was thinkin’ there’d be a little melodic thing happenin’ in the second half of this one. We wanna keep ‘em still kinda bouncy...” Eddie: “OK.” He comes in with a flourish at the re-entry after the break. He tries one more take.

Eddie: More melody, less melody?

Tate: A little more, I think.

Eddie: OK.

In take three Eddie plays a descending motive before the break, then elaborates on his post-break melody slightly.

Eddie: Cool—is that kinda alright? But it was kinda low and muddy...

Tate: Yeah. It’s kinda the right idea I think. The melody on the second half should be a little more front-loaded and not so much towards the very end there.

Eddie: OK.

Take four. Eddie hasn’t really done much different but played fewer notes near the end of the track—Tate seems to approve. Tate: “Felt good.” Eddie: “Cool...”

With all their trouble in trying to isolate the “needle-drop” quality and subsequent failures, the Echo Boys take a hard stance and firmly affix the third alternate demo within a new frame. Whereas the other two alternate demos were more esoterically framed with generic references, this new associative move situates the sound within the discourse of a “real” band, British rock sensation Coldplay, which has seen tremendous mainstream success in the US as well as internationally. In doing so, the Echo Boys situate the third demo solidly within a wide-ranging and very popular contemporary discourse through

what Tate calls “echoey guitars” and the band’s self-described style of “very heavy soft rock.”⁴⁷ The association of “soft rock” with this ad is especially intriguing. While several advertising and psychology studies on music render “soft rock” synonymous with “Top 40” or “pop,” one 1996 psychology study on adolescents’ personality traits dichotomizes “soft/nonrebellious” rock with “hard/rebellious” rock.⁴⁸ In doing so, the Echo Boys draw on fresh, contemporary sounds with broad mass appeal that are simultaneously affiliated with ideas of mainstream acceptability. Much like the effort to “mellow-out” the heavy metal feel in the Sports Bar demo, the Echo Boys safely associate the sound with rock styles that may raise mainstream, middle-class, “nonrebellious” values.⁴⁹

Having established the frame, the Echo Boys resort quickly to metaphor and proscriptive comments that help them hone in on specific sounds. Tate’s request for “something jangly” on the electric guitar steers Eddie to adjust the Pod toward a light, shimmering timbre; Eddie draws attention to that tone color using arpeggiated chords with added ninths. They eliminate the minor tonal inflections apparent in the marimba

⁴⁷ <http://www.myspace.com/coldplay>, accessed 4/17/08.

⁴⁸ See T.O. Robinson, J.B. Weaver, D. Zillmann, “Exploring the Relation between Personality and the Appreciation of Rock Music,” *Psychology Report* 78, no. 1 (1996): 259-69.

⁴⁹ John Fiske argues that discursive power and ideas of realism are significantly influenced by middle-class or bourgeois values while those values are naturalized as “common sense.” Fiske cites Roland Barthes, who explains his notion of “exnomination.” According to Barthes, the bourgeoisie openly “names” itself as an economic force, but doesn’t acknowledge its influence politically (“...there are no ‘bourgeois’ parties in the Chamber . . .” Quoted from Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* [London: Paladin, 1973], 138). Exnomination thus “masks the political origin of discourse,” thereby obscuring differences of class, gender, ethnicity, etc. As a result, a group with economic capital “establishes its sense of the real as the *common* sense and . . . [invites or requires] the subordinate subcultures to make sense of the world, of themselves, and of their social relations through the dominant, exnominated discourse. . .” as they engage with the dominant ideology. John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987) 42-43, 51.

and bass lines, which conflict with the bright, shimmering, “bouncy” feel they hope to capture in this demo. Adding “more melody” rather than “less melody” on the keys, and layering melodies in the higher registers of the track, promotes a sense of motion while keeping the energy of the piece light and dynamic, not “low and muddy.” This third demo offers the client a lighter, brighter, mainstream option that contrasts with the second, blues-inflected demo in particular. With no way of hearing how the client hears “needle-drop,” Tate’s three-alternates strategy enables him to re-set the starting point with the client for this particular spot. The client can select one of these three alternates as a musical solution closer to something they’d accept, then direct the Echo Boys toward minor revisions as necessary.

In the process of ad music revision, the Echo Boys perform and record not just musical sounds—they enact and concretize sonically ideas about cultural norms about social relations, behaviors, and ideologies. They organize musical sounds in ways that convey meaning within a multi-layered, sometimes thorny labyrinth of constituents, ideologies and popular culture. Their musical-rhetorical efforts parlay principles and values that mark how Cox positions itself (and, by extension, its audiences): avoiding objectionable “red-neck” or anti-social appearances linking to musics indexed as “country” or “heavy metal,” respectively; steering clear of “dorky” or “rumpty dump” characteristics in favor of portraying savvy and smarts; adopting a persona considered “organic” rather than disadvantageous associations with production music. Careful composition, reflecting particularly on associations with musical genre and timbre, help bring a brand life through the ad. The Echo Boys’s fastidious organization of musical

sounds demonstrates the importance of further study of how we understand music to mean, to represent values, to sway opinions, and propagate ideology within institutional constructs like American late-capitalism.

Chapter 4: Sound Design, “Impact” and Reification of Values

With regard for film sound, Michel Chion observes that the “film spectator recognizes sounds to be truthful, effective and fitting not so much if they reproduce what would be heard in the same situation in reality, but if they render (convey, express) the feelings associated with the situation.”¹ In audiovisual advertising, sound design is critical not only narrating the ad story or message, but doing so in a way that represents some idea of reality, and moves the audience member emotionally, sensorially, or even sensually. This chapter explores the production processes behind sound design, the goals of sound artists, and the role of processed sound in representing a version of reality in the context of marketing objectives. Sound design in particular heightens sonic reality for the sake of what the industry calls “impact,” that is, an audience member’s physical, physiological or emotional response to audiovisual stimuli infused with meanings and values. A reference to the audience member’s embodied response to an ad, “impact” is critical in the instantiation of a brand, a process some marketers call a “brand experience.”² As producers attempt to create impactful experiences through the ad, their sound designs communicate meanings and values associated with the otherwise abstract brand that are thought to resonate with target audience members. Producers’ beliefs

¹ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 109.

² “A **brand experience** is an individual audience member’s experience as he or she interacts with a brand—every time he or she interacts with that brand. Every interaction a person has with a brand contributes to his or her overall perception of the brand...It entails understanding how to weave a common thread or voice—seeming like one voice, across all of an individual’s experiences with that brand—to integrate the common language into all experiences with the brand...The *main goal* of the brand experience is to gain an individual’s interest and trust in and loyalty to the brand.” Robin Landa, *Designing Brand Experiences* (Clifton Park, NY: Thomson Delmar Learning, 2006), 9. Emphases in original.

about target audience members' listening practices influence their creative work. In other words, ad producers' build sound based on their beliefs for who their listeners are, the values they hold, and how they listen to ads.

As has been shown with music, advertising sound design can circulate discourses of authenticity and identity, and contributes to the reification and commodification of experience, particularly as a reflection of post-production studio conventions that involve processing sound with effects like reverberation.³ Several music scholars recognize the studio as a site for replicating constructions of identity and value through sound. Harris Berger and Cornelia Fales demonstrate that timbral processing in heavy metal music defines the "heaviness" of the music; distorted guitar in particular communicates ideas of power and strength for some metalheads.⁴ Thomas Porcello recognizes how studio microphone placement and processing techniques deliver an "Austin sound" in country music, which connects the sound not just to place, but also to constructions of space, notions of sincerity and ideas of local identity.⁵ Louise Meintjes observes that, for producers in a South African studio, the selection of music technologies (including

³ With regard to music, see (among others) Aaron Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Louise Meintjes, *Sound of Africa! Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Thomas Porcello, "Sonic Artistry: Music, Discourse and Technology in the Sound Recording Studio," Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, Austin, 1996; Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁴ Harris M. Berger and Cornelia Fales, "'Heaviness' in the Perception of Heavy Metal Guitar Timbres: The Match of Perceptual and Acoustic Features over Time," in *Wired for Sound: Engineering and Technologies in Sonic Cultures*, ed. Paul D. Greene and Thomas Porcello (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 181-97.

⁵ Porcello, "Music Mediated as Live in Austin: Sound, Technology, and Recording Practice," in *Wired for Sound*, 103-117.

miking techniques, and acoustic or electronic instrument selections) differentiates sounds as “traditional” or “black stuff” compared to sounds coming from “overseas.”⁶ As these scholars show, the studio functions as a site for negotiating values and identities while materializing these sonically.

Unlike music, however, the social role of sound design—that is, sound effects like footsteps, wind, room tone, bleeps, bleeps and blips that represent narrative actions or events within an ad—is often overlooked.⁷ As my research shows, sound design serves several functions in the ad and the marketing strategy supporting the ad. Sound design represents verisimilitude in the ad often while heightening the audience member’s experience of that reality (which I’ve called here a construction of The Real, that is, a stylized representation of reality that has no grounding in reality). Sound design prioritizes events within the narrative and directs the audience member’s attention to those events based on the strategic goals supporting the ad. At the same time, sound design can lend expressiveness or life-presence to the audiovisual experience and, by extension, the brand. Moreover, successfully crafted sound helps ensure the ad’s impact and the instantiation of the brand through the audience member’s emotional and embodied response. Finally, as discussed with music in the previous chapter, it provides a conduit into audience members’ own historical and cultural experience, linking previous sonic experiences with ad sonic experiences, and facilitating relationship-building between the audience member and brand.

⁶ Meintjes, “Reaching ‘Overseas’: South African Sound Engineers, Technology, and Tradition,” in *Wired for Sound*, 23-46.

⁷ With sound design I also consider processing and mixing conventions and strategies.

Commercially-available sound effects libraries provide a context within which much sound design is created. Sometimes providing the source material for the design, sometimes compelling the designer to fashion new sounds, stock sound effects often serve as a ballast against which the designer expresses his own creativity. Many of my informants pride themselves on manufacturing their own unique sounds that solve their design needs. Indirectly critiquing what they consider lifeless or banal sound library selections, Evan and Alex of Blazing Music + Sound⁸ enjoy creating sounds that bring imagination, individuality, and what they call “life” to a spot:

Evan: When we can we love to do that [manufacture their own sounds] as opposed to just using stuff [from a commercial library]...

Alex: Which also brings in life, too, the way a live musician does. If you go out and record your own sounds? Because...everybody [in the industry] has the same sound effects libraries. Like I've heard...

Evan: Yeah, I can recognize the sound effects...

Alex: Yeah, all the time. 'Cause there's a hawk *awh* [he demonstrates the sound] caw that I hear all the time on TV...

Evan: Or a kid laugh...

Alex: A kid laugh, oh my god...

Evan: You know which one I'm talking about...

Alex: Yeah, I've used it! I'm guilty of it!

Evan: I don't know who that kid is, but...

Alex: Oh my gosh...There's only big basic sound effects libraries, you know, [like] the Sound Ideas Library, that's like 15 or 20 discs or something. It's wonderful to have...

Evan: Everybody has 'em...

Alex: ...but if you go out and get your own stuff, or make your own stuff, it's the same thing where there's life to it and something special...

Evan: Plus you go out with a purpose. I know I've got this scene, so I'm gonna get something closer instead of just a generic wind blowing through trees or room tone or whatever...

⁸ Read “Blazing Music and Sound.”

As a tool and resource, a library can seem to the sound designer as both bread and bane: though stock libraries can offer easily accessible building blocks for low-budget projects, sound designers often criticize libraries for over-used, unimaginative, lifeless sounds. Sound designers like Evan and Alex take satisfaction in the creativity required to customize sound for an individual spot that brings adds creativity and presence to the ad. At the same time, their unique sounds mark their craftsmanship with a quality standard above that often associated with library sounds. As Evan and Alex articulate, the creative process of building sound is infused with ideas of value shaped by their personal experiences in producing media as well as their familiarity with sound design in media like film, television programming, and other ads, all of which affect their definitions of quality sound design.

Central to this study is recognition that all audio representation is contingent on the expectations built socially, historically and technologically for how things ostensibly should sound in media representations. As Rick Altman points out, in all audiovisual media “*there is no such thing as direct representation of the real; there is only representation of representation.*”⁹ Though this may seem like a simple or even naïve remark, I see its significance in considering sound representation as socially-, culturally- and historically-constituted, and the ways sound is crafted to produce the effect of The Real. As Jonathan Sterne elaborates, our understanding of sound is grounded in the contexts of ever-emerging technologies, ideological paradigms, and concomitant listening

⁹ Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 17. Emphasis in original.

practices.¹⁰ At the turn of the twenty-first century, I argue, ad sound design is understood within a historical framework of sound in various media, including film, that construct Real representations of reality, and situate the individual as “consumer,” a position between The Real and the everyday experience of the self. Producers’ experiences with sound in media mediate producers’ (and audience members’) expectations for how The Real should sound. For ads in particular, The Real is framed within late-capitalist social practices, in which productions of The Real are associated with ideas of identity and value in the process of reifying the commodity experience, and encouraging group identification around commodities.

In my field experience, I learned that The Real is often presented through a heightening or boosting of the aural elements, particularly for the sake of making an emotional or even physical impact with audience members and to bring a life-presence to the media production. In his study of the role of technologies in the construction of music, Mark Katz has observed ways that early twentieth-century sound recording may have influenced violin vibrato practices to convey the emotionality and musical personality of the performer. While serving several functions, an increased use of vibrato “could offer a greater sense of the performer’s presence on record, conveying to unseeing listeners what body language and facial expressions would have communicated in concert.”¹¹ In fact, to project intensity through the sound, Katz quotes one violinist as

¹⁰ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005; 2003).

¹¹ Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 93.

“heightening” his vibrato, that is, intentionally increasing the vibrato in order to hide intonation imperfections and convey the performer’s emotion and expressive gestures.¹² At the same time, Katz argues, vibrato helped individuate an unseen performer’s tone, creating a unique, personalized sound that could be sensed through the recording. Although traditions like heightened vibrato may have developed to compensate for the lack of a visual element with early sound recordings, the practice of heightened sound to convey emotion and physical presence continues with sound effects practices in every medium using sound.

Conveying values and emotions through sound correlates the design directly to marketing objectives and, more specifically communicating ideas of values reified through their association with products. With producers’ fabrication of target audience identity, desires to publicize brand identity, presumptions for how those audience members listen to ads, and beliefs about the value sets those audiences hold, ad producers craft sound to carry messages about values and ideals. More than promoting products or services, the producers of the commercials I analyze here use sound to sell peace of mind, ideals for socialization, feelings and value sets. In the case of the Echo Boys’s work with Cox Business Services, Tate focuses on how to privilege events in ad’s mise-en-scene to represent ostensibly authentic representations of the scenarios depicted in the ad narrative. In the process, Tate depicts ideals for office management, organizational

¹² “While an increased use of vibrato helped compensate for the insensitivity of acoustic horns, it also allowed violinists to project their sound to microphones while minimizing bowing noise. Louis Kaufman recognized vibrato’s usefulness in this way. ‘This is something of a trick, you know—getting around the surface [noise] and yet getting the intensity at the same time. *The vibrato has to be somewhat heightened: it has to be somewhat faster than you really need for a public hall.*’” Katz, 94. Emphasis Katz’s.

control, and social relations. The Echo Boys' Harley-Davidson project demonstrates something of a blending of real and myth. Through this ad, Rob shows how ad producers' reliance on audiences' experiences and expectations contributes to the reference and reiteration of cultural myths as a way for audiences to feel sensation for the product and brand. Finally, from Blazing Music + Sound, Evan and Alex discuss their Lowe's Foods and Xyience commercials (targeting "stay-at-home moms" and "weight-lifters," respectively). These "cartoonish" or "fantasy" situations reveal ways sound design reflects values presumed to be held by their respective target audiences. While the sound design for each ad may be doing work beyond the points I illuminate, these cases reveal how the craftsmanship of ad sound design is steeped in the context of late-capitalist ideologies and social practices. Branding strategies define the sounds and the meanings associated with the sounds.

As part of a branding strategy, sound design becomes a site between producers and audience members for co-constructing simulated experiences through multimedia productions. Examinations of sound design reveal ideas about reified experience that are central to the aesthetics of creating artwork for the sake of branding and profitability goals. I explore these producers' creative processes for underlying beliefs on how people respond to sound, what kinds of sound people privilege, and how sound shapes experience. Sound design provides ad producers a way of evoking signifiers, cultural narratives, values and feelings seated in audience experience. With these case studies I interrogate the social role of sound design as a channel for reifying and commodifying personal experience. How does sound design serve to define a spectrum of "experience"

from “real” to “cartoon”? When does it serve to “represent reality authentically,” when not? How does the prioritization of narrative events through sound design contribute to the ad producers’ goals of fostering relationships between target audience members and brands? How does sound design contribute to an “attitude” or general persona representing the brand? These questions speak to the kind of “voice” created for a brand through sound design as well as the messages that voice speaks. While promoting a product, ads invite the audience members to engage with products and services that signify wish fulfillment, the satisfaction of desires for safety, sociability, prestige, or a host of other socially-, culturally- or historically-defined qualities that often lie outside the functional use (use-value) of the products or services themselves. Sound design in ads can help build sonic links between those values and branded products or services, and embody within the audience member ideas of value associated with products and brands. These are ways that the abstract idea of the brand becomes instantiated in the audience member’s own body.

The Echo Boys and Cox Business Services: Relating through The Real

Verisimilitude and order: Brokerage

For a six-spot series for telecommunications provider Cox Business Services, Tate received storyboards but has seen rough cuts for only a few spots.¹³ These ads promote Cox’s data and voice management services, like broadband wiring and support,

¹³ A “rough cut” is an early stage edit with several images in place, often to a “dummy” or temporary music track, and often without editing effects like fades, wipes and the like.

and telephone networking. Each of these spots demonstrates issues common in sound design: representing verisimilitude while lending uniqueness and style to the ad; directing an audience member's attention to elements that contribute to the marketing narrative; conveying ideas of reified values by demonstrating the benefits promised by products; and making a physical or emotional impact with audience members. Framed by Cox's and the Agency's marketing objectives, the Echo Boys's sound design processes demonstrate the designer's creative talents, familiarity with cultural codes that make sound designs successful, and negotiations of creativity with marketing objectives.

Despite minimal information from the Agency (which often mediates between client and producers like the Echo Boys), Tate decides to start building the background ambience he imagines for the spots to give himself a jump on the fast turn-around required for projects like these. In this case, Tate knows that the Agency Creative Director is going out of town at the end of the week, and the Creative Director wants to show Tate's sound design ideas to Cox before he leaves. Given the typical time frame for projects like these, often just two or three days from concept to completion, Tate's giving himself a head-start by setting some sonic groundwork before he has edited video. Tate has seen the storyboards and the scripts, and his prior experience with Cox projects gives him the confidence to start putting some sounds together so he's ready to roll as soon as he "gets the pictures." He wants to get the tracks "a lot of the way there. I think I'm gonna have to turn this around pretty darned quick...Typically I do not do it this way. I usually will have something at least to look at before I start doing sound effects..." Because of his prior experience with the client he trusts his intuition and begins the sound

design—he’s done similar 30-sec. spots before for this client and besides, he explains, these are just “little 15s.”

Tate’s room is filled with sound. The hum of hard drive fans make up a bed of room tone supporting Tate’s sound design on the Synclavier. From the streets of downtown Minneapolis below, car horns wail and the light rail train screeches and whistles, infiltrating his space as Tate reviews library holdings. He’s currently working on the spot called Brokerage that’s set in a brokerage firm office and call center, so he’s looking for clips of office sounds that he can layer and create a unique sense of space for the fictional office. This Brokerage is a satisfied Cox customer—that influences the kind of sound design Tate constructs.

The first sound clip represents general office sounds. Tate dismisses it almost immediately: “This sounds too big...I just want something for the background...This kind of spot is pretty much literal sounds. ...I enjoy doing these...You just try to make it believable. You can spend a lot of time doing that.” He gestures toward the computer screen: “I’ll sort of use this as my general wash of stuff [i.e., sound]. This [office] area’s supposed to be really active, so I gotta...gotta make it busy...” At one point I ask Tate how he imagines filling out a sound design track:

I look for, OK, here’s a general din, [and] here’s some articulate things that you might be able to pick out of there...Then a few little beeps and boops that are way up there that stick out. I’m lookin’ for a general din and here are a couple of little soloists that are poppin’ out of there every once in a while...Also keep in mind that I don’t want much up there [in the middle frequencies] where the guy’s gonna be talking...I can do the finessing once I see the attitude of what’s going on there [in the visuals].

Tate’s design of the “general din” and selection of the “soloists” lend character to the ad and brand. Like his musical decisions, his sound design decisions establish color, flavor and persona for the ad and brand. Additionally, his selection of “beeps and boops” help contemporize the scene—he’s meticulous about selecting sounds that convey a sense of the contemporary, not sounds that might seem outdated. Being careful about sounds that might conflict with any voiceover (VO), which would appear within the middle range of human hearing, Tate’s particular about the kind of work each sound does. While some sounds are intended direct the audience member’s attention to key events in the ad, many sounds provide a “general din” that fits with the Agency’s and client’s ideas for branding and strategy.

Tate flips through the library clips like pages in a Sears and Roebuck catalog. As in production music, stock sound effects are available for purchase from several companies—the Echo Boys own dozens of sound effects libraries, each containing as many as twenty or more CDs of stock sound clips. Increasingly libraries are also available on-line, and sound designers can download individual effects rather than having stacks of CDs take up precious office real estate. Because his Synclavier Audio System uses an analog interface, Tate listens through several CDs to decide which tracks to import into the Synclav database.¹⁴ He listens to one track labeled as a recording of

¹⁴ The Synclavier first appeared in the mid-1970s—Tom bought his in the early 1980s, and at the time (according to Tom) it was still the most cutting edge tool in the industry. Tom continues to use the Synclavier even today owing to his familiarity with the system, and the time required to learn other systems. Tom admits regret that he never bought a digital interface for the Synclav when it was more available—now that upgrades to the Synclav are harder to find, he laments the extra time required to import sound library effects through his analog platform. Time efficiency is one reason Tom’s been working on learning Pro Tools—demonstrating that he’s familiar with the latest, most cutting edge studio technology is another reason. Pro Tools is recognized as the industry standard, the most powerful studio processing

office sounds—it sounds like the recording was made by placing a microphone right next to a computer keyboard as someone frantically types away. A telephone very near the mic rings, and the background is filled with paper rustling and dozens of incoherent voices. Because of the way the clip is recorded, the keyboard and telephone appear very far forward in the mix, foregrounded and very loud compared to the backgrounded voices and paper rustling. Tate dismisses it almost immediately:

Too busy. It's just wrong ...A lot of the library effects that they have out are really outdated...you know, offices just don't sound like what they used to think they sounded like in old newspaper days...

He flips through only a few more office sound clips before abandoning the libraries.

Promptly dissatisfied with their stock offerings, Tate decides to create his own office soundscape.¹⁵ He's already conceptualized some of the kinds of sounds he'd like to use in creating the sonic space of the brokerage firm, and he layers two clips named OFFICE and SMALL CROWD QUIET, with which he's familiar from prior projects.¹⁶ Next he looks to fill out the design further:

Alright—let's get some individual people blabbing in here, wherever I put those...OK, so now I've got some general blabbin' goin' on. You know these offices just aren't that huge, but they're supposed to be active so I'll get some general talking...

interface available—some clients, though they might not know studio technologies, recognize by rote that Pro Tools is the most cutting-edge tool available, and sometimes evaluate a studio based on their access to Pro Tools (I spoke with one studio that admitted owning Pro Tools just to say they had it, but the sound engineer doesn't use it).

¹⁵ Besides being familiar with many stock sound effects libraries, Tom doesn't have a lot of time to search for pre-fabricated sound beds—it's more time-effective (and fun, probably) for him to simply create his own.

¹⁶ By "layering" I mean Tom positions the sound clips in a Synclavier sequence (or developing track) so that they overlap each other temporally.

To find sounds of individuals talking for this fictional office setting, he selects a library track he's imported and labeled PARTY. PARTY contributes to the general conversation-based sound bed on which he'll build, and provides certain "solo" voices that Tate may choose to stand out in the soundscape. Within the mix a male voice calls out *Can I get a refill, please?* Tate cuts the recording: "Except they're not supposed to say 'Can I get a refill please?' ...I wanna get rid of that drunk."

Brandy, sir?

Tate snorts. "Brandy sir."

Tate rewinds and plays again. *Brandy, sir?* In Tate's mind these words stand out too much and are inappropriate for the office soundscape he's trying to create, so he plans to delete this text, especially if it might interfere with the voiceover: "It's weird the way some words just jump out. They say 'Wet my whistle,' and you don't hear that in there. And all this will be under [the voiceover] talking..." Laughing becomes audible in the track. Rewind. "Oooh, laughing wouldn't be audible in the brokerage firm. It doesn't look like any fun is going on in there—I've seen it." He continues playing through PARTY. ...*Thank you.* Rewind. *Thank you.* "There you go, thank you's a good word. People on the phone would say 'Thank you' a lot."

Tate's next sound clips are voice tracks with miscellaneous lines of dialog. He runs through a few clips:

Carolina Telephone.

United Telephone.

(A deep, monotone voice:) *That's not the w...*

Tate moves on to the next clip—none of these work for him.

Five thousand two hundred dollars, congratulations!

“Hey, why not? That sounds like something somebody would say in there.” He adds the track to the mix, decreasing the volume so it appears to be part of the background.

Another telephone effect sounds within the recording—the ring reminds me of my parents’ 1970s pink acoustic kitchen phone, which had an acoustic metal bell inside that alerted us to incoming calls. “That’s not gonna work,” Tate asserts. Too ‘70s, not contemporary enough.

Once Tate is satisfied with his general soundscape, he decides he needs to fill out the sound design by representing the technologies available in this bustling brokerage office:

OK, now—we’re gonna need some phones. Phones would be a good thing in this outfit. And, you know, once we get the picture and we can see where people are walking and what the hell they’re doing then I’ll zero in on some sounds. This just saves me some time.

He adds an electronic telephone ring, then begins to play with beeps. The Synclavier enables pitch manipulation of the sound files with minimal change in timbre. Tate plays an unaltered beep using the Synclavier keyboard, depressing the key representing the pitch A below middle-C. That key represents the effect at the pitch recorded. With some experimentation, Tate depresses keys below that A, which lowers the pitch of that beep slightly. Then he adds it to the design, and decreases the relative volume slightly. With

the design of this beep, Tate fills out the sound bed with lower frequency, quieter sounds that resonate with the idea of an office setting that exudes a relaxed sense of urgency.

Tate flips through more library sound effects for “some more beeps and boops that might be going on in that room.” He dismisses some “Star Trek type sounds” in favor of some mid- to high-frequency clicks: “Sure, that would work.” He adds the taps to the montage. In context they evoke a sense of computer keyboard or 10-key tapping. He returns to and isolates the phone sound—after listening to it solo, he decides to shorten the duration of the sound and decrease the volume. Consequently, he gives the sound a lower profile, and relegates it more as part of the background ambience rather than the foreground. He plays through his sound design in full again. He says he’s listening so that things sound “natural” for the environment depicted. He says many of his assignments are “to mimic just a normal, what you think that situation would sound like.” In other words, the sounds need to represent or evoke the ambience that he believes the audience would expect for the space in that Brokerage office, a content Cox customer.

To create the feel of this Brokerage office space, Tate makes several critical decisions, including what the office should not sound like. First, stock sound effects recordings that sound “too big” might not lend the right feel for the particular office space depicted in the scene. Recordings that sound like there’s too much activity, or even frenetic, may associate an unwanted sense of stress with the satisfied Cox customer portrayed in the ad, and may distract the listener from the VO and the ad’s primary message. Second, the stock recording with the close-miked computer keyboard doesn’t

offer the right sense of perspective for the spot—keyboard clicks and the ringing telephone in that recording are foregrounded instead of being part of the general background wash intended to support the portrayal of the power broker and this office. Consequently, rather than using a stock effects recording, Tate opts to build his own office soundscape. He establishes a sound bed using a stock recording labeled PARTY from a sound effects library, which offers an upbeat, energized wash of people’s voices that’s not “too busy,” especially compared to the stock recordings he dismissed. Next he decides what kinds of appropriate “soloists” should stand out from the soundscape. All laughing and lines like *Can I get a refill?* and *Brandy, sir?* get axed. *Thank you* remains. Likewise, Tate dismisses what he calls some “Star Trek type sounds” in favor of sounds that mark the design as contemporary (as opposed to the connotations surrounding the 1960s television program *Star Trek*) and non-fictional. Through his design decisions, Tate shapes the character of this fictional office: it’s a serious place that bustles, but not frenetically. The background voices communicate an energized urgency along with gently bridled politeness.

Representations of office settings like this one encode an idealized reality, one whose sonic signifiers are deemed sensible given representations of office spaces in other media like film and television programming. Thomas Porcello observes that sound representation and ideas of what realistic sound actually sounds like are shaped simultaneously socially, historically, technologically and intertextually. Porcello notes that

[w]hen subjects report that real guns sound more “fake” than guns in the movies, for instance, they are pointing to the sonic expectations set up by the conventions of film sound mixes, as well as movie theater and home theater sound systems; such is also the case when the richly warm FM-radio announcer’s voice sounds thin and flat in face-to-face conversation, absent its compression-rich and cardioid-mic proximity-effect-enhanced radio timbre. Even where technological mediation is absent from the sonic signal chain (an increasingly infrequent event in contemporary life in all parts of the globe), its absence has a ghostlike implication for our expectations, our templates, of how we expect sounds to sound.¹⁷

Contemporaneous media inform production decisions for other media. In the early twenty-first century, film, television, video games and a host of other audiovisual media mutually influence reception expectations of each—and therefore production standards for each. This kind of intertextual mediation of how sounds “should sound” likewise affect the relationship between sonic event and meaning.

Tate’s familiarity with other media may influence his critique of the sound effect’s stock office sounds: “offices just don’t sound like what they used to think they sounded like in the old newspaper days.” Seemingly offhand, Tate’s comment elegantly reveals the interrelations of social, historical, technological and textual mediations. With one comment Tate marks the clip as man-made, obliterating common presumptions that the sounds might be captured by placing a microphone in an office setting. To say that offices don’t sound how people “used to think they sounded” brings into relief the constructions of sonic representations according to how media producers have created sound design in the past; how sonic representations in various media over the past

¹⁷ Thomas Porcello, “Afterword,” in *Wired for Sound: Engineering and Technologies in Sonic Cultures*, ed. Paul D. Greene and Thomas Porcello (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 270.

century have helped habituate expectations of sound among lay listeners and producers alike; and how ideas about how things “should sound” transform with changes in the technologies making up our daily soundscape, sound recording and processing technologies, and artistic and social trends.

Furthermore, Tate’s reference to the “old newspaper days” lends a backwards glance to media constructions of what might be considered white-collar work before the establishment of the office-bound middle class. Practically, Tate certainly has his own experience with contemporary office technologies; therefore, he has a sense for the sonic elements making up some office soundscapes. His own business uses contemporary fax machines, successive generations of computers, and telephones among other office gear. His approach to building an office soundscape is a blend of his personal witness to these technologies and their representation in various media. Additionally, he recognizes historical media trends in which particular spaces came to represent the workplace, like the newsroom. Tate’s comment conjures my recollections of Howard Hawks’s film *His Girl Friday* (1940) and Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* (1941). Both films feature the bustling newspaper offices, their sound designs sparkling with reporters chatting, typewriters clicking and handheld phones ringing in concert with the energized banter between Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell or Welles and George Coulouris. These films from the 1940s may have contributed to the shaping of sonic expectations for how offices might sound as the United States underwent its transition from an agricultural and industrial economy to one of service.

More recently, brokerage houses have been represented by modern media in films like *Wall Street* (1987), for which director Oliver Stone solicited the consulting services of former Salomon Brothers partner Kenneth Lipper to ensure the accuracy of the depiction.¹⁸ Interestingly, Stone's depiction of a brokerage firm seems more frenzied than that of this satisfied Cox customer. With phones ringing at random, voices shouting and tempers flaring, the brokerage in *Wall Street* seems more stress-filled, anxiety-ridden. In contrast, documentary film *Risk/Reward* (2003), which profiles four women employed on Wall Street, follows the work of Kimberly Euston, a currency trader for a brokerage arm of the company then known as Credit Suisse First Boston (presently known as simply Credit Suisse). As the documentary follows Euston at work, the background is filled with common office sounds, several of which are represented similarly in the Cox ad. Phones ring constantly, faxes and other office technologies beep and buzz, paper is pushed, people speak on phones and to each other across the room—and they even laugh. Despite the mass of sound, the office appears orderly and the people sound calm (unlike some portrayals in *Wall Street*).

Tate acknowledges that much sound design exists to lend a sense of verisimilitude to the image. He says many of his assignments are “to mimic just a normal, what you think that situation would sound like.” As we see through the construction of these ads, “mimicking the normal” becomes a complex, time-consuming, highly-mediated process as Agency and sound design personnel decide which aspects of the depiction to highlight in order to resonate with the branding strategy. Ad producers' ideas for how things

¹⁸ *Wall Street* (1987), Oliver Stone, 20th Anniversary ed., Twentieth Century Fox, 2007.

should sound mediate sound design decisions, particularly in terms of other sonic representations in the media and—most importantly—the message they hope to communicate. In contrast with the popular film *Wall Street*, Tate’s restrained, orderly Brokerage office suggests a state that can be achieved with Cox services. Aspects of sound design are selectively stylized to reinforce the marketing strategy. In this case, Cox services are shown to promise a sense of order or control in a space that has been popularly portrayed as volatile and hectic.

“All hell’s breakin’ loose”: Perry

Unlike Brokerage, another Cox spot, called Perry, depicts an office in dire need of help from Cox Business Services. “Perry” represents a calm, collected corporate professional in charge of his office’s IT needs. A frantic woman with tight, curly red hair scurries to Perry’s office with a crisis:

Perry, Perry—three new employees. Phones, features, voicemail—now!

With a slide of his mouse and the click of a button, Perry solicits Cox Business Services and coolly dissipates the red-haired lady’s emergency. In contrast with Brokerage, the office setting in Perry represents the storm before the calm.

As he begins building a soundbed for Perry, Tate listens to and selects a track labeled OFFICEWE [*sic*] BUSY. The track is amass with sound: paper shuffling, voices garbling, clicks clicking. Tate explains,

Yeah, we assume this office is supposed to be going haywire because she comes in and she’s all flustered, like ‘We got all these new employees and we got this and we got that.’ All hell’s breakin’ loose.

Tate listens to several more beeps and phone rings labeled PHONE03, PHONE04, 05, 06. Tate selects PHONE06, a sound with a longer duration that resembles a digital phone ring, and layers it with OFFICEWE BUSY. Next he listens to COMP KEY, a recording of computer keyboard tapping. He shortens the clip so only two taps are audible and inserts it into the mix.

From there Tate returns to his personal library and searches for “computer.” Through the course of the Perry narrative, the audience is expected to understand a chain of events made coherent through visual editing and sound design. While sitting at his computer and hearing the red-haired lady’s frantic appeal, Perry ostensibly brings up a Cox internet dialog box, which appears initially as a graphic inset against a medium shot of the anxious red-haired lady. The red-haired lady fades as the dialog box is revealed as part of a full Cox webpage. Through editing conventions, I understand the narrative: Perry scrolls down the page and clicks his mouse on select radial buttons and links on the webpage—in doing so, he sends a direction to Cox Business Services to complete a task that sets up the new employees with the needed Cox communications services. One of the first events in Perry’s process involves the on-screen depiction of a hand-shaped cursor selecting “Configure Users” on a faux Cox website. Having searched for “computer” sounds, Tate selects a beep to correspond with the action, plays with the pitch, and adds the beep into the sequence at a lower pitch than the original. He admits that “that’s just a place holder—I don’t think that’s the right beep for what’s going on there.” Later I ask Tate how he wasn’t certain that that was the “right beep.” Explaining

that the original sound may have been “just too shriek or something,” Tate speaks to a sound designer’s sensitivity to pitch and timbre, and to the goals of the marketing message:

Well, you don’t want it to stick out too much. It’s kinda wallpaper at that point. To put a real piercing sound on there...you want something to kind of blend in and go under. It’s kind of background stuff at that point...A lot of those kinds of beeps will really cut through glass—they’re really somethin’ that’s gonna stick out. That was a really important event there, so it needs something...that syncs up but [it has to be like] wallpaper.

Tate deemed the event significant enough to assign it a sound, but processed that sound so as not to draw the listener’s attention specifically or distract the listener from the ad’s primary aim.

Tate replays the sequence and removes part of the voice track with nearly imperceptible laughter. “No laughin’.” Later Tate finds some footsteps in his Synclavier library that he aligns over the image edit, preparing the audience aurally for the impending appearance of the woman on-screen. Tate’s having trouble aligning the footsteps and shuffle with the image so that the sounds and image appear realistic. He speaks half to me, half to himself as he works his way through the problem: “There’s some-m wrong with that...Gotta figure [this out]...I’ll make it work, I swear...I got one too many steps in there or something...What’s goin’ on?...Whooo.” His lips flap as he breathes through his problem.

During the conversation, Tate’s surfing the sound design bank he keeps on his Mac, ruminating on what other sounds would tell the on-screen story in the most engaging way. Tate continues surfing the library, listing through scratches and squeaks

and grinds. I ask him what sound he's looking for: "I'm not sure. I'm just playing...[I'm wondering] if that mouse should make any sound...Sometimes this stuff is better handled just goin' and getting a mic out if you want it to be [realistic]..." He plays with more beeps—he finds a timbre he likes and tests pitch after pitch after pitch. He decides on one and runs the video once more, poising his finger at the Synclavier keyboard. As the mouse click happens on-screen, he hits the keyboard, syncing the sound with the on-screen mouse-click in real time. Next, Tate surfs keyboard clicks, flutters and reverberating crashes. He adds a mechanical fluttering sound to the image depicting a close-up of a computer monitor scrolling through a webpage. The sound resembles a photocopier magazine ratcheting into place, or maybe a mechanical rolodex as it flips through business cards in search of information. "It's a bunch of BS 'cuz it wouldn't really make that sound..."¹⁹

Next he sorts through all kinds of fast wind sounds and jet fly-bys. "I'm tryin' to sort of make that sound that my computer makes when you send an e-mail. It goes *whew!*" Tate's trying to capture the idea that something important is being transported at the click of that mouse button. At the same time, he remains sensitive to any sounds that might be inherent to the Cox webpage:

So, some-m like that... You know, sometimes these companies... I don't know if their systems make certain sounds... A lot of things, like literal sounds, if you're workin' for a blender company or something, you put [the sound of] Joe Blow's blender on their blender and they know what their blender sounds like—but how would I?

¹⁹ The fluttering sound is excised at some point of the post-production process—in retrospect, Tom didn't remember when, why nor by exactly whom that decision was made. He reasoned that the design may have just gotten too "busy," and someone from the Agency decided "we just didn't need it."

Jets fly through his speaker system as he finishes his thought. “Hey, that’s kinda what it sounds like...So I just edited down that jet sound so it’ll start where I want it to, made a new sound out of it that’ll live in my computer forever now.” Tate layers a second sound clip with his jet-whoosh, a mechanical sound with two pitches roughly spanning a descending major third. He listens to his new dramatic whoosh:

I hope they go for that. I mean, it kinda says, ‘There it goes.’ I wish that I could say it was some brilliant idea. I only do it because my Dell computer at home when you send off an e-mail goes shhhhhh. The whole schtick [of this spot] is ya know, what are we gonna do what are we gonna do what are we gonna do? And it’s like one magic key and that’s—it. So if it reinforces that somehow, that would be a good thing.²⁰

Tate runs the sequence again. I watch and listen for Tate’s complete sound design—there’s a sound that represents every step in the process of Perry solving the red-haired lady’s problem: I hear a double-beep alert with the appearance of the initial dialog box graphic inset, then a single beep as a hand-shaped cursor selects the “Configure Users” option; I hear the mechanical flutter as Perry scrolls through the Cox Business Services webpage; Perry taps on the number keyboard; the mouse boops as Perry makes a selection from Cox Business Services; with an extreme close-up, a webpage radial button beeps as Perry’s arrow-cursor contacts it and it fills in.²¹ Then I watch as Tate hits a Synclavier key and pastes a copy of his new jet fly-by with the cut to a medium-shot of the satisfied Perry, who just e-delivered his directions to Cox.

²⁰ This “whoosh with pitches” sound is excised near the end of the post-production process by the Picture Editor, an Agency representative.

²¹ The “mouse boop” becomes a click in a later version.

“So, yeah, I’ll bust it out in a couple different layers.” He’s preparing the sequence so that he can transfer the timeline to Rob for mixing with the spots. In the process, he reviews his work and realizes he may have miscalculated on the footsteps early in the clip. “Sheh. And now I look at it—it’s been workin’ good for me but—one, two, three, four, five...” The red-haired lady’s feet and legs aren’t actually visible on-screen, but Tate uses her upper body movements to align footsteps sounds with her image. “There’s one, two—some-m’s wrong with that second to the last step...Ah, it’s drivin’ me nuts now. It looked perfectly right to me before but now—does she slow down just a little right before [she stops and turns in Perry’s office doorway]?...Or does she just slide in there?” Rewind. Review. He modifies the timing of the second-to-last step and seems satisfied once again.

Although the office ambience for Perry is represented for only the first eleven seconds while that of Brokerage lasts nearly the entire thirty second ad, it’s apparent that Tate’s soundbed for Perry differs from Brokerage in density and texture. While remaining subtle, the background voices in Perry’s disordered office are louder in the mix, more numerous, and sound at a higher overall frequency range. Perry’s office has more phones ringing, and his office exhibits different kinds of phone rings at different pitch levels and different, irregular durations. As the phones sonically appear in Perry more frequently than in Brokerage, they lend an arrhythmic and disorderly feel to the soundscape. In contrast, the Brokerage phones all ring at the same pitch and duration, reinforcing a sense of consistency. Fewer phones ring in Brokerage, too—an interesting detail considering that the office represented is a brokerage call center. The infrequency

of the phone rings help maintain a sense of order within the representation of the Brokerage. These differences leave Perry's office feeling more chaotic than the Brokerage, which already enjoys its Cox Business Services solution—the anxiety portrayed by the red-haired lady in Perry confirms the overall pre-Cox-solution affect. The soundscape lends each respective office a different feel, one that demonstrates a pre-Cox disorder and lack of control (Perry's), and one that subtly emphasizes the orderliness bestowed on an office using Cox Business Services (the Brokerage). In both spots Cox Business Services are associated with order and reliability, a salve for a corporate professional's potential anxieties around control, efficiency and productivity.

In his endorsement of sound analysis methods that integrate music, sound design and dialog, Paul Théberge recognizes the function of background noise—or lack thereof—to communicate meaning in film. For him, “relational silences,” that is, representations of presence or absence through sound, rely on the audience member's understanding of sound conventions and their roles in creating Hollywood realism, and are designed to invoke feelings or values associated with the reality represented. For instance, with the final scene of John Huston's *Asphalt Jungle* (1950), Théberge observes that

the chief of police turns up the volume on several radio receivers, resulting in a cacophonous montage of police communications; then, in switching them off again, he invokes the fear of a city without police protection, a city where dangerous criminal elements are allowed to operate in silence.²²

²² Paul Théberge, “Almost Silent: The Interplay of Sound and Silence in Contemporary Film and Television,” in *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound*, ed. Jay Beck and Tony Grajeda (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 53.

Beyond the Cox services of themselves, these qualities emulated through sound design constitute the added value of Cox's telecommunications services as reified through the ad, and discernable in the Cox Business Services branding strategy. Not only do customers invest in Cox's voice and data transmission services, they also purchase relief from their anxieties and perceived lack of control.

Representing each office setting realistically also relies upon conventions long ago borrowed from film like image and audio synchronization, as evinced by Tate's great pains to synchronize the red-haired lady's footsteps with her imaginary feet. Rick Altman describes these *codes of reality*, that is, iconic and indexical relationships between audiovisual representation and what audiences might accept as real.²³ With regard for early film, Altman situates emerging film sound technologies socially and historically—he emphasizes that early film sound technologies that garnered any acceptance represented sound in terms of already accepted representation practices. In representing reality, each medium borrows from conventions already defined by other, pre-existing and established media.²⁴ For instance, reality codes for voice synchronization in early film were rooted in the expectations set by voice-sync

²³ Altman, 16-18. Emphasis in original.

²⁴ “If each medium defines a particular version of reality and codifies in a specific manner the systems required for successful representation, thereby establishing necessary and sufficient conditions for representing the real, then in order to represent properly each new technology must succeed in representing not reality itself but the version of reality established by some already existing technology. In other words, *there is no such thing as direct representation of the real; there is only representation of representation*. Anything that we would represent is already constructed as a representation by previous representations. Because reality is always already coded by previous representations, the process of representing reality must always take into account those codes and the representations that produced them.” Altman, 17. Emphasis in original.

technologies successful in operatic and theatrical productions.²⁵ In the case of the spot called Perry, Tate's soundscape is shaped not only by other representations of offices in films or other media. The designer must also take into account how audiences are habituated to expect verisimilitude between sounds like footsteps and related body motion seen on-screen. Footsteps that seem out-of-sync with the red-haired lady's movements might distract the audience, and mark the representation as lacking quality.

Interestingly, Tate also breaks reality codes when he deems it necessary. Although he admits that a sound like the mechanical fluttering is "a bunch of BS 'cuz it wouldn't really make that sound," his instinct is to show the motion of the scrolling website with the rhythmic ratcheting mechanical sound as an important detail in narrating Perry's actions. Here sound helps tell a story about simplicity, dependability and efficiency.²⁶ The double-beep timed with the initial appearance of the graphic inset draws the audience member's attention to the new and physically impossible image; close-ups on Perry's mouse-clicking finger are accompanied by simple single clicks; selections of links or radial buttons are also paired with electronic boops or eeks that are fractions of a second in duration, with pitch and timbre differentiating each. The quick and regular rhythm of the mechanical flutter married to the webpage scrolling suggests predictability and reliability.

²⁵ Altman, 158-66.

²⁶ The need to represent simplicity and efficiency may be why certain sounds like the fluttering were eliminated in post—those sounds may have made the crucial Perry-saves-the-day computer sequence seem too busy. At the same time, it may have breached codes of reality in ways that the editor and producer didn't find satisfying. Again, I was unable to confirm the reasons for the excisions.

Finally, Tate's decisions emphasize what he considers salient events at the height of the plot, in which Perry moves his mouse, scrolls through a Cox webpage, clicks a radial button, and e-requests Cox services. All the sounds dramatize Perry's interaction with his computer—and thereby with Cox—as he simply, efficiently requests Cox services. Tate's most prized design element, his manufactured “whoosh” with the final mouse click, reveals his ideas for accentuating and heightening what he deems the most important event in the narrative, the final act in mitigating the red-haired lady's emergency. Based on Tate's experience with his personal home computer, the whoosh serves several purposes. The texture of the whoosh, with the mechanical two-pitch clip layered with it, is more complex than the sounds leading up to it, heightening the drama of this final moment of sending away the request for services. The jet fly-by sound connotes speed, stream-lined sleekness, efficiency and savvy; the two-pitch, descending motive confirms finality. The marriage of these sonic symbols communicates a subtle yet confident panache that accompanies the medium reverse shot to Perry, who turns assuringly toward the red-haired lady and silently suggests that he's quelled her angst.

The brand and the social: Sports Bar

“So now we gotta deal with a guy in a sports bar next.”

Tate listens to library tracks with crowds of people. Tate is concerned about representing the crowd sonically in terms of the camera's perspective. “...[It'll] depend on how they cut it, if they got some people way the heck back there [in the background of the visual frame].” More tracks with crowds. “The opening scene is like they're

standing by where they're cooking." He's thumbing through clips that have clinks and clacks that could resemble movements of plates, glasses and silverware.

Promptly concluding that the library tracks don't satisfy, Tate turns to some of his own recordings. Besides using library effects in his sound design, Tate collects field recordings for his work using a DAT or a MiniDisc. Because he made these recordings himself, he knows what kinds of referent materials are available in the recording—he doesn't have to waste time going through library recordings when he knows what's available in his own. He plays through one track with voices I recognize from the Echo Boys's and Crash+Sue's staff. "So, a lot of this stuff, I just know where it's at. So, I need a knuckle-head in a bar. There's one! It's called P-LOUDMOUTH." He samples part of the track where laughter is followed by Tate's own voice saying *I'm smooth, ain't I?* "Ain't I." Tate rolls his eyes at his own grammar and antics. It's actually the laughter in that track that Tate's after, and he's looking for more laughter to mix in. He leafs through tracks of his own kids laughing, then comes across another recorded laugh resembling Beavis of MTV's *Beavis and Butthead*. "I don't think we'll use that one." He flips through more: "Hmph, smoke laugh...That's a real laugh but it sounds like a witch...Oooh, EVIL CLOWN LAUGH—that'd be nice in there..." Tate's referring to another "real laugh" from one of his employees—despite the label he assigned to it when he recorded and stored it, somehow EVIL CLOWN LAUGH works for his mix. He finishes the track. The recorded moment featuring the "witch laugh" made it into the mix along with EVIL CLOWN LAUGH. Recordings from Tate's kids and "Beavis" aren't considered appropriate for representing that venue, so they don't make the cut.

In terms of sound design content, Tate's pushing the track about as far as he thinks he can. "I was thinking there might be a baseball game on the TV, but if the music's goin', it's gonna be just a mess." As he explains later, "there's a certain busy factor. There's a certain point where something's gotta go to keep it clean...If there's too much to take you away from what you're supposed to really be listening to in the first place that's a bad thing..." Given that the ad's purpose is to channel the audience member's perception and thought process in a direction that favors the ad narrative (and the client's revenue and profit motives), Tate seeks to keep the mix "clean," free from the quantity or kinds of sounds that might distract the audience member from the branding goals.

With Sports Bar, Tate shows his meticulous concern for presenting sound that validates the image (just as the image must justify the sound design decisions). For these Cox spots, representing the ad's narrative scenarios "realistically" lends a kind of character to the Cox Business Services brand. To represent the Sports Bar with more material, like sounds from TV-broadcast sporting events, the soundscape will be too cluttered. Despite the fact that the Cox would support the broadband services necessary for displaying televised sports in a bar—and despite the fact that the Agency's original memos and storyboards specifically point out that TVs are visible in the ad—Tate builds a soundscape around people, social interaction and, most distinctively, laughter.²⁷ In this way, Tate accomplishes two things: he avoids creating a soundscape in which too much

²⁷ That aspect of the mise-en-scene, TVs on the walls of the Sports Bar, don't appear in the final version of the ad. Images with TVs on the walls were either re-thought during production or edited out.

activity could distract the audience member from the primary message of the ad, particularly if the soundscape distracted from the VO. Additionally, it centers the sonic focus of the ad not on products or services, but around people socializing and laughing—that contributes to the humanization of the brand by highlighting social experiences. The soundscape allows a shift in perception from the inanimate product to the possibilities for socialization that the products and services promise. For the sole proprietor or manager of a sports bar, creating an atmosphere for socialization is critical for profitable business.

Furthermore, Tate’s choice to use personal recordings rather than library stock effects serves him in two ways. First, it saves him time in creating the soundscape when his experience tells him he’ll have to turn the project around quickly. He’s familiar with the content of his own field recordings, and feels confident that he can find satisfactory material. Second, it infuses “real” voices into the sound design as opposed to the canned, generic stock recordings. With his field recordings, Tate may feel more assured that the soundscape will sound “natural” or “organic,” to borrow a few favorite industry buzz words.

Sonic drama (with a wink): Drip

Next Tate builds new sequences for the spot he calls Drip. According to the first video edit Tate’s received, the visuals start with after-hours shots of an office acoustic tile ceiling. The storyboards show water dripping from the ceiling onto papers and into coffee cups on the desks below. The VO begins with:

You can go out of your office—

But what if your office goes out on you?

Immediately after these first lines the ceiling caves in under a gush of water. The VO helps set up the drama around this office catastrophe—the ad’s message states that, with Cox’s VoiceManager products and services, a business would still remain functional even if disaster struck and shut down the office (or at least a few desks, as shown in the ad). Tate looks to dramatize the trickle then the torrent gushing from the ceiling onto the desks, files and office equipment below. He jokes: “This one’s kinda fun ‘cuz it’s kind of a game—when the pictures show up we’ll see how close it is [to seeming realistic with the image]. Like the Pepsi Challenge.”²⁸

Starting with the point of greatest emotional effect, Tate’s working with a sound clip labeled WALL CRASHING. “So really all I want from that [sound clip] is the big impact—it’s not like there’s gonna be a bunch of wood falling or anything [in the images]...” He deletes three-quarters of the clip, keeping less than a second of the WALL CRASHING sound, then decreases the volume. He draws from other clips with names reflecting what they represent: WATER CRASH, WATERFALL, WATER UND, WATER RUSH, WATER MOVE. He samples parts of each and layers them in the mix. “So I’m just loadin’ this up with a ton of sounds... I really want it to get big.” Layering these, Tate forges a densely textured mass of sound to represent the initial rush of water as the ceiling caves in. He comes across one sound clip that ends with water sounds

²⁸ Tom explains, “I think, you know, most of everything that I end up getting... usually has some sort of a humorous spin on it. Plus you know we’ll have to see when we get it in there [i.e., in the mix]. Because the music is sorta the little exclamation point or the little poke in the ribs, when music kicks in. A lot of times when you have a quiet moment like that, the music is like the rim shot, like, OK, here we go. So a little wink comes out of the music, too.”

flowing to an eventual dribble. Rewind, play back. “That’s what I needed,” Tate mumbles. “I needed it to stop.” He imports the clip into the mix. Later Tate explains that the effectiveness of the design will come from “a crack splash that’ll stick out on the high end and then a river, low rumble so it’ll make it sound big.”

Moving next toward the beginning of the clip, Tate works on building the drama before the ceiling crashes. He puts DRIP WET into the sequence, shortens the clip so only a few seconds sound, then aligns the end of DRIP WET with the beginning of WALL CRASHING. From there Tate moves forward from the water sounds to create sounds resembling the infrastructure breaking. First he pulls up FAUCET SQWK, listens, inserts. This sound contributes to a narrative logic that fits the image in Tate’s mind: “Gotta give it a reason to break—pipe broke.” He listens to STRTCH WD, a sound already imported into the Synclav system—he named the sound file as such because it sounded to him like wood stretching. Sampling about a second of STRTCH WD, Tate adds it to the sequence immediately preceding the water rush sounds.²⁹

Next he returns to the water sounds, wanting to supplement the sounds he has with something that sounds more powerful. He calls up a file he’s dubbed RIVER, and pulls it into the Synclavier system’s “polymemory,” which allows Tate to play with the track’s pitch. He shifts RIVER’s pitch down using the D and F keys on the Synclavier

²⁹ Much of Tom’s detail here—representations of pipes breaking, wood stretching, walls cracking—was eliminated before the final mix. According to Tom the Agency wasn’t interested in “all that other theater that I tried to put in there...They didn’t want any pre-shadowing that something was happening here...” From the Agency’s perspective, the sounds of walls cracking and pipes breaking detracted from the sudden impact of the water gushing through the ceiling. The sounds offering sonic logic for the water gush gave too much information, setting the listener up to expect the water gush. In the opinion of Agency personnel, eliminating the precursory sounds makes the water gush more sudden, more startling, more impactful.

keyboard: “I was gonna...gonna get a little extra beef on this thing...when all the water comes rushin’ out ...” Having manufactured a new sound clip at a lower, beefier pitch, Tate gives it the unique name JOYCRVR.³⁰ He sometimes names his personal creations with respect for contemporary events that will jog his memory on when he used it—he uses his life history as a mnemonic for tracking the effects he invents. In this case, he believes his memory of my presence in his studio will help prompt his memory for how to locate that specific effect in the future.

The Drip spot presents several issues common in sound design. First, ideas about cleverness seem to differentiate quality sound design and the expertise of designers—at least among designers themselves. Tate’s reference to Drip being something of a fun game at this early stage in development alludes to his enjoyment of finding a smart, perhaps unconventional solution to the many challenges his clients present. In an interview Tate explained that, with sound design,

I put a little wink into everything...I try to do somethin’ more than just put the literal stuff there. I mean, [I] do that as well, but if I can put a goofy sound in, like this thing [the ceiling in Drip] falling down, make it go *rrrr*, [he groans] you know, why not?

A sound designer’s many audiences include not only lay listeners (that is, people who may be media-savvy yet unfamiliar with the mechanics and processes of ad production). Audiences also include clients, Agencies, and, significantly, the sound designer’s peers.

³⁰ Several newly invented sound clips were dubbed JOYCExxx during my internship and field experience with the Echo Boys.

A designer's creativity—particularly in contrast with banal library stock sound effects—marks the craftsman and his work with a badge of competence and exceptionality.

Second, Drip exemplifies the advertising world's desire to create "impact." In this instance, Tate's use of the word ("So really all I want from that [sound clip] is the big impact...") carries a double meaning. On one hand, Tate wants to represent the physical impact created by a gush of water crashing through an acoustic tile ceiling. On the other hand, Tate's obliquely referring to a favorite ad world qualitative metric for ad efficacy. In advertising parlance, "impact" refers to an embodied effect of an ad upon the audience member, particularly an emotional response. To generate that emotional response, Tate wants to create a design for Drip that's "loaded" up with sound, a "big" and "beefy" sound. Tate's idea for shaping this impactful sonic event involves heightening the listener's sense of the natural.³¹ Within the codes of reality by which he must abide, Tate designs sound that not only represents the water breaking through the ceiling, but sounds like an overwhelming, massive flow. The sound sequence begins with a "crack splash that'll stick out on the high end," attracting a listener's attention or maybe even startling her. Following that is a "low rumble so it'll...sound big."³² The ad's message implies that unforeseen disasters could strike and business people need to be prepared—the

³¹ I thank David Samuels for helping me with this turn of phrase.

³² Sound designer Tomlinson Holman writes that manipulations of frequency within the sound envelope represent ways that "[s]ound has a subliminal role [in media], working on its audience unconsciously [*sic*]...[An] example of this kind of thing is the emotional sound equation that says that low frequencies represent a threat. Possibly this association has deep primordial roots, but if not, exposure to film sound certainly teaches listeners this lesson quickly. A distant thunderstorm played underneath an otherwise sunny scene indicates a sense of foreboding, or doom, as told by this equation...[T]he shark in *Jaws* is introduced by four low notes on an otherwise calm ocean..." Tomlinson Holman, *Sound for Film and Television* (Boston: Focal Press, 1997), xvi.

dictates of corporate culture insist that the wheels of business turn under any circumstance. The “crack” and “rumble” sonically align one’s startled reactions with unspoken value sets and capitalistic anxieties around businesses ostensibly living on and functioning efficiently despite any catastrophe.

Finally, Tate’s quirky sound clip naming system brings to light the problems of sound as icon and the complications of sound-derived meanings in context. Tate knows he can’t realistically track his favorite sound clips using names that simply index what the sound might represent to him. He might remember how a particular clip sounds, but would likely have to listen to dozens of RIVER clips (and clips with similar monikers) before reaching his newly-invented JOYCRVR. Especially since many sound effects might represent different sonic events or meanings in different contexts, the label used to name a sound clip could actually be misleading. Instead, by incorporating some reference to his life experience into the file name, Tate adds a unique tracking mechanism to the clip and circumvents a potential problem presented by the inherent inconstancy and fluidity of sonic representation.

The Echo Boys and Harley-Davidson

Blending myth and the real

Professional motorcyclist Kaiser Norton rides Harleys for three reasons: “the cool styling, the throaty V-Twin sound and the powerful feel.”³³ At least that’s according to

³³ “Kaiser Norton, *professional motorcycle rider, Harley owner since 1994.*” Harley-Davidson 2006 Annual Report, www.harley-davidson.com, accessed 9/10/07. Kaiser Norton exists—I found his name on

Harley-Davidson's 2006 Annual Report, where Norton's testimony lies among several that attest to Harley owners' experiences with their Hogs.³⁴ As Norton's words attest, the Harley-Davidson engine sound marks the product as unique among motorcycles. Advertisers draw from the sound—as well as associations with the sound—as they build television ads for Harley products.³⁵ I focus here on the sounds selected and carefully processed for one commercial in the Harley-Davidson “Live By It” campaign, an ad called “Original Music.” With the Harley-Davidson brand, advertisers know that there's a signature in the sound of a Harley engine that differentiates it among motorcycles. Over time, this signature has become permeated with cultural myths and popular narratives that, for instance, circulate associations with motorcycle clubs like the Pagans or Hell's Angels, or even invoke Harley's own historical advertising.

Other audiovisual media, like the popular films *The Wild One* (1953) and *Easy Rider* (1969), may significantly shape cultural perceptions for how Harley's sound should

a results listing for the All Harley Drag Racing Association from 2003, <http://www.ahdra.com/livearchive/livevegas2003.html>, accessed 9/10/07.

³⁴ The 2006 Annual Report claims these owners' statements as evidence of the community built around and through Harley-Davidson products: “There are many stories about Harley-Davidson. Each one is testimony to the rare and privileged bond between our Company and our customers.”

³⁵ In 1994 Harley-Davidson filed a trademark application on its engine sound. Nine competitors filed comments opposing the application, citing other brands of bikes with similar engines and thus similar sounds. After six years and litigation, Harley-Davidson retracted its trademark application. See Michael B. Sapherstein, *The Trademark Registrability of the Harley-Davidson Roar: A Multimedia Analysis*, http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/law/st_org/iptf/articles/content/1998101101.html, accessed 10/3/07; HD's trademark application is copied at <http://www.lectlaw.com/files/inp14.htm>, accessed 10/3/07. “We do know that the sound is one of the two main reasons why people buy our cycle -- the look and the sound,” said Ken Schmidt, Harley-Davidson spokesman. “Competitors have begun copying our sound, and we are concerned about possible confusion.” *NYT*, 10/8/95, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=990CE1DA1531F93BA35753C1A963958260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=print>, accessed 10/3/07.

sound as represented in sound design.³⁶ In both films the deep, wide vibration of the protagonists' motorcycle engines are held in contrast with other bikes. The famous opening scene of *The Wild One* involves a stationary camera positioned in long shot on the center line of a road as Marlon Brando narrates an opening. A low, thunderous roar gradually increases in volume as dozens of bikes approach the camera, then burn past either side, one bike even skidding in near-miss as a high-pitched squeal tears through the mix. The engine sounds in the design seem to be close-miked recordings with a fair amount of engine revving, emphasizing the low, rumbly sound emitted from the deep engine vibrations. This opening scene is followed by the motorcycle gang entering a small California town and disrupting a town-sponsored motorcycle race—the engines of the racing bikes are noticeably higher in pitch, faster and shallower in vibration, and seem to exhibit less detail in sound quality, that is, may not have been miked as closely upon recording. The sound of the rebellious gang's close-miked bike engines become associated with their antics as they rattle the townspeople's social boundaries. Throughout *The Wild One*, as Brando's character Johnny Strabler is shown to be a sympathetic character, Strabler's integrity and rejection of injustice is connected with his persona and the bike. Similarly, in *Easy Rider*, the small motorbikes with which Peter Fonda's and Dennis Hopper's characters are introduced in the film sound nasally and whiny compared to the Harley engines they ride later. The loudness of the Harley engine

³⁶ In *The Wild One* (1953), Marlon Brando's character actually rode a Triumph Thunderbird 6T, not a Harley; nonetheless, the leather-donned, rebellious Johnny Strabler contributes to the myth co-opted by Harley-Davidson marketing. In a well-known line from *The Wild One*, a female character asks Strabler "What are you rebelling against?" Strabler replies, "What do you got?"

portrayed as the bike is positioned near or approaching the camera accentuates the irregular firings of the Harley engine that give it its characteristic “potato-potato” feel.³⁷

The creative team for Original Music confronted several critical decisions. These decisions hinged upon the producers’ assumptions on how their audiences listen, how listeners respond to sound in ads, and how people relate with brands through sound. The discourse of ad producers brings into relief how fixed ideas of listeners and reception practices are culturally-specific and ideologically-imbued. In this case, ideas about the listener are shaped by advertising culture and branding strategies. More than just a reflection of market demographics, a branding strategy establishes a persona for an inanimate company or product. As an examination of the sound for this Harley-Davidson spot will show, sound design can blend ideas of myth and real to serve branding strategy: in doing so, sound design imbricates a complex constellation of signifiers with the brand, and can evoke narratives, values or feelings that marketers believe resonate with specifically-targeted audiences. Similar to the Echo Boys’s work on the Cox spots, their efforts on “Original Music” were conceptualized to heighten the listener’s sense of the natural.

Responding to a dip in product sales in early 2006, Harley-Davidson selected an Advertising Agency to generate buzz for the product line. Television commercials for

³⁷ Whereas the horizontal configuration of most bikes deliver a balanced, regular rhythm as the pistons fire with each revolution of the crankshaft, the Harley’s V-twin design results in irregular firing. With many bikes each piston is connected to the crankshaft with a separate pin from its connecting rod. With a Harley engine, both pistons are connected to the crankshaft with the same pin. Along with the pistons’ V configuration, this makes the pistons fire at irregular intervals, creating the unique “potato-potato” sound. “What gives a Harley-Davidson motorcycle its distinctive sound?” HowStuffWorks, <http://auto.howstuffworks.com/question325.htm>, accessed 6/4/08.

the Live By It campaign were first broadcast that year, and revised ads continue to run today. The ad entitled Original Music resembles many Harley spots in its conjuring of the Harley myth, highlighting the lone rider on the open road, at once outlaw and outcast, a resister to the status quo. The ad's VO reads as follows:

*Original music and lyrics by William Harley, Arthur, Walter and William Davidson
With live performances daily at your Harley-Davidson dealer
It's easier than you might think to make some music of your own*

The title and script for Original Music already reveal part of the ad's strategy. Saying that the sound of the Harley is "Original" marks the sound with an elite status, a valuable uniqueness that implicitly devalues competitors as imitators. Referring to the engine's "Music" connects an aesthetic validity and desirability to the sound. As "music," this form of sound represents value, aesthetic pleasure and distinctive quality. Furthermore, "music" implies that the value in this sound is appreciated most by well-trained, highly-attuned listeners. Finally, one can capture this music—that is, you can make some Harley music of your own—by visiting a Harley dealer and acquiring your own instrument. This associates a craftsmanship with owning and riding a Harley; in this way, Harley riders are celebrated for their taste and knowledge of quality bikes. Associated with the qualifiers "Original" and "Music," the sound marks the bike as an exceptional product that distinguishes a Harley rider from other motorcyclists.

In conceptualizing the Harley rider, the Agency Copywriter who wrote this voiceover script wrote to emulate how he thinks Harley riders speak. He believes that Harley riders "tend to be really straight-forward and conversational. [When they hear an ad script, they think] Yeah, I'll buy that. They kinda talk like I talk." When I asked the

Copywriter who he believed would respond to a commercial like this, who was buying Harleys, he commented that the commonality among Harley enthusiasts has to do with an attitude and how these people spend their free time. “[W]hether it’s a plastic surgeon or a factory worker...” the Copywriter believes, “...these are people who don’t put up with a lot of bullshit.” They believe in “simple, honest things...the bond is in their mentality toward life...” With that in mind, the Copywriter also instructed the Voiceover Talent to deliver a dry, flat reading of the copy. He told the Talent to imagine, “you’re a friend of the viewer...you’re showing him your bike—explain it to him. You [bring] him into your garage, turn on a light, and show him your bike...” The Copywriter noted that with the first few takes the Talent was “puttin’ a little mustard on” his delivery. In other words, the Talent’s early readings included voice inflections and emphases outside the Copywriter’s imagination. This “mustard” didn’t convey the cool, aloof biker persona that the Copywriter had in mind. With a little Copywriter coaching, the Talent soon captured a detached, no-nonsense sensibility that corresponded with the Copywriter’s conception of the Harley persona.

Like the voiceover, the sound design for this spot is critical in depicting a Harley sensibility, but with even greater subtlety and sophistication. The project initially landed in Tate’s lap, a master sound designer with a well-earned reputation in the Minneapolis advertising and media production communities. After receiving the rough cut of this spot (that is, images edited without sound), Tate created an original design based on his personally-recorded stock of Harley-Davidson engine sounds. Around the Echo Boys studio, several team members voiced concern over the sound design: Tate’s archive

contained several original Harley engine recordings, but his sounds were based on the Sportster family of bikes, whose Evolution[®] engines are smaller and less-powerful than the Twin Cam[®] featured in the images. Would the Agency accept a sound design based on a Harley engine that didn't match the image? Or is the Agency willing to absorb additional costs for re-recording the Twin Cam[®], not to mention the schedule delay. After an ambivalent response from the Agency—and being under a deadline himself—Tate designed sound based on his Sportster archive. To compensate for the engine disparity, Tate supplemented his Sportster sounds with other complex, multi-layered sound effects he custom-crafted for that spot. Drawing from his collection of thunders, jet whooshes, and other complex sounds, Tate enhanced the Sportster sound design, and saved these new effects in his Synclavier Audio System with names like TWINBEEF.

The Agency declined Tate's design—it might insult the sensibilities and knowledge base of Harley aficionados who could hear the difference between the Evolution[®] and Twin Cam[®] engines. As a matter of practice, ad producers avoid such distractions from their communication goals—they want the viewer-listener to be caught up in the ad experience and message, not thinking about extraneous information. Additionally, the Harley brand relies on associations with ideas of authenticity and veracity. As Echo Boys engineer Rob explains,

[t]he big thing for them is kind of the authenticity of the sounds. Because people really know that Harley sounds a certain way. And if it's not that sound put against that picture, that Harley, some people might not want—it's a big deal for them to have that be true.

So the Agency collected its own recordings from a bike with the same engine as that in the images.³⁸ Running the bike at a consistent 50 mph, a recordist captured the engine sound at different angles and distances, sometimes tracking the microphone around the bike to simulate movement. Then the Agency delivered the sounds to Rob for processing and editing. Inspired by the pictures, Rob designed sound in accord with his knowledge of film and television editing practices, the Agency’s creative direction, and his own creative impulses. The sound design was constructed to present an aural experience to accompany the pictures, to offer the audience a feeling of witnessing the ride and for actually being on the bike.³⁹

For the first Establishing Shot (where the landscape establishes the setting), Rob said the Agency creative team “kinda wanted a sound like they were just riding through the hills and kind of a far off, echoey perspective...” So he pulled out some low frequency, added a slight delay and processed the sound using a reverberation plug-in for Pro Tools. In the second shot, where the bike first approaches the camera, Rob imported

³⁸ Luckily, the Agency had two ready resources. The Agency’s Creative Director owned a Dyna Low Rider, with a Twin Cam® 88, and the Agency itself supposedly owns a Dyna Street Bob, with a Twin Cam® 96. [The stories between the Echo Boys and Agency conflict, so I’m not entirely certain whether the 88 or 96 was recorded.]

³⁹ Rob: “[A]s far as the processing... I had one exact copy of that same thing. The top one and the second one are the same sounds, but one is EQ’d a little differently, a little more compressed. And then you kind of mix the two...They’re the same track [but] the processing for each is a little different...[In the pan-tilt shot of the bike traveling Screen-R to Screen-L, the] top one has a little more high end to it, and this one, I think I was trying to bring out that really vibrating tone to it in the second one...Up front [in the establishing shot], of course, they kinda wanted a sound like they were just riding through the hills and kind of a far off, echoey perspective... some bottom end taken out, put a delay on it so there’s a slight echo and then, yeah, put it through a reverb...So just doing something slightly different [with] each cut...And on this one here [close-ups of the bike], like, it sort of changes more drastically than the others. And I just again copied it so these [tracks] are the exact same thing, but I just shifted the bottom two [tracks] slightly so that it just kind of phases...I mean, there’s no particular reason for it except to do something different and, I don’t know, cool sounding...So there’s no conscious reason—well, there’s a reason for it, but to do something different. And at the end they wanted to really feel it [the bike] go by and end with that wind.”

identical sound clips into two tracks, aligned the identical tracks to play simultaneously, then processed the two tracks differently. In one track he boosted the upper frequency range. With the other track, he boosted low frequencies, and compressed the track. Compression narrows the amplitude range of the wave so that loud sounds aren't so loud, and quiet sounds aren't so quiet. With compression the listener can hear the intricacies of the engine more distinctly. Volume increases gradually as the bike approaches the camera's position. An extra sound design "whoosh" emerges as the bike nears the camera, accentuating the movement of the bike toward the viewer's eye. These extra sound design elements are residuals from Tate's original design.

The next four Close-Ups (CU) are uniquely related. With the first three CUs—tracking the left side of the bike, CU on the boot, and CU tracking to the front wheel on the right side—the original sound for each shot comes from the same source, what Rob calls a "base motorcycle sound." For the first two CUs, Rob supplemented the base sound with other Twin Cam[®] recordings from the same recording session, simply to make each shot sound unique. For the CU on the wheel, Rob phased the tracks physically. In other words, Rob copied the base sound excerpt into two different tracks in Pro Tools. Then he physically slid one track so that it was slightly misaligned with its identical partner. Rob said he did this "simply looking for a way to change the sound so each shot would have a different feel," which adheres to film conventions in which each edit cut implies a change in position and, therefore, sound perception. Misaligning the sounds also accentuates the imbalanced "potato-potato" feel characteristic of Harley engines. Moreover, according to Rob, these shots are "a little more compressed" than the

two opening shots, heightening the details of the engine's sonic artifacts. The fourth CU—the pivot shot around the gas tank from the rider's perspective—is a completely different original recording. With the shot of the gas tank, Rob recalled that the Agency Creatives “wanted it to really feel like you're on [the bike]...” To achieve this, Rob explained to me via e-mail that he “found a sound that was naturally bigger/meatier, had more vibration to give the sense that you were on the bike.” He then boosted the low end and compressed the sound, again making the details in the sound easier to hear.

The final two shots—the first being a Long Shot (LS) of the bike approaching the camera, then another LS of the bike driving away—show respective increases and decreases in volume, and additional sound design elements. A “whoosh” over the edit emphasizes the bike's presumed passage in front of the viewer. The final shot accentuates the bike's departure with slight delay and reverb, and extra design elements like looped wind sounds and birds establish the outdoor scene. Rob recalled that “at the end they wanted to really feel [the bike] go by and end with that wind.”

When I asked about his creative approach, Rob explained that he was “just doing something slightly different [with] each cut...I mean, there's no particular reason for it except to do something different and, I don't know, cool sounding...So there's no conscious reason—well, there's a reason for it, but to do something different.” Rob's commitment to building uniqueness, not only for the sounds as a whole but for each edit, indicates his awareness of expectations for sound design. Though he doesn't have the industry tenure of his boss Tate, Rob recognizes at this early career stage the markers for quality: knowing film (and media) conventions, knowing when and how to break

convention, and crafting unique sound that conveys meaning under the guide of marketing objectives prescribed by his client.

In line with the Harley brand strategy, Rob's work invites the media-savvy audience member to place himself in the ad, to hear the distant echoes of riding through hills, to feel vibrations. Rob's decisions were based on making one shot just "slightly different" from the next, which follows film editing conventions without calling undue attention to the ad's mechanics. Likewise, the audio edits had to be smooth and simple, distinct yet modest. Any jarring edits might come off as lacking quality or pretentious, overemphasizing the powerful presence of the bike or jolting the listener from the relaxed lull of the engine's deep, distinctive voice. Furthermore, the sound design refers to physical sensations—or imagined sensations—of a powerfully-vibrating bike beneath the rider (and, by extension, the audience member encouraged to imagine herself as the rider). Rob's decisions on perspective changes associate the sound with space, and establish a presence for the bike and the brand through the ad. The construction of this "aural space" yields a referent for the myth of the Harley rider as constructed in film. The sound represents aloof individualism and genuineness, for no-nonsense and simplicity. The close-miked base recordings resonate with sonic associations made in films like *The Wild One* with Johnny Strabler's rebelliousness and defiance of authority, marked by the stark contrast between the motorcycles racing in the town-sponsored event as Strabler's own socially-transgressive ride invades the otherwise orderly town. Phasing highlights the unique irregular timing of the Harley engine, which harkens to the sound of the Harleys in *Easy Rider* as Wyatt and Billy roam free on the open road. Processing

techniques using reverberation marks the sound as being generated in the filmic outdoors—the sound looms large as reverberation suggests the sound is reflected off near-by objects. Even with that impression, however, compression emphasizes the intricacies of the distinctive engine that might be lost in an expansive space. The construction of the Harley myth through sound involves an insistence that the engine sound—invasive to some, offensive to others—has a right to take up its own space under its own rules.

Both Tate and Rob crafted sophisticated sound designs that augment the natural sound subtly and unobtrusively. In advertising vernacular, their sound designs generate “impact.” For that world brought to life through film stock, microphones and digital technologies, the natural world doesn’t convey an impact expected for that medium. In fact, according to Tate, un-effected natural sound recordings are sometimes “pretty weak” for Tate’s assignments. At the same time, subtlety is valuable in sound design, especially with a spot like Original Music. To resonate with the preconceived Harley sensibility, this ad needs to represent values of simplicity, honesty, authenticity. According to Tate, the sound design can’t be “all wiz-banged out.” Wiz-bang doesn’t speak to Harley riders.

At least, not in Tate’s mind. Interestingly, Tate’s conception of how sound *will* influence the listener is shaped less by marketing statistics, and more by his own experience and ruminations on pop culture. For Original Music, the Agency never revealed marketing data or targeting information to the Echo Boys. Nonetheless, Tate speculated on clear audiences for Harley projects:

...[T]hey got their Harley diehards...[but] I don't know how much marketing they're doing to the Hell's Angels, you know what I mean?...[They wouldn't have to] unless Harley's already turned into too [much of a] weekend-warrior-type motorcycle...[T]hey are kinda marketing to...what I imagine is [*sic*] guys my age who never had one in the old days, but now they got the money and they're going through their mid-life crisis, and [it's] time to get on my Harley and let my freak flag fly.

In Tate's mind, unless the Harley-Davidson brand has lost some cache of authenticity with the stereotypical biker crowd, Harley-Davidson doesn't need to market to that population. Instead, the company would target people of means outside the clichéd biker community with the means to invest in expensive motorcycles. Tate may not know demographics, but his thinking may align with that of Harley-Davidson marketers. According to Harley-Davidson's own market statistics since 2003, Harley owners have a median income of over \$80K/year.⁴⁰ Only six of Harley's twenty-eight 2009 models list for under \$10K—all of those are Sportsters. Bikes with Twin Cam[®] engines range from \$11,995 to \$19,499.⁴¹

Like most ads, "Original Music" must satisfy several listening perspectives. First, producers want to satisfy those listeners who they believe listen to the engine sound with acuity, including people familiar with the bikes and who've owned perhaps several Harleys throughout their lives. Harley-Davidson supports this observation by the limited

⁴⁰ Statistics for 2007 plant Harley buyers solidly at around \$85K. "Demographics," Harley-Davidson USA, http://investor.harley-davidson.com/demographics.cfm?locale=en_US&bmLocale=en_US, accessed 2/21/09.

⁴¹ These prices are for base bikes, without customization. "Motorcycles," Harley-Davidson USA, http://www.harley-davidson.com/wcm/Content/Pages/2009_Motorcycles/2009_Motorcycles.jsp?locale=en_US#/model/flstsb, accessed 2/21/09.

marketing statistics it chooses to display on its website: of 2007 purchasers, 52% of customers owned Harleys in the past. An additional 33% previously owned competitive bikes.⁴² Second, the producers want to satisfy expectations of a film- and television-viewing public, people who are habituated to hearing sound shift with a change in visual perspective. Adhering to film and television editing conventions also minimizes the possibility of distracting the listener from the ad's primary aim. Additionally, processing and editing conventions provide a grammar through which inculcated audiences can easily, quickly read audiovisual information. For instance, audiences are expected to understand that a shot with a bike approaching the camera followed by a shot of a bike driving away *means* that the bike passed by the viewer-listener during the moment of the edit. Likewise, sound design can position the listener within the image by teaching the listener about the setting, environment and objects in the ad's simulated world. For audiences familiar with this kind of audiovisual media, such conventions facilitate impactfulness. Finally, designers may fashion sound for savvy listeners with excellent, high-end home stereo systems. The fact that this ad is shot in letterbox format (marked by the black bars along the top and bottom of the screen) suggests that this ad was designed with wide-screen televisions in mind, perhaps accompanied by High-Definition broadcast and outstanding home audio equipment. Rob's design, invented to "sound cool," to "do something different," would be all-the-more impressive on a stereo system that could handle a broad, complex frequency range. As a bonus, the design would likely

⁴² "Demographics," Harley-Davidson USA, http://investor.harley-davidson.com/demographics.cfm?locale=en_US&bmLocale=en_US, accessed 2/21/09.

impress Rob's peers, reinforcing his technical expertise and creative stature among his colleagues and clients.⁴³

Blazing Music and Sound: Forming Fantastic—How *Not* to Relate to an Ad...

Lowe's Foods

As the premier sound design and music house in the Carolinas, Blazing Music + Sound has built a national reputation for excellence, won coveted projects for organizations like Travelocity and Audi, and collaborated with the likes of NOVA and National Geographic. As the Echo Boys's Cox spots were built to represent reality, and the Harley ad featuring a blend of myth and reality, the Blazing Music spots featured here represent another end of the spectrum. With their Lowe's Foods and Xyience NOX CG-3 projects, Evan and Alex from Blazing Music carefully construct what might be called anti-realities. With consideration for the target audiences imagined for these ads, the sound designs are influenced transparently by concerns for how certain sonic representations might displease or even repulse audience members. For that reason, Evan and Alex purposefully downplayed certain references to reality in the design, inviting audience members to relate to the ad story as something fairytale-like, cartoonish or fantastical.

⁴³ Rob's analysis of his listenership suggests that while many lay listeners may not critique sound design, some might at least notice a level of sophistication that he and his peers would definitely appreciate: "That kind of stuff, especially in a commercial, doesn't necessarily translate [with lay listeners who might say] oh, I can really hear it going side-to-side. But I mean I think if you compare the two, where one did it and one didn't do that, you could definitely tell the difference. And, you know, I think it just gives it—whether people realize what's going on or not it just sounds better than not doing it that way. I don't think they're gonna say, oh, that's cool how it pans from right to left. But the fact that it is there, I think—well, when the motorcycle does pass by at the end you do get a sense of that shift..."

For a commercial for Lowe's Foods, a grocery chain throughout North Carolina and Virginia, Alex and Evan had the challenge of providing sound design that didn't sound "too aggressive." The spot advertises "*greenpoints*" that Lowe's patrons can collect with the swipe of a magnetic-striped card as they make purchases from the chain. The *greenpoints* in the spot are anthropomorphized, depicted using actors in green body suits who "fall" into a kind of *greenpoints* holding area inside "Linda's Lowe's Foods card" (complete with coffee maker, water cooler, vending machine and other accoutrements one might find in a corporate office break room). As the mise-en-scene suggests, the *greenpoints*' sole occupation is to provide "Linda" with savings and benefits through her Lowe's Foods membership card. As PA-piped music plays in the holding area/break room, a newly-born *greenpoint* falls into the room with a rising-pitch "sshhh" followed by a soft "thud" as the Lowe's customer makes a purchase. Later, several *greenpoints* "sshhh" back up and out of the room as the card holder redeems her *greenpoints* for, as explained by a veteran *greenpoint*, "free groceries, extra discounts, even cash off."

Evan and Alex direct my attention first to the music they designed for the *greenpoints*' holding area. They originally planned for the music to be "some sort of Muzak-sounding" music, but they decided they needed something with more humor. So they opted for music with what they called a "Latin feel": a thinly-textured piece with a mambo rhythm and strictly diatonic synth-keyboard melody, equalized to eliminate some low end to replicate the sound of music piped in through cheap public address system speakers. Evan and Alex mention that they think the demographic—which they describe

as “shopping stay-at-home moms”—would appreciate the humor evoked by the music. The pair agree that the music for the spot “couldn’t be too aggressive,” reflecting their concern that that would be displeasing to that demographic.

The concern for sounding too “aggressive” or “violent” accompanied the sound design project as well. Alex explains that the original sounds accompanying the entrance and exit of the *greenpoints* originally had “stuff with lots of low end [*bgggghhhh*— he makes explosive sound with his voice]...it sounded aggressive and violent.” Evan adds that “they [the Agency and client] wanted a big sound [so] we tried lots of different things [like] a jet turn...Originally the client thought the body landing should sound real big with lots of body parts hitting the floor, but Alex—‘we’—thought ‘nah’...” After much experimentation, they decided to “focus on the *point* as more of a person.” With this frame of reference, however, Evan and Alex made seemingly incongruous creative decisions. Instead of “having lots of body parts hit the floor,” Alex layered some wind sounds from the synthesizer to create a “sshhh,” then “took the low end out so it was more simplified, pure, so it wouldn’t sound aggressive...” He explains further that an aggressive sound “wouldn’t sound like a supermarket,” and might turn off the demographic. Alex adds that they ran into the same issue with a Travelocity commercial featuring a ceramic gnome (like those considered stereotypical suburban garden décor, especially from the 1970s and ‘80s). In one commercial the gnome was run over by a luggage cart and they used sounds the gnome might make if he was being hurt—upon client objections, Alex and Evan edited those noises out so it didn’t sound like the gnome

was injured in any realistic way. Their experience with another client's objections with a previous ad affected their creative decisions for the falling *greenpoints*.

By playing with reality codes, Evan and Alex carefully steer away from any negative affect that could be associated with the *greenpoints*. They establish a cartoonish, humorous feel within the spot using a Latin-inspired Muzak-type background effect, which borrows from cultural expectations for how a supermarket in the US might sound. The music functions as a sound effect itself, wallpaper that helps define the space in the ad as part of a supermarket complete with music processed with the low end taken out to emphasize the impression that it's played over cheap public address speakers. Ironically, though they choose to "focus on the *point* as more of a person," they avoid representational conventions that might correspond to the reality of a human figure careening to the floor. Rather than emulating the reality of a person falling, the designers' "focus on the *point*" was framed by how they believed their target audience might want to hear the experience of the falling *greenpoint* represented sonically. At risk of offending the ostensibly fragile sensibilities of "stay-at-home moms," Evan and Alex manufactured sound that disembodies the *greenpoint*, making the anthropomorphized character fairytale-like. The item promoted in the ad is not merely Lowe's Foods service and membership benefits. The brand strategy also signifies Lowe's Foods as a light-hearted, innocuous, non-violent space safe for moms, kids and *greenpoints* alike. The sound design is built for an idealized target audience made up of women who the producers likely imagine as surrounded by—and influenced by—media messages fed them through children's programming about friendliness and non-violence. The sound

design contributes to culturally-specific ideals—at least those of the imagined stay-at-home mom—of how reality could or should be: nonviolent, nonaggressive.

Xyience

Evan and Alex were tasked with creating music and sound design for a commercial featuring a performance enhancing supplement call Xyience NOX-CG3 (rhymes with “science,” begins with a hard /z/ sound). As a product billed to “lengthen muscle pump, gain size, improve performance and increase strength,” Xyience NOX-CG3 is intended for use by people interested in building muscular size and athletic performance.⁴⁴ The product’s name lends some insight to marketing strategy. Though the product is considered a supplement and not subject to scientific scrutiny by the FDA, the rhyme with “science” associates ideas of laboratory protocols and exacting analyses that support the marketing claims. Additionally, hardening the beginning unvoiced /s/ sound to a voiced and vibrating /z/ sound embodies the name while giving it a stronger sounding name. The commercial features mixed martial artist Chuck Liddell who held the Light Heavyweight title in the Ultimate Fighting Championship between 2005 and 2007. The music and sound design were fit to the spot to portray Liddell as a fantasy character, as a persona that audiences perhaps wouldn’t relate to directly, but whose

⁴⁴ “Xyience, Xtreme Science,” <http://www.xyience.com/pc-517-4-nox-cg3-400g-creatine-arginine-glutamine.aspx#>, accessed 5/5/08. As a “nutritional supplement,” the product isn’t subject to FDA approval. The quoted passage is qualified: “These statements have not been evaluated by the FDA. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent disease.” As of 2/21/09, this page is no longer available. Though I’ve found on-line distributors that claim to have Xyience NOX-CG3 available for sale, the product is no longer listed on the Xyience website (www.xyience.com, accessed 2/21/09).

unearthly, animalistic power might be enticing to audiences seeking benefits advertised with performance-enhancing supplements.

During initial meetings with the Agency, Alex asked for a description of the target audience—he was given the rubric “weight lifters.” Alex says he didn’t find the depiction informative: “That’s not much of a demographic...[it] could be anyone—old people lift weights, young people lift weights...” With a task at hand, however, Alex and Evan made decisions on music and sound design for the spot. First, they decided to use a guitar riff that’s “like ZZ Top.” Alex described it as a pentatonic riff that evoked hard rock. Evan added that “it would have to be more modal to resemble metal,” which they didn’t want to evoke. They wanted it to “sound tough—rock and roll but not metal.” Throughout the conversation Evan and Alex mull over the genre a bit and conclude that the guitar riff they chose was “not even hard rock, more like blues [with its] big back beat drums...[the track is] safe in there.”

A “safe” music track is one that sits in a space that potentially conjures sociocultural associations desired by the Agency and client while eliminating certain undesirable connotations (see Chapter 3, “Musical Genre, Poetics and Listener Experience in the Production of Meaning”). Like the Echo Boys, Evan and Alex shy away from associations with heavy metal. While they wanted to portray Chuck Liddell’s character as “tough,” heavy metal might have connoted a sense of anarchism or social rebellion that Evan and Alex might turn audiences off completely. The portrayal of Chuck Liddell’s “character,” however, offers a special twist. According to Evan and Alex, “we don’t want to relate to him [in a realistic way], but maybe to take on a little bit

of him.” The Agency wanted Liddell’s depiction to be fantasy- or dream-like, so they created a soundtrack to make him seem “like an animal or a force of nature...so we can objectify him...” In fact, the first line of Liddell’s voiceover states, *They say ‘Chuck, you’re a freak’...* They don’t want audiences to relate to Liddell as a real human being—in fact, Evan and Alex joked that the absurdity of Liddell’s Ultimate Fighter persona makes them disinclined to relate to Liddell themselves—he’s outside their cultural comfort zone. Instead, they set out to represent the character as fantastic, something larger than life. The purpose of the ad isn’t to encourage people to emulate Liddell completely and realistically, but rather to be enticed by some aspect of the fantastic.

This is where sound design plays a critical role. A key to creating the fantastic through sound involves the alignment between visual and aural elements. According to Alex, the synchronization—or rather lack of sync—between visual hit and sound effect is critical in creating a sense of un-reality: “If you hit everything perfectly it belittles what you’re trying to do...we didn’t line up the hits with the visuals [to contribute] to the dream quality...it makes it less real.” Similarly, image processing contributes to producing the fantastic. Alex notes that, just as speeding up visuals can make a piece feel “cartoon-like,” slow-motion can lend an impression of a dream-like, mythical or unreal experience. With these images, Alex carefully selected and processed sounds to align with every slo-mo image. Whip cracks and thunder crashes accompany nearly every time Liddell hits the kickboxing bag, often with stereo delay. Especially with Liddell’s first strike in the course of the narrative, heavy delay functions within filmic conventions to convey that Liddell’s character is outside of reality. According to Alex, this helps “create

a little more mystery” for the character in the commercial—the slow motion and sound effect help generate a sense of myth around the character, “[making] him seem more important in the grand scheme of things.”

Another favorite effect of Alex’s, used throughout the Xyience ad, is reverse thunder, that is, processing a recording of thunder so that the digital file plays in reverse. Alex likes reverse thunder for the power evoked by the sound. He admits, “I use reverse thunder a lot...it’s a really powerful sound, and resilient. You can EQ it, compress it, utterly destroy it, and it still has power.” This may be because thunder often involves not only deep rumbling, which can represent great size and ominousness, but often includes a searing crack, which can be emotionally startling. In reverse, however, the sound might diverge from the audience member’s expectations. With an intensifying low rumble that culminates in a searing crack, reverse thunder might generate impact because of how it doesn’t conform to industry norms.

For the animalistic roars peppered throughout the spot, Alex and Evan slowed down recorded throat-clearing from a voice talent with whom they have a long-standing relationship. During their many voice sessions with this long-time smoker, Alex and Evan had collected numerous recordings of the talent clearing his throat. They slowed down the throat-clearing, equalized it to emphasize lower frequencies, and added some reverb—as Alex points out, “you can hear the phlegm.” Creating their own non-traditional “roar,” Alex and Evan emphasize an other-worldly-ness about the Liddell depiction. Using a stock tiger roar, for instance, would simply associate Liddell with a tiger even if the recording were processed. To create an utterly unique, unearthly

character around Liddell, they fabricated a completely foreign sound with qualities resembling a roar, but couldn't be directly attributed to any known living being.

For these ads evoking fairy tale or mythic qualities, Evan and Alex purposefully play with reality codes. In the case of these Lowe's and Xyience ads, Evan and Alex mark events as being outside reality within filmic conventions. By ensuring sonically that the Lowe's *greenpoint* falls harmlessly to the floor, they hope that audience members will associate nothing offensive with the ad—that is, what the Agency and producers have presumed the target audience would find offensive. With this the ad producers reveal their presumptions of the target audience members' shared aesthetics and values. They believe any impression of injury to the *greenpoint* would violate the sensibilities of stay-at-home (read: sheltered or unworldly) moms steeped in messages from kids' shows like "Barney & Friends" that emphasize non-violence. Similarly, with the Xyience NOX CG3 ad, the character created around Chuck Liddell could be potentially off-putting to many audiences. To make the character more suitable for a broad audience, Alex and Evan design sound that creates a mythical quality to the character and setting. Fabricating other-worldly sound effects using reverse thunder and the phlegm-based roar, the sound designers mark the Liddell character with super-being qualities. Similarly, keeping certain sounds decidedly out-of-sync with the image—especially the slow-motion image, already marked as unreal—associates a fantastic quality with the ad narrative. Through these creative decisions, the ad producers hope that audience members will feel comfortable relating to the represented displays of super-strength and -

endurance as traits they'd like to take on themselves, much like audiences since the 1930s have found fascination with Superman's unearthly powers.

Commodification of experience through sound

The so-called brand experience is a process of commodifying audience members' life experiences in calling them to relate to brands through ads. With the promises submitted with each ad—peace of mind, increased business, joy, personal satisfaction, values validation—ad producers reify experience, and re-sell it to potential consumers as attachments to products and services. Employing audience members' experiences with other media, particularly with sound, is key in this process. Each of these ads borrow from film conventions to carry out narrative, representational and emotional work through sound. Sound supports the story of the ad and brand by directing audience members' attention to events that the producers deem salient to their message. Additionally, because of reality codes shared among various audiovisual media, much ad sound must index what might be considered natural sonic events as understood by a media-savvy public.

Underlying all these functions is the effort to heighten the listener's sense of the natural for the sake of "impact." Defining the sound design's impact, and by extension the efficacy of the ad, are the complex machinations of marketing strategy, including the fabrication of a brand identity, the imagination of a target audience identity, and presumptions for how target audiences derive meaning about the brand through the ad. Drawing upon social and cultural practices around fairy-tales, cartoons, cultural

narratives or myths, ad producers invite audience members to pick and choose particular qualities from the characters portrayed to incorporate into their own self-image or life experience. As a method for directing audience attention toward select brand qualities marketers believe will boost sales, sound design contributes to an ad experience and thus a brand experience. With sound, producers invite audiences to embody the brand emotionally or physically while associating the ad experience with a web of signifiers circulating around the brand. In the process, an audience member's own life experience, along with wants, needs and desires, can be commodified, connected narratively, indexically and dramatically to products and services, and sold back to the audience member who participates in the discourse of the brand.

Chapter 5: The Real, the Consumer, and the Self: Ads in Public Discourse

Besides communicating brand identity and promoting products for sale, advertising functions as a way to construct social relations through commodities, and promote community building through brands. In this chapter I analyze these processes using two ads in the Dove brand's "Campaign for Real Beauty." These ads interest me not only in the producers' claims to define (R)real, but also because their distribution methods enable me to track the ways that the ads contribute to cultural discourse, that is, a way of talking about cultural issues. Additionally, the presence of audience members' online comments enables me to think through the ways that people use advertising in making sense of their everyday lives as they incorporate advertising into their everyday lives.

Since their release, both ads spread like wildfire through online social networks. Evolution and Onslaught received most of their distribution through interactive internet tools, initially on YouTube and Dove's own website, but also on numerous additional sites whose managers embedded the video into their respective pages.¹ Through YouTube alone, Evolution was viewed nearly nine million times since its posting in

¹ "Evolution" and comments associated with it can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYhCn0jf46U>; "Onslaught" and related comments at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ei6JvK0W60I>. Both of these were uploaded by [tpiper](#). I viewed additional comments through YouTube postings from [zephoria](#) ("Evolution") and [joseelias452](#) ("Onslaught"). Though largely part of an internet campaign, "Evolution" saw some play on MTV in the US, and supposedly on Netherlander and some Middle Eastern television outlets. "Evolution (Dove)," [wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolution_(Dove)#cite_note-MakingOf-10), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolution_\(Dove\)#cite_note-MakingOf-10](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolution_(Dove)#cite_note-MakingOf-10), accessed 9/1/08.

October, 2006, and Onslaught nearly 300,000 since October, 2007.² Besides the web, Evolution saw some limited play on MTV, and both ads were featured on broadcast television news and entertainment programs like NBC's "Today" and ABC's "Good Morning America," which helped the ads become a source of debate. YouTube alone collected over 3700 comments for Evolution and over three hundred for "Onslaught."³

These two ads "grew legs" through an interactive market strategy known by some as "social network marketing." While target demographics seek to segment groups of people by outlining difference, social network marketing strives to employ potentially endless social networks already extant to carry ad messages "faster and more exponentially than ever before."⁴ In particular, some marketing experts maintain that the strategy "can improve brand advocacy *and* increase mass-market brand awareness" by taking advantage of ever-broadening social networks.⁵

Though the actual distribution method for these ads isn't strictly through television like the others analyzed in the prior chapters, monitoring audience members' reactions to these ads may provide insight into how audience members respond to, interact with and socialize through audiovisual media and advertising. Traditional television broadcast ads invite audience members to interact with the ad only through the

² These numbers based on initial posting of the ads by tipper—other copies have been uploaded since. Numbers for each ad updated as of 2/22/09.

³ These numbers based on initial posting of the ads by tipper—other copies have been uploaded since. Numbers for each ad updated as of 2/22/09.

⁴ Justin Kirby, "Viral Marketing," in *Connected Marketing: The Viral, Buzz and Word of Mouth Revolution*, ed. Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden (Amsterdam; Burlington, MA: Elsevier, 2006), 87.

⁵ Kirby, 88. Emphasis in original.

choice to watch/hear the ad as it plays on their living room TV sets; in contrast, the placement of the Dove ads enables internet users to work out their responses to the ads in community with other internet users, and to represent themselves more directly as active participants in social discourse around each ad. By accessing the site and choosing to “push play,” internet users take an active position in engaging the ads. In testament, YouTube poster remistevens laments playfully, “I’ll even watch commercials on YouTube, I’m such a loser.” Additionally, many so-called “viral ads” like these are designed so that interested audience members can share the ad within their respective social networks by sharing links to the ad’s web page with friends, family members or colleagues, or by embedding the ad directly in their own web pages. Then audience members can critique and discuss these ads through online journals and blogs, or by posting comments on the site hosting the ad. Many viral marketing projects, where ads seemingly “‘escape’ onto the Web” before they’re available through more traditional outlets, deliver “a kind of cachet” among internet users for whom the material seems “exclusive and therefore more desirable...”⁶ Particularly in the early twenty-first century, with the lightning speed of information dissemination, being the first in your network to break news is a marker of cultural savvy and power. Marketer Schuyler Brown argues that social network marketing “works because it flows through the people who actually

⁶ Kirby, 90.

want to hear and spread the news. It's not interrupting the regularly scheduled programming; it *is* the programming."⁷

Generating this kind of word-of-mouth "buzz" is a critical goal of many marketing plans. Initiating and managing social discourse in this way has become key marketing strategy according to marketing scholar Michael Solomon:

It's no longer about advertising; it's all about buzz (what we used to call positive word of mouth)...According to a report from consulting firm McKinsey & Co., 67 percent of U.S. consumer goods sales are now influenced by word of mouth.⁸

And the internet has provided an excellent tool for generating social discourse around brands. While television ads do generate "buzz," the internet has emerged as a valuable marketing tool because of the ways it invites and employs people's conscious interaction with the brand, ad and message. Additionally, as my analyses of the discourse around the Dove ads show, internet comments give ad producers immediate feedback on which aspects of an ad audience members notice, and how an ad's message resonates with audience members.

While social network strategies make use of social communities already extant, they also enable marketers to expand their potential audiences and breach conventional geographic boundaries. Recognizing the globalization of consumerist practices, some

⁷ Schuyler Brown, "Buzz Marketing: The Next Chapter" in *Connected Marketing: The Viral, Buzz and Word of Mouth Revolution*, ed. Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden (Amsterdam; Burlington, MA: Elsevier, 2006), 209. Emphasis in original.

⁸ Solomon (Ph.D., Social Psychology, UNC-Chapel Hill) is Professor of Marketing and Director of the Center for Consumer Research in the Haub School of Business at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. He's served on faculty at NYU, Rutgers and Auburn. Michael R. Solomon, *Conquering Consumerspace: Marketing Strategies for a Branded World* (New York: AMACOM, 2003), 175-6.

marketers presume that the internet invites people to interact with a world-wide community of people like-minded in their consumer habits:

The rise of multinational corporations that distribute recognizable, branded goods around the world is creating a globalized consumption ethic. Increasingly it makes little sense to segment consumers in terms of nationalities...People scattered around the world are more likely to share common value structures based upon similar exposure to popular culture in the form of movies, music, and other media vehicles.⁹

Because of the confluence of global consumer practices and internet technology, marketers can re-conceive of their audiences not in terms of traditional demographics like ethnicity or geographic locality, but through common behaviors and social networks. The World Wide Web facilitates a logic that allows marketers to modify delineations of target audience. By absorbing on-line behaviors and social networks into capitalist practice, marketers can cast a potentially wider net over people who might engage with the ads through online conversations, postings or blogs.

Social network strategies also help marketers overcome the ubiquitous obstacle of disseminating sales messages among jaded, media-savvy audiences. Marketers hope that people who view the ads online may become influencers within their own social networks as they share the link or speak of their experience of the ad with other people who know and trust them.¹⁰ Marketer Sven Rusticus claims that word of mouth or social network marketing

⁹ Solomon, 19.

¹⁰ Solomon, 51-2.

derives [power] partly from its credibility—while only 14% of people believe what they see, read, or hear in advertisements, 90% believe endorsements from their friends and acquaintances, primarily because they are not seen as having any vested interest.¹¹

The impression that an online user has no “vested interest” in the product advertised represents a kind of authenticity that marketers have identified as significant in circulating ad messages through social networks. In one example that manifested since the original drafting of this thesis, marketers for Skittles brand candy employed the micro-blogging platform Twitter and other social networking media in an experimental marketing effort: on 2 March 2009, the Skittles website home page was re-launched to feature a live Twitter feed, and embedded Facebook, YouTube and Flickr content.¹² By employing these internet tools, Skittles marketers empowered audience members to define Skittles promotional content through their 140-character micro-blogging “tweets” and uploaded video, still images and comments. The site generated so many hits on its first day that it crashed Twitter. This experiment wasn’t without glitches, however—just two days after launch, the Skittles marketing team re-vamped the site to make Twitter less prominent after several users contributed unrelated, absurd, and sometimes profane tweets. Since then marketers have debated the benefits to social network marketing and

¹¹ Sven Rusticus, “Creating Brand Advocates,” in *Connected Marketing: The Viral, Buzz and Word of Mouth Revolution*, ed. Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden (Amsterdam; Burlington, MA: Elsevier, 2006), 47-8.

¹² For a summary of the Skittles/Twitter phenomenon, see Kerry Capell, “When Skittles Met Twitter,” *BusinessWeek.com*, http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/mar2009/ca2009038_020385.htm, accessed 3/12/09. I offer this information as a revision to the thesis submitted on a deadline of 2 March 2009, the very day that the Skittles website was launched.

related representations of authenticity, transparency and audience collaboration versus the risks of relinquishing control over branding in this way.¹³

Another example involving both corporate and political interests arose in the fall of 2008, CBS opted to allow some ostensibly pirated footage from “Late Night with David Letterman” remain on YouTube—the move allowed the television network to generate buzz for the show and CBS that may not have been possible through CBS’s own YouTube postings. On 24 September 2008, Arizona Senator John McCain cancelled his appearance scheduled for that night’s program, explaining that he was on his way to Washington to tend to the emerging global economic crisis—later that day, CBS leaked footage of McCain being miked for an interview with CBS Evening News anchor Katie Couric. Feeling dismissed and outraged, Letterman railed against the senator during that night’s show, and CBS uploaded a clip from the program to its dedicated YouTube channel.¹⁴ At the same time, private YouTube users have posted clips of the late-night

¹³ Freelance marketer and web designer Michael Gray blogs his admiration for the Skittles scheme, and links to several other blogs with supporting and contrary opinions at <http://www.wolf-howl.com/socialmedia/skittles-twitter>, accessed 3/12/09. Interestingly, DDB Worldwide President and CEO Chuck Brymer has argued for companies to employ Chief Community Officers, or CCOs, to manage social networks. Just as many corporate bureaucratic and administrative structures employ Chief Financial Officers (CFOs), Chief Information Officers (CIOs), Chief Operating Officers (COOs) and sometimes Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs)—all with CEOs managing this hierarchy—Brymer argues that social networking is significant enough to warrant a dedicated administrative branch and personnel. See Brymer, *The Nature of Marketing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), especially his Chapter 9 entitled “The Chief Community Officer: A New Agent for Your Brand,” 157-75. Marketers for Domino’s Pizza might have wished for a CCO with the debacle of April 2009, in which two Domino’s employees posted YouTube videos depicting themselves purposefully tainting pizza ingredients by exposing food to their own body excretions, then building pizzas with the exposed food products. Patrick Doyle, the President of Domino’s USA, posted a corporate response on YouTube, in which he denounced the employees’ actions, and spelled out Domino’s legal actions against the employees, the shutting down of the respective franchise, and the company’s revised hiring practices.

¹⁴ Part of Letterman’s tirade included a live cut-away from his own show to Katie Couric’s CBS Evening News set where McCain was in the process of a make-up session in preparation for an interview with Couric.

comic's tirade on YouTube—and the user-posted clips have generated more hits than CBS's. Of the more than 3.5 million total views, 3.2 million were for user-loaded clips. One nine-minute segment uploaded by YouTube user 1970oaktree alone received over 2.6 million views. Routinely television networks demand that YouTube remove allegedly pirated clips from the site—CBS owns the rights to all of Letterman's broadcasts for distribution, ad sales and profit, and CBS generates no income from clips uploaded by private parties.¹⁵ Curiously, CBS made no attempt to pressure YouTube or anyone else to remove the Letterman clips from the site. AdAge.com journalist Michael Learmonth speculates that CBS sees a marketing benefit in keeping the clips in circulation:

Part of this collaboration [with YouTube owner Google to identify copyrighted material on YouTube] appears to be allowing users to upload copyrighted content if it suits the purposes of the network. Rather than send a reflexive takedown notice, CBS is allowing Letterman fans to do the marketing for them... Videos uploaded by users often get more views than those uploaded by the content-owners. CBS knows this and rather than try and wring a few ad dollars out of the video, opted to let YouTube do some marketing work for them.¹⁶

Because internet users seem to trust or identify with user-generated content more than corporate uploads, the user-posted clips may circulate more freely and broadly than CBS's own internet broadcasts. The benefit to CBS and Letterman is that their shows and brands continue to generate "buzz" through user-initiated and sustained channels.

¹⁵ I say clips are "allegedly pirated" because several critics, including Learmonth, speculate that 1970oaktree might actually be a CBS employee. Whether 1970oaktree is a plant from CBS/Letterman or even merely an employee who surreptitiously posted the clip is unknown.

¹⁶ Michael Learmonth, "Letterman YouTube Video Outdraws CBS Clip," AdAge.com, http://adage.com/mediaworks/article?article_id=131363, accessed 9/30/08. This trade journal is an online offshoot of *Ad vertising Age*, one of the industry's staple journals.

Though the benefits are difficult to measure beyond the number of “hits” or views counted by YouTube, social forces may operate to produce some cheap—but perhaps very effective—marketing for both Letterman and CBS.

One of the reasons the Letterman clip found an online audience has to do with its thematic punch: Letterman’s rant against Senator McCain occurred near the close of a heated presidential campaign. Similarly, in order for a social networking or viral marketing plan to work for Dove, the ads had to be arresting visually, sonically or thematically so that people would feel compelled to share and discuss the ads—arresting, of course, based on social, cultural and technological standards abound in 2006 and 2007. And, indeed, the ads are notable in all three ways. The production team invested in using current technological resources like digital compositing to piece together images in a way that evoke earlier visual styles, but add innovative, breath-taking twists. Likewise, the music represents freshness, innovation, and cutting-edge style to appeal to audiences plugged into the immediacy of information and technology provided by tools like the internet. According to Paul Marsden, market researcher at the London School of Economics,

innovative campaigns that use surprise, humour, intrigue, or delight...get the products they are promoting onto conversational agendas. By getting onto conversational agendas they raise the product’s salience in the minds of their target buyers and create conversational contexts conducive to sharing opinions. By creating conversational contexts conducive to sharing opinions, more opinions are shared, and if those opinions are positive, sales are boosted.¹⁷

¹⁷ Paul Marsden, “Introduction and Summary,” in *Connected Marketing: The Viral, Buzz and Word of Mouth Revolution*, ed. Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden (Amsterdam; Burlington, MA: Elsevier, 2006), xxv-xxvi.

The Dove ads represent novelty at its best in the context of technologies and distribution methods available in 2008. Because of their creative designs and what Marsden might call conversational thematic material, both ads quickly became staples in cultural discourse, and continue to generate hits and comments. Numerous parodies of each ad have appeared all over the World Wide Web as a testament to their popularity and ubiquity.

People's comments about the Dove ads empower me to consider the role of "consumer" between the industry's construction of The Real and the audience member's everyday life experience. In the process I examine how branding strategy is naturalized in cultural discourse. Given the opportunity to converse about ads through online resources, which aspects of the ad do audience members accept or contest? How do people incorporate them in their everyday interactions, on-line or off-? How do the ads raise socio-cultural issues, or even shape discourse surrounding those issues?

Admittedly, these ads are unique from many audiovisual spots in that they were produced to challenge other ad messages overtly. Evolution and Onslaught function by promising an unveiling of the machinations of the ad production and beauty products industries. In the process, they create a new layer of meaning that can be re-ascribed as Real, a unique paradigm for social discourse framed within Dove's branding message.

By ostensibly waging an ad war for the sanctity of what they call Real Beauty, ad producers for the Dove campaign re-construct ideas of the Real in a way that presents the Dove brand in opposition to traditional beauty industry images, rhetoric, and beauty

standards deemed oppressive and destructive. Implicitly, the Dove brand is positioned as a proponent of real people. Owing to these themes and their placement on the web, the ads encourage online discussion of social values, including critiques of capitalism, corporate behavior, and the mass media, all circumscribed within branding strategy.

Though the Dove ads are part of a marketing ploy, my research shows that audience members appropriate the ads in the process of making sense of their everyday lives. As Michel de Certeau and Janice Radway demonstrate through their research, audience members often appropriate media in the process of understanding and expressing their own life experiences. Ruminating on everyday practices like walking a city, Certeau examines the “‘ways of operating’ [that] constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production.”¹⁸ For Certeau, the knowledge and symbols imposed on people who didn’t produce them become tools in the “making do” of everyday life.¹⁹ Similarly, Radway writes of women who self-identify as wife and mother, and the conflicted, ironic ways they use the gothic romance novel as a way of reconciling their experiences of patriarchal social constructs. Reifying the identities of her participants by their associations with “patriarchal marriage,” Radway considers the reading strategies and

¹⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xiv.

¹⁹ Certeau’s Chapter III, entitled “‘Making Do’: Uses and Tactics,” ponders how daily life is comprised not of activities singularly institutionalized (like work) or informal (like leisure), but rather of activities in-between, constantly blended. Certeau, 29-42.

coding/decoding frameworks used by her participants in interpreting their novels.²⁰

Similarly, I consider YouTube interlocutors as consumer-practitioners in their processes of making sense of the Dove ads through their life experiences, and making sense of their lives using the ads. While the internet may facilitate marketers' goals in reaching wider audiences in new ways, it also empowers audience members in employing the devices of capitalist culture in ways that suit their lives.

The presence of these ads within the interactive sphere of the internet provides additional dimensions of complexity with the presence of one of the producers actively participating in online conversation. Tim Piper, Ogilvy and Mathers employee and Creative Director for both ads, infuses himself within YouTube's cyber-discourse under the moniker tpiper. Piper contributes to discussion, enlightening interested YouTube fans on his expertise and experience in producing the ads, and defending the veracity of the ads' messages. While representing himself, the production team, and the Dove brand, Piper (selectively, I imagine) unveils production tricks, reiterates marketing rhetoric, and shares ideas, feelings and opinions with audience members interested in the ads.

Piper's presence functions in the marketing strategy in numerous ways, but three in particular strike me as salient here. First, as Walter Benjamin has argued, the modern day reproducibility of artwork enables audience members to act as experts who comment on artwork, or as movie extras who become part of the story woven by the media

²⁰ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991; 1984), 8-9.

producer.²¹ In other words, the accessibility of the ad permits audience members to participate with the media—YouTube contributors parse out their opinions, ideals and value sets as though they themselves are part of the ad narrative. Moreover, with participation from Piper, bloggers and posters can position themselves as part of the meta-narrative of ad production as they engage with Piper on issues of the making of the ads. To make such a strategy effective, however, marketers recognize that the advertisement requires a hook, something that facilitates what marketers often refer to as “involvement” or the audience member’s willing engagement with the ad.²² In this case, the fascination with technologies behind the ads’ production, and the appeal of the craftsmanship of the audiovisual work grasp audience members’ attention. As this chapter demonstrates, bloggers and posters are indeed drawn in by the representations of technology, especially the depiction of a graphics editing program simulated to re-shape the model’s face and body.

²¹ “It is inherent in the technique of the film as well as that of sports that everybody who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert. This is obvious to anyone listening to a group of newspaper boys leaning on their bicycles and discussing the outcome of a bicycle race. It is not for nothing that newspaper publishers arrange races for their delivery boys. These arouse great interest among the participants, for the victor has an opportunity to rise from delivery boy to professional racer. Similarly, the newsreel offers everyone the opportunity to rise from passer-by to movie extra. In this way any man might even find himself part of a work of art...” Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 231.

²² See, for example, Deborah J. Macinnis and C. Whan Park, “The Differential Role of Characteristics of Music on High- and Low-Involvement Consumers’ Processing of Ads,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 18:161-173; C. Whan Park and S. Mark Young, “Consumer Response to Television Commercials: The Impact of Involvement and Background Music on Brand Attitude Formation,” *Journal of Marketing Research* 23 (1):11-24; G. Douglas Olsen, “Creating the Contrast: The Influence of Silence and Background Music on Recall and Attribute Importance,” *Journal of Advertising* 24 (4):29-44; Richard F. Yalch, “Memory in a Jingle Jungle: Music as a Mnemonic Device in Communicating Advertising Slogans,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 76 (2):268-275; James J. Kellaris, Anthony D. Cox and Dena Cox, “The Effect of Background Music on Ad Processing: A Contingency Explanation,” *Journal of Marketing* 57 (4):114-125.

A second significant way that Piper’s YouTube presence supports the marketing strategy is by contributing to the brand’s persona as something like a living being, with simulated sentience, value sets, and sincerity. As a representative of the seemingly untouchable production side of advertising, Piper lends ideas of authenticity to the brand, sending audience members a message that Dove’s campaign isn’t merely corporate rhetoric. A real person—in fact, a real person with real corporate pull and creative power in these ads’ production—writes to suggest he believes in the campaign’s cause, and shares those ideas in YouTube’s informal arena. As Benjamin explains, technological reproduction of the artwork and resultant shattering of aura allows for the emergence of what the theorist dubs a “cult of personality” developed by the early film industry to engage audiences with constructed personae of film stars.²³ Habituated by what Benjamin terms the “‘spell of the personality,’ [that is,] the phony spell of a commodity,” audience members engage with media representations of personalities as if they were real—and branding practices seem to have borrowed from this film marketing practice.²⁴ By imbuing the brand with value sets and opinions—that is, by simulating sentience through branding—ad producers facilitate relationship building between audience members and their ideas of the brand persona. Additionally, audience members can engage in community with other people who empathize with the brand persona. In this way, marketers can build what they call brand loyalty or brand advocacy not only

²³ “The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the ‘personality’ outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity.” Benjamin, 231.

²⁴ Benjamin, 231.

between audience members and the brand, but also within communities of audience members. Piper's representation of the Dove brand through his presence as a YouTube comment contributor instantiates and propagates ideas of the brand as something like a living being with values and opinions—a persona with value sets which people can support or oppose, and political positions with which people can comply or argue.

A third way Piper's presence suits the marketing strategy is by representing the promise of unfolding intriguing mysteries of advertising presumably inaccessible to the public. Capturing ideas of online human authenticity, like that of 1970oaktree with the YouTube posting of the Letterman clip, Piper serves a complicated but useful strategic role. His participation positions him, and by extension the Dove brand, as an internet user detached from traditional ideas of corporate or institutional power. At the same time, as an ad professional, he represents the promise of unraveling some of the mysteries of ad production. Like Jean Baudrillard before him (in *Simulacra and Simulations* among other works), Michael Taussig observes that institutional powers like law, capitalism, monarchy and the like maintain layers of social structures taken for granted by lay people as natural while shaping people's behaviors and expectations. These social structures constitute what Taussig calls a "public secret" shared and accepted within a particular social or cultural milieu. Taussig seems to take the theory a step further, suggesting that the process of deconstructing a so-called public secret re-animates and re-empowers the secret. For example, while an artist may transgress certain social norms with her artwork, she may also claim socially-accepted rights, like the right to free speech, in the face of criticism. In other words, the artist reinforces social norms in the

course of contesting them. As Taussig articulates, paradoxical social practices like these further empower institutional social structures while obscuring them:

...the figure of *appearance*, the appearance of appearance, the figure of figuration, the ur-appearance, if you will, of secrecy itself [is] the primordial act of presencing...[The defacement of appearance] brings insides outside, unearthing knowledge, and revealing mystery. As it does this, however, as it spoliates and tears at tegument, it may also animate the thing defaced and the mystery revealed may become more mysterious...²⁵

As tpiper, Creative Director Tim Piper presents provides an impression of transparency for jaded, media-savvy audience members who might question the sincerity of yet another corporate shill. By putting himself on par with every other YouTube user, tpiper presents himself as an everyday guy who's part of the online community sharing tricks of his trade beyond what seems evident in the ads. In doing so he implies a presence of democracy among the ads' producers and other audience members, suggesting that the advertising and marketing industries seek mutual openness and collaboration with audience members. At the same time, tpiper seems to share information carefully, restrictively, and at times admits certain "cheats" or calculated moves made during ad production in attempts to articulate a particular ad message. As a fellow YouTube user who claims to believe in the ad message, Piper establishes himself—and by extension the Dove brand he represents—as accessible, sentient and real with the possibility for transparency. Simultaneously, his presence instantiates the veil of capitalist culture, reinforcing mysteries of the advertising industry even as he purports to deconstruct them.

²⁵ Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 3. Emphasis in original.

Along with the public mysteries surrounding advertising, online contributors grapple with the secrets of cultural power linked to constructions of “beauty.” As Naomi Wolf has articulated, the idea of beauty remains a

currency system...determined by politics...[I]n the modern age in the West it is the last best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves.²⁶

With their attempts to unravel the numerous messages in the Dove ad—including those about corporate responsibility and values—internet posters entangle themselves with the reification of beauty standards through ad images and beauty products. This ad campaign complicates the mystery with an additional layer of density: the ad producers appropriate ideas of girl- and woman-empowerment in re-packaging the Dove brand and products, which still support industry constructions of beauty standards for the sake of product sales.²⁷ Borrowing from Taussig’s words, I submit that people’s online posts reflect the tedium of these layers of complexity. In their attempts to make sense of how institutionalized beauty customs and rituals play out in their everyday lives, online contributors participate in the circulation of ad messages even as many of them rail against them.

²⁶ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002 [1991]), 12.

²⁷ For more on the corporate assimilation of “girl power” for branding and advertising, see Michael D. Giardina and Jennifer L. Metz, “Women’s Sports in Nike’s America: Body Politics and the Corporate-Empowerment of ‘Everyday Athletes,’” in *Sport, Culture and Advertising: Identities, Commodities and the Politics of Representation*, ed. Steven J. Jackson and David L. Andrews (London: Routledge, 2005), 59-80.

Like Taussig, I find myself exploring this case study as a writer who must find “the shortest way between two points, between violence and its analysis, [via] the long way around, tracing the edge sideways like the crab scuttling.”²⁸ With nods to Louis Althusser’s arguments for interpellation and Stuart Hall’s emphasis on the role of agency in shaping cultural discourse, I note that these YouTube comments and blogs support a reasoning of people’s personal agency melded with institutional influence. Dialogically, ad producers and audience members alike share in the definition of people as consumers. This project reflects on the ways that ad producers (re)circulate cultural myths and narratives through image and sound, and interpellation of audience members as consumers. Through years of habituation, people globally have accepted and even embraced consumerism as a way of self-definition and building community. Sustaining consumerism as a social practice invites people to participate in The Real just as it requires their participation. Online blogs and posts may be one way of gauging audience members’ agency in shaping their own interactions with corporate consumer paradigms. Though some of the quotes may seem repetitive in terms of content, I present contributors’ arguments and perspectives here within a number of frameworks that represent their curiosities about ad production, their critiques or support of the ad industry, and ways they process personal pain as they read the ad. For the sake of readability, and in my attempt to present bloggers and posters within their own self-defined standards for self-representation, I choose not to infuse my reproductions of their comments with “[*sic*]” and other tools of the academic trade that demonstrate my

²⁸ Taussig, 2.

recognition of unconventional spelling, grammar or other “language skills.” While I do supply bracketed comments occasionally for clarification, I prefer to represent online comments as they appear online.

Close reading, Evolution

The first on-line ad in Dove’s “Campaign for Real Beauty,” Evolution deconstructs the production of a print advertisement seemingly typical of the beauty industry, illustrating the process of preparing a model’s face and hair for a still photography shoot. Additionally, it presents a construction of an ad’s post-production process, in which a Photoshop-like graphics editing program is used to slim the model’s figure, enlarge her eyes, shape and stylize her face and color-correct her hair and complexion for a dramatic look. A hybrid of time lapse and stop photography (with dropped frames) lends the sense of both documentary validity and artistic flair to the image (think Godfrey Reggio’s *Koyaanisqatsi* [1983] or any documentary that, say, depicts flowers blooming within a matter of seconds). At the same time, the time lapse sequence evokes emotionally-laden physical transformations like those in horror films—John Landis’s *American Werewolf in London* (1981) or even music videos like Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” (1983) spring to mind.²⁹

²⁹ These take off from early horror films that demonstrate transformation through cross-fades, as in Lon Chaney, Jr.’s *The Wolfman*, or the later two of the three best-known *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* films (Rouben Mamoulian’s 1932 version starring Fredric March, and Victor Fleming’s 1941 version starring Spencer Tracey). Each of these uses cross-fading to superimpose newly-designed images over the star’s original character likeness.

As I recall Peter's reliance on music when editing the Subway Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket spot, I recognize that the music in Evolution helps establish a pace and rhythm for visual editing. Because of the synergy between musical and visual rhythm, the ad invites a physical response from the audience member as she feels the steady underlying beat with the syncopated breakbeats. An electronica piece, "Passage D" features "breakcore" stylings, including breakbeats (often at around 160 to 180 beats per minute) that evoke speed, complexity, and sonic density.³⁰ With the entry of the music track (about twelve seconds into the 1:15 piece), a piano's simple arpeggiated minor chord establishes a somber and even a reflective mood for the piece as a woman model maintains a stationary, subjective gaze into the camera. For me, "Passage D" is simply "techno," electronic dance music with steady, insistent dance beats that are flavored with engaging melodies and timbres to encourage dancing (I know of techno from dance clubs or raves).³¹ Other listeners well-versed in the generic language of electronica might argue that "Passage D" merges breakcore (aka, "drum and bass") stylings with so-called "intelligent dance music" (or IDM—electronic dance music also considered "listenable" according to people who contribute to Wikipedia and several blogs).³² One blog even calls IDM an "anti-genre genre," suggesting it somehow reigns

³⁰ By breakcore, I'm referring to electronic dance music styles that emphasize speed, complexity, and textural density. Some aficionados consider it a blend of "industrial, jungle, hardcore techno and IDM [intelligent dance music]." See "Breakcore," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breakcore>, accessed 2/23/09.

³¹ "Passage D" was written by The Flashbulb (aka, Benn Jordan) and made available to Ogilvy and Mather for "Evolution" through Vapor Music.

³² See "Intelligent Dance Music," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intelligent_dance_music, accessed 9/8/08.

outside the conventions of musical genre discourse.³³ The result is a piece with almost frenetic energy, a steady pulse with syncopated breakbeats, and an engaging, easy-to-listen-to piano melody.

“Passage D’s” breakbeats hit with the time lapse hair and make-up sequence—the syncopated mid-range drum machine sounds, with quick attack and rapid decay, keep me on edge as I watch the time lapse/stop photography morphing of the model’s image through the hair and make-up series. The breakbeats affix my attention to the rapidly changing images and the dramatic stylization of the model’s body. Near the end of the spot, the camera “zooms” out to reveal the finished image as part of a billboard advertising foundation make-up. Two young women walk by the billboard and glance up at it briefly before exiting the frame—this calls to my mind the ways that beauty advertising may have shaped my own ideas about how I should look during my formative years, and my hopes for my young nieces as they go through adolescence. As the women pass through the frame, the music mix in “Passage D” shifts—lower frequencies are diminished so that the concluding piano lines sound like they’re coming out of inexpensive speakers. Further emphasizing the ad’s theme of image processing and stylization, this mix modification accompanies a final fade to black and intertitles that bring home the ad’s message: “No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted... Take part in the Dove Real Beauty Workshop for Girls. Visit campaignforrealbeauty.ca”

Sound design helps establish the verisimilitude of Evolution’s production set, and dramatizes the time lapse photography for impact. An off-frame voice with some reverb

³³ “Intelligent Dance Music,” <http://idm-new-age.org>, accessed 9/8/08.

(suggesting an expansive space, like a production stage) establishes the scene by calling out: “OK, folks, uh, very quiet please—cameras rolling and recording sound.” Two audible clicks (resembling flipping light switches) call attention to the bright lights switched on to alternately highlight one side of the model’s face, then the other.

Throughout the time lapse hair and make-up session, select sound bites represent voices and people shuffling about the woman’s transforming body—the sound bites thicken the sonic texture, creating tension with their barely-coherent presence and constant variation. During a two-second photography shoot sequence, sounds emulating camera flashbulbs firing and shutters snapping help explain the sudden [brightening] within the frame. The sudden infusion of this new sound arrests my attention. Besides their rapid fire rhythm, their fast, low frequency attack with the halted mid-frequency sustain and fast decay batter my body as bright flares of light overwhelm my eyes. Owing to the syncopated backbeats of “Passage D,” the flashbulb sounds themselves might not have surprised me—with the brilliant flashes of light, however, they pummel my senses for two seconds before my attention is redirected to the final sequence: the graphics editing session in which the model’s image is stretched, shaped, and stylized to meet some imaginary producer’s ideal. Leading up to this photo shoot sequence is a critical, often overlooked sound design and editing convention that helps the listener transition from one scene to another. In the second before the photo shoot, a slowed, elongated version of the flashbulb-firing sound clip adds a wind-like transition leading up to the photo shoot—this single sound helps alert the listener to a spatial and temporal shift from the model’s make-over process to the photo shoot. This sound-with-editing convention not only

alerts the listener to the new approaching photo shoot sequence, it also prepares the listener's aural expectations briefly for the news sounds to follow. The sound design helps authenticate the setting, calls attention to key moments that help the listener engage with the narrative, and harnesses the viewer/listener's body in while revealing these tricks of the trade of beauty industry advertising.

Through image, music and sound design, the Evolution strategy seeks apparently to invert the beauty industry's presentation of The Real by deconstructing it. In the process, the ad presents a new layer of Real meaning, one framed within Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty. As part of the campaign, the Dove business unit establishes the website www.campaignforrealbeauty.com, which offers links to Dove products pages and interactive tools for beauty tips, quizzes and self-esteem articles. It provides information on the "Dove Self-Esteem Fund" (DSEF), which supports projects like self-confidence workshops among the Girl Scouts, along with its panel of international experts on its Fund Advisory Board. The site offers pages targeted toward "Moms and Mentors" and "Girls Only."

Close reading, Onslaught

In Onslaught, the 2007 follow-up to Evolution, the music begins immediately with an intertitle emerging on a black—mimicking the intertitles that introduce Evolution, this opening sequence immediately links the two ads. The music for Onslaught is "La Breeze" from the now-defunct British group Simian. As with "Passage D" composer/performer The Flashbulb, Simian is a relatively unknown group,

particularly in the US and Canada, with its music being released primarily in the UK. Their resulting “indie” status may have made their music very appealing as people heard it in Onslaught.³⁴ The song’s guitar track opens with some single-string triplet figures on acoustic guitar as the opening intertitle materializes on-screen, and a light drum pattern establishes a pulse at around 86 beats per minute (bpm). At about nine seconds, an extreme close-up framing a girl’s face fades in. In slow motion, judging from the way the girl’s eyes blink and hair breezes about her face, this beautiful, red-haired cherub with a Mona Lisa smile gazes subjectively into the camera. For me the slow-motion keeps the image steady, fixed, timeless, as even the girl’s wind-blown hair moves only with smooth, graceful motions. A soundtrack vocal line in the soprano frequency range calls, “Ah, here comes the breeze,” establishing a minor tonality with ornaments and a descending melodic contour. The girl’s demeanor and steady subjective gaze locks mine, establishing my own subjective relationship and participation with the ad.

As I engage with the girl’s intent focus, I notice the drum pattern subdivided to about 172 bpm at 0:15, the rhythm feeling more insistent with added kick drum, bass guitar, and rhythm guitar and keyboard featuring dissonant harmonies with seconds (that is, pitches a whole tone apart). With crescendo, the now multi-part vocals announce, “Here it comes...here it comes...here it comes...”³⁵ Aligned with the girl’s fixed,

³⁴ Simian’s “La Breeze” was also licensed for advertising the Peugeot 1007, a mini MPV (multi-purpose vehicle). Neither the product’s geographic sales region nor the commercial’s broadcast locality are apparent to me at this point. I found this information on a number of on-line sites, including “Simian,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simian_\(band\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simian_(band)), accessed 9/8/08.

³⁵ Complete lyrics from Simian’s “La Breeze” in “Onslaught”:

Ah, here comes the breeze...

enigmatic, slow-motion gaze, I feel tension heighten over these next eleven seconds (a substantial time span within the conventions of advertising production). At 0:23, the vocals finally declare, “Here they come!” with a high-frequency scream or whistle in the background (and perhaps a low-frequency, explosion-like sound effect that may or may not be part of the music track). The (o)nslaught begins...

As the main chorus sets in at 0:26 (“Here it comes, the breeze that’ll blow away / All your reason and your sin...”), the girl’s tranquil face gives way to a barrage of cuts to other advertising. Billboards, subway posters and print ads, many seemingly captured from urban settings and targeting women’s bodies, all smash toward the camera (and therefore my own gaze) in tempo with the unrelenting drum beat. As with “Passage D,” the images in the ad line up initially with the subdivided tempo in “La Breeze,” making the rhythmic motion of the images as physically palpable as the infectious dance track. Synchronized sound effect wind noises heighten the visual-bombardment illusion. After

*Here it comes
Here it comes
Here it comes
Here they come!*

*Here it comes the breeze
That'll blow away
All your reason and your sin
Same with your minds
So do your best to run away
But take a ref and you will pay
You cannot hide*

*Here it comes the breeze
That'll blow away
All your reason and your sin
There's no place to hide*

Whoa, here comes the breeze

barely two seconds, enough for the synchronized audio and visual rhythms to establish a cadence, the rhythmic pattern is disrupted and my sense of balance unsteadied as the composited stills seem to adopt random rhythms of their own. Eventually the still ads submit to motion ads (ostensibly from television or other medium that allows motion photography). Two scantily-clad women shake-what-they-got for the camera, and for the first time since the audiovisual blitz began, the camera rests on them for nearly two seconds—which seems like an eternity given the previously established pace. This sudden disruption of visual rhythm hyper-accentuates my position as voyeur to these women, objectified and commodified by their presence in this mini-ad made up for the sake of Onslaught.

Around 0:35, texted images shoot toward my eye: “HOT,” “The Body Issue,” “Eat to Stay Slim,” “diet” and “TRANSFORM” pummel the my eyes as the wind effects in the sound design morph subtly to take on qualities of incoherent spoken language. As these women’s wind-voices enunciate more clearly, I hear the emergence of the phrase “perfect skin.” Soon language is unconcealed. In a montage of purposefully fabricated brands and ads, models with infomercial-like subjective gazes on the camera hold fictitious beauty products and pronounce “You’ll look...” “...younger...” “...smaller...” “...lighter...” “...firmer...” “...tighter...” “...thinner...” “...softer...” Minimization of low frequency in the voice tracks emulates the sounds that these clips would make if they were real ads broadcast through little television speakers. Later, the tension in Onslaught ratchets up once again. Through a series of close-ups, the ad presents images constructed to represent plastic surgery procedures that make me cringe: liposuction and Botox

needles slide into buttocks, cheeks, and eye areas. Forceps and scalpels tug, slice and re-shape noses, chins and breasts. At the same time, sound design scrapes, wrings and abrades my ears. I bristle at the sounds of oozing bodily discharge and seepage. I think of Rob's sound design for the Harley Davidson commercial, how his client wanted listeners "to really feel like you're on [the bike]..." The sound design viscerally offends me—I want to avert my eyes, not so much because the images are grotesque, but because the hyper-real sound design represents slimy, oozing bodily fluids being unnaturally released. The over-the-top sonic depiction of these surgical procedures elicits my distaste, and marks the procedures as repugnant.

Finally, suddenly, the music quiets to a multi-voice repetition of the opening: "There's no place to hide...Ah, here comes the breeze." The image changes just as abruptly. After a minute of overwhelming motion, I feel like someone's slammed on the break and brought my audiovisual ride to a complete halt. A slow-motion, fixed medium shot watches several girls (a racially-diverse lot) pass through the camera frame as they cross a street—the medium shot reveals their wardrobe and props, including backpacks and books that they might take to or from school. Eventually, our beautiful red-haired cherub enters the frame solo, her gaze intent on the camera. In medium shot, she seems close enough to hug—it's an intimate position with the camera positioned near her eye level, which leaves me as the viewer feeling crouched down to her height. As she passes through the stationary frame from right to left, her body wipes out the intertitle that appeared on-screen:

talk to your daughter before

the beauty industry does.

The red-haired girl leaves the frame. The screen fades to black. A final intertitle instructs:

Download our self-esteem programs
at campaignforrealbeauty.ca

Returning to slow-motion action after the exhausting barrage of images and sound heightens the sense of profundity intended by the ad. It brings to my mind a common theme I hear in the media, that we “naturally” strive to protect children, especially girls, whose vulnerabilities and helplessness leave them victim to repugnant beauty industry images and rhetoric.

Making sense of The Real: comments on image, music, sound design

In the more than 4000 YouTube posts and blogs I’ve reviewed, ideas of real-ness emerge as salient concerns among discussants in numerous, complicated ways. Interlaced throughout their conversations are complex inquiries into the veracity of the ads’ representation of the ad production process and beauty industry practices; the inconsistency between these seemingly politically-correct and morally-upstanding Dove ads and other contradictory messages in ads for brands owned by parent company Unilever; and the degree to which internet users accept the ad messages at face value. Woven throughout these inquiries and comments are markers that, for these internet users, may indicate what they see and hear in the ads as real or Real. Posters’ evaluations of (R)real seem to circulate around four central themes: sincerity, uniqueness or

originality; adherence to spoken or unspoken social standards; the cultural cache of shrewdly recognizing the devices of ad strategies; and ideas of brands as personae. Internet users in my sample articulate these underlying values in terms of their experiences with the ads' images and music.³⁶

With regard for image, many of tpiper's early posts for Evolution address people's technical inquiries about the ad's production process. For instance, tpiper explains to curious YouTube enthusiasts how the production team captured the graphics editing process that represents post-production manipulation of the model's head shot. Dozens of YouTube users inquire about the graphics editing program—most seem to be amateur or professional graphics editors themselves, curious about the software's technical capabilities and inquisitive about the original software product used to produce those effects. In responding to inquiries on the software used for the graphics editing sequence, tpiper reveals some of the bureaucracy and legalities embedded in the ad design process while establishing his earnest pledge to reveal his own secrets from his project:

tpiper: We asked a high-end fashion photographer to make her look as beautiful as possible for a cover/billboard (normal advertising request). I asked the retoucher to save his progress in files/layers, and that's what was used to create the animation. It's 100% real. Retouching took 4 full days. Make-up, lighting, and shooting took about 4 to 5 hours.

tlundin: Wonderful, compelling video. Nicely done.

My geek side is curious: what graphics program is shown? It's not Photoshop; is it a fake program for the purposes of the movie -- a Fauxtoshop, if you will? That's a neat bit of irony in itself, if even the on-screen graphics program was fake! :-)

But what program did the artist actually use to retouch the images?

³⁶ As I'll discuss, no online posts discuss or even refer to sound design.

tpiper: The retouch artist would not let us see his methods. His technique is valuable, so he keeps it under wraps. With help from Soho animators, we illustrated the graphic tools to avoid legal complications...we re created them [the representations of graphics software] to avoid legal issues.

In explaining the production process, tpiper frames the production process within the realm of the real. By saying “[i]t’s 100% real,” tpiper speaks to his graphics editing peers or wannabes who want relate with tpiper as a fellow media producer, and want access to the secrets behind the actual production processes for this ad. Despite one comment in which he suggests another layer of concealment (“The retouch artist would not let us see his methods...”), tpiper reveals tricks of his own trade for his less technologically savvy admirers.

Interestingly, the revelation of ad secrets comes off as a shell game. Despite his claim that the graphics layers are “100% real,” tpiper divulges that he and his team fabricated graphics editing tools to make an attention-grabbing point:

gasgan70: any idea what software are they using to adjust the model? does not seem to be photoshop

drivebyuploading: I don't think it's a real program. It's just looks like a program for the purposes for the film. For example when they extend the neck the hair above the shoulders also moves up, I think this would be impossible for photoshop to do (it would stretch the hair making it look vertical across the stretched portion, instead of wavy).

tpiper: True. A neck can't magically appear behind the face as it gets pulled up. That was a cheat we made to best show what had occurred in that part of the retouching.

With his disclosure of the visual “cheat,” tpiper discloses that the software is in fact not an unadulterated original, but rather a simulation designed to make a dramatic point about beauty industry contrivances. In doing so, tpiper reveals that the Dove brand’s seeming

exposure of the beauty industry is similarly filled with smoke and mirrors. Despite the promise of clarity, tpiper's comments bring the ad's issues under further levels of obscurity.

Posted after tpiper's admissions about the graphics program images, many YouTube users challenge the veracity of Evolution's charges that models' images are graphically altered in post-production. While questioning the genuineness of the depiction of the ad production process, these YouTube posters concurrently raise issues of beauty standards and the beauty criteria that they hold as valid in their everyday lives:

skateEsSon: The most paid models in the world are the most paid for a reason. they almost never use re-touching. just if a hair is in the way of the face or lighting is wrong. almost never do any victoria secret models or kate moss use re-touching ever. almost no professional models use re-touching or else you cant be a model. you can ask any agency or ask any photographer.

[...]

MrKetchup: My best friend is working for one the most famous photo agency worldwide and I can guarantee you that every single photo of even the most famous/paid models are photoshopped.

Regularly she show me her work and I can tell you that she is one the best at it as the "after" pictures look so natural.

She is under NDA [non-disclosure agreement] and she shouldn't show the RAW files to keep the "magic" of the Star System, but believe me when I say that a lot of "stars" really deserve to be photoshopped to continue...

[...]

ceciliam23: Trya Banks was interviewed once and talked about how heavily altered Viki Secret Models are. I think it's pretty prevalent actually.

SUZEQ99: SkateEsSon, You bring up an interesting point. Models are beautiful, no one is saying they are not. Advertisements are 'art' not 'reality' as they (as you said) "photoshop...drawn to high def...mainly the skin...or wrinkles..." - thus art. I agree that beautiful models don't need much touch up, and yes I have been in many rooms with them.

jsharp1701: But they still do all that digital crap to the "pretty" model shot by the "decent" photographer. NO ONE looks like the women in the magazines - not even the women in the magazines! That's the point.

SuccessRubberDuck: Yes, granted. They may retouch the lightening, or remove specks on the skin, but they /DO NOT/ edit the face entirely, as dove has depicted it.

Blushun: They may not when it's a model who won the genetic jackpot, but who do you see on magazine covers and perfume ads? Celebrities and celebrities are almost always retouched like mad.

[...]

ohbozhetymo: i work for L'oreal advertising and retouching these models everyday. they take pictures of baby skin, then crop textures and put on models face for silky smooth skin looks. its impossible to gain such skin. this ad is pure truth. its just sad that it forms insane beauty standards. its all about money.

While challenging the sincerity of the ad's depiction of the ad production process, interlocutors like skateEsSon make claims to the beauty standards s/he takes for granted in everyday life. For skateEsSon, real models exist whose appearances can remain unadulterated and still adhere to certain beauty conventions that skateEsSon believes to be generally accepted. Contrary to skateEsSon's suppositions, ohbozhetymo's experience suggests that post-production photo editing is a common industry practice. Additionally, s/he proposes direct relationships between this kind of graphics editing, profitability goals, and beauty standards within capitalist culture. For SUZEQ99, the post-production manipulation of images is a criterion for distinguishing ads from the "reality" of everyday beauty—in fact, photo retouching constitutes "art" for SUZEQ99, which suggests s/he appreciates aesthetic value in the work of post-production image manipulation. SuccessRubberDuck enters the conversation with a moderating voice, conceding that while some retouching may be done, the ad exaggerates the processes and

results. Though YouTube users don't seem to find the clarity regarding the issues they raise, many of them are clearly engrossed in the images and indictments of the beauty industry associated with the visuals.

Particularly focused on visual themes, some YouTube users express concern over Evolution's charges, finding their social consequences disturbing. Because of the ad's arresting look, childre24 is left in nearly dumbfounded awe, and apparently concerned about how the media's visual representation of human beings affects people's values for sincerity and originality: "wow...that's all..wow...I knew of photoshopping before, but I had no idea they did that much of it. jeez, why can't people just be real anymore?" 50precent comments on the psychological effects of this kind of alleged media practice, and worries for broader social consequences: "its amazing that we can stretch stuff so far away from whats real, they make people feel bad becuase they dont look like that. is this what we want the world to be?" DrSooz shares his/her experience in an attempt to soothe fears:

I was a NY model. I was a makeup artist & photog's stylist later. U asked, "what do we do?" The answer's different 4 every1. What do U do? I take adverts as fantasy & I know what's in mags & ads isn't real. I educate myself about products B4 I buy. So we're cynical, so what? *The point of the ad: Don't feel bad if U don't look like women in mags. They don't look like that either!³⁷

³⁷ Comments to the contrary:

emtyhanded: nothing is made up by the media.. im a college student going into media and advertising and we learn that every ad is researched by a research team exstensively and whatever people react to the most is used.. people are attracted to the fake images.. its just to bring attention to advertismen and get people to know about and eventually purchase the end product.. nobody is going to be attracted to a model on an billboard with crows feet and blemishes

partyhoodown: Well clearly advertising alters everyone's perception. "made up" by the media = CREATED by the media btw.

Several posts point out that beauty standards have changed historically, make-up has been used by women and men for millennia, and assessments of body shape and size are historically and culturally specific.³⁸ Throughout their discourse, several interlocutors debate today's beauty standards, arguing that their personal standards don't match those of The Real—rather, they subscribe to something else that they define as “normal,” a counter to The Real that is, well, real according to their personal standards and experiences of daily life. I presume by “normal,” these people refer to un-effected

funwithwarcrimes: right-media only appeals to the deep impulses, instincts, emotions that are already there. But as you do your research, you might find current ads play on those to extreme. To the point of young girls starving themselves...I love advertising, but someday, you might love an adolescent boy/girl very much and feel the pain they feel when they try to live up to those false images. Until they are mature enough to make the distinctions, they need other, healthier images. good luck with your career!

[...]

globaltrance86: Beauty is not necessarily made up by the media. There is a general consensus between cultures on what is beautiful...strong jaw lines, larger lower lip, large, neonatal eyes are just some examples on what humans think is attractive.

RinginInMyHead: A general consensus? That is very false. There are certain attributes one culture may consider beautiful while another finds repulsive. Even from person to person, the perception of beauty differs.

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." All the models displayed on magazine covers may appear beautiful, but once you change your perspective and see how that "beauty" came to be (by watching this video), the magazines start to look a lot more unattractive.

³⁸ congruity: Makeup has been widely used throughout history (Cleopatra and other historic aristocratic figures; just read Jane Austin) to cover up unnatural facial blemishes and achieve skin perfection. Smooth, flawless skin isn't something manufactured by Capitalism; it's an ideal wanted to be achieved by many women for a very long time. Only now, we have Botox, Nip/Tuck, Oxy, Crest White Strips. Plus now we also tend to live past 55, warranting the need to reclaim our youth.

MsGrim: lol [Laugh Out Loud] you got a point there. but- im just troubled at how our current society just overdoes it. you see little 4 year olds playing a game that automatically changes their hairstyle, makeup etc. there are 4 year olds who go to the salon before they even hold a cellphone. (im getting this off a cnn showing a while back. the game actually exists.)

images.³⁹ As they work to clarify their opinions, some posters praise the ads for presenting themes that resonate with their own values:

oZaffyo: haven't you ever seen a current dove commercial? they use NORMAL people instead of gorgeous, skinny, young models. i think they're doing something great.

londybridge: Oh, sorry. I didn't know. And I guess I shouldn't have said "ugly." Thanks.

humancow2392: u know, the way u phrased ur comment suggests that "NORMAL" people aren't as attractive as "gorgeous, skinny, young models." it's ppl like u that are making young women today feeling inadequate b/c of how they look.

oZaffyo: no, i mean "NORMAL" as in that they haven't gone through all this makeup and shit, and that their profession isnt to be gorgeous and skinny, in other words, what models are.

SweetLeangel: I think oZaffyo means normal to mean real. Dove use women who look like real women do. I like that they're doing that, too, because the women on the adverts are pretty, anyway. Like all girls. ^_^

oZaffyo: exactly. thank you. very good.

This exchange exhibits these posters' critiques of the hyperreality of The Real, and their attempts to define and differentiate themselves and their values from ad industry conventions. oZaffyo defines his/her own beauty standards under the rubric of "NORMAL," a category that alludes to oZaffyo's everyday experience, an original state unadulterated by "makeup and shit." SweetLeangel concurs by defining this "normal" or everyday as "real"—and then by ironically reproducing the Dove brand's message by saying that the women in Dove ads "are pretty, anyway. Like all girls." By fleshing out definitions and ideas of beauty standards among them, users like oZaffyo and

³⁹ For most bloggers, it seems to me, un-effected "normal" images correlates specifically post-production manipulations of images (not pre- or production decisions like hair styling, make-up, lighting or camera lens selections—with the exception of oZaffyo and a few in this specific interchange, many posters seem to take these for granted.

SweetLeangel express an affinity to Dove's ad messages because they find their values for and personal experiences of real-ness represented through Evolution's seeming revelation of industry deceptions.

Even though dozens of comments demonstrated fascination for the graphics editing software, several YouTube users didn't find the graphics editing sequence alarming or even enlightening. simianlad and k3ym4st3r both seem unfazed by the revelation of post-production image editing:

simianlad: I don't find this particularly shocking or troubling. Touch-up has been going on for a long time. It's used in all contexts, from kids in cereal ads to old people in Viagra ads. Before Photoshop, it was done in the darkroom...

k3ym4st3r: You can do that and much more with photoshop...And that kind of editing happens not only in this kind of media, also in music, voices are "helped" by pitch adjusters for example...

Despite the astonishment expressed by so many YouTube users, some experience audiovisual ads grounded with an awareness for these kinds of production processes.

Despite the Dove brand's promise of unveiling industry secrets, simianlad and k3ym4st3r suggest that this news isn't really news at all. Rather, the information is publicly available for all to share, particularly those who might consider themselves savvy in ways of technical production. For some posters, this may represent a kind of cultural cache: they express their self-identification as worldly or experienced. They see through the smoke and mirrors, and won't be taken in easily by the machinations of media production or the ad agency.

Throughout these conversations bloggers debate the limits to which adulterated images represent "real people." Their arguments express value in the humanity of the

model, and perhaps the sentience or Benjaminian aura of the seemingly victimized model. Some bloggers may see themselves in the model, recognizing ways that their own beliefs and value systems may have been twisted, carved and re-packaged. For instance, many YouTube posters debate the “real-ness” or “fake-ness” of the model once she’s been transformed, particularly in terms of the post-production graphics editing. They exchange ideas about what is “natural” or even “normal” with regard for how people look or should look. For example, [persongirl101](#) submits that the model “looks fake at the end” of the ad. In response, [crazyhappyanimegirl](#) notes, “She's supposed to, that's the point. Yet so many girls look in the magazines and expect to look like that naturally. No one really knows the truth anymore.” [PurpleCantaloupe79](#) disagrees with interlocuters implicit derision of the altered image, suggesting that the model “looked so much better after the transformation.” [euphoricrose](#) engages with [PurpleCantaloupe79](#), countering:

It wasn't even HER anymore. It was completely faked and manipulated.
She looked beautiful and natural before hand..and it was still a human being.
Afterwards it's just a computer generated image with a human base.
[PurpleCantaloupe79](#): maybe it wasn't. but unfortunately people don't want to see regular people on tv and in advertisement. they want the fantasy. that is just the cold reality. the general population want the fake not the real.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ [m0nallisa](#) agrees with [PurpleCantaloupe79](#): amen to that. photoshop is a cool thing, but not when you use it to make urself look like something ur not. that girl was caked with makeup and yet they still photoshopped her. she looked nothing like herself in the final product. that's not what beauty is.

[pr0jecti0nist](#) and [BronzeEleven](#) continue arguing whether artificial could be real:

[pr0jecti0nist](#): Sure, contemporary society's manipulation of the concept of beauty based on artificiality shouldn't mean anything.

[BronzeEleven](#): What's wrong with artificial?

[pr0jecti0nist](#): Simple: it isn't real, it's distorted. Chasing a lie is not very healthy, aside from being a waste of time. If you don't like your neck, your eyes or your skin, work on your perception - don't change yourself

euphoricrose's insistence that the graphically-edited image "wasn't even HER anymore" suggests that the discussant values an idea of sentience. S/he wants to believe that a human spirit and mind authenticate the existence of the face represented on-screen. The exchange between euphoricrose and PurpleCantaloupe79 touches upon one possible aspect of consumer practice: as ad producers present characters in their ad narratives, people are habituated to relate to the characters and center themselves in the story. As part of a consumer practice, in which advertisers associate Real personae with brands and products, branding helps people personalize products and brands. In doing so, consumers may be able to build affinities and even affections for products and brands through the representation of The Real, making it easier to believe they can satisfy fantasies of what their lives could be through their consumption of products and services.⁴¹ For

based on other people's surreal views of beauty. To me, self-acceptance is the way to go. True beauty can't be attained by nip/tucking (or photoshopping).

BronzeEleven: 'Artificial' does not mean it does not exist or 'isn't real', nor does it mean it is distorted. Tofurkey for example is artificial turkey, and there isn't anything wrong with that and certainly is 'real'. Beauty is relative. If society veivs women who are thin and wear make-up ect as 'beatiful, than who are you to say society is wrong? Is beauty not in the eye of the beholder?

pr0jecti0nist: First of all, society doesn't have an "eye". People have eyes and they are free to create their own concept of beauty. What _society_ creates is a stereotype, and then _society_ stigmatizes people who can't achieve it, people who deviate from pre-conceived ideas, of, for example, what women should look like. A stereotype is artificial and distorted because is is a collection of characteristics isolated from a real subject..._Real_ people can never really become the stereotypes they chase after, because it isn't a concrete reality to begin with. That's why they use _plastic_ surgery and softwares. BronzeEleven, please understand that I'm not being aggressive. Take a look around you: thousands of people starving and cutting themselves, using drugs to escape from "reality"... you think society is RIGHT?

⁴¹ More comments on Real Life, media and fantasy:

xraytwonine: I am a fashion photographer myself, I went through a fine arts school and i learn that in today's society, it's very cynical, nothing can be trusted, and no one is right, institutionalized religion is whack, and we are surround by disposable consumerism. so what do we do, what does live means? we just want to be happy, right? no?

PurpleCantaloupe79 and many others, believing the model is real is critical in buying into Dove's message.

fallenangel1003's comments illuminate one way advertising affects social relations. Arguing that people may act on The Real ad fantasy, sometimes through drastic transformations of their own lifestyles, personae or physical appearances,

xraytwonine: well, the media is in charge of broadcasting what's "interesting" and often our fantasies lead us to the most unrealistic things... if you are so easily affected by what the media tells you then you are weak.

DrSooz: Not weak --human. We're all vulnerable to this sort of manipulation in one way or another. Think they don't shine up the cars in the Toyota/Chevy/Dodge/Lexus ads? Think again.

DrSooz: I was a NY model. I was a makeup artist & photog's stylist later. U asked, "what do we do?" The answer's different 4 every1. What do U do? I take adverts as fantasy & I know what's in mags & ads isn't real. I educate myself about products B4 I buy. So we're cynical, so what? *The point of the ad: Don't feel bad if U don't look like women in mags. They don't look like that either!

xraytwonine: what I meant is that it's "ok" to feel sad that you don't live in a "fantasy", because real life sucks anyways.

DrSooz: Speak for yourself.
I'm not sad. I don't want a fantasy life. My Real Life doesn't suck.

xraytwonine: great, dont get personal though. i just hope that this type of advertising will still exist, but I also hope people can be more educated also

[...]

MindExpansion101: If these girls are that detached from reality that their view of life comes from media and not from . . . umm. Life? They cant be helped.

fn0rdianslip: the media that people see and hear and experience is completely inextricable from life, it is a part of life.

biologically, a human body's (and mind's) response to a two dimensional image or moving image is the same as a human body's response to a three-dimensional image.

look it up.

without direction or explanation, anyone can misinterpret a fabricated reality from a spontaneous, "natural" reality. most do even with proper explanation, since the two are so interwoven.

fallenangel1003 reveals how ads may influence people's expectations, and how those expectations are (re)circulated:

...all the girls now only have these fake images to show us what we should look like. And then men are seeing these images and they expect us to look like that. In the end the girl is fake, she's not a real person. She looked so much better at the beginning. Girls are not barbies and we shouldn't be treated like one by being photoshoped and getting surgeries to look better.

Commenting on advertising's influence on male-female (hetero-normal) relations, fallenangel1003 reveals ways that the ubiquity of ad representations shape social relations. Within their commentaries about whether or not the model is real as a result of image editing, s/he weaves complex a argument infused with feminist rhetoric ("Girls are not barbies") while still remaining focused on the model's appearance ("She looked so much better at the beginning"). Corroborating Taussig's theory, fallenangel1003 reifies institutionally-inscribed standards, still commodifying the model and model-like appearances, even as she rails against them.

In contrast, kakomu points out that Evolution circumscribes the discourse around it even as it seemingly challenges beauty standards. S/he responds to a fellow YouTube poster's critique of user comments:

" Its amazing how many of these comments prove the point of the video, even though the posters can't see it."

Or maybe the irony that they're using a model to sell this "self esteem fund". Or maybe the irony that the emphasis of this commercial is STILL about beauty, whether it be natural or fake as opposed to something more productive, like intelligence, hard work or creativity.

As kakomu observes, even in the course of supporting or critiquing the ad, much of the discourse reifies industry beauty standards.⁴² Similarly, through their interaction with the ads, YouTube discussants recycle, re-circulate and reify ideas of consumer practices. They interact with the themes, images and sounds put forth by the ad producers, reifying the brand as a contributor to conversation. In the process of seemingly deconstructing the beauty products industry's template for beauty standards, Evolution producers and YouTube commenters alike serve the same paradigm—by placing aesthetic value on the model's appearance, advertisers and audience members both contribute to the reification of beauty standards, the execution of branding strategies, and propagation of consumer practices.

⁴² Others who concur:

rafu1: Dove has "purchased" the argument for embracing women for who they are, regardless of how they look. The problem is that Dove is still pitching us a product to make ourselves look better. This whole self esteem fund is really amazing! For all that's been written about how advertisers play to our insecurities to sell us things we don't need, Dove has really responded in a clever way!

[...]

LastPyrrhicVictory: This is just another advertising campaign that plays on your insecurities... just in a more positive way.

najt3ex: That's David Ogilvy... he's a genius

[...]

rafu1: right on...its not just that this is still "just" an ad, this is the perfect ad...it subverts the whole argument out in society about how women should be represented. While Dove chooses to use real looking women, they do so only to exploit the same feelings all those other ads that use anorexic women do.

Aiakia: Exactly. They have a different target group so that while this advertisement is still popular, it will make people want to buy their products because they "care" about unraveling the beauty myth. It's still all about profit, regardless.

Spotting the original: demonstrating cultural prowess and values through musical knowledge

Closely related to the value of representing uniqueness and originality is the ability to identify uniqueness and originality. In a *Wall Street Journal* article, Grey Worldwide's Director of Music Josh Rubinowitz declared, "I've been on a quest [to] make a hit record" by featuring music from relatively unknown groups in ads.⁴³ The practice of introducing what might be considered a relatively unknown group or song to a mass audience through an ad works for an advertiser in a number of ways. For one thing, residual royalties from the music in the ad "could be a new source of much needed revenue for agencies," particularly in an era in which ad budgets are shrinking, audiences focus their attention toward non-traditional venues like the internet, and industry stability seems less certain than in the past.⁴⁴ Additionally, by recreating ads as music distribution sites at a time when digital file sharing reconfigures people's imaginations for how they access new music, ad producers mark those brands as current, trendy, cool—this helps mark the agency and brand as arbiters of taste.⁴⁵ Judging from the incalculable inquiries

⁴³ Brian Steinberg and Suzanne Vranica, "As 30-second Spot Fades, What Advertisers Will Do Next," *WSJ*, Jan. 3, 2006, A15.

⁴⁴ According to Steinberg and Vranica, "[I]t finally sank in on Madison Avenue in 2005 that the 30-second commercial is fading as a means of hawkig products and services. Ad executives will be busy...trying to figure out what to put in its place. Good luck to them: Audiences are splintering off in dozens of directions, watching TV shows on iPods, watching movies on videogame players and listening to radio on the Internet. All these activities cut out the usual forms of sponsorship and take place when and where consumers—not media executives—choose." Steinberg and Vranica, A15.

⁴⁵ Timothy Taylor also notes further that "[i]n the face of the dumbing down of radio [with corporate monopolization and cost cutting efforts to minimize variety in play lists since the 1990s], some people in advertising were attempting to reconfigure television commercials as an alternative non-mainstream site to hear new music." Taylor, "The Changing Shape of the Culture Industry; or, How Did Electronic Music Get into Television Commercials," *Television and New Media* 8 (2007), 241. As the "new petite bourgeoisie," Taylor argues that ad professionals in the first decade of the twenty-first century attempt "to confer legitimacy on itself not by brokering high culture or importing techniques associated with high

for the music sources of both Evolution and Onslaught, the Dove campaign strategy worked effectively on that level. By far, the most-asked questions about the ads' music centered on the song title, group name, and how users could access the tracks for themselves.

Along with the possibility for generating new revenues from music sales, ad producers seem to believe that music unknown through traditional music industry outlets can mark the brand as fresh, unique, and original. As Michael Dando from Suite101.com observes,

It would seem to make the most sense for an ubercorporation to tap the most popular bands to hype their products, but this is clearly not the case as obscure and underground acts are securing some of the more premium advertising spots, selling everything from cars to sweaters. Perhaps the current influx of indie bands on the small screen is the result of companies wanting to promote themselves as the next hippest thing at the same time jockeying for a spot as the best kept secret in town. Or maybe the ad gurus know that the current consumer culture craves whatever is new, innovative and exciting, not wanting something they've "already heard."⁴⁶

Promoting a brand as "the next hippest thing" associates a cool-ness factor at a time when many audience members have immediate and often easy access to music resources, and

culture in the production of advertisements...instead [they are] presenters of hip, underground culture, not high culture." Taylor, 252.

⁴⁶ Michael Dando, "TV Ads Favor Latest Indie Music," Suite101.com, 12/5/2007, http://rockmusic.suite101.com/article.cfm/the_latest_indie_music_is_on_tv, accessed 10/23/08. Suite101.com is an online magazine that began in 1996. Editor-in-chief Joy Guegler promotes the online magazine as giving "well-researched advice...it's educated opinion that is sourced journalistically...There is a high level of accountability" for content. According to *The Vancouver Sun*, Suite101.com draws about eight million readers per month, and states that "although Suite101.com is a Canadian company with mostly Canadian editors and many Canadian writers, 70 per cent of the Web traffic is from the U.S., eight per cent from Canada and the remaining 22 per cent from the rest of the world. Marke Andrews, "Vancouver's Suite101.com faces stiff competition," *Vancouver Sun*, 8/5/08, <http://www.canada.com/vancouvernews/business/story.html?id=f7747faa-fe86-4f39-9097-0a0e34b0cf72>, accessed 10/23/08.

“being the first to know” about breaking news or a breaking band marks the brand with cultural savoir-faire. Marketer Schuyler Brown borrows from conservative pundit William Safire’s coining of the term “neophilic” to describe current cultural practices of self-definition as “being the first to know” of new trends, new information, and certainly new music.⁴⁷ The music gives the ad what Marsden might call a conversational agenda or context within which interlocutors generate discourse. In the process, some discussants represent themselves as on the cutting edge of cultural knowledge, bearing enviable expertise in music recognition and hip-ness that may contribute to displays of a kind of competency and cultural power.

Perhaps as their way to demonstrate this kind of prowess, several YouTube posters share knowledge of seemingly obscure or little-known music. Several contributors comment on the version of The Flashbulb’s “Passage D” remixed for the ad compared to an earlier version of the track. In the process, they reveal values about the kinds of sounds to which they think so-called mainstream audiences may or may not respond—sounds that may have been minimized by producers to make the track more appealing to a broader audience. For example, Caccobius points out that the ad’s remixed version of the track “is a special, rather soft version. the original is a bit more ‘noisy.’” Posters tlundin and angeldyst impose valuations of the music for generalized audiences as they discuss ways that the song was adapted and The Flashbulb’s overall compositional style:

⁴⁷ Brown, 221-2.

tlundin: Be warned: you probably won't like the original song. The Flashbulb is a group that overlays gentle melodies with a harsh, frenetic drum machine track. It's their "thing". The music was adapted for the commercial and remixed -- the drum track was greatly subdued, and some of the keyboard phrases were looped. The remix is actually a better song than the original, IMO [In My Opinion].⁴⁸

angeldvst: The Flashbulb is one musician, and a lot of his stuff is very gentle! But lot of his stuff is challenging to the average listener.

tlundin: You're right, angeldvst, good correction. I would like to amend my comment to say that in the specific case of Passage D (the original song from which the commercial soundtrack is remixed), the loud burps and braps of the drum machine track is a Too-Much-Coffeeman musical experience that's quite the opposite of the more soothing feel of the soundtrack. But yes, a good deal of The Flashbulb's music can be taken "as is", while some of it is -- as you say -- challenging to listen to. :-)

By extending their knowledge about The Flashbulb's oeuvre, contributors like Caccobius, tlundin, and angeldvst promote themselves as being "in the know" on this unknown artist's work before it even appeared in a commercially viable venue like the Evolution ad. Meanwhile, they demonstrate their knowledge of and values for sonic artifacts, and make judgments on which sounds may or may not appeal to some audience members.

At the same time, these posts argue for particular values demonstrated through sound, and comment on markers of originality.⁴⁹ In describing artist's work, tlundin suggests that The Flashbulb's signature sound relies on an overlay of "gentle melodies with a harsh frenetic drum machine track. It's their "thing." By implication, the remix

⁴⁸ The Flashbulb is actually not a group, but rather a single artist named Benn Lee Jordan.

⁴⁹ For discussions of scholars or performers finding, claiming and privileging "original" music scores or (historically) authentic performance, see Richard Taruskin, "What—or Where—is the Original?," originally published in *Notes: A Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 46 (1989-90), 792-97; reprinted in *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 155-63. See also his "The Modern Sound of Early Music," originally published as "The Spin Doctors of Early Music," *NYT Arts and Leisure*, 29 July 1990; reprinted in *Text and Act*, 164-72.

for the ad eliminates The Flashbulb’s “thing,” perhaps making the track no longer original or unique to The Flashbulb.⁵⁰ The original version of The Flashbulb’s composition features some highly distorted synthesized sounds, thick-textured buzzes and rapidly looped ratcheting figures entering at different pitches, some of which reminding me of media representations of electricity. Additionally, the percussion track has a much thicker texture with several syncopated rhythms layered upon one another. Thinking back to the Echo Boys’s music revisions for the Cox spots, I wonder if the music had been revised to appeal to an audience sensitive to women’s issues—playing into cultural stereotypes that may have prompted the producers to soften the music. As tlundin observes, the track was “greatly subdued” to generate a “more soothing feel.” angeldyst notes that much of The Flashbulb’s work “is challenging to the average listener.” On one hand, the producers may have modified “Passage D” so that the track still invoked the edgy stylishness of contemporary urban dance sounds without driving away woman-sensitive or so-called mainstream audiences who might find the original track off-putting, agitating or even acerbic. In doing so, at least for tlundin, the producers may have eliminated the juxtaposition of sounds that made the track unique and original to The Flashbulb, part of the artist’s “thing.” For an industry-professed social project like Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty, however, eliminating the so-called “noisiness” or a “greatly subdued” or “soothing feel” may support the ideas that the Dove brand is

⁵⁰ In contrast, the Simians’ “La Breeze” doesn’t generate the same discourse for the ad “Onslaught” despite the obvious editing required to whittle the track down to fit an ad lasting 1’ 19”. Unlike “Passage D,” the track based on the Simians’ music exhibits no new sounds or elimination of particular sounds within the track. The cutting out of certain parts of the song to fit the time-frame and visual rhythm of “Onslaught” seems unnoticed or taken for granted by bloggers and posters as unremarkable within the context of how they relate to the ad or with each other through the music.

delivering a profound ethical message while uncovering industry deceptions.

Additionally, the fact that the Campaign is directed toward women and girls may play into stereotype-influenced decisions for minimizing edgy sounds that could disturb feminine sensibilities.

Like the Echo Boys, who worked to shape music that didn't sound "needledroppy," the music tracks in *Evolution* and *Onslaught* draw upon values for originality and uniqueness. At the same time, the producers eliminate sounds that may pose an affront to certain audiences. Unlike the Echo Boys's music for the Cox ads, however, which is intended to add energy without calling much attention to itself, the music in both *Evolution* and *Onslaught* grabs people's attention. Likely that consequence is intentional—while the music establishes a editing-friendly pace and makes many listeners want to move their bodies, the music can appeal particularly to music collectors with digital collection skills and resources. In the age of peer-to-peer file sharing sites like Napster, Limewire and Kazaa, and with establishment of iTunes as a distribution hub, people find ways of expanding their musical interests and collections. Recognizing and collecting this music, audience members flaunt their musical and cultural knowledge by what music they might recognize as fresh, hip, or outside the traditional music industry, and by their knowledge of artists and music outside the industry mainstream.

Silent sound design

Interestingly, none of the thousands of blogs and posts in my research discuss sound design or its effects. Considering the technical and cultural savvy bloggers and

posters demonstrate through their online discourse, their lack of awareness, lack of interest, or uncritical acceptance of sound design is striking. One could argue that this speaks to the subtleties of an effective sound design. As my research shows, sound design is extremely important to ad producers, who spend countless hours perfecting sound design, especially in revisions when early designs don't work according to a client's standards. Despite the fact that advertisers sometimes invest heavily in sound design, it seems sometimes to be barely noticed by users and producers alike—that is, unless the design calls undue attention to itself. Nonetheless, it's clear that effective sound design is deemed necessary for engaging audiences—and “effective” takes into account both sound that will engage and sound that won't repel audience members.⁵¹

For audience members, however, sound design doesn't appear to be a site for overt engagement with the ad. It's hard for me to imagine that Evolution and Onslaught would have generated the often visceral responses shared by online contributors without the sound design I hear in each ad. With the numerous sounds added in to draw an audience member into the reality posed by the ad—laser-like pops and blasts from camera flashes in Evolution; scraping wind sounds accompanying Onslaught's bombardment of images composited to zoom toward the viewer; eerie squeaks and creaks accompanying the post-production stretching and stylization of the Evolution model's

⁵¹ In the case of Lowe's Foods commercial (Chapter 4), Evan and Alex were careful to design a soundscape that didn't drive away audiences who might imagine the humanoid *greenpoints* getting hurt as they slid into the *greenpoints* break room/holding station. Similarly, Echo Boy Tom admits that his music for Cox's background music for “Sports Bar” (Chapter 3) functions much like sound design—the client demanded that the right kind of music represent that bar. For that Cox spot, the music/sound design shapes a persona of the satisfied Cox customer, which functions as an extension of the Cox brand. For some brands, like Harley-Davidson, sound design is crucial to enticing potential consumers to interact with ideas and feelings around what owning a Harley might bring them.

body and the Onslaught bodies undergoing plastic surgery—the sound design elicits numerous physical responses from me. I’m subtly startled with by sudden camera flashes; I’m simultaneously unnerved and disgusted from the idea of fictional or real bodied being dismembered by a scalpel or post-production graphic design. Given the ubiquity and accessibility of sound processing software (at least among people with the resources to own or access a Garage Band-loaded Apple computer or other software), I’m curious about the continued lack of discourse around sound production. The social, cultural or ideological constructs that designate sound design outside media discourse could be areas for further research.

The Real, social behavior, corporate ethics

Demonstrating the success of social network marketing strategies, Onslaught was embedded on Motionographer, a website dedicated to networking and information sharing among filmmakers, animators and designers.⁵² Consequently, numerous Motionographer constituents post comments on the ad. Because of the site’s declared audience and patronage, these postings presumably come from people who have experience with the technologies and procedures of audiovisual production, many of whom may have industry experience. Surprising to me, few Motionographer comments

⁵² Motionographer founders/maintainers state that the motivation behind the site is “to be a source of inspiration for filmmakers, animators and designers by sharing outstanding work from studios, freelancers and students, feature stories that give readers a closer look at influential studios and individuals, commentary that sparks discussion or introspection about the creative process, miscellaneous items that Motionographer contributors find interesting...” Motionographer, <http://motionographer.com/about/>. Comments from “Dove Onslaught,” Motionographer, <http://motionographer.com/2007/10/02/dove-onslaught/>, accessed 9/9/08.

grapple with the technical aspects of production; rather, like many YouTube posters, they focus on the ads' social and cultural placement, influence, and how the ads resonate with their own value sets.

Some Motionographer bloggers not only accept branding as a shaper of cultural meaning and discourse, they view Onslaught specifically as a harbinger of meaningful and moral corporate activity:

gabreal: This is an example of branding that touches a deep ethical level in the disgusting commonly accepted understanding of the beauty industry. (here in America) Nice job Dove for supporting such work and exposing such horrible practices in the name of beauty. This type of branding stands, in a way, amongst the type of “greening” of corporate practice that is becoming so popular. This is meaningful work.

gabreal's comment reveals a common and sometimes uncritical acceptance of branding strategies as natural contributors to cultural discourse and meaning-making rituals. S/he discusses Onslaught as a sign of shifting corporate interests that apparently resonate with gabreal's own socio-political inclinations: what s/he calls a “greening” of corporate actions. Although gabreal's idea of “green” isn't immediately comprehensible, it seems to stand in for ideas of environmentally responsible and ethical practices. This kind of “environmentally friendly” could also represent what might be considered a softer approach, perhaps even a “soft-sell” approach that incorporates a language of ethics within what might otherwise be considered a ruthless corporate milieu.

On the flip side, many bloggers are quick to charge the Dove campaign with hypocrisy. MilkmanD's post also includes link to a video parody (also uploaded on YouTube) to drive home a point that corporate profitability goals support and sustain

advertising.⁵³ The parody opens with still images of girls. With each image, an intertitle tells a secret about each brightly smiling girl, that she “wishes she were blonde,” or “hates her curls.” Interspersed among those images are pictures of Dove products, like Dove’s Hair Silk, superimposed by a title inviting the audience member to “buy this.” MilkmanD’s reference to the parody and comment that Dove branding strategies are “two-faced” prompts a new comment from gabreal, whose rhetoric takes on a different slant as s/he acknowledges corporate profit motives:

MilkmanD: Straight to the heart. Point recieved. Amazing.

On the other hand does Dove expect us to believe that they would be OK as a company if we never ever bought their products again to make “our skin look better and therefore feel better about ourselves”?

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25by9mgBgKo>

2 faced.

gabreal: The parody is funny and its true advertising work is never ‘that’ meaningful since it all boils down to money in the end.

The innumerable online parodies of this ad—along with a blogger’s ability to cite them—demonstrate the reach of the Dove ads along with the depth of their infusion into cultural memory. Successful parody relies on audiences’ prior knowledge of the original subject matter along with the audience member’s careful attention to the images, sounds and themes of both the original and parody. Additionally, gabreal’s critique, that the creative work of advertising “is never ‘that’ meaningful” owing to profit motives, clearly positions advertising as low-brow, uncouth or meaningless within her/his value set. In

⁵³ “Dove Real Beauty Campaign Parody Ad,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25by9mgBgKo>, accessed 9/7/08.

other words, for gabreal, profit motives render even the Dove messages insincere, vapid, and thin.

In contrast with gabreal's critique of meaning-making and advertising, other bloggers accept brands and ads as contributors to sincere and meaningful cultural discourse. In another Motionographer posting, PlayingKarrde defends his/her personal interaction with Dove and use of Dove products; additionally, s/he criticizes nay-sayers suspicious of the motives behind the ad:

PlayingKarrde: I buy Dove soap because it makes me beautiful. And I'm ok with that.

But seriously, whatever Dove's intentions, if the message is the right one, is it so bad that they are doing it to sell something? It's not like they're actually advertising their products with this. It's just their brand name at the start.

You can be cynical all you want, but its better that ads like this are broadcast to sell soap than ads that make you feel bad about yourself because you don't fit into their perception of what is beautiful, in order to sell your their products.

PlayingKarrde's comments reveal a commonplace acceptance of compartmentalizing branding personae from overall corporate profitability goals. S/he refers to Dove as she would a sentient being opinions, values and goals—"whatever Dove's intentions," s/he insists, PlayingKarrde has no quarrel with the brand's corporate ethics.⁵⁴ S/he contests criticisms of advertising's sales motives if the sales message features a noble cause (perhaps the epitome of sincerity). Besides, s/he argues, no product is actually pushed in the ad—rather "[i]t's just their brand name" that's being defined through the ad's message. The comment dissociates ideas of product sales from brand definition practices, implying negative connotations with sales routines while naturalizing branding

⁵⁴ Several posters refer to the brand this way: WheelofTime is "glad to see a company who is willing to step forward and say 'Hey this is wrong'. Good for Dove."

strategy. Despite the seeming demonization of sales rituals, PlayingKarrde finally suggests that sales efforts can be redeemable if the sales strategy reflects acceptable moral standards (unlike “ads that make you feel bad about yourself because you don’t fit into their perception of what is” beautiful, socially acceptable, or—better yet—identifiable as socio-economically powerful). Motionographer contributor tinapinxit agrees with PlayingKarrde, and takes an activist stance in support of the Dove campaign:

tinapinxit: You can analyze this all you want, but if you’re a woman, this will most likely speak to you.

Yes, it boils down to money, but if they can reach even only a few people with the message of real beauty - then it’s all worth it.

If they can make a woman with few extra pounds feel that she’s not a monster, that she’s beautiful - then it’s worth it.

If they can change the mind of a woman who’s contemplating getting implants and butchering her already perfect body - it’s worth it.

And if you call that brainwashing - brainwash away.

For tinapinxit, the ends justify the means. As s/he criticizes how The Real of the beauty industry affects women in terms of esteem and body image, this discussant takes a clear stand on ethical legitimacy of the marketing strategy. tinapinxit’s own sense of “real beauty,” as she identifies it in her post, has to do with women not perceiving themselves as “monsters” if they don’t share the body image. Despite any underlying industry profit motives, tinapinxit may feel so detached or unaffected by the company’s revenue objectives that her primary focus remains on speaking out against the contradictory message itself.

Like PlayingKarrde and tinapinxit, YouTube users like melbookermusic support the message and pledge to distribute it within their social networks, avowing to share the

video with their daughters and other young women in their lives: “Good job!!!! This has been needed for some time. I have a daughter, and I will not let her grow up thinking she has to fit in some company's standard of beauty.” Despite a great deal of support for Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty, however, other online comments critique, criticize, lampoon or downright denigrate the effort. Noting cynical and sometimes derisive comments from his/her peers, [ajaxouch](#) argues that

...[t]his is a good video. About awareness and prevention of a lot of disorders brought on by societal norms. Just because YOU can see through it all, which you dont by the way, doesn't mean everyone else does. Why are you so negative about something good?

[ajaxouch](#)’s comments prompted by those of contributors like [lolagolightly](#), [christianbaier](#) and [TheVerySpecialThommy](#). Their skepticism ranges from pointing out contradictions among Unilever’s (Dove’s parent company’s) brands, to cynicism toward corporate profit motives, to explicit rejection of the Dove campaign⁵⁵:

[Lolagolightly](#): Whatever Dove! Dove is owned by the same company, Unilever, which makes Axe for men. We've all seen those commercials and how much they respect the intellect and natural beauty of women! You can kiss my ass dove; it's just a marketing ploy. They don't actually give a crap if you feel good about yourself, they just want you to feel good enough to buy their products. DON'T BELIEVE THE LYING BASTARDS!

⁵⁵ More on profit motive:

[innerbeast415](#): did u guys see that dove "angel skin commercial?" this is marketing- a good message, but it's marketing. relish the ideal, but don't go out and buy all dove stuff (which really isn't that good) over this.

If this were done by a NONprofit or something, i'd be in full support.

[...]

[Mendingo](#): That is a genuinely brilliant ad. I just wish it was real and not a marketing excercise for a beauty company.

christianbaier: companies lie to get your money. film at eleven.

TheVerySpecialThommy: this is the goal of every company, and they obviously don't care how to achieve it. money rules the world...

BrezhnevIsMyCoPilot: Dove's parent company, Unilever, produces Axe shower gel--how does advertising for that fit a positive female image?

Even worse, Unilever India produces skin lightening creams under the names "Fair and Lovely" and "Fair and Handsome". The commercials for these products depicted darker-skinned Indians as unsuccessful at courting members of the opposite sex. Positive self-image, eh?⁵⁶

Like these, several YouTubers highlight the incongruencies between Dove's ostensibly noble cause and the parent conglomerate's actions associated with the product, brand or corporate conglomerate.⁵⁷ With concerns ranging from Indonesian deforestation to

⁵⁶ Axe (aka Lynx in Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and the UK) is a male grooming products line known for commercials that feature women driven lustfully mad by the scent of men wearing Axe products; Fair & Lovely skin care products (sold in India, perhaps in Egypt) claim skin whitening effects—it's ads feature women getting attention from employers and men after having been rejected; and Slim-Fast, another line of Unilever products, promotes nutrition-in-a-can for dieters.

⁵⁷ sexymir89: HAHAHA I laugh. Dove is also participating in this distortion they speak of. The company that owns them is called Unilever. Unilever owns Axe, a company which exploits women as sex objects who lust after men wearing Axe. As well Unilever owns Slimfast, made to keep you thin. Also the company owns Fair and Lovely, a cream with bleach in it used to whiten darker skinned women, primarily in India. Don't believe everything you see.

gabrielhs2: But Unilever is not Dove. Different companies, different filosofies. FIAT owns Ferrari. But Ferrari is Ferrari.

[...]

Nostalgia1981: I don't understand how Dove can promote "natural" beauty when this firm belongs to Unilever who also makes tons of ads with idealistic ways of looking, such as AXE and Slim Fast. This campaign is only a way to get more money while creating the illusion that they care for real being so people can identify themselves to their products and buy it. Sorry, you will not get me.

Mucha911: You are absolutely right, Dove's campaign is a marketing scheme. But it's still sending a positive message, and that's what counts. Everything that is sold has a marketing scheme, that's how things get sold...

[...]

feministkat: Dove is owned by the same company (Unilever) that owns AXE. So much for try to promote a positive image for young women!!!

animal-testing of beauty products to inconsistent brand messages among products, many YouTube posters hold Dove (the brand) and Unilever (the holding company) accountable for what the posters view as incongruity between branding messages and corporate behavior.

Contributors [flakery](#), [SarahNev](#) and [anthill21](#) take a different perspective. They compartmentalize products and brands owned by the same company, arguing that the campaign could contribute something constructive to cultural discourse, and reasoning that the people who work on each individual campaign are often unassociated with ads for other products or brands held under the same corporate umbrella:

[flakery](#): At least they are getting something beneficial out to the people aside from the axe commercials....something is better than nothing right?

[SarahNev](#): I don't know about this for sure, but just because two companies are owned by the same company doesn't mean they have the same philosophies and whatnot. It's like saying that the movie Norbit and the site Neopets have the same goals because both are owned by Viacom. =P

[anthill21](#): Exactly

In keeping with what one might call a postmodern sensibility, these YouTube bloggers seem to accept multiple, sometimes contradictory messages disseminated about a brand or product line with seeming congruency. For [SarahNev](#), each brand persona is entitled to its own “philosophies” or “goals.” While countless YouTubers like [BrezhnevIsMyCoPilot](#) are dubious about the motives behind Dove/Unilever ads, posters like [SarahNev](#) dissociate brands, including those within the same holding company, as

[Ireytha](#): that means nothing. Axe and Dove are two different things. they are just owned by the same company. it does not say that the whole company follows the views of the people endorsing in Dove.

separate entities (attesting perhaps to the historical reification of brand as persona). Some contributors even point out that the individuals producing particular ads or campaigns are rarely the same from brand to brand and product to product—those comments imply beliefs that the people producing each promotion espouse the sentiments and values of the ad message they create, and that people wouldn't choose to work on ads that didn't resonate with their personal values.

Public expression, personal pain

Some astute posters replicate some of the ironies of the Campaign for Real Beauty through their posts, using sardonic humor to critique the commodification and reification of “model-ness” and “beauty.” After an earlier condemnation of corporate profitability goals, TheVerySpecialThommy returns to rile up interlocuters with what I read as tongue-in-cheek parody of the Dove ads producers' representation of conventional beauty standards⁵⁸:

TheVerySpecialThommy: how come the photoshopper didn't correct the nose? it's too big

Justmatt1: photo shop is a supermodel's best friend. Mmuah! lol j/k [Laughing Out Loud, Just Kidding]

TheVerySpecialThommy: they gotta correct that nose, it's too big... how come the photoshopper didn't notice?

TheVerySpecialThommy: incredible amount of work just to make her fuckable

cjsugarromeo: I'm sure you never go on second dates!!!

MysticChick12: PREACH THE TRUTH!!! This is why I love Dove--I have ALL of their products!

⁵⁸ Of course, there's no way to ascertain definitively which of TheVerySpecialThommy's comments might be satirical—given his condemnation of corporate interests (in other posts referenced herein), I'm guessing that TheVerySpecialThommy's work here is tongue-in-cheek.

TheVerySpecialThommy: what truth? that the majority of women are plain ugly and need tons of makeup and photoshop to at least be pretty on a photo?

MysticChick12: NO, that's not what I meant! The TRUTH is that women's preception of "beauty" is often distorted because we use fashion magazines and billboards as templates for how we should look. This commercial clearly shows that what we see is not always the truth. I'm glad they showed the process and all the work that goes into that stuff; it's not all real, and we shouldn't starve or beat ourselves down for false, attainable beauty.

muchomorkowa: your perception of beauty is really distorted how can you comment on how ugly she really is and what they forgot to improve - you missed the point

TheVerySpecialThommy: she looks like an angel after photoshop. I could fall in love with her if she actually looked like that. unfortunately 95% of women are ugly. not lovable. there's nothing that can change that fact. not even tons of makeup. the world belongs to beautiful people, it's the way nature arranged us men. beauty actually means health, ugly people aren't healthy and hence [hence] should rather not spread [their DNA by reproducing]. I can imagine that life's hard for women if they're ugly, but that's the way it goes. get over it

TheVerySpecialThommy's comments mirror the multiple levels of Reality construction created through the Dove ads. First, "Thommy" takes advantage of the anonymity provided by YouTube's online posting interface to elicit righteous reactions from earnest posters like MysticChick12 and muchomorkowa. While it's indeed difficult to read sincerity in any postings with certainty, it appears that MysticChick12 and muchomorkowa defend against (what I read as) TheVerySpecialThommy's hyper-misogynistic lampoon. Not getting the joke, MysticChick12 and muchomorkowa express perhaps deep and old frustrations about female objectification.

Second, Thommy's clever comments bring into relief both a nonsensicality of unreal and unrealistic cultural beauty standards (notably shaped by corporate advertising) and the irony of the Dove ads. Perhaps striking at the heart of cultural narratives as well

as beauty ad motives, Thommy digs deeply into motivations people might have for engaging with the Dove ad messages (or any ad promises): to avoid personal pain. With fixations on the size of the model's nose, and insistence that "most women are ugly" and ugly women are "unlovable," Thommy hyperbolically mimics the kinds of painful messages circulating about women and appearance. In the process, s/he highlights the cultural narrative Dove co-opted for the campaign and claims to disavow: ugly ducklings are only accepted as beautiful swans. Thommy's performance brings into relief the ironies that the Dove brand—built on corporate interests—can lead a society toward standards that are more noble, righteous, or psychologically or spiritually healthy. Through dark distortions of his/her own, TheVerySpecialThommy calls into question uncritical comments made by her/his peers, and challenges both corporate-influenced beauty conventions and the motives of the Campaign for Real Beauty.

Several YouTube comments reveal painful insights on their own experiences with ideas of beauty. The comments of lov3cir3 echo those of other YouTube users, and perhaps thousands unwilling to be so vulnerable:

I know this defeats the point of this video (I totally agree that it's sad and unfortunate that we have so many image biases in our culture), but...
I really wish I could look as pretty as that end result.

A number of YouTube posts testify to having friends or acquaintances dealing with eating disorders or esteem issues, and hold the media accountable for its effects on

people's psyches and sense of well-being.⁵⁹ VeganLevanael argues that the Dove campaign attempts to propagate and then capitalize on people's vulnerabilities:

The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty seems to me just another way to sneak advertising to girls under the guise of some sort of feminist "positive image" workshop... I work for the Girl Scouts and had to run workshops made by the Dove Campaign and it just annoyed the hell out of me. Dove products are the same as any other "beauty" products... "real beauty" campaign or not, they are making money off the insecurities of women... insecurities which they will gladly perpetuate.⁶⁰

Showing sensitivity to people's expressions of pain or insecurity, tpiper gets in on the act, and shares personal insights and feelings from members of his creative crew. As people respond to the ad, tpiper relates specifically from his experience producing the spot, making the marketing experience even more real for interested viewers:

⁵⁹ Arguments pro and con:

agorlewski: "No wonder our perception of beauty is so distorted"?

The media did not invent this - people did. The media just gives people what is culturally and biologically acceptable. It does not create anything.

sabdown: No, retard. The media chooses the most beautiful, most inappropriately perfect pictures of women to show us that this normal.

⁶⁰ Arguments on this as a "women's issue":

i999shadow: To the *adults* around here that want to actually comment on this from a serious level: This is a very unique moment for the "beauty" industry to fess up to the brainwashing of all people over "beauty". We train people to want something that doesn't exist, and then we berate women for not meeting that fictional standard. i999shadow continues with a feminist critique, stating, "I bet that if we did this to MEN and they BOUGHT in to the degree women have, that it would be illegal to tamper with a photographic image in media and the fine would be death....men hate having to live up to those of their own that are "pretty" or well hung as it is, without electronic fakery..." momoyen adds: "Why is it always about women. What about men -- there are men that have problems to deal with too just like this!!"

Despite i999shadow's claim, this happens with men frequently (of course, the fallout has different complications). *Men's Fitness* sparked a media controversy with its June/July 2007 issue—the cover featured the typically lean tennis player Andy Roddick with arms and pecs approaching the size of Hulk Hogan's (next to a headline that read "How to Build Big Arms in Just 5 Moves"). YouTube user sirvonbeerbelly points out that women aren't the only people subject to objectification in ads: "...yeah men dont have pressure on them at all. we all look like crap and woman will always fall in love in the ugly coward."

aishydoodle: As a 22 year old woman whose self esteem is shaken every time I pick up a magazine or turn on the television, thank you. Thank you thank you thank you.

tpiper: Stephanie in the video is also 22. When I used for the concept storyboard (to present to client), she asked, "Not many people are going to see this, are they?" lol

aishydoodle: Wow! I can't believe she's 22, the "beautifying" really aged her! That's another thing advertisers do to us youngins, make us appear like we're in our 30s so that us living, breathing 22 year olds feel like some sort of underdeveloped callow oddities. Good for Stephanie for taking this on. I hope she realizes the importance of what you all are doing. (Next time, pick me!! Hehe.)

By baring insecurities of Stephanie the model, tpiper establishes an empathetic relationship with aishydoodle on behalf of the Dove brand. In this way tpiper's participation further reifies the brand as a personified being with feelings, attitudes, and values.

The secrets of beauty advertising revealed...

Although many respond favorably to tpiper, several YouTube users take her/him to task for the Dove ads' depiction of values and adherence to beauty standards that resonate with contributors' own beliefs. Though YouTube gives tpiper a chance to clarify or even further the marketing message, he dances around discourse particularly with people who challenge him ideologically or aesthetically based on their own sociocultural perspectives. In some cases, interlocutors seem to be testing tpiper's sincerity, the degree to which his posted rhetoric matches that of the Dove ads.

Throughout this debate focused on cultural and corporate beauty standards, YouTube contributors also seem to confront the degree to which tpiper adheres to beauty standards

that feel relevant to interlocutors' lives (and, therefore, seem real to them). As tpiper and friends debate presumptions underlying the Evolution ad's messages, tpiper playfully divulges that even as his campaign ostensibly strives to expose beauty and ad industry secrets, his work yields secrets of his own:

zombiefrankenstein: this girl was already a hundred times more beautiful than the average woman. we all know actresses and models are made up and photoshopped. but as i say, she already had the raw materials...

tpiper: people have different views on that. i liked this girl because although she was 'real', she still had what it took to look like a model/celebrity after being photographed and lit. Yet she STILL gets all this work done to be 'poster perfect'. the point being that even models don't look anything like their posters. I'm with you, she isn't ordinary like some media coverage is suggesting. (But shhh!)

[...]

Track607: THIS IS STUPID. She was MUCH prettier than almost anyone. If they are telling us that this women is "average" looking, then how are we supposed to feel? We look at her and think "Hmm I dont look as good as her", but if she is average, then what am i? Dove just makes us feel even worse..

tpiper: Some media coverage reports that she represents the average woman. She doesn't. She was picked because she would best demonstrate the before and after - but she still needed to have model qualities to make the point that not even models look like models.

Track607: Of course they do.. with make up. Thats a good thing, cause any women who wants to look like a model CAN. It would be a heck of a lot better to just make the models NOT put on make up and then the slant of beauty wouldnt be so high, and i dont like it when women put on make-up anyway.

If shes Dosen't represnt the average women, and they still say that she is, then we feel even worse. Heck, i prefer how she looked before the "treatment".

MeringueJ06: They're not saying the girl is average at all. They're not saying anything about the beauty level of the girl in the video, but rather that they put the girl through hours of prepping with hair and makeup, special lighting, and then finished it off with Photoshop. What is beauty? The media in our society is distorting beauty for us. How can we know what true beauty is when it goes through hours of manipulation before it's presented to us?

tpiper: exactly. thanks.

Despite the Evolution ad's implications that virtually anyone could sit as a model with the hair, make-up, lighting and post-production resources available, tpiper discloses the contradiction that his model was chosen specifically "because she would best demonstrate the before and after—but she still needed to have model qualities to make the point" he wanted to make. The Creative Director's circular logic—that his model needed to have model qualities (whatever those might be) to demonstrate that "not even models look like models"—brings into relief the layers of convolution taken for granted by tpiper and his fellow YouTubers. MeringueJ06 elaborates on tpiper's logic style, propagating a belief that the media define what MeringueJ06 calls "true beauty" ("How can we know what true beauty is when it goes through hours of manipulation before it's presented to us..."). And tpiper concurs. The exchange reveals presumptions around definitions of aesthetic values and cultural standards for concepts like "beauty." No one contests MeringueJ06's reliance on ads or audiovisual media (or any institution outside the self) for presenting or circumscribing beauty ideals—in fact, tpiper propagates the belief through his agreement. Likewise, no one points out the incongruencies evident in Dove's critique of the beauty and ad industries. While the ads may challenge corporately- and capitalistically-defined standards by re-defining "Real Beauty" and by seemingly democratizing the discourse through YouTube, it does so by imposing another layer of The Real framed within the strategies and marketing aspirations delineated for the Dove brand. Regardless of the promise to reveal the secrets of the industry, the ads and discourse around the ads seem as obscure as ever.

In the face of continued criticisms, tpiper repeats the common capitalist trope of using purchasing power to express values and opinions.⁶¹ He assigns blame for the media's representations of "beauty" on ad clients who "demand the stereotypes." He argues further that cultural mores change through democratic processes, that his fellow YouTubers hold power in their support of his and the Dove brand's efforts. In the process he reiterates his mythologizing of the Dove brand as a noble crusader leading a charge on behalf of women and girls everywhere:

sxcbeast101: Dear Tpiper

You don't really expect that this jolt of truth is going to make companies change their perception. The idea of cosmetic/fashion advertising is for the consumers to think that if they purchase the product, then they'll get closer to that image of perfection. The attitudes of some people that have already posted suggest that as soon as women pick up a magazine filled with such images, they start cursing God for lack of blessed genetics when that isn't true

⁶¹ In an interesting move, tpiper chooses to take advantage of his authority status on YouTube in a way that might have jeopardized his projection of sincerity. On 19 March 2008, Time Magazine announced that Tim Piper was nominated to Time Magazine's Top 100 most influential people of 2008—the magazine invites readers to vote for their choice. tpiper engaged with his new YouTube social network by soliciting their votes with varied responses:

tpiper: Hi guys,

I've been nominated for Time Magazine's top 100 most influential people (2008) for my work on Dove Self-Esteem films. Your support would help me get bigger projects for this topic off the ground. (Or at least will show others how important the subject is.) Please search for Tim Piper on Time Magazine's website and vote how you see fit. Really appreciate the help.

tpiper.

femicide: Tpiper ... I'll vote only if there is a category for "Yet Another Propoganda Piece To Give Women More Excuses for Being Stupid." More promotion of female victimhood. How can women EVER become leaders in numbers if they are constantly portrayed as being led by the nose so easily? Unable to think for themselves. It's NEVER THEIR fault as individuals is it? ALWAYS someone else's fault. I am so sick of this women-as-victims mentality. It treats them like children and is insulting!

kejchal: I will support u

Already dubious of the sincerity of the Dove campaign, femicide reams out tpiper as vociferously as possible through YouTube's written medium. In contrast, kejchal seems to voice support quietly.

tpiper: I expect a series of jolts will be needed to change perception. But it'll change. Our beauty culture is unhealthy (watch [the Dove ad called] 'Daughters' and you get the idea). Dove is a brand willing to tackle the problem and it's investing heavily into it. When the public rewards this investment, change in the market becomes imminent.

[...]

tpiper: Every agency is guilty, true enough. Clients demand the stereotypes. All we can do is take advantage of opportunities like this in order to help our other clients see the light. But ads like this need support if there's to be change, not cynicism... Your comments and votes will encourage more of the same from Dove. And other brands will have to change.

[...]

tpiper: From a marketing perspective, it comes down to whether or not people support this self-esteem venture as to whether or not Dove will be there in the morning. The power is in your hands, not Dove's.

From a human perspective, the Dove brand (in Canada) is nothing more than a few people trying to think of ways to undo the damage of our beauty culture. Such as, beauty workshops. I've worked on enough brands to tell you - Dove walks the walk.

[...]

tpiper: The party is over. FartyFartyPoopyPants is on to us marketing types. Although, when I stopped shampooing my hair, it did kind of stink. So I'm actually glad Dove sells hair products.

And really FartyFarty (if I may call you that), Dove isn't suggesting that you don't make an effort to be beautiful -- that's a fun part of being a girl. Dove just believes everyone has a right to 'feel' beautiful, no matter what.

At least, that's how I see it. ⁶²

⁶² tpiper defends his sincerity:

tallneil: This is a great video, but sadly it is still just an Advert. They just want to sell more soap and beauty products. If they really wanted to change the world they would stop making products that are focused on beauty and start making hygiene products (a necessity) that are sustainable and animal testing free. The fundamental problem is they are a corporation that sells beauty products and are using your emotional attachment to your own issues to sell their product.

tpiper: It's an ad all right. It's advertising Dove Self-Esteem Workshops for parents/mentors to help their kids grow into confident woman in the face of a harsh beauty culture. What's the problem again?

tallneil: Clearly you work in advertising and you bought into the lie that big brands can be altruistic. Well I'm sorry to tell you that all your very amazing creative work is being used to mislead people. Have you watched the movie "The Corporation"? You could have made a documentary about the beauty myth and

While encouraging YouTubers to vote with their dollars, so to speak, tpiper's comments help reify the stereotypes of what is "the fun of being a girl" while claiming to invert them. Even if tpiper believes what he says, as Taussig points out, his professions toward changing the system contribute toward reinforcing it on several levels, not only in claiming to reveal the secrets of ad production, but also the secrets of coding/decoding of meaning and the dissemination of values.

Human nature vs. capitalist conditioning

With a recent study inspired by Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" and other similar studies from Great Britain, business professors from Villanova and the College of New Jersey suggest that ads featuring very thin models made women feel worse about themselves, but better about the brands featured; in fact, participants said they were more likely to buy products featured with thin models than products in ads showing "regular-

posed it on YouTube if you wanted to spark thought, but to brand it is to sell it. If Dove wanted to help self-esteem they would stop contributing to a brand driven beauty economy and anonymously donate to youth counselling programs. But they don't because it would lose their shareholders money and wouldn't develop their brand. If you just want to wash your hair you don't need to get a brand named and heavily marketed product to do and you can get some that are biodegradable, locally made and not tested on animals.

bigmammoth: that's great moderated comments.... I was wondering how youtube would start to suck. Step one insert a bunch of corporate "viral" videos, step two let them select the comments. Step 3 suck.

tpiper: No one asked me to post this film on YouTube. And no one asked me to moderate. Dove posted it on the campaignforrealbeauty websites where you can download it. (At least you can at campaignforrealbeauty.ca)

size models.”⁶³ Villanova professor Jeremy Kees rationalizes women’s responses in terms of the participants’ perception of the brands, and the advertisers’ sales objectives:

The really interesting result we're seeing across multiple studies is that these thin models make women feel bad, but they like it. They have higher evaluation of the brands. With the more regular-size models, they don't feel bad. Their body image doesn't change. But in terms of evaluations of the brands, those are actually lower...I'd tend to be cautious about using models in advertising that wouldn't maximize the attitudes and evaluations of the advertising and the brands...Certainly [Dove is] getting a lot of publicity, and it's a great, innovative campaign. But in terms of the bottom line of how that might be impacting... purchase behavior, I'm not sure.⁶⁴

Although he doesn’t deconstruct his remarks himself, Professor Kees’s comments bring into relief the ways that corporate profitability motives and advertising can shape people’s world views. His observation that “thin models make women feel bad, but [the women] like it” reveals that many women in his study may have naturalized common branding strategies. Despite the anxieties, insecurities, or pain people might actually feel, late-capitalist consumer values privilege ideas of identity and value reified through their associations with products and circulated through beauty myths.

Interestingly, Kees himself takes for granted that “bottom line” corporate profit motives outweigh any ethical principles that might be transgressed in the quest to

⁶³ The study comprised a sample of 194 college women aged 18-24 who “expressed more negative feelings about their sexual attractiveness, weight and physical condition after seeing thin models than before.” Jack Neff, “Skinny Women Better for Bottom Line,” AdAge.com 7-30-08, http://adage.com/article?article_id=130021, accessed 7-31-08.

⁶⁴ Jack Neff, “Skinny Women Better for Bottom Line,” AdAge.com 7-30-08, http://adage.com/article?article_id=130021, accessed 7-31-08. According to Neff, the results of this research run contrary to studies reported in 2005 and 2006 from psychology professors at University of Sussex and University of West England, which argue that ads featuring exceptionally thin models do make women feel worse about their looks but aren’t any better at selling products than ads featuring more typically proportioned women.

influence people's purchase behavior. Despite his own evidence that "thin models make women feel bad, but they like it..." Kees doesn't question the misogynistic implications of such branding strategies, and even admits doubt that the ad series will translate into increased sales (so wouldn't advise clients to adopt the strategy despite its apparent nobility). Through the discourse of advertising, ad industry re-circulates those late-capitalistic values sets while (re-)validating the industry's practices and very existence.

Conversely, Kees may be observing human behaviors we may not like to admit or discuss. In wealthy and capitalist countries like the US, the shiny bauble of a branded handbag or car—and how the product might shape one's perception of her/his identity or image—may have replaced once-common survival practices. Participating in a culture of constantly modifying personal identities (much less media representations), we now invest energies in a world of hyperreality, one built on layers upon layers of constructed truths and image-management. From slightly different vantage points, *Evolution* and *Onslaught* both promise revelation of secrets, specifically corporate secrets in this case. With *Evolution*, the representation of the production of a beauty ad—from a model's make-up and hair session, through a depiction of a photo shoot, to post-production graphic manipulation of the model's features—presents the allure of revealing mysteries of the beauty industry and ad production in particular. *Onslaught* re-presents arguments for the constant audiovisual, psychological and emotional torrent of advertising in the lives of people residing in capitalist culture, made palpable through sensorial bombardment of image, music and sound.

My analyses of these ads may suggest that each of us is simultaneously isolated in and connected through a world of social discourse. That discourse borrows from, contributes to, and shapes cultural knowledge through audience members' embodied responses, emotional movement, or perhaps intuitions or "gut feelings" based on hyperreality disseminated in the media. Invoking the concept of "truthiness" made famous by television comedian Stephen Colbert, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich describes political strategies in a way that could apply to almost any contemporary, marketing-defined cultural exchange. Criticizing the McCain campaign, Rich contends that the Republican candidate's strategic campaign methodology

... is to envelop the entire presidential race in a thick fog of truthiness. All campaigns, Obama's included, engage in false attacks. But McCain, Sarah Palin and their surrogates keep repeating the same lies over and over not just to smear their opponents and not just to mask their own record. Their larger aim is to construct a bogus alternative reality so relentless it can overwhelm any haphazard journalistic stabs at puncturing it.⁶⁵

In Rich's opinion, the fabrication of a Karl Rovian-style, impenetrable persona has become common practice in today's post-modern political milieu as well as through media outlets like advertising. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard suggests that the repetition and reverberation of the constructed image performs a particular function in today's society beyond presidential campaign strategies, arguing that institutions like Disneyland reinforce the dominance of capital by constructing a cute,

⁶⁵ Frank Rich, "Truthiness Stages a Comeback," *NYT* 20 September 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/opinion/21rich.html>, accessed 21 September 2008.

colorful, merry face as its overlay. In the process, the delineations between what is represented and what is actual become increasingly obscured:

...Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the “real” country, all of “real” America that is Disneyland...Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.

The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp. Whence the debility of this imaginary, its infantile degeneration. This world wants to be childish in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the “real” world, and to conceal the fact that true childishness is everywhere—that it is that of the adults themselves who come here to act the child in order to foster illusions as to their real childishness...here, in the sophisticated confines of a triumphal market economy is reinvented a penury/sign, a penury/simulacrum, a simulated behavior of the underdeveloped (including the adoption of Marxist tenets) that, in the guise of ecology, of energy crises and critique of capital, adds a final esoteric aureole to the triumph of an esoteric culture.⁶⁶

Baudrillard further likens the existence of Disneyland to the Nixon administration’s

Watergate scandal and the processes that uncovered and defined it as “scandal.”

Following Baudrillard’s argument, *Washington Post* journalists and Disneyland patrons might serve related functions in that they

[do] the same work of purging and reviving moral order, an order of truth in which the veritable symbolic violence of the social order is engendered, well beyond all the relations of force, which are only its shifting and indifferent configuration in the moral and political consciences of men. All that capital asks

⁶⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 12-4.

of us is to receive it as rational *or* to combat it in the name of rationality, to receive it as moral *or* to combat it in the name of morality. Because *these are the same*, which *can be thought of in another way*: formerly one worked to dissimulate scandal—today one works to conceal that there is none.⁶⁷

Here Baudrillard suggests that both law and capital define people's responses to them. Complicity and opposition uphold the institutions on the terms defined by the institutions. In the process, the frameworks laid down by both law and capital are seen as reality rather than veils that structure human interaction, veils that can also obscure underlying, real human relations.

Taussig might suggest that the allure of the public mystery, and the intrigue of that mystery's exposure, prompts so many YouTube users to engage eagerly with tpiper, an eagerness expressing what Taussig might equate to "the child's love of revelation."⁶⁸ My analysis of internet discourse around these two Dove ads suggests that, despite the promise waged through the Dove ads, The Real is never completely revealed. As bloggers and posters demonstrate through their praise for and protests against what the ads represent, the ads shape and inspire conversations that reveal only layers upon layers of ideas about what people think is real (and Real). Moved by what they feel physically, physiologically, emotionally, many of these audience members seem compelled to respond to the ad to express admiration, support, skepticism or denunciation of the ads' premises. Perhaps the real secret, as Professor Kees and Baudrillard seem to suggest, is

⁶⁷ Baudrillard, 15. Emphases in original.

⁶⁸ Taussig, 269.

that there is no secret at all, only our child-like desires for enchantment, stories, and shiny objects.

Closing Remarks for “Reality by Design”

As I mention in Chapter One, I see the kinds of cultural practices described throughout “Reality by Design” functioning as people endeavor to shape opinions, influence behaviors, and build economic or political power locally and globally. The processes of mediatization have been employed for political and ideological ends throughout the twentieth century, and will be further forward. For example, ideas of value and identity already attached to the music of Simon Bikindi, a popular Rwandan musician, played prominently in the campaign to slaughter anywhere from 800,000 to over one million Tutsi and so-called Tutsi sympathizers in a matter of 90 days in 1994.¹ Bikindi’s music—and indeed his reputation as a national figure—was harnessed as Hutu extremists blasted his songs through RTLM, one of two radio networks authorized to broadcast in Rwanda.² “Bikindi” was abstracted as a brand—and his music, already imbued with ideas of Rwandan cultural meanings, could be conveniently packaged by Hutu government militants under their own ideological and political framework and re-directed within their agenda.

Similarly, Leni Riefenstahl’s documentary *Triumph des Willens* (1935) positions Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist Party as the rightful heirs to German power, and

¹ While initial reports held the number to around 800,000, in 2001 the Rwandan government reportedly revised those numbers to over one million. “Netherlands to hand over singer to Rwanda war crimes court,” *Agence France Presse*, 13 December 2001.

² *Radio Télévision Libre de Mille Collines* (RTLM) began broadcasting on 8 July 1993, disseminating messages allegedly calling for the murder of Tutsis and opponents to the Habyarimana regime. Radio Netherlands Wereldomroep, “Hate Radio: Rwanda,” <http://www.rnw.nl/realradio/dossiers/html/rwanda-h.html>, updated 15 October 2002, accessed 21 February 2003; ICTR, *The Prosecutor Against Ferdinand Nahimana*, p. 13.

natural purveyors of German ascendancy. Just as MSA and BIS borrow from American cultural codes to promote the Texas Style Smoked Beef Brisket (Chapter 2), Riefenstahl borrows from cultural codes already circulating throughout German culture to present Hitler and the National Socialist Party. In the opening sequence, Reifenstahl depicts Hitler's plane descending through the clouds onto Nuremburg as Richard Wagner's Act III prelude from *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* plays. Wagner's opera, famous throughout Germany, borrows from the legend of the real Hans Sachs and the Master Singers of Nuremberg. Through this tale, Wagner shares a story of the triumph of creative genius over superficial pedantry. These themes already rang loudly throughout 1920s and 1930s Germany, and were woven throughout much of Hitler's rhetoric and campaign for power.

Musicologists, germanists, ethicists and a myriad of other scholars have shed blood, sweat and tears in debating the "truth" of Wagner's intents, the "accuracy" for whether and how Wagner's music represents anti-semitic inclinations.³ For me, indexing musical elements as representative of anti-semitism (in this case) isn't the key to understanding the issues at hand. Rather, I'm interested in recognizing the alternate fixity and fluidity of musical sounds (and other sounds), and comprehending how a

³ See, for example, Barry Millington, "Nuremberg Trial: Is There Anti-Semitism in 'Die Meistersinger'?" in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 3, no. 3 (Nov., 1991), 247-260; Paul Lawrence Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Hans Rudolf Veget, "Wagner, Anti-Semitism, and Mr. Rose: *Merkwurd'ger Fall!*" *The German Quarterly*, 66, no. 2 (Spring 1993), 222-36; Veget, "A Response to Hans Rudolf Veget's 'Wagner, Anti-Semitism, and Mr. Rose,'" *The German Quarterly*, 67, no. 3 (Summer 1994), 408-10; William Rasch and Marc A. Weiner, "A Response to Hans Rudolf Veget's 'Wagner, Anti-Semitism, and Mr. Rose,'" *The German Quarterly*, 67, no. 3 (Summer 1994), 400-408; Rose, "The Wagner Problem in the History of German Antisemitism," *The German Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (Summer 1995), 304-5; Veget, "Sixtus Beckmesser: A 'Jew in the Brambles'?" in *Opera Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1995), 35-45; Millington, "Wagner Washes Whiter," *The Musical Times* 137, no. 1846 (Dec. 1996), 5-8.

culture reads media image, music and sound in terms of other circulating cultural messages—this is central to understanding the production of culture throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, and untangling the conveyance of meanings for political or ideological ends. As I show with my work with the Echo Boys (Chapter 3), the fluidity of musical genre categories and the meanings circulating with genre help the producers select sounds that they hope will guide their audience members' reading of the ad. In the process, the Echo Boys fill their soundscapes with meanings that direct audience attention, but invite interpretation depending upon an audience member's personal experience with American capitalist culture and mediatized messages. The process of composing those musical sounds, however, is painstaking—the Echo Boys are meticulous about timbral, ornamental and generic elements that they hope will contribute to an ad's objectives (all subject to their client's biases and expectations, of course).

Though sound design is often overlooked as a carrier for meaning, it similarly parlays ideas of social behaviors and values. In advertising, sound design can be an effective tool in inviting the audience member to embody ideas of the brand through impact. As I show in Chapter 4, branded values can be communicated whether the ad narrative points directly to reality, narrates fantasy, or conveys something in between. With the Echo Boys's Cox spots, where the designer endeavors to portray a scene realistically, ads like Perry and Drip demonstrate the emotional effects producers hope to engender through sound. The anxious office sounds in Perry depict a stress level that could represent or elicit unease that their potential audiences might already hold, or even generate it anew with VO like *What if your office goes out on you?* (from Drip).

Other affective work from the ads includes the association of the product or service with social practices. Much like Perry, Brokerage and Sports Bar show ways that the human voice can be used as a sound design element to construct a social atmosphere: how voices are positioned in the mix, the kinds of phrases allowed to stand out as “soloists” in the mix, the role of laughter in creating atmosphere all convey ideas for social interaction within specific social settings. These are examples for how sound design can associate a kind of sociability with the brand, reifying ideas of “professional” or “informal” behaviors while promising those kinds of sociality through the product or service. The brand is built around promises that chaotic offices can be made orderly and calm with the right communications services, that social venues will receive rewards of communications services that will foster fun, leisure and entertainment. Each of these examples illustrates that a brand may superficially represent a product or service, but what a brand sells is a promise of particular life experiences.

Similarly, sound like that of the Echo Boys’s Harley-Davidson ad can represent complex constellations of meanings that draw upon cultural myths, other media, and personal value sets. The promise of sensual gratification associated with the representation of the Harley engine, the experience of “feeling the engine” through the ad, divulges this key aspect of branding strategy. The Harley ad demonstrates the blending of ideas of life experience with cultural myth and sonic representation of the product itself. Borrowing from culturally-circulated ideas about how the Harley should sound, particularly as represented by other media, ad producers connect audience members’ experiences of Harleys (whether through film or reality) with the experience of

watching the ad. Ad producers anticipate that the filmic qualities of the ad's sound design—using phasing, reverb and compression to heighten the listening experience—contribute to an audience member's physical and emotional "feel" for the bike and the riding experience.

Blazing Music + Sound's commercials for Lowe's and Xyience relay a fairy tale or myth as opposed to representing some version of reality. Nonetheless, the sound design plays with reality codes for the purpose of accentuating or, with Lowe's, minimizing drama and audience affect. Because of the ad producers' expectations of how people might relate to ads, Alex and Evan design sound in ways that specifically heighten or minimize possible affective responses. If stay-at-home moms might be offended by the "violence" of injury to a Lowe's *greenpoint* or Travelocity gnome, they design sound that purposefully avoids those connotations. Besides, as the designers rationalize, the violence doesn't make the *greenpoints*' holding area in Linda's Lowe's Foods card seem much like a supermarket anyway. Likewise, if a general "weight lifting" audience might be put off by Chuck Liddell, the sound design can help emphasize the mythic qualities of Liddell's character while heightening qualities that might attract a target audience of "weight lifters."

Undeniably, our experiences within capitalist culture influence our perceptions of who we are, how we self-express, and how we satisfy our life needs and lifestyle preferences. Within this complex econo-politico-cultural system of practices, audiovisual productions mediate meaning on a visceral level for audiences as media producers contribute to audience members' world view. With regard to film, Miriam Hansen points

out that the power of audiovisual media lies in “...the way they [open] up hitherto unperceived modes of sensory perception and experience, their ability to suggest a different organization of the daily world.”⁴ As this dissertation reveals, those implications for world-view structure may be inscribed through the process of audience members co-creating meaning based visceral, sensorial interactions with media. Here we see a relationship between sense as feeling (physical, physiological, emotional) and sense as comprehension. With Chapter 5, I show how audience members work to resolve or make cognitive sense of their sensorial and emotional experiences, a process that may function as one part of comprehending one’s cultural milieu. An audience member’s process of deconstructing image, music and other crafted sound, and her/his opposition or agreement with the themes and messages associated with those stimuli, demonstrate her/his participation in the process of shaping meaning.

Acknowledging the always shifting levels of agency among audience members and media producers helps frame our understanding of the production of culture. Despite the increasing accessibility of the technologies, tools and skill sets necessary for individuals themselves to contribute content and commentary to sites of discourse like YouTube, corporate entities like Unilever and ad agency Ogilvy and Mathers maintain certain authority in the shaping of this collective discourse. An internationally-renowned organization like Ogilvy and Mathers has the prestige and network already in place to orchestrate print and television publicity around the YouTube ads (which is likely a key

⁴ Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999), 72.

component of the campaign's success—for instance, media outlets like “The Today Show” and “Good Morning America” could broadcast the presence of the YouTube ads to a broader population who may not have happened upon the works on their own). Similarly, Unilever maintains the financial resources to build a complex website to enact some of the promises of the Campaign for Real Beauty, complete with “expert” counsel, interactive strategies for site users to carry out the campaign's message, and the Dove brand's own contribution of beauty tips and web-based community building portals. Besides the fact that a collaboration between Unilever and Ogilvy would unite some of the brightest talents in filming, lighting, make-up, music, sound design, and post-production processing, that partnership also puts into play a set of media practices to which many individual audience members have no access. Though this process seems to be changing quickly with the availability of technologies to lay people, the exchange of cultural narratives, symbols and meanings can still be initiated and directed to some extent by entities high in capitalistic echelons, those with particular financial resources and socio-economic networks available to them.⁵ Even through the seemingly collaborative process of deconstructing the Evolution ad, of revealing the mysteries of the beauty and advertising industries, Unilever and Ogilvy preside over the revelation of mystery through tpiper.

All of this brings me to ruminate on constructions of power within increasingly globalized politico-economic cultural practices. One reason some musicologists twisted

⁵ At the same time, I'm seeing local media outlets attempt to harness this as they offer seemingly customized, local news outlets and encourage audience members to contribute content—the benefit to the media organization is increased potential for ad revenue.

themselves in knots to debate Wagner's anti-semitism has to do with the construction of musicology and the discipline's traditional investment in the powerful symbolization behind a canon of creative geniuses. However, this process repeats itself as any of us defend our favorite pop stars, political candidates or activist causes, many of which are branded with constructed identities that are stylized, imbued with values, and disseminated through media channels—identities that are warmly admired or hotly criticized as (R)real. The resulting capitalist folklore both tells us stories of who we believe we are while disguising the institutions that control the narratives. The “truth” of whether Beckmesser's character in *Meistersinger* “actually” represents Wagner-nemesis Eduard Hanslick—or Wagner's alleged anti-semitic stance generally—pales against the recognition of the power of the *existence* of the *stories* of Wagner, Hanslick, anti-semitism, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century German quests for nobility, international respect, and hegemony. Similarly, cultural narratives describing who we believe we are as Americans, as so-called consumers, as men, women, parents, religiously-active, socially-conscious, or any number of labels, are constantly retold to us through stylized audio and visual media. Despite our deepest moral standards and beliefs of human commitment to truth, the stories we tell ourselves through image, music and sound can be more powerful than truth, which is often mired within the tegument of public secrets.

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Biography

Joyce grew up in rural central Minnesota before attending the College of St. Benedict (St. Joseph, MN—BA, Biology, English minor). After working in the (r)real world for a few years in sales and marketing, she attended the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, MN—self-directed non-degree program). There she achieved the equivalent of an undergraduate Music degree, which facilitated her acceptance into the University of Wisconsin—Madison's graduate program (MA, Music History/Musicology) in 2000. She matriculated into the Duke University program in Musicology in 2002.