An Homage to the Posthuman in Ohmann: Retailing Culture through Consumer Electronics

Ryan M. Moeller

Reading Richard Ohmann's *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* was a defining moment in my preparations for becoming a scholar in rhetoric. I remember experiencing a mixture of awe and horror: Ohmann's ability to make sense of the complexity of technological innovation and its effects on the magazine industry, the emergence of advertising as an industry, and the subsequent effects upon retail and consumption—indeed on everyday life in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century—were deep, detailed, and convincing.

Also of profound influence was Ohmann's differentiation between *mass culture* and *popular culture*. In *Selling Culture*, he explicitly chooses the former in order to keep matters of production and power in the foreground of his analysis and to focus his critique on the inequalities of cultural production (14). He defines mass culture as "voluntary experiences, produced by a relatively small number of specialists, for millions across the nation to share, in similar or identical form, either simultaneously or nearly so; with dependable frequency, mass culture shapes habitual audiences around common needs or interests, and it is made for profit" (14). His analysis follows events and texts produced by these emergent, elite specialists (advertisers) and he articulates their formula for success with laser-like precision: "identify a large audience that is not hereditarily affluent or elite, but that is getting on well enough, and that has cultural aspirations; give it what it wants; build a huge circulation; sell lots of advertising space at rates based on that circulation; sell the magazine at a price below the cost of production; and make your profits on ads" (25). But always implicit in Ohmann's work is a care not to attribute too much agency to any singular agent of mass culture and thereby ascribe intentionality where it is not due: advertisers did not set out to intentionally influence mass culture to reorient itself around consumerism. That came as a by-product of their combined efforts to professionalize and create a niche for themselves.

In "Richard Ohmann: An Appreciation," Patricia Harkin quotes Ohmann's own account of his teaching method as:

> "...beginning with something like close reading, encouraging students to read and ponder literature as a part of the historical process, and in engagement with some ideas about how history happens and how consciousness and culture interact with material life. . ." (*Politics of Letters*, 116). To that end [Harkin continues] throughout his work, he encourages us to look critically at the day-to-day material conditions of our existence. He then reads these texts closely, demonstrating how they call us into being.

In fact, many of his arguments are, as Harkin describes, elegant enactments of material culture, ideology, social institutions, and concepts. For example, in *Selling Culture*, he describes the interaction amongst the magazine and advertising industries at the turn of the 20th century and the effects of production on the emergent consumer. He reads various texts, including advertisements, magazines, and even economic developments such as the changes in department stores and catalog retailers, all subsumed under his definition of mass culture and working in conjunction to create a culture homogenized by its affection for consumerism. In "English and the Cold War," Ohmann reads changes in English studies through specific events and policies originating in Cold War politics. But this process of subsuming or cataloging individual and collective efforts under their respective effects on mass culture is never perfect. This is because mass culture is hegemonic in nature: it is made up of "shifts that throw up new historic 'blocs'—and pertinently, that work themselves out partly in the realms of ideology and culture," gaining influence and validity through a variety of institutions, everyday practices, and ideologies (*Selling Culture* 47).

So, what I'd like to do in this essay is to pay homage to Ohmann by abstracting his methodology and applying it to what I see as the latest incarnation of the hegemonic practices he has devoted his career to exposing and working to change: mass retailers of consumer electronics. In *Lead Us Into Temptation*, James B. Twitchell argues that advertising has become a national and cultural mode of communication: "if religion is how we talk about the world beyond, then advertising is how we talk about the machine-made world of the right here and now… Advertising is the primary language, the lingua franca, of commercial culture" (50). This primary language, which began at the turn of the century with the emergence of advertising as a profession, has become a part of our signifying practices by circulating new usages and relationships, redefining or purging outdated and unwanted usages, and policing our current ways of thinking about the technologies that help us live our lives. I'm reminded here of several colloquialisms that come from the consumer electronics industry specifically: *podcasting, blogging, IM* (referring to *instant messaging*), and even *e-mail*, *spam*, and *f2f* (or face-to-face communication). *Wired* magazine—the self-proclaimed news magazine for the *digerati* or the digital culture in the US—runs regular columns titled "Jargon Watch" and "Wired-Tired-Expired" which track new and changing language usages based upon the consumer electronics industry. And, while there is no single organization we can point to and credit or blame for our dependence upon consumer electronics in the workplace, in our homes, and for our entertainment, historian Alfred Chandler argues that the consumer electronics industry "dramatically defines the causes of the success and/or failure of national industries" (13). There is certainly evidence for this claim: the high-tech industry employs millions of people globally and its products underlie virtually every other industry.[1] The modes of production and ideologies that allow manufacturers to make thousands of identical products also force the consumption of thousands of identical products, a cycle that results in mass markets instead of local and specialized merchants, the creation of industries and corporations that must generate enormous revenues to stay in business, and the generation enormous amounts of waste including hazardous by-products, non-biodegradable packaging materials, and obsolete products.

Having established the historical trajectory and contemporary relevance of this research site, I'd like to turn to Ohmann's methodology, which I will define as posthuman: that is, he recognizes the limitations of human agency within the scope of mass culture and yet presents glimpses of agency alongside a more cohesive materialist history.

A Posthuman Ecology

Unlike many scholars who study how consciousness and culture interact with material life, Ohmann does not fall into the traps laid by technological determinism or humanism—that technology operates beyond human control or that human reason and logic somehow exists above and beyond material realities or technological power. Instead, his methodology is posthuman in its observations of the complexity inherent in what Mark C. Taylor would call *adaptive systems*: systems that adapt with their environments and that simultaneously shape and are shaped by the environments as well as the conditions of change. Capitalism is one of these adaptive systems for Ohmann, and he describes it as being *agile* in a recent interview with Marc Bousquet titled "Education, Solidarity, and Revolt." English Departments are another type of adaptive system—although many of us might question how adaptive an English department can really be—as are education and literacy education. The agility or ability to adapt and subsume environmental changes is what makes capitalism, academia, education, and other engrossing ideologies and institutions so pervasive. However, unlike humanist or determinist critiques of capitalism, ivory tower-ism, and literacy crises that end in inevitable relationships based upon class and access to the means of production and profit, Ohmann's critiques very carefully articulate multiple moments of agency and transformation within these complex systems.

For example, although Susan Miller ultimately discounts Ohmann's argument in *English in America* that a "problem-solving" student serves the military-industrial complex, she does agree that the student revealed by composition textbooks was basically a docile, solitary, isolated body whose work, whilst serving a common purpose, was expected to conceive, frame, discover, and express itself alone (101-2). By placing student writing in such isolation, Miller argues, composition textbooks have assigned writing to a socially neutral skill set (raceless, sexless, ageless, classless), to be mastered as a general competency and then discarded. She quotes Ohmann powerfully in her introduction:

> We need, that is, to place composition against "a superstructure—laws, institutions, culture, beliefs, values, customs" that controls a "whole way of life including culture and ideas far more subtle and effective than naked force supported by ideological institutions which effectively enlists everyone in the 'party' of the ruling class, sets limits to debate and consciousness, and in general serves as a means of preserving and reproducing class structure" (Ohmann qtd. in Miller 7).

This "placing against a superstructure" is what I call political economy analysis. Political economy studies the convergence of a market economy, ideological machinery, and social relations—and all the baggage that comes along with these—by tracing paradigms of production, distribution, and consumption and their resulting effects on culture. But it's not enough to leave it at this, since culture also affects the way products and ideas are produced and distributed. Byron Hawk describes this sort of moment of confluence or convergence or mutual influence through a metaphor of the technical writing classroom where "student-workers may not be able to fully or even partially rewrite [any] company's meta-narratives from below, but they can change how those meta-narratives are enacted within the ecology of the corporation; their agency comes from their situatedness in the complex ecology" (390).

In *Selling Culture*, Ohmann places the magazine, advertising, and retail industries in just such a complex ecology. As manufacturers began to see the magazine developing a national audience, they began to buy space in order to sell products to readers. Readers, assuming that the magazine they were buying was a cultural commodity, were not aware that they were purchasing a commodity that commodified them. Magazines "presented [readers'] attention, their needs, their aspirations, their anxieties, as use values to unseen third parties" (8). Ad agencies sprung up as professional organizations of experts who mediated the treacherous waters between producers and consumers. Through market analysis and rhetorical studies of specific audiences, ad agencies analyzed the needs of the culture at large and negotiated between manufacturers and publishers for advertising space. More importantly, though, these ad agencies began to shape mass culture as they presented products as necessities for an emerging middle class with higher aspirations. Using advertising revenues to sell magazines for less than the cost of production, magazines were widely available to anyone of moderate means. The middle class "got a cultural experience for almost nothing, meanwhile being counted, weighed up 'demographically,' and courted in ways both direct and oblique" (9). Important public decisions regarding the regulation of sales, advertising, commodification of the consumer, and production were moved out of public view into corporate advertising headquarters.

Consumers are trained by marketers to desire the accumulation of products and to value certain ideologies represented by the technologies: convenience, speed, efficiency, security, etc. Such training is not new. Both Ohmann and Stuart Ewen argue that a highly-trained mass market audience had to be created in the early part of the twentieth century in order to consume the massive numbers of products made available. Stuart Ewen investigates the convergence of democracy and consumerism during this time, and argues that consumerism was "taught" via powerful metaphors of freedom:

> Within the vision of consumption as a "school of freedom," the entry onto the consumer market was described as a "civilizing" experience. "Civilization" was the expanded cultural world which flowed from capitalism's broad capacity to commodify material resources. (30)

This was not an easy sell, however. Social and economic realities threatened to defeat this grand new civilization, and "many industrial ideologues [realized] the continuous need to habituate people psychically to consumption beyond mere changes in the productive order which they inhabited" (30). This habituation was achieved (and still is) by presenting products as an escape and refuge from the very lifestyles that their production demanded. These advertisements provided "mass produced visions of individualism by which people could extricate themselves from the mass" (Ewen 45). Implicit in these visions of individualized mass utopia was a limitation of choice "to the prescriptions formulated by business and politicized in its advertising" (91). Thus the dialectic of choice as both a constraint and liberty of the modern marketplace was established as a self-referential and inescapable cycle of desire.

Like Ewen, Ohmann identifies a palpable urge on the part of industry to educate a society to accept mass culture:

> Not only would [capitalists] colonize the leisure of most citizens, as they had previously dominated work time; they would also integrate the nation into one huge mar-

> ket and market culture… Before the people of the United States were a nation politically, businessmen had gathered their "island communities" into a nation organized around markets, money relations, and commodified culture. (59)

This culture of commodification and consumption enticed consumers by offering the sense of identity and satisfaction through brand names. Consumers were taught how to consume products that met their needs, even some needs that they might not have been able to identify previously. This was achieved by "positioning the reader as a consumer surrounded by cultural 'wares,' and becoming qualified to choose among them" (230). An appeal to consumer choice empowered the consumer as a rational agent in a foreign matrix of commodification. Of course, this rationality was generously produced by the advertisements which informed the skilled reader of the correct or "tasteful" products.

To summarize, the marketing industry developed in response to the exponential rise in production (or at least the potential of production) brought about by industrialization as a way of mediating the interests of industry with the "needs" of consumers. At the outset, that mediation took the form of conditioning the public to mass culture and consumption in order to guarantee continued markets for the products of industry and to meet the growing needs of a consumer society. While meeting these needs, marketers—however inadvertently—habituated consumers to the ideology of mass culture and mass marketing. The universal appeals to consumers' individual needs provided the promise of satiety and the reality of continual desire; appeals to consumers' abilities to choose from variety of products provided the illusions of freedom and competition. Marketers used consumers' choices—both predicted and actual—to quantify behaviors and to predict future choices; and most recently, statistical research methodologies allow marketers to make those predictions even before products are developed.

Another example of Ohmann's posthuman method is found in his powerful essay, "Literacy, Technology, and Monopoly Capital." In it, Ohmann locates the mock "crisis" of "computer literacy" within the larger hypothetical literacy crisis. After situating technology and literacy within a cultural ecology, he then provides historical evidence to support his claims that these "crises" have been used to serve the needs of monopoly capital through the management of labor and the control of sales through a "universal, national market, increasingly managed by the same corporations that produced the goods" (679). And to demonstrate the collective efforts of the elite force of technology producers, he provides several reflections: suppose writing had been developed by slaves to communicate without their masters' knowledge; suppose print technologies had been developed by radical, local groups for their own purposes rather than being aimed at a mass audience; suppose wireless communication had been invented by women working from home to establish "networks of childcare and concern" (680). Instead, the technologies that we study have evolved, "shaped within particular social relations, and responsive to the needs of those with the power to direct that evolution" (680).

As I turn to the retail side of consumer electronics, my method is to:

> 1. locate a shift, contradiction, or new development within the "mass culture" that suggests an interesting site of contention or consumer training,
> 2. look for patterns of commodification, in terms of both products and consumers,
> 3. identify professional organizations, experts, or institutions that mediate and shape consumer responses to the contradiction identified in the first step, and
> 4. discuss the impact of that mediation upon the further propagation of mass culture.

Contradiction: Unified Product Image

Critics of the type of history presented here point out that any industry is at the mercy of a highly competitive market and that marketers are a diverse and varied bunch. They point to a lack of organization and leadership and claim that most marketing campaigns fail. There is no way, they argue, that such a disorganized industry such as consumer electronics could educate an entire society, much less a global economy. Brownlee and Buttrick, for example, discuss the inability of industry to control price or competition. In *Producer, Consumer, and Social Choice*, they point to a general lack of "oligopolistic [uses] of advertising, model changes, and multiple brand names and outlets" (271). The consumer electronics industry, they might argue, is made up not only of finely-tuned and intricately designed electronic systems but also of the day-to-day practices and working conditions of laborers, designers, and marketers whose methods are not so finely-tuned. It is a conglomeration of consumers, producers, designers, users, marketers, retailers and critics of electronic products supposedly working in harmony.

However, there are significant ways that the consumer electronics industry presents a complication for Brownlee and Buttrick's complacent position. A recent survey of U.S. market size for consumer products reveals that the category "consumer electronics" encompassed nearly a third of the entertainment market for 2002, surpassing "toys" and "sporting goods," and totaling more than "stationery & greeting cards," "photogoods" (including cameras), and "books and magazines" combined ("Entertainment Trends"). Moreover, the consumer electronics industry relies upon a few manufacturers to produce a wide variety of products under multiple brand names and models to be sold by multiple retailers. And as Joe Cappo—advertising, marketing, and media columnist—argues, advertising has followed this model: "of the top twenty agencies twenty years ago, seventeen have been swallowed up by the four major agency holding companies" (14). These industry leaders exert tremendous influence on the production and consumption of goods at multiple levels: product design is influenced by discrete choice analysis, the art of predicting consumer choices through various statistical methods; production is influenced by sales of previous and current products, marketing appeals to consumer choice in the mass market, and consumption is explained through consumer behavior research.

But ultimately, the packaging of consumer electronics tends to hide these processes. Marketers disappear behind ads that present a cohesive and unquestioning view of the product's place in consumers' lives. The practices of the designers and workers are obscured by the image presented by the product. Problems, flaws, and disagreements fade behind the unified façade of a product's sameness. Compounding this effect are the tactics used to evaluate products' quality as a function of the number of products sold—as if the number of units sold were any indication of the product's quality.

Patterns of Commodification: Commodity Fetishism

The first step in the formation of the consumer electronics industry was turning high-tech products into mass produced goods as a way of reducing costs and maximizing profit. Creating mass produced goods that can be easily bought and sold requires low-cost production, high volume sales, a high rate of product turnover or a short product life cycle, convergence of producers, and, the most recent iteration, discount volume sellers.[2] Computer and television components are mass produced (typically by the same few companies), and the final products are built on assembly lines in large plants. This industry constructs and entertains a strange dialog between what it calls "high-tech products" and "commodities." The trend in the industry is to turn technologies and innovation into easily consumed products.[3] When a technology like the plasma screen television or computer monitor is first introduced, it is often expensive and complicated. The Digital Video Disk (DVD) player, for example, was introduced at a price of $600.00. Currently, DVD players can be purchased at Wal-Mart for $39.00. While the DVD player remains as technically complicated as ever, forces of marketing and consumption have erased the complexity for consumers, presenting merely a "black box" which plays movies with amazing clarity and great sound.

In "The Moral Significance of the Material Culture," Albert Borgmann differentiates between commanding technologies and disposable technologies. Commanding technologies are those that are complex, refined, and made up of many technologies and knowledges (e.g., a musical instrument). Disposable technologies, on the other hand, are items that are relatively simple to operate (e.g., a stereo) (87-8). Using music as an example, it is easy to see how the stereo's relative cheapness and ease of use, even though its operation in terms of algorithms, electronics, and mechanics lies far beyond the layperson, has made music—once arduous to master and costly to recreate—disposable, commodifiable, disembodied, and susceptible to consumerism (89-90).

The next step in the commoditization of high-technology is the convergence of a relatively large number of small producers into a small number of large producers who also distribute most of the consumer electronics, often under different brand names. Alfred Chandler traces this trend from the emergence of radio and television to the production of the personal computer and entertainment peripherals like compact disk (CD) and DVD players. After the sales boom of 1920s radio sets, several conglomerates quickly took over the market:

> over six hundred new enterprises entered the market within a four-year span, but nearly all disappeared quickly. By 1940 ten companies accounted for close to 75 percent of sales of receiving sets… From the [consumer electronics] industry's beginning, long-lived entrepreneurial start-ups were very few. (240)

According to Hoover's, an on-line database of business and market information, the Sony Corporation dominates sales in the consumer electronics industry, including the game console market, where it enjoys a 70 percent market share over its competitors. Sony's sales in 2003 topped 63 billion dollars, and its profits reached nearly a billion dollars ($978 million). Over 60 percent of Sony's revenues come from sales of televisions, stereo equipment, personal computers, and digital cameras. Sony also owns music and video recording companies (Epic Records and Columbia Video), film studios, DVD recordings, and television studios and programming (Najjar "Sony"). Hoover's profile of Sony's major competitor, Matsushita, unveils Chandler's theory of convergence: Matsushita owns more than 380 companies that distribute its products, including Panasonic, Quasar, Technics, and JVC (Najjar "Matsushita"). Chandler argues that market leaders like Sony and Matsushita will continue to dominate the consumer electronics industry because of two primary factors: "highly specialized technical knowledge embedded in an integrated learning base" and the resources to support an "extended time of study before new products [reach] world markets" (244).

Additionally, consumer electronics industry journals discuss the commodification of high-tech products. Trade journals like *TWICE: This Week in Consumer Electronics, DSN Retailing Today*, and *Chain Store Age* regularly publish articles and interviews on the state of the consumer electronics and retail industries with key executives in leading companies. In "Dealers Learning to Live in a Wal-Mart World," president and chief executive officer of computer and electronics chain store CompUSA Larry Mondry articulates the tension between what he describes as high-tech products that are complex and challenging to sell and commodities that are cheap, simple, and almost walk themselves off of store shelves: "as the technology becomes more ubiquitous, and frankly, commoditizes, [discount retailers like Wal-Mart are] in a position to sell anything they want to. Once [a high-tech product] becomes the Walkman, in that you don't need a lot of product knowledge and it's understandable and everyone and their grandma has it, then they can certainly sell it. We can't think they won't" (26). In "High-Tech Goes Low Price: Mass Contributes to Commoditization," Laura Heller cites Circuit City chairperson and chief executive officer Alan McCollough's concern over technology commodification and mass distribution: "the rapid commoditization of product has long been a trend in [the consumer electronics industry] and allowed discounters to become a considerable force in the industry" (41). Consumer electronics retailers are under considerable pressure to make high-tech products seem like commodities, despite the complex nature of the products themselves.

Mediating Institutions: Big-box Retailers

Once high-tech products have been made consumable, they still must reach the masses by some means. The retail sector of the consumer electronics industry is no stranger to the type of convergence demonstrated by the industry's producers. In fact, retail convergence is due to the commodification of the industry's products, since low price goods can be sold cheaply in high volume retail locations and over the Internet. According to *DSN Retailing Today*, the self described "leading international newspaper serving the ever-growing mass market," the commodified product drives the industry by allowing discount retailers to become a competitive force in the industry. Wal-Mart, the discount retailer par excellence, "moves the second-highest volume of products in the [consumer electronics] category after specialist Best Buy" (Heller 41). Wal-Mart has come to represent mass discount retailing to scholars of retail and shopping, and many argue that it has the market force to eradicate many of the local retailers that line the avenues of main street America and replace them with a single mega-shopping experience. The forces of commoditization are further enacted upon these products and their consumers through advertising, store design, and market research.

Massive retail outlets like Wal-Mart are among the recent innovations in retail history. Known as *big-box stores*, *category killers*, and *superstores*, these huge retailers are quickly replacing other retail store models. Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation, and Planning defines big-box stores as those over 50,000 square feet, with typical sizes in the range of 90,000 to 200,000 square feet, and those that derive most of their profits from a high-volume of sales rather than high mark-ups ("Big Box Retail"). These stores are typically rectangular, windowless buildings with expansive parking lots, an architectural feature that demonstrates how superstores cater to a highly mobile regional population. These retail behemoths are now ubiquitous in the US and their design and function rarely varies one from another. With few exceptions, buying a CD at a Best Buy in St. Paul, Minnesota is exactly the same as buying one from a Best Buy in Tucson, Arizona. In fact, one of the challenges for store designers is maintaining a uniform interior store design across very different locations, from suburban power centers (regional retail centers with two or three big-box "anchor" stores) to urban warehouse retrofits. Best Buy introduced its "Concept 4" store design when faced with the challenges of opening its giant stores in densely populated cities like San Francisco and New York that attract pedestrian traffic rather than suburban or regional commuters (see Heller or Wolf). The store designs maximize space by including open-air demonstration rooms, split-level designs, and interactive kiosks in order to sell the same amount of merchandise in two-thirds the space and to maintain the uniform feel of their much larger regional cousins.

The evolution of the big-box store demonstrates the level to which consumers are trained in the art of retail: big-boxes offer a stripped down and streamlined, one-stop shopping experience and instruct consumers in how to find the best selection at the lowest prices. Ohmann traces a history of the retail industry from country stores and local merchants to mail order catalog companies to department and chain stores. Each development in retail science represented a more cost-effective and efficient vehicle for delivering a higher volume of products to consumers at lower prices. The immediate effect was that almost everyone in the extant consumer chain benefited: manufacturers and wholesalers found outlets for their products, retailers and marketers trained the public in the art of buying through advertisements, store displays, and sales, and consumers found an increased selection of products at lower prices. This trend—begun by the department store and mail-order catalog—is sustained by the big-box, where the process has found maximized size and variety with minimized overhead and cost.

Wal-Mart presents itself as an easy target for critique and for representing this trend in retail, with its high visibility in middle class, rural, culture in the United States. No definitive histories of big-box stores exist, but many retail scholars and critics point to Wal-Mart's early incorporation of big-box elements and its overwhelming takeover of local and national markets as indicators of such industry leadership. In fact, the big-box layout is so new, that most studies prior to 2000 don't even recognize it as a sustainable innovation in retail (cf. Bluestone, Hanna, Kuhn, and Moore's *The Retail Revolution* (1981); Israel's *Store Planning/Design: History, Theory, Process* (1994); Michman and Greco's *Retailing Triumphs and Blunders* (1995); or Andersen's *Small Store Survival* (1997)). These retail design resources deal almost exclusively with the department store as the dominant retail space. The North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) defines department stores as "primarily engaged in retailing a wide range of the following new products with no one merchandise line predominating: apparel, furniture, appliances and home furnishings; and selected additional items, such as paint, hardware, toiletries, cosmetics, photographic equipment, jewelry, toys, and sporting goods. Merchandise lines are normally arranged in separate departments" ("Department Stores"). Ohmann discusses department stores in terms of their vast selection and wide variety of commodities (70-1). But the recent growth in the retail industry has been dominated by big-box retailers. According to the University of Wisconsin-Extension's Center for Community Economic Development, big-boxes have a strong foothold on the industry:

> Most of the traditional mall department stores are no longer full service as they have scaled back their merchandise to only apparel, cosmetics, shoes and some household items. The number of department stores selling appliances, furniture electronics, lawnmowers and other durable goods is limited. Further, mall department stores are representing a shrinking part of the retail industry having lost sales to mass merchandise and specialty retail stores. (1)

Essentially, big-boxes make giants out of what might have been a single department: office products, furniture, groceries, consumer electronics, hardware, etc. Department stores are classified by their content, big-box stores by their size and selection within a single category—making choice even more plentiful and ostentatious. According to *TWICE: This Week in Consumer Electronics*, multi-regional electronics stores and mass merchants held 53.2 percent of the industry sales in 2002, compared to regional stores that took 1.1 percent of sales in 2002 or department stores that held only 0.3 percent of sales (Wolf "Top 100" 20). Purdue University retail scholar Thelma Snuggs points to the success of mass retailers as a leading economic indicator. Among her list of top ten specialty stores are consumer electronics big-box competitors Best Buy, Circuit City, and CompUSA (70).

Lest my critique come across as presenting big-boxes as a part of some natural retail evolution driven by consumer needs, let me state that, as a more efficient means of moving a higher volume of products to a greater number of consumers, the boxes provide their best service to capital. In "Retail Structural Dynamics and the Forces Behind Big-Box Retailing," structural geographer Scott Munroe argues that:

> firm cost structures, independent of location, can greatly affect the optimal size of facilities with little regard to the preferences of consumers. That is, even when consumers have no great preference for large facilities, such large facilities can dominate the landscape simply because they are a more efficient means of retailing to their operators. (371)

In fact, much of the literature on big-box stores debates the drawbacks and benefits of these huge structures in terms of local business, the environment, and economic growth. Of primary concern to local communities is the environmental impact of such huge retail locations, the resulting traffic and pollution from consumers and delivery vehicles and connected parking lots. Many communities with precious natural resources such as rivers or wetlands, tourist sites such as natural landscapes or wildlife, residential areas, and space demands such as New Rochelle, New York; San Francisco, California; Fort Collins, Colorado; and Tucson, Arizona have all implemented environmental policy statements in an attempt to block further big-box developments within their communities or, as Chris Duerksen and Robert Blanchard argue, to make those developments less "indifferent to local identity and interest" ("Belling the Box").

In *Going Shopping: Consumer Choices and Community Consequences*, retail historian Ann Satterthwaite documents Wal-Mart's incorporation of community programs and service initiatives as a nation-wide, corporate response to local concerns over stability in the economic and employment sectors. Wal-Mart has very publicly positioned itself as a small-town retailer with very regional, big-box implications on local communities:

> Such megastores [as Wal-Mart] have become major determinants not only of shopping patterns but of the quality of life in a wide circle of communities. When the giant has stamped out all the local competition and then dies itself, a community is in trouble. (180)

Whether or not big-boxes stimulate or stifle local economies through competition and employment, they are always implicated in the community at levels far beyond the immediate vicinity. And since most big-boxes are national chains, local stakeholders have little opportunity to leverage any sort of voice beyond boycotting, which is problematic, especially if there is no local competition. Additionally, journalist and urban critic Roberta Brandes Grantz identifies these as temporary benefits to the community in question. Rather than increasing competition, stores known as "category killers" seek to eliminate the competition and dominate the market (172). When retailers like Wal-Mart or Best Buy carry a wide variety of products—from groceries to hardware or from CD players to DVDs respectively—just one category killer can put multiple retailers out of business. Grantz characterizes the process as such:

> "Attack" teams are put together for the first few months of operation of a new store. If a new store is meant to operate with 100 employees, the "attack" team will contain 150 and will include friendly, helpful salespeople for the first several months. The first-time shopper at the store has a positive experience and saves money—at first. Customers are won early. Local stores close. Some try to reposition themselves to fit a new market… They try, without access to Wall Street funding or helpful politicians. Some succeed. They change their prod-

> uct mix, emphasize service and specialty goods. Many fail. Some—maybe—remain in business, but barely. (173)

And all too often, argues the Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation, and Planning, the resultant lack of competition leads to a reduced workforce and higher prices: "it is important to note that [the] disposable employees are included in the initial job creation estimates, so the number of long-term jobs is often significantly less than the developers would have the public and its officials believe" ("Big Box").

But the average consumer with limited financial resources and little leisure time cannot meet the demands required by such a media campaign. Occasionally, retailers and corporations have adopted the values transmitted by consumer boycotts; animal testing in the cosmetic industry or dolphin-safe tuna fishing are good examples. But in the case of big-boxes, the values I am discussing (the elimination of local competition, a corporate ideology of excessive growth, or the aim of efficiently selling high volumes of products to a mass market) are integral to the cause of mass consumerism. The appeal of big-box consumer electronics retailers is to numbers and volume, not individuals or even individual sales. In order to facilitate individual sales within the system of mass retail and marketing, retailers implement strategies that I call the "consumer management experience."

Mediating Institutions: Consumer Management

Consumer management is the term I use to refer to all of the efforts that go into managing how a consumer navigates the retail space, decides upon a product, and makes a purchase. These include store design, shopping assistants, salespeople, and in-store kiosks and networked, interactive stations that attempt to bridge the gap between the physical retail location and the corporation's web site or e-tailer.[4] Consumer management represents a shift toward customer self-service by providing consumers with more information and less personal contact with store representatives per transaction. Consumers must then be trained in navigating retail spaces and information sources. This training in navigation also represents a negotiation between the consumer's own values and buying constraints; the retailer's advertising; the retail space; and the products themselves. This network of meanings must all be negotiated by the consumer.

Within the big-box model of retail, store design and layout becomes increasingly important as retailers expect consumers to navigate the store and make purchases with little to no help from store employees. Consumers must do this by reading cues from signs and displays. In short, consumers must interact with the stores themselves. In "Superstore Interactivity: A New Self-Service Paradigm of Retail Service?" Australian retail and marketing scholars Bill Merrilees and Dale Miller argue that this trend in levels of customer service is directly related to the shift in retail toward the mass market: "The idea of self-service was often put into practice in a shift from full personal service, as a means of reducing labour costs, particularly in specialist stores and department stores. Finding and choosing products became very much the role of the customer" (386).[5] The goals of mass retailing, including a drastic increase in the volume of sales, do not include such labor intensive elements as a highly trained and motivated sales force except in special, high-ticket markets like car sales or emerging technologies markets. If the store has been designed to be efficient and consumer-friendly, then a small number of merchandise stockers and cashiers are all that are needed to operate even a larger store. Efficiency and friendliness to Merrilees and Miller include such techniques as well-lit and appropriate signage that directs customers quickly; product placement (placing related and dependent products in proximity to each other, for example, putting the proper toner cartridges next to printers, or the correct batteries next to a mobile phone) so that customers do not have to look elsewhere in the store for these items; and product fact sheets, which allow customers to quickly scan product features and compare similar products in a related category (387).

In *Web Rules: How the Internet is Changing the Way Consumers Make Choices*, Tom Murphy discusses the trend toward self-service as a result of the tension between corporate and consumer interests. An editor and columnist for CBS.MarketWatch.com and former correspondent for Bloomberg News, Murphy argues that corporate mergers and superstore, big-box retailers hurt consumer choice: "In most mergers, customers end up with fewer stores to shop in and, sometimes, higher prices due to reduced competition. Power shifts from the individual to the corporation" (12). To defer or offset this power differential, large-scale retailers will often offer "individualized service" in order to appeal to consumers' desire for some level of service. Most recently, this individualized service comes in the form of database driven, real-time price comparisons or computer program "wizards" which aid consumers in selecting the "best" product for their needs. Web sites like PriceGrabber.com (www.pricegrabber.com) or BizRate.com (www.bizrate.com) will generate tables that compare price and availability of a certain product or a range of products amongst a number of electronic and traditional retailers. Electronic retailers like BestBuy.com, a subsidiary of Best Buy, offer similar services to consumers:

> Visitors can find cutting-edge product information, product reviews, guided shopping features and technology news. Also offered are a Compare feature, Shopping Assistant feature, Think About folder, and multiple angle product views, making BestBuy.com a state-of-the-art shopping experience. ("Company History")

In looking for a digital camera on BestBuy.com, for example, a consumer can select various products and see a comparison chart of features, options, configurations, and prices; he or she can add a product to a "wish list" for later purchase or for purchase by a third party; and he or she can access articles on a particular camera, brand name, or on digital cameras in general in the "Research Center." Each of these features appeal to the consumer as a rational decision-maker who will weigh his or her options and choose accordingly.

Despite the fact that this wealth of information and shopping "assistance" can be overwhelming and make choosing a product extremely time consuming, these shopping assistants are extremely valuable to retailers not because they assist consumers, but because they collect data on consumer choice processes. At Amazon.com, for example, a glance at a few products will generate a "customized" web page of products consistent with the products he or she has viewed. Additionally, stored preferences and purchase histories will allow Amazon.com to tell a consumer what other people who looked at a particular product have shopped for and/or purchased. These strategies offer the perception of solicitous customer service within the self-service model of retail sales. They allow retailers to move an extremely high volume of merchandise and collect vast amounts of information on individual sales while expending very few resources on facilitating those sales.

Where this level of data collection and electronic interactivity is not traditionally available—for example, in physical stores—retailers use electronic, networked kiosks through which self-checkout stations, rebates, and post-sale electronic surveys create synergy and consistency between online and in-person retail experiences. Jeff Hayes, the director of CAP Ventures, a corporate consulting and market research firm, sees interactive kiosks as one of the "five timely trends in in-store technology." He argues,

> From ATMs to grocery store self-checkout to airport self-check in, consumers are now seeing and using kiosks in many aspects of their lives. Look for innovative retailers to weave kiosks and self service systems into the consumer experience. Future kiosk adoption will be driven by customer experiences with Web-based purchasing, desire for improved customer service, interest in appealing to key shopping demographics, and the ability to improve productivity. (2)

Best Buy has already implemented kiosks into its store design. From in-store demonstration terminals for video games, computer software, and hardware sales to diagrams for installing a home networking solution to networked computer stations for purchasing or comparing products on-line, Best Buy seamlessly connects the online and off-line shopping experience. Like self-checkout stations in grocery and hardware superstores, these kiosks place responsibility for navigating the individual transactions onto the consumer, while the retailer invests his resources in the appeal to larger numbers of consumers. Rebates and on-line market researchers offer rewards and cash back on purchases in exchange for valuable market data on consumers. This data is collected by forms that are snail-mailed back to the manufacturer (in the case of most rebates) or by an on-line survey that is announced on a consumer's receipt, directing them to the web site.

In advertisements and on sales receipts, retailers repeatedly tell consumers how important they are. In great numbers, consumers provide retailers with the demographic data they need to stock their stores, advertise expeditiously and develop more efficient shopping transactions—for the retailer. While retail strategies like store design, data collection, e-tailing, and shopping assistants are loudly touted as ways of facilitating individual sales and fostering meaningful relationships with consumers, they are ultimately the means for moving greater numbers of goods more efficiently with fewer resources. The consumer navigates complex store layouts, vast electronic databases, and confusing arrays of similar products alone, while retailers silently collect data to predict her future purchases.

Mediating Institutions: On-line Rating

As retailers seek convergence between physical retail spaces and on-line e-tailers and inventory control systems, two more emerging trends in consumer management need to be critiqued: on-line rating systems employed by auction sites and used goods retailers like EBay.com or Amazon.com and "managed customization" by computer retailers like Dell or Gateway. These appeals to individual consumer voice and authority operate in much the same way as the self-service strategies discussed above, but they add a layer of autonomous feedback that operates—on the surface at least—to empower consumers.

EBay.com is an enormously successful Internet auction house that facilitates personal, private-party auctions on almost any item, new or used. It allows members to create, modify, and end auctions and to set controls such as the minimum auction price, auction length, and item descriptions. Additionally, its electronic payment system, PayPal, provides the capability for users to pay for items. Membership is currently free. EBay makes money by taking a small percentage of every sale, so its motivation is to facilitate as many concurrent auctions as it can. EBay began as a home business of founder Pierre Omidyar in 1995, and by 2004, eBay announced that over 430,000 sellers held full or part time auctions. It also announced "an estimated $2 billion in global gross merchandise sales in 2003" ("eBay Announces"). In April of 1999, Amazon.com added auction and private used goods sales to its retail arsenal. It later added an auction site that allows consumers to list used items for sale that are announced to viewers as they browse equivalent new products.

These auction sites are discussed widely among internet journalists and critics as opening up new avenues of choice and competition and as creating alternatives to big-box retailers. In *Web Rules*, for example, Tom Murphy cites such shopping opportunities as forces that increase consumer choice and competition and directly oppose the constricting forces of corporate mergers and superstore market control (12). And, in fact, one of the biggest problems facing both retailers at their inception was an overwhelming sense of choice and competition, with little information to decipher product authenticity, seller reputation or reliability, or transaction security. Moreover, neither corporation takes any responsibility for anything beyond the security of the transaction. They simply place sellers in contact with interested buyers. David Bunnell, chief executive officer and editor of Upside Media and founder of *PC Magazine* and *PC World*, writes about eBay's solution to this problem in *The eBay Phenomenon*. In order to build trust between buyers and sellers and to solidify each party's relationship to the company, eBay developed a feedback system whereby buyers and sellers could rate one another. It "provides a positive-neutral-negative rating format that is both public and cumulative. Thanks to this forum, participants can build public reputations, just as traditional merchants and customers have always done in their communities" (56). As positive feedback accumulates, individuals are assigned different stars that indicate the volume of transactions processed through eBay. Amazon.com also allows buyers to leave feedback about sellers; the program publicly summarizes the feedback, rating (on a 1-5 scale), and volume. This practice has spread among many Internet retailers and product comparison sites, so it is not difficult to find summative representations in the forms of stars, colors, or happy face icons.

Some differences in terms of how these feedback forums orient consumers to each other and to the retail industry are worth noting. Unlike the traditional relationships between individuals and local retail locations, these new on-line relations are formed with Amazon or e-Bay, as well as between buyer and seller. Thus, a new layer of consumerism, the management of the transaction, is added. But retailers like eBay and Amazon are not themselves exposed to public critique at the same level as the consumers who conduct transactions under their umbrellas. Additionally, while eBay and Amazon.com both perform summation and editorial functions on the feedback, neither takes any responsibility for that feedback or for the transactions upon which the feedback is based. Bunnell asserts that the various transaction utilities provided by eBay are the reason for so many successful transactions, but the functionality of the retail site renders sellers as agents of the site while obscuring that relationship behind the rating system (62-4). It is a new service model, whereby business is conducted privately for corporate profit, with little ethical or legal responsibility for individual transactions. Where there is an issue with transactions over questionable material—child pornography, racist materials, human body parts, etc.—eBay is quick to step in and stop the transaction. This level of executable control, lurking in the background, is what defines the relationships that are obscured by the auction interface. All this takes place under the metaphor of an auction with bidding, competition, and a winner. This metaphor adds to the obscuring of buyer-seller-retailer relationships, and it provides another opportunity for data collection as each bid and view is recorded and made public.

Mediating Institutions: Customization

Another retailing strategy that has emerged in the consumer electronics industry takes place under the guise of product customization. Computer retailers like Dell and Gateway allow customers to customize every computer system they offer. Their television commercials depict the horrors of off-the-shelf computer shopping, and present customization and build-your-own computer systems as the answer to the problem. Gateway promises to build computer systems around a consumer's needs and lifestyle rather than requiring each consumer to learn vast amounts of technical information and product jargon. Dell allows users of its web site to change system configurations to items like hard drives, memory, and peripherals through drop down menus by category. Customized systems can be saved for later retrieval, purchased, or manipulated on the basis of price and other factors.

Like consumer management or enhanced self-service, strategies of customization appear to give consumers some measure of autonomy and choice in the retail experience. However, the choices are limited and are often determined in advance by the retailer. They must ultimately serve the retailer's goal of moving a high volume of merchandise, so the choices are limited to those that facilitate the retailer's distribution network.[6] Contrary to what retailers would have consumers believe, the available choices do not reflect individual consumer values. The available options are those that have been determined by statistical marketing analysis to sell well. Most of the components are made by the same small group of manufacturers—processor chips will be made by Intel or AMD, CD-ROM and DVD-ROM drives by Matsushita, monitors by Samsung. Moreover, such options will often be made for the retailer by a manufacturer that also sells to the retailer's competitor, and so on. Additionally, these consumer choices are collected and used as market research that will determine future product offerings and configurations. For example, Dell currently offers consumers categories of hardware as opposed to complete customizability: value, home office, entertainment (including multi-media production), and gaming. Most of the current strategies in retail—represented by big-box stores, e-tailers, rating systems, and customization utilities—function like statistical marketing research and discrete choice analysis, granting consumers a relatively small amount of choice that is quickly used to determine future markets, retail strategies, and product offerings.

Conclusion

The corporate philosophies of mass retailers and big-box specialty stores are dominated by expansive growth. Bunnell cites plans for exponential growth matched with scalability and mass customization as a business model that has determined eBay's success (93). Best Buy includes "extraordinary growth" as one of three foundational corporate values. Former Amazon.com employee Mike Daisy discusses the company's aggressive position on growth, creating ad hoc patches to problems as they presented themselves and "scaling" solutions that would continue to work as their customer base doubled and tripled. In *21 Dog Years*, he describes a corporate philosophy built upon an "infinite customer base" (140). While these mass retailers appeal to consumer self-service and informed, rational choice, these services and choices turn out to be very carefully managed and negotiated by the retailer well in advance of any transaction. The independent actions of consumers are recorded and collected as market research. Little more than minimal attention is paid to customer service or quality of experience as enhanced self-service floods the store and Internet with information that must be deciphered, valued, measured and compared by consumers. In effect, this flood of information accomplishes two things simultaneously: it obscures consumer choice through its overwhelming vastness while narrowing product offerings according to predicted buying patterns.

Both accomplishments exemplify Ohmann's notion of mass culture by obscuring issues of design, production, and use under a universal product image and by presenting a notion of individual choice to a mass audience. Additionally, the ideology of expansive growth parallels the advances in monopoly capital that Ohmann identifies in "Literacy, Technology, and Monopoly Capital." This leads me to conclude—however sadly—that changes in retail strategies hardly reflect new social relations or class relations. Rather, consumers and consumer advocates must find ways to enact change within the ecology of mass retail and consumerism. Some strategies include building consumer-voiced websites like "Bestbuysux.org" (www.bestbuysux.org) and "The Big Box Home Page" (www.big-box.com), both of which present consumers with a multiplicity of perspectives and positions on big-box retail. Consumers are also finding ways to support local retailers and businesses by engaging in urban pedestrian shopping instead of frequenting automobile-friendly superstores and lobbying local city-planning and development advocacy groups. In short, refusing to be a predictable, efficient consumer offers the best chances for personal service and rejecting the growth patterns demonstrated by mass retailers. But even erratic consumer behavior is likely to be incorporated into retail strategies. For example, little consumer behavior lies outside of the purview of Amazon.com as it tracks users navigating its inventory. Such tracking offers retailers and manufacturers the ability to predict consumer behavior and to make necessary changes in their distribution of products. While these strategies are not inherently predatory or "nefarious," they do instruct consumers in the techniques of mass consumerism using recycled consumer values to do so.

Notes

[1]One professional organization, the American Electronics Association (AeA), represents nearly 2 million employees and 3,000 companies in the United States alone.

[2]The industry term—commoditization—transforms the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism to suggest that products have value (exchange value) in spite of labor practices or beyond technological content. The idea is that high-tech products become commodities when they cross an invisible threshold into cheap and ubiquitous use. This conflation of use and production is larger than I can deal with here, but I will suffice it to say that marketing and retail strategies in the consumer electronics industry operate in such a way as to completely divorce products from their histories of production. This removal of production creates value-free products which are easier to market and sell to a mass audience.

[3]*Wired* magazine's editor-in-chief, Chris Anderson, locates four "collisions" that occur when a product moves from "innovative" to "ubiquitous." These include: critical price, the moment when a product becomes affordable to mainstream consumers; critical mass, when most consumers know someone who has the product; displacement, the "collision" between a rising technology and one on the decline (currently this is evidenced by flat screen and CRT monitors or broadband Internet access and dial-up service providers); and zero cost, when the retail cost of the product becomes cheap enough for nearly universal access (when DVD players hit $39.00 at Wal-Mart). See Anderson's "A Crash Course in Innovation: The Four Collisions that Make a Breakthrough Technology."

[4]An e-tailer is an electronic retailer making some or all of its merchandise available for purchase over the Internet.

[5]This trend is certainly supported by similar developments in other retail venues: department stores, mail-order catalogs, and e-tailers. These developments culminate in the big-box store design and convergence of physical retail locations with digital inventory control systems that control vast numbers of products sold regionally and over the Internet.

[6]Retail distribution networks exert enormous influence over the production and consumption of commodities. For example, if Hewlett-Packard (hp) does not manufacture enough units to meet its commitments to Best Buy, then Best Buy will put Sony Vaios in their place. Best Buy must always generate interest in whatever products it has been able to secure for distribution. This offers another level of obscured consumer choice.

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