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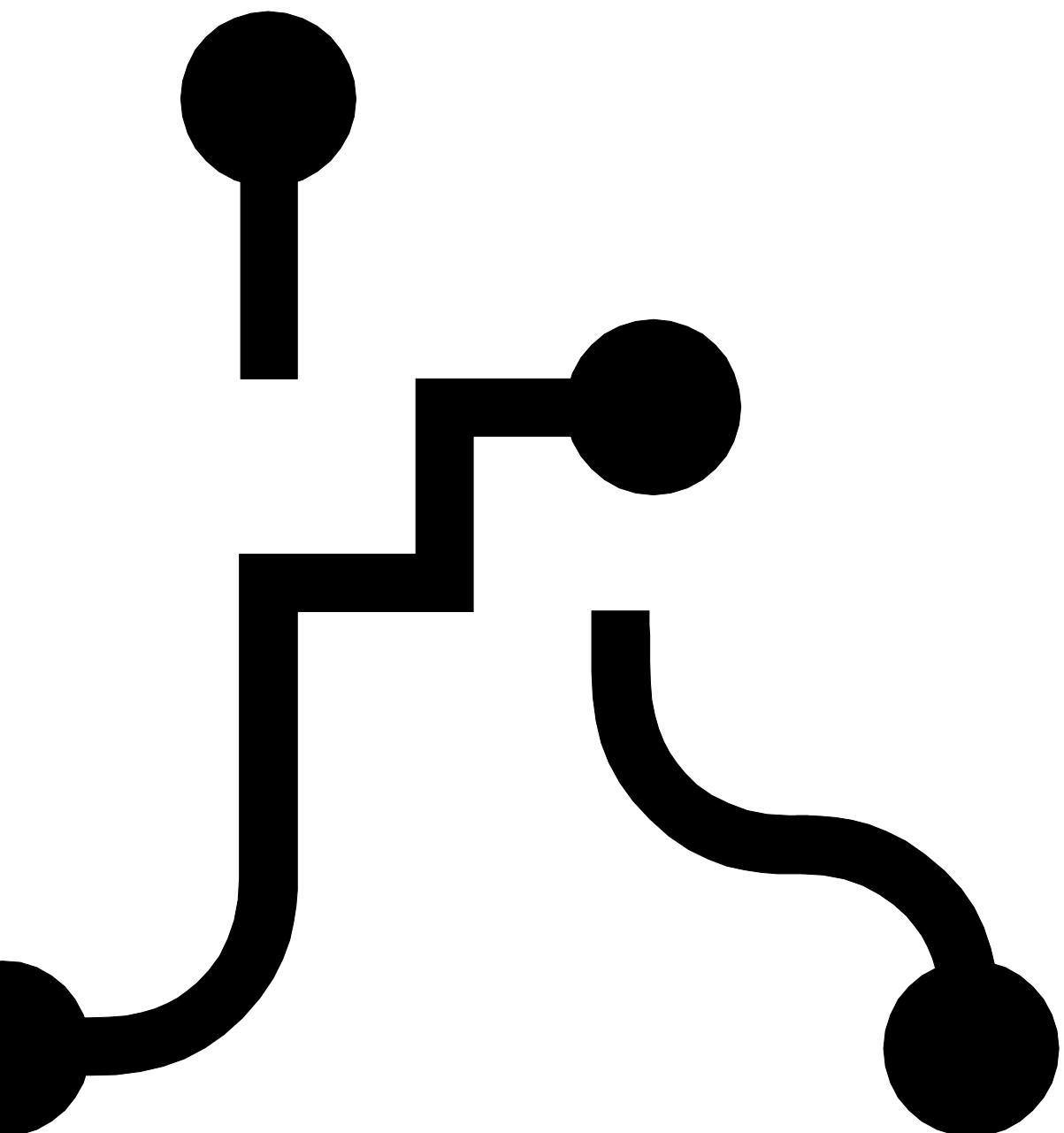
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### Book Review

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## Book Review

### **Arthur Asa Berger (2019). *Shopper's Paradise: Retail Stores and American Consumer Culture*. Leiden: Brill.**

*Shopper's Paradise* traces the dominant and emergent shopper's ethos in contemporary American consumption culture by reflecting culturologically on the functional aspects of various retail formats. Undoubtedly we are living in exciting, and at the same highly volatile times. In fact, volatility and liquidity constitute the mantras of contemporary consumption culture that is marked by experimentalism, decreasing loyalty and malleable demand patterns. It is a smooth consumption space, relieved from the rigidities of traditional market segmentation. This space is largely shaped by technological convergence across the purchase and consumption journey, by the progressive virtualization of the real (or, more aptly, the physical) and the reification of the virtual. This hybrid hyperreal space where the contemporary retail landscape is situated has been detrimental for time-hallowed retail formats, such as the mall, while having spawned new retail formats, such as Amazon Go.

In this monograph which recontextualizes and extends previous works such as *Marketing and American Consumer Culture* and *Ads, Fads and Consumer Culture*, Arthur Asa Berger adopts a cultural hermeneutic approach in unearthing deep and recurrent structures beneath manifest and shifting retail experiential patterns. This is achieved in an accessible manner that contains and distills the essence of the argumentation without the vagaries and complexities that are defining of pedantic scholarship, thus rendering the work appealing to a broader audience. This is a much needed enterprise insofar as academic concepts have always functioned as a pivotal resource for animating the popular imaginary, by providing reflections on the directly lived experience which are then used by mediators of cultural production for stage setting experiences anew in a simulacral fashion.

However, as prudently cautioned by the author, "trying to understand what it is that motivates people to buy what they buy is, at the end of a consumer's journey, in the final analysis, an enigma." A cultural hermeneutic is not an antonomastic rendition of apocalyptic reasoning. At the end of an interpretive journey the enigma of the 'whys' of consumption persists. And this is attributable to the sheer and unshakeable certainty that each purchase act and every account of underlying choice drivers are incumbent on an interdiscursive nexus that always slips from the analytic as and in its totality. Each interpretive endeavor is always already constrained by its finitude, although, in essence, it is determined by an unfathomable set of conditionals

that are operative in the background as *animus mundi*. But at the same time, this is the secret allure that sets apart a cultural interpretive outlook to the whys of consumption from behavioral approaches which are constrained by individual elaboration mechanisms. The latter ultimately stop precisely at the point where the cultural hermeneutic journey begins.

In *Shopper's Paradise* Berger regularly evokes concepts, frameworks and models from seminal authors in a bewildering disciplinary roster, spanning cultural studies, sociology, narratology, psychoanalysis, semiotics, marketing. This hermeneutic armory has been applied consistently by the author in discrete cultural practices and artifacts in previous works, such as *Media, Myth & Society*, *Narratives in Popular Culture*, *Media and Everyday Life*. The hermeneutic is enriched with a discussion of shopping patterns alongside a fourfold consumer cultures typology (hierarchical, individualist, egalitarian and fatalist) that rests on two axes, namely the strength or weakness of group boundaries and the number and kinds of rules and prescriptions that apply to individual consumers.

The focal investigation areas, here, consist in the contemporary and rapidly shifting American retail landscape and the shopping experience across distinctive retail formats. By combining the art of flaneurism with an autoethnographic self-reflexive posture, Berger pursues a reading pathway that combines the portrayal of retail structures and shopping patterns with underlying mythical structures that persist beneath alternating narratives.

Fuelled by the same exploratory drive that urged professional flaneurs such as Simmel, De Certeau, Goffman, Baudrillard to wander endlessly in public spaces in an attempt to pin down and to articulate latent regularities in everyday culture, Berger engages in a voluntary estrangement from his (and thousands of Americans who routinely perform the same retail oriented practices) familiar practices. He distances himself temporarily from directly lived shopping experiences, in order to land on the mythopoetic context that sustains them.

Heidegger's observation about man's poetic dwelling afforded to illuminate the inherent interdependency between philosophy and literary works. One might say, by the same token, that Berger's culturological reflections on shopping practices and the broader retail experience across multiple retail formats constitute an attestation of our mythopoetic dwelling. Influenced at its core by the Barthesian analysis of ideologies as modern mythologies, Berger subscribes to the thesis that "semiotics, in conjunction with other disciplines, is the most important means of determining the meaning these objects have for people and the role they play in society and in consumer cultures." A cultural hermeneutic approach, along these lines, affords to

lay bare the invisible structures that underpin and circumscribe ordinary communication, inasmuch as the assumptions that go into the creation and circulation of cultural artifacts in quest for a structural unconscious, without naturalizing it in terms of a presumed ‘hard-wiring in the brain’. “There is rarely any doubt that the unconscious reasons for practicing a custom or sharing a belief are remote from the reasons given to justify them. Even in our own society, table manners, social etiquette, fashions of dress, and many of our moral, political, and religious attitudes are scrupulously observed by everyone, although their real origin and function are not often critically examined... If we all knew why we did everything we did, then there would be no need for social sciences” (Berger 2006).

Against this background, *Shopper’s Paradise* canvasses some of the major infrastructural shifts in the contemporary American retail landscape, while offering a glimpse into the mythopoetic structures that have been sustaining the shopping experience all along. “We may not realize that we are living “mythically,” but [...] myths inform all cultures and have a profound, though hidden, impact on our lives in many different ways.” This dual orientation is also an attestation of the co-existence of a mindset that has been bequeathed to us from modernity and which is defined by stably metanarratives and claims to universalism, with a post-modern ethos that manifests a proclivity for play, experimentation and pastiche.

In greater detail, and with a view to outlining the key trends that are spotted in this book, particular emphasis is laid on the sweeping changes that have been brought about by Amazon’s expansion into the food sector which catapulted the trail-blazing etailer into a top-ranking global retail player. At the same time, the launch of Amazon-go accomplished significant strides in furthering the culture of convergence that is marked by a progressive virtualization of the physical shopping experience. Enhanced convenience either in top-up or extensive shopping has been a pivotal retail performance driver in the face of increasingly time-thirsty consumers. Solutions to this end have been keen on transposing aspects of the online retail experience to physical environments. This trend is reflective of the broader convergence between the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’, a contrived and precarious opposition that dissolves anyway in the face of what Baudrillard lucidly described as the ‘hyperreal’. The culturological lens here dwells on the newly launched Amazon-go retail format which does away with physical cashiers. Although not wholly in defense of this sort of disintermediation that disrupts human interaction, Berger recognizes the unquestionable operational efficiencies that emerge in a path to purchase. In this context, new roles pop up, such as that of ‘shopping consultants’ who are

responsible for attending to purchasers' queries about the self-completion of purchase acts in-store.

An adjacent trend in the broader virtualization of physical retail outlets consists in the so-called 'showrooming' which involves consumers' interaction with physical stores before purchasing products online at cheaper prices. In an attempt to lock in consumers between showrooming and actually placing an order, traditional retailers have been jumping on the pop-up shop bandwagon, that is the temporary operation of physical outlets aimed at educating consumers on the available assortment, as well as the benefits that stem from non-migrating to competitors. "Bonobos was the first penguin in the water, and soon after many digitally-native brands like Glossier, Brandless, Warby Parker and others have all extended their brands into the physical realm, some on a more permanent basis and others in a more temporary manner" (Forbes, The 5 most important trends that will shift retail's balance of power in 2019).

The rise of Amazon has also been pivotal in the consolidation of the de-mallification trend. Malls, once the Meccas of experiential shopping and key socialization hubs, have been largely abandoned throughout the United States. At the same time, physical de-mallification has been coupled with the upsurge of e-malls that seek to simulate the mall experience in a Life 2.0 setting, so to speak. The same trend is encountered in the department store arena where staple brands such as Macy's have been closing down physical stores while migrating online, only to return 'physically', yet less extensively, in pop-up mode.

In mythical deep positioning terms, Berger assimilates physical malls to mythological labyrinths where shoppers are constantly confronted with forking paths. What is questionable, though, is whether this trait that may be appeal enhancing for a physical mall, translates well in its virtual reinscription. For example, the Mall of America functions as a secularized Garden of Eden by dint of its size and the abundance of desire-fulfilling outlets. The same utopian positioning lineage is traced in Farmers Markets and Paradise which resonates with an unconscious desire to return to paradise, as reflected on fresh fruits and vegetables.

Buying at an offline department store may be transformed into a wholesome aesthetic experience that delivers the shopper to an alluring multisensorial, multimodal conundrum. By dint of the sheer stage-setting of a physical department store, the playful parading of shapes, sizes, colors and any accompanying paraphernalia (from in-store music to scent to the incidence of mirrors) induce a temporary release from repressed wishes, while urging shoppers to indulge regressively in the demand issued by the id. This experience is impossible to

replicate in an online setting that is more constrained sensorially. This competitive disadvantage is expected to be circumvented as online purchasing approximates its physical counterpart in its progressive transformation into a wholesome simulative immersive experience. In any case, what may be perceived as an experiential downside in an efficiency-driven online setting, becomes compensated for in terms of greater potential for lifestyle segmentation across product categories. Amazon, alongside other etailers, applies AI and machine learning to this end, thus affording to leverage narrowly targeted cross-selling opportunities. For example, Amazon Scout uses machine learning to recommend specific products to shoppers based on their likes and dislikes (CPC Strategy report).

What is attained, in essence, from a sociological point of view, by performing dynamic segmentation tactics on an individual shopper basis, is a precipitate overlap between economic and sociocultural capital, in Bourdieu's terms. As is well-known, cultural capital does not translate automatically into economic capital. Berger exemplifies this truism in the context of the Texan retailer Neiman-Marcus who carved a niche market for the nouveau-riches by accommodating their demand for home deco as marks of distinction. This trend that is termed here 'couthification' hypothesis describes the process whereby Neiman-Marcus attained loyalty status by engineering the taste of an emergent segment, while relieving them from the anxieties of showing poor taste. A similar upscale positioning route is currently being pursued by malls featuring luxury department stores. The increasing polarization in disposable income has favored the expansion of the upscale retail niche, while the loss of malls' traditional mass socialization role has been coupled with their resurgence under a premiumization rubric.

On the diametrically opposite side of the premiumization pole we encounter discounters and savers such as Costco and Dollar Tree. Whereas malls resonate mythopoetically with the labyrinthine archetype and its proliferating pathway ramifications that simulate the id's vicissitudes, Costco stands for treasure hunting. Consumers feel rewarded for landing bargains among the regular assortment on offer, a trigger that is facilitated by limited promotional runs. Treasure hunting ultimately translates into a feeling of urgency and its saturation in impulse purchasing. Therefore, a temporary metaphorical transposition into a utopian treasure hunting expedition enables and conditions mundane purchase acts. At the same end of the value continuum, Berger positions the Dollar Tree which follows a different psychological strategy to Costco, yet resting with the same underlying intention at quenching fundamental existential angst. The Dollar Tree provides

comfort by setting a low-end ceiling to any and all purchases that may be conducted within its enclave: the \$1 ceiling.

Finally, the case of Starbucks, a success-story in many respects, merits evoking in the context of the minimalist trend in brand identity design that has become dominant over the past few years. Driven by unprecedented competition for mindshare in highly cluttered omnichannel environments, brands have been adopting minimalist identity designs (both in terms of logos and payoff lines) which are easier to retrieve at the point of purchase, as well as more adaptable across creative platforms. In this context, Starbucks changed its logo from the original version that portrayed a “mermaid’s breasts and scales on her body with four words on it to the final version which only shows the mermaid in as simplified a version as possible, without mentioning either the brand or its product.”

*Shopper’s Paradise* showcases the interplay between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ or the old in the new, by highlighting the mythical scaffolding of contemporary shopping experiences. The culturological outlook that is offered here is a reminder of the fact that technological advances enable and constrain new ways of communicating and consuming, although they are neither the same nor fully determining of such ways.

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