

THE MYTHIC ELEMENT OF MASS MEDIA AND ITS RELATION TO PLATO'S CAVE

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Abstract: This paper compares some influential critiques of mass media and the mythic element they diagnose within it. Each theory is compared to the myth of the cave, described by Plato in his Republic, which suggests that whatever the format of our sociocultural communications systems, they falsely maintain a paradigm we assume equates with some kind of abiding truth or reality. This relatively 'illusory' quality must be qualified, however, by the transformative power and potential of mass media both as a paradigm and as a vehicle of cultural change. This tension is discussed in regards to Marshall McLuhan's thesis that The Medium is the Message, the Frankfurt School analysis performed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the 'Culture Industry' chapter of their Dialectic of Enlightenment, and in Karl Marx's theory of the commodity fetish as revised by Jean Baudrillard (in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign) and Slavoj Žižek (in The Sublime Object of Ideology). Close readings of these influential critical analyses of the cultural and symbolic elements in the proliferation of mass media and communications industries today reveal an age-old tension between ignorance and knowledge, illusion and truth that is far from settled. My conclusion considers the degree of agency we, as consumers of mass media in the early twenty-first century, might enjoy in terms of its dominant message. It assumes that a Marxist critique of the media and communications industries remains relevant in the twenty-first century.

INTRODUCTION

How could we define the mythic element of the globalised mass media and communications industries of the early twenty-first century? Further, what does the attempt to answer this question offer to a critical study of the field? In responding to such questions, this paper considers one aspect of the way the literary and philosophical discourse surrounding it has considered the 'mass media' as a hegemonic monolith with its own terms of dissemination and perpetuation. The critiques I discuss here all investigate the explosion of information technologies in terms I would call 'mythic,' because they utilise metaphor to explain a force greater than that which is apparently under human control (especially when rational argument

seemingly cannot encompass the subject matter). Each considers the new information age to have varying degrees of utopian and/or dystopian aspects and all can be further elucidated with reference to an ancient myth of the cave, used by Plato in his *Republic*, which is designed to explain the way humans live in unassuming ignorance of an almost all-abiding illusion. The degree to which we enjoy power over this force, or agency within its pervasive field, will be the subject of my conclusion.

I begin with Marshall McLuhan's thesis that 'the medium is the message,' an idea that interprets a new electronic age as the bearer of its own mythic portent. The message that we have shifted out of a previous reliance on print media and its logic of linear development to a realm in which information is available across a broad range of shifting levels, amongst which we choose and manoeuvre, is extended across the 'global village.' This multiform message links a retribalised world with almost unmanageable reams of information, but by becoming 'masters of cultural and historical alchemy' through the study of media as a mythic language with its own grammar and syntax, we can accept 'the direction and control of media old and new' (McLuhan, 2005, p. 19). Against this utopian visage, which McLuhan qualified in later work, is pitted the unrelentingly bleak vision of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's 'Culture Industry,' which is a monolithic monster that crushes all opposition to its relentless drive to corner markets and produce greater profits. For these Frankfurt School theorists, the information age merely extends the dominion traditionally sought on behalf of the corporate elite, from the colonisation of new lands to the infiltration of people's minds. If their logic is accepted without question, however, the actual site where resistance to this new form of cultural fascism might take place becomes difficult to discern. As such, in many ways, their version of the mass media begs capitulation to its powers (or retreat into high modernist, avant garde aesthetics).

Alongside these two options and germane to both is the Marxian concept of the commodity fetish. This theory outlines the way cultural products have imprinted upon them an illusory sense of transcendence, a mystique of the idol that draws their consumer into a desecralised relationship redolent of worship. Two recent thinkers have commented at length on this idea; one, Jean Baudrillard, considers the way the commodity fetish has been extended through mass media to become a monster that flattens all opposition with its perpetual appetite, while the other, Slavoj Žižek, recognises the continual conflict involved in any such agenda, concluding that while the mass media may indeed resemble a monstrous entity that can devour the souls of humans, it can still also provide the tools for its own transformation. All of these ideas can be considered, in conclusion, as different outcomes of the myth of Plato's cave. Does the prisoner held shackled in a world of illusions escape to see the light of truth – and what could such broadly defined ideas mean in terms of our engagement with globalised mass media in the early twenty-first century?

PLATO'S CAVE AND ITS RELATION TO POSTMODERN MASS MEDIA

In his myth of the cave, Plato relates the story of prisoners who are kept shackled, facing in one direction only, while a series of images dances on the wall before them. With no alternative reality to compare to the shadows, which are produced by puppeteers holding images up to a firelight emanating from behind them, the prisoners take their situation for an abiding reality. For Plato in the *Republic*, we are those prisoners, the moving images are produced by our senses, the world is the cave and it is likewise confusing to the extent that it seems to our perceptions to be real. The rare prisoner who escapes the cave of corporeal life, however, comes to realise that there is a far truer reality outside of this one and that the truth found there is of a lasting nature that can be guaranteed with recourse to the eternal (as opposed to this changeable world). For Plato the path to this greater truth follows reason, which purifies the confused senses and

dismantles our submission to convention (which is unquestioningly accepted by the prisoners in a similar way that people are imprisoned within their seeming reality in the film *The Matrix*).

A reading of the cave myth in terms of postmodern mass media could begin with the recognition that the information age floods our senses with endless imagery that we cannot avoid. The narrative has metamorphosed, however; the 'deceiving' actors relaying confusing information, for instance, no longer represent just our perceptual apparatus and reliance on convention but a corporate-sponsored, globalising, capitalist regime. With this in mind, John O'Neill takes the perspective that Plato's cave can still be used as a direct parallel to 'the mass age of television' (1991, p. 4). Just as our sensory nature tends towards acceptance of a conventional worldview, then, these new 'actors' on the stage of truth would likewise, on behalf of the profit motive, prefer that we remain in front of a wall of imagery, which is now the ever shifting face of the billboard, computer screen, television set, mobile phone, bus stop, building hoardings, and so on ad nauseum. Also, for Plato, escapees from the cave receive special training designed to introduce them to the eternal truths beyond the common assumptions of the prisoners. These 'philosopher-kings' then return (against their will now that they are enlightened and find the gloomy strictures of the cave all-too-human) to lead the herd of followers, but without necessarily offering them recourse to the difficult truth, which the prisoners would no doubt deny anyway. While we could not call the leaders of postmodern mass media philosopher-kings, and while they do not suffer from having to lead the unenlightened but rather profit from the blanket of media they ensconce consumers within, today's directors of the imagery within the cave do share the assumptions of dominance accepted by Plato's necessarily cynical elite.

For the metaphor to survive transplant from Plato's context to this one, then, the prisoners remain the public but the source of their shadowy imagery becomes the profit motive driving so much twenty-first century mass media. These 'projectionists' are heavily invested in retaining the mass media's power over the consumers' attention. A new hierarchy becomes prevalent, then, wherein a minority of the 'prisoners' of this world comes to recognise that control of the dominant format of imagery renders them a portion of political and economical freedom over the rest of the horde, while unquestioning acceptance of the imagery most dominant in twenty-first century mass media is the province of the most shackled and lowly of the prisoners. Thus critical analysis of mass media and/or a general level of education in the field may be seen as a stepping-stone towards loosening the power of profit to drive the dominant sociocultural imagery of our times.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE AND THE SHIP OF HUMANITY

Marshall McLuhan's thesis in *The Medium is the Message* treats the advent of mass media, especially in the sense that it proliferates electronically, as a shift in the entire consciousness – and therefore in the mythic history – of the humanity influenced by it. Although he later modified the extremeness of his position, earlier statements sometimes read as if we have entered a new utopia where all of humanity, once it has thrown off the shackles of print media and the linear trajectory of awareness associated with it, enjoys the same 'ship of state.' Such an attitude ignores the ignoble perspectives of the captains of industry McLuhan himself seems to have respected so much (Fawcett, 2004, pp. 218-219). But beyond his naivety pertaining to the capitalist regime of profit motive and the territorialism of today's retribalisation of the global village, McLuhan's ideas retain some of their force, because he was prepared to consider the advent of twentieth-century mass media in the bigger picture of western history and the long arc of its communicative technologies. As McLuhan scholar Lance Strate points out, in order to study media *as* media (or to practise 'media ecology'), 'we need to use our powers of observation to reveal our otherwise invisible media environments ... [and] make meaning

out of our media environments and their effects' (Strate, 2008, p. 129). In other words, as Neil Postman has explained, 'cultures are formed *within* media, rather than media simply being produced by cultures'.¹

The twentieth century shift from a society built around and dependent upon mechanical technology to one immersed in electronic informational media is accompanied, then, by a shift in the way consciousness, and society itself, is shaped. The fragmenting process encouraged by alphabet, and then print technologies, is overwhelmed by a flood of new information delivered on multiple levels, such that the modern youth 'lives mythically and in depth' (McLuhan and Fiore, 2001, pp. 8-9). These new media, far from being a mere vehicle of the real happenings of contemporary life, contain and deploy the very force of this complete revolution, which in many ways takes us back into a culture of the Word. This amorphous space challenges the visually rationalised order of European print media culture, which heretofore made space 'uniform, continuous, and connected' as a line of 'fragmented bits' of information (pp. 44-45). For McLuhan, the main front in this civil war between old and new technologies was the television, which conditions its consumers to receive messages aurally as well as visually, engaging them in a complex interplay directly influenced by the smash and grab attention-gathering techniques of advertising, with scant time spent on narrative form (pp. 125-26). While now dated in terms of the technologies involved – the digital and Internet revolutions would surely be seen as the front line today – McLuhan's idea that the new acoustic space envelops us in a 'seamless web' of 'simultaneous relationships' (p. 111), conveying a return to the totalisation of mythic consciousness, beyond 'detached patterns' and towards a new *participation mystique* (p. 114), retains some intellectual cache in terms of this paper. His recognition that the 'contained, the distinct, the separate—our Western legacy—... [is] being replaced by the flowing, the unified, the fused' speaks eloquently to the postmodern experience of the digital age (p. 145).

McLuhan's suggestions as to how this shift could best be negotiated arise out of the way he defines mythic aurality against the phonetically organised (visual) universe: 'Speech is a social chart of th[e] bog' of acoustic space, the boundless directionlessness that was abolished by the invention of writing in the city' (p. 48). The multidimensional space enjoyed by pre-alphabetic societies is recreated with electric circuitry (pp. 56-57). The way today's consumer is plugged into a variety of electronic media in a constant stream of information, often from many directions at once, bears out the prescience of this aspect of McLuhan's analysis (although a postcolonial reading would surely abhor his passive acceptance of civilisation's colonising power over other societies). He averred that this new mythic realm offers the challenge of retaining the abstract, speculative reasoning of the Socratic dialogue (pp. 113-14) while letting go of visually-enhanced illusions of order. Two literary metaphors suggest to him similar strategic procedures. We might choose to follow Joyce into *Finnegans Wake* and the ancient 'means of living simultaneously in all cultural modes while quite conscious' (pp. 119-20). Or, alternatively, but with a parallel nod towards the dissolution of known order, we can accompany Poe and his delirious speculations on the nature of the whirlpool into which he descended: 'In his amusement born of rational detachment of his own situation, Poe's mariner in "The Descent into the Maelstrom" staved off disaster by understanding the action of the whirlpool. His insight offers a possible stratagem for understanding our predicament, our electronically-configured whirl' (p. 150). Our drift into the global village, if it is to avoid the tragic possibilities inherent in the 'bog' of aural/mythic society, must seek to overcome ignorance of the media culture that helps to shape it. Interestingly, in these times of renewed apocalyptic speculation, the maelstrom is an ancient symbol for the end of the world (De Santillana and von Dechend, 2005, p. 214).

Much of the language found in his famous book can be found rehearsed in earlier publications. In 'Myth and Mass Media,' McLuhan is akin with the Roland Barthes of *Mythologies*,

relating the myth-making process associated with Hollywood and Madison Avenue as a kind of social telescoping, distilling 'in a single image the total social action or process that is imagined as desirable'.² Usefully, McLuhan's utopianism makes him question the 'prevalent concept that the mass media exert[s] a baneful influence on the human spirit' (McLuhan, 1959, p. 17). But the associated idea that the newspaper offers 'unprocessed, uninterpreted, raw news' (p. 18) for readers who must then piece items together to make their own meaning out of life clearly underestimated the power of today's broadcast/print frenzy of cross-promotion, a phenomenon of global sponsorship so deeply ingrained in the production of early twenty-first century cultural artefacts as to be ubiquitous.³ The newspaper editorial itself may endeavour to provide objectivity,, but the content of mass media is programmed to a fine degree regarding the overall narrative the consumer is expected to take from it; the message is not just fixated on continued consumption, but on attention being pointed in very certain directions depending on the media sponsors involved.

Baudrillard's less salutary vision, discussed below, retains more traction in terms of the way postmodern mass media operates to flatten all to which it refers into a single, amorphous dimension of consumability.⁴ To accept McLuhan's electronic myth, as I have mentioned, we would need to assume a sense of collectivity in human affairs and society that could be termed a 'ship of humanity' myth. As Brian Fawcett notes, although we can't blame McLuhan for not seeing the future, we can say that 'the recent evolution of mass systems, particularly those related to communications ... seem to be increasingly shaped by and driven for financial profit,' and run by corporations single-minded enough in their drive towards this goal that the advance of critical awareness in its customer base – which is all of us – is hardly a tacit goal, to say the least (Fawcett, 2004, p. 208).

While part of McLuhan's thesis is clearly misguided in its naïve optimism, it just as clearly maintains for the individual consumer of this modern phenomenon – again, that is all of us subsumed within the new world of western technology and/or global market advertising – an aspect of agency. As McLuhan commented in *The Medium is the Message*, 'there is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening' (p. 25). The prisoner in McLuhan's cave, that is to say, is no longer shackled such that they must face the same wall at all times. They can get up, move about, choose different walls to look at; interact with, make a request to, or even become the projectionists. For McLuhan, there is no greater truth available outside the cave, as if we were locked into Plato's realm of shadowy illusion while the sun of true intelligibility shone elsewhere; 'we cannot escape into a higher metaphysics or into an elite culture' (O'Neill, 1991, p. 7). As Strate puts it, the cave represents the entirety of reality and it is the media utilised by the projectionists that matters, more than the shadows they project:

McLuhan's goal was the liberation of the human mind and spirit from its subjugation to symbol systems, media, and technologies. This can only begin with a call to pay attention to the medium, because it is the medium that has the greatest impact on human affairs, not the specific messages we send or receive. It is the symbolic form that is most significant, not the content (Strate, 2008, p. 130).

The cave is thus the world and different levels of truth illuminate it; no eternal metaphysic, like Plato's sun, stands guarantor outside the system. This kind of perspective accords favourably with the always-contextualising historicism of the postmodern outlook and it also allows for the individual agency required for any comprehensively critical position on modern mass media. But McLuhan's position also conveys a theoretical weakness in regards to the power dynamic

involved in what Fredric Jameson calls 'the cultural logic of late capitalism.' For Jameson, the postmodern celebrates 'a prodigious exhilaration with the new order of things, a commodity rush' that erases history and nature in a process of sheer consumption (Jameson, 1991, p. x). It represses its own history (and tendency towards cultural fascism) beneath the logic of the shopping mall (p. xi) and draws all into its vertiginous lure (theorisation of which requires 'a whole new media-lexicological subdiscipline', p. xiii). If the seemingly irresistible spread of the profit motive across postmodern mass media requires some form of active resistance, as opposed to disinterested observation of its maelstrom-like qualities, this qualification to a theory like McLuhan's requires ongoing attention.

ADORNO AND HORKHEIMER'S CULTURE INDUSTRY - A DOWNWARD-SPIRALLING DIALECTIC

Jameson's work, in many ways, is an updated version of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the Culture Industry, which in their enormously influential *Dialectic of Enlightenment* diagnoses a kind of mass trance in consumer society. Their subtitle – 'Enlightenment as Mass Deception' – stakes out the territory of their investigation: to what extent is the combined platform of media and culture targeted by captains of industry with little care other than for the profits that motivate them? Their answer is damning and comprehensive. The Culture Industry is a mechanical monster, one-dimensionally unanimous in its subjugation of the individual in the same kind of master/slave relationship as civilisation assumes over nature (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 94). Art is business in a society split by elitist domination and dedicated to the ascendancy of those with the strongest economic position.

The familiar Frankfurt School combination of Marxist and Freudian analysis is explicit: alongside this critique of capital is found the psychological mode of enculturation in the individual, who internalises the repressive code as their own superego, or personal control (p. 95). The monolithic omnipotence of capital thus stamps its constituent consumers with 'the power of their true master' (p. 98); art forms such as film are industrialised to suit exactly the same mechanical rhythm and routine as the workplace (p. 104), so that the authority of capitalist ideology is accepted even as we seek escape from it (p. 109). The ubiquitous love of novelty inherent in late capitalism is thus set in a framework of 'unending sameness'; change is ultimately and completely conservative within this dominant paradigm (p. 106). With so many heretofore 'irreconcilable elements of culture' subjected equally under a 'single false denominator', the capitalist culture industry resembles no less than a mythic system of totalisation (p. 108). Just as the global logic of capital does, the 'culture industry cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises' (p. 111). And like the transcendence held out as attainable yet distant by a religious complex, the principle of the culture industry never releases its grip on the consumer. Finally, the individual is tolerated only as they identify with the universal quality of capital (p. 124), which remorselessly mocks the land of eternal feasting (or milk and honey, p.126) that I suggest has long been the dream of the west.

However, according to Saladdin Said Ahmed, the Culture Industry 'does not have a specific agenda to stupidize the mass individual; rather, it invests in the mass individual's fetishistic attitude towards commodities' (Ahmed, 2008, p. 80). 'Mass culture' is therefore the realm where individuals come together under a fascistic 'regime of totems and fetishism' (p. 89). Regardless of which direction this stream flows in, the result is a flattening out of quality and diversity into the lowest common (commodifiable) denominator. The psychological terms of the collective trance state, as it is manifest on behalf of the capitalist profit motive, are considered by semiotician Cosimo Caputo, for whom the commodity venerated in the culture industry and its media acts as an idol (Caputo, 2001). He defines this idol as a fetish that 'captures the gaze ... [and] dazzles it', unlike the genuine sacramental icon, which instead 'provokes the gaze,

invites it not to stop, but to look about' (p. 238). This can be seen at work in idolised Hollywood fame or brightly lit consumer products at the local supermarket, where our obsession with the 'ever-new' is titillated but never fulfilled (p. 238). Psychic colonisation triumphs with 'a kind of gelatinous doctrine that insensibly envelops all rebellious reasoning, inhibits it, confounds it, paralyses it until it is suffocated ... [so that] it is not an exaggeration to speak of modern dogmatism' (pp. 235–36).

In another recent update of the dogmatic power of commodification, it is pointed out that although the 'Global Culture Industry' now markets design-intensive indeterminacy and difference rather than labour-intensive identity, the economic imperative remains exactly the same: the 'way in which capital successfully accumulates' (Lash & Fury, 2007, p. 5). While the commodity still effaces its history in order to parade an aura of mystique, however, the brand values its unique qualities as a way of being easily relatable to the consumer who desires association with them (p. 6). 'Yet the brand's cosmology of difference and invention,' Scott Lash and Celia Fury continue, 'is at the same time the source of a reassembled system of domination. Global culture industry's emergent regime of power results in inequalities, disparities and deception rarely encountered in Horkheimer and Adorno's classical age' (p. 7). Since 'things' were commodified they have become media, while media have become products themselves (p. 8). In the flux appears a new paradigm of 'event-culture' with its own metaphysic of the monad, where substance and image are folded into one dimension along with mind and matter (p. 15). This style of immanence is surely not liberation from the ancient dualism between dark worldliness and light transcendence, but a sinking into the maelstrom of such a mythic system's collapse.

The prisoners in the world of the contemporary global culture industry, then, seem to have only been reshackled by the shift from commodity as thing to media as commodity-event; in Adorno and Horkheimer's cave, we still remain facing the same wall as ever. Only the generation of elite directing the projection of images and the technology (both physical and psychological) utilised on behalf of the trance-inducing pageant change. The prisoners – those of us involved in the modern markets of culture and consumption and thereby complicit in civilisation's subjugation of nature – are ruled not by philosopher-kings who have left the cave, seen the light and returned, but by profit-driven corporate capitalists more than willing to peddle deception. The Culture Industry employs mass media to instil their fascist regime of capitalist subjugation without remorse or compunction. The cave is sealed and the prisoners grist to the mill. There is no escape. This lack of transformability in the monster of mass media is the shadow to McLuhan's new mythic age; such critical theory might be stronger theoretically, as Strate admits, than media ecology, but the latter 'is more open-ended and adaptable, and more concrete, less prone to *the hardening of the categories*, as McLuhan was wont to say' (Strate, 2008, p. 134). While a necessary antidote to theoretical weakness in terms of resistance to the dominant paradigm, Adorno and Horkheimer's critique lacks the vital component of agency in the consumer, who for them is supposedly shaped so markedly by the 'message' of mass media that they can no longer offer resistance to the profit motive that compels its product.

MARX'S COMMODITY FETISH, BAUDRILLARD AND ŽIŽEK'S MONSTER

Karl Marx pointed out, in his *Capital*, that there is a certain magical element to the commodity, which is built in to the way it is produced and presented to the consumer. His point stands, as far as I can tell, whether one considers the cultural artefact they consume to be a material item purchased at the mall or an item of communication we listen to, watch, read, or ingest without even being aware of it. For Marx, this operation proceeds according to the idea that a commodity attains a religious, mystical or transcendental dimension due to the extra value

(over and above its material, or use, value) ascribed it during the process of its production and exchange (Marx, 1970). This socially mediated process is obfuscated in direct proportion to the complexity of the division of labour inherent in its production. 'Primitive' societies enjoy 'extremely simple and transparent' relations amongst themselves, their products and 'Nature,' which they revere (Marx, 1970, p. 79). Development of this 'narrowness' is desirable (in spite of its being inherently deceptive) until a society's material production is 'consciously regulated' by 'freely associated men ... in accordance with a settled plan' and over a 'long and painful process of development' (p. 80). This would be the communist dream made possible with the coming into and passing out of being of the capitalist mode, which in turn has transformed the means and power of production originally released by the industrial revolution.

The use value of a material object, known according to its primitive condition, is translated into an exchange value according to social agreement. This exchange value remains independent of a commodity's inherent use value and 'obtains fixity' according to a system of exchange that varies 'continually, independently of the will, foresight and action of the producers' (p. 75). The obfuscation attending this process combines worship with powerlessness – we fetishise a commodity to the extent that we are alienated from the conscious processes of its production. Thus capitalism continues the process of mystification historically conveyed by religion. Imagistically, it is as if the capitalist mode of production operates as a magician, covering over the conditions by which the commodity comes into being before pulling away the screen to reveal – the magical idol, upon which we are free to project our desires, our lack, the status and identity we crave with consumption, and so on.

Marx's recognition of this trick offers hope to the humanist, but it also indicates the depth of capitalism's shadow; today's hyper-profane, materialistic postmodern commodity fetish continues to operate as the opiate of the masses, with damaging and ongoing sociocultural costs. The commodity leads this parade as its mystic icon (or idol), with an ahistorical origin, a mysterious authority and a hoped-for telos. Hence the modern consumer, as much as the traditional Christian, is convinced that they should accept a 'nature' emptied of cultural history, as Barthes would have it (Barthes, 1974, pp. 142–43). Marx's concept of the commodity fetish is further developed in two influential commentaries, Baudrillard's *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981) and Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1992). Both attempt to correct Marx's original thesis with reference to the driving force behind the fetishistic relationship of the modern consumer to commodities in general, and both grapple with the multifarious challenges facing any critical engagement with mass media towards the end of the twentieth century and beyond.

For Žižek, the open dialectic of confrontation between different ideologies of power continues, as our world of endless plurality continuously throws a spanner in the works of any composite vision of reality (whether politically or psychologically constructed). For Baudrillard, on the other hand, postmodern life grinds unceasingly towards the monological monster that haunts it from the shadows of its origins. The transformation of God, as guarantor of the sign's meaning, operates solely on the level of His hyperreal weightlessness (Baudrillard, 1981, pp. 5–7). This secularised simulation of origin and authenticity is all light and air, like the ubiquitous flood of information in which meaning is dissolved (pp. 79–86). For Baudrillard, as for McLuhan, television was the frontline agent of this process that confuses the real, the model and the medium (pp. 28–29). It flattens all communication into a homogenous space-time that structures a newly totalised model of social relations best symbolised in the kind of directed anticipation redolent of the hypermarket (pp. 75–77).

Both Baudrillard and Žižek treat the commodity fetish as a Frankensteinian creation

we have unwittingly created and granted excessive power to. We are here located between the 'ship of humanity' and hierarchical models of society employed by McLuhan and Adorno and Horkheimer respectively. Consumer society feeds on the very monster it stitches together for its own benefit, such that the projectors in the cave could be any one of us in turn because we are all implicit in maintaining the illusion we live by. The slave, however, as in any good horror story, eventually becomes the master. For Baudrillard, the ideology of political economy, 'the fundamental code of our societies' (p. 147), is revealed as an impersonal monster which 'simultaneously produces the content and the consciousness to receive it', while remaining cunning enough 'to veil itself continually in the evidence of content' and the 'obviousness of value' (p. 145). The political economy we choose because it promises to improve our standards of living, that is to say, in turn shapes the very way we think so that we request more of the same; it becomes master, just as Frankenstein's monster chases him down and rules his fate in the end.

This occurs, according to Baudrillard, because of a fundamental point missing in Marx's theory of commodity fetish, which concerns the value consumers place on the commodity. Marx's mistake, claims the French theorist, lies in assuming a kind of infrastructural (primitive, natural) 'use' value upon which the (developed, cultural) 'exchange' value is built, or elaborated. Baudrillard's own analysis rests upon a revised definition of ideology, according to which the 'use' value of the immanent commodity and the 'exchange' value of its transcendental sign are produced together, along with the kind of individual who will consume them. The individual, then, shares a shape (or taste?) with the 'peculiar magic' of this all-pervasive, ever-hungry phenomenon: 'Ideology seizes all production, material or symbolic, in the same process of abstraction, reduction, general equivalence and exploitation' (p. 146). The 'code' controls meaning as it 'rationalizes and regulates exchange [and] makes things communicate' (p. 147). We are tracking not something that binds society together with rationalised mystifications (or 'coherent' belief systems) pointing hazily towards some mythic reality, but rather a structuring force (like myth for Lévi-Strauss) that socialises, informs and, in fact, *produces* the individual of contemporary consumer society according to a general, abstract system of exchange (p. 147). As commentator Charles Levin notes, Baudrillard reverses Marx's narrative of commodity fetishism, so that exchange value is not 'a mere by-product of complexity,' but is the inspiration 'that induces the logic of utility and mobilizes the psychology of needs in order to perpetuate itself' (Levin, 1981, p. 18). Consumption (rather than production) drives the system to invent new needs, and the consumer acts as a kind of bricoleur desperately attempting to organise their 'privatised existence and invest it with meaning' (p. 5).

Comparatively, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek revises Hegelian dialectics in the light of Freud, so that, rather than seeking an ever-progressive overcoming of endless antagonism, we recognise that all knowledge 'finally accepts "contradiction" as an internal condition of every identity' (Žižek, 1992, p. 7). Hence the colonising monster of 'absolute knowledge' is reframed as 'nothing but a name for the acknowledgment of a certain radical loss'.⁵ The Lacanian philosophy of lack drives egoistic consciousness, the 'Other Scene external to the thought whereby the form of the thought is already articulated in advance' (p. 19). It is in this sense that Alfred Sohn-Rethel claimed our reality is 'already "staged"' outside of the field of conventional consciousness (of either everyday or philosophical pedigrees).⁶ Thus 'false consciousness' is implied by the very nature of an ideological framework according to which participants cannot know exactly what they are doing or what the essence of their object of fascination really is (p. 21). The mystical transformation of the commodity operates according to similar operational procedures as the Freudian dream-work, both attaining an alluring form thanks to a process whereby frustrated desire is charged with deeper meaning. Labour power may have been discovered as the secret that transforms the object from use to exchange value,

for Marx, but 'the process by means of which the hidden meaning disguised itself in such a form' remains obfuscated (p. 15). We are in the realm of the ephemeral nature of the satisfactions offered by materialistic consumption: we cannot possibly gratify our desires because they are perpetually regenerated from beyond the sphere of consciousness (and in fact actively construct the form of that consciousness). The monster in its shadows haunts the commodity – as its ephemerally offered, yet ultimately ungraspable, promise of satisfaction – just as the latent content haunts the dream.

Like Baudrillard, then, Žižek claims for ideology a 'structuring power' over our social reality; it is not 'an illusion masking the real state of things' (p. 33), but an illusion (or 'fetishistic inversion') that grants things 'embodiments of universal Value' (p. 32). Although they (and the money that represents their value) are 'in reality just an embodiment, a condensation, a materialization of a network of social relations', we function in regards to them as if they embodied the spirit of wealth itself, its 'immediate, natural property' (p.31). Individuals recognise this but act as if they didn't. The postmodern consumer therefore lives in a world of materialistic transcendence, or mystified commodity exchange, in which Marx's reversal of Platonic Forms reveals another layer of mythic discourse beneath (or beyond) conventional consciousness.⁷ Both analyses have close familial links to Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology, in which myth forms the framework of the way people think. Not only is it inescapable, it is ineradicable, open to transformation but inherent as inherited. The cave is in fact structured according to a reality beyond that which we perceive in the imagery displayed before us on its walls; but that reality is not necessarily of the domain of higher truth, but deeper. It is not symbolised by a metaphysical light that sits behind the sun of sensorial or conventional truth but can be found with further investigation into the shadows within the cave. Thus there is still room for the escapee to leave the world of everyday assumption, to come to this realisation and to inhabit the projection room with a clearer vision of what constitutes the age of mass media and its imagery of truth and reality. Like the Virgilian hero in the epigraph to Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, if we cannot bend the higher powers, we must move the infernal regions; for Žižek's postmodern world, the secret truth to the commodity lies not in the metaphysical guarantor or its human representative the superego, but in the body, its desires and its id.

In terms of both Žižek's Lacanian kernel and Baudrillard's symbolic, these truths operate from behind such imagery and are excluded from the equation of conventional consciousness as they continue to haunt it from beneath. They can only be approached in metaphor because they act from across a horizon that never disappears but concomitantly cannot 'be named except by allusion, by infraction' (Baudrillard, p. 161). In our ultimate blindness to a Lacanian 'symbolic real,' then, the symbol conceals as well as reveals; it 'attempts to mislead: it permits itself to appear as totality, to efface the traces of its abstract transcendence, and parades about as the reality principle of meaning' (p. 162). But, as Charles Levin notes, this amounts to a different kind of deception from that allowed by traditional Marxian analysis. For Baudrillard, no 'critique of political economy can go on believing that its truth lies simply in the recovery of an essence that capitalism hides and represses without actually destroying' (Levin, p. 21). Baudrillard's notion that we are thoroughly integrated in this 'subterranean play of reification' (p. 11) can then indicate hopeless immersion in illusion as much as it can point towards a less alienating existence in the 'daylight' realm of modern media.

According to the directives of this model of consumption, the commodity is now '*immediately produced as a sign, as sign value, and ... signs (culture) are produced as commodities*' (Baudrillard, p. 147). Naomi Klein points out how a metaphysic of branding feeds a kind of corporate transcendence that signifies a spiritual state, such as the romance of coffee, rather than a product (Klein, 2000, pp. 20-21). Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* predates this insight by two

decades, by showing that we have always purchased the connotations of an object along with its physical features. It is the *feeling* we seek from the product or media, more than its physical use value, that creates the commodity fetish; but this feeling is as perpetually ephemeral as it is constitutive. For Baudrillard, culture itself is produced as (and reduced to) an endless variety of commodities and signs collapsed into each other under the weight of a system predicated upon simultaneous consumption of the abstract and material. It is therefore crucial to see that 'the separation of the sign and the world is a fiction,' and that 'this world is quite simply the Signified-Referent ... a single and compact thing, an identity of content that acts as the moving shadow of the Signifier' (Baudrillard, p. 152). The sign and its referent operate according to the vicious circle they share with any metaphysical organisation; this 'superior myth' reciprocally illuminates both commodity and meaning in a gigantic simulation (pp. 150–61). We can see how Baudrillard's musings on Marx's commodity fetish led directly to his theorisation of the simulacra.

Žižek, however, shifts the argument away from the paralysing unity of Baudrillard's simulacra and back to the everyday conflicts that mark the realities of political economy. Althusser's reproach to Marx's elementary formulation of commodity fetishism – that it 'is based on a naïve, ideological, epistemologically unfounded opposition between persons (human subjects) and things' – is reconsidered, with Lacanian insight into the way people and things *are* indeed opposed (Žižek, p. 33). While capitalist subjects mediate amongst one another 'as rational utilitarians, guided only by their own selfish interests ... all their beliefs, superstitions and metaphysical mystifications ... are embodied in the "social relations between things". They no longer believe, *but the things themselves believe for them*' (p. 34). Ideology (like myth) structures reality, mediates opposites on behalf of making this reality culturally palatable, and hides behind the dream we know as our conventional world (pp. 45–47). Capitalism depends upon 'the permanent revolutionizing of its own conditions of existence' such that the kernel – 'its own fundamental, constitutive imbalance, "contradiction"' – perpetuates as a Hegelian absolute (p. 52). This form of economic organisation prescribes exponentially increasing consumption as the medicine that will eradicate, in an ephemeral haze of corporeal satisfaction, the timeless kernel of societal and ecological antagonism at its heart. The gigantic expenditure on capital works in Australia prescribed as the appropriate medicine for the illness that was (and continues to be) the global financial crisis begat in 2008 illustrates how this logic continues to enjoy widespread dominion. Today's consumers inherit a system designed to eat its way through the earth: its 'normal' state is marked by the endless novelty of an unstoppable monster. Ephemeral satisfaction both initiates and sustains the addiction of production and consumption; but for Žižek, the '*excessive power*' manifest as this frenetic activity reveals its own '*fundamental impotence*' (p. 53).

Žižek's cave reveals a struggle over the means of imagery production that stays truer to his Marxist roots than does Baudrillard; yet, a Lacanian kernel of ineradicable tension infects both systems of thought. In this sense, Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* would have to be seen as the master text to both theoretical schemas, neither of which can offer any real guidance to the prisoner except to shine a light on the root of their fundamental impotence. Whether or not this illumination can lead to some form of active agency in regards to our situation of prisoners in a cave presumably remains in our own hands.

CONCLUSION

This brief excursion across postmodern mass media has taken in a variety of critical analyses, each of which deals with a new age of electronic and digital communications as if it revealed a mythic element. Each of these analyses, which have gained a large measure of influence in

varied fields of cultural critique over recent decades, have been placed in the perspective of Plato's ancient vision of illusory knowledge and emancipation into a difficult truth, as outlined in his cave myth. The paper asked: what is beyond our immediate interaction with the content of modern mass media that could reveal something underlying, or even mythic, in regards to its form?

McLuhan's vision of a global village assumed a collectivity directly negated by the desire of capitalist profiteering, which has no stake in reducing the trance-like nature of consumerism peddled as the 'message' of much of the 'medium.' Yet his ideas maintained a place for each individual consumer, who could exercise their power within this transformative regime to choose amongst the endless raft of possible bits and sources of information. Twyla Gibson notes that McLuhan remains important for the way he draws 'attention to media as communication' and underlines 'the need for different kinds of media and information literacy' if we are 'to understand how changes in communication technology impact language, culture, and society' (Gibson, 2008, p. 164).

Such a playing field of possibility stands in stark contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the Culture Industry, which infiltrates the very psyche of every consumer within its considerable reach, to extend the colonisation that was begun with civilization and its building of empire. Baudrillard and Žižek, meanwhile, adapt Marx's theory of the commodity fetish to fit the new lingua franca, both claiming that modern mass media acts as an uncontrollable monster that escapes any containment we might desire for it not only because of mass media's power to colonise regardless of cultural context but, more deeply, because it shapes the very psyche it appeals to. It does this, both theorists agree, by acting as a representation offering to fill the lack that inspires the human ego into action. Our very identities, then, are called forth to communicate within the realm of impersonal desire and ephemeral satisfaction, an endless cycle only strengthened by the participation of every consumer within its grasp. To differing degrees, each sees a monster in place of a consciously mediated system of communication. Whether it can be transformed according to the agency of the consumer collective partly depends on who controls its reigns; in the hands of a corporate elite whose identity shifts but whose agenda remains the same, the monster of mass media grows until it suffocates all resistance. Alternatively, the proliferation of media forms into alternative 'messages,' if it can resist the crushing weight and 'swallowing' action of commodification, may paradoxically unite a significant enough critical mass of alternative visions of 'truth' and 'reality' to counter the monolithic flattening of cultural capital into its lowest common denominator.

If the metaphor of Plato's cave has any relevance to this situation, as I believe it still does, it is because many consumers of twenty-first century mass media believe that the raft of images flashing consistently on the walls of our world sells one message above, beyond, or beneath all others: do anything you like, as long as you continue to consume. If we are inevitably prisoners in some way to the fact that we can have only limited (and therefore, in some sense, illusory) awareness of any abiding truth in our vision of reality, how then do we navigate the world beyond this dominant paradigm? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to suggest possible answers to this question, it is hoped that some leverage may have been gained in recognising the imagery employed by significant commentators on the advent of mass media and the information age, especially in terms of its mythic content. Gaining even limited agency in terms of such theoretical schemas seems to me a reasonable step in our interaction with a phenomenon so pervasive as to be mythic in its own right. If this is the case, then, as the commentators I have discussed here each in their own way suggest, we are dealing with the way in which the very psyche of the twenty-first century individual, as consumer, is constituted. Transformation of this situation in terms beneficial to each of us should be regarded as a matter of educational

imperative, for purposes of social justice as well as personal gratification.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Postman (2000), cited in Strate (2008, p. 135).
- 2 McLuhan (1959, p. 8). D. F. Theall (2001, pp. 130-131) considers the similarities between the two thinkers.
- 3 Brian Fawcett (2004, pp. 239-240) outlines the way corporate sponsors design television around the desires of corporate sponsors. The transparency of cross-promotion between television, music, print and the industries they can be utilised to represent is an accepted feature of postmodern culture.
- 4 The relationship between McLuhan and Baudrillard is explored in Theall (2001, pp. 133-137) and, comprehensively, by Gary Genosko (1999).
- 5 Slavoj Žižek (1992, p. 7). Žižek's Lacanian rescue of Hegel rereads classical motifs such as commodity fetishism according to an approach that promises to critically analyse 'contemporary ideological phenomena ... without falling prey to any kind of "post-modernist" traps (such as the illusion that we live in a "post-ideological" condition)' (p. 7).
- 6 Žižek (1992, pp. 16-21) considers Sohn-Rethel (1978) the foremost theoretician on the commodity-form.
- 7 "This inversion through which what is sensible and concrete counts only as a phenomenal form of what is abstract and universal, contrary to the real state of things where the abstract and the universal count only as a property of the concrete – such an inversion is characteristic of the expression of value' (Marx, 1970, p. 32).

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