BREWING IDENTITY:
FAIR TRADE COFFEE, IMAGE, STYLE AND CONSUMERISM IN LATE CAPITALISM

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in Social Studies
University of Regina

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April 2014

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Brian Jeffery Gordon, candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Social Studies, has presented a thesis titled, *Brewing Identity: Fair-Trade Coffee, Image, Style and Consumerism in Late Capitalism*, in an oral examination held on April 17, 2014. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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ABSTRACT

Since the collapse of the International Coffee Agreement in 1989 the production of coffee has been in crisis. Small holders struggle to survive at even a subsistence level following the deregulation of the coffee industry and the subsequent increased control of the value-chain by buyers and roasters. Fair Trade is seen as one way of increasing the amount small producers are paid for their product. The recent explosion of "relationship coffees" has helped a number of small producers, but is increasingly now used as a marketing and branding device for Fair Trade and traditional coffee companies alike. The symbolic nature of Fair Trade coffee has been used to differentiate coffees, as well as extract greater value from the raw product. The strategies used to market Fair Trade coffee are increasingly visual in nature, and use producers' lives and surrounding landscapes as semiotic lifestyle signifiers for first world consumers. In this way consumption is privileged and producers' lives are deemed knowable, and thus become part of economic exchange. The visual, semiotic nature of consumption often distorts the reality of most small coffee producers, while at the same time re-enforcing the hegemony of consumerism in consuming countries. In this way Fair Trade coffee is an excellent example of symbolic exchange built on a material base: a most salient feature of the late-capitalist order. Using the social constructivist approach and semiotic textual analysis, this thesis explores how meaning is created through this process, and the propensity for people to buy products imbued with symbolic cultural capital in late capitalism. Consumers now purchase signs and symbols that signify membership in a certain group. In order to uncover mechanisms that allow for the commoditization of caring, ethics, or environmentalism, with reference to Fair Trade coffee, images are analyzed using semiotic textual analysis. This is accompanied by an overview of consumption and production in this current regime of accumulation.
Deconstruction of images allows for semiotic connections to be made between the production of coffee and the identity building symbolic nature of late-capitalist consumption. This analysis of photographic images used to market Fair Trade coffee it is discovered that meaning making is a highly complex process in late-capitalism, and increasingly relies on detached visual signifiers in widely disseminated images in advertising. These mechanisms have ramifications for politics in the broadest sense, as individual acts of consumption come to replace actual political debate, engagement, and policy.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of many faculty and staff members that made this process possible, edifying, and at times enjoyable. I would first like to thank the staff in the Sociology office, Stacy Leader-Sallenback and Michelle Jones. They were always able and ready to help an unorganized grad student. Second, I would like to thank professors that continually challenged me in their classes: Jo-Ann Jaffe, Polo Diaz, and Murray Knuttila. Moreover, I would like to thank Andre Magnan for taking on the role of advisor in the latter stages of this project, and providing relentless encouragement in completing it. Lastly I would like to thank the rest of the committee, John Conway and Simon Enoch, whose comments, edits, and encouragements helped immensely in this process.
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For VZ
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“It’s not just what you are buying; it’s what you are buying into.” – Starbucks’ signage

“The ultimate consumption experience is going for a Starbucks coffee.” - Slavoj Zizek

This particular historical moment in the trajectory of capitalism is dominated by the consumption of commodities marketed to consumers using highly sophisticated advertising techniques, and where acts of charity are fully incorporated into the things we buy. But why is this so? And why now, as opposed to forty years ago, are acts of charity incorporated into the price of a product, and used in marketing and advertising?

The examples of this seem to be endless, but a few that come to mind are Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty, or the National Football League’s pink campaign in support of breast cancer research. Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty is a “worldwide marketing campaign” that is based on the promotion of Dove as being a supporter of “real beauty” and places itself as converse to the beauty industry’s focus on unrealistic female forms. While the supposed principle for the campaign is to “celebrate the natural physical variation embodied by all women and inspire them to have the confidence to be comfortable with themselves,” (http://www.dove.pk) this merely acts as a way for Dove to differentiate itself from other brands, while at the same time purporting to be in support of morally and socially beneficial objectives.

Advertising campaigns such as this are made possible by the ever-increasing focus and importance placed on the visual nature of social life. How we interact with the world and the meaning we make of it is increasingly being constructed by attention to surfaces,
produced by a sharp visual turn in everyday life. As McIntyre (2008) argues, we experience a lot more of the world than our parents did by having a visual window into endless experiences that we will never encounter in actuality. Through images and texts used in marketing and advertising, we are increasingly attuned to the cost of global capitalism and made to feel guilty about our consumption. At the same time we are offered a way to assuage this guilt through the market, without changing our consumption habits. Our sense of social responsibility is diverted from collective action and engagement with our surroundings to the sanitized channels of individual consumption choices. In the context of late-capitalism this is facilitated by mostly visual forms of advertising, and is the basis of contemporary identity construction and meaning making. It is increasingly the case that we are what we buy, and this leads to a greater importance placed on the symbolic meaning contained in consumer products, including charity or social responsibility.

The increasing use of visual marketing devices is a symptom of a moment in capitalism where moral and ethical qualities are captured and utilized by the market for advertising purposes. The act of buying Fair Trade coffee, or a product contained within the pink ribbon breast cancer campaign, is part of alleviating the guilt and anxiety we experience in a world ravaged by global capitalism. It is also part of creating a unique identity for ourselves that we can display to others. Lifestyle and identity are now fluid creations that can be constructed and de-constructed by the whims of fashion. In our visual world, making the right purchases is intimately tied with the person we are trying to project to the world, and as Stewart Ewen (1988) points out, personal style is increasingly the way we understand, interpret, and act in the social world.

This is a study in branding and advertising and how, in turn, semiotic communication of this nature is ideological in its very essence. Branding is an extremely
successful way to sell products because of the semiotic nature of the process. In the language of semiotics the corporate brand logo and things associated with it is the signifier, and the consumer is the signified, coming together to form the sign. Thus, the only way that branding works as a strategy is when consumers of a certain commodity complete the semiotic chain that is only set in motion by the advertisers. This way of studying consumption treats consumers’ actions as neither ‘passive’ nor ‘contradictory’, but as actors that are continually mediating meaning through a social world increasingly reliant on the market for emotional needs, meaning, sense-making, and charity.

**Fair Trade Coffee**

Fair Trade coffee is at the forefront of bringing this phenomenon to the mainstream, and therefore provides an excellent window into this highly complex process. As something that started as a way for socially minded consumers to help coffee farmers in war-torn Central America, the symbolic nature of Fair Trade coffee is now mined to differentiate coffee and to brand entire companies. At best this can be seen as an effort by corporations and consumers alike to bridge the gap of uneven trade in global capitalism. At worst, it is a way to extract greater value from the raw product using highly sophisticated visually based marketing strategies. Coffee farmers’ lives, and surrounding landscapes, are used as semiotic signifiers for first-world consumers to gain membership into a group of socially conscious lifestyle consumers. In this way, the act of consumption is privileged, and producers’ lives and natural landscapes where coffee is grown are deemed to be both knowable and a product to consume. These campaigns often utilize narratives of development, poverty, and indigenousness to indicate the Fair Trade nature of the product and the benevolence of the corporation. The visual, semiotic nature of consumption often
distorts the continuing reality of most small coffee producers the world over, while at the
same time re-enforcing the hegemony of consumerism.

Fair Trade coffee is a good example of late-capitalist accumulation, where symbolic
value is generated from, and then sold as part of, a material commodity. Consumers
increasingly purchase products to signify solidarity with certain lifestyle groups of which
one wants to be a part, as the outward display and consumption of goods as part of an
ongoing lifestyle identity project. The importance placed on the acquisition of identity and
lifestyle is part of increased individualism, in addition to increased attention to surfaces,
style, and fashion. The Fair Trade coffee industry in its current form has utilized this
situation in an effort to increase market share and in-turn to help a greater number of coffee
farmers. This strategy, however, has its own set of problems on both the production and
consumption sides, as farmers find it increasingly difficult to capture increased share of the
retail price, and Fair Trade becomes part and parcel of the realm of fashionable semiotic
lifestyle consumption of late-capitalism.

This thesis uncovers the mechanisms at work in everyday acts of consumption,
using Fair Trade coffee as a case study. With the heavy use of images in marketing today,
and the visual nature of our lives made up of signs and symbols, an attempt is made to
uncover and deconstruct these images presented to us, and to highlight the possible
negative consequences that they bring to both producers and consumers. Because we often
encounter people outside of our direct experience visually through consumption, the social
relations at work are often overlooked or eclipsed. The possibility of democratic politics is
potentially lost if everyone except Western consumers is ‘othered,’ and if we are convinced
that our purchases can cure the unevenness that is caused by global capitalism.
First, the thesis outlines a few basic assumptions of how individuals interact with reality, media and culture are examined. From this starting point there is an examination of the visual nature of Fair Trade coffee marketing and the possible effects on individual and collective understanding of the social world.

**The Social Construction of Reality**

All studies in sociology assume the world is socially constructed. It is assumed that the object of study is not “natural” but a series of ongoing social constructions that are not inherent to the physical world. Furthermore, the process of social construction is an ongoing one, constituted by the everyday acts of individual agents. Instead of viewing the social world as being imposed on individuals, social constructionists see a constant dance between outside forces, individual action, and meaning creation. In this way, social construction precariously occupies the ontological middle ground between individualism and structuralism. While individual actors may actively construct their social world and make meaning out of it, there are larger structures that allow certain actions and meanings, and disallow others.

The language of social constructivism became part of the lexicon after the publication of Berger and Luckman’s *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger and Luckman argue that “all institutions appear the same way, as given, unalterable and self-evident,” (Berger and Luckman1966: 45), when in fact they are a complex set of dialectical relations that have developed over time. Meaning accorded to actions comes to be viewed as objective when in fact it “is a humanly produced, constructed objectivity” (Ibid.). As human actors move through the social world acting as if things are unalterable, they are constantly, if ever so slightly, changing 'how things are done’ and what meaning is accorded
to those seemingly unalterable actions. As the social world is transmitted from person to person, or generation to generation, as Luckman and Berger point out, it gains strength and objectivity. Therefore, when thinking about the socially constructed meaning accorded to things by the mass media, and the powerful grip on the transmission of culture it has, it becomes evident why social constructivism is a necessary approach to examining meaning through a textual semiotic investigation. Social constructivism is a necessary starting point as it immediately tries to uncover the reason a phenomenon is a certain way, and why people generally take it as given. One major advantage of the social constructivist approach is that it views the social world and agents within it as being malleable over time, and contingent on material conditions. While members of a society might view their actions and the meanings accorded to them as given, the world is constantly changing, and therefore altering the conditions of existence and the meanings accorded to their actions.

This thesis deconstructs images from Fair Trade coffee marketing strategies in order to place them in the wider cultural context of consumerism specifically, and late-capitalism generally. In this way the ideology of consumerism and radical individualism can be seen as a dialectical relationship between human actors, the use of semiotics in advertisements, and the wider climate of consumerism and individualism. This method explores how the process of consumption has been infused with meaning and, in turn, identity formation, and what changes in capitalism and technology have precipitated this change.

Many observers, most notably Baudrillard and Harvey, insist that in late-capitalism we are constantly bombarded by a semiotic world filled with signs (Harvey 1990, Baudrillard 1981, Lowe 1995). These signs and sign systems are all around us, most notably in advertising, and force constant meaning negotiation and creation by actors who
are limited to acting in the prescribed ideological space provided for them. For this reason the constructionist approach is necessary in uncovering sign systems, as they are the most prominent way in which actors in late-capitalism constantly mould, interpret and reinterpret meaning. In turn this is precisely how discourse and ideology operate in the late-capitalism.

Semiotics is the study of the language of signs, both visual and written, which posits that signs are made of up of two distinct parts: the signifier and the signified (Hodge and Kress 1988). Semiotics argues that the connection between the two is arbitrary and changeable over time. For instance, the word ‘tree’ and an actual tree are not the same thing: the word tree signifies the actual physical object, the signified. That we use the word tree to signify an actual tree is arbitrary, and in reality has little to do with the large plant outside our window. Social conventions and constructions within language have developed over time, however, so that now we assume tree and a ‘tree’ are synonymous when they are not.

In what are referred to as ‘relationship coffees’, images are used in advertising and branding as vehicles for floating signifiers that imbue meaning to a particular coffee. The signifier in this case has been detached from its original or previous meaning, and is used to signify something else entirely. A photo of a pristine natural environment can signify that a particular brand of coffee is a good steward of the environment, for example. This may or may not be true, and in the instant of consumption a consumer is hardly going to be able to discern this, though it may influence their purchase. More importantly, in small steps, it may change the meaning they associate with environmentalism, coffee production, and consumption as a whole.
The social constructionist approach, combined with semiotics, can uncover the complex interrelationship between human agents, images, and late-capitalism. In deconstructing images of Fair Trade coffee semiotically, the thesis examines not simply why people act the way they do, but the larger social and cultural limits that restrict and allow certain actions in late-capitalism, and how individuals make meaning in their world. Semiotics allows one to identify signifying practices and the existing codes or sign systems used in the construction and conveyance of meaning (Fourie 2001). The purpose of this thesis is not to evaluate the efficacy of Fair Trade or other “relationship coffees” in helping small producers, but on how meaning is assigned to certain actions, and in-turn consumption at large, because of visual marketing practices. The main interest here is the discursive arena of meaning making with regards to consumption and consumerism in late-capitalism, of which Fair Trade coffee is an excellent example.

The Visual Turn

One of the most easily recognizable features of late-capitalism is the expansion of the visual realm, and the sheer volume of visual signifiers heaped upon people every day. This proliferation of images, and the transition to a visual culture, has meant monumental changes in a great many things. The focus here is what this visual turn has meant for the production of meaning and the hegemony of consumerism. Gamson et al. (1992) argue that “we walk around with media images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues” (3). While this is true to a large extent, it is not that simple. In keeping with the social constructionist view, consumers and media images are involved in a continuous dialectical relationship of meaning making. As this visual culture increases its dominance “the immediacy of events, the sensationalism of the spectacle, become the stuff
of which consciousness is formed” (Harvey 1990: 54). Our visual culture has a cumulative aspect. As we form meaning and consciousness out of images, those images are built upon previously constructed images and give meaning through existing narratives. Images, especially in advertising, posit a world based on consumption as natural and inevitable. Actually it is constructed part of the larger apparatus of late-capitalism.

In essence, there are two different phenomena important to the discussion of image, meaning, and consumerism in late-capitalism. First, we live in an increasingly visual culture, which is part and parcel of late-capitalist accumulation. This visual culture has very powerful meaning-making potential. Second, our knowledge of the world and its working is increasingly gleaned from visual media. This creates a situation where consumerism and “colliding worldviews are translated into style, images to be purchased” (Lowe 1988: 15).

As the culture of late-capitalism becomes increasingly dominated by the visual image, special attention needs to be paid to its inherent power. Many authors (Leitch 1983, Eco 1976, Ewen 1988, and Lowe 1995) have argued that the visual sign acts differently than the linguistic sign, and is in many ways more potent. The visual sign is open ended, as opposed to the much more closed meanings of linguistic signs. That is not to say that signifiers for linguistic signs cannot change over time, but visual signs in images can change very quickly, with their meaning being constantly renegotiated by human actors. Since all signifiers are products of the human mind they are floating in their very essence (Leitch 1983). In that sense then “images provide for an extra level of signification, beyond the codes of linguistic signs” (Lowe 1995: 13), and contain much more that the viewer completes on their own. When consumers are confronted with images of Fair Trade coffee producers in advertisements and packaging, for instance, what is left out for the consumer to fill in is almost more important that what is actually present, and is where the
opportunity for meaning making takes place. The consumer relies on previously learned cultural codes, usually predominantly informed by other media texts. Instantaneously the image of a coffee farmer becomes a floating signifier for ‘social justice.’

**Media and Individualism in Late-Capitalism**

For consumers, late-capitalism has generally meant an explosion in technological advances dominating and shaping our personal and private spheres. As Harvey (1990) notes most Americans spend around seven hours a day watching television and though at the time of writing the internet was a distant dream, the amount of leisure time spent either online or watching television has both diversified and intensified. The relationship of media viewing, shopping and identity has become a fairly closed circuit in the last thirty years. For the majority of North Americans, consumption of media and shopping are the major activities in their lives other than paid employment. This has deep implications for the construction and understanding of reality, as well as for individualism in late-capitalism; people consuming more and more media often do so passively and alone.

Within the field of sociology there is a debate on whether the rise of electronic communication, namely the internet and television, has precipitated a more individualistic society. On the one hand Manuel Castells (1996) argues that the network society has been marked by major changes in how people interact with the social world, and therefore each other; he sees the transition to a network society as part of late-capitalism, and the change has been made possible and sustained by the internal logic of global electronic communication. Castells argues that the technological advancement of society is fundamentally changing how we interact with others and the world around us. The visual,
electronic culture that now encapsulates the West increasingly forces us to rely on visual sign systems to construct and make meaning out of current reality.

On the other hand, Harvey (1990), following Simmel (1911), argues that as modernization occurred and people moved to cities providing endless external stimuli, people were forced to treat all people as strangers. As people are overloaded with stimuli, previous ties to family and class wane, and "our only outlet...is to cultivate a sham individualism through pursuit of signs of status, fashion, or marks of individual eccentricity" (Harvey 1990: 26) and "the need to acquire self-respect, status, or some other mark of individual identity, all play a role shaping modes of consumption and life-styles" (123). This is becoming more pronounced as we experience *The Cultural Logic of Late-capitalism* (Jameson 1991) and face the increased colonization of personal space and time. Nearly all areas of life in late-capitalism are brought into the market in an economy based more on symbolic production and consumption. With the increasing dominance of the image in late-capitalism, "producers are forced to view others in purely instrumental terms" (Harvey 1989: 103) and personal ties are changed, reworked and are ever more dominated by impersonal electronic communication.

The debate over the individualist nature of current society is not new, and perhaps the most pertinent view for this thesis is C.B. Macpherson's concept of possessive individualism. It is Macpherson's view that capitalist liberal democracies are based on private property, which sets up a situation "based on the assumption that man is an infinite consumer" (Macpherson 1977: 43). As people are released further from historical bonds and modes of behaviour, freedom is gained, but only a very specific freedom to work inside hegemonic capitalism. This freedom gained is based on the assumption that human beings are "bundles of appetites that are, in principle, unlimited and not subject to rational
scrutiny” (Carens 1993: 2). Consumer capitalism we now see is based on this assumption and has furthered the idea that citizens are only out to satisfy their desires and appetites. Indeed, the hegemonic nature of late-capitalism has led to an individualism that is personified in an instrumental addiction to shopping, style and fashion. It is superficial and fleeting. Things are purchased increasingly for their sign value, which includes consumers in certain groups and differentiates them from others. As people are confronted with an infinite number of products, signs, identities and life-styles, the individualist ethic is reinforced and reproduced.

The placement of the citizen/consumer at the center of the world, reinforcing this notion of possessive individualism, is one of the most important aspects of studying consumerism in late-capitalism. It is the citizens’ ‘duty’ in this society to maximize individual economic situations in order to maximize hedonistic consumption. And while there are many subjective meanings regarding individual commodities, the dominant significance, as Veblen (1899) argued, is to display one’s wealth and status.

Consumer capitalism has changed fundamentally how people interact with the world. Indeed when forming a mental picture of mass consumption, many often think of the 1950s and 60s with pink houses and cars in every driveway. While this is obviously an image created through television and film, it illustrates two important factors that allowed consumer capitalism to evolve. Throughout the post-war years, under the so called ‘Keynesian Social Contract’, workers gained several improvements including increased pay, shorter hours and paid holidays (Abercrombie et al. 2000). As affluence and leisure time grew, so did the opportunities for consumption. In effect this created a situation in which the most dominant form of leisure time was consuming commodities. As we have moved through the last thirty years, we have seen the hedonistic consumption of goods, and the
search to find and purchase them, as one of the largest uses of our non-work time based on the notion that happiness equals consumption. Consumerism has become hegemonic. It is the dominant way of doing things, and finding meaning in today's world. Consumption has become “an established and stable way to organize the social, daily life of a people” (McGregor 2007: 16). To put it another way, consumerism is the dominant hegemonic ideology of affluent citizens, and consumption is the activity in which people engage and know the world. As John Berger states in *Ways of Seeing* “[p]ublicity adds up to a kind of philosophical system. It explains everything on its own terms. It interprets the world” (1972: 149).

There are many aspects of consumer culture that are worth investigating. In order to examine it regarding the images used to market Fair Trade coffee, and the associated ‘lifestyle’ consumption, a focus on the changes in production, the re-orientation of the subject, the fragmentation of experience and identity, as well as the cultural obsession with surfaces, styles and fashion is required.

As consumer capitalism deepens, a greater proportion of the world’s resources are consumed by people from mainly Northern highly industrialised countries (McGregor 2007). As well, accompanying this there is a greater physical distance between producer and consumer, combined with mental distance from marketing, packaging and branding. McGregor (2007) explains the disproportionate consumption by the global North quite succinctly:

Even though Northern consumers comprise only 20% of the world’s population, they consume more than 86% of the world’s resources. They have 87% of all automobiles, 74% of all landline telephones, use 84% of all paper, consume 58% of all energy, eat 58% of all fish and meat, and get 94% of all bank loans (McGregor, 2007: 16).
We currently find ourselves in a world where 80% of the world’s population is shut out of Western style consumer society, yet they have their lives dictated by it. On the other end we have a minority of people gobbling up the world’s resources at an unsustainable rate, and basing their happiness on this situation. Under these circumstances more and more people are realizing as an illusion\(^1\). McGregor notes (2007) “even those doing the trampling can be considered as oppressed by the system, slaves to market ideology.” So we have a situation where a tiny minority is in a competitive race to consume as much as possible, while the majority is left to fight over what is left, including the exported production jobs. This is where the discussion starts.

The next chapter focuses on the changes in capitalism, and in-turn, consumption. A point must be made here about the “real and significant changes in production relations” (Cerni 2007: 1). With the current obsession with consumption and consumer capitalism, Cerni notes a neglect of the actual changes in capitalism and of the commodity form in general. The commodity has been transformed, production exported, and the production of symbolic profit valorized by the neo-liberal economic order.

It is important to note there has been an explosion of the quality and quantity in consumer goods since the end of World War II. Accompanying this trend, or maybe because of it, fewer and fewer people in super-industrialised societies are actually involved in production of material goods. Alan Tomlinson notes that in the global North “more and more people work to make impressions” (Tomlinson 1990: 21 in Cerni 2007: 5), while just a generation or two ago most people worked on farms, in factories, or in other blue collar industries. This has fundamentally changed most citizens’ link between the goods they

\(^1\) The sharp rise in people suffering from depression and anxiety in late-capitalist societies can at least partly be derived from the constant search for meaning and fulfillment through consumption. When this does not arrive, even with high levels of personal consumption, people have their consumerist belief system thrown into question and anxiety and depression ensue.
consume and the incredibly complex and highly skilled, capital intensive networks that make those commodities possible, and the conditions of the workers or the environmental impacts. People have little way of actually knowing the world outside of the hyperreality, to use Baudrillard’s term, created by consumerism and electronic communication. According to Daniel Miller (1995) “consumption provides the only arena left to us through which we might potentially forge a relationship with the world” (17 cited in Cerni 2007: 6). While there are many white collar and service jobs in the global North, they are less likely to actively transform things from the earth into actual wealth (Cerni 2007). Concurrently we see an expansion of the market into previously uncommodified areas. Technology has allowed the creation of a symbolic marketplace through infinite, low cost image reproduction. Things that were previously seen as outside the market are now encased by it, even our sense of social justice, equality, and charity. This transformation in capitalism has fundamentally changed the interactions people have with each other, and the world, creating “societies increasingly out of touch with their own practical conditions of existence” (Cerni 2007: 9). This revolution of capitalism, and of production itself, has created a highly competitive landscape of consumption increasingly based on fragmentation, emulation, and temporality of individual experience.

What this means for the commodity form, and for consumers in the Western world, is nothing short of monumental. The commodity in consumer capitalism is now increasingly infused with subjective meanings, as well as being consumed by unique citizens that project their own constructions onto them. In earlier forms of capitalism “the commodity kept the meaning of its value locked in; now, it constantly invents and proclaims new meanings” (Cerni 2007: 3). The meanings constructed for the consumer by life experience, and increasingly by electronic media, are unique and fragmented. Therefore “each consumer is a unique subject for each unique object of consumption” (Cerni 2007: 3).
As everyday life shifts towards maximizing choices in the 'here and now,' a form of severe temporality emerges and characterizes late-capitalism and post-modern culture.

Capitalist modernization is built around the social division of the labour process, and the inherent alienating qualities of estrangement from both one's work and the actual value that is being produced. Therefore capitalist modernization has inherently fragmenting tendencies (Harvey 1990). Modernism was based on the ethos of a rupture with the past; a forgetting of the old and the total embrace of the new. The factory replaced the cottage industry or family farm and a grand separation was made between work and family life (Berman 1982). This process continued and deepened the fragmentation of people's everyday experience, and ability to know the world. Late-capitalism has radically deepened this situation. Any coherent notion of the whole is totally ruptured and people now encounter the world "as a succession of isolated and superficial encounters that have no transcending aim" (Cerni 2007: 13). The collapsing of space-time horizons in this flexible form of accumulation, given great technological innovation, has meant the ability to produce commodities on a niche scale, "expressive of a great variety of styles" (Harvey 1989: 75).

The collapsing of space and time under flexible accumulation has allowed for niche production, in which most Northern consumers do not take part. Products are infused with symbolic meanings that are consumed by subjects with their own subjective meanings, leading to an increased sense of temporality and fragmentation of experience and in turn, identity. According to Bennett this means "the fragmentation of information begins by emphasizing individual actors over the political contexts in which they operate. Fragmentation is then heightened by the use of dramatic formats that turn events into self-contained, isolated happenings" (2002: 49). The ideology of the fragment firmly directs the
consumer to be more concerned with fashion, style and surfaces (their own subjective meanings combined with those contained in purchased commodities), than with depth, history or the material and political basis of their life-style.

**Fair Trade Coffee**

The history of the Fair Trade coffee movement is long and intricate, the focus of many books and academic articles. What began as a grassroots initiative to counter the plight of farmers in war-torn Central America in the 1980s (known as solidarity coffee), has become a world-wide movement encompassing several products from sugar to chocolate. While clearly these remain niche products, the growth in recent years has been astonishing. According to the Fair Trade Federation in 2003 total sales of Fair Trade products topped $500 million, at the same time fairly traded coffee grew by 91% from the year before (Lyon 2006). The efficacy of Fair Trade as a response to market crisis has been hotly debated with the recent growth and subsequent movement toward the mainstream. A growing discrepancy between what producers get paid, the retail price, and with the economic accessibility to consumers, combined with the “fair-washing” of large companies, has caused much discussion around the case for Fair Trade (Fitter and Kaplinsky 2001). Fair Trade, and specifically Fair Trade coffee, intends to increase returns to the small farmer who has been decimated by neoliberal trade policies. However, the ongoing coffee crisis and subsequent Fair Trade movement has meant control of the value-chain has been further concentrated in the hands of large roasters and buyers (Daviron and Ponte 2005). Many coffee farmers, even Fair Trade members, are still struggling to survive. At the same time there is increasing use of their livelihoods and landscapes as ways to produce symbolic value for coffee companies (Wright 2004). The land and the lives of producers struggling to
stay afloat amid huge market pressure are now fodder for late-capitalism to package, market, and sell.

Fair Trade coffee is an excellent example of the situation encountered in late-capitalism where products are loaded with symbolic value. This symbolic value is then bought by consumers, and the coffee is merely a conveyance for floating signifiers, which indicate a certain lifestyle and identity. This is part and parcel of a new regime of capital accumulation, that is dependent upon free flowing, quickly changing production of highly symbolic niche products for lifestyle consumption (Harvey 1990, Lowe 1995). While much attention has been paid to changes in production, often overlooked is the importance of market segmentation, and relating technologies allowing capital to gain very detailed knowledge about smaller, specialized segments of consumers. According to Lowe this started in the 1960s and had a very powerful effect. As Lowe explains, following Leiss, Jhally and Kline (1988): “Information about lifestyle aggregates is useful in both design and production of product characteristics, as well as targeting and positioning of commodities in the market. Late-capitalism has necessarily meant a fragmentation of consumption, with market segmentation research allowing for lifestyle advertising, marketing and branding and “the new social relations of consumption” (Lowe 1995: 62). The ‘societally conscious lifestyle consumer’ is one of the Nine American Lifestyles outlined by Mitchell (1983), and the one we are concerned with here. Their lifestyle choices are often dictated by certain ethics and values supposedly embodied in products such as Fair Trade coffee (Lowe 1995). These particular values have now been symbolically attached to products and sold to lifestyle consumers.

In late-capitalism Western culture has become primarily visual; that is, increasingly dominated by advertising and marketing, and promoting certain lifestyles. In the case of
Fair Trade coffee images of coffee farmers and of nature are increasingly utilised in the sales effort. These images can be read like linguistic signs as they indicate, or signify, the product and, in turn, the consumer as socially conscious and having a particular lifestyle. The images of coffee farmers are turned into floating signifiers of a lifestyle that these consumers are trying to portray. In essence then, consumers are, in the language of Bourdieu (1989), converting economic capital into cultural capital through sign vehicles (in this case coffee) which indicate a certain belonging within a certain lifestyle. Lifestyle consumers of this particular variety are said to be buying their social responsibility, but they are really buying certain signs and symbols to display to others their lifestyle.

Fair Trade coffee, like all consumer products to some extent, has been infused with symbolic meaning, and this meaning is what is being bought and sold in late-capitalism. Images of producers and landscapes are mined for their floating signifiers and used as product characteristics. This allows the creation of profit by buyers, roasters, and retailers. Consumers buy these products as part of a lifestyle or identity project where one must buy the right car, live in the right area, wear the right clothes, and of course, drink the right coffee, in a never ending twofold and contradictory search for distinction and acceptance from others. The meaning conveyed in this hyper-consumptive world through images, advertising, and lifestyle consumption is one of fragmentation, superficiality, and hedonism, with little or no regard for the majority of the world that makes the consumer society possible.

This thesis argues, following Lowe (1995) that not only is reality a social construction, but the body and the mind are as well. As we come into contact with work, commodities, and advertising our bodies and minds are forced into a constant negotiation of meaning. In late-capitalism, almost everything has been commodified, not just
production and consumption, as was the case for earlier incarnations. Late-capitalist practices are necessarily structural, systemic, discursive and semiotic. Primacy is then necessarily given to surfaces, style, and fashion. Commodities in late-capitalism have been transformed into sign vehicles consumers purchase as part of individual identity construction, and to give meaning to the social world. Through signs and symbols, reality is distorted and the hegemonic ideology of consumerism is produced and re-produced. As McIntyre (2008) argues,

> If social actors draw on various experiential resources to bestow meaning on the world around them and electronic media increase the importance of cultural symbol systems in this equation, it becomes clear that both the content and form of communications carry weight in this process. In societies where the channels of public communication are primarily vehicles for profit, what results is a cheapening of cultural symbolic systems replete with numerous potential sites of distortion (24).

Understanding the world as a social construction allows for deconstruction of meanings that are created for actors in the social world. If the world is socially constructed, but generally taken as given, even natural, state of affairs, then we can examine how these meanings are constructed, why they exist, and how they are maintained. This emphasizes the non-material forces at work in everyday life, with a focus on meaning-making and the interpretation and re-interpretation of the dominant discourse.

This thesis argues that human agents do not exist independently of their social environment, or the collectively held meanings that exist, and there is a mutual constitutiveness of structures and agents. In late-capitalism the human subject, and therefore meaning, is increasingly created through the use of images to market and brand commodities. This view allows for a semiological examination of images and texts, and how these are used to produce and reproduce meaning. Semiotics assumes there are signifiers and signified, which are arbitrary, and it is in this relationship that meanings are produced
and conveyed. The signifiers are not constant but always changing, and can even become, in late-capitalism, detached from what they initially signified.

This thesis examines the images used to market, brand, and advertise Fair Trade coffee. Through a further reading of these images the mechanisms at work producing the ideology and discourse of hegemonic consumerism in late-capitalism will be uncovered. Fair Trade coffee is an excellent example of commodities being instilled with signs and signifiers of a certain lifestyle. With the dominance of visual communication, both inside and outside of commodities, the obsession with surfaces, fashion, and style are predominant characteristics of the late-capitalist moment. A semiotic deconstruction of individual images used to market Fair Trade coffee will illuminate the mechanisms that enforce and reinforce the current social order of hegemonic consumption.

The starting point for this examination is the major transformation in capitalism from the Fordist production model that dominated after World War II, to the flexible accumulation of late-capitalism. This historical materialist approach examines the changes in the logic of capital accumulation in order to better understand the current operation of consumption. Changes in the regime of accumulation change the way actors understand and act in the world. The dominance of technology and rapid space-time compression has radically transformed human interaction and with the material world. One of the most striking features of this transformation is the emergence of a visually dominated culture. The visual nature of late-capitalism is one of its most salient features, and has placed visual semiotic communication as the foremost way reality is constructed and presented to individuals.

Following Marx’s famous remark “production is consumption and consumption is production” (Marx 1970: 133) Chapter 2 will focus will on consumption. The fundamental
change in the logic of late-capitalism, and an evaluation of current and past consumption theories practices are discussed. There has been much recent focus on consumption, however, we will begin with general theories of consumption that are still very relevant in this new regime of accumulation. Extremely important here also is the discussion of cultural capital, emotional needs being increasingly met through consumption, and the increased visual nature of late-capitalist advertising. This will set the stage for a more in depth discussion on the semiotic nature of late capitalist consumption that is centered on the production and transmission of visual signs and signifiers that constitute a particular lifestyle. The power and meaning that are created through the hegemonic nature of consumption will be illuminated here, and connections will begin to be made with the case study of Fair Trade coffee images. Namely examining how social and cultural values become signifiers of product characteristics in late-capitalism, and how this semiotic nature of consumption is a source of social power.

Chapter 3 brings these theories of production and consumption together in an assessment of the visual nature of marketing the Fair Trade coffee industry. First, a brief overview of the entire coffee industry in its current form is undertaken, with particular focus on deregulation and the ensuing plummeting of prices known as the coffee crisis. The material underpinnings of the semiotic nature of consumption must be grasped in this example to understand how changes in the logic of capital accumulation change the relationship we have with commodities. As Harvey notes (1990), capital is a process not a thing, and if one wants to grasp fully the nature of hegemonic consumerism then one must understand the mechanisms operating at both general and specific levels. Fair Trade coffee provides an excellent example of lifestyle consumption built on the symbolic production of signs and signifiers. Hence a window is provided into meaning, discourse and ideology in late-capitalism.
The next chapter examines six images used in the marketing, branding, and advertising of Fair Trade coffee. These diverse examples are from traditional coffee companies like Nestle and Starbucks, as well as Fair Trade companies like TransFair and Oxfam. They are deconstructed to uncover meta-signs and signifiers used, through images connected to existing dominant narratives; to semiotically imbue this coffee with symbolic value. The use of semiotics and deconstruction will "lay bare the grounds of signifying practices-the codes or sign systems used in the production of meaning" (Leitch 1983: 9), which is the focus of the discussion in Chapter 1.
Late-capitalism is marked by rapid shifts in consumption practices, the dominance of the image, and the fluidity of identity construction (Mandel 1975). Studies in contemporary consumer activities often fail to explain the material underpinnings for this “period of rapid change, flux and uncertainty” (Harvey 1990: 124). The rapid restructuring of the capital accumulation process has meant changes in consumer habits, ‘needs’, and identity. Those changes have their basis in the material world, and any investigation of consumption must first outline the central material tenets of late-capitalism, and how those changes have radically altered the lives of consumers and contributed to the rise of identity based consumption of signs.

This chapter outlines the monumental restructuring of capitalism in the transition from Fordism to late-capitalism, and how that restructuring changed the lives of both consumers and producers, and how the image, advertising and style have come to be hegemonic in nature. In order not to selfimplode because of inherent internal contradictions, capital needs what Bob Jessop calls “the social fix” – a way of organizing social life to ensure the reproduction of conditions for capital accumulation (Jessop 2002: 7). The social fix capital requires in every incarnation is part of the regime of accumulation, and this is used to describe the transition from mass consumption to late capitalism, or what Harvey terms “flexible accumulation.”
1.1 From Fordism to Late-capitalism

The defining characteristics of the Fordist regime of accumulation are well-known (Braverman 1974, Baran and Sweezy 1966, Harvey 1990). David Harvey offers perhaps the most concise description of Fordism as “a corporate commitment to steady but powerful processes of technological change, mass fixed capital investment...and mobilization of economies of scale through standardization of product” (Harvey 1990: 134). Long-term, stable growing capital investment, combined with scientific management of labour productivity enabled the mass production and consumption of consumer goods on a previously unprecedented scale. In Marxist terms, the rate of profit quickly rose after the Second World War and then slowly began to fall, as part of what Mandell (1976) calls a long wave of capital accumulation. The gross domestic product of the United States, the driver of this period, grew by 3.3 percent in the 1950s, 3.8 percent in the 1960s, then dropped off to 2.8 percent in the 1970s (Lowe 1995).

As with other regimes of accumulation, Fordism, or monopoly capitalism, had its own set of institutional arrangements to ensure stable conditions for social reproduction. The most important of these was the Keynesian social contract, which emerged out of the New Deal under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the growth in the power of organized labour, and the crisis encountered in the 1930s (Harvey 1990). The Keynesian social contract provided the social fix to Fordist accumulation by redistributing wealth and ensuring stable and growing wages for workers. This allowed workers to partake in mass consumption, and thereby sustain the consumer demand necessary for them to retain their own employment. Capital benefitted from minimal inter-firm competition, long-term investment, highly skilled labour, and a captive market for their goods (Harvey 1990). The
United States "[wrote] the rules of the game, [enforced] their acceptance and, and under[wrote] the risks" (Lowe 1995: 18).

The post-war period brought sustained, long-term growth to the capitalist system (Harvey 1990, Lowe 1995, Jessop 1992). The Fordist regime of accumulation became hegemonic worldwide, kept in place by the military and economic power of the United States (Harvey 1990, Lowe 1995), as well as its "financial, industrial and technological superiority" (Lowe 1995: 18). In the Western, non-socialist world, this generally necessitated improvement in the standard of living among a growing middle class, and unionized manufacturing jobs provided the base for the mass production and consumption of consumer goods (Harvey 1990).

This boom could only continue for so long, however, before over-accumulation began to present problems. With the post-war reconstruction of Germany and Japan complete, and the exhaustion of foreign and domestic markets, cracks began to emerge as early as the 1960s (Harvey 1990). As the world economy entered the 1970s, stagflation began to occur as economic growth faltered and US efforts to manage monetary policy by printing money resulted in rampant inflation. Meanwhile, "duplication and competition among national industries, as well as automation and technological improvement in production, resulted in over-production capacity" and "the hegemony of Fordism began to crack" (Lowe 1995: 19). Newly minted social programs, which were based on stable economic expansion, became increasingly difficult to pay for, resulting in crises of legitimacy for states across the capitalist world (Harvey 1990).

What emerged from the crisis of Fordism was a massive re-organization of capital (Harvey 1990, Lowe 1995, Mandell 1976). Many terms have been used to describe this new regime of capitalist accumulation, but for this thesis Harvey's (1990) concept of flexible
accumulation and Mandel's (1976) concept of late-capitalism will be used. They capture the essence of a system based on fixed labour with little power, footloose capital that often is larger and more powerful than most nation-states, and fractured identities of Western consumers who search for meaning through consumerism as the traditional institutions of marriage, the church, and class politics break down. Flexible accumulation meant changes in not only production, but also necessarily meant changes in consumption patterns (Lowe 1995). Changes in the way capitalist accumulation systematically obscures its own operation, or changes in representation, were also required.

1.2 Dominant Features of Late-capitalism

The dominant characteristics of this new regime of accumulation are the liberalization of trade and attendant mobility of capital, the de-linking of production from financial markets, and the compression of time and space horizons. These central features of late-capitalism are essential to understand the rise of an “individualized yuppie culture” (Harvey 1990) that placed paramount importance on image, niche consumption, and personal style (Lowe 1995, Jameson 1991).

This period of capital reorganization and technological advancement necessitated the piercing of both time and space, since Fordism had exhausted the spatial fix for new methods of accumulation. It was clear the era of long-term fixed capital investment was over, and once again turnover time in the accumulation process was going to have to decrease. With advances in technology, and the restructuring of global capitalism, what emerged was a hastening of production of aesthetically stimulating products that aroused emotional responses from consumers (Harvey 1990, Lowe 1995, Jameson 1991). Late-capitalism, or flexible accumulation, is marked by unprecedented capital mobility and short-
term investments in the small-scale production of niche commodities often imbued with symbolic meaning (Harvey 1990, Lowe 1995).

The breakdown of the Bretton Woods Agreement and the elimination of the gold standard allowed for the increased mobility and diversity of capital investment with the deregulation of the financial and monetary systems (Lowe 1995, Mandell 1976, Harvey 1990). As Harvey notes; "it is through the financial system that much of the geographical and temporal flexibility of capital accumulation has been achieved" (Harvey 1990: 194). The flow of capital and goods the world over eased, enabling capital to continuously re-establish itself wherever profits are greatest. Free trade agreements and an ongoing war on organized labour cemented this new reality (Mandell 1976, Harvey 1990). Alongside the unencumbered movement of capital required the creation of entirely new financial markets that de-link the financial system from material production. It is now possible to generate profit by speculating in a variety of world markets. In addition to this, it was now possible for capital to fully penetrate the non-capitalist world and shift investment and production to regions that had not been totally colonized by Fordism (Mandell 1976). Harvey characterizes this as the spatial fix of capital (Harvey 1990).

This transformation was in part made possible by the evolution of telecommunications and technology (Mandell 1976, Castells 1996). Instant communication made the financial system autonomous from production, as capital flows could be reversed and traded without having any real link to material production (Harvey 1990). Futures markets and hedge funds are two examples of this phenomenon. As Mandell states, "every period of radical technological innovation thus appears as a period of sudden acceleration of capital accumulation" (Mandell 1976: 113). In essence it is part of the temporal fix needed to re-organize capital accumulation in order to bridge time horizons. This temporal
fix precipitated "new production sites and new instruments of production" (Mandell 1976: 113). Castells (1996) argues that technological revolutions are characterized by a penetration of every domain of society.

The consequence of capital mobility, technological revolution, and the end of long-term capital investment has been a hollowing out of the West’s industrial base and decreased power of organized labour. This was accompanied by growth in the service economy (Harvey 1990). Employment opportunities for the middle classes have shifted from long-term, unionized, skilled and semi-skilled labour to increasingly casual, part-time, and contract employment (Lowe 1995). This new organization of employment “enables capital to adjust more flexibly to changing, new economic demands” (Lowe 1995: 23). Employment has become much more tenuous as flexible capital looks to acquire and shed employees with greater speed and frequency, and at very little cost. The new regime of accumulation generally meant de-skilling labour, less job security for workers, and a new focus of employment in service industries (Lowe 1990).

One of the most important features of flexible accumulation is the compression of time and space. There have been many contributions to understanding the experience of time and space in late-capitalism (Castells 1996, Jameson 1991, Harvey 1989, Soja 1989, Giddens 1984, Lowe 1995). They differ in how much emphasis they place on the re-organization of capital accumulation, but broadly conclude that individuals move through and encounter space and time in radically different ways now than in the era of Fordist mass consumption. In general, the need for increased turnover time, combined with technological innovation, has led to the increased fragmentation and ephemerality of lived experience. The focus shifted to symbolic narratives and the consumption of signs and signifiers attached to commodities that appear to exist in the same space and time. The
world is now in many respects at our fingertips, and our individual and collective
perception of reality has changed. Space and time horizons have collapsed into individual
moments, with no trace of the material conditions that make them possible.

The experience of space and time have changed, the confidence in the
association between scientific and moral judgements has collapsed, aesthetics
has triumphed over ethics as a prime focus of social and intellectual concern,
images dominate narratives, ephemerality and fragmentation take precedent
over eternal truths and unified politics, and explanations have shifted from
the realm of material and political-economic groundings towards a
consideration of autonomous cultural and political practices (Harvey

The compression of space and time, while firmly rooted in capital accumulation
practices, is made possible and reproduced by the changes in technology over the last thirty
years. Castells (1996) and Harvey (1990) emphasize that the invention of the micro-
processor and other advances in technology allowed capital to be truly global in character
by enabling instant connections to be made between production and ever-changing
consumption habits. Global producers and global consumers are now brought together in
the same moment, annihilating any real experience of space and time.

Consumption and production systems have decreased time horizons and therefore
fractured, according more power to fashion cycles, advertising and image where “aesthetic
production has become integrated into commodity production generally” (Lowe 1995: 82).
While the Fordist regime of accumulation relied on economies of scale, the new regime of
accumulation relies on economies of scope. Instead of the mass production of goods,
economies of scope enable the production of an ever-increasing array of new products with
a very short turnover time. As Harvey (1990) argues, fragmentation and ephemerality are
the hallmarks of the rapid space-time compression brought about by these significant
changes in capital accumulation. Individualized tastes and yuppie culture were cultivated
by the increased importance of advertising and marketing, and the simultaneous rise in
visual modes of communication and representation. This has the effect of creating a consumption environment in which style and fashion are elevated to new levels of importance, and giving the creation and maintenance of a certain lifestyle new prominence. In broader terms, Jameson (1991) argues that “the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever-more novel seeming goods, at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasing essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation” (82). With capitalist restructuring, further importance is placed on the aesthetic nature of the design, production, and marketing of commodities where value and excess profit, while having a material basis, are created symbolically (Harvey 1990).

1.3 The Media Dominated Visual Nature of the Late-Capitalist Economy

The dominance of electronic media and the creation of mass-produced visual images for advertising are integral to the decrease in turnover time and associated visual nature of experience in late-capitalism. As Harvey (1990) notes, “ephemerality and instantaneous communicability over space then become virtues to be explored and appropriated by capitalists for their own purposes” (288). In modern advertising, photographs are transformed into images detached from reality and in effect work to create reality themselves (Tomlinson 1991). Contemporary advertising and branding seeks to extract images from their objective conditions, infusing them with subjective meanings, which are in-turn attached to commodities. The images used in advertising are inherently superficial, and have culturally mediated meanings, or connotations. As Berger notes “[T]he way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (1972:8). Meanings found in advertising then come to signify something other than what is actually contained within the image. For example, an image of a coffee farmer can become a floating signifier for Fair
Trade coffee to the socially conscious consumer. “An image is a sight that has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved” (Berger 1972: 10). This is accomplished through the juxtaposition of images that associate seemingly dissimilar things (Lowe 1995).

With the rapid development of new technologies in late-capitalism, electronic media have become the dominant way in which we communicate, navigate, and understand the world (Harvey 1990). Indeed, the triumph of consumerism as the dominant way of life in developed countries has relied on visual advertising and branding of new consumer products. As Tomlinson (1991) argues, “we may think of the media as the dominant representational aspect of modern culture” (61). Electronic media are imperative for the success of flexible accumulation as it transmits advertising and associated lifestyle marketing. The thousands of images flashing across a television or computer screen lead to an ever-greater attention to surfaces and an obsession with style and fashion (Ewen 1988). As Harvey (1990) argues, “the symbolic orderings of space and time provide a framework for experience through which we learn who and what we are in society” (214). Late-capitalism has meant the symbolic orderings of time and space are mainly offered through media that are increasingly visual in nature (Jhally 1991). If images dominate how we order space and time, then it can be argued that media have an ideological ontological function. This happens in two ways. First, they help create and shape our reality. Second, it establishes the legitimacy of its own authority (McIntyre 2008, Stahl 1999).

The penetration of daily life by media in late-capitalism, with its increased attention to the ephemeral and the fragment, has meant that vision is the most important way of sensing the world (Lowe 1995). Both television and the Internet rely on visual
interpretations of images quickly flashed across a screen. As Lowe argues, the primacy of sight is not a given, and is “culturally and historically specific, not universal” (Lowe 1982:132). In Western societies the greatest increases in technology have been primarily in visual media. Thus we live in a visual culture and consume hundreds of visual media images everyday that flatten and obscure reality.

There are contradicting views on the ways media interact with culture and lived experience, ranging from the deterministic to the mediated. The Frankfurt School, and particularly Theodore Adorno, argues that media, and the popular culture promoted by it, are deterministic (Abercrombie et. al 2000). The Frankfurt School positioned consumers of media and culture as “dupes”, lulled into a life of unquestioning consumerism, granting the media dominant structural power in capitalist societies. While it is impossible to deny the effects of visual mass media in shaping reality and individuals’ relations to it, it is important to examine a more nuanced relationship between media and culture. The stance taken here is that of Tomlinson (1991) who argues that media does not simply shape reality and culture, but is mediated by individual lived experience. While visual media may dominate our lives and heavily influence how reality is constructed and interpreted, is it not simply a one-way relationship. Individuals also have real material lives that exist outside the media, and as such they act to mediate the relationship with the mass media and vice-versa. This is important, as individuals bring all prior experiences and knowledge to each viewing of media images and texts, allowing for connotation to occur. In other words, the images provided to us are read in conjunction with our lived experience. The mediation of lived experience and the mass media allows for subjective meanings to be created. Our reality “must always be partly a function of our past experiences which generally, in modern cultures, include experiences of media texts” (Tomlinson 1991: 63). In this sense, experiences of media texts are cumulative.
While viewers of electronic media “are aware of the potential for distortion in the images they receive,” (McIntyre 2008: 13) there is an increasingly vague impression of where media representations stop and lived experience begins. Because “visual communication... simulates first-hand experience; the process of mediation is not so evident” (McIntyre 2008: 17). Consumers of mass-media in late-capitalism are so inundated with various media images, it becomes more difficult to discern the underlying reality, and the effect of media representations of that reality. The visual dominance of contemporary culture necessitates a new way of understanding and interacting with the physical world. Visual imagery speaks to the language of the other senses, particularly those of smell and touch, and is therefore very powerful (Lowe 1995). As Lowe (1995) argues, the primacy of sight allows for much more persuasive marketing techniques, as advertisements can stimulate thoughts, feelings, hopes or dreams, and not just focus on the concrete benefits of a product. A visually dominated culture can simulate reality in a specific way and turn our attention more to surfaces and increasingly, as Ewen (1988) argues, to a social world dominated by personal style and fashion.

The elevated role of visual modes of representation and communication owe much of their importance to the invention of the photograph, able to capture a specific moment of space and time much more accurately than anything before. As French Structuralist Roland Barthes asserts Camera Lucida, the advent of photography divides the history of the world in two parts: before and after the invention of the camera (Barthes 1980). Before the first photograph, taken by Joseph Niecepe in 1825, all visual representations of the material world outside of one’s lived experience were confined to paintings or drawings. As an ostensible representation of objective reality, the arrival of the photograph has had profound implications for the conception and representation of the world outside of, and including, our own experiences. As Goldman et al. (1991) explain, for a photograph to become an
image, it must be viewed by someone not involved in its production. For the majority of the photograph’s history, it was viewed only by those who took the photograph. In late-capitalism the photograph has been transformed into an image, whose reproduction and transmission possibilities are nearly infinite. Photographic images, particularly those used in advertising campaigns, are now viewed by millions of people. The consumers of these images are deeply removed from the production process, and what they understand from the image is informed by wider narratives and cultural codes (Ewen 1988).

A constantly expanding anthology of photographs is now readily accessible through the democratization of technological tools for producing, viewing, and sharing images. Photography has evolved to the degree that how we experience ourselves and others is constructed through photographic images. As Susan Sontag (1990) argues, we use photographs to prove to ourselves that reality actually exists; “the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people’s reality, and eventually one’s own” (57). Photographs are an increasingly important way in which reality is socially constructed. Photographic images in late-capitalist advertising are so prevalent and persuasive that people construct their realities to match the photographs. In studying lifestyle magazines, Ewen (1990) found that when people sent in pictures of their living rooms they looked very close to the images presented in the magazine advertisements. With the proliferation of photographic images in late-capitalism, the understanding and perception of reality is more and more constructed by something that appears tangible, real and objective, when it is not.

Photographs, and now digital images, are conceived as being an objective depiction of reality precisely because they have been socially constructed this way. Ever since their conception, there has been a clear demarcation of the element of ‘truthfulness’ between paintings and drawings on one hand, and photographs on the other (Bourdieu 2002).
Photographs have been constructed in such a way as to be viewed as unassailable depictions of reality when, in actuality, a photograph “hides more than it discloses” (Sontag 1990: 23). In the end, photographs are “as much of an interpretation of reality as paintings or drawings are” (Sontag 1990: 57), yet are increasingly viewed and consumed as fact. Photographs have the effect of flattening reality by subsuming both space and time. All three dimensions of understanding converge, and the person being photographed suffers what Barthes (1980) calls a “flat death”. By their very nature, photographs are a slim slice of time, and subjects always exist immediately in the past. Space, time and the material conditions required in the production of the photograph are eliminated, leading the viewer to “rule out historical understanding of reality” (Sontag 1990: 53). When this process occurs, “the past can seem as certain as the present. What we see on paper is as certain as what we touch” (Barthes 1980: 88). History, and therefore the understanding of present reality, is altered as photographs present everything as existing in the perpetual present/past. The photograph also has the effect of seemingly eliminating the spatial constraints of actual lived experience as it “give us a sense that we can hold the world in our hands” (Sontag 1990: 3).

Not only does the photograph serve to eliminate understanding of the material constraints of space and time involved in commodity production but it also hides the very complex material processes involved in actually recording the actual image itself. The photograph is false on the level of perception as it presents an image of reality perfectly concealing the intensive productive process involved in making the photograph, and distorting the material conditions of the lives of the subjects involved. According to Ewen (1988) this is where the photographic images used in advertising derive their power. The photographic image can simultaneously “free itself from the encumbrances posed by material reality and still lay claim to that reality” (90). Photographs in advertising, give the
viewer a sense that the commodities and lifestyle portrayed are attainable and desirable, eliminating any thought of the social relations of production needed to produce those commodities or the image. As Lowe (1995) argues, “bits and pieces of different simulatory spaces and simulatory times are valorized to produce and hype the consumption of the late capitalist commodity” (89). The dominance of the digitally produced image has meant that the framework for our perception is altered, and this alteration can be used in infinite ways to market commodities.

When an individual views a photograph it is impossible not to fill in the blanks and place that image in a certain place and time according to their own understanding and knowledge. In visual culture, inundated with photographs, our understanding becomes increasingly superficial as time and space are compressed, and material processes are concealed. Reality can never be comprehended through photographs, though they increasingly provide the clues and grammar that dictate our lives, and are constructed and presented as actual truth (Ewen 1988). Further, as they are perceived as truth, photographic images become sites for meaning and manipulation, infused with narratives and the personal experiences of each viewer. In this way images gain their rhetorical and discursive power from history lessons half learnt (Lowe 1995).

In *All Consuming Images* Ewen (1988) argues that images have to meet three requirements to be brought into the style market; they must be disembodied, mass produced, and able to become merchandise. The most important requirement for a photograph to become a digital image used in advertising is it must be disembodied, or separated from what is depicted in the image. This happens in two key ways. First, it must be separated from the social and material processes involved in its production. Second, it must enter the digital world in order to be mass produced and transmitted in advertising.
When an image enters the digital world it can be used in advertising to represent, or signify, something other than that which was originally intended. For example an image of a tropical rainforest can be used to represent “purity.”

Images must also be able to be readily mass produced. While the initial production cost of photographic images are often very high, they pale in comparison to the prospective value of a digitized image that can be reproduced ad infinitum in an advertising or branding campaign. Finally, for photographs to become images they must be able to convey some sort of meaning that can be attached to merchandise. Photographs of coffee farmers would not be images unless they were somehow mass produced and disseminated for the purposes of marketing.

The notion of representation is important at this juncture as photographs have become the dominant mode of representation in late-capitalism. Representation can be defined as “the construction in any medium (especially the mass media) of aspects of ‘reality’ such as people, places, objects, events, cultural identities and other abstract concepts. Such representations may be in speech or writing as well as in still or moving pictures” (Chandler 2010). Anything outside of our direct experiences needs to be mediated by representations. Any notion of what it was like to live in Medieval Europe, for example, is impossible for us to grasp without writing, paintings, or movies on the subject.

If representations are “symbolic orderings of space and time (that) provide a framework of who or what we are in society” (Harvey 1990: 214), it follows that changes in representation will in turn change how reality is constructed. Meaning-making has changed with the visual turn in representation. The total saturation of our mental landscape with visual images in late-capitalism means that “technically reproduced surfaces...vie with lived experience in the structure of meaning. The image offer[s] a representation of reality more
compelling than reality itself, and even thr[ows] the very definition of reality into question” (Ewen 1988: 25). The photograph has become the predominant vehicle of social transmission, communication, and reproduction, and subsequently of social power in the regime of late-capitalism. As Harvey (1990) argues “If spatial and temporal experiences are primary vehicles for the coding and reproduction of social relations (as Bourdieu suggests), then a change in the way the former get represented will almost certainly generate some kind of shift in the latter” (247). Control of the visual means of representation is a major source of economic and social power, as visual communication, especially of taste and fashion conveyed through marketing, are ultimately discrete conveyors of capitalist ideology and meaning.

Harvey argues that “(P)recisely because capitalism is expansionary and imperialistic, cultural life in more and more areas gets brought within the cash nexus and the logic of capital accumulation” (Harvey 1990: 344). Images, and the created symbolic value, have become an arena for accumulation, where signs and symbols attached to commodities, not the actual commodities themselves, are bought and sold. “Furthermore, images have, in a sense, themselves become commodities” (Harvey 1990: 287). Consumers, as Ewen mentioned, operate in a symbolic realm where taste, style and fashion are tightly interwoven into everyday life.

The transition in the regime of capital accumulation from Fordism to flexible accumulation or late-capitalism has changed the very essence of how social life is experienced, how reality is constructed, and how meaning is made. Thus it must be the starting point of any enquiry into present consumption habits. Capital, as Harvey (1990) argues, is a process in which social life is reproduced through commodity production. This process works at relentlessly changing the society in which it is embedded. Through a
search for solutions to crisis tendencies, the current incarnation of capital has turned to
decreased turnover time and symbolic production as new ways to extract wealth. One of
the most prominent ways this is currently achieved is through the marketing and
consumption of images, fashion, and style (Ewen 1990). Individuals are increasingly caught
in a world where experience is fleeting and ephemeral, and that places increased social
importance on image maintenance, identity construction, and lifestyle consumption. The
visual turn in late-capitalism has shifted our experience of reality. A visual and media-
dominated world must be seen through the lens of capital accumulation, not just in the
production and consumption of goods, but in the production and reproduction of meaning
as well. This is part of capitalism’s systemic obscuring of its own operation. As Berger
notes “capitalism survives by forcing the majority to define their interests as narrowly as
possible” (1972: 154).

Any materialist understanding of the present historical moment must include an
examination of the production of commodities, actual or symbolic, or increasingly a
complex hybrid of the two. Late-capitalism is consumer driven, and the production of niche
products is dependent upon close attention to style and fashion trends and just-in-time
production. Late-capitalism relies on the visual realm as the site of symbolic production,
and the primary means of marketing and branding products, as well as the creation of
meaning. Furthermore, late-capitalism employs images as the primary vehicle for meaning,
creating and providing an understanding of the world ensuring the conditions of its own
reproduction. Since the visual world is ultimately controlled and administered by capital
controlled media, the photographic image may currently be one of the largest sources of
power. How the photographic image is used in late-capitalist advertising and branding is
therefore of key importance. As the image is both culturally produced and consumed
according to certain codes and expectations, it can therefore be studied semiotically. Lowe
(1995) argues that the image is a vehicle for the conveyance of linguistic signs and is so powerful that the signs can be detached from both space and time, and what they actually signify, and become free floating signifiers that can then be attached to products. This process of signification in advertising images is the focus of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 2 – THE NATURE OF CONSUMPTION IN LATE-CAPITALISM

The transition to late-capitalism has fundamentally altered the world necessitating a shift in the focus of Marxist analysis from production to consumption. This shift is known as the consumptive turn, and has allowed insight into the nature of how both production and consumption operate in an apparently seamless fashion, constantly redefining consumer tastes and offering an endless array of new and highly differentiated products (Harvey 1990, Lowe 1995). The technological interconnectedness of late-capitalism, and the resulting space-time compression, has led to unprecedented managing of consumer tastes and habits, instantly linked to the primarily overseas production of commodities. Through the use of mass-produced and disseminated images in an intensified market setting, consumption is now dominated by advertising selling leisure and lifestyle. Individuals hedonistically consume semiotic signs and signifiers of status, wealth, and lifestyle. In response to the crisis of Fordism, capital employs new accumulation strategies based primarily on the production of niche consumer goods steeped in symbolism and lifestyle signifiers.

In late-capitalism everyone is, in a sense, forced to operate within the confines of style and appearance (Ewen 1988, Harvey 1990). Goods have taken a paramount position in defining who we are and how we make sense of the world. As David Harvey notes, the presentation of an image is the single most important aspect of “individual identity, self-realization and meaning” (Harvey 1990: 288). Or, as Ewen (1988) argues, “for people to maintain personal integrity in this world, they need to cultivate a critical awareness of the visual realm” (xxv). In the late-capitalist setting, the measure of one’s personal success is not only their conspicuous consumption of goods, as Veblen (1899) argued, but also the presentation of self to others (Goffman 1959). The assembling of a congruent identity and
lifestyle made up of consumption choices, has become increasingly important in a world trading in style and surfaces.

The power of photography and the ability to reproduce and transmit media images has profoundly transformed the way people living in advanced capitalist societies see, interpret and interact with the world. As Ewen (1988) notes, “new aesthetic outlooks and powerful new visual techniques [are] helping to transform the physics of perception, the relation between the ways people see and the physical world they inhabit” (xxxi). Further, as Harvey (1990) describes, “advertising and media images have come to play a very much more integrative role in cultural practices and now assume a much greater importance in the growth dynamics of capitalism” (287).

Of interest here is how the trade in images operates at a semiotic level, and how the dominance of signs and signifiers mask the underlying ideology of late-capitalism. How does the deluge of media images used to market products overwhelm citizens’ critical thinking ability, and focus our attention on style and surfaces? How does hegemonic lifestyle consumption, as Lowe (1995) calls it, operate, and how is this tied to the consumption of media images? This chapter examines how symbolic consumption has developed in late-capitalism and the mechanisms that guide it.

Theories of consumption are examined in relation to the consumption of Fair Trade coffee in order to understand the mechanisms that allow for continued and expanding capital accumulation. In addition to more recent contributions to theories of consumption, Veblen’s (1899) and Goffman’s (1959) theories of conspicuous consumption and the presentation of self in everyday life, respectively, remain relevant. Distinction and the conversion of economic and cultural capital, along with the redefinition of needs, also provide important insights into contemporary consumption habits as well. However, the
more recent contributions of semiotics are necessary to fully understand the nature of hegemonic consumerism and the underlying meaning and ideology of late-capitalism. Fair Trade coffee provides us with one of the most salient examples of symbolic lifestyle consumption.

2.1 Theories of Consumption

American economist and sociologist Thorsten Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) is an important starting point for any investigation of consumption. The insights he provides regarding conspicuous consumption remain valuable to examinations of consumerism. If anything, the display of consumer goods has become more important in late-capitalism than in Veblen’s time. Veblen (1899) reminds us, when analyzing consumption we cannot forget the role of hierarchy, status, and the outward display of wealth as motivating factors that shape our relationships with consumer goods.

Veblen’s principle of conspicuous consumption operates much the same today, albeit in a more complex fashion. For instance, an individual buys a Mercedes to indicate to others she has the pecuniary strength, to use Veblen’s terms, to afford such luxury products. Therefore to display status, the purchase becomes symbolic (Veblen 1899). In essence, Veblen laid the groundwork for examining the symbolic nature of goods. For him, the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods was evidence – or in other terms, a sign or symbol – of the wealth of the purchaser. While this remains true, what has changed is the depth and importance of the multitude of symbolic meanings attached to goods. Costliness, while still important, vies with other, sometimes conflicting, symbolic meanings. As argued by Dubois and Duquesne (1993), “the purchase of luxury goods does not obey economic
Conspicuous consumption is now motivated by the symbolic and social value attached to consumer goods.

With the rapid increase of niche consumer goods, consumption is increasingly reliant on the display of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1980). It is no longer sufficient to consume luxury items for differentiation of class alone, as “conspicuity shifts from quantity to quality, from the appropriation of materially valued products to the appreciation of culturally valued products” (Shipman 2004: 1). In this current regime of accumulation the exchange of symbolic meanings is of paramount importance to identity construction. Therefore individuals have even greater motivation to outwardly display their consumption.

With the enhanced symbolic nature of goods, individuals now seek to place themselves within a social hierarchy not only of wealth, but also of taste, style and fashion. Currently it is not simply a matter of having the means. One must also have the knowledge of the ‘right’ goods to consume in accordance with a particular lifestyle. Goods high in symbolic meanings and expense become positional goods indicating that not only does the consumer have wealth, but also knowledge or taste. This is a method of social distancing and negation, while at the same time active identity building.

Symbolic-interactionist Erving Goffman also offers important insights in understanding consumption in late-capitalism. In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life Goffman (1959) argues that social life, and all its attendant actions and meanings, can be seen as theatre. On the stage of life, all actions are intentional and highly managed by the social actor. We move through our daily lives constantly making decisions based on how we think it will be received by others in social situations (Goffman 1959). In order to fully understand the meaning-making process and symbolic power encapsulated currently in
consumption, "we need to turn to everyday life as the site for expressions of cultural symbolism" (Firat and Venkatesh 1995: 249). In an age where symbolic consumption of lifestyle signifiers is paramount, Goffman’s reminder is even more applicable. If we conceive of social life as a dramaturgical performance, and if social life in late-capitalism is dominated by the image and identity one puts forth through the consumption of different lifestyle goods, then we can say that meanings and identities are constantly changing as the symbolism found in these goods is always in flux.

Regarding late-capitalist consumption there are a few important points worth noting. First, all human interactions and meanings are socially constructed and malleable over time. The appearance we put on when we are in the company of others is time, place, and audience dependent (Goffman 1959). Second, the expressions we give through language and non-verbal communication are semiotic in nature. We speak or dress in a certain way in order to impress upon others an acceptable version of ourselves that will grant us rewards in our own social group (Goffman 1959). In consumer society non-verbal communication is very important. Goffman helps us realize that human actors will go to great lengths to project a desired image to others in order to be accepted in social situations. In today’s world there is a plethora of different social groups to which to belong. Each of these is relatively omnivorous in their consumption habits. While we present a self to the outside world symbolically with what we buy, the groups we are trying to fit into are increasingly fragmented. This then creates a situation in which the presentation of self in everyday life becomes a search for belonging, but also a search for distinction, differentiation, taste, and class. This leads to the insights of French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.
To understand how distinction and taste operate, and how, in-turn, social and cultural values become part of fashion and lifestyle consumption, one must recognize that goods are “embedded within the social, cultural, and symbolic structures” (Firat and Ventakesh 1995: 249). As Bourdieu states, “the cultural capital objectified in material objects and media...is transmissible in its materiality” (Bourdieu 1986: 7). Signifiers of cultural capital, like authenticity, can at the same time create and project a certain lifestyle. They can also evoke an emotional response in us: “signs not only denote, they also connote” (Abercrombie et al. 2000: 311). Harvey (1990) argues this fetishism over consumer objects - what Bourdieu calls an “aesthetic disposition” where people treat “everyday objects like food, in a way that de-emphasizes functional utility and instead views everyday objects through an aesthetic lens of cultural appreciation and knowledge acquisition” (Johnston and Bauman 2010: 33) - is used to disguise and distort what is really on display: class distinctions. Distinction operates on scarcity and relevant symbolic meanings, so one must keep in mind how symbolic consumption of social and cultural values is “more disguised than those of economic capital,” and “is predisposed to operate as symbolic capital, i.e., to be unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence, as authority exerting an effect of (mis)recognition” (Bourdieu 1986: 5). The search for distinction in contemporary consumption is one of the most significant motivating factors individuals face in making consumption choices.

The consumption of goods with high symbolic value conceals economic capital by displaying it as cultural capital, but it is symbolic, because this cultural capital is for display and therefore distinction. Therefore, the ideological underpinnings remain hidden to both the consumer and others. As Bauman and Johnston (2010) argue, “the status attained through cultural appreciation is framed as a matter of individual tastes and lifestyles, which are posited as sophisticated, savvy, and cosmopolitan” (41). Lifestyle consumers are
involved in displaying their cultural and symbolic capital to others, conferring distinction, and therefore status, from other groups. While status-seeking consumers may be high in economic income, they convert economic capital into cultural capital, as Bourdieu argues. The ideological and meaning-making power of consumption is derived from the act of converting economic capital into cultural capital, and this "exchange transforms the things exchanged into signs of recognition" (Bourdieu 1986: 10). The symbolic nature of Organic products, for instance, confers membership to certain groups outside the 'mainstream', but also noting symbolically the consumer has superior taste. For products to become lifestyle markers they must contain, symbolically, a certain amount of cultural capital to be apprehended in purchase and consumption.

This conversion of economic into cultural capital also operates in the reverse direction, when, for example, cultural capital of seasoned hipsters can be converted into economic capital. As Perry (2006) remarks in reference to Chicago's trendy Wicker Park neighbourhood,

Bars and restaurants also benefit from the starving artist ethos, but they benefit even more from the concern for status that pervades Wicker Park. For example, people working in the service industry are encouraged to display their status as hipsters, to be their sub-cultural selves, because in so doing they contribute to the aura of cool that attracts clientele of the financially endowed sort (the 'urban tourists consisting largely of yuppies, 'amateurs', the insuffciently hip) (2006: 3). Consumers fiercely compete in capital conversion to attain distinction and therefore status. Class differences are minimized, poverty (especially if chosen) is glorified, and emphasis on fragmented, image-based lifestyle and identity is produced and reproduced "only to the degree that the whims of fashion sustain it" (Harvey 1990: 82).

Any discussion of consumerism inevitably leads to a conversation about needs and wants. The 'false needs' hypothesis of the Frankfurt School contends that in a capitalist economy advertising is used to create false needs to sustain the mass consumption of
consumer goods (Adorno 1991). This hypothesis is problematic, as it positions consumers as dupes who are effectively tricked into pursuing ‘false’ needs. In The Limits to Satisfaction, Leiss (1976) takes a more nuanced view of consumption, arguing in a high-intensity market setting our emotional needs are increasingly met through the market. As capitalism deepens and searches for new forms of profit, it displaces arenas where people previously met their emotional needs, such as the family or church. As Leiss (1976) explains, “those who live in this setting learn to search for the satisfaction of needs in the purchase of commodities” (71). In the words of Habermas (1987), capital has colonized the life-world. The semiotic nature of the late-capitalist commodity “works to break down the boundary separating exchangist and non-exchangist terrains” (Lowe 1995: 78). Late-capitalism has destroyed historical ways of meeting an individual’s emotional needs, and increasingly these needs are met through the market.

Leiss’ characterization of needs and wants is an important contribution to understanding why people are motivated to consume items that have very abstract use-values. Leiss argues that when capitalist societies reach a level of material prosperity, the social bonds that fulfill emotional needs are dismantled and sold back to consumers in the form of commodities. In the words of one advertising executive “in a sense what we’re doing is wrapping up your emotions and selling them back to you” (Jhally 1990: 3). Leiss argues “needs for self-esteem and self-actualization are not simply material objects but things that have a complex set of meanings or ‘messages’ associated with them” (1976: 57). And further, “these messages constitute the symbolic or culturally determined aspects of material things themselves,” and are constantly changing, re-packaged, and attached to various material objects (Leiss 1976: 82). This leads to the “fragmentation and ‘destabilization’ of the categories of needing” (Leiss 1976: 88). In late-capitalism concrete forms of needs satisfaction are replaced by an ever-increasing array of new product
characteristics. As Lowe (1995) argues, this type of consumption is predicated on a highly potent advertising structure capable of linking material objects of consumption with emotional needs. The unifying theme of this type of consumption is “self-actualization or ‘individuality’” (Leiss 1976: 64). In a society fraught with fragmentary experience and identity, advertisers promise implicitly that emotional needs and individuality can be attained through the market.

Leiss argues “every expression or state of needing has simultaneously a material and cultural correlate” (1976: 64); or put another way, every emotional need has now been fashioned as a product characteristic that can be attached to products and sold in the market. But where does that material and cultural correlate come from, and how does late-capitalism fulfill this need? Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1988), Lowe (1998), and Ewen (1988) make the argument that the contemporary capitalist world is dominated by visual advertisements, and these contain signifiers that indicate a promise of fulfilling those needs. Individuals in late-capitalism are bombarded with hundreds of advertising images every day, but the real power of advertising, however, is in its overall cumulative nature. This has the effect of forming a powerful cultural message that life satisfaction and emotional needs fulfillment can be achieved through the market (Jhally 1990). Visual modes of advertising now dominate forming the visual grammar of our lives. It connects ever-changing product characteristics with ever-changing fashion tastes tied to notions of identity and individuality (Ewen 1988, Lowe 1995). In its current form, advertising is not defined by simple manipulation of people’s wants and desires, but by interweaving identity, lifestyle, and emotional needs with commodities. The visual nature of contemporary advertising is able to link together dissimilar ideas and messages with changing product characteristics in order to convince individuals of their emotional needs fulfillment potential.
The Body Shop, for example, which sells personal skin and body care products, is heavily reliant on images of marginalized youth of the global South, and displays these often life-size images prominently on the windows of their stores. Through the visual grammar of these images they are able to associate marginalized peoples with skin and hair care products seamlessly. This is achieved in part by appealing to feeling, or emotional needs of potential consumers. The Body Shop brand is imbued with a ‘social consciousness’ so that people who consume the products are able to incorporate this, however small, into their personal appearance and identity, as well as their emotional state of being. Real human social connections that supply us the resources to meet our emotional needs have also been lost to late-capitalism and we are socialized to meet those needs through material goods. Within late-capitalist advertising individuals “respond to images emotionally and immediately, connecting social, cultural values with product characteristics” (Lowe 1995: 67).

2.2 The Semiotics of Consumption

Late-capitalist advertising depends on two important factors: first, it relies on visual modes of representation, and second, it relies on the increasing speed and changes in the images used (Jhally 1990). This operates on a more complex level than just an association of images or feelings with products through juxtaposition or re-combination, though this obviously is part of it. In the visually dominated culture of late-capitalism advertising relies on the semiotic reading of visual signs (Lowe 1998). This is explored further later in this chapter, but what is important to note here is that consumers are not simply being manipulated by late-capitalist advertising, but are subject to a whole host of emotional and physical dynamics that constantly work to alter how they move through consumer
capitalism. Advertising of the semiotic kind brings together all moments of consumption into the emotionally charged battlefield of the (post) modern social landscape.

In order for products and fashion to be a fluid conglomeration of signs and symbols, increasingly so must be the sense of self. As Huws (2006) notes, identity and experience in late-capitalism are necessarily fragmented. With this fragmentation comes anxiety and longing, or as Ewen calls it “the dream of wholeness” (Ewen 1988: 32). Individuals seek out products in the marketplace promising this re-configuration of the self, and it only makes sense that advertisers seek out and exploit, as Leiss (1976) argues, our fragile identities and emotional states. Late-capitalism is marked by pervasive feelings of “aloneness, isolation, invisibility, and insignificance” (Ewen 1988: 79). The images that dominate late-capitalism are used to convey partial fragments of identity, or fulfill emotional needs that can be attained through the purchase of certain products.

With the advent of modern advertising visual signifiers have elevated style, fashion, and surface appearances in general, to virtually unchallenged primacy. This becomes self-reinforcing, as the more we invest in the world of style, the more likely we are to experience the anxiety that we were trying to initially overcome. As Stuart Ewen notes,

Style is a process of creating commodity images for people to emulate and believe in. Such emulation, though, is not without its costs. As frozen photogenic images become models from which people design their living spaces, or themselves, extreme alienation sets in. One becomes, by definition, increasingly uncomfortable in one’s own skin. The constant availability of alternative styles to “adapt to,” to purchase, thrives on this discomfort. The marketing engines of style depend on anomic subjects seeking to become splendid objects (1988: 91).

While there is some modest agreement on why advertising is so effective, there is less agreement on how visual late-capitalist semiotic advertising works. Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1988) argue that visual advertisements are part of the semiotic plane and operate much like linguistic signs. In linguistics there are two parts of a sign:
there is the signifier (the word ‘tree’) and the signified (the actual tree). Visual images, operate similarly it is argued, but in a much more complex and powerful way. For instance, there is only one type of object that the word ‘tree’ signifies. A visual image on the other hand contains many complex signifiers and visually simulates the tree for the viewer. When we are shown montaged and juxtaposed visual images of a tree, along with auditory linguistic signs, what forms is a complex semiotic message instead of just a simple sign (Lowe 1995). This function of visual signs allows hundreds of other signifiers. For example, ‘nature,’ ‘purity,’ or ‘life,’ to be attached to the notion of a tree, which is much more than a person would ever conjure up reading the word on a page. An image then is never just a single sign but a conglomeration of many signs, and therefore many signifiers (Lowe 1995). In late-capitalist advertising multiple visual signs contained in images conjure up and play on pre-existing socially constructed notions, and then associate those narratives with product characteristics.

There are important differences between signification and simulation in linguistic and visual signs. Visual signs transmitted through images encourage the viewer to believe that there is no difference between a sign and what it is originally referring to. The visual sign not only signifies ‘tree’ but also simulates it. This makes the image “much more powerful and pliable,” as the fact that it is culturally coded is hidden by this simulatory property (Lowe 1995: 57). Visual signs possess an almost infinite amount of referential potential as what is contained in the image is static (tree), but the context in which that image of the tree is presented can be infinitely changed and merged with other visual signs to signify a feeling, product, or both (Lowe 1995). This allows the image to be taken out of any specific context and attached to any other. For instance, the image of Machu Pichu can be detached from
what it originally signifies, namely, the actual site in Peru, and attached through recombination and montage to other signifiers such as ‘ancient’, ‘authentic’, ‘exotic’.

For example, as Caroline Wright (2004) pointed out, the signifier of Machu Picchu used to signify authenticity only works because of a highly developed discourse that equates that site with ancient and indigenous civilizations culturally positioned as more authentic or ‘real’ than our own.

This process has become so commonplace in late-capitalist advertising that viewers fail to recognize the semiotic work being done, and how that functions to produce characteristics for products that are not part of their material attributes. The visual sign “has more volatility and motility than the opposition of denotation/connotation possessed by the linguistic sign” (Lowe 1995: 58). For example, notions such as ‘compassion’ and ‘empathy’ are attached through the visual signifier of the pink ribbon for breast cancer and associated ad campaigns to the material attributes of legions of commodities ranging from clothing to sporting events. As Leiss (1976) notes, “the advertisement’s composition connects background imagery with products which have not the slightest relationship to it” (89). Advertisers are able to utilize the viewer to do some of the actual semiotic work for them as they must contextualize and connect the wide variety of different signs they are presented with and then attach them to the brand or product (Lowe 1995). In this way the semiotics of consumption operates on two different levels of understanding: one which signifies and simulates, and another that forces the reader to complete the semiotic work of connecting the visual signifiers to a material commodity.
This has been taken one step further, as social and cultural values are now used to signify product characteristics: “contemporary advertising utilizes each and every cultural value to promote the consumption of commodities” (Lowe 1995: 61). Put another way, social and cultural values are the signifier for product characteristics (Lowe 1995). Social and cultural values were previously contained outside of the market, but when they are used as signifiers in visual advertisements they are destabilized and can be manipulated to signify product characteristics.

Advertising gains its power from the meaning made through connecting signifiers to larger societal discourses surrounding those signs. As Hodge and Kress (1988) note, “the original advertisement as a text gained meaning from an inter-textual relationship with other texts” (11). The advertising image is only a small slice of the underlying meanings that make it effective and therefore there must be special attention paid to the underlying cultural discourses represented. The advertisement uses visual signifiers to connect to meta-signs that are part of the late-capitalist discourse. This is again how Machu Pichu can be used to signify something like purity, but if the larger societal discourse did not exist then this advertisement would not be effective, or even make any sense to the viewer. In summary, the visual nature of late-capitalism has de-stabilized needs as well as social and cultural values, which are increasingly met through the market, and visual signs contain many free floating signifiers through the use of montage, juxtaposition and relay.

The late-capitalist consumer is necessarily a lifestyle consumer, as different commodities (and associated signs and signifiers) are used to convey a sense of self to the consumer and others (Lowe 1995). In this way lifestyle consumption is intimately linked to
identity construction. The consumption of a particular lifestyle is an effort to fill the emotional vacuum of meaninglessness and make whole the fractured identity common in late-capitalism. Individuals strive to convey to others that they know themselves enough to construct a semblance of self constructed from a multitude of different lifestyle signifiers. As Ewen (1988) notes, the presentation of a coherent style or fashion is one way in which we try to prove our social worth to others. Consumers are marketed a multiplicity of lifestyles all promising enjoyment and fulfillment, and portray a certain way of living as advantageous (Lowe 1995).

While there are several definitions of lifestyle and lifestyle consumption, the best may come from Katz-Gerro who states,

The concept of lifestyle connotes individuality of taste and a distinctive choice of activities associated with specific groups. Common lifestyle indicators in sociological literature include leisure pastimes, cultural consumption, and cultural tastes related to clothing, music, reading, and choice of holidays (1999: 630).

Lowe argues in the 1960s a concerted effort was made by market researchers to segment the market, providing companies with a way of targeting their advertising budgets rather than simply hoping that their message reached the intended audience. This combined with revolutionary technological changes, just-in-time production, and the destabilizing of needs and corresponding product characteristics, has led to “the unprecedented phenomena of the consumption of lifestyle” (Lowe 1995: 62). In this new era of lifestyle consumption, goods are manufactured and marketed with specific lifestyles in mind that determine design, price, and placement among other factors (Leiss, Kline and Jhally 1988). When deciding on a new product or a variation of an old product, lifestyle statistics are mined extensively in order to maximize profit and use marketing budgets efficiently.
The breakdown of Fordism in the 1960s and 70s was mirrored by the collapse of a traditional monolithic lifestyle in advanced capitalist countries. Marketing and popular culture shifted to a counter-culture ideal in which disparate voices and lifestyles were mined for marketing purposes. As Frank (1997) notes in *The Conquest of Cool*, the counter-culture was co-opted by capital, and ‘cool’ was now a signifier for everything from 7up to Volkswagen. Thus began the marketing of niche products to different lifestyle segments, as each one could be played off against the other. Concurrent with this was the development and deployment of new and more efficient modes of representation and transmission of advertising signs. This meant that certain cultural codes in advertisements could be used as indicating certain lifestyles (Lowe 1995).

Socially conscious consumers are a growing type of lifestyle consumer in the late-capitalist order, as more companies seek to profit from commodities that signify “morally beneficial objectives” (Bryant and Goodman 2004: 344). For consumers of this particular lifestyle there is a strongly held belief “consumption is a way in which individuals [can] make a difference” (Ibid). For the socially conscious a certain type of understanding of the world must be present as everyday acts of consumption are given political meaning. Marketing to the socially conscious consumer is powerful in that it combines morally righteous intentions and actions with lifestyle signifiers that can be purchased (Johnston and Bauman 2010).

The class nature of niche lifestyle consumption is often disregarded and obfuscated by semiotic marketing when individuals are all posited as equal consumers searching for the right lifestyle. In reality socially conscious consumers tend to be university educated and possess disposable income that can be spent on goods proclaimed to be ‘Fair Trade’, ‘organic’ etc. Socially conscious lifestyle consumers’ possess equal and relatively high
amounts of economic and cultural capital. They have enough cultural capital to be aware
and concerned about the state of commodity production, and enough economic capital to
purchase goods purporting to remedy some of these social ills. So-called ethical
consumption must be seen through the analysis of lifestyle consumption, and “with income
distribution becoming more unequal, and lifestyle consumption more varied and more
expensive, the body is caught in a new contradiction between class and lifestyle” (Lowe
1995: 68). What is noteworthy about socially conscious lifestyle consumers is they
regularly see themselves as working against the system of consumerism in some way, when
in actuality they support and re-enforce its power.

Consumption is also semiotic in the way consumers indicate, with their purchases,
membership in certain lifestyle groups, while at the same time actively constructing what is
deemed to constitute those groups. Signifiers for product characteristics are in the end
signifiers for lifestyle. Lifestyle is nothing other than a social group that is based on
difference and social distance. The rules of consumption are set by the powerful, and
therefore serve their interests, and work to include some, and exclude others. The ethos of
the market and therefore consumerism (happiness and fulfillment through the hedonistic
consumption of goods) is produced and reproduced through visual signifiers and
represented to consumers as “living the good life” instead of enjoying “vantage point of the
dominant”.

In order to sustain these structures of domination the dominant groups attempt
to represent the world in forms that reflects their own interests, the interests of
their power. But they also need to sustain the bonds of solidarity that are the
conditions of their dominance” (Hodge and Kress 1988: 3).

The visual nature of late-capitalist advertising and marketing produce a version of the
world suitable to the interests of capital, while erasing any traces this is indeed the case. As
Hodge and Kress (1988) note, “If readers permit themselves to be constructed as consumers
then this gives them a kind of power. So as readers they are powerless; as consumers they are powerful, though that power is in the gift of the makers of the text” (9). The ‘gift’ that consumers are given is that of freedom of choice to construct the lifestyle and identity they want. However they face the restriction of tailoring that lifestyle only through the market of available signs and signifiers that are presented to them by capital.

Lifestyle consumers operate within “discursive, systemic and semiotic practices” (Lowe 1995: 72), intrinsically linked to discourse, ideology and power (Hodge and Kress 1988). The visual discourse of current advertising promotes an ideology of consumerism eclipsing any ethical ends consumers hope to achieve through their purchases. The semiotic emphasis on style and surfaces in the consumption plane masks the underlying discourse and power relations present, leaving them completely naturalized as part of normal everyday life (Hodge and Kress 1988). Hidden from view are the actual social relations of production, and the hegemonic nature of consumerism. Consumption on this level is a social requirement, and opting out – unless it is in some ways acceptable to the market – is not an option. The semiotic nature of marketing perpetrates the view that hedonistic consumption is the only way to live, belong and be whole in the world.

As Hodge and Kress point out in Social Semiotics, “meaning is always negotiated in the semiotic process, never simply imposed inexorably from above by an omnipotent author through an absolute code” (1988: 12). This echoes the views of Johnston and Bauman when describing the hegemony of foodie culture: “For hegemony’s cultural leadership to be effective it must change along with social and historical circumstances; cultural consent is never permanent, and is always in the process of being contested” (2010: 201). Through the focus on surfaces and style, lifestyle consumption becomes hegemonic; “cultural leadership is required to achieve cultural consent, which reinforces class
inequality and often works to ‘short-circuit attempts at critical thinking’ by working its way into common sense” (Ibid.). The contested terrain of lifestyle consumption relies on constant negotiation by actors, and is always accompanied by seemingly dissenting voices that allow for the appearance of critical thought and discussion. As the case study reveals, the fleeting ephemerality of a consumerist landscape entirely dominated by images has allowed capital to incorporate forms of dissent and sub-cultures into its operation (Heath and Potter 2004). As Harvey notes “the ephemerality of such images can then be interpreted in part as a struggle on the part of the oppressed groups of whatever sort to establish their own identity (in terms of street culture, musical styles, fads and fashions made up for themselves) and the rush to convert those innovations to commercial advantage” (1990: 289).

The power of consumerist hegemony lies in the fact that it is invisible to social actors. The signs that operate in the world of advertising largely go unnoticed as they have been totally naturalized as the simulation and juxtaposition totally overwhelms them. The ideology of consumerism paints a very specific view of social relations that operate to define reality and what kinds of questions and criticisms might be offered.
CHAPTER 3 – CASE STUDY – FAIR TRADE COFFEE

The massive re-structuring of the world capitalist order during the last thirty years replaced and moved the Fordist mode of production to the periphery. For industrialized nations this meant not only an abandonment of traditional manufacturing employment, but also a trend towards urbanization with industrialization of agriculture and concurrent policy directives in an emerging global capitalist order. As the Bretton Woods hegemony of the post WWII era was eroded and gave way to financialization and the decoupling of money and productive capital, the global rural population trying to earn a living as independent commodity producers were thrown into a crisis from which many of them will never recover. While the Keynesian, Fordist models were not without their flaws, commodity producers were often insulated and protected by state protection from inevitable boom and bust cycles. As commodity markets were slowly de-regulated in the new age of neo-liberalism, and producers were left to fend for themselves in the global market, there was a qualitative and quantitative change in commodity production and social organization. As state intervention in markets diminished, power in the value chain was generally consolidated by large agri-business and food companies. Large multi-nationals their subsidiaries now produce profit by the manufacture and marketing of ‘food products’ using traditional commodities as raw materials. This control of the value chain by corporations has left most primary producers in a particularly precarious position.

During the early part of the last century, states moved to regulate commodity markets generally, and food production specifically, in response to the uncertainty following WWI, the economic crash and drought of the Great depression, and the essential boom-bust nature of commodity markets. As part of the Fordist regime of accumulation, food prices were kept low and stable in order to maintain the productive capacity of the industrial
workforce. Under the Keynesian system the main reason for regulating the production of agricultural commodities was to maintain stability and control. In order to create parity between the industrial manufacturing and agricultural bases, farmers’ incomes were protected using various policy instruments, to ensure stability across the entire system. Production of agricultural commodities was in most countries primarily for the domestic market and “the main objective of national agricultural policies implementing barriers to trade was to stabilize domestic prices” (Daviron and Ponte 2005: 15).

This meant two different outcomes for independent commodity producers, depending on their location in the global capitalist order. For farmers in the North this meant stable incomes and a generally prosperous time period, even though rural populations were in steady decline with the increasing mechanization of farm work. Farmers in the periphery meanwhile faced mounting pressure from lower prices for their products. According to Singer and Prebisch “(I)n the periphery, productivity gains caused declining primary commodity prices; in the centre, productivity gains led to higher salaries for workers and higher profits for capitalists” (Cited in Daviron and Ponte 2005: 16). It also severely curtailed the profit making ability of manufacturers and processors as they faced import tariffs and marketing boards and a generally protective regime. Long-term capital investment characteristic of Fordism was becoming harder to maintain with the oil shocks of the early 1970s and the increasing financialization of the economy. This inevitably affected independent commodity producers as well. With the regime of accumulation changing to a more ‘fixed, footloose and fractured form,’ the trade barriers of the past were systematically torn down and replaced by neo-liberal trade policies. As Daviron and Ponte (2005) point out:

In relation to commodity exports, the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s saw a reversal of policy approaches. Import substitution was replaced by the promotion
of an export-led growth strategy. International commodity agreements were abandoned and liberalization policies adopted (19).

The shift to flexible accumulation has had three main consequences for agricultural producers. First, the privatization or elimination of state sponsored or supported marketing boards and processing facilities. Second, the promotion of production for export instead of domestic markets which led to a concentration on mono-cultural cultivation of certain cash crops, leaving farmers far more at the mercy of international commodity traders and boom and bust market cycles. Third, it eliminated or reduced direct subsidies or tax benefits for small producers. This led to a situation where in Northern countries, which dominate power relations in international negotiations, kept in place some of their protectionist measures, especially those benefiting capital, while forcing countries in the South to tear down most protection for farmers. Farmers the world over, but especially in the South, faced an ongoing crisis of low prices. All commodity producers are now pitted against each other, and any protection against the boom and bust cycle, or from the power of global agribusiness, has now been greatly diminished.

The transformation of agriculture and the crisis of independent commodity producers followed the general trend of flexible capitalist accumulation in late-capitalism. As Harvey (1990) and many others have noted, the trend to a more free flowing form of capital accumulation necessarily meant the liberalization of trade barriers. This pitted farmer against farmer across the globe, while at the same time concentrating power in agribusiness and food companies. The prices for raw commodities dropped at the farm gate while the prices for food for consumers stayed the same or went up. Morisset (1997) found that between 1970 and 1995 there was an increasing differential from what the farmer was paid and what the consumer paid for four of the most traded agricultural commodities –
coffee, sugar, wheat, and beef (Daviron and Ponte 2005). With more power held by agribusiness, and little protection from an increasingly paper commodities market, what has been called the farm crisis in Canada and the United States is merely part of a crisis for independent commodity producers around the world.

In other words, the low and decreasing share of consumer prices received by farmers is explained by the market power of large private actors in consuming countries, and in particular the market power of large trading companies able to influence the transmission of world commodity prices to domestic prices (Daviron and Ponte 2005: 23).

Daviron and Ponte (2005), following Wallerstein and Hopkins, use a value-chain analysis to try to understand how the restructuring of agricultural trade has negatively impacted small coffee farmers. A value-chain is defined as “a network of labour and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity” (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986; in Daviron and Ponte 2005: 27). Their analysis using the value-chain model found that large buyers use their consolidated market power to hold the price of green coffee low, while charging more at retail for processed, marketed and branded coffee (Daviron and Ponte 2005). They conclude this makes coffee a ‘buyer-driven chain’ where control is concentrated at the top, while higher risk input operations (like growing the actual coffee) are left to small producers, who have no other option but accept the risk and low prices. In these value-chains where companies now increasingly produce ‘food products,’ ”key actors concentrate on branding, design, and marketing functions” (Daviron and Ponte 2005: 28).

What emerges from this picture of coffee production, and agricultural production in general, then is that one sees farmers paid for material quality attributes at the farm gate, while the real value is being created symbolically by advertising, branding packaging and roasters elsewhere. On average coffee growers see a little over a dollar a pound for green coffee,
while roasters will sell it for over ten dollars on the grocery store shelf (Pendergast 1999).

Daviron and Ponte sum up the situation well:

Many developing countries are stuck in producing and exporting goods that are valued for their material quality attributes. Symbolic and in-person service quality attributes are generated and controlled elsewhere. Thus market power is a question not only of market share (and abuse of it), but also of capturing the most valuable attributes while undermining the value of the attributes that need to be purchased (2005: 47).

Value and profit in late-capitalism, while having a material basis, is created symbolically by processors and retailers. While coffee prices for the farmer are low, the sum of marketing and branding strategies create another much more lucrative avenue to extract profit. The use of images of coffee production is very important to this process, over which farmers have little control and see none of the benefits. Images and the created symbolic value has become the arena for the creation of profit, where signs and symbols attached to commodities, are created, bought, and sold. Consumers, as Ewen (1988) mentions, operate in a symbolic realm where taste, style, fashion, and meaning are tightly interwoven into everyday life. Not only do images of coffee farmers become commoditized to create symbolic value, but they have become floating signifiers for such things as ‘social justice’ and ‘authenticity’. These floating signifiers, in turn, become signs and symbols for consumers to purchase and display to others, while the reality of coffee production is further obscured or completely hidden from view.

3.1 Traditional Coffee Production

Coffee, along with cotton, tea, tobacco, and sugar, was a staple of Colonial economies throughout the 17th and 18th centuries (Heathcott 2000). From the outset, coffee was a product almost exclusively produced for export, and, having no nutritional value, has not
been produced for local consumption on a large scale (Topik 2003). The production and trade of coffee in many ways exemplifies the classic heartland/hinterland relationship of capitalism, in which wealth is generated for Northern countries by exploiting the labour and resources of the South.

As Heathcott notes “coffee was at the leading edge of a colonial system of extraction that, in numerous guises, still persists today” (2000: 2). What was initially based on a plantation model of commodity production using slave labour has evolved into a system of liberalized trade controlled by transnational corporations. Subsistence producers are highly susceptible to volatile markets and control ever-smaller portions of the value-chain (Daviron and Ponte 2005). The coffee economy, then, from the start been based on an unequal exchange: resource extraction from the South to feed commodity consumption and the production of wealth in the North. The consumption of coffee on the mass scale we see today began with the advent of industrial capitalism, which brought technological innovations and mechanization to the process of coffee production, introducing economies of scale (Heathcott 2000). As more coffee could be processed, shipped and roasted at one time, more value could be captured from the raw bean. With the attendant expansion of production, in addition to the introduction of low-grade coffees and low import taxes, coffee began to lose its prior status as a luxury commodity and be consumed on a mass scale for the first time. By the end of the 19th century it became a habitual drink of the working class (Topik 2003).

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2 Many have argued that the mass consumption of coffee by the working classes was a necessary part of the industrialization process. As capitalism required a more regimented labour and time schedule from workers, “caffeine became instrumental” and coffee became part of the lifestyle of lower-middle class and middle class workers for the first time (Topik 2003: 37).
The International Coffee Agreement (ICA), first signed in 1962, was an effort by coffee producing nations to apply joint state regulation to the production of coffee in order to curb unstable, generally low prices caused by overproduction. This model can be contrasted with the current model of social regulation that, since the collapse of the ICA in 1989, “has positioned social actors as external moral overseers who govern economic activity often through standard-based certification and labelling procedures” (Raynolds 2012: 276). The ICA, which began as a means to address the constant crisis of boom and bust cycle in coffee production, had been plagued with problems from both inside and outside the coffee market: interests in large producer countries and political turmoil to name the two most salient. The quota system brought in under the ICA was, in theory, a way to combat overproduction and speculation. It ultimately failed because coffee as a commodity is inelastic (a decrease in price does not increase demand). Coffee producers were caught in a ‘prisoners’ dilemma of sorts as quotas only work if followed by all producing countries. An oligopoly of U.S. firms set the price for all coffee, regardless of quality, as they had the most market buying power. The ICA, while succeeding in temporarily stabilizing prices, failed when the largest player, the United States withdrew. Initially pressured into signing for Cold War geopolitical reasons, they became reluctant once these reasons started to evaporate. Large roasters in the U.S. greatly benefitted from the failure of the ICA as they were able to stockpile huge masses of raw beans at severely depressed prices (Sick 1999). The International Coffee Agreement was first initiated by a group of 36 producing nations after enduring a disastrous decade of record high coffee production and low prices. They came together to form the International Coffee Organization (ICO). These nations were very dependent on dollars earned exporting coffee, and sought to form some sort of quota system (Sick 1999). In 1962 the first five-year term of the International Coffee Agreement was signed by all major exporting nations and the U.S
The ICA employed a number of different tactics, to varying degrees of success, to stabilize the price for raw coffee: controlling both exports and imports, setting a price floor, promoting increased consumption of coffee outside the United States and Europe, and taking measures against coffee stockpiling (Sick 1999). These measures proved highly complex and difficult to enforce, and since it was voluntary, any party could officially withdraw with 90 days notice. The ICA created an environment that favoured the production of mass produced low quality beans. Coffee drinkers began to demand higher quality coffee, and producers would work around the ICA to satisfy that demand and earn extra income. In addition to this, market share of coffee in the beverage sector continued to dwindle, even in the face of ICA promotion. The large roasters saw a series of mergers and acquisitions in this period as market share was tightly contested (Pendergast 1999).

The ICA limped along until the late 1980s, stabilizing prices somewhat, but independent producers were hardly thriving, as they were caught in the perennial cost-price squeeze of commodity production. The ongoing revolutionary wars in Latin America shone a light on the plight of coffee farmers, and the U.S. continued to sign on, again for political reasons, even though they saw Latin American producers as acting like a cartel. In this system, counterfeiting and smuggling abounded, while the majority of the coffee was still of very poor quality. By this point a two-tiered coffee market had arisen with low quality beans inside the agreement and high quality beans outside of it (Sick 1999).

3.2 The Restructuring of the Global Coffee Market

The U.S. National Coffee Association withdrew its support in favour of free trade in coffee and in 1989 the U.S. government was ambivalent about renewing its support. A bitter standoff ensued between Brazil and the US about export limits abruptly suspended the
agreement on July 4, 1989. Not long after there was chaos on the world coffee market as prices went into free fall and continued to drop as more farmers flooded the market with their stockpiled beans while at the same time increasing production (Pendergast 1989). Average revenues fell from $10.7 to $6.6 billion and large roasters and retailers took advantage of the price situation and stockpiled green beans.

The creation, implementation and eventual collapse of the ICA were based on a number of reasons. Sick (1999) reminds us, however, that the coffee consuming countries, and roasters in those countries, benefit from the removal of any sort of quota system as depressed, low quality beans work in their favour. This is again part of the move away from overt governmental control of a supply management structure and a move towards a neo-liberal, late-capitalist social regulation model. While the social regulation model can be made to sound superior by authors such as Raynolds (2012), as Fair Trade can alleviate some of the problems for a select few farmers, it favours large buyers and producers by fragmenting the coffee market and creating the illusion of justice in the global production when a majority of it is still produced under poverty-like conditions below cost of production. The collapse of the ICA meant that roasters and retailers could control more of the coffee value-chain and create new ways of expanding market share based on a consistent low-price raw material could be infused with material and symbolic attributes. The rise of the speciality market, including Fair Trade in coffee is at least in part due to the collapse of the ICA and the resulting severely low prices at the farm gate.

The economic restructuring of the coffee industry, like most agricultural commodities in late-capitalism, was beneficial to large, vertically integrated corporations, and very costly to independent commodity producers. Coffee farmers were left in a similar situation to commodity producers around the world: trying to produce a greater quantity of a lower grade product to stay afloat with depressed prices. At the same time, vertically and
horizontally integrated buyers, roasters, and retailers benefited from purchasing coffee at depressed prices, increasing the amount of value to be added in consuming countries. Topik (2003) notes, at the same time, since coffee first became an accepted part of the working class’s daily life, it has been rendered “rather price and income-inelastic.” As a result there is a persistent danger of market saturation. As income grows, the appetite for coffee does not, and thus there is a need to constantly develop new ways of extracting value out of the same raw material. In late-capitalism, this has meant the depression of raw coffee prices and the diversification of the coffee market, with more and more reliance on specialty and relationship coffees that are ripe for marketing and branding strategies. New revenue streams in the coffee industry have been found in the production of symbolic value and Starbucks style coffee ‘experiences.’

As coffee production entered a period of neoliberal deregulation in the early 1990s, the world market was characterized by oversupply and overproduction relative to only modest increases, and at times decreases, in demand (Ponte 2006). As large coffee interests saw the appetite for consumption stagnate and existing markets become saturated, the need to cultivate new markets where coffee was not habitually consumed on a mass scale, such as in Eastern Europe and Asia, became apparent (Ponte 2003). There were minor price increases, mainly related to weather conditions in Brazil. However there was a huge drop in prices in the early 2000s. Coffee was part of the pattern of depressed prices for all agricultural commodities grown for world markets.
3.3 The Latte Revolution and the Rise of Speciality Coffee

At the same time large-scale roasters and retailers sought to establish new methods of roasting, packaging, and advertising to increase the value added to the raw coffee bean. These methods can be placed in three interrelated and mutually reinforcing categories: material, consumptive, and symbolic. Together they have given rise to the specialty coffee industry, or what has been termed the 'latte revolution.' Today the speciality market is increasing at a rate of 20% a year and composes around 8% of the total U.S. market, with Fair Trade sales in 2008 topping 65,000 tonnes (Pay 2009). However, with the buzz surrounding the growth of the Fair Trade market in coffee it still only composes 1% of the global market in coffee, with 78% of Fair Trade production located in Latin America (Pay 2009). The picture gleaned from the speciality market is one that is still dominated by food service giants like Starbucks and Dunkin' Donuts "[profiling] themselves as socially responsible corporations" (Pay 2009: 15). Large conventional roasters, such as Sara Lee and Nestlé still purchase very little Fair Trade coffee.

The coffee bean itself is characterized by ever-expanding product differentiation and choice with respect to the roasts and blends available for consumption. Much of this differentiation is rooted in the requirement that coffee companies label the country of origin of their product, as mandated by the 1907 U.S. Pure Food and Drug Act (Topik 2003: 41). In the specialty coffee industry, differences in coffee bean origin have been mined for their symbolic value, leading to an explosion in coffee varieties based on varied geographic locales (consider 'Java' or 'Sumatra', among many others). As Michael Smith notes,

(W)hat this classificatory system does, in effect, is produce its own geography based on a taxonomy of North American taste preferences, reducing the non-Western world to a collection of coffee varietals that in a sense replace, metonymically, the complex configuration of social, cultural, economic systems in which they are produced (1996: 516).
This is what Daviron and Ponte (2005) have termed a ‘differentiation strategy.’ Over time the geographical location of the actual growing of the bean has become less and less important, virtually eclipsed by the symbolic nature of a carefully constructed brand created using various signifiers within its marketing and packaging. For example, ‘Colombian’ coffee from Starbucks refers more to the roasting, labeling and branding than to where the coffee is actually grown.

Specialty coffee also entails a particular consumption experience, where consumers gain symbolic capital through the very act of purchasing and enjoying a coffee. Specialty cafes or “theatres of consumption” provide a manufactured space where consumers can see and be seen sipping their $5.00 dollar lattés (Smith 1996: 506). Specialty coffee shops work very hard at manufacturing spaces that create a simulacrum of European coffee culture, fused with the imaginative geography of coffee producing countries, which Smith (1996) calls discursive appropriation. Starbucks, for example, sells “the idea that the consumer need not resign herself to receiving these images second hand, that with Starbucks as a guide, one can actually visit these places oneself” (Smith 1996: 517). In this way, coffee retailers are capitalizing on recent obsessions with shopping and foreign travel as “… the act of consumption becomes a vehicle for symbolic adventures overseas” (Smith 1996: 517). Thus, the consumption experience is very much dependent on the brand of coffee being consumed and the symbolic capital or distinction that it provides through a heavily constructed discourse of elite European coffee drinking and the exoticism of the coffee’s origin.

As Daviron and Ponte note, specialty coffee is also defined by a consumption experience in which “material goods are sold increasingly in association with in-person services” (2005: 43). There are two primary ways in which such in-person services are
delivered. First, employees act as problem solvers who help identify a customer’s taste and match it with a certain variety of coffee. They might attempt to match particular human traits to intangible and highly symbolic traits assigned to coffee varieties (Daviron and Ponte 2005). Second, the act of ordering, along with the preparation of specialty drinks, “...is integral to the act of consumption” with specialty coffee (Smith 1996: 506). This is reflected in the elaborate designs left in the foam of a latte or cappuccino, and also the special language of ordering pioneered in North America by Starbucks.

The symbolic nature of the latte revolution is complex. Most important for the purposes of this thesis is the creation of coffee as a ‘lifestyle product’, or even further, as an ‘identity signifier’. As Smith notes, “clearly the consumption of this type of coffee carries with it a certain status that serves to separate the [specialty] coffee drinker from the regular coffee drinker” (Smith 1996: 509). As Bourdieu explains (2003), this type of consumption creates distinction, or symbolic distance, between those who have access to cultural, not to mention economic, capital, and those who do not, in much the same way as the fashion industry does.

The mutually reinforcing material, consumption, and symbolic qualities of specialty coffee enabled roasters and retailers alike to extract significantly greater value from what are now comparatively cheap raw coffee beans, thus increasing profit margins and establishing much-needed niche markets where demand was previously sagging. The traditional players of the coffee industry adapted to this new strategy became active participants in the veritable explosion of specialty roasters and retailers, creating subsidiary specialty brands, while at the same time continuing to produce a low-grade, mass-produced product. As Ponte notes, “café chains have adopted fairly mainstream corporate strategies”
(Ponte 2001: 414). As we see McDonald's and Tim Horton's enter the market of specialty coffee, the reverse is also true.

A quick examination of most coffee shops, whether local or part of a chain, leads one to notice the influence Starbucks has had on creating a particular notion of urban space and authenticity centered on the consumption of specialty coffee. While there are variations from local shops to Starbucks, there are striking similarities (and differences that just claim to be more ‘authentic’ than Starbucks). Starbucks has set the standard for what a post-modern, late-capitalist coffee experience is expected to be. The old world model in itself is a signifier of cultural and economic capital required to enter and once inside the consumer is bombarded with a whole variety of signifiers that can be acquired through the consumption of coffee. What is compelling is that neo-liberalism prompted a decline of local coffee hangouts, along with many other places that once were common meeting places for community members, creating a vacuum that coffee chains have been more than happy to fill.

Starbucks is no doubt the leader of the specialty industry, as they pioneered the arena of symbolic coffee consumption. After almost two decades of being a quiet roasting house and small coffee shop in Seattle, it was taken over by a young enthusiastic entrepreneur named Howard Shultz. Schultz, so the story goes, was on vacation in Italy and supposedly had a revelation when it came to coffee consumption as he envisioned bringing the old world coffee experience he was enjoying to North American consumers. Right from the very beginning, Starbucks and its CEO had a very particular notion of creating an urban space through its stores. As Smith notes, Starbucks was “utilizing but also helping to shape social

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What comes to mind here is the fact that Starbucks will play in house company mandated music to create an ‘atmosphere’, while my local shop rails against this by letting employees play their own music, creating a ‘more authentic’ feel. While different and less annoying sometimes, it is part of the same managed feeling that Starbucks helped to cement.
interaction in the streetscapes and consumer cultures of the urban setting” (1996: 504). This notion of urbanity was fused with the discourses of authenticity and exoticness that Starbucks has gone to great lengths to create, through the descriptions of their coffees and the designs of their stores.

Starbucks continues to be the leader in bringing material, symbolic and in-person attributes to the mainstream coffee consumer. They were the first to seriously fuse the material, symbolic and theatrical qualities of coffee together into a highly stylized urban space (Smith 1996: 506). Starbucks was able to fuse the value of the commodity with the field of fashion and to appreciate and then exploit the values of authenticity, exoticness and performance involved in a trip to Starbucks. Starbucks attracted, even created, the consumer seeking distinction and cultural capital. Such consumers had to afford the experience as well as being able to give meaning to the symbolic act of coffee consumption. As with the field of fashion and style, people want to be seen as part of the dominant group, of which Starbucks was/is part. While this may seem self-evident, especially after Starbucks totally saturated the market, the importance of this should not be overlooked. As the consumer constantly seeks distinction from others, Starbucks has made a perfect way for them to convert their economic into cultural capital. As Starbucks becomes mainstream it is unclear whether this strategy based on scarcity can be maintained.

With the use of design, music, specialized language, photos of exotic coffee growing locations and farmers, Starbucks has been able to package a perfect non-threatening yet distinction infused experience to everyday people: “(T)he creation of designer appeal rests on a particular configuration of symbolic qualities that combine to ‘reanimate’ the aura surrounding hitherto mundane, mass-produced products” (Smith 1996: 506). This is part of “the Artistic Mode of Production [which] transforms urban space from manufacturing to
service sector use by establishing a built environment for the performance, display, and sale, and production of cultural symbols” (Zukin et al., 1992, 108 cited in Smith 1996, 507) so fundamental to late-capitalism.

Coffee production sustainability labels (organic, Fair Trade, bird friendly, etc.) have also been added as part of the symbolic nature of coffee consumption. Sustainability labels include many coffees that are certified “Fair Trade”, “organic” or “shade grown” or some combination of the three (Daviron and Ponte 2005). These labels add another layer to the material aspects of the specialty brands. While overseen by a fairly strict regulatory mechanism, there is often piggybacking other labels on these terms. While this material aspect is important from a production side, the important thing again is the material aspect being turned into a brand that confers certain ‘lifestyle signifiers’ on the buyer.

Consumption of this type is by no means limited to coffee. It is part of the larger phenomenon of post-modernity where lifestyles become a life project (Featherstone 1987: 59, cited in Smith 1996: 509). Or put another way, in the West consumption has been framed as not only a leisure activity but as a way to create an identity. As Peter Trifonas and Effie Balemenos (2003) argue in their book Good Taste: How What You Choose Defines Who You Are, in today’s world products we buy are so imbued with lifestyle signifiers we have arrived at a point where what kind of coffee you drink, for example, will immediately place you in a certain class of consumers. Consuming products highly imbued with cultural signifiers has become a way that people can create their lifestyle or identity in an increasingly fragmented and ephemeral urban way of life.
Since the breakdown of the ICA in 1989 small coffee producers have been in a state of crisis. Even with the introduction of “Fair Trade” and “organic” labels, “it is difficult for producers to capture value from them” (Daviron and Ponte 2005:46). As more value is added in consuming countries, there is less value for producers to capture. Specialty coffee companies rely on a homogenous raw material at a stable price, usually lower than the cost of production, that they can manipulate through roasting and then sell as a branded product imbued with signifiers with the help of very careful marketing strategies. While this has meant better returns for some farmers, there has been growing concern from roasters and retailers about the consistency of the coffee they buy. Stefano Ponte (2001) argues that following market liberalization exporters who target the specialty markets are increasingly relying upon large coffee plantations through vertical integration and long-term contracts while small coffee farmers are being economically marginalized. The state of the specialty industry is nicely summed up by Lyon,

Fair Trade market participation can offer a variety of potential benefits to producers, including higher prices, stable market access, organizational capacity building, market information and access to credit. However, the benefits of Fair Trade are offset by increasing debt burdens, low prices, regular audits, and outside supervision, and the potential for increased socio-economic stratification (2006: 453).

To capture some of the value in this chain, producers need to be linked more closely to consumers, which is often a difficult task. What the urbanite in Vancouver has in common with a smallholder in Brazil, for example, is not readily apparent.

It is difficult to gauge if consumers in the West are more concerned with the coffee farmers themselves, or the lifestyle signifiers that they are purchasing: “(T)he disjuncture between consumer life-politics and producer livelihoods reflects the questions raised by critics of Fair Trade who maintain that Fair Trade normalizes global inequalities, re-enacts colonial trade relationships and regulates Southern participants to mono-crop export
production” (Lyon 2006: 457). The specialty coffee industry enabled more profit to be accumulated in the coffee value-chain; however it is almost impossible to capture a share of this added value for small producers. At the moment, there are large amounts of money being made in the specialty coffee industry, but like most commodity sectors, it is not going to the small farmers who need it the most, but rather to multi-national corporations. As of 1973 only 25% of the retail price of specialty coffee returns to the producing countries. This gap is sure to have widened, prompting, Galeano to proclaim that “it is much more profitable to consume coffee then to produce it” (1973: 101).

As emphasized by Harvey, “the mobilization of desire and fantasy” to increase consumer demand for luxury products is the basis for postmodern consumption in late-capitalism (1990: 61). Neo-liberal trade policies, together with downward pressure and increased control of the value chain, have enabled large coffee companies to receive, even demand, mass-produced coffee at a price below that of production. While projects like Fair Trade coffee have tried to even this imbalance and return a better price to small holders, coffee companies, conventional and otherwise, have incorporated their plight in the world coffee market into their marketing and branding strategies. The value-added portion of the profit reaped by large companies is increasingly based on visual signs and signifiers that are sold to consumers. Images of coffee farmers specifically, and the Fair Trade label generally, is a way for companies to extract more profit out of a single bean. The images of producers, and the signifiers gained from them, obfuscate the reality of the coffee industry and delude consumers into thinking they have some sort of benevolent power with the dollars they spend, conferring on themselves lifestyle attributes for display to others and forming part of a fluid construction of identity.
The visual nature of late-capitalism, combined with the breakdown of traditional sources of identity has meant increased attention to outward displays of consumption to indicate membership in certain lifestyle groups. This is achieved by goods and services being heavily imbued with symbolic meaning created through advertising, marketing, and branding. Coffee, for example, contains many signifiers detached from their original meaning and attached to coffee, to differentiate not only the product from others, but the consumer as well. For instance, as Wright (2006) notes in her study of TransFair advertisements, signifiers such as Machu Pichu can be lifted out of their original context and meaning and given another. In the context of the ad the viewer is then enticed to associate Machu Pichu with other codes that are supposedly associated with TransFair coffee, such as authenticity, traditional livelihoods and so on, even though coffee production and ancient civilizations have little to do with each other. In the case of Fair Trade coffee, images of livelihoods and/or landscapes are used to signify certain symbolic attributes even though on their own bear no relationship to Fair Trade or coffee. Existing cultural and historical codes allow the consumer to make this connection, allowing certain social and cultural values consumers values to be linked to the products they consume.

The fragmented nature of identity in late-capitalism has meant the development and projection of lifestyle has become paramount and personal style and fashion has become the way individuals not only place themselves in the social world, but also how they gain meaning from it. Style or fashion can be thought of as outward displays of group membership, and are constituted by commodities with symbolic meaning in the wider world (Ewen 1988). Even if other consumers do not know anything about Fair Trade coffee, or the supposed benefits it purports, it indicates a certain amount of cultural knowledge and worldliness, a part of a cosmopolitan lifestyle deemed extraordinary or advantageous. How they translate into building identity and lifestyle operate in two opposite but
complementary ways. Symbolic consumption operates semiotically as the purchase of these products indicates membership in certain groups. But it also operates at the level of distinction, as individuals have an avenue to place themselves apart from others due to knowledge of cultural codes and what is deemed desirable. With Fair Trade coffee, consumers locate themselves as having certain social and cultural values that are associated with having a ‘socially conscious’ lifestyle. This process allows coffee to be marketed to a specific kind of lifestyle consumer, allowing entrepreneurs to extract profit from symbolic production based on a low cost, increasingly homogeneous raw material. Fair Trade coffee can be seen as a “solidarity seeking commodity culture” where “[s]elected Northern consumers purchase ‘ethical’ commodities, while the act of consumption itself is politicized through these materially and socially embedded ethical relationships” (Bryant and Goodman 2004: 358). In saying it is solidarity seeking does not mean that consumers are seeking solidarity with Fair Trade farmers, though some might claim this to be true. They are in fact seeking solidarity with other consumers who are part of this lifestyle group.

Fair Trade was initially predicated on growing knowledge of the pitfalls of intensive forms of commodity production and the ravages of civil war on small coffee producers in Latin America. Presently Fair Trade and the signifiers it uses have become so widely disseminated that the actual knowledge of how and why Fair Trade is beneficial has been obscured or even lost altogether. The signifiers are strong enough to stand on their own and following Lowe this means images have been detached from their original referent and attached to others, to signify a lifestyle choice. The more widely consumed the images of Fair Trade, the less meaning they have for consumers in relation to actual producer livelihoods; the more they are encapsulated in the world of style, fashion, and consumerist politics. Bryant and Goodman (2004) argue that in an attempt to de-fetishise the production of coffee, Fair Trade has in turn commoditised the ethical nature of
consumption. This ethical nature can quickly be pushed into the background and Fair Trade coffee can just act like any other brand differentiation strategy for consumers. Consumers are in a situation then where they are not fully aware of why they should care or pay more, but they know they want to. This is the perfect situation for maximum profit extraction for companies like Starbucks, who can acquire only a small amount of their coffee Fair Trade, but use a large amount of the symbolic nature to sell any of their products. Because of coffee’s unique position as a status symbol, it has been mined symbolically to an unprecedented extent. It is hard to think of any other industry using the fact that primary producers are having difficulty surviving as a marketing strategy, though these are slowly emerging. The depressed price of the raw material, and a more homogenous product because of increased control of the value chain, has meant that coffee companies now produce profit in the symbolic realm through advertising, marketing and branding.

Symbolic production is increasingly reliant on the use of visual images, which are detached from their original meaning, and used to signify membership in a certain group, and are now part of meaning-making and identity construction for Northern consumers. Fair Trade coffee, and the visual images used to market it, while first used to defetishize the production of coffee, have actually created a market for “ethics” and have turned consumption of this kind into just another lifestyle status product. In an effort to defetishize coffee consumption it has been fetishized to an even greater extent.

The analysis of Fair Trade images shows in the next chapter, visual images of Fair Trade use meta-signs and existing narratives to signify a specific lifestyle – the socially conscious lifestyle consumer. Images are effective because they are easily detached from original meanings, and are used to tie into existing narratives of authenticity, nature and colonialism. Using images to market, brand and advertise Fair Trade coffee “perpetuates unequal power relations between producers and consumers” (Bryant and Goodman 2004:
359), distorts reality, and reinforces the logic of consumerism based on overt display of identity and meaning-making symbolic consumption. The next chapter examines several examples of Fair Trade images used in a variety of different ingredients of the marketing process. The nature of symbolic production of profit though lifestyle signifiers and their possible effects are then highlighted and discussed. This section links the changing nature of the coffee value-chain with the symbolic production produced through images of Fair Trade coffee, and identifies the meta-signs and symbols that are to convey a specific lifestyle or status. After a deconstructive reading of each image, there is a discussion of the most prevalent themes. Through this discussion, and in the conclusion, the ideology and discourse of late-capitalism are exposed and the affect on consumption and democratic politics is examined.
CHAPTER 4 – THE SEMIOTICS OF FAIR TRADE COFFEE

The visual nature of late-capitalist marketing produces a widening gap between media dominated experience and actual lived reality. The visual turn in culture fashions a consumption landscape where individual expression, identity, and style form a significant component of meaning formation for consumers (Ewen 1988). Validation is increasingly found through the world of style and fashion, where images are used as status and lifestyle signifiers. As Ewen argues “underlying meaning has been masked” as “the rise in a mass market of images has had an unprecedented impact on the ways people have perceived, experienced and behaved within the world” (Ewen 1988: 271). What is of interest here is how this process actually occurs with images used by capital for promoting lifestyle consumption, and how this process is expressed or revealed in the marketing and sale of Fair Trade coffee.

Currently having a semblance of style indicates to others that one is a fully integrated subject in late-capitalism. This is increasingly imperative, as individuality is given great importance, often touted as the source of personal fulfillment and meaning. As Ewen notes, “the emerging market in stylized goods provided consumers with a vast palette of symbolic meanings, to be selected and juxtaposed in the assembling of a public self” and “the utility of style in this regard is to find for oneself, and for others, the evidence of meaning in one’s life” (1988: 79). Images used in marketing lead consumers to believe that the meanings made from images and consumption are their own, and provide meaning to their lives, and are not a product of discourse and narrative. To uncover the meaning-making properties of visual images a semiotic investigation is needed to uncover the process and structure linking them to discourse and ideology (Hodge and Kress 1988). The hegemony of lifestyle consumption is part of late-capitalist ideology, which weaves its way
in and through social actors’ moves, inclinations, and dispositions (or habitus). In
uncovering the signs and signifiers used to create symbolic value in Fair Trade coffee one
可以 begin to uncover how meaning and ideology operate in late-capitalism. What follows is
an in-depth examination of six images used in the advertising and marketing of Fair Trade
coffee.

They were chosen from diverse sources and settings in order to illustrate the variety
of visual advertising methods and highlight the similarities contained in them. These were
chosen because of the amplified rhetorical nature of Annual Reports, as they are
increasingly used to promote and maintain a positive corporate image. First, there is an
analysis of three different covers of annual reports dedicated to espousing the benefits of
Fair Trade coffee: two from conventional ‘big players’, Starbucks and Nestlé; and one from
one of the largest not-for-profit organizations that producing Fair Trade coffee, Oxfam.
These annual reports are used to manage the image of the company for shareholders and
the public, and are a major corporate rhetorical device (Schmitt et al. 1995). While
traditionally annual reports have been for the specific use of shareholders and controllers,
they have become rhetorical devices infused with images available to be disseminated to
the public at large. Images available online, as part of producer profiles of Fair Trade
farmers from Trans Fair Canada, were selected for the next illustration. This is a good
example of Fair Trade companies trying to personalize the connection between producer
and consumer. The final two sets of images are part of in-store packaging and promotion.
The first is an actual package for Level Ground’s Fair Trade coffee, which was chosen
because of the dominance of the image of the coffee farmer on the cover. The second is an
in-store flyer from Kicking Horse Coffee, which is available from most retail outlets that
carry the coffee. These were all selected as they provide very diverse sources of use of Fair
Trade coffee images in marketing, advertising, and branding.
4.1 Methodology – Semiotic Textual Analysis

Traditional Marxist analysis of consumerism in late capitalism, while important for understanding and evaluating the material basis of the coffee economy, is not able to add to a depth of understanding of individual consumption habits and their meaning-making processes. Marxism has by and large treated consumers’ consciousness as either being ‘false’ or, at the very least, contradictory. Gottdiener (1985) argues that the agency of individual actors regarding consumption is an important consideration, and provides a window into the sense and meaning-making practices making up a large part of social life. This must be considered along with the object of consumption itself and neglecting the intertwined relationships of these separate diagnostic levels is to neglect the “full dialectical complexity” of current capitalist accumulation (Gottdiener 1985: 979). While the commodity itself must be studied, no commodity has a life or meaning outside the social world. All commodities and their meanings are “created, communicated and ideologically managed” (Ibid.). In the fragmented landscape of late-capitalism using semiotic analysis is imperative “because cultural objects mean different things to different social groups” (Ibid.).

In order to fully grasp the meaning-making power of commodities, such as Fair Trade coffee, and in turn the operation of ideology in late-capitalism, how individuals make sense of their purchases and their interactions with media images becomes crucial.

One of the most important assumptions in a semiotic analysis, and one compatible in a larger Marxist framework, is that meaning resides in the material world. Material objects are not given meaning or use unless they have some interaction with the social world. Semiotic analysis focuses on the mechanisms and moments that create meaning for individuals. It “focuses explicitly on symbols and their exchange by specifying precisely the places within social interaction where meaning is created, communicated and received” (Gottdiener 1985: 982). Products consumed in late-capitalism are heavily imbued with
symbolic meaning, and this meaning is transferred and created through a complex visual language that is socially constructed. Visual signs, it is argued, operate like linguistic signs and need to be treated as such, however because of their simultaneous simulatory nature are much more powerful.

In analyzing the images used in Fair Trade coffee advertisements and promotional material textual semiotic analysis is employed where the image is treated as text, and the most likely interpretation of signs in that text are presented. A text is anything that people take meaning from: including books, news stories and advertisements. As Mckee argues, “Whenever we produce an interpretation about something’s meaning we are treating it like a text” (McKee 2003: 4). In treating these images as texts an attempt to uncover the meaning and sense-making practices of a certain culture at a certain time and a semiotic reading of Fair Trade images will provide some generalizations about the hegemonic consumerist ideology of consumer capitalism. How we make sense of the world we live in, even in the smallest constituent parts, has truly important effects. Ideology in late-capitalism is precisely this.

Semiotic textual analysis also provides a better understanding the process of identity formation in late-capitalism. At a time when anomie, isolation and alienation are having an unprecedented impact on mental health, the study of how people see themselves and others in and outside of groups is of vital importance. A large part of semiotics is precisely concerned with how people identify themselves and those around them, including some and excluding others. As McKee (2003) states, the way we make sense of ourselves and those around us has very real effects on the larger world. This is especially pertinent for the fragmentary nature of identity in late-capitalism.

An important reason for doing semiotic textual analysis is that texts, such as advertisements, can have a real, concrete effect on the meaning and sense-making aspect of
a culture (McKee 2003). In this example, Fair Trade coffee advertisements are changing how people make sense of consumerism and gain meaning through it. The point is not that advertisers are trying to change the sense-making practices of consumers in a negative way, but the way in which these advertising texts are composed may be doing exactly this. In undertaking semiotic textual analysis “we’re interested in finding out the likely interpretations, not deciding which is the most correct one” (McKee 2003: 63), and trying to interpret the effects of these meanings on people’s perception and understanding of the world.

This work takes a post-Marxist, post-structural approach to textual analysis, which arguing an analysis of texts can uncover deep structures or mechanisms that are not readily apparent in the text. This interpretation identifies the intended and therefore probable reading of the text, the discourses the text is utilizing, exploiting and reproducing as well as the deeper meaning of what the intended meaning implies about consumerist ideology. Ideology now resides in the intended reading and consuming of media narratives utilizing stereotypes and cultural norms.

To properly complete any textual analysis one must first establish the context in which the texts are found and here that is late-capitalism where social responsibility has been incorporated into the marketing and consumption of products, in this case Fair Trade coffee. Second, it is important to discern the most relevant parts of the text being analysed. Not every part of a text is as important as every other and thus the researcher must be able to decipher the most relevant parts of interest to the particular research objective (McKee 2003). For this type of analysis, where the goal is to make some generalizations about the sense and meaning-making of late-capitalist society, there is no need to study every aspect of every text. In this research the objective is to uncover the mechanisms enforcing and
reinforcing consumer culture in late-capitalism, and what sense-making structures are prevalent in the images used to market and brand Fair Trade coffee.

As in every scientific inquiry, the effectiveness of semiotic textual analysis is heavily reliant on the researcher’s knowledge of what is being studied. The research must be knowledgeable about the society, aware of other similar texts and formats, and the wider public context in which the text is found (McKee 2003). The researcher is well positioned to provide insight into the images used to sell Fair Trade coffee, due to a deep involvement in the Fair Trade movement since its origins as Bridgehead and Oxfam’s relationship Latin American coffee in the 1980s. As the movement grew and was pulled into the mainstream, the researcher was acutely aware of various marketing strategies, most notably the increased use of visual advertisements. The researcher is also aware of the context in which these texts are found, namely late-capitalist Canadian society, which has, like most other industrialized countries, gradually floated to a neoliberal model based on charity and cultural consumption. The dominant and competing discourses currently found in capitalist society must be known and used to guide the researcher in what is important, and how dominant discourses are utilized and furthered through the semiotic advertising structure. One needs to know what one is looking for and some of the possible outcomes of the research in order to be able to pick out the relevant parts of the texts being analyzed.

The advertising texts analysed in this thesis are argued to have a very high modality. That is they are strongly related to reality and thus have further effects on consumers’ lives outside of the actual reading of the text and therefore a semiotic approach is interested in meaning-making functions of a text; what semiologists call signification is needed (McKee 2003). For a semiotic analysis, the text is broken down into its constituent parts or ‘signs.’ These signs are then treated as language, or something that ‘speaks to’ something else. How these various signs are arranged and put together in the particular text in various
combinations lead to a particular reading of an image in an advertisement or marketing material for Fair Trade coffee is assessed. What is of interest is the intended reading and therefore meaning that is conveyed through the image or number of images. In addition to this, it is important to identify which signs are there to reassure us of the author-reader relationship, and which are intended to associate the sign and the brand to one another.

These advertising texts have become one of the pre-eminent sources of cultural expression and therefore meaning, in late-capitalism, and have very real effects on how people view and understand the world (Berger 1972). As Barthes (1964) argues, every object becomes a sign of its own function, and therefore the objects found in images of Fair Trade coffee become signs that signify a certain function or trait. For example, the inclusion of an Indigenous woman in the Starbucks image comes to signify naturalness, or authenticity, just as a car symbolizes freedom. In essence, what this analysis examines is the underlying meaning and sense making relationships enabling these marketing strategies to be successful, and how these underlying structures influence how people think about and understand the world. Eco sums up semiotic analysis well by stating:

Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken for significantly taken for something else. Thus semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to lie, conversely it can’t be used to tell the truth; it cannot be used ‘to tell’ at all (1976: 7).

Language is a social institution governed by rules and conventions. Each of us speaks, both verbally and non-verbally and moves through daily life speaking certain things at all times. In the consumer culture of late-capitalism things we wear and buy, and the personal style we compose for ourselves, is increasingly part of non-verbal communication. As Pines contends
Everything we do sends messages about us in variety of codes, semiologists contend. We are also on the receiving end of innumerable messages encoded in music, gestures, foods, rituals, books, movies and advertisements. Yet we seldom realize that we have received such messages, and would have trouble explaining the rules under which they operate (Pines 1982 cited in Berger 2005: 15).

This explanation may seem like common sense to most people, but what is important to semiotics are the rules and regulations that control how people ‘speak’ in a multitude of ways. Semiotics hopes to bring those unspoken, non-verbal communication rules and meanings into consciousness, and therefore treat as an object of study (Berger 2005). For it is in the realm of communication, both verbal and non-verbal, where meaning is created.

Textual semiotic analysis is often criticized for its lack of scientific validation. However McKee (2003) argues that quantitative statistical measures are only one particular form of knowledge production and qualitative textual analysis is an equally valid method of inquiry that studies very different phenomena. Textual analysis does not stand up well to traditional Positivistic scientific standards such as repeatability or quantitative knowledge, but human social interactions, as McKee points out, “are not the same thing as chemical reactions” (2003: 120) and therefore cannot be treated as such. When employing semiotic textual analysis no two interpretations by researchers will be exactly the same: “This is largely because semiotics recognizes that much of the likely interpretation of a text depends on contextual information such as genre, wider discourses in culture and intertexts” (McKee 2003: 131). Items found in these texts and that relate to other wider discourses there a multitude of different ways of reading, different amounts of knowledge of the researcher, or different questions being asked.

How then is one supposed to produce relevant cultural knowledge of texts using semiotics? The key is to have sufficient knowledge of the texts and the culture and time in which they are found. The researcher’s knowledge of the coffee industry as well as a keen
eye for advertising and marketing trends, along with a critical knowledge of consumerism and late-capitalism, makes the reading of the advertisers’ intended message an accurate one. The intended reading put forth by the advertiser is close to my reading of the image, however their intention is to promote the brand and sell coffee. The researcher’s reading studies how this is done, and also what this intended meaning can represent at a further level of abstraction. While no two researchers readings will be exactly the same they will be similar if the object and purpose of study are similar.

4.2 Deconstructing the Images of Fair Trade

Figure 1 - Oxfam Canada – Cover of 2007 Annual Report

The cover of Oxfam’s 2007 Annual Report is a great illustration of an image used to market Fair Trade coffee. The cover contains a full page photograph of a woman picking coffee. On the left hand side a large stylized looking arrow pointed directly at the woman’s face and includes the text “Ending Global Poverty Begins with Women’s Rights.” The only other text is the title and the Oxfam Canada brand logo, which is important. It imprints on our minds a signifier of the Oxfam brand, so that when seen later it is associated with the things included in the text, both written and visual. One of the first things to be noticed in this example is that the cover is totally dominated by the photograph. It takes up 98% of the page and the young woman’s smiling face is front and center. In the photograph the woman is seen smiling and is reaching through leaves of a coffee plant to the coffee beans and her body, except for her face and arm, are obscured by leaves of the coffee plant. The photo is taken from a point of view through the coffee plant and any other parts of her body except for her hand and face are hidden. The foreground is dominated by the coffee plant.
itself, and the woman is almost obscured from view in the background of the image, but her smile is still highly prominent.

At first glance the image evokes feelings of connection with natural world, and a connection of coffee picking and happiness. The domination of the coffee plant in the foreground of the photo conveys a direct association with women, or femininity and the natural world. The focus on nature and femininity exemplifies, as Wright argues, that we yearn to “take shelter from the man-made world in nature” (2004: 674), and femininity and nature are ultimately intertwined. The reaching motion of the woman’s hand very much suggests that struggles for women and coffee producers are solvable through the market. The focus on the actual coffee bean is also of importance here as well as it first presupposes that all of the viewers of this will be able to identify the raw coffee bean. It also builds on the meanings of coffee consumption that are held in the collective psyche of socially conscious consumers: namely that Fair Trade is a way out of poverty for coffee farmers. If this was not already somewhat known to the audience of this cover, then it would have to contain a lot of other signifiers to help do the semiotic work, but because these already exist they can be left off and the viewer does the work themselves. This allows the cover to reach a more complex level of signification.

It is also very evident that the woman is smiling. The viewer cannot help but associate Oxfam and Fair Trade coffee with general happiness of producers and consumers alike. It supposes that if you drink coffee from Oxfam and help improve living and working conditions for workers, you can feel good about being part of this process. There are several semiotic leaps that are undertaken here, and the text accompanying the photograph helps us along. The cover conveys the notion that all of the things contained in it are equal and have a direct causal relationship to one another. Poverty can be eliminated, women’s
rights can be achieved, nature can be front and center and preserved, and indigenous or traditional livelihoods maintained, all by the purchase and drinking of coffee by consumers. Viewers of this cover bring with them many cultural codes and meanings that are taken for granted that allow it to be effective. By playing on these codes the cover is able to, in multiple ways, associate these codes with the brand. In doing so it also furthers and changes these codes.

**Figure 2 - Starbucks – Cover of 2007 Corporate Social Responsibility Annual Report**

The next image examined is the cover of Starbucks’ 2007 Corporate Social Responsibility Annual Report. The cover is a mix of a photograph, text, and artistically drawn words. The orientation of the camera is positioned below the workers and the coffee which allows for the majority of the cover to contain blue sky. It is here where Starbucks corporate ideals can faintly appear in highly stylized fonts implying a notion of lifting people up and out of poverty through Starbucks and coffee production. Starbucks’ corporate logo along with the slogan “life happens over coffee” is prominent at the bottom of the cover. In the foreground we see a large pile of newly harvested green coffee with two coffee labourers standing on top of it. The title of the report and Starbucks corporate logo and slogan are also very visible in the foreground. The background again contains both the photographic image and written words, and while the majority of the background is the mainly clouded sky, what we can see is a lush rugged landscape dominated by what we assume is coffee plants. Weaving throughout the background is stylized writing in fairly large font that says “harvest coffee” in a variety of different languages. This image invokes feelings of beauty, nature and globalism. At first glance it seems to be saying coffee first,
workers second, and environment third, or that both coffee and worker belong to that environment.

This is a direct instance of how images used to market Fair Trade coffee semiotically privilege consumption of the North. It posits consumption as an effective way to help coffee farmers. The photograph posits them with little agency of their own in remedying their situation as it positions consumption at the center of social life. This iterates and re-iterates the primacy of consumption in confronting global inequality. For those involved in coffee production, like the ones pictured in this photograph, life does happen over coffee, albeit under totally dissimilar circumstances. Through this photograph Starbucks invites the viewer to romanticize poverty and traditional livelihoods. As Wright mentions “(I)n buying and drinking the coffee the suggestion is that I can also consume the authentic and unspoiled richness of a ... pre-industrial landscape” (2004: 676). Visual signifiers provided in this image portray subsistence agricultural production as a pure, authentic way of being. These are semiotically presented to alienated and anomic consumers in late-capitalism looking to alleviate these feelings. This idea plays on the general misconception of marginalized people being happier, even though their existence is far more tenuous.

The consumption experience promised and promoted here by Starbucks is symbolic. If the consumptive act is symbolic, consumers are actually buying and consuming the lives of these coffee producers and their marginalized position in the global capitalist order (Wright 2006). Through the use of visual signifiers, coffee producers’ lives themselves become an object of consumption. In this way Starbucks is able to extract profit from the farmers and the raw bean. The structural disadvantage that coffee farmers face is mined for symbolic content which can be turned into profit for Starbucks. These images obscure this
fact and wholly and unabashedly convince us that they ‘care’ and through purchasing we can ‘care’ as well.

Starbucks relies on several far more visible rhetorical mechanisms to promote its support of Fair Trade in addition to this example, and in sum it forms a powerful benevolent corporate image for the company. Stores are often plastered with life-size images of coffee workers, convincing and reassuring customers of Starbucks ethical standards, and in turn their own. The image discussed here is part of the discursive project that is very tightly managed by Starbucks. Starbucks and other companies that peddle the rhetoric of Fair Trade have come to financially dependent not only “on the sweated labour of Third World people, but on their discursive appropriation to sell its coffee” (Smith 1996: 505).

Figure 3 - Nestlé – Cover of 2007 Annual Report – The Faces of Coffee

Nestlé recognizes that Fair Trade is a useful way to raise consciousness about the coffee issue and for individual consumers to express their solidarity with coffee farmers in the developing world (Faces of Coffee: 37).

The Faces of Coffee Report is produced by Nestlé to highlight their ethical commitment to the coffee farmers. Of all the examples illustrated this report contains the largest number of images of coffee farmers as 43% of the report contains prominent photographs of coffee producers, workers, or management from Nestlé. While a small percentage is accompanied by text directing the reader, most are of only coffee producers and workers. Nestlé is very forward in their use of coffee farmers as signifiers of their corporate benevolence. The cover of this report is analyzed here, but it is worth noting the majority of the report is visual in nature, and leaves the viewer to reach their own conclusions regarding Nestlé’s coffee sourcing policies, albeit within prescribed boundaries.
A large photograph dominates the cover and contains little text other than the title and the Nestlé brand logo. This image contains an indigenous woman on a steep rise in the coffee fields with a young child on her back, and little else. Her hand is reaching down to hold on to a plant, if only for help climbing the steep hill, as there is no evidence that she is actively harvesting coffee. The expression on her face evokes feelings of sadness in the viewer as she has a noticeable frown on her face. The foreground is dominated by the woman and her child as well as numerous lush coffee plants. The background is almost completely filled with coffee on rugged hillsides, with only a slight patch of sky visible within the top left-hand corner.

One of the first things of note is an absence of anything that could help the viewer locate geographically in the world where this photograph was taken. In this way it provides the perfect visual signifier for Nestlé to employ as it is perfectly detached from any actual reality and can be a floating signifier for poor coffee farmers throughout the world. The viewer also notices she is holding the coffee leaves in her hand, thereby further signaling to the viewer that she and her baby are at one with the landscape they inhabit. As Wright notes in analysing a British campaign for Level Ground, “(T)he image evokes authenticity and knowledge of the producer, the way she and the coffee “belong” to the environment” (2004: 676). This image is an excellent example of what Bryant and Goodman (2004) term moral commodities which are invoked and utilized in a neo-liberal framing of the South.

The image of the indigenous woman and baby among coffee plants utilize two closely connected discourses surrounding marginalized people and places. In choosing an Indigenous woman and her infant this image invokes the supposed naturalness of coffee production and consumption in addition to positing women and femininity as ‘natural’, ‘life-giving,’ and ‘authentic’.
In late-capitalism Western consumers are continually bombarded with messages about how current lifestyles are unhealthy and destructive, both physically and emotionally. Along with this consumers are reminded and that a more ‘natural’ way of life, provided by consuming the ‘right’ products would increase our happiness and wellbeing. This image invokes this narrative, and allows Nestlé to use the woman as a free floating signifier of a more ‘natural’, ‘healthy’ way of living as there are few stronger signifiers of life giving naturalness than an Indigenous mother and her infant child.

Another part of this symbolic value is directly related to the first; the woman is used as a signifier of the generalized ‘other’. Through the purchase of Nestlé coffee consumers are semiotically invited to consume part of the ‘other’ that is dignified or righteous. Bryant and Goodman put it very succinctly:

How [Amazonian] ‘Indians’ are portrayed in the North is seen to be indicative of the political discursive influence, and economic impact of Edenic narratives. This is so whether they are portrayed, for example, as a subsistence-oriented ‘Noble Savages’ or market-linked ‘Jungle Maharajas’. Here, ‘environmental imaginaries’ are closely linked to notions of ‘pulp fictions of indigenism’ (2004: 350).

**Figure 4 - Level Ground Coffee- In-store Packaging**

Our mission is to trade fairly and directly with small-scale producers in developing countries, offering our customers ethical choices. – From Level Ground Trading Website [http://www.levelground.com/directfairtrade/](http://www.levelground.com/directfairtrade/)

The next image to be considered is the in-store packaging from Level Ground Trading and their brand of Fair Trade coffee. Level Ground is unique in that, unlike most Fair Trade coffee companies, it utilizes images of farmers directly on their packaging instead of in some other more indirect manner such as in-store displays, on its website, or just using the Fair Trade certified logo. Coffee packages are dominated
by images of individual coffee farmers in such a way that it takes time to locate any information about the coffee itself, and the image cannot be avoided. Coffee farmer Jaime Martin dominates the foreground of this image and he is pictured smiling heartily. Columbia, written in all capitals and in large font also dominates the foreground of the package. The background is almost totally blank and is just the beige colour of the packaging. The rest of the package is taken up by smaller images of a map of Columbia and personal information about Jaime Martin.

Again this is a good example of Fair Trade marketing using personal stories about specific farmers to individualize production and consumption. Packaging and "advertisements often include information about a co-operative [member's] age, location, ethnic identity and how they benefit from Fair Trade" as "roasters market their Fair Trade coffee through one dimensional representations of Fair Trade producers as small farmers, celebrating some kinds of difference, while submerging others" (Lyon 2006: 459). This has an effect on the consumer of disregarding the actual farmer contained in the image and the aesthetic just becomes a differential brand marker. For the marketing purposes Jaime's life as a small coffee farmer is discursively appropriated for the benefit of Northern consumers. For consumers it matters little who is on the package, and in reality could be anyone who fits the company's Fair Trade image.

The domination of the packaging with an image of a coffee farmer from a specific place is interesting to contrast with Nestlé’s Faces of Coffee report, as Level Ground goes to great lengths in personalizing the image and specifically locating the farmer. While the intended reading is to personalize the story of coffee production with a particular farmer, and in a sense work against the purely stereotypical
objectification that is present in so many other Fair Trade marketing strategies, the effect is that it only reinforces this fact. This effort to personalize the story of coffee farmers being helped by Fair Trade only serves to further destabilize the signifiers of Fair Trade by helping support difference making. It is not so explicitly stating that Jaime Martin (in this particular case) is just one of many coffee producers in need of benevolence from Northern consumers. According to Bryant and Goodman "often representation of these products involves relating biographies of producers, thereby imbuing Fair Trade products with the imprint of producers' place-based livelihoods for the consumers benefit" (2004: 356). This intended reading of this particular strategy is built upon the individualist impulses of late-capitalist consumers, and links it symbolically to a larger social project and to "[imbue] Fair Trade products with the imprint of producers' place-based livelihoods for consumers benefit" (Bryant and Goodman 2004: 357).

A theme that runs throughout all of these images is that the natural environment is a “worked on second nature” which has the effect of commodifying it (Bryant and Goodman 2004: 357). In this example consumers encounter evocation of a specific place (Columbia), which works in two, albeit complimentary ways. It utilizes the existing narrative surrounding Columbia (war torn and dangerous) and positions Jaime Marin as an example of how consumers can ‘save’ them. This evokes the narratives of Central American political strife, the origin for Fair Trade coffees, as well as notions of the settler, or this case consumer, as saviour. Individual acts of consumption are framed as being transformative and place the Northern consumer in the power position (Bryant and Goodman 2004). It works against any cultural or structural understanding of global capitalism and does not subvert the ideology of consumerism that has created these global inequalities. This has the combined effect
of positing the majority world as something out-there that just needs our individual acts of charity to improve the poor economic and social conditions. As Sivannandan argues,

The Third World is no longer out there as an object of struggle; it is here, in the minds of the people, as an anodyne to consumption, in the personal politics of the subject – an object of Western humanism, the occasion for individual aid, a site for pop culture and pop politics (1990: 47-48).

Figure 5 - TransFair Canada - Online Producer Profile

Many traditional Fair Trade not-for-profit producers like TransFair have, in an effort to defetishize the consumption of coffee, relied heavily on images of co-operative coffee companies they support. The most widely accessible and disseminated are those found on the internet. Fair Trade consumers are continually urged to research and get to “know” the people that actually grow the coffee. It is hoped that consumers with a greater understanding and knowledge of the Fair Trade coffee industry that will see farmers as people needed to be ‘saved’. TransFair may have noble intentions, but the effort to make farmers’ lives ‘knowable’ only further reinforces discourses of difference and obscures unequal power relations still inherent to the coffee industry, and global capitalism itself.

This image is found on the TransFair website under the heading producer profiles, and is one of many contained there. The image contains three separate photographs of stages and persons involved in the production of green coffee. First, the image in the upper left is that of racks for drying green coffee, with a few workers walking between the rows. The perspective is from above and far enough away that you cannot see the faces of the workers, or not even necessarily recognize what the
The image along the bottom contains a closer up view of labourers working with drying green coffee, with some farmers in the foreground but most in the background. The final image is of what the viewer is to assume to be a technician or bureaucrat in a shirt, tie and lab coat that is intently looking very seriously at the camera. This collage of images evokes feelings of technical expertise juxtaposed with pre-modern production methods.

This image and the photographs contained within it right away posits the viewer as not ‘knowing’ the reality of coffee production and invites further viewing to learn more. The significant part of this image is a close-up of a worker in a lab coat smiling at the camera. He appears to be in a lab, and has a suit and tie plainly visible underneath the very white coat. The viewer of this image is taken on many semiotic leaps in a fraction of a second. So quick are these leaps that there is no chance for critical evaluation of what symbols, signifiers, and stereotypes this image is using and therefore reinforcing. Discourses of ‘self’ and ‘other’, science and technology, and gender are all present here, and need to be unpacked to examine how the juxtaposition of these images works semiotically in marketing such as this.

The creation of the digital image has allowed for endless use of juxtaposition in advertising and branding. As Lowe (1995), along with Eco (1976) and Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1990) have argued, juxtaposition is a fundamental part of late-capitalist advertising as it allows for two seemingly disparate things to be brought together, and “demands the addressee’s active participation” (Lowe 1995: 59). Much more information can be communicated than in an ordinary visual sign as it “requires the active, perceptual connection of the addressee” (Lowe 1995: 55). In this image, the presentation of the man in the suit and tie and lab coat next to workers doing the very
arduous labour demands that viewers fill in the blanks and uncover the message that is being put forth. These semiotic leaps are made possible for the viewer because of discourses and narratives in the wider world. Viewers take the semiotic work as almost being automatic and for this reason the image is infused with meaning-making potential.

By juxtaposing the images of manual coffee production and technological expertise the author of this image taps into the broad discourse of Orientalism first outlined by Said (1979). The coffee labourer is presented as ‘other’, and therefore is part of the Northern discourse of development. This is fundamentally based on the Northern consumers’ notion of the inferiority of people in other places, especially the South (Hussy 2011). As Hussy notes in “Fair Trade and Empire,”

Many Fair Trade promotional materials rely on a perception of producers as primitive people from exotic, far off lands. This understanding of producers is constructed and supported by the development industry. In the developed/under-developed dichotomy, those who are said to be developing are thought of as existing in a time previous to those considered developed, a simpler time that the developed world grew out of long ago (2011: 17).

The broad message here is that knowledge of how to do things ‘right’ comes from, and can only come from Western technical knowledge, as the ‘other’ is lacking intelligence, expertise, and work ethic. This involves “institutionalized patterns of cultural value [that] consumes the actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction” (Fraser 2001 cited in Wright 2004: 678). So while the narrative of ‘otherness’ can be used to cash in on ideas of the ‘authentic’ and ‘noble savages’. In an effort to defetishize the production of coffee these images actually exploit and reinforce difference and the notion of ‘self’ – smart, white, cosmopolitan - and ‘other’ – brown, inferior, passionate, illogical, and lacking business savvy. The portrayal of coffee farmers getting much needed
technical support obscures, and has the opposite effect of reinforcing, the fact that farmers are in an unequal power relationship, and therefore do not participate equally in Fair Trade networks (Lyon 2006). The crisis of small producers in the international coffee market is posited as not being the product of neo-liberal trade policies, and more as a product of producers lacking the intellectual capacity to produce and market their coffee in a way that makes it viable.

Another part of the broader discourses utilized in this image, albeit closely related to the promotion of ‘otherness,’ are those of science and technology. The juxtaposition of coffee farmers doing manual labour and the presence of an expert figure in a lab coat is significant. This again is part of the narrative of development and signifies the prominent idea in Northern society that solutions to problems can be found solely in the market using science and technology. This again reinforces the notions of Orientalism, as the uncivilized other is lacking the intelligence and the development to organize the production of coffee, but consumption choices can change this. In essence the image is still conveying the message that you need scientific knowledge to fully realize the benefits of the Fair Trade market. An ideology of individual action and market hegemony, which deflects any structural analysis of the coffee industry or late-capitalism as a whole is present, and is imparted to the viewer. The point being no image or advertisement could ever portray the structural limits of the global coffee industry – the medium is in effect the message.
Coffee is the largest cash crop in the world. It's also the second-largest traded commodity – only oil is traded more. By paying farmers fair prices regardless of the world market, we can have an impact. As a pioneer in the Canadian Fair Trade movement, Kicking Horse Coffee has been there from the start. We are truly proud to be the largest Fair Trade roaster in Canada. *But more than that, we are proud of Canadian coffee fans who choose Fair Trade. Canadians really do Kick Ass!* (Emphasis added) - Text that accompanies the images in the flyer.

The final images that will be examined are found in the in-store flyer of Invermere, British Columbia’s Kicking Horse Coffee. It is available at their store display in most retail settings, including Canada Safeway. While the company does not have any Fair Trade images on their packaging directly, they do employ the Fair Trade logo accompanied by the phrase "Fair Trade not aid" along with the flyer. The flyer contains equal number of pages of images and text, with nine separate images contained on each page. The juxtaposition of detached signifiers of coffee and lifestyle is contained within several small images on each page. Of the nine images, two depict raw or growing coffee, two depict coffee consumption, two depict wildlife or nature, one depicts outdoor lifestyles, one depicts the cowboy lifestyle of the old West, and one depicts traditional livelihoods of Southern producers. One of the most striking features of the collage to note is how the juxtaposition of images promotes a certain 'lifestyle' of Western consumer, and posits that through drinking Kicking Horse coffee that lifestyle is conferred on the consumer. The consumer is presented with signifiers of the ideal lifestyle consumer that Kicking Horse is appealing to through these images. This person would be middle-aged, but active (rock climbing), live in the West or at least have some attachment to the frontier life-style (cowboy boots, Grizzly bear), as well as having an interest in social justice (Fair Trade). As Lowe states; “[t]he characteristics of a product partake of the social, cultural meanings associated with the activities” (1995: 66). Fair Trade coffee is a signifier of a certain lifestyle consumer, and is used by the consumer to
indicate membership into this group. The lifestyle that is indicated by buying Fair Trade coffee is one of “well-educated, prosperous, politically liberal, and motivated by social ideals” (Lowe 1995: 64).

It is also interesting to note the text accompanying these photos also invokes Canadian nationalism. By saying that “Canadians really do kick ass!” Kicking Horse is evoking nationalist feelings that are currently being used to sell everything from beer to Coca Cola. While this is just another way of tapping into the privileged consumption and exceptionalist aspects, as it is using and reinforcing the idea that people living in Canada are somehow able to, through buying the right coffee, lift people out of poverty. This is also part of the discourse of the citizen consumer that posits our duty as a citizen to consume and the only way to help people is through the market. This tied in with strong nationalist sense is a very powerful message to consumers as not only is Fair Trade coffee part of your lifestyle, but it also part of your patriotic duty. Nationalism in late-capitalist countries is predominantly utilized by capital as a signifier for product differentiation and this is another example.

4.3 The Rhetorical Power of Fair Trade Images

Privileging Consumption

One of the most important aspects evident in the images used to sell Fair Trade coffee that of privileging of the act of consumption. Regularly consumer gains are stressed more than possible gains for coffee farmers, and the act of hedonistic consumption is valorized through the images and advertising of Fair Trade coffee by appealing to lifestyle aspirations. This is done by tapping into existing narratives surrounding consumption, coffee, and the inequalities of global capitalism. The taste and fashion distinction available
for consumers in their personal identity project is given primacy over any possible benefits for producers. The ethical piece often comes second, and in the background.

With the marketing of Fair Trade coffee two distinct production moments are brought together as one (Bryant and Goodman 2004). First, we see the production of narratives surrounding actual coffee production and the ethical standards of Fair Trade. Second, we can identify the broad moral discourses produced through narrative strategies through labels, displays, and photographs of Fair Trade products. Or as Wright (2006) argues, commoditization of this kind contains a double fetish as it obscures the realities at the site of production and creates cultural and economic surpluses for consumers. Fetishism “refers to the ascription of power to inanimate objects, and commodity fetishism involves the endowment of commodities with properties assumed to be intrinsic to them, alongside concealment of social relations involved in the human production of the commodities” (Wright 2004: 669). Fair Trade coffee is given transformational qualities that obscure the actual realities encountered by farmers in the world coffee market.

Food products, such as coffee provide good examples of this new fetishism of lifestyle consumption in late capitalism. As “foods simply do not come from places, organically growing out of them, but also make places as symbolic constructs, being deployed in the discursive constructions of various imaginative geographies” (Cook and Crang 1996: 140 in Bryant and Goodman 2004: 349). Coffee’s very nature of being a solely imported product from ‘exotic’ locales, along with general customer knowledge of the coffee crisis, enables symbolic production to take place and therefore there is a “semantic over investment or burden” placed on consumption (Bryan and Goodman 2004: 349). Today this is almost universalized and contained in almost every product. Admirable intentions that can be misguided through the powerful semiotic effects of advertising are based on the
assumption that capitalism in its current form is inevitable, and it is the duty of consumers to put a human face on it.

**Consuming Lives and Landscapes, Constructing Narratives, and Distorting Reality**

The images deployed to market Fair Trade coffee are the product of carefully crafted advertising campaigns aimed at increasing sales and promoting a positive corporate image. Fair Trade coffee continues to quickly grow as part of the specialty coffee market around the globe, but as of 2009 it still only accounted for 1% of global coffee sales (Potts 2012). Starbucks Corporation, which has been one of the biggest champions of Fair Trade, and uses often life-size images of Fair Trade growers in its stores, only sources between three and ten percent of its coffee from Fair Trade certified producers (Ibid.). The reality of the coffee market is that “(w)ork in coffee, whether as a waged labourer or smallholder, tends not to provide subsistence income” and “the actual work of cultivation is arduous and poorly remunerated” where “women often bear a disproportionate share of the burden” (Smith 1996: 513). This type of discursive appropriation used in Fair Trade advertising and branding obscures the reality of most small coffee farmers. The power of these images is contained in the relay of lifestyle signifiers that utilize and reinforce existing narratives surrounding ethical consumption and the production of coffee. While Fair Trade no doubt helps certain producers navigate the volatility of the global coffee market and gain more control of the value chain, the concern here is how images used in the marketing of Fair Trade have a propensity to stand for the whole of coffee production. This has been termed ‘fair-washing’ by many critics, but what is really happening in this process is worth further investigation.
As discussed earlier in this thesis, image saturated media is increasingly how late-capitalist consumers navigate and understand the world. This creates a huge disjuncture between the reality on the ground and consumers’ understanding of this reality. Stuart Ewen (1988) argues that the image is a site that flattens and distorts reality, and thus tends to obscure power relations present. What the viewer is able to garner from these images is just a highly managed and manipulated slice of time. Because most Northern viewers have no other way of apprehending and understanding the lives of Southern producers, they are given the impression that the smiling happy coffee picker is wholly representative of the reality. In all instances the image hides more than it reveals. What Northern consumers are not able to discern in the image is what is important to a full understanding of coffee production. The images used in the marketing of Fair Trade coffee only allow for certain conclusions to be drawn, ones that are preferred by the company in painting them as benevolent corporate entities that are concerned with the health and welfare of coffee farmers. As Ewen states the consumption of images has quite effectively erased the negative aspects of global capitalist production:

The interior life of...industry [is] marked by low wages, long hours, and severe standards of discipline; meanwhile the outer face of industrial society was developing an ingenious ability to stamp an alternative way of seeing – one that evoked a sense of abundance – across its visible exterior (1988: 37).

Lowe (1995) points out that the image we encounter in advertising is necessarily meant to alert us to existing narratives, and not to the actual reality, in order to signify a certain lifestyle that can be indicated through purchase. Consumers though often confuse the larger narratives that the images convey with reality itself as the image contains a powerful simulatory property. The image of coffee farmers invokes in consumers all past and present narratives surrounding landscapes, people of the global South, and lifestyle, most of which is meted out by advertising materials. One of the most important narratives
that companies are tapping into is the idea that ethical everyday consumption choices have transformational power. Fair Trade coffee is “part of alternative consumption practices in a process that imprints and circulates specific political ecological understandings of the biophysical environment and peoples to be “saved”” (Bryant and Goodman 2004: 357). The narratives constructed of benevolent Northern consumer and poor Southern producer that are utilized by Fair Trade images narrow the consumers gaze, and distort the actuality of global capitalist production. Images of Fair Trade “participate[s] in the continual reproduction of global power imbalances that keep producers everywhere at a disadvantage” (Hussy 2011: 17). This is part of the late-capitalist accumulation strategy, which needs to construct a particular understanding of the world through commodities and use this symbolic order to as source of value and meaning (Harvey 1990).

What allows this form of marketing to work is that "the entire realm of social and cultural values have become simulatory images" (Lowe 1995: 62). The images of coffee farmers used in marketing Fair Trade coffee contain many destabilized signifiers of a whole variety of social and cultural values that constitute a particular lifestyle. When using an image in this way it is easy to detach the actual image from what it actually represents. As Lowe states, “[f]reed from the referent's context yet likened to the referent, the image can then be associated with other images and linguistic signs for signifying purposes” (Lowe 1995: 58). The woman captured in the image on the cover of Nestlé’s annual report is designed to be a signifier for a whole number of social and cultural values. The signification of these values through the image not only objectifies her, but also triggers stereotypical cultural knowledge in consumers. The version of reality painted through the use of Fair Trade images allows Northern consumers to very safely go on consuming in the same way focusing on looking good to others and promoting a certain lifestyle while not getting involved intellectually or politically at a more meaningful level.
The revolution in advertising, marketing, and branding practices has affected almost every consumer product, and coffee is no exception. As neoliberal policies restructured the coffee industry concentration and centralization occurred at an unprecedented scale along with vertical integration of the supply chain. This has been accompanied by fragmentation of brands and an explosion in marketing, packaging and advertising, creating symbolic value. Marketing and branding have meant that the real value from coffee is not actually gained from the coffee itself, but from the “enduring if less tangible symbolic economy of images and representations” (Smith 1996: 515). The specialty coffee industry, which is supposed to be based on a closer relationship between producer and consumer has actually meant the opposite. Corporations have appropriated discursively the lives of small coffee farmers in the majority world through a creation of symbolic capital that is sold to consumers in exchange for their economic capital. Through these exchanges, consumers constantly try to simultaneously acquire identity through the purchasing of these products, and distance themselves materially and symbolically from the great mass of coffee drinkers.

The specialty market at best pays coffee farmers marginally more for growing coffee and at worst averts our gaze from the realities that producers face. Some go even further like Smith and suggest that “images of exotic Third World locales that persist a sort of colonial sediment in the popular imaginary of the West” (1996: 517). Symbolic value is created and appropriated through the use of images in advertising which has ensured the success of the specialty coffee industry. Most coffee farmers still are producing at a subsistence level, and are heavily reliant on the world price of coffee, that remains low. Large coffee companies avoid a substantial amount of risk involved in growing coffee and can capture a majority of the surplus in the value-chain. Relationship coffee, while providing an alternative for consumers, has only led to the continued impoverishment of the majority of small coffee producers.
What is evidenced in these examples is that specific visual signifiers of larger social and cultural narratives are used in the marketing and branding of Fair Trade coffee. While there are slight differences between conventional and non-conventional coffee companies, the methods they employ are very similar. Fair Trade marketing utilizes a specific set of narratives and discourses to signify a certain type of lifestyle consumption. These range from Edenic myth making, the romanticization of poverty and traditional livelihoods, to nationalism, and active athletic ways of life. What they all have in common is that they are used to signal to the consumer that certain coffee, and the way it’s produced, is just another element in having a socially conscious lifestyle. The most pertinent point is that these products intrinsically do not have anything to do with the lifestyle one actually wants to portray. The case study shows how products imbued with certain characteristics have come to influence the construction of identity that is closely linked to the obsession with surfaces, style, and fashion. In reality it is obvious that buying these products alone will not make one more socially conscious. Consumers, though most would not admit it, are caught in the dance of symbolic value, projections of identity and being attuned with social trends.

The hegemony of consumerism is produced and reproduced as consumers find their only way of exerting power or enacting change is through the market. The social relations of consumption now totally eclipse the actual social relations occurring in material production of commodities. Wright (2004) is correct in saying that this is the way in which commodity fetishism operates in late-capitalism, as relations between things are seen as relations between people and those relations are seen as natural.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Late-capitalism has brought innumerable changes to how we see and interpret the world. Representation of everyday life as part of social reproduction for the purpose of capital accumulation is at the very heart of late-capitalist logic. To fully apprehend the mechanisms that both produce and reproduce the conditions for capital accumulation focus must be on the commodity form. As Marx argues; “[A] commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (2007: 163). In late-capitalism the commodity appears even more ubiquitous and pervasive with the developments in technology and image-based advertising.

What is important to remember when investigating the commodity form in an accelerated and instantaneous commodity landscape is that all commodities and consumption derive from a material base. The dynamic nature of capital allows for many fixes and re-organizations to ensure ever expanding profits. In late-capitalism the commodity form and social actors’ relation to it has changed precisely because of the drive to further capital accumulation. The crisis of post-war Fordist hegemony has transformed the capitalist world and the commodity in a variety of important ways. In order to grasp fully the nature of capital in this moment, the focus must be on both the re-organization of production of material goods, but also on the new ways in which the realms of profit seeking have deeply penetrated the symbolic realm and in-turn our psyche.

The reorganization of capital into a flexible accumulation process, along with the technological revolution, has flooded social life with images. Images have revolutionized advertising, branding, and the circulation of commodities. The effect has been that the turnover time for capital has been increased significantly, as barriers of space and time are
brought together seamlessly. Therefore how individuals make sense of their daily lives has changed as well. As “identity is increasingly dependent upon images” (Harvey 1990: 289) and “[I]mages are the dominant language of the modern world” (Jhally 1990: 8), the symbolic consumption of signs and symbols must be an object of study when understanding late-capitalism.

The suppression of global coffee prices has been a disaster for small farmers, but has facilitated the growth in the symbolic consumption of coffee in two ways. First, a low-cost consistent raw material that deregulation has produced in the coffee market allows for coffee to be branded and marketed in a variety of ways using roasting techniques and symbolic appropriations. Second, this suppression of coffee prices has meant that niche markets, such as Fair Trade, that are in apparent opposition to the system, can be appropriated symbolically. The images used to market Fair Trade coffee operate in a simulatory semiotic manner which is part of late-capitalist lifestyle construction and hegemonic consumerism.

The Experience of Space and Time in Late-capitalism

The experience of space and time in this flexible regime of accumulation is paramount to understanding its fragmentary nature, and the use of social and cultural values as signifiers for product characteristics. As Cerni notes “the world of consumption is a world of multiple but unconnected temporal experiences” (2007: 4). For the consumer this means a "sense of fragmentation and de-centered self; multiple conflicting identities" (Lowe 1995: 10). For example, one might drink locally brewed beer, wine from South Africa, coffee from Indonesia, wear thrift store fashion and expensive designer footwear. Each of these commodities is laden with subjective meaning, as “bits and pieces of different
simulatory spaces and simulatory times are valorized to produce and hype the consumption of the late-capitalist commodity” (Lowe 1995: 89). The late-capitalist consumer navigates through a situation where space and time are “no longer the framework of our perception” (Lowe 1981: 161) and meaning and identity are now the product of choices they make in the arena of consumption. This causes consumers to become obsessed with surfaces, style, and fashion, or the semiotic landscape of late-capitalism. The ideology of the fragment and its focus on surfaces are part of the ideology of consumerism that today is the dominant way of finding meaning in the world.

**Consumerism in Late-capitalism**

Northern consumers navigate a world of increasingly powerful and abundant media images which dominate the construction of reality and meaning. Increasingly detached from any sort of material production, they act on desire and hedonistic impulses to fulfill emotional needs that are delivered through advertising in trying to forge some sort of identity in a world with no firm underpinnings. As media images come to dominate our mental landscape, fragmentation and superficiality are inevitable, and a depthlessness of life is created. The aestheticization of everyday life means the transformation of social life and identities into life-style projects, where one must buy the ‘right car’, wear the ‘right’ clothes and drink the ‘right’ coffee (Abercrombie 2000).

What does obsession with style and the hegemony of consumerism mean for the ability of citizens to apprehend, understand, and change the world? Herbert Marcuse was one of the first to perceive this as a potential problem for industrialised countries as it means a “closing of the universe of discourse” (Marcuse 1978, cited in Ewen 1995: 262). The culture industry has grown immensely and the proliferation of media images has come
to dominate our mental landscape, while simultaneously cutting off other ways to experience and interpret the world. The attention to surfaces and style has “encouraged a comprehension of the world that focuses on easily manipulated surfaces, while other meanings vanish” (Ewen 1989: 262). Not only do other meanings vanish, but also the ability to make connections between events and social problems do as well. As Harvey (1990) argues, we live in an era of the perpetual present, where individual actions are motivated by maximizing the consumption of surfaces, fashion, and lifestyles.

Hegemonic consumerism is increasingly at odds with our material conditions of existence, and creates a consciousness that is increasingly at odds with actual lived experience. Not only are citizens of Northern countries consuming beyond their means, but also beyond the limits of the planet, and at the expense of the less fortunate. Consumption of the ‘right’ kind has become at once, both an escape from reality, and the principle way we construct and decipher it. Life becomes a project of hedonistic, competitive consumption. All other meanings are slowly discarded as “truth is...continually subjected to forces of the marketplace” (Ewen 1989: 264). A more in depth understanding of reality, and the possibility of other forms of meaning, are continually shrunk by the hegemony of consumerism, and the fragmented superficial nature of signs, symbols, and signifiers are imbued into daily life.

Contemporary ideology simply translates the really unproductive character of consumption into its corresponding figures: subjects who construct meanings without transforming objects, who choose and desire but are materially powerless (Cerni 2007: 13).

The subject and the act of consumption have become central to the operation of the capitalist order. Hedonistic consumption of commodities constructs an ideology and a way of life that is without focus and severely detached from the material conditions of existence.
The compression of space and time within flexible accumulation has meant "a distinct material basis for the rise of distinctive systems of interpretation and representation" where “commodities are themselves the primary bearers of cultural codes" (Harvey 1990: 299). This new regime of accumulation is capable of culturally mining images, life-struggles, life-styles and so on, and re-arrange, re-interpret, and transform them into floating signifiers that can be attached to commodities through branding, packaging and advertising. While the concentration is on the commodity form, one must not lose sight of the fact “that cultural forms are firmly rooted in the daily circulation process of capital” (Harvey 1990: 299). Capital accumulation is now driven importantly by the production and consumption of symbolic value appropriated from producers in the global South.

This thesis sought to uncover and apprehend various mechanisms and visual modes of representation that operate in the symbolic consumption of Fair Trade coffee through mass produced media images of Fair Trade coffee farmers. How Northern consumers interpret the world and move through and understand it is a primary focus, and one of the ways to uncover these mechanisms is to study the site of symbolic production. In an image-saturated world "our own experiences are of little consequence, unless they are substantiated and validated by the world of style" (Ewen 1988: 76). The outcome for this includes the widening gap between surface and reality, the invisibleness of class and power, individualization of politics, and hedonistic consumerist ideology. Ideology, in late-capitalism, far from being a top down, total way of thinking, is now much more diverse and contradictory. It is produced importantly through highly managed reproduction systems and individual consumer identity construction through images and the world of style.

The semiotic consumption of Fair Trade coffee through media images, and how hedonistic consumption is fundamental to the ideology of hegemonic consumerism, a
hallmark of late-capitalism, was explored. An examination of symbolic production and consumption of goods through images, style and fashion is an integral part of examining social power and meaning in late-capitalist society. As Harvey (1990) argues, how meaning is made, and how social actors explain their world, change as representations of that world change. For late-capitalist consumers, meaning is made through the hegemonic consumption of commodities imbued with symbolic attributes. The nature of this consumption is at the heart of late-capitalist discourse and ideology, and has significant effects on politics at every level. In an image-saturated society, surface triumphs over substance and social actors’ ways of thinking about the world, and their responses to it, are shaped by the hegemony of style, fashioned out of the semiotic consumption of lifestyle goods. The underlying meaning and consequences of the operation of the world are masked. In this regime of accumulation, power, while appearing more democratic and diffuse, is in reality increasingly dictatorial in nature.

One of the most powerful underlying narratives that can be gleaned from the study of images used to market Fair Trade coffee is that consumption is privileged above all else. While the benefits to the individual farmer are illustrated, they are invoked in a way that can be used semiotically to confer lifestyle and status on the consumer. Taste, distinction, status, and social responsibility are presented and sold through promotional images, packaging and branding of the coffee’s Fair Trade nature. Consumption is encouraged, and whenever the ethical dimensions of Fair Trade come to the fore “the attention of the potential consumer is quickly returned to the theme of self-reward” (Wright 2004: 669). Within marketing campaigns, and images used in them, “consumers are rendered agents of development and simultaneously reassured that they can contribute to global fairness while maintaining high levels of personal consumption” (Wright 2004: 669).
Individual consumption choices are portrayed as having a transformative nature, part of the individualization of responsibility in late-capitalism. Consumers are positioned as agents of social change and "political action as consumption (and vice versa) individualizes environmental and social problems and their solutions in ways that repeatedly forestall and mystify any meaningful ways of actually dealing with them" (Lyon 2004: 461). The assumption is that all citizens are equal consumers, and those that cannot vote with their dollars hold less power to enact social change. When responsibility for social change is rendered an individual action attained through the market, the prospect of real and meaningful social change is eclipsed since it is turned into a matter of socially divisive personal style and fashion choice. As Ewen argues "[I]n the resulting realm of superficial meanings, democracy itself becomes style; popular political involvement becomes structured by a pattern of spectatorship and consumption" (1988: 268). Johnston and Bauman agree and further state:

This framing builds on a neo-liberal vision of environmental change that relies on market mechanisms, and suggests ultimate faith in enlightened, educated consumers’ self-interest as the primary motor for social change. Consumer choice is prescribed as an easy and efficient solution to address market failures like sustainability, leaving public sector solutions or regulation of market actors unmentioned and underemphasized. In essence the market – in the form of educated and enlightened consumer choices – is presented as a solution to market failures, and the suggested focus is on how individuals can make the ‘right’ choice at the restaurant or grocery store (2010: 170).

The dominance of images in the semiotic lifestyle consumption of Fair Trade coffee obscures class differences, normalizes privilege, and frames wealth and high levels of consumption as both inevitable and desirable. It romanticizes poverty and traditional livelihoods of people who grow Fair Trade coffee, and appropriates these facts for profit. Poverty is framed as an individual problem. Johnston and Bauman argue that within foodie culture “poverty is naturalized and normalized” and that “poverty is simply a part of a
place” (Johnston and Bauman 2010: 177). It is our “white man’s burden” to help them. This is directly related to current and past narratives of development, even Orientalism.

Examples of images used to market Fair Trade coffee also provide evidence that “stories tend to imply that the solution to poverty is in the hands of individuals who need to pull themselves out of poverty” (Bauman and Johnston 2010: 177). So not only is the solution to poverty an individual one for the Northern consumer to solve by paying more for their coffee. At the same time the producers’ subsistence existence is presented as an individual problem they can solve on their own as well. Individual solutions on either end of the supply chain limit the space available for substantive social action and policy change.

It is interesting to contrast this with these very same consumers’ views on poverty and poor people in their own societies. Fair Trade coffee that may help some poor farmer halfway around the world is evidence of the rhetorical power of consumption. One is able to make change without having to go without or do any of the work involved in seriously confronting poverty. Economically disadvantaged exotic people which one can consume at a distance and which provide social distinction and status, do not force consumers into any wider analysis of the system or of current consumption practices. While there is a long history of charity in the upper classes, as a sign of affluence and status (conspicuous consumption), that notion has changed in late capitalism. Zizek (2009) argues, late-capitalism brings together both consumption and its cost into a single moment. Fair Trade in this sense sanitizes the difficult and ongoing work of actually challenging the structural causes of poverty by allowing people to just pay for it.

In their inquiry into the discourse surrounding high-end food consumption Johnston and Bauman (2010) found that the way in which class is obfuscated and erased is an excellent example of consumerist hegemony. Ethical consumption is part of cultural
leadership in late-capitalism that is required to achieve cultural consent for hegemony. This hegemony reinforces class inequality and often works to “short-circuit attempts at critical thinking” by “working its way into common sense” (Johnston and Bauman 2010: 201).

When poverty and its solution are presented in this superficial way, as an individual problem through the use of images, the systemic nature of poverty is negated. It posits only one common sense understanding of poverty and class, and only one way to alleviate it, while eclipsing and side-lining all other explanations and solutions. There is direct link between a host of socially conscious product choices and democratic ideology of global consumerism. Consumerism has been situated as a means of political power in a world economy that renders individuals powerless against big corporations and government. The strategic purchase of goods, such as Fair Trade coffee, is a way of asserting political power (Frank 2000).

This is part of the wider narrative of citizen as consumer, where individualistic democratic ideology has merged with niche consumerism, where buying Fair Trade coffee is a democratic duty. There are two main problems here. First, as Frank (2000) and Heath and Potter (2005) have shown, this kind of socially conscious, or ‘hip’ consumerism is marketed and branded on the basis that it is somehow resisting capitalist hegemony. Fair Trade coffee’s direct dialectical relationship with the mainstream coffee market is an example of late-capitalism that requires resistance to ensure and reproduce its hegemony (Heath and Potter 2005). Second, as Johnston and Bauman (2010) have shown, taste is socially constructed by the dominant class which produces “an ideology of faux-populism [that] suggests a democratic connection across classes, while minimizing the extent of socio-economic inequality” (Johnston and Bauman 2010: 42). Bourdieu (2002) asserts the realm of taste and fashion revolves around distinction and cultural capital, a disguise for economic capital and therefore for class position and status. Inequality is further obscured
by the omnivorousness of the late-capitalist consumer who will live very frugally in some areas in order to purchase goods high in symbolic capital in others.

In a rapidly changing society great importance is placed on being attuned to social trends or fashion and being seen as part of the initial uptake is deemed very advantageous and a source of distinction. Distinction and status are found through being on the right side of the curve when it comes to new trends, whether it is clothes or social responsibility. In addition, society currently frames shopping and hedonistic consumption as the keys to happiness and fulfillment. It is considered socially advantageous to consume in a particular way: the assemblage of a unique lifestyle is seen as a measure of success in the late-capitalist world. As Harvey (1990) argues the pressure is not just to show everyone what goods you can afford to buy, but one is expected to drive the ‘right’ car, drink the ‘right’ beer and so on. Of course what is considered ‘right’ has a multitude of different answers in a multitude of different social settings and classes. What is important to note in late-capitalism is that one must be constantly re-inventing what the best possible combination of signs and symbols to consume and display as identity is fluid and fractured. As Ewen (1988) notes, what we hope to achieve is completion of the identity project, which is always, just out of reach.

Another significant point about niche consumption is how it is utilized by the capitalist elite as evidence that capitalism is becoming more democratic and equal. Recent commentators on the right have heralded this development as a way to democratize culture and consumption (Frank 2000). Business and its cheerleaders welcome the choices that have come with consumer capitalism. Everyone can buy and fulfill their own unique tastes and not be a slave to the moneyed classes who have historically defined taste. While this is in some sense true, as the case of Fair Trade coffee illustrates, notions of class inequality
and politics are being subsumed by consumer choice. This has real and immediate effects for democratic politics, as the culture wars have been replaced by the taste or consumption wars. People without the cultural or economic capital are easily pitted against those who have it. This is significant as sub-cultures of consumption both form bonds of solidarity in taste and consumption, and break those bonds in class. The concept of populism with profit, and pitting main-street against yuppie hipsters, is being reinforced by lifestyle signifiers like Fair Trade coffee. This can lead to people not seeing forces of class and power and in certain instances voting against their own economic self-interest.

Late-capitalist hegemony is closely linked to identity and consumerism as it is interwoven into the semiotic practices of consumption. Hegemony regulates the way in which social economic activity occurs, and the semiotic interaction involved, which “suggests that there is a set of cultural and social practices, ideas and interpretations that can be recognized as naturally occurring, not socially constituted givens in social life. These tend to be presented as essential elements in the formation of the self, in developing a relationship between self and society” (Mosco 1996: 242).

Studying the images of Fair Trade gives us a better understanding of how meaning is created in late-capitalism by examining how the material and symbolic are intricately intertwined in late-capitalist accumulation. While Fordism was characterized by ideology, late-capitalism is characterized by hegemony of market forces. Ideology in consumer capitalism works in a hegemonic way as it relies on gaining consent rather than using coercion. Mosco sums it up well:

Unlike values, hegemony is politically constituted, but unlike ideology, it does not reflect an instrumental distortion of image and information. Rather, hegemony is the ongoing formation of both image and information to produce a map of common sense sufficiently persuasive to most people that it provides the social and cultural coordinates that define the 'natural' attitude of social
Hegemony is therefore more powerful than ideology because it is not simply imposed by class power, but constituted organically out of the dynamic geometries of power embedded in social relations throughout society. (1996: 242 Emphasis added)

Hegemonic consumerism is also an example of individuation, a term coined by Poulantzas (1978). In capitalist society collective categories and identities are turned into individual ones. Therefore in late-capitalism the semiotics of consumerism is part of this process that placing concentration on differences and uniqueness, rather than similarities, and hence diminishing space for collective action. This process, of which Fair Trade coffee is part, diminishes the power of collective identities such as gender, race, and class. It produces a situation where individualism manufactured through semiotic consumption is taken for granted as the only possible way of enacting change. Instead of challenging the economic structures that produce enormous global inequities, we can just pay a little more for our coffee. As Mosco argues the current hegemony has meant “the reconstruction of ideas about social welfare and private charity” (1996: 243).

The concern with the consumerist based hegemony of late-capitalism is that those very ideas of charity and social welfare are being changed, but because of its immense presence and power it is very difficult to apprehend. As Mosco argues “hegemony is stronger than ideology because it is based on consent rather than coercion. But consent is very demanding ...hegemonic power is based on social relationships requiring complicity across class, gender and other hierarchies” (1996: 242). Coffee is an excellent entry point into a study of this state of affairs as it carries significant material and symbolic power which illuminates this phenomenon. As Zizek (2012: 315) argues coffee is cultural capitalism at its purest, where a semantic overinvestment has made it possible for the purchase of a Fair Trade coffee to already include the price of its opposite. This is the new dominant way of thinking surrounding inequality in late-capitalism. What is lost, Zizek
argues, is that even though we may feel good about our purchases in the moment, we are only furthering the system that is causing the alienation, anomie, and guilt that entices us to pay more for our coffee. This situation of hegemonic charity consumerism is an excellent indicator of a system in rapid decline and panic, and the ideology it produces is all encompassing. It allows us to forget that fundamentally “it is immoral to use private property in order to alleviate the horrible evils that result from the institution of private property” (Wilde 2013).
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Figure 3 – Nestlé
Figure 4 – Level Ground
Figure 5 – Transfair Online Producer Profile-
Figure 6 – Kicking Horse Coffee In Store Flyer