POSTMODERN CONSUMPTION AND ECOLOGY: ARE THEY COMPATIBLE IN A GLOBAL ORDER?

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Abstract

This paper examines the nature of postmodern consumption from an ecological perspective. The specific dimensions of postmodernism that are examined are hyperreality, decentering the subject, and fragmentation. A brief summary of the postmodern assessment of each is provided and followed by an ecological assessment. It is argued that the two views are virtual antitheses in hyperreality and fragmentation. While both views extol decentering the subject, the objective is different. The ecological implications of the globalization of postmodern consumption are then examined.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between postmodernism, consumption, and ecology. Their areas of commonality and difference will be assessed with particular concern for the implications of the globalization of postmodernist conceptions of consumption as a cultural phenomenon. The paper will begin with brief introductions of the relevant postmodernist and ecological constructs as they will be used herein and proceed to their relationship to consumption. This will be followed by an assessment of the implications of the relationships from a globalization perspective.

The primary difficulty in the development of the proposed analysis rests in the definition of the terms postmodernism and ecologism. With respect to postmodernism, the difficulty is well known and Featherstone (1991), quoting the Modern-day Dictionary of Received Ideas, informs us that the word postmodernism "... has no meaning. Use it as often as possible (p. 1)." With respect to ecologism, Eckersley (1992) states, "Of course, the label Green [ecologism] is an extraordinarily elastic one that has been applied to, or appropriated by, all manner of environmental and political positions over the past decade (p. 8)." Thus we are faced with the dilemma of choosing between no meaning and too many meanings. Consequently, the notions of modern and postmodern to be used for present purposes will be developed before moving to the specific aspects of the postmodern that will be examined for their ecological implications.
The Project of Modernity

Generally speaking, modernity refers to a periodization concept in that it identifies, roughly, the time period of what we will loosely refer to as the modern period. It refers to the period beginning with the Renaissance and proceeding into the mid-twentieth century. While certain of its defining characteristics may be vaguely identified in the pre-modern, it is during this period that the concepts with which the modern is associated became the dominant ideas. What then were these defining concepts?

For present purposes, three fundamental shifts occurred at approximately the same time and were mutually reinforcing. These were the rise of Baconian/Cartesian science, the development of liberalism via Locke in politics and Smith in economics, and the demise of religion as a controlling force in the other two. These transformations spelled the end of the pre-modern, feudal society that preceded it and ushered in a new society the basis of which was no longer tradition or religious hegemony. The immanent ontological and epistemological changes define the modern period.

With respect to the epistemological, it has been argued that the mode of knowing was transformed from revelation to reason. Knowledge was based on objective truth that could only be obtained by the empirical methods of the new science. Further, the purpose of finding the truth was, in Bacon's words, "the Betterment of Man's Estate," not the "knowledge for its own sake" that is often attributed to it. Here also was the incipient link between science and technology which was to fructify a century later in emergent capitalism and the triumph of instrumental reason. Within this milieu, Enlightenment thought suggested that the arts and sciences would "...promote not only the control of natural forces but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings (Habermas 1983, p. 9)." The emancipatory potential of instrumental reason was unlimited.

From the ontological perspective, humans were released from the totalized domination of the Church. Possessive individualism became the mode of existence in which individuals were considered in possession of themselves. Descartes (1916) thrust the individual to the center of the world with ample rationality to discover its underlying mechanical operation and Bacon had
provided the justification for doing so. With Cartesian dualism entailing the separation of mind and body with mind (the rational) having the superior position over body (the material), came a second type of separation. This was the separation of individuals from nature (Merchant 1992). Humans were viewed as separate from nature, but more importantly, were superior to it (Merchant 1980). The ecological ramifications of this centering of the individual will become apparent later. With these ontological and epistemological transformations, the modern period was fertile for the accelerating evolution of capitalism.

With the rise of liberal capitalism, the apotheosis of technical rationality in the social organization of work was achieved and through it, social life as well. The exigencies of the capitalist mode of production recreated the social order in its own image, submerging the individual and institutions in the totalizing activities of production (Kassiola 1990). With it came the "rise of the consumer society and material culture (Venkatesh 1989, p. 101)." The modern world became characterized by the obsession for material progress extolling consumption as the means to happiness.

While this is a much too brief examination of modernity, it provides the basis upon which the postmodernist conceptions of consumption and its role in culture can be examined. In summary, Venkatesh (1992) describes the modernist project as follows: If one were to describe the central characteristic of the modernist narrative, it refers to a period when the individual is defined as a "knowing" subject, an autonomous agent working within a social and economic order which was driven by the power of reason. In the modernist ethos, knowledge serves an instrumental purpose, as a tool for improving the material conditions of human life on this planet (p. 199).

**Postmodernism**

Featherstone (1991) describes postmodernity as "...an epochal shift or break from modernity involving the emergence of a new social totality with its own organizing principles (p. 3)" Only a portion of that totality will be examined here. Specifically, he refers to three areas in contemporary culture that pertain to postmodernism. These relate to the artistic, different regimes of signification in the lived world, and to modes of production, consumption, and the circulation of symbolic goods (Featherstone 1991). For purposes of the present paper, only the last of these will
be examined since it is within this domain that the relationship between postmodernism, consumption, and ecology is most evident.

The fundamental critique of the modern project rests in the reality of "reality" as defined within the modernist metanarrative (the dominant social paradigm based on Enlightenment thought). Lyotard (1984) offers a challenge to the metanarrative itself arguing that all such "stories" lack credibility and have lost their legitimizing function. Science has, in effect, gone the way of religion in the premodern period. Rather than metanarratives, he argues for small, local narratives. The bourgeois individual of the modern metanarrative is a myth and has been rendered ideological (Sarup 1989) as has the notion of universal progress. This represents a shift from the universalism of modern science to localism and particularism (Venkatesh, Sherry and Firat 1993). Rather than a material world of inert matter in motion, we are left with a world of images, of simulacrum (Baudrillard 1983a). While the modern emancipatory narrative (indeed, metanarratives as such) has been negated by postmodernists, the diverse assemblage of small narratives represents liberation from the metanarrative; a freedom to experience alternative modes of being without the artificially imposed constraints of the modern (Firat 1991).

Thus postmodernists reject the notion that human social existence has any "real" basis in fact. Rather it is the product of an interplay of multiple myths (Baudrillard 1983a; Eco 1986; Firat, Venkatesh, and Dholakia 1993). Maintaining the modernist conclusions about the individual, self, freedom, etc. requires perpetuation of the mythical system, i.e., the modernist metanarrative. These are referred to by Focault (1980) as "regimes of truth" and are conventional, not transcendent. Postmodernists prefer that the small, localized community based narratives be respected (Lyotard 1992). The postmodernist critique has as its purpose to "...lay bare the myth of modernity and confront it on its own terms (Venkatesh 1992)."

Within the modern/postmodern debate, a great deal of diversity can be found. Particularly in question is whether the cultural changes evidenced represent a true "post" perspective or simply changes in the later stages of modernism. Habermas (1983) for example, suggests that the modern metanarrative has not died but simply needs revision. The problems have arisen from the
penetration of economic and administrative rationality into the domain of communicative rationality which requires a different standard of rationality. Thus, if the differences between the two were reconciled, the difficulties would recede. He concludes, "...instead of giving up modernity and its project as a lost cause, we should learn from the mistakes of those extravagant programs which have tried to negate modernism (Habermas 1983, p. 12)." Jameson (1983) refers to the period as late or multinational capitalism. While critical of the modern metanarrative, he maintains the totalizing, base-superstructural model characteristic of the Marxist metanarrative (Featherstone 1991). Jameson (1991) also argues that "...every position on postmodernism in culture...is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today (p. 3)." As is evident from the foregoing, what entails postmodern has not yet been completely defined. However, there are several aspects of the postmodern condition (Lytotard 1984) that are common within the critique of modernism. It is these factors that will now be examined.

**Ecologism**

For purposes of the present paper, three dimensions of ecologism will be used to assess the ecological implications of postmodern consumption. Kilbourne (1994) suggests that the construct has three dimensions that can be used to define the ecological nature of a particular behavior.

These are the economic, political, and technological. For the economic, the basic premise of of ecologism is that of steady state, or no growth economics. This is extolled as the only condition which leads to sustainability in a finite world. For the technological dimension, the ecological premise is low impact, appropriate technology eschewing the technological fix endemic in the modern metanarrative. Finally, for the political dimension, ecologism represents radical rather than reformist political change. From this perspective, it can be seen that ecologism and, what is normally referred to as environmentalism, are fundamentally different. The latter refers to technological mediation, political reformism, and economic growth as solutions to the ecological crisis. This renders it fundamentally modernist in perspective anchored in the Enlightenment based
dominant social paradigm. Ecologism calls for fundamental change in the modern metanarrative, but it does not suggest the death of metanarratives as in the postmodern.

The world view, or cosmology, of ecologism is predicated on the decentered subject. This is referred to as ecocentrism and is in opposition to the anthropocentrism of the dominant social paradigm (Eckersley 1992). Further, the relationship of the individual to the ecology is holistic and cooperative rather than atomistic and dominational (Goldsmith 1992). This is the perspective from which the conditions of postmodern consumption will be evaluated.

**Conditions of Postmodern Consumption**

Within the domain of postmodernism examined here, the production, consumption, and circulation of symbolic goods, three specific manifestations of the postmodern will be developed. These categories were established by Firat and Venkatesh (1993) and are based on a review of the literature of postmodernism. The categories are hyperreality, decentering the subject, and fragmentation. The essence of each of these conditions will be examined from a postmodernist perspective and then from an ecological perspective to determine where they are similar and where they conflict. The implications of this analysis will then be examined from the perspective of the globalization of the culture of consumption.

**Hyperreality**

The essence of hyperreality is the condition in which what was previously simulation or hype becomes real. Eco and Sebeok (1983) suggest that this is a product of the arbitrary nature of the relation between the signifier and the signified. Because it is arbitrary, the signifier can become "free-floating" with the possibility of attaching to new meanings (other signifieds). The new sign becomes true to the community of believers (consumers) who then experience the hype as reality, possibly preferring the hype to the "real." This is evidenced by the success of Disneyworld, IMAX, etc. where consumers can experience the natural at home. In a recent camping trip to Rocky Mountain National Park, this anomalous prospect became real when I wandered by an RV with a portable satellite dish. The occupant was tuned to a television program on national parks. Experience the wonder of nature with no insects. The simulation was preferable to the real. As
Firat and Venkatesh (1993) state, "...the postmodern consumer feels justified in playful enjoyment of the simulation rather than constantly seeking the somber reminders of 'reality' (p. 231)."

In this process, decontextualization detaches events from the historical process (context) and presents them as collage with surface appearance but no depth. This presents no problem in hyperreality which provides excitement but not truth. Firat and Venkatesh (1993) state, "...all is represented on the surface, and the duality of surface (appearance) and interior or substance (essence) is dead in postmodernity ... It is this image which, represented through the planned interplay of signs, then reflects on the surface and becomes the 'essence' that the consumer seeks in adopting the product (p. 232-233)."

**Ecological Critique of Hyperreality**

Through the decontextualization process, the image of the product is separated from the physical. We consume images, not products. A similar duality was actually propagated a century ago in neo-classical economics which transformed the reality of the physical product of classical economics into an abstract bundle of utility (Kilbourne 1994). While the intention was different then, the consequence has an equivalent ecological potential. What must be considered here are the ecological consequence of the preference for the hyperreal, the simulation and the consequence of the separation of the image and the reality (ecological) in hyperreal consumption.

Here, a major assumption must be attached to the remainder of the analysis. While certain aspects of reality are socially constructed, not all of reality is. The issue is not with the linguistic mediation of metanarratives of social processes such as liberal capitalism or Marxism. Rather it is the implication that reality as such does not matter. Whether we can arrive at a consensus metanarrative through, for example, Habermas' (1971) ideal speech situation, while an issue in postmodernism, is not one in ecologism. Because we cannot arrive at a consensus for such a metanarrative does not negate the existence of such. There is a narrative in nature. *Nothing comes from nothing and everything goes somewhere.* Nature reads neither modern nor postmodern literature.
With regard to the first issue, preference for the simulation over reality, it should be recognized that the separation of the imaginary and the real coupled with the privileging of the former, attention is focused away from the real. But it is here that the ecological consequence of consumption manifests itself in reality. Consumption of images or utilities has no consequence, i.e., no resources used, energy consumed, or waste created. Consumption is reduced to the "playful enjoyment of the simulation" while the "somber reminders of reality" are pushed further into the background of the process. By decentering production in the production/consumption cycle and privileging consumption, attention is diverted from the process of production as traditionally defined and centered on the consumption process which produces consumer images in infinite variety. While marketing creates images, production processes still create commodities.

The result is not only factualizing the fiction of consumption as suggested by postmodernists, but fictionalizing the fact of consumption as suggested in the literal meaning of the term consumption, i.e., used up. The ecological essence of consumption is the somber reminder of reality. Preference for the simulation not only removes constraints on levels of consumption but promotes it at increasing levels as consumers playfully move from one image to the next yielding geometric economic growth. From an ecological perspective, geometric growth immanent in hyperreal consumption is anathema (Capra 1982). The metanarrative of nature reveals finitude (Meadows, et. al. 1972). When the virtual forest is preferable to the real forest, of what value is reality?

It is evident from the foregoing that, in hyperreality, postmodernism and ecologism are virtually antithetical. Hyperreality promotes geometric economic growth which is considered unsustainable by ecologists. Hyperreality privileges the simulation over the real, negating the intrinsic value of nature as such. Hyperreality focuses on the surface, ecology on the depths. Collage is the essence of hyperreality, connection is the essence of ecology (Bateson 1972).

Decentering the Subject

Within the modernist project, the individual was extolled as the center of activity. With the ascendance of the knowing subject in science and the development of possessive individualism in
the political, the freely acting individual became the focus of attention for the next three hundred years. All activities, be they scientific, political, or economic, had the betterment of the condition of the individual as their driving force. The person was subject, freed from political and religious hegemony, and nature was reduced to instrumental object serving individual needs.

Within postmodernism this relationship is eroded. It challenges the centered subject as illusory or as myth. The subject is not only removed as the center of activity, it is further suggest that it never was the center. As Jameson (1983) states, "...not only is the bourgeois individual subject a thing of the past, it is also a myth; it never really existed in the first place; there have never been autonomous subjects of that type (p. 115)." A confusion has always existed between the subject and the object in modernism. From a consumption perspective, this implies that it is not the consumer who is the subject of activity but the product itself which acts upon consumers providing their identity. This is effectively a reversal of the subject-object relationship of modernism (Kilbourne 1991). Or as Baudrillard (1983b) suggests, it is the objects that actually control the consumption process. This undermines the autonomous subject of modernism.

Ecological Critique of the Decentered Subject

Unlike the hyperreal of postmodernism which is in conflict with the basic premises of ecology, decentering the subject is very much in concert with the major thesis of ecologism. Referring to the centered subject of the modernist metanarrative as anthropocentrism, ecologism suggests that this aspect of the modern must be eradicated if ecological sensibility is to arise.

Dobson (1990) states, for example, Green politics explicitly seeks to decentral the human being, to question the mechanistic science and its technological consequences, to refuse to believe that the world was made for human beings - and it does this because it has been led to wonder whether dominant post-industrialism’s project of material affluence is either desirable or sustainable (p. 8)

He further adds that the ideological nature of the dominant social paradigm "...suggest that words used in any given description of the world are opaque rather than translucent, and demand deciphering (Dobson 1990, p. 12)." The "arrogance of humanism" (Ehrenfeld 1978), i.e., the centered subject of science and liberalism, results in the prevailing modernist belief that all
problems arising from human interaction with technology can be solved by the same science and technology that caused the problems in the first place (Winner 1986).

The necessity for the decentering of the subject rests in the teleology of the modernist project which was effectively the "betering of man's condition" through the domination and control of nature, both inner and outer. In centering the subject, science and liberalism removed premodern religious constraints on behavior relating to nature (Merchant 1980). Man (not women) were separated from nature in Cartesianism and placed above it. As this project unfolded, it culminated in industrial Capitalism through the additions and transformations of Smith (1937) who contributed the final reductionist step in the instrumentalization of nature for human purposes; self-interest Hirschman (1977). Not only is the subject centered, but the only characteristic of the subject that matters is immediate, material self-interest. This became the driving force of capitalism and "free" markets, the apotheosis of the Enlightenment (Kassiola 1990). With the development of neo-classical economics in the late nineteenth century, the material (consumption) self-interest of the centered subject is complete and ecological degradation is inevitable (Kilbourne 1994).

Thus, because of the dramatic and inevitable ecological consequences of the centered subject (anthropocentrism), the decentering of the subject is a critical aspect of ecologism. While the goal of decentering is the same within postmodernism and ecologism, there is not complete agreement as to what this means. Here we must return to the anti-metanarrative stance of postmodernism. Within ecologism, the decentering of the subject is for the purpose of deprivilegating it within the metanarrative of nature. It does not negate the metanarrative itself which remains wholly intact, but rather, provides a better understanding of in and the human role in it. Postmodernist decentering seems more of a negation of the constraints imposed on the subject by the modernist narrative. It is a freeing of the subject to engage in playful interaction in the life world. If this playful consumption behavior of the image collage suggests the death of metanarrative as such, then ecologism and postmodernism again will differ. If, on the other hand, the emancipatory character of postmodernism is accompanied by an adequate ethic of freedom, itself a metanarrative, then the differences are not so great.
Fragmentation

Two aspects of fragmentation will be examined in this discussion. They are the fragmentation of images, or material signifiers (Jameson 1983), and of time. Firat and Venkatesh (1993) suggest that the concern for central meaning characteristic of modernism has been transcended in postmodernism. This suggests that within the individual, "...a central character or a consistent identity is neither possible nor even sought (Firat and Venkatesh 1993, p. 232)." With reference to fragmentation of discursive forms, Firat (1992) also states, "This pertains to the inability, or in the case of the postmodernist, the unnecessity, the indesirability, of referring to any unified, consistent, centered field, idea, system, or narrative (p. 203)." The celebrated side of this condition is its emancipatory potential in freeing the individual from the conformity of the modern narrative. No one has to be anyone in postmodernism. What then is the essence of fragmentation?

With respect to the fragmentation of images in postmodern consumption, it is argued that the free floating signifier affords the consumer a virtually limitless choice of both brands and self-images that can be combined, turned on and off, or created through pastiche (Jameson 1983). This extends from commodity production to the production of shopping environments which themselves become spectacles. The proliferation of images, each autonomous and unrelated to the others, engenders decontextualization, the separation of the product from its original context, the separation of the signifier and the signified. This process culminates in the separation for the object from its function; the object is the image.

Fragmentation of time is also characteristic of the postmodern. In this process, just as images become fragmented, so do consumption experiences become fragmented from each other. Each product, seemingly independent from the rest, represents an experience that is disconnected. Fragmentation implies that in each instance of consumption...the consumer engages in a series of independent, unconnected acts without common purpose (Firat and Venkatesh 1993, p. 232).

Thus the consumer engages in an unending sequence of unrelated consumption experiences, unconnected in purpose or time. Jameson (1983) suggests that this is analogous, but not in the clinical sense, to schizophrenia. He states:
In other words, schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence (p.119).
The significance of this construct is that it suggests that the experience of the present is intensified while its connection to the past or future is submerged in the process. The discontinuity with the past engendered in fragmented reality leads to what Jameson refers to as "historical amnesia." Thus the fragmentation of the metanarrative follows in postmodernism.

Fragmentation is considered primarily in its positive aspects within postmodernism and is essentially celebrated as the triumph over the hegemony of any particular "regime of truth." It represents emancipation from conformity, sublimation, rational justification, and the freedom to live in disconnected spectacles with no commitments to any particular one.

**Ecological Critique of Fragmentation**

As with hyperreality, fragmentation is virtually antithetical to ecological sensitivity. In the obvious case of the metanarrative, as was indicated earlier, within ecology there is an implied narrative in nature. Since fragmentation leads to the "incredulity of the metanarrative," within Lyotard (1984) and the postmodernist marketing scholars cited here, it is clear that this disjunction cannot be resolved easily. While Jameson (1991) is less adamant about this in his examination of social process and structure in the trajectory of late capitalism, his position is frequently criticized by postmodernists such as Featherstone (1991). A major difficulty would arise here with social and Marxist ecologists who would argue that such an approach ignores power relations inherent in Capitalism, be they from the modernist or postmodernist perspective (Bookchin 1990; Kassiola 1990). This effectively relinquishes the power in symbol manipulation to cultural specialists who control by defining the struggle for positional goods that differentiate and define both the classifier and the classified. This provides cultural specialists the power to define scarcity. Featherstone (1991) adds, Dominant groups, therefore, seek to possess or establish what William Leiss (1983) calls 'positional goods', goods which are prestigious because an artificial scarcity of supply is imposed...The intellectuals (the dominated fraction of the dominant class), therefore, use the logic of symbolic systems to produce distinctions which contribute to the reproduction of the existing relations between classes and class fractions (p. 88-89).

While the locus of power shifts from production to consumption, the essence of power remains. This conflicts with the decentering of production in the postmodern which ostensibly
negates dualist conceptions such as production/consumption. The consequence is not the
elimination of the dichotomy, but the reordering of it with consumption ascending as the source of
power over the consumer. While this reversal appears to be modernism in disguise, the same
might be said of fragmentation as such. While the concept is consider a character of
postmodernism, it as also an essential aspect of the modern. It is, in fact, the essence of
Cartesianism which has fragmentation of nature as its primary method. It is precisely this
fragmentation that rankles ecologists since its essence is anti-ecological.

With regard specifically to the fragmentation of images, the separation of signifier and
signified, Firtat and Venkatesh (1993) suggest that the need for context has been transcended in
postmodernism. It has become the role of marketing to effect this decoupling, separating the
product from its original cultural context and arbitrarily recoupling it in another. This
decontextualization, while considered playful in a postmodern perspective, appears almost nihilistic
from an ecological perspective. Among the contexts from which the product is removed is the
ecological. When only images are transformed, allowing for the paradoxical juxtapositioning of
opposites, "the playful switching of (self)-images, the tolerance for acting and being different, not
to commit to any form of being forever, but to try and retry each (Firat 1994)" are celebrated in
postmodernism. When decontextualization extends to the genealogy of the commodity, a new
paradox emerges. Behind each image consumed is a resource consumed, and while there are truly
limitless images, there are no limitless resources. The consumer ultimately consumes existence as
such. Fragmentation is a dialectical metanarrative.

With the fragmentation of time, a similar critique emerges. While each consumption
episode becomes detached from the rest and the consumer resides in the now and here (Gitlin
1989), Jameson's (1983) schizophrenia materializes in which each successive present is;heightened in intensity. This yields the intense pleasure of consuming images but allows the
consumer to live only in the present. Unlike the modern counterpart, the postmodern consumer
need not commit to a project and "...wants to experience the past and the future now and here
(Firat 1994)." While the postmodernist celebrates this possibility, the ecological paradox emerges
as before. By intensifying the present, we potentially jeopardize the future. While the consumer may successfully reside in a series of "perpetual presents," resources do not. The narrative of nature will almost certainly intervene.

From the preceding, it can be seen that the postmodern and the ecological differ in their assessment of the consequences of the postmodern condition in consumption. It should be pointed out that the criticisms raised are not with the description of postmodern consumption. The ecological analysis of industrial cultures is fairly consistent with the postmodern. Where they differ markedly is in the evaluation of consumption and, particularly, the potential effects of unlimited growth in consumption (Daly 1993). This question is never addressed within postmodern literature. Where postmodernists celebrate postmodern consumption as the emancipation of the individual that was promised in the modern but failed to materialize, the ecological perspective is critical of this type of consumption (Porritt 1984). This critique is heightened when the analysis is expanded to the globalization of postmodern consumption, or as Firat (1994) refers to it, the consumption of culture.

**Globalization**

When every aspect of the culture has been reduced to the marketable, culture itself becomes consumable (Sherry 1987). As a result of this, Firat (1994) suggests...culture is no longer so much what people belong to, but increasingly something that they consume...when all cultural signification is mediated through the market and through commodification, despite the fragmented existence of different and competing cultures, (life) styles, images and brands, the market, itself, and marketing...become the new universal...Fragmentation, through the process of marketization, becomes the new metanarrative (p. 21).

Firat (1994) provides an analysis of the globalization of fragmentation from the perspective of cultural identity. He suggests first that cultural change is inevitable under any narrative, premodern, modern, or postmodern. Further such change has been mediated by power relations which are not uniformly distributed in any culture. To the extent culture can be represented as commodity, its integrity might be preserved through fragmentation. Because of the overproduction of signs and their detachment from signifiers, their potential for crystallizing into a dominant ideology is diminished (Featherstone 1991). Thus the eclipse of the sacred in a culture is not as
likely as might be expected. The Americanization of the world order seems unlikely. Featherstone (1991) argues, "...the tendency we have referred to within consumer culture to produce an overload of information and signs would also work against any coherent integrated universal global belief on the level of content (p. 127)." While this may be satisfying on the cultural integrity level, it begs the ecological question which suggests that while cultural integrity may be safe, the culture itself may not be. Nor is any global order with consumption as its foundation likely to increase its sustainability.

Within the ecological literature, over-consumption is second only to over-population in its capacity to create global ecological havoc (Durning 1992). Thus far, only the industrialized nations have exhibited the patterns of consumption vilified by ecologists. The globalization of postmodern consumption through the hyperreal and fragmentation represents probably the greatest threat to human survival that could exist. The thought of eight to ten billion consumers all struggling for consumption experiences in the now and here is the essence of the ecologist's nightmare. With the marketization of Eastern Europe and the allure of the market potential in China, there are no positive ecological scenarios. While the preservation of cultural identities is an important issue, from the standpoint of ecologism, globalized fragmentation renders the question of cultural integrity effectively moot. Virtually no postmodern scholar has even addressed the question of where the resources to support globalized postmodern consumption will come from or where the waste will go. While the death of socially constructed metanarratives may be imminent, Fisk's (1973, 1974) call for socially responsible consumption has lost none of its force. Nature's narrative, nothing comes from nothing and everything goes somewhere, is alive and well. The question is not whether we should celebrate globalized postmodern consumption or vilify it. The question is, Can we afford it?

References


