Is Re-Enchantment just Enchantment?: Towards an Understanding of a Second order Enchantment

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New Religions, Temple Burns, and the Re-enchantment of Belief

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This study depicts the grassroots, themed, creative behavior of consumers at a popular American anti-market festival and analyzes them as ritualistic and touristic processes that de commodify, resacralize, authenticate, and reenchant the processes of belief and meaning-making that have most commonly been provided by organized religions. Although the Burning Man festival has been explored as an autonomous zone of self-expressive communal and social regeneration, the significance of its sacred dimensions holds insights for consumer researchers interested in exploring meaning-making, authenticity, the sacred and reenchantment in contemporary religious expression.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12288/volumes/v33/NA-33

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ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY

The McDonaldization of Enchantment and Consumers Practices of Re-enchantment: A Dialectic View of Transformative Consumption

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We glide through contemporary shopping malls, our senses filled by a dazzlingly dizzying array of sights, sounds, and seductive sales pitches. We choose our themed meals from a palette of standardized choices fortified with all kinds of differentiating symbolic additives. Our living spaces, conversations, and personal styles become increasingly interlinked with the ceaseless flow of calculated commercial images that promise an aura of mystery, sensuality, and authentic difference. In the midst of this consumer culture flux, lies Nietzsche’s fabled myth of the eternal return: a perpetual repetition of unfulfilled quests and disappointing outcomes that are undertaken in hopes of attaining an elusive ideal. This session will place an analytic spotlight on this dialectical cycle of enchantment?rationalization?disenchantment?re-enchantment and the kinds of consumer desires and transformative consumption projects that it engenders. The papers in this session will analyze how this dialectic motivates particular forms of transformative consumption that are geared toward not only self-transformation but also to transformations in the very structure of market relationships.

This dialectic between disenchantment and enchantment has been a recurring analytic subtext of culturally oriented consumer research. Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) chart the tensions and movements between sacred and profane consumption that animate everyday consumption and imbue special possessions with their invocative power. Arnould, Price, and Otnes (1999) reveal how natural servicescapes enable consumers to experience a magical transformation conspicuously absent from the rationalized flow of their everyday lives. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) trace out modernity’s disenchanting and rationalizing trajectories and anticipate that the conditions of postmodernity will engender a new liberatory project of creative, playful, and enchanted consumption. Kozinets (2001) argues that ardent Star Trek fans (Trekkers) seek to align technological utopian promises of science with the emotionally charged realms of fantasy, myth, and mysticism. Kozinets (2002) analyzes the empowering and enchanting rituals that emanate from Burning Man participants from their usually distanced, prosaic, marketed social experiences. Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003) find successful retro branding invoking the storied forms of myth that blend quests, nostalgic longing, and irresolvable mysteries into storied realms of enchantment whose delights draw from the past. Thompson (2004) argues that the natural health marketplace leverages the idea of mystical enchantment through its mythological blending of Gnostic appeals to spiritual transcendence of the body and Romantic appeals to the magical and revitalizing properties of nature. Kozinets et al (2004) analyze ESPN Zone as a liminal and ludic space where consumers escape their routinized work lives by engaging in deep play; in this way, these consumers can see themselves as a part of a wondrous and transcendent spectacle, linked to fantasy, celebrity, and magical moments of athletic achievement. Muniz and Schau (2005) contend that the enduring loyalties and passions expressed by members of the abandoned Apple Newton community are steeped in an ethos of technomysticism and religiosity.

This family of studies can be parsed into two related but distinctive thematic categories. The first addresses how consumers rework and refashion the cultural/symbolic resources offered by the marketplace to mitigate feelings of disenchantment. These studies emphasize the co-creation of meaning and suggest that consumers enchant consumption objects by situating them within layers of emotional and autobiographical significations. Consumers also actively created their own enchanted worlds of consumption through their participation in consumption communities and a multitude of liminal consuming spaces. The second set of studies analyze the ways in which the commercial market has responded and adapted to these ephemeral consumer desires for enchantment, via strategies such as retro branding (Brown et al 2002), using computer technology to create interactive domains for fantasy enactment (Davis 1998), and designing so-called “cathedrals of consumption,” such as Las Vegas spectacles, themed shopping malls, theme parks, themed restaurants, cruise ships, magnificent high tech athletic stadiums, various forms of superstores, and state-of-the-art movies theaters (Ritzer 1998).

However, another turn of this dialectical cycle is now underway: a growing legion of consumers are expressing dissatisfaction with the pre-packaged experiences of enchantment that are made readily available within these cathedrals of consumption (e.g., Thompson and Arsel 2004) and are seeking out transcendent consumption experiences that convey the aura of magic and authenticity (Arnould, Price, and Otnes 1999; Kozinets 2002; Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Thompson and Arsel 2005). While specific studies have explored specific moments in this dialectic, little consideration has been given to the dialectic relationships that exist between these consumption modalities or discussed the transformative impulses that emerge from this cycle. The aim of this special session was to cast a theoretical spotlight on this broader set of dialectical relationships.

SESSION OVERVIEW

The dialectic between rationalization and enchantment can be traced to the formative stages of the modern capitalist system. From the outset, the rationalizing impulses of Fordism co-existed with the enchanting consumer dream worlds offered by department stores, arcades, and theme parks (Benjamin 2002; Leach 1993). This very tension also provides the genealogical and conceptual link between two of the more influential books ever written on the capitalist system: Max Weber’s (1904/2001) The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Colin Campbell’s (1987) The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism.

Weber famously argued that the Protestant ethic, with its emphasis on hard work, delayed gratification, and rational self-control, set the cultural stage for the high degree of capital accumulation and investment that capitalism required to flourish. Moreover, the Protestant ethic was highly compatible with the bureaucratic rationalization of production and economic relations that fueled the growth of the capitalist economy. Weber also laid the foundation for many contemporary cultural critiques of capitalism by warning that the expansionist tendencies of capitalism had the potential to create an iron cage of rationality that would disenchant the world and empty the human soul. Campbell’s (1987) companion work argues that the Protestant ethic also demanded an intensive reflection on one’s inner life and passions for the ostensible purposes of quelling any vestige of sinful thought. Campbell suggests...
that this form of reflexive self-monitoring paradoxically stoked the imaginative hedonism and other forms of consumer fantasy that function as the cultural drivers of modern consumption.

George Ritzer (1993, 1998, 2001) further develops this dialectical relation by analyzing its contemporary manifestations in a postmodern economy oriented toward service (rather than manufacturing) and where lifestyle choices and consumption interests have become defining aspects of identity. According to Ritzer, the iron cage of rationality has taken the form of McDonaldization—that is, a process by which the principles of the fast-food industry—efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control through technology—are being applied, across the globe, to more and more sectors of social life. Across myriad contexts, Ritzer shows how these rationalizing principles have led to a high degree of cultural homogenization and also have transformed the very nature of work and consumption.

In his more recent work, Ritzer (2005) makes a dialectic turn by positing that McDonaldization also inspires consumer desires for enchantment, which the capitalist market then attempts to satisfy through a plethora of “cathedrals of consumption.” These consumption cathedrals are designed to attract and enchant consumers and thereby inspire purchases of the magical goods and experiences being proffered. Through this argument, Ritzer culls a postmodern synthesis from Weber and Campbell seminal explanations of rationalism and romanticism. The rationalizing tendencies of McDonaldization foster potent desires for experiences of enchantment. A staggering variety of themed serviceescapes now stand ready to give consumers what the experiences of enchantment that they have been structurally predisposed to want. Paradoxically, these cathedrals of consumption adhere to the logic of McDonaldization by delivering commercialized and pre-packaged forms of enchantment and therein lay their most fundamental shortcoming.

Ritzer (2005) contends that enchantment emerges from moments of unpredictability and spontaneity but these qualities are antithetical to the imperatives for technological control and consistency that characterize branded serviceescapes. As a result, these themed consumer environments can only offer rationalized simulations of enchantment and they consistently fail to deliver the feelings of awe, wonder, and surprise which are intrinsic to fully captivating experiences of magical consumption (see Arnould and Price 1993). The simulations of enchanting places are never quite authentic and never quite fill consumers’ experiential void. These conditions then set the cultural stage for a continuous cycle of consumer expectations and disappointments (a self-perpetuating cycle much like Campbell’s explanation of insatiable consumer desires). Trapped within the McDonaldized world of consumerism, individuals tend to see few ways out of the system and hence continue to pursue a futile project of enchantment through the paradoxically rationalized and predictable dream worlds produced by corporate capitalism. For Ritzer (1999) and many like-minded social critics (Lasn 1999), consumers are trapped in a resilient, multi-faceted, and hence pernicious iron cage of rationality.

This pessimistic account suggests that the dialectic between disenchantment and the quest for enchantment is a kind of closed loop that cycles through in perpetuity. Ritzer sees a glimmer of hope in an irrepressible impulse for creative self-expression. Ritzer, much like Lasn (1999), views creativity as the humanistic monkey wrench that can jam the system and open up venues for resistance and escape. In effect, consumers are seen as either being fully constrained with the iron cage of McDonaldization or they helplessly bang against its bars hoping to create an opening wide enough for an escape into some never quite specified Utopia. The papers in this session explore a different set of implications that follow from this cycle of enchantment?rationalization?disenchantment?re-enchantment.

Ostergaard and Jantzen opened the session with a brief distillation of Ritzer’s “cathedrals of consumption” thesis. Next, they analyzed specific experience economy exemplars from a postmodern perspective to argue that Ritzer’s pessimistic view is premised on an outmoded modernist view of authenticity. Drawing from Baudrillard’s order of simulacra, they proposed that the very nature of enchantment has been transformed in ways that defy the assumptions of the Weberian tradition. Next, Thompson and Coskuner analyze an emerging form of marketing relationships—Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) through interviews with producers (e.g. farmers) and CSA members. Their analysis shows that CSA farmers and consumers are linked in a common project to create a new market form that forges an ethos of communal participation; that reintegrates consumers into the production process; and that rekindles connections with the magic of the land and food. Through the CSA model, farmers and consumers understand themselves as transforming the market system in a way that obviates the ills of corporate-dominated agri-business and more specifically the corporatization of organic farming. These same actions also imbue food consumption with an aura of magic that emerges through a symbolic contrast to the far more convenient and predictable world of processed foods and fast food chains. Sherry and Kozinets analyze the ways in which desires for spiritual epiphanies and sanctifying (and community building) experiences which traditionally have been fulfilled by organized religions are now actively constructed by consumers in spheres far removed from religious institutions. These re-enchanting practices map onto postmodern consumer trends by emphasizing a decentralized, grassroots, DIY participatory where there is no singular authority orchestrating the form that sacred experiences may take. Kozinets and Sherry argue that these consumer-centric actions are a re-enchantment of religious experiences and a means to reclaim experiences of the sacred from the rationalizing impulses of organized religion.

SHORT ABSTRACTS

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