

The Gorilla in the Room

by

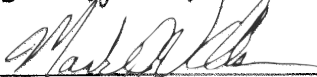
Leeshy Lichtman

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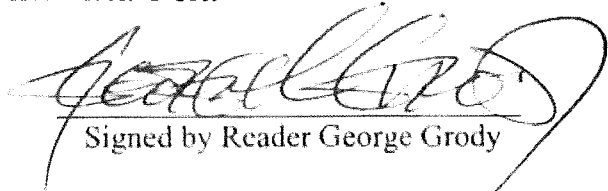
Signed by Leeshy Lichtman



Signed by Advisor Mark Olson



Signed by Reader Victoria Szabo



Signed by Reader George Grody

Introduction

A commonplace saying: “Let’s discuss the elephant in the room.”

Its definition: “Let’s talk about ‘X,’ a relevant, potentially taboo topic that ‘stands’ – metaphorically – in the middle of room, as everyone dances around it, trying to pretend it is not there.”

Even if the saying is not familiar, you’ve likely encountered a situation in which people were knowingly, but not admittedly, adjusting their behavior to conform to social requirements. From personal experience, I’ve come to believe that today, facing an “elephant” is unavoidable. It is *impossible* to escape *every* occurrence in which people alter themselves or refuse to confront issues that influence our culture. These topics – the “elephants” – have a prevalent role in the life of the average American, who shrugs off the reasons behind his or her purchasing practices, especially regarding choice between brands. More “elephants” include: current-day shopping patterns, the way we value people (e.g. hook-up culture), self-image issues, external pressures to buy and behave in certain ways, and the pressure to act in accordance with our social class’ purchasing standards.

These elephants, known topics often ignored, are complemented by factors of our society that most people fail to recognize. Essentially, these are the overlooked, backend formulas that create the elephants. In our case, let’s call them... the gorillas. For context: In 1999, two professors, Chabris and Simons, conducted a psychological study on the topic of selective attention. In the study, “The Invisible Gorilla,” they asked participants to watch a video clip in which people in either black or white shirts tossed a basketball back and forth. The professors instructed their students to count how many times the ball was passed by only the people in *white* shirts. As the basketballs are being passed, a man in a gorilla suit walks through the room. The

crazy thing? Half of the participants *did not notice* the gorilla in the room. The professors claimed, “it was as though the gorilla was invisible” (Chabris & Simons, 2010). The results of this study reflect the psychological concept of *selective attention* – when people focus intently on something, they are unable to recognize other elements that surround them (Davidson, 2011 pp. 2-3). In this case, the participants were *so busy* focusing on how many times the ball was passed by the white-shirt-wearers that they missed the gorilla. This study ultimately reveals that when we’re focused on a task, our attention becomes selective; we fail to perceive the rest of our surroundings, often having no clue of the things we are even missing (Chabris & Simons, 2010).

For the purposes of my project, the gorillas represent complex and extensive cultural conditions that we often fail to pay attention to, or even recognize. By non-consciously consuming – i.e. by solely focusing on the white-shirt basketball passes – we’ve become the Heinz-eaters, Wal-Mart-goers, and iPhone-users of the world. Often, we fail to recognize the implications of our purchases. Most pressingly, I believe that the people of our society have failed to recognize the increasing mechanization of the “decisions” of Heinz, Wal-Mart, and Apple. While people are capable of at least *acknowledging* that the conceptual elephants exist (though they don’t do anything about them), people are unable to recognize the gorillas: the factors that construct our relationships to products, and the criteria involved when making the choice to buy them. They’re the choices we don’t think about, the things we take most for granted that have become naturalized.

These two large and powerful animals have invaded current-day consumerist culture. They are the controversial, theoretical topics that most people evade, refuse to discuss, or fail to notice. The elephants of consumer culture are those that we “see” but don’t process or acknowledge; the gorillas are those that we can’t even see, given our selective attention.

Ultimately, my project aspires to induce reflection on consumerism. My goal is incite thought and conscious reflection in relation to the following themes: the constructed nature of our consumer environments; agency & choice; authenticity; and time. The goal of this thesis project is to shed light on these animals – to analyze issues that have no concrete answers, and to understand why people think, act, and, more specifically, consume, in the way that they do. This written work is complemented by a solo performance written, directed, and performed by me. While this paper discusses and analyzes our culture, I felt that this mode of presentation was unable to adequately convey some of the emotional and lived experiences I wanted to engage. As I attempted to grapple with these concepts in my own life, my performance has evolved into an artistic rendering of my thesis project; it is a combination of both personal and fabricated experiences. The solo performance is 8-minutes in duration, and narrates a crisis in the life of a character who has been personally affected by the four themes discussed.

The Constructed Nature of Consumer Environments.

From a culture focused on commodity exchange,¹ the mid-20th century came to define a time of rising consumerism, built upon an increasing reliance on commodity consumption. Marx defined the term commodities as products of both use and exchange values; in simpler terms, objects that have significance beyond their functionality (Marx, 1867, p. 36).² My argument does not claim that people did not care about materials before, but rather that the development of commodities incited both “spectacular” and “prestige” values.³ Because of this shift, objects began to occupy many people’s lives in ways they had not before.

¹ The buying and selling of objects.

² Use value being the utility of consuming a good, and exchange value being the stature of products for which a commodity can be traded above and beyond its use value. (Marx, 1867, p. 27).

³ Both terms here impose meaning on the products beyond their physical materials, similarly to brand names today.

This discussion of consumerism directly relates to Guy Debord's first thesis in *The Society of the Spectacle*. In it, he states that "all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles" (Debord, 1967, thesis 1). He extrapolated this conclusion both from his study of Marx's *Das Capital* and from his own observations of the escalating prevalence of consumer culture. To elaborate, below are both Marx and Debord's opening statements in their respective publications:

- **Marx:** The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities (1867, p. 27).
- **Debord:** In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation. (1967, thesis 1).

While Marx explained that commodities have come to occupy our lives, Debord's theory conveys that, in a world of production, *spectacles* have come to occupy our lives. What Debord did was theorize beyond Marx's theory of commodities; he claimed that the Spectacle⁴ is both an accumulation of the commodities with which we've interacted, and the world saturated with images and ads. In turn, Debord claimed that the Spectacle came to both control us and occupy our lives. The Spectacle's dividing elements became affirmations of our appearance, possessions, and life choices. Therefore, Debord's piece, *The Society of the Spectacle*, has become the presiding theoretical frame for my thesis project. Through a close reading of Debord and additional Marxist, post-modern, and current-day consumer behavior theory, my thesis seeks to better understand modern consumerism relative to Debord's theory of the Spectacle.

Before moving forward, it is important to note that from this transition in society, Debord concluded that we have abandoned our desire to "be" for an obsession to "have" and to "appear

⁴ The Spectacle is noted as a proper noun in Debord's work. As you will see, I use different forms of the term throughout. Generally in my project, the use of Spectacle refers to Debord, "Spectacle" (in quotes) is my critique and commentary on Debord, and lower-case spectacle(s) references a much more diverse, and less unified, range of circumstances.

to have” (Debord, 1967, thesis 17). To elaborate, throughout his work, Debord posited that it is impossible to have an authentic relationship to *any* commodity. Images became so ubiquitous that we began to passively lend our attention to the Spectacle. People became acquiescent by means of the “spectacular” images mediating all social relationships, and as a result, we reduced ourselves to spectators who *have* in order to *appear*. Essentially, Debord criticized the Spectacle for reducing “living” to a passive function of representation that resulted in thoughtless purchasing practices (Zaretsky, 2017). His critique was centered on the claim that the feeling of “needing” products was, in reality, completely manufactured by cultural messages.⁵ Debord noted that as the nature of consumer society fostered the Spectacle, we became separated from our true needs, replacing them with “pseudo-needs” (Debord, 1967, thesis 51). Essentially, Debord claimed that commodities in society created a spectacular form of “needing.”

Building off of Debord, I’ve identified through my own reflection two functions that create the modern-day “Spectacle.” The first is where manufacturers produce a spectacle that we consume, while the second involves consumers cultivating a spectacle *of themselves* through consumption. Essentially, my notion of the two-sided spectacle presents the idea that both companies and our selves play a role in creating and sustaining an incessant desire to buy. As a result, the overarching Spectacle – understood as a combination of both brand “spectacles” and people’s desires to create a “personal spectacle” – creates this false form of “need.”⁶

The growth of consumerism and fabricated desires in the twentieth-century is framed in Celia Lury’s book *Consumer Culture*. In her work, she notes that the rise occurred through growth in the number of stores, the development of a wider range of goods, a new view of

⁵ These manufactured needs can be related to the highest of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, “self-actualization.” Cultural messages create a need for product by referencing people’s drive toward self-actualization (McLeod, 2016).

⁶ I’d like to declare that my conclusion was developed off of a generalization, and my claims do not apply to every person in every product category.

shopping as leisure, the emergence of brands, an increase in income and living standards, and the pervasiveness of advertising (Lury, 2011, pp. 2-3). She explains that this increase did not only result in the proliferated pervasiveness of shopping and products in our daily lives, but also in a shift in how each product is valued.⁷ According to Lury, this value directly ties to “ownership and the use of material goods, economic status, inequality and meaning” (2011, p. 11). In other words, products began fulfilling more than just utilitarian needs. The twentieth-century raised the degree to which clothes became signifiers of more than covering your body, and food of more than satisfying hunger. From her research, Lury elaborates on Marx by stating, “consumer culture is a type of material culture in which the consumer emerges as an identity,” and that products have developed the power to “integrate an individual into the normative order of the larger social group” (2011, pp. 9, 22). Her statements highlight the role that society’s voice plays in the deliberation on both ends; both media and social settings have managed to mediate who “feels” or “is” most important based on the spectacle they have or have set forth into the world.

While I’ve noted that the practice of brands inciting pseudo-needs was prevalent in the 1960s, from *Consumer Culture* and an understanding of the development of American shopping habits, it is clear that it has only been augmented in twenty-first century America. Consumer behavior theorist Paco Underhill asserts that today, we are “dangerously over-retailed” and that “you have to make an effort to avoid shopping” (2009, p. 24). Thus, today’s Spectacle involves both brands and people in a continuous, complex calculated production that has come to consume us. Underhill’s allegation raises the following questions: how does the Spectacle embed itself so deeply that we don’t even notice the gorilla in the room? How do shopping institutions create such a grand production that people feel the *need* to buy as if it is a *real* need? *Why* do they eat up what brands are serving?

⁷ See above discussion: the rise of commodities according to Marx.

Answers to some of these questions can be found in Underhill's book, *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*. In his work, he describes a detail-oriented, psychology-based "Science of Shopping." According to Underhill, retail marketing is an empirical social science; by merely observing people's behavior a retailer can determine exactly what to do to sell more products (2009, pp. 3-10). Underhill presents the idea that when the bigger, successful brands⁸ place their products in stores, they address the following questions to ensure that they achieve their goal: how should each item be placed? How can this placement make target consumers feel as though they *need* the product and could not survive without it? How can we fully and wholeheartedly understand the consumer to the point they feel as though they are being talked to directly? What are the influences of the environments in which people place themselves, and how can we as a brand use them to our "advantage?" (2009, pp. 28-35).

Successful marketing requires an ongoing conversation between brands, stores, and consumers that directly relates to the conscious shaping of shopping environments. For example, endcaps, the display of merchandise at the end of store aisles, are effective at exposing goods to shoppers; stores make use of this to catch shopper's attention for new releases or discounts (2009, p. 79). Strategy placement also relates to in-shelf decisions; for example, by placing breakfasts foods near each other, they create a dialogue for the customer in which he or she can imagine combining them at home (2009, p. 216). Lastly, another example relates to the geographic locations stores; oftentimes, stores put different window displays based on geographic location, crafting specific displays based on their audience; not every overhead sign or aisle setup is global; every local consumer's needs and wants are different, and that's why stores tailor to this diversity (2009, p. 34).

⁸ Here, I reference brands as an already spectacular form of the commodity. Brands involve a complicated relationship between a logo, product, strategy, and in-store implementation.

Consequentially, the dialogue of the constructed nature of our consumer environments is one directed by those curating the stores. Through an analysis of their target consumers, companies work to present customers with a shopping environment that encompasses their aspirational features. Current-day brands and marketers work to figure us out; by deciphering who we want to *be*, they convince us that we *need*. However, while brands curate the physical environments, it is people's "spectacular" intentions that drive them. Similarly to Debord's discussion of our produced "need" and desire for a particular image based on consumption, Underhill states that "shopping is a transforming experience, a method of becoming a newer, perhaps even slightly improved person. The products you buy turn you into the other, idealized version of yourself" (2009, p. 126). Therefore, given that shopping is a "transforming experience" rather than a task, companies have the ability to directly pull elements from our transformational goals in order to persuade us to buy more.

An additional element of this conversation relates to contemporary American culture's programmed attention patterns. Developmental psychology studies show that patterns are formed from the very beginning of childhood, "everything is 'worthy' of attention until it's not." (Davidson, 2011, p. 32). Culture can *program* us to see, and pay attention to, a particular spectacle.⁹ Specifically, in American culture (though not limited to), we are taught to pay attention to superficial details from a young age. In her book, *Now You See It*, Cathy Davidson's research concludes that in America, an expression of love is based on aesthetics; when we talk about babies, we talk about how *cute* their aesthetic features are, rather than other qualities and abilities (2012, pp. 31-33). Hence, similar to the way we've learned to talk to babies, brands have learned to both sell to us since infancy and through different stages of our lives by appealing to

⁹ In light of my discussion of selective attention in my intro, it is clear that people cannot focus on *everything* going on around them.

superficial ideals of beauty and attractiveness. Companies feed into the patterns our culture has created; they generate advertising campaigns according to their target customers and the programmed ways they see and hear. It is for this reason that brands are able to construct environments in the way that they do; it is the constructed nature that enhances and reconfirms our own notions with which we have been raised. The construction of brand environments didn't start as "programmed," rather *our own social tendencies* created the possibility for such a pervasive constructed nature.

That said, while we may have similar patterns of attention, it is important to note that when it comes to purchasing, people are not all the same. Where people live, where they come from, and what they seek to be perceived as – these factors come to construct the way they buy and who they aspire to be. While we've come to pay attention to aesthetics, Underhill speaks about the changing roles of men and women, as well as generational differences that are involved in a store's construction. Analogous to my earlier discussion on general consumerism, intricate practices are enacted to make sure that the target audience feels comfortable buying the "right" brand. Whether it's the setup of the aisle, the location on the shelf, the writing, the brand-image, the price, or the overhead signs, it is all thought-out based on *who* the brand thinks *you* want to be (2009, p. 68).

In addition, gender identity continues to be a target of marketers, often in problematic ways. While today it is socially acceptable for women to shop at hardware and automobile shops, and for men to stroll the lanes of the supermarket, older gender norms are still consistently reinforced. Though stores have become increasingly multi-gendered, marketing still reflects and reproduces gender norms in order to attract an audience. For example, Underhill presents a specific case in which paint purchases increased when advertisers related them to fashion; the

paint ads related to how the women would *feel* with the color, similar to how they feel when trying on an outfit. The study concluded that even in an era of greater gender equality, differential targeting by gender impacted the company's decisions, and thereby, its success. The rise in sales led Underhill to conclude that men look at the practicality of paint and change it when there's a chip, while women are ready to change the color of their walls when they feel they need a change (2009, pp. 130-133). Thus, even if we are aware of the gender-based construction, we are not outside of this discourse, and gender roles have a significant impact on daily life and decisions. Marketing companies are aware of the social construction of gender norms, and therefore structure their campaigns and construct their own shopping environments in a way that attracts desired buyers.

In addition to gender, marketers often target specific generations. Underhill mentions how the baby boomers are aging, making seniority the new "in" age; he even goes as far to say that one day several beloved clothing brands may start manufacturing adult diapers (2009, p. 138). Because the aging population of baby-boomers is a huge consumer demographic, one can anticipate that brands targeted to senior citizens will radically increase in the coming years. On the opposite end of the spectrum, he notes the fact that "the average four-year-old American can identify more than one hundred brands" (2009, p. 152). This claim exemplifies the fact that from young children to the elderly, consumer brands cover a wide spectrum of generations. In addition, it further emphasizes the importance placed on branding, the increasing pervasiveness of big name companies, and the fact that marketers are aware of the different shopping patterns of each generation.

Given the weight our society places on images, the constructed practices that structure our brick-and-mortar shopping experiences also exist in online environments. Social media

platforms allow us to conform to and construct our own spectacles. On these sites, there is the opportunity both to put ourselves on display and to concede into buying from in-feed advertisements. Specifically, online ads have shifted social media sites away from their original, consumer-focused experience. In their initial formats, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and several other social media sites did not overwhelm their users with advertisements. Today, you can't scroll through a single feed without being inclined to buy something. What's particularly fascinating is that these platforms already prompt people to show themselves only in the states that they want to be seen: their happiest smiles, their prettiest clothes. Now, not only do we look at other people's happy lives, but we also see *staged* happy lives. These staged lives look even *better* than our friends, family, and acquaintances, and the best part? They're for sale – *by buying, we can now participate in this "happy life" ourselves!* These advertisements are catching people on social media, on platforms that many times make people feel badly about their own lives, and then are drawing them into buying by offering them something "better."

The construction of social media has not only incorporated passive advertisements, but has also made room for users to *engage* with their favorite brands. Forbes author Ross Gerber notes that social media ads have incited an "intensifying change in how products and services are sold in terms of consumer engagement and motivation" (2016). Social media platforms have created another environment in which we buy; while people may not download these apps with the intention to view advertisements, companies have integrated themselves into people's daily lives beyond physical stores and form a relationship with users in a way that feels "genuine." I wouldn't take the legitimacy of this relationship *too* seriously though – because **gorilla alert** marketers have already implemented several strategies when it comes to social media. "Serial entrepreneur" Gary Vaynerchuk's book, *The Thank You Economy*, is filled with tips and tricks

when it comes to companies' "relationships" with customers on social media. This book, along with several others, teaches brands how to interact with their consumers to create a seemingly heartfelt connection.

What is particularly interesting about Vaynerchuk's book is that he considers why social media became so important to brand-marketers and the customer-brand relationships of American culture. He explains that customers have an intrinsic desire for personal relationships, and that the rise of corporate giants replaced the "personal feel" of mom-and-pop shops (2011, pp. 4-8). As humans, we define ourselves by the people with which surround ourselves, and it became difficult for us to do such with stores when our relationship to them became so impersonal. Therefore, the rise of social media allowed people to *connect* with brands – though we should always be asking ourselves how "real" that relationship really is.

Aside from creating relationships with brands online, we also construct our identities on social media through who and what we "befriend" or "follow." This directly relates to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of "The Mirror Stage." In his work, he describes the establishment of the ego as fundamentally dependent on external relations (Hewitson, 2010). In terms of consumption, while we construct our environments with our engagement with brands, I believe that our involvement with certain brand names is preselected based on our sense of self and our social environment.¹⁰ Your identity mirrors the people you befriend; college students tend to befriend mostly other college students, while people in their mid-twenties generally see pictures of newlyweds and babies. Ultimately, brands are preselected for you based on your geographical location, demographics, and in online cases, your overall presence. In this way, brands aspire to directly know what you want based on what and whom you've seen and clicked.

¹⁰ By using the term preselected, I'm trying to highlight how the consumer environment "wants" to give us choice, but its reality is actually constrained to factors of our settings.

Consumer environments are therefore thoroughly constructed spectacles, produced and consumed by individuals daily. Though my opinion may be biased, I agree with Debord here – we have come to live a social life mediated by images. If anything, this relationship has become more intense since Debord’s writing was published. Shopping and concern over personal self-image came to occupy many people’s lives, and as a result, consumption became about collecting. More importantly, our satisfaction is sought after in the status and the recognition of the value of these specific commodities. In my interpretation, we are spending hours, both as consumers and as marketers, being influenced by the placement of products as mundane as ketchup bottles in the supermarket. We are influenced by shelf placement, coloring, and brand image that all project the “Spectacle” (the culmination of both personal and brand) as being real, while in reality it is a calculated production.

Agency & Choice.

If so much of what is put in front of consumers is calculated, in what sense do they have the power to choose what they are buying? If their surroundings are so conscientiously constructed, how do we assess consumer agency? When is there an option overload? To what extent is consumer choice so predetermined that we have no real options? And are we really choosing to use Google as a search engine, to buy our ketchup from Heinz, and our phones from Apple?

In his book, *The Filter Bubble*, Eli Pariser critiques our current-day society and explains how an increase in customization on the Internet, especially personalization based on a filtered identity, limits what people see. Pariser deepens our understanding of the limitation on real choice through his concept of the filter bubble. This concept compartmentalizes people into

groups, targeting them in accordance with their previous choices; we don't see alternatives to what we already like because our previous choices are used to filter our options to what the marketing algorithms assume that we want to be seeing.¹¹ He explains that our lives have become so filtered, that even new knowledge stems from ideas "adjacent" to what we already know – we are not shown anything far off from what we are already accustomed to seeing (Pariser, 2011, p. 125). Thus, the filter bubble affects the way we think by taking our previous choices and thereby allowing us to only see, read, and hear more of the same. This filter blinds us from opportunities to encounter something new in our environments.

Pariser, though he mainly discussed an online presence, might even call our interactions with grocery brands as "filtered." Our supermarkets have a wide array of choices, yet corporations manage to monopolize sales of products as mundane as ketchup. Thus, our choice of brand is, to some extent, predetermined for us. It's easy for us to pick a product off the shelf, throw it into our carts, and cross it off our grocery list. But for those of us with no strong purchasing opinions, we oftentimes choose the bottle in front of us. Oftentimes, it is the marketing professionals and store operators, who planned out our seemingly autonomous shopping experiences, that lead us to make this choice.

In other cases, we choose the bottle that is labeled with a familiar name; often, it is one that is considered well known and trustworthy, with overarching positive values. Both online and in stores, we have options within the dominant brand. Within the social construction of predetermined decisions, these options even give us the perception of choice. For example, Heinz bottles are often the only brand we see in restaurants, planes, and commercialized spaces – and in the supermarket, we are likely to just grab it off the shelf. This notion highlights the power

¹¹ Even in cases where a new brand is developed from another's failure, companies often capitalize on failures in order to make a better product that is still in line with the target customers' values.

of Heinz as a dominant brand; the company is one that has come to, and stayed in power for decades. Through the logic of inertia, those that are in power tend to stay in power due to their “recognizability.” Therefore, the term “presence” does not only relate to a physical existence on store shelves, but also to brand power. Heinz, as a dominant player in the ketchup field, is often our first choice because of its significant presence in our lives. The choice to reject the mainstream by not choosing Heinz comes back to the logic of Debord; the cultural repertoire as an illusion of choice.

While this expanded array of options allows us an ample amount of “choice,” oftentimes our choices are delimited to options *within* a single brand. For example, as the dominant player in the ketchup game, Heinz worked to stay competitive by developing an extensive array of options underneath its brand label. The company provides us with several flavor and size options, calling it the “Heinz Family of Products” (“Heinz Ketchup Varieties,” 2016). The family size is larger, meant for making memories over family barbeques and dinners; the picnic pack, for nice days of snacking while lounging outside; the reduced sugar option, for those looking out for their calorie and sugar intake; the mini bottles, for restaurants or travel; the hot & spicy choice, for those who like to switch it up and test a variety of flavor; and mustard, for those who do not like, or just want to supplement, ketchup. Thus, the company’s “Family of Products” presents an element of Heinz marketing that leaves us with the opportunity to define ourselves. These options translate into different representations, allowing us to choose within the brand. This idea of options within the restriction, narrowcasting, can lead to the question: because X is constantly available in our line of consumerist vision, do we really have the option to choose something else?

Our viewpoint is filtered; we only ever really see or hear about Heinz. We are narrow-casted; the choices we make may not necessarily be the best (tasting) or most desirable. Rather, they're the ones we are most calculatedly exposed to. This company has managed to integrate itself into our lives by making its name known; it's likely that people would have trouble naming more than one other brand of ketchup; it has become the standard, and anything different is a deviation from the norm. These scenarios elucidate the fact that Heinz has placed itself into our lexicon by being *visible* to us not only as a product on a shelf but also in our lifestyle – *making us feel like we've been choosing it all along*.

As I discussed in the section “Constructed Consumer Environments,” there is a calculated formula of website and store structures that directly aligns with how we pay attention. The overarching ideology of constructed environments places a constraint on our consciousness, thereby limiting our agency and the lexicon of brands with which we can associate. This created identity, one filtered on several levels, is one that allows us to “make decisions” within a confined field of choices. We are spending this extra time strolling aisles and surfing sites, “making decisions” both based on the location of commodities and by how they reflect who we are.¹² Thus, there is much more to shopping than simply picking a product off the shelf. Both a production of companies and our subconscious understanding of the product brand accompany each shopping experience. Our filtered identities influence brand's structural choices, which in turn filters the purchasing opportunities we see, thereby affecting our “happiness” while shopping (Underhill, 2009, p.33). My point is this: we've allowed brands to create these images, and we choose to filter ourselves into the environments that are so constructed, that we believe we are happy, regardless of our distorted ability to choose.

¹² See above discussion: how who we “befriend” influences our constructed environments.

Have you ever heard the saying, “If you don’t want to eat it, you don’t have to”? It’s pretty likely that you have. However, have you ever heard, “If you don’t want to use Facebook, you don’t have to”? Well, in 2011, Mark Zuckerberg, the legend himself, actually told this to a group of angry users (Pariser, 2011, p. 176). The founders of Google reported on a similar idea; “it takes a single click to go to another search engine. People come to Google because they choose to” (2011, p. 178). These two claims are true; you can close your computer screen, use a different search engine, or register to a different social media site. But, when it comes to making big brand choices online, given the ubiquity of the platforms, is that really plausible? If I wanted to connect with friends online, would I ask them to join me on a different platform? If I had to do research, would I open up a search engine other than Google? Both Facebook and Google have become so deeply embedded into our culture, that even though one literally doesn’t have to use these platforms, it would take a lot of effort to avoid them. The two sites play such a prevalent role in most people’s daily lives, that they it feels virtually impossible to give them up.

Technology is increasing its grip over our lives and, ironically, the drive toward “personalization” means that as individuals we miss, and in some cases choose to miss, many opportunities for exposure to new experiences, ideas, and products.¹³ *The Filter Bubble* brought me to this understanding: the personalization process is not about *you*, but rather, it is about what *group you are in* (Pariser, 2011, p. 172). Are you in the group that likes a particular thing? If yes, then great - they’ll throw an ad at you. If not, then they’ll find a way to compartmentalize you into a different group. This notion can lead to the question: is this really personalized? Rather than a “personalization,” this further exemplifies the concept of the constructed environment.

Companies can distort our perception by too readily directing our attention to what we, or those

¹³ As I’ll discuss later, personalization is not without it’s benefits. In a world saturated with images, we may welcome the filter bubble to prevent the cognitive overload of too much information.

similar to us, have already purchased; from our clicks, they are able to choose what we see, know, and even want, leaving us without the chance to discover something new.

Similarly, Pariser stated, “Google is great at helping us find what we know we want, but not at finding what we *don't* know we want” (2011, p. 104). This quote really brought me to question: what am *I* missing out on with personalization? In accordance with my prior discussion of ad-targeting strategies, they show us what they know we'll buy. So really, they're not showing us anything we might *question* buying. But wait! Isn't that the beauty of shopping? Discovering something new through the leisure of browsing? I've come to believe that this quote simply enhances the notion that we are *missing out* as a result of the personally constructed filter bubble. We've been marginalized into a certain world, and we will *never know* that we want something because *we may never see it*. And, given this pervasiveness of the constructive nature, the whole thing is set up in such a way that we often do not even realize that we're being targeted.

However, as Simon Sinek notes, “There's barely a product or service on the market today that customers can't buy from someone else for about the same price, quality, service and features” (2009, p. 16). We are buying more, changing faster, and have more brands in our closet and refrigerator than we can probably count (Pariser, 2011, p. 206). Therefore, this illusion of choice, one that curates brands within our personal realm, actually helps us to navigate and filter through the plethora of decisions thrown on us on a daily basis. At this point, we may just have *too* many choices that some simply need to be made for us. The filter bubble may therefore be necessary to avoid cognitive overload in an era of marketing saturation. In essence, it is not that we are “programmed” to buy a certain way, rather it is that we accept that several choices are filtered out for us. We decide to cut our losses on what we may miss out on given the

overwhelming number of options, because what we are offered closely aligns with the spectacle we desire.

The filter bubble actually makes our lives *easier* by narrowing the scope of products we see; if we did not live in a filtered bubble, we would be completely overwhelmed with options. And within this narrowed scope, we are still able to imprint our brand-name products with memories, regardless of how we came to purchase them! Ultimately, filtering is necessary to manage the overabundance of options we have today. And yet, I still worry about what we are missing. The following questions still vex me: what don't I see because my Google page is personalized? Is there an article I would have read, an item I could have bought and loved? Did I never get the chance to learn something new because I was stuck in a "filtered bubble" of my previous searches?

In addition, I now recognize that our culture has limited us deeply to what we *like*. We no longer have to encounter anything that frustrates us or makes us sad, so we often choose not to.¹⁴ Therefore, I believe that as a result of filtering, one day we will be so used to only seeing or hearing things that we like, that we will no longer tolerate anything that happens that is not completely positive towards us. We'll begin turn to our computers, devices, and products – even more than we already do. It is often what is *real* and unfiltered that disappoints us. And while it would be nice to live in a perfect world, these disappointments push us to grow as individuals. This lack of agency and choice that the filter bubble has induced makes me fear that interaction with adversity will soon become irrelevant; when there's something we *don't like*, we'll just filter it out.

Authenticity.

¹⁴ We do so by actions such as avoiding unpleasant articles and "unfriending" friends whose interests don't align with ours.

Our predisposition to pay attention to aesthetics, the construction of consumer environments, and our resulting choices - or lack thereof - led me to contemplate the relationship between consumption and our identities. From the analysis of constructed shopping experiences and the social discourses related to them, it is pertinent to confront the influence of these practices on the “authenticity” of those exposed to them.¹⁵

While Debord never explicitly defined authenticity, his reference to the commodification of daily life implies that “any notion of the authentic becomes (almost) impossible” (Harris, 2012). By theorizing our lives as a collection of images in which genuine relationships have been replaced by simulacra, Debord claimed a reduced quality of life (Zaretsky, 2017). Debord professed that our lack of consciousness allowed the Spectacle to swallow us all. For him, the Spectacle was beyond following the crowd; it was a total and totalizing system. The Spectacle distances us from our true desires and replaces it with those it produces; we consume without considering the root of our desires.

Thus, I’ve been brought to question: by “surrendering” ourselves to today’s Spectacle, one that disallows “authentic” relationships,¹⁶ to what extent do we surrender our so-called “authenticity”? How should we think about the concept of authenticity in relation to our patterns of consumption? I would argue that, while I respect Debord’s overarching concerns, his notion of authenticity (overcoming all relationships with commodities) was too romantic and individualizing; he pathologized people’s natural tendency to seek social affirmation and belonging. Ultimately, Debord was invested in a kind of radical individualism that denies the fact that we live socially. Therefore, I’d like to counter Debord’s concept of authenticity through the

¹⁵ I have intentionally placed the word authenticity in quotations because the following discussion is meant to explore the abstract concept of what authenticity actually is, in search of a definition.

¹⁶ At least in the eyes of Debord...

lens of neuroscience. By way of gaining an understanding of the role of the limbic brain in our choices and behavior, we can understand the relationship between a social life and authenticity.

The subconscious mind makes many of the calculated decisions Debord accused the Spectacle of controlling. In reality, it is not that the Spectacle dominates us; rather, it exploits the neurological, subconscious processes that make our emotional decisions. This conversation occurs in the limbic brain:

The limbic lobe consists of the medial portions of the frontal, parietal, and temporal lobes that form a continuous band of cortex overlying the rostral brain stem and diencephalon. The limbic lobe is sometimes termed the limbic system because its neurons form complex circuits that collectively play an important role in learning, memory, and emotions (Kandel et al., 2012, p. 267).

In simpler terms, the limbic system is the part of the brain that is conceptualized as the “feeling and reacting brain” (Swenson, 2006). This component of our brain motivates our feelings that don’t make rational sense – the gut-decisions that are often hard to put into words. It drives our beliefs, our insecurities, and our desire to belong (Swenson, 2006). Particularly relevant to our discussion is the amygdala, the structure of the brain considered the “integrative center for emotions” (Wright, 2017). While this structure was historically linked to fear, researchers such as Pessoa generalized this concept to all emotions. With help from evidence of EEG recordings, Pessoa concluded that the amygdala helps an organism define stimuli and respond accordingly. This conclusion made way for Pessoa to determine the amygdala in relation to general emotional and social processing, thereby influencing our decisions (2011, pp. 681-694).

The consideration of fearful and emotional decision-making directly ties to marketing consultant Simon Sinek’s *Start With Why*. In his work, he references several studies of the limbic system in relation to our shopping patterns, and explains that the limbic area of the brain is often leveraged in ad-campaigns and company efforts to incite brand-loyalty. Primarily, he discusses

the limbic brain in relation to the intrinsic desire to belong to a *specific* community. Sinek explains that “peer-pressure” works *not* because the majority of our “group” is always right, but because *we fear* that we may be wrong (2011, p. 24). The link of fear and emotional processing, as per our discussion of the limbic brain above, explicates the strategy behind brands that inspire us; they draw us in by making us feel special, sociable, and like we *fit in* to a group that is bigger than ourselves (2011, p. 25). The need to belong (and the fear or not belonging) is evidently a very basic human need that directly ties to why we buy (and “succumb” to the Spectacle).

What Debord essentially called inauthenticity – conceding to the Spectacle without thinking – can therefore be understood as pre-wired in our brains. Debord’s claim that we “lost” authenticity by following the crowd can instead be recast as a natural tendency determined by the structure of the human (limbic) brain. While the Spectacle was successful in consuming our attention with consumption, it was only able to do so given that it also touched on our basic desire to belong. Debord’s fundamentally individual view does not really leave room for group affiliation or living socially (which we do). Therefore, I believe that Debord’s claim is *too* extreme, and have chosen to use further research to redefine “authenticity,” being true to one’s self, even in a context where the “self” is constructed.

Today we yield to our brain’s wiring, and its influence on our desire to belong in the context of the Spectacle. This notion brought me to analyze the nature of people’s practices – what they do, why they do them, and the resulting factors on both their authenticity and consciousness. To begin, I’d like to allude to my earlier discussion of the limbic brain; people start some of their purchasing journeys by, both consciously and non-consciously, constructing a persona (and buying certain products) in order to fit in to a certain group. In Sinek’s *Start With Why*, he explains that people make this choice based on the group’s impression to the outside

world (2011, p. 41). By the group's conjured messages, people create an aspirational lifestyle in their minds – one similar to that of the group – and *buy* in order to achieve it.¹⁷ What's particularly fascinating about this phenomenon is that a person begins to like or dislike products and styles based on what is currently in their group's product-lexicon (2011, p. 42).

However, while we succumb into peer-pressure within our self-selected category, we often own an eclectic array of brands. In his work, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, scholar Michel de Certeau elaborates on this claim by stating that a person's "products are scattered in the graphs of televised, urbanistic, and commercial production" (1984, p. 31). I believe that Certeau's claim, that our possessions come from diffuse sources, emphasizes my earlier assertion of the constructed self. By collecting several brands and an array of products, we are able to curate our own image. That said, while our product choices are scattered, they are still within the brands that align with the group in which we've chosen to marginalize ourselves. Our loyalty does not reside with the brands, rather their relationship with the people or group to which we strive to belong, though in that category is a wide selection of brands and styles from which to buy.

Moreover, de Certeau elaborated on his theory of brand-selection by implying that it is not only in what the brand does for us, but what we do with the brand as curators and users (1984, p. 31). Though buying a product in our group's array of brands allows us to feel a sense of belonging, de Certeau notes that "this misunderstanding assumes that 'assimilating' necessarily means 'becoming similar to' what one absorbs, and not... making it one's own" (1984, p. 166). Here, de Certeau is emphasizing the fact that when assimilating through purchases, people forget that they still have the opportunity to be unique. From this point, I've come to reflect on the concept of individualism in a world of constructed choices. Unlike Debord, de Certeau claims

¹⁷ See footnote #5 to re-connect this argument to Maslow's Hierarchy.

that even in a consumerist society, there is room for individuality. Even relative to the decision to be a part of a particular group, de Certeau claims that the “reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author’s position. He invents in texts something different from what they ‘intended’” (1984, p. 169). In short, the consumer can detach a product from its origin to create a certain message of their choosing. Therefore, I agree with de Certeau’s claim that:

The consumer cannot be identified or qualified by the newspapers of commercial products he assimilates: between the person (who uses them) and these products (indexes of the ‘order’ which is imposed on him), there is a gap of varying proportions opened by the use that he makes of them” (1984, p. 32).

Essentially, a company has an intended message (the Spectacle the company produces), but the meaning, what the product signifies, is developed by customers. Relaying a message is dependent on how you *use* the products, not *if you own them*. Similarly, German philosopher Martin Heidegger claimed that the key to authenticity is “making one’s existence one’s own, separated from others”(as cited in Hardt, 1947, p. 50).

In the 21st century, we are fortunate enough to have increasing opportunities for personal development and self-expression within our constructs (1947, p. 57). Our consumer relationships to social media in the digital age expand upon this conversation. Both our fear and emotion based choices come into play when it comes to defining ourselves on social media. The images, links, and posts are all constructed to create a particular image (to make us fit in). On Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, we curate a mix of both accurate and concocted representations of our lives. Even though the images are of us and we think that our profiles are accurate representations of ourselves, do we ever really stop to reminisce about the countless untagged photographs and time spent thinking of the right caption? These actions add an extra level of consciousness toward the “right” post, and are therefore tied to the *creation* our profiles, but not

to self-awareness. The digital age has further enhanced the connection that people have to their own spectacles, which are constructed and “fake” on a new level given these new platforms.

Despite this truth, even though we *know* that people construct the spectacles and profiles, we often believe them. These fabricated and constructed social media profiles still manage to seem authentic, and, maybe in some sense, they really are. To explain it might be necessary to turn our understanding of Benjamin’s theory of the “aura” on its head. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Benjamin describes the notion of “aura” as dead, existing only in an improbable and mystical space. The aura for Benjamin represents the originality and authenticity of a work of art that has not been reproduced; he claimed the loss of the aura through mechanical reproduction – it is lost by way of reproducible images and the massification of art (1936, pp. 13-17). However, I believe that in the process of formulating brand images or personal spectacles, by means of reproduced images, we actually “enhance” our profiles. The reproducibility of our pages, and coherent factors of the profile, validate the “aura” and create a seemingly authentic connection.

The claim above raises the discussion of counterculture. The counterculture began with people who “reject[ed] or oppose[d] the dominant values and behavior of society” (“Counterculture,” 2017). In our day and age, these are the hipsters, the festivalgoers, and the “granola” tree-huggers.¹⁸ Though the people of the movement originally meant to oppose societal standards, New York Times author Robert Zaretsky posed the question: “do the critical counter-images that protesters create constitute true resistance, or are they instead collaborating with our fascination with spectacle?” (2017). I agree with Zaretsky – while these people intend to

¹⁸ Granola meaning: “people who are environmentally aware... open-minded, left-winged, socially aware and active, queer or queer-positive, anti-oppressive/discriminatory (racial, sexual, gender, class, age, etc.) with an organic and natural emphasis on living, who will usually refrain from consuming or using anything containing animals and animal by-products (for health and/or environmental reasons), as well as limit consumption of what he or she does consume” (“Granola”, 2017).

oppose our societal norms, even they succumb to the Spectacle by producing massified images. A great example of this claim relates to the consumerist elements of modern music festivals; at these events, “the hipster is able to play the role of the bohemian while simultaneously wielding the resources of the bourgeois” (Delistraty, 2014).¹⁹ Today these events are manufactured and are generally materialistic. Thus, I’ve come to believe that even in effort to “fight” the way images and brands define us, those of the counterculture technically still yield to the Spectacle. Here, even those of countercultures exist in the context of image reproduction, thereby making participation in the Spectacle unavoidable.

This discussion leads me to the topic of the larger struggle at hand – how do we overcome the Spectacle? And can we even? This main, overarching issue relates to de Certeau’s statement:

Consumers are transformed into immigrants. The system in which they move is too vast to be able to fix them in one place, but too constraining for them ever to be able to escape from it and go into exile elsewhere. There is no longer an elsewhere (1984, p. 40).

The claim that there is no longer an “elsewhere,” meaning that the Spectacle is inescapable, is unnerving. And while I’ve come to conclude that we may never break free of the spectacular construction brought upon us by consumerism, I’ve found redeeming factors of the Spectacle’s metaphorical trap. Often, the filter bubble is helping us make decisions that would otherwise be overwhelming; if we were to be consistently analyzing our lives, we’d be exhausted, indecisive, and most likely, extremely unproductive. In addition, even though something is a commodity, it can still be an anchoring point for an experience or relationship. Relationships that are built in and through brand-name products aren’t necessarily bad, and can still be rich even if they’re grounded in a shared experience built around buying something.

¹⁹ This occurs regardless of whether these people are actually on social media or not – even the events are spectacles of their own.

This realization shifted my main critique from the lack of “elsewhere,” to the claim that in our current state of being, people often resort to “ward[ing] off the effects of an analysis” (Certeau, 1984, p. 41). I’ve come to consider, most people don’t ask themselves the hard questions nor create a moment of reflection in the midst of their brand spectacle. They often forgo questioning, “do I need this?” and the subsequent, “why.” Thus, my goal here is not to induce a state of panic, rather to induce awareness. I’d like to interpret the definition of authenticity as having an awareness of the fact that that you are an accumulation of spectacles. You are tied to the array of items you purchase; therefore, given your spectacular construction, live as how you believe you want to be perceived, and heed caution when conceding to society’s expectations of the construct you aspire to be. Instead of surrendering to those powers or interests that manage everyday life, consciously build your own experiences. Authenticity is a consciousness in creating your own spectacle, with the clarity of why you’re making that choice.

Time.

In Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, he theorizes a historical shift in the way that people understood time. In his chapter, “Spectacular Time,” Debord explains that society transitioned between two perceptions of time, from cyclical to pseudo-cyclical. Debord claimed that our interaction with time was originally “cyclical,” meaning that time was focused on seasons and their reoccurrence (1983, thesis 126). Before clocks, watches, and other timekeepers, each season would come back in its rightful moment. In simpler terms, his interpretation was that time was not an object to be consumed, rather that it passed with a cyclical return. In his work, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, Giorgio Agamben points out that ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle also understood time as cyclical:

For we say that human affairs and those of all other things that have natural movement... seem to be in a way circular, because all these things come to pass in time and have their beginning and end as it were 'periodically'; for time itself is conceived as coming round; and this again because time and such a standard rotation mutually determine each other. Hence, to call the happenings of a thing a circle is saying that there is a sort of circle of time... (as cited in Agamben, 1993, p. 91-92).

Aristotle's description elaborates on our discussion of cyclical time by noting its natural movement in a way that creates a cycle. Specifically, the "mutual determination" between time and its return of season is what makes time cyclical. In the past, cyclical patterns were suggested by seasonal cycles. In this context, time was not consumed, but instead was used to accommodate planting and ideal atmospheres for each crop or laborious task. The time of a person, in this case a farmer, cycles in never-ending circles without beginning nor end. Hence, cyclical time more closely aligned with an endless cycle and *not* with our modern obsession with progress.

Debord declared that consumerism complicated our interactions with time. He writes that time became devalued, and no longer in the service of "human development." (1967, theses 147). He goes on to say that the devaluation of time has been replaced by another form of time, labeled "pseudo-cyclical":

The general time of human non-development also exists in the complementary form of consumable time which returns as pseudo-cyclical time to the daily life of the society based on this determined production...Pseudo-cyclical time is actually no more than the consumable disguise of the commodity-time of production. It contains the essential properties of commodity-time, namely exchangeable homogeneous units and the suppression of the qualitative dimension. But being the by-product of this time which aims to retard concrete daily life and to keep it retarded, it must be charged with pseudo-valuations and appear in a sequence of falsely individualized moments (1967, theses 148-149).

Debord called this "new" interpretation of time "pseudo-cyclical" because he believed we were living a linear life charged with fake validations of our individuality and authenticity. Similarly,

Agamben elaborated on the shift in the interaction with time by claiming that it was caused by “western man’s incapacity to master time, and his consequent obsession with gaining it and passing it” (1993, p. 93). Therefore, in our case, we can call this form of time “linear,” placing time in the context of the “before and after” (1993, p. 97). Twentieth-century capitalism requires a constant renewal of products, always looking ahead. Modernity itself rejected the cyclical, and forced time to move as a linear experience (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 94). Therefore, though time was once “directionless,” it developed a direction (ever “forward”) and a purpose (“progress”) in the modern world (Agamben, 1993, p. 94). Rather than seasons returning in a cycle, i.e. a “cyclical pattern,” we began a pattern of perpetually striving to move forward.

The shift in the way we interacted with time changed our relationship with labor. While the era of farmers was defined by living by seasons and their inevitable return, the rise of industrial capitalism concretized time by imposing timesheets and timekeepers (Thompson, 1967, pp. 82-92). Both the concepts of linear time and time as a unit of value were materialized in the 21st century. The commodification of labor incited a force for a regime of time in which waged labor put a dollar price per an hour of work. While the era of “pre-clocks” was defined as cyclical, I’ve come to interpret the development of time clocks and a structured workweek as having “straightened out” the circle, making time both linear and a commodity.

The commodification of time also allowed it to become governed by logics of scarcity. Today, time is something you always feel the need to have more of, and, once spent, that you can’t reclaim. Time has not only restructured itself into a linear format, but has also essentially become a product in itself. Time is now managed, segmented, and seen as a resource; it is one that is limited; like a bag of chips, you’re bound to reach the end. In this context, I’m not talking about people’s fear of death, rather their worries of not getting the newest, most “in” product.

I'm talking about the subconscious conversation people have with their limbic brains about the way they're spending their time relative to social expectations.²⁰

Time is understood as an object that once used, cannot be repossessed. This new structure and social weight with regards to spending time allowed for hierarchies where the way people spent their time became a “symbolism of status” (Thompson, 1967, p. 67). Not only were physical clocks and watches marks of luxury, but they also metaphorically represented the status based on the way time is used (1967, p. 67). Time is a commodity that proves members of society to be superior based on our use of it; the ability to “take your time” and have leisure time is both a function and a marker of class. Thus, because of this social value, I believe that we've adapted Debord's statement of the “social image of the consumption of time” (1967, thesis 153). An example of this relates to paying for several tasks rather than performing them on their own. People today will pay an hourly wage for housekeepers, massage therapists, and other services that are time-based.

Because time is limited, we make “economic choices” and weigh different alternatives. Oftentimes people are forced to *choose* between something that will take a lot of time but is less money, or something that will take less time but is expensive. However, this choice is one that is only available to those fortunate enough to have options when it comes to how they spend their precious time. This time is considered a “unified commodity” in which there are both aspects of sociability and materiality; spending time is a form of consumption that directly relates to both time and power (Debord, 1967, thesis 152). As a result, in her work, *Beyond Time and Money*, De Grazia states that “workers came to prefer more money to more leisure” and that “working class leisure was commercialized” (1993, pp. 24-26). This preference came from people's desire to spend money a certain way, to validate their products, and in turn, their time.

²⁰ See conversation from the previous section, “Authenticity,” to refresh your memory on the limbic brain.

Because we are judged by how we spend our time, companies have capitalized on this, and we are now advertised how to “spend our time better” or even how to “pay to have the time of our lives.” Often, we are advertised *time* rather than commodities, and therefore we live *in an illusion of how to best spend this time*. In other words, “it is a question of how this time is put to use, or how it is exploited by the leisure industries” (Thompson, 1967, p. 95). In *Start With Why*, Sinek discusses how companies have capitalized on our uneasiness in relation to how we spend our time. In his work, he tracks the successes and failures of companies based on their messaging, concluding that the most successful companies advertise time (2009, p. 197). Rather than marketing their product, companies convey messages about saved time, given time has become a more powerful mechanism in inspiring purchases; it is more attractive to advertise than tangible products. For example, Apple, the multinational tech company, persistently exudes a message about what is important in a lifestyle, and not necessarily in a piece of technology (Sinek, 2009, p. 42). All the ways in which its technology is advertised as promising us more leisure time; it isn’t about the technology at all – it’s about the time we’re having, gaining, or creating by using it.

Another interesting example is Starbucks and its relationship to coffee shop culture. Philosopher Habermas described original coffee shops as “a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing equality of status, disregarded status altogether” (1992, p. 37). However, Starbucks represents a completely alternate view of this trend. The company single-handedly created a coffee-shop culture in the US, only to completely turn it over into one of the quicker cups of coffee you can find (Sinek, 2009, 198). When Starbucks originally opened, it only existed on college campuses; it started with the idea that people didn’t come to buy coffee, but rather the experience of sipping your coffee out of a ceramic cup and eating your Danish off of a

ceramic plate (2009, p. 198). This format was similar to Habermas's, in which coffee shops were a key infrastructure for social communication and the formation of a properly functioning "public sphere." Starbucks, however, soon did away with this idea, favoring paper cups, no longer making its signature experience about the third space of spending your time there. Additionally, in 2014, the company managed to lessen your time in-store even more by launching a "mobile order and pay" app ("Starbucks Company Timeline," 2017). However, though the Starbucks experience had become about the coffee, its brand remained strong; the company's original reputation (along with the shift) managed to give customers the feeling of getting the "best" cup of coffee while "saving time" doing so.²¹

By going to Starbucks, do we really "buy" ourselves time? And while we are advertised a way to spend our time (and that time is a purchasable entity), how do we actually "buy" it? I've concluded two possible ways: by buying actual products and experiences, or through people. The former way has been discussed above as buying a tangible object for a dollar amount. However, similar to Hardt, I believe that "the individual 'consumes' ball games, moving pictures, newspapers and magazines, books, lectures, natural scenery, social gatherings, in the same alienated and abstractified way in which he consumes the commodities he has bought" (1993, p. 54). Here, we are buying experiences that translate into memories.

We also buy time in the form of human interactions. In E.P. Thompson's work *Past & Present*, he claimed that, "time is now [considered] currency: it is not passed but spent" (1967, p. 61). People have begun to spend their time similarly to buying a product. For example, you could say that the commonplace phrase, "I'm on my way," which metaphorically "buys" you minutes until you are expected to arrive. Aside from running late, we can buy time if we want to see more

²¹ Though, based on flavor preferences, saving time might mean giving up on flavor...

of something, be with something longer, or are stalling. It works the other way around as well; in doing someone a favor, you are essentially paying people with your own time.

The exchange of time gets quite complicated when we are talking about people, given that we often weigh alternatives between time and money; time is acted upon in a similarly to cash. So I've begun to ask: *whom* are we actually buying time from? While we could be buying time from family, friends, or a service provider, we could also be paying with our own time. Or wasting it. At what point is something a waste of time and how do you *know*? Overall, we live in a culture that pretty much makes everything an object, and time, a topic so abstract and all-powerful – so *beyond us* – is one that we've managed to commodify. Time is often equated to money, and money is an object, and therefore, this entire conversation relates to a complicated and convoluted math equation that results with time as an object.

Though Debord critiqued that our focus on attaining said “time” results in a failure to live life, I still believe it is important to acknowledge that our relationships to brands can be grounded in experience. Though I do not want to dictate whether or not you should be changing your behavior, I'd like for the conversations above to call for consciousness. Through time we create shared experiences and produce memories; in the way that we spend time, there are both emotions and growth involved. While we can't get the minutes of our days back, and our use of them is not actually a transactional experience, we leave with a “souvenir” of how we chose to spend them. At this point, I hope to induce reflection on the last three sections relative to how you move forward in actually spending the precious commodity of time. Think about how our environments are constructed, how it limits our agency, and how it influences our days; in this wake of consciousness, evaluate the best way to spend your own time.

Solo Performance.

In his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord declares, “the spectacle’s domination has succeeded in raising a whole generation molded to its laws” (1967, thesis 2). While I tried to articulate this concept in my thesis project, I felt that words on a paper could not do the pervasiveness of the Spectacle justice. Therefore, I came to the decision that a monologue, one that articulated a person’s “spectacular” experience, would come to enhance the claims I’ve made throughout my project.

I wanted to create a piece that is representative of the emotional toll that twenty-first-century consumerism has on actual human beings, drawing from and moving beyond the theories discussed throughout my work. I’d like to preface the script to my solo performance with de Certeau’s claim that:

The reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author’s position. He invents in texts something different from what they “intended.” He detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings (1984, p. 169).

Though I am obviously the author of my thesis, my monologue comes from the standpoint of the reader. When I originally wrote the script of my solo performance, I created a very literal piece in which the main character talks to commodities as if they were people. She talked to her dress, purse, and belt about experiences she had with them, and the viewer was prompted to interpret this as the character talking to actual people. Throughout the process of writing this piece, I became extraordinarily frustrated. The piece began to feel *so* literal... inauthentic to say the least. Out of frustration I decided to write a more personal, raw piece, which resulted in the script below. This final version has been edited to the point where the character does not actually

represent me as a person, but I do believe it reflects several of the ways I have been influenced by today's commodity culture.

The Script:

Setting: AA Meeting – stand and deliver – requirement for her “spectacle mask” to be off – character is dressed in fancy attire, wearing apron to imply that she was setting up for the dinner.

[Come in from outside and approach chairs]

I know I'm late, I just really needed a quick fix from you **daily-goer** alcoholics...

And I KNOW I'm not supposed to be drinking at these things but who really cares about a “one day sober” chip anyway?

You don't feel comfortable with me *drinking here?! Okay okay* – *[takes swig of drink, puts drink under the chair]* Well – I happen to be here for a *critical* reason. A perfectly valid AA opportunity – I'm *stressed* about hosting a “lovely” family dinner in an hour and if I don't vent someplace I'm breaking out the WHISKEY.

YES – *again* I'm here to talk about my family. Not like any of you people are any more interesting. I can't stay long though, or the potatoes will burn...

As you already know: My dad – *yes, I know you've heard this but she's* *[looks to audience member' new!]* *[Begins to walk to back of chair]* My dad - Born in the Soviet Block, moved, married, moved again, four kids. His wife died. My mom – Born on an Israeli Kibbutz, married, one child, divorced. Moved. Her ex dies too.

My parents met through a *newspaper* ad. “Widower looking for a new mother to my children.” They fell in love... and it was so wonderful, they decided to have me.

My name means my gift. MY gift. *MY gift...?* By 'MY' you mean *YOURS, right?* ... *so I'd better live up to it.*

At sixteen – I went on a hiking trip I thought would help me find myself. 98 miles with a 60lb backpack *[super heavy weight on actress]* , I was *miserable* - put in situations unfit for my 110lb body.

*Really Heather?! What you heard there was my 16-year-old **weight!**? Literally no one cares about your eating disorder right now we're in an AA meeting. Did you not read the **sign?***

Anyway – I thought the trip would end and I would go home where nothing *so* bad would ever happen again. But the day I got home – physically bruised and “emotionally scarred,” my mom came into the room...*[looks to side]* *What MOM.*

**Looks forward:* “Daddy has cancer.”

At that moment, a part of me died... and soon after, a series of three lies began:

[Hand gesturing finger numbers]

Lie 1: He’s going to live

Lie 2: My family is happy

*[Gesture *3 fingers* Lie 3]*

**Pause*

He died in front of my face. Not literally, I wasn’t there when he died, but he died long before he was dead. And I began to pity myself for my loss.

[Starts to get on the floor] I often bring it back up to feel the pain again. It’s okay that I feel alone because my dad died. It’s okay that things are difficult because my dad died. It’s okay that my family is an *absolute mess* because *he* died...

[Look down, clench teeth] *OH fuck you Aaron, don’t get me started*

[Look over to person in audience] *Didn’t we pick you up off the floor last week? we already know you’re the QUEEN of self-fucking-pity.*

[Gets up] AND you know what, I don’t *drink*. I have a drink from *time to time*. That doesn’t mean I have a *serious issue*...

My first drink, my first *real drink* – was a week after I learned about his cancer. I went to a party and took not one, not two, but *ten shots*. In an hour.

This pattern was put on pause until the 6-month anniversary of his death - my first day as a freshman in college. Un-pause that button. HIT PLAY - I’m drinking anything that comes my way. Under the table.

I realize - my dad’s cancer diagnosis is not the reason that my family is unhappy and disjointed – it’s simply when I finally began to see its flaws.

Not the quirky ones that everyone has, but the **core** in which it started.

It recently hit me like a ton of bricks - I am the **only** person biologically related to everyone in my family. Always mediating between everyone surrounding me – a vessel of information, a vessel of love, a vessel of interpretation -

He's not talking to her because she didn't do this and he hit her when she smoked that and he also died before he got to meet him and she cried to her and she turned her back and she died leaving them and he never hugged them and he decided to shut doors while she decided to move and they wanted money and she had a meltdown and she was jealous of me for having them, and me?

[Crosses legs, sits up] I drink therefore I am.

[Assesses room, no one thinks she's funny] But I'm FIIINE – relax everyone ... you know I really should be getting back to the soufflé or it will fall...

[Gets up to walk toward door... slows down and says:]

It's not that I care about the fucking borscht it's just that... if they say I'm their gift, if they named me "my gift" – when are they going to give me mine?

***Doorbell rings –in reference to family arriving for dinner*

Oh and Lie number 3... I am not an alcoholic.²²

Correlation:

You might ask me: what does a monologue about a 25-year-old alcoholic have to do with your entire discussion of cultural theory? Interestingly enough, the first step in Alcoholics Anonymous sounds quite similar to Debord. The group claims, "we admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable" ("The 12 Steps of AA," 2017). To me, this sounds exactly like succumbing to the Spectacle!

Therefore, while I've called for consciousness throughout my project, I believe the journey to this point of reflection is easier said than done. The character in my work somewhat admits to the fact that the Spectacle has governed her life, and is struggling to deal with it. Though the monologue is an artistic weaving, below are the ways I believe my piece fits in to the four themes of my thesis project:

²² This performance took place on April 25th at 7:00pm in Duke University's Brody Theater. It was recorded. If you are interested in viewing the footage, please contact leeshylichtman@yahoo.com.

The Constructed Nature of Consumer Environments: The character's environment was one that she was born into – her role was essentially pre-constructed for her. From the very beginning, her family was constructed; the two parents came even together from a newspaper ad! As a result, her role within her family was inevitable.

- Within the family, there were the “Elephants” – big topics that are never discussed such as how the family came together, and there were also “Gorillas” – the fact that she is forced to keep her family together because no one realizes (i.e. selective attention) that she is the only one biologically related to everyone.
- An even more artistic aside: in the context of consumerism – she is a “gift” – which is often (and ambivalently) a material object that is bought – essentially the main character is a product on the shelf that was taken off to serve a certain purpose in her environment. This directly ties to the nature of the gift economy; in it, valuables are given without an explicit agreement for immediate or future rewards (Cheal, 1988, pp. 1-19). Within her family, the character's role was preselected for her simply based on a background story; there is never a promise of any reward... though the character is persistently in search of one.

Agency & Choice: Do you think she *chose* to wear the cocktail dress and the frilly apron? Did she *choose* to host this dinner? Based on the environment in which she was raised, and her interpreted social stature, this is the way she is expected to behave. Not only is she forced to a certain standard of dress based on her social standing, but she is also “choiceless” when it comes to hosting this family dinner. She was locked into the “decision” of hosting because of the structure of her family; her family members, and their expectations, defined her agency.

Authenticity: In this context, the character struggles to live an authentic life – but she is unsure

of what that means. Is it living to her family's expectations? Or, is it realizing what she wants for herself? In this journey, she began to drink – and for much of the performance piece, her relationship with alcohol, similarly to her relationship with herself and her family, is inauthentic. Alcohol became the commodity that she began to rely on, yet she consistently denies that she is an alcoholic (because the perception of alcoholism is bad and she doesn't want to defy the “good” category she has always been placed in).

In addition, in the script, the core of her family was broken and convoluted – yet it took the cancer diagnosis for her to realize the façade. Similarly, the main character's core is damaged, and she puts on a façade herself: given the lack of consciousness in how she wants to lead her life, she results to using alcohol as a vice, ironically in effort to maintain her image. She seems to be persistently in search of finding herself, but uses alcohol, a pervasive product in social culture, as a crutch. By the end of the performance, the character “overcomes” an element of her struggle by admitting to being an alcoholic. That said, she does so ironically – with a third lie, leaving the viewer questioning what she really means by her statement. One additional element is that as the character struggles to figure out who she is, given that she is the person that keeps her family together and is trying to be a “great” person, to the other AA members in the room she is shallow and rude, responding to their interjections in a superficial manner.

Time: The whole performance hinges on the fact that the character has a mental breakdown while she's preparing for the dinner that is *literally* about to happen. At the start of the monologue, we know that her guests' arrivals are imminent, but we don't know exactly when. The doorbell rings as she is still at the AA meeting (they've arrived!). The character obviously doesn't know how she wants to spend her time and is trying to hold her family together while also live her own life. She struggles with what to do: does she do what's best for her family or

herself in the long run? However, the audience doesn't actually know what she will do because she's run out of time...

Finally, the character makes it a point to note that she rarely comes to the AA meetings – she believes that they are essentially a “waste of her time” and that she has better things to do (which is also why she's rude to the other members). While the audience is unsure of what she truly does in her spare time, it can be inferred that she has an alcohol problem. That said, she might live a more authentic life had she contemplated the best way for her to spend her time without alcohol.

Conclusion & Reflection.

I have a question – yes, another one, I know I've already you asked a lot. But, after reading *The Gorilla In The Room*, did you learn something new? Did you reflect on how you buy in a way that's different? In a way that's self-reflective and conscious?

Well, if the answer to *any of these questions* was a resounding yes, or even a slight nod, I believe that I will have succeeded – and that working on this paper for countless hours, writing dozens of pages was worth it. If you didn't, it was still worth it. Why? Well, you can ask me a million times what it felt like to be writing this thesis, and I will give you a million different answers. This topic is one that has touched me personally, and has definitely incited a fair share of mental breakdowns. When you're talking about the flaws of our society, how could it not? But, I really do believe that I am exiting this process as a more conscious, deliberate person.

That said, the reason we don't think about this topic all the time, the reason we ignore the elephant and don't even see the gorilla, is that we would go absolutely insane if we did. However, I believe that failing to recognize and discuss them at all can lead our world down a

narrow path. So, while I am not telling you to boycott all corporations, to move out into a field and become the next Guy Debord, I do preach is that this recognition, this understanding of what is happening around us, will lead each person to live a more “authentic” lives (however you’ve come to interpret authenticity). What I am asking is that we *see* the gorilla, and *not* let it become an elephant. Let’s live alongside these animals – recognize that they’re there, and acknowledge the discomfort of having them there while also finding a way to live with them. Not in the sense that we will all be farmers and make our own ketchup, but in the sense that we can recognize and be aware of what is going around us, instead of falling into the never-ending consumerist pit that has several echoes telling us that we need more.

Lastly – as I move on to work in sales for an ad-tech company, I am able to realize, and *consciously accept* the irony of joining a team that helps drive consumers into their own filter bubbles. But if you can’t beat them...

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