

***Culture and Consumption II: Markets, Meaning and Brand Management.* Grant McCracken. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2005. 240 pp.\***

Reviewed by John F. Sherry, Jr.

Freakonomics, meet brandthropology. In this concise volume (a companion to his watershed 1998 effort) of articulate introspection and insightful ethnographic essays, the author exhorts anthropologists to take back their culture. This reclamation requires more than merely wresting control from the pundits, critics, and celebrities of the contemporary cultural scene. It demands a plumbing of the ontological status of consumer culture before engaging in reflexive critique. Such a project should be close to the heart of every museologist and material culture specialist.[1]

Grant McCracken, a former curator, active industry consultant, and peripatetic professor, is an unrivalled stylist. His conversational eloquence, self-deprecating humor (he is, he admits, Canadian), and incisive wit engage the reader throughout the book. He has structured the volume to rock the reader from the intensely personal to the analytically universal. He anticipates the themes of his elegant interpretations – many reprinted from other sources – in his autobiographical musings as an active participant in consumer culture. It is little wonder that *Business Week* has recommended his blog (cultureby.com) to anyone who would comprehend contemporary consumer behavior. While *Culture and Consumption II* is not as intellectually dense as its predecessor, it is a more immediately accessible work that will reinvigorate interest in the original.

---

\* Posted to *Museum Anthropology Review* October 7, 2007. See: <http://museumanthropology.wordpress.com/2007/10/07/mar-2007-2-18/>. © John F. Sherry, Jr. MUA2007-11 / MAR2007.2.18.

In the first of seven sections, the author lays out his agenda in autoethnographic detail, beginning with a mini-manifesto on the need for consumption studies that are empirical before they are critical. The indictment of materialism has unfairly preceded a carefully considered analysis of the role goods play in peoples' lives. The author proposes a paean to material culture, properly understood. Insofar as meaning is resident in stuff –and not only or even principally managerial meaning–anthropologists are uniquely suited to inquire into the dynamics of its investment, recovery, and reconfiguration. And, as it happens, to interpret those dynamics for a media audience, as his satirical account of events surrounding his appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show hilariously demonstrates. Ethnographic consumer researchers have increasingly employed the term *materiality* in documenting person-object relations, to bracket the prematurely harsh judgment hardwired into the term *materialism*, and to avoid diagnosing consumption as a pathological syndrome before it is adequately understood.

The author unpacks a North American key symbol or root metaphor–home–in Part Two, first in a breezy piece on the house as a “transformational opportunity” in our socio-psychological and metaphysical construction projects, and then more systematically in a signature essay on “homeyness.” He analyzes the physical, symbolic, and pragmatic properties of the North American dwelling that make the home a cultural cynosure. In Part Three, he trains his sights on the car, offering first an autobiographical reverie on the ways in which boys identify with cars (and attendant danger), and then in an ethnohistorical cultural account of automobility as embedded in the 1954 Buick. He explores the “interpenetration” of humans and machines, and celebrates the car as the “gift” and “proof” of progress. It is difficult to imagine two more apt examples of the cybernetic self than house and car, or two artifacts more conducive to co-creation by marketers and consumers.

Celebrity is the focus of Part Four, viewed first through the prism of Marilyn Monroe, a cultural artifact embodied as a new American “persona,” whose chief meaning revolves around “access of every kind.” In another signature essay, McCracken examines the phenomenon of celebrity endorsement, using a cultural meaning transfer model of consumption to illustrate and correct the shortfalls of the dominant psychological model of influence. Viewing the world of celebrity as among the most powerful sources of meaning available to marketers, he explores the ways in which our individual experiments in self-construction via goods are shaped by these “superconsumer” exemplars.

The most poignant, theoretically compelling, and managerially relevant of the author’s insights, as well as those most pertinent to readers of this journal, are found in Part Five. Here we are treated to an evocative account of the “Madeleine object”—in this case, the author’s uncle’s wallet—an artifact so charged with meaning and power, and so “irreducible,” that it threatens to “overwhelm theory.” McCracken then provides a magisterial ethnographic account of such an object writ large: the Royal Ontario Museum. He contrasts the traditional curatorial “preferment” model of museum management with a “transformation” model that captures the lived experience of the museum visitor, and shows how the consumer’s appropriation of the curator’s offering can be harnessed to facilitate a more satisfying engagement. He offers some guidance for negotiating the cultural shift that contending narratives produce on the prospective ordering of exhibitions, as curators strive to design experiences that anticipate the unarticulated and emergent desires of the visitor.

In Part Six, McCracken begins with a tongue-in-cheek description of an avuncular pep talk delivered in his role of experienced corporate consultant and elder statesman of meaning management to a group of young initiates trembling in the corridors of commercial power. The

huckster-of-the-symbol-aura of the encounter is first evoked and then dispelled by the author's ingenuous demeanor. He segues to a critique of the information processing model of advertising that dominates consumer research and elaborates a meaning-based model that encompasses the cultural contexts and projects of consumer behavior. McCracken construes advertising as a semiotic field upon which consumers draw in their identity construction projects, and he tracks the movement of meaning from culture to consumer through goods.

The volume concludes with Part Seven, an MBA-style discussion of the role of culture in meaning management. The author provides a practical demonstration of the ways in which culture colors every aspect of value creation, and of the marketing mix. The essay is a convincing illustration of the utility of the anthropological sensibility to the care and feeding of brands.

*Culture and Consumption II* is well suited for adoption as a supplementary text at any level in courses dealing with material culture or museology. It should pique the interest (and perhaps the ire) of curators seeking to revitalize the design of exhibits. It is a ready demonstration to students of anthropology of the relevance of their training to careers in commerce and to the prospect of enlightened personal consumption. Most happily, since McCracken has written so frequently for a marketing audience rather than an anthropological one, his book may encourage our tribe to explore the literature of consumer research that has grown so receptive to ethnographic inquiry in the past decade.

## **Note**

1. See Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

*Anthropologist John F. Sherry, Jr. is the Ray W. and Kenneth G. Herrick Professor of Marketing in the Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame. His research focuses on consumer behavior, organizations, and qualitative methods. He is the author of many works, including Contemporary Marketing and Consumer Behavior: An Anthropological Sourcebook (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), (with Stephen Brown) Time, Space, and the Market: Retrosapes Rising (Amonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003) and (with Russell Belk) Consumer Culture Theory (Oxford: Elsevier, 2007). [MAR2007.2.18]*