

**Reveling in Uselessness: Queer and Trans Media, Consumptive Labour, and Cultural
Capital**

by

Joshua T. Morrison

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Film, Television, and Media)
in the University of Michigan
2019

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Caryl Flinn, Chair
Associate Professor Daniel Herbert
Professor Lisa Nakamura
Professor Katherine Sender, Cornell University

Josh Morrison

jtmgrizz@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-6460-2105

© Josh Morrison 2019

For Grammie
who taught me to be fabulous
and nurtured my passions

And, especially, for Grandpa
and the virtues he instilled:

curiosity

patience

persistence

(And, of course, for Liza)

Acknowledgements

At first, it seemed to me that the old idiom “it takes a village...” was very apt for a dissertation, but having reached the point of submission, I think a more accurate phrase would be that it takes a small army of people supporting you, helping you, listening to you, loving you, and giving you feedback to get from the beginning to the end of this process. I cannot possibly list everyone who has contributed to this project along the way, but know that if you aren’t listed, you are not forgotten, nor is your help, love, and support not appreciated.

First, I must start by thanking my mentor, supervisor, friend, and colleague Dr. Caryl Flinn: from recruiting me to the University of Arizona, to helping me get to Michigan, to the uncountable hours she’s put into feedback, professionalization, teaching, writing letters, seeing me through my very best and worst moments, and the millions of other tasks a supervisor takes on, she has been the finest of examples to me. I could never have come so far personally, professionally, or intellectually without her guidance, kindness, and humour. Caryl, my fellow Canuck, you are truly a gem.

Thanks also to my committee members, who have provided feedback, support, reference letters, teaching and research opportunities, and many things beyond: Drs. Dan Herbert, Lisa Nakamura, and Katherine Sender. You are a group of rock stars, and I continue to be in awe of your research, your teaching, and your mentorship.

Endless appreciation and accolades must go out also to the many other professors who have helped me along the way, especially Dr. Candace Moore, who sat on my committee through

my early years in FTVM, comprehensive exams, and prospectus. At Michigan, thanks also to: Drs. EJ Westlake, Johannes von Moltke, Markus Nornes, Sheila Murphy, Elizabeth Wingrove, Peggy McCracken, Yeidy Rivero, Richard Abel, Matthew Solomon, and Giorgio Bertellini, who have all taught me seminars that influenced my dissertation work, helped me with the job market and professionalization, or supervised teaching appointments. At the University of Arizona, thanks to Drs. Susan White (my one and only Bear-Cub Bro), Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, Susan Stryker, Adam Geary, and Miranda Joseph. At Western, Drs. Alison Lee, Helen Fielding, Kim Verwaayen, Kim Solga, Chris Roulston, Mary Bunch, Arja Vainio-Mattila, Katherine McKenna, and Colleen Richardson. This dissertation also benefitted greatly from the editorial advice, feedback, and support of Drs. Eliza Steinbock, C  el M. Keegan, and Laura Horak, the co-editors of the Cinematic Bodies special edition of *Somatechnics* which parts of Chapter 4 of this dissertation are published in. Big thanks go out to Dr. Ryan Powell, my mentor for the SCMS Queer Caucus Mentorship Program. A special thank you to Drs. Susan Knabe and Wendy Pearson, who adopted me as a baby queer academic, and have always supported me and helped me grow not just as a scholar, but as a person: I love you both endlessly. Thanks also to Susan and Wendy's dining room table, upon which my dissertation was finished before defence. Finally, the first, and one of the best, teachers I ever had was my childhood and teenage piano teacher, Mrs. Szabo: thank you for everything, especially teaching me how to love and create art.

Special thanks must always be given to all the staff who make departments run, and help students like me keep their degrees running, advancing, and happening at the day-to-day level. Thanks especially to Carrie, Mary-Lou, Marga, Lisa, Leigh, Darcy, Laura, and Alicia.

My work has been supported by multiple fellowships, writing programs, and seminars and the people who make them vibrant, including: the University of Michigan Institute for the

Humanities Fellowship Program (special thanks to Laura, Aileen, Duygu, Anna, and Michael), the Sweetland Dissertation Writing Institute, and the Institute for Research on Women and Gender Community of Scholars summer seminar (with a huge hug and thanks to Brady and Chris). From monetary support to invaluable interdisciplinary perspectives, I couldn't have produced what I have without these opportunities, for which I am supremely grateful.

No graduate program experience is complete without colleagues and friends to engage with, debate with, give and receive feedback with, and share experiences, good and bad, with. A special shout-out must be given to my FTVM cohort-mate, Yuki Nakayama, and honorary cohort-mate Orquidea Morales: without you two, I know my sanity wouldn't have made it through this process with me. Through the years, my graduate school colleagues have meant the world to me. In FTVM: (Uncle?) Mike Arnold, Peter Alilunas, Erin Hannah (the OG FTVM Canadian materialist), Dimitri Pavlounis, Feroz Hassan, Nic Heckner (stars forever), Nathan Koob, Ben Strassfeld (a consummate gentleman), Katy Peplin, Richard Mwakasege-Minaya (a model colleague and friend), Kayti Lausch, Kaelie Thompson, Joe DeLeon, Marissa Spada (dolls rock, just like you!), Vincent Longo, Sean Donovan (loo loo LOOOO!!!!!!), James Elrod, Júlia Irion Martins, and Sophia Chen. At Arizona, especially: Zury, Rax, Lisa, Erin, Josh, and the queen of getting shit done, November. Special Tucson love to Laura (who saw *TOTWK* with me for the very first time), Lauren (Betty would not approve) and Rachel (Shulamith would totally approve). At Western: Nadine, Nadine, Rae, Dana, Robin, Shannon, Mallory, Jacob, Jess, Lee, Althea, Jen, Jen, Kate, Lisa, and Shelly.

A special thank you to my dissertation-writing group: Natasha (the best Rocky Horror sidekick and drinking buddy a queen could ask for), Ceclia, and Cheryl. Endless thanks also to the friends and colleagues who have given me their time reading my work, talking through

problems, and offering advice: Allie (the best academic Spice fan...right after me :P), Kady, Michael, Monique, and (of course and forever) Alice. To my partner Viktor: you've been there for me more than I could have hoped or dreamed during the final leg of this marathon. Thank for your love, your support, and your understanding: you're wonderful.

To my friends and family, pets and roommates, thank you for your patience, understanding, kindness, support, and love. Sarah, you've read and offered constructive criticism on so much of my work, so heaven knows you've served your time in the queer theory dungeon; thanks big sis. Mom and Dad, you've always been there for me, loved me, and been proud of me, which is a gift not every queer gets given: thank you. Grandpa, you may not have been able to see me defend, but your presence in my life has been unique, special, and one of the greatest gifts I've ever received. Vanessa, my sham wife (and my entire shamfam!), you have been the very best to me through the years: I wouldn't be the person I am without you. To my roommates and neighbours who have brought me joy, talked me down, and otherwise been amazing, especially Tommy, Josiah, Rocco, Charles Shaw, and Pat (the coolest radical BMX biker queer you could ever find), forever thank you. To Liza, the derpy diva queen of my heart, and to He-Man Killface and Foxxxxy Schlady, the calmest lizards you could hope for, I love you all.

Finally, to everyone above and everyone I couldn't remember to list in my dissertation-finishing haze, thank you, and I love you.

Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
List of Figures	viii
Abstract	x
By Way of an Introduction	
Queer Potato: Uselessness and the Lives of Commodities	1
Chapter 1	
Queering Use/lessness and Cultural Capital	38
Chapter 2	
I Really Really Really Wanna Zig-a-Zig-AH: Spice Kitsch Under Postmodern Capitalism	74
Chapter 3	
Ur(sine)texts: <i>BEAR</i> Magazine, The Bear Mailing List, and Prodsusage as a Site of Identity and Community Formation	128
Chapter 4	
Cutting Camp with Killing: “Bad” Feelings, Homeopathy, and Consumptive Camp	198
By Way of a Conclusion	
Annie’s Eyes: Walking on the Broken Glass of Contemporary Capitalism	252
Bibliography	261

List of Figures

Figure 1: Pretty Potato	1
Figure 2: Dance Camp	85
Figure 3: A Fabulous Woman	92
Figure 4: Recursive Spice	109
Figure 5: Pastiche Spice	112
Figure 6: <i>BEAR</i> 1	134
Figure 7: Biker Bear	154
Figure 8: Christopher	156
Figure 9: Woofers	163
Figure 10: Gordon	166
Figure 11: Gary	170
Figure 12: Raven	171
Figure 13: Jorge	172
Figure 14: Getting Personal	186
Figure 15: “This is the F*cking Sh*t!”	201
Figure 16: Bubbles Survives	214
Figure 17: “I Blame Society”	225
Figure 18: “You Shouldn’t Need Flashcards for Murder”	229
Figure 19: Boner’s End	240

Figure 20: Triumphant (Campy) Ending

243

Figure 21: Annie's Eyes

253

Abstract

Reveling in Uselessness: Queer and Trans Media, Consumptive Labour, and Cultural Capital posits and defends a theory of media consumption as sites for the creation and maintenance of queer and trans cultural capital. This occurs around the nexus of uselessness of two varieties, explained in the introduction: media genres, styles, aesthetics, or objects considered useless due to their mass (re)producibility, banality, or niche specificity, and the people who consume them that, due to their marginalized identities, are made to feel “useless” under contemporary capitalism. Following the introduction is a chapter laying out the theoretical framework of this project, particularly resituating Marx and Bourdieu’s theories of (cultural) capital and value within queer and trans theories.

Chapter 2, the first of three case studies, examines the late-90s pop mega-phenomenon the Spice Girls as postmodern kitsch commodities, updating kitsch theory to account for changes in media commodity mass production and consumption in postmodern culture. Here, economic uselessness resides in the kitsch media commodity, while kitsch consumers are seen as structurally useless beyond their buying power. In Chapter 3, the history and formation of gay bear culture through an examination of how bears, a group of gay men who felt useless and ostracized from both mass culture and gay club cultures, contributed to and consumed pornography from *BEAR* magazine and discussed how they can use media to build a community that makes them feel useful and valued via the early Internet listserv The Bear Mailing List. My final case study examines the camp exploitation film *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* to explore

how it is repurposing camp to centre on the experiences of trans women and promote communal healing and reconciliation with the traumas regularly inflicted on queer and trans bodies under capitalism.

Reveling's conclusion returns to the broader questions of use/lessness and value explored in the introduction, framed through memory and the affective power of media to encourage and foster difference. *Reveling in Uselessness* insists upon consumption as an essential site for exploring the simultaneous social, political, and affective impacts of media commodities, an important additive to current discussions of media reception and political economy, by offering a framework for exploring the affective and material impacts media have on identity, community formation, and queer & trans world building beyond questions of representation. This dissertation demonstrates how it is in the "useless" places, genres, and aesthetic styles where people who feel socially, economically, or politically "useless" reside and build new, exciting, queer realities based in creative excesses of style and self.

By Way of An Introduction

Queer Potato¹: Uselessness and the Lives of Commodities

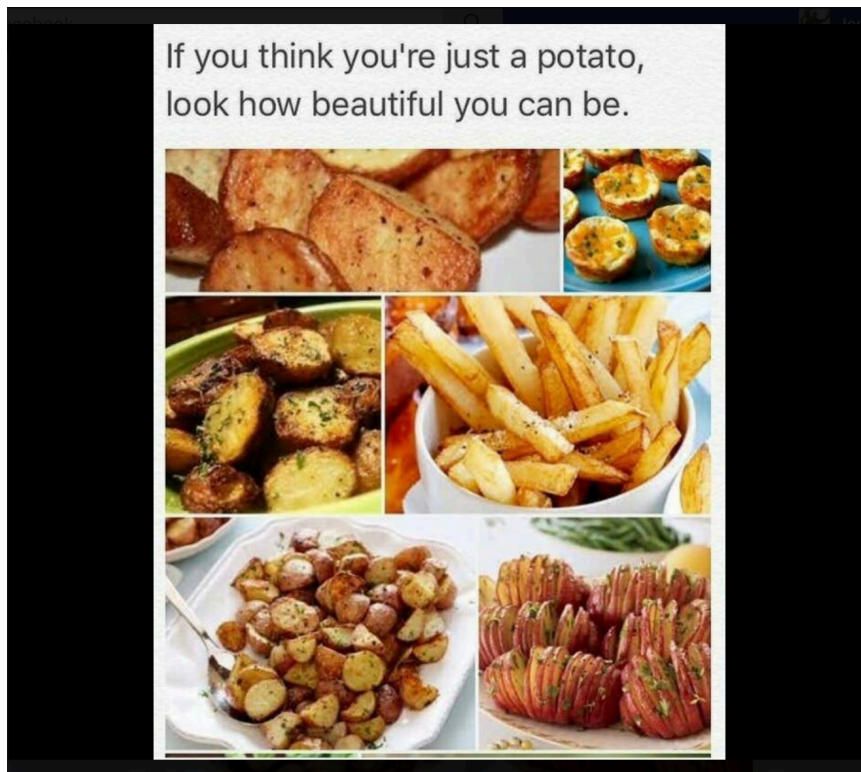


Figure 1: Pretty Potato. Digital image. Creator unknown. Accessed May 17, 2017. Found in author's personal Facebook feed.

“Thus man’s wisdom, or his lack of it, alone decides whether even the richest of nature’s gifts shall serve as a blessing or a curse.”

-Redcliffe N. Salaman, The History and Social Influence of the Potato.²

¹ I follow Ries in using “potato” as a standalone term, rather than “the potato” or “potatoes”, to allow potato more flexibility to serve as a material object, crop, and condensation of social meanings.

During my childhood in a small, straight, overwhelmingly white and Christian town in semi-rural Ontario, I felt isolated from my confusing sexual identity and the wider, more accepting queer world I vaguely knew existed outside of my religious family and closed-minded high-school. Media consumption came to occupy a prominent place in my life, as it offered me an emotional and affective escape from a place I couldn't yet leave physically. Without knowing the specific terms for it, I developed a corpus of queer media that guided the development of my identity, hopes, and dreams. The kitsch of the Spice Girls, the camp of *Queer as Folk* (Showtime, 2000-5), the eroticism of *KINK* (Showcase, 2001-5): these are just a few examples of influences I latched on to for a window onto a queerer, more positive future, as well as models for myself. They served not only as representations, but models for how to labour in myself to be more of the person I wanted to be. Kitsching up my wardrobe and attitudes to be like Scary Spice, camping up my speech patterns while valuing the club music of *Queer as Folk*, and researching more of the sexual and body modification cultures I saw on *KINK* were all processes I went through to value myself outside of the norms of my heteronormative town, even though that value was barely recognized, and certainly not valorized by those around me. I used these continuous processes to feel better about myself and disturb the norms of the people around me, even seeking to destroy them in my more rebellious days. Reflecting on this confusing, but formative, time in my scholarly development, I find my commitment to thinking through style, aesthetics, and identity as labour processes rather than fixed forms, and queer media consumption as a site of alternative valuation that is essential to living well as a minoritized subject. From finding ways to survive the shitty, depressing days that are inevitable under

² Redcliffe N. Salaman, *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*, revised impression, reprinted w/ new introduction and corrections by J. G. Hawkes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 602.

capitalism to labouring at larger interventions in oppressive social structures, queer and trans media consumption do essential work, and developing a theory of socially useless use value to account for this work structures and drives my dissertation.

So: why potato?

Firstly, if there's one thing I've learned writing a dissertation about consumption, even media consumption, it's that no matter what you do, one cannot avoid talking about food, whether as metaphor or actual food as examples for consumptive habits and patterns. More personally though, perhaps as a bear, perhaps because of growing up in (white) church life in a small town (I often joke that my only cultural food heritage can best be described as "smiling white church lady at a community event" cuisine), food was frequently used in my personal and social contexts to bring people together, comfort others in tough times (criticize the church all you like, a church lady's lemon meringue pie can make most hurts better), and build or reinforce community ties. In my life, both early and in traditions I consciously continue through baking today, food consumption has meant, at various times of my life, community formation, Christian rituals and rites (the bread and blood of Christ, given for you...), and family bonding. As a preacher's kid, these realms often overlapped, as I learned to bake bread, something I still use to de-stress and show care to others, largely when my father was baking bread for sick parishioners, next Sunday's Eucharist, or to sell at a church fundraiser (his bread always disappeared within an hour of the sale commencing). Food preparation and consumption is a nexus in which ideas of community, self, care, affect, and identity have intersected not just for me, but also for people, even entire nations, as I will outline below.

I've chosen potato, specifically, for two reasons, one personally frivolous, and the other more academic. (As this dissertation seeks to purposefully and productively examine both the

ephemeral and useless, as well as the serious and political, this dual nature of potato also serves as a foreshadowing of how and why I've come to each of my case studies, which I will explain anon.) For me, potato means snack, comfort food, and family, facilitated by its central place in white, Anglo-Canadian cuisine. Potato featured heavily in my life's favourite dishes, such as various leftover-based casseroles and pan-bakes, Shepard's pie, chips crushed up on top of casseroles, the rare times we got to eat out (and get fries, clearly), and any other number of memories and references. As a crop nearly universal in temperate zones across the world, full of nutrients, cheap and easy to buy or grow, potato is often considered a sign, symbol, and ideologically weighty food of the working class. As such it is mentioned as a staple crop, symbol, and key means of sustenance in Karl Marx, Pierre Bourdieu, and other scholarship about class relations. Potato infiltrates consumption the world over, providing the bridge between my personal affinities and a theoretical appraisal of potato, not just as a food, but also as ontology and metaphor for my entry point into discussing media consumption and its effects through a materialist lens.

Potato is also something we tend to ignore, or even use to degrade people, socially and culturally. Being called potato has a tendency to define a person as useless in some way. The couch potato is defined as someone lazy, someone indolent, someone useless on many levels: useless because they aren't working, because they aren't helping others or bettering themselves (just watching TV, useless media, getting fat, becoming a useless body, at least in the eyes of the capitalist, I'm sure Marx would say), useless because their (over)consumption is coded as disgusting, too much, extraneous, or otherwise other. Potato, with its penchant for growing protruding eyes and going soft, is symbolically tied to how people perceive of "useless" bodies and people and media and culture. "Couch potato" is a condensation of how othered bodies and

subjectivities, tied to the “junk” media they consume and the “junk” food they eat, are rendered useless in capitalist culture, a feeling I know well at a gut, base, affective level. Being a fat, faggy queer has led to my being branded the couch potato many times in my life, along with being called many of the things associated with the term: fat, gross, lazy, disgusting, and yes, even useless. Consumption thus forms the basis of my project, both how consumption habits are used to degrade particular people and media, and how queer and trans media seek to reframe “useless” consumption habits, reframe potato media, as commodities that can provide joy, sustenance, quotidian and/or contingent relief from difficult lives. This introduction, framed around and through queer potato, lays out the larger theoretical framework of consumption I am engaging in this dissertation’s case studies.

The fabulous thing about potato is that no matter what cultural, social, and ideological freight we may attach to it through the various ways our culture consumes potato, in reality, potato has largely manipulated humans to propagate itself, at least from an evolutionary standpoint. Journalist and public intellectual Michael Pollan argues as much in *The Botany of Desire*, exploring the evolutionary spread of potato, tulips, apples, and cannabis, all plants which have developed traits that fulfill human desires for sustenance, whether cultural or material. For example, the tulip appeals to our desires for beauty, while cannabis appeals to our desires for relaxation and relief. Apples appeal to our desire for sweetness, and potato evolved to become a highly adaptable staple plant that we, humanity, spread across the globe, far beyond where it could have reached on its own, and at a much faster pace. These plants, and especially potato, have evolved to get humanity to do the work of propagating their species, developing a relationship similar, in many ways, to that between bees and flowers.³ From this starting point, I

³ Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2002).

extend this idea to say that potato media does much the same for us: it appeals to our desires, whether happiness, the wish to be entertained, or the wish for cherished moments of solace outside of quotidian, everyday life. Potato media, then, offers us glimpses of new and different ways to consume the commodities placed before us for profit: just like the actual species, cultural potato seeks to fulfill our consumptive desires, and in doing so, it offers to shape us, both to perpetuate itself, but also to change human habits and patterns to perpetuate it. Queer potato media studies, then, seeks out the queer and trans media which offer visions of difference and change, even if tiny and incremental, the same way that evolution works in the realm of tiny, small changes and adaptations to new environmental and human conditions. I can't promise that this dissertation, nor queer potato, will offer a schema for undoing the violence capitalist media does to othered subjects, but I do hope it will help to destigmatize devalued, debased, and "useless" media and its consumption, reframing it through studying media aesthetics and forms often degraded or treated as second class, as a practice of survival for many, and an avenue to thrive for many others. This approach does, in many ways, follow Pollan, Ries, Salaman, and others in affording potato, and for me, the media I am naming as queer potato, more agency than one usually offers objects (though I do believe that any study which takes Marxian and materialist thinking seriously, regularly engages in affording commodities lives of their own, much as Marx did, whether consciously acknowledged or not).

In this way my project brushes against posthumanist theories most commonly found in digital media studies, even if this thesis is not directly a posthuman project, as I am committed to decentering humans as being the only subjects that can truly affect the world. In this context however, I think it is, in fact, entirely possible to read proto-posthumanist tendencies in Marx and Bourdieu, given how seriously they take the lives, movements, and influences of

commodities without human sentience or intelligence. Thus, though I will not expand on this point much further, I feel it is worth noting how close materialist thinking comes to the posthuman in much the same way I do, and to offer this as a preliminary statement of one direction my theorization may go as this project continues to evolve and become new and different organisms beyond my defence and degree conferral. Perhaps if we are more serious about incorporating media studies into larger concerns like posthumanism, and its very serious mission to contribute to helping humanity through crises like climate change and wealth inequality, then media studies can further expand its relevancy to a changing and growing world.

That said, one does not have to stray all the way into posthumanist thinking to afford a certain amount of agency to a (media) object. In *What Do Pictures Want?*, W. J. T. Mitchell takes a vitalist approach to studying images writ large, including pictures, moving image media, and cultural symbols.⁴ Following the rhetorical strategy of his title, Mitchell questions what it is that images, as increasingly central parts of our society and its politics of meaning making, try to elicit, evoke, or actualize in the dialogic process they engage with their consumers. Mitchell contends that, “If images are life-forms, and objects are the bodies they animate, then media are the habitats or ecosystems in which pictures come alive”.⁵ Following from this approach, then, my queer potato theorizing views media objects as having the ability to shape the world around them, encouraging certain behaviours and practices while discouraging others, and always

⁴ Mitchell, W. J. T. *What do Images Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). I deploy the term vitalist here to acknowledge the ways that Mitchell seeks to avoid anthropomorphizing images and affording them the same conceits and active, conscious agency as living creatures (another brush against posthumanism). Mitchell seeks to examine images, including media objects, on their own terms, and take seriously their role in shaping the world and people’s actions. Thus, he, and I, afford media a vitalism that, though stopping short of full agency, still views objects and commodities as actors in the world.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 198.

propagating outward in both expected and unexpected ways in the mediated cultural ecosystems in which they operate.

Though I seem to have strangely false memories about potato showing up more than it actually does in both Marx's *Capital Vol. 1* and Bourdieu's *Distinction*, especially as an avatar of Bourdieu's frankly sometimes-fetishistic study of the working class, it is still present, and serves as a useful metaphor for my meditations on class, taste, and culture. The references to potato in *Capital, Vol. 1* are primarily limited to Chapter XXV: "The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation". Most of them appear specifically in a section of the chapter detailing the economy and migration patterns of the Irish working class after the famine of 1846.⁶ Marx profiles potato as one of the most basic, sustaining crops of agricultural peasants, central to the (re)production of labour power in the Irish economy. Potato means strength, sustenance, and survival during difficult economic times. Marx demonstrates in his case studies how these economic difficulties disproportionately affect the oppressed classes, marking potato, I argue, as a formative mediated symbol of crisis capitalism. Specifically, for Marx, as migration and changing agricultural work came about due to the adopting of work gangs and part-year, temporary hiring of workers post-famine, potato became even more important at the same time that farmers were losing their homes, including their meagre, basic potato patch. Potato shifts from being a means for self-sufficiency to a crop to be harvested by precarious workers before their winter of unemployed discontent, starvation, and often homelessness.

For Bourdieu in particular, potato stands in as one example of the taste of the necessary: cheap, easy, nutritious, and filling, potato is something that subjugated class fractions come to love even as it serves as part of the system of maintaining the worker's body so she can continue

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2011), 753-83.

to sell her labour to the capitalist for exploitation, both monetary and symbolic. In *Distinction*, potato pops up throughout the text as part of discussions of the relationships between food, taste, and class (fraction). Potato is most heavily featured, however, in chapter 3, “The Habitus and The Space of Life-Styles”, which moves through many case studies and areas of life, demonstrating how social meaning accrues to everyday objects, from clothing, to foodstuffs, to literature. Food, for Bourdieu, offers many insights into class, from what food is affordable or appropriate, to how the ways one consumes food provide markers of social and cultural standing: the gusto with which the worker (the male worker for Bourdieu, as he regularly reproduces many gender stereotypes about women, “appropriateness,” food, and eating) eats to replenish his strength compared to the slimming, small portions of the rich demarks an important cultural difference cleaved along the ideals of quantity versus quality.⁷

Interestingly, in the introductory first chapter of the text, “The Aristocracy of Culture,” Bourdieu mentions food alongside mediation, specifically photography, when introducing his insistence on the examination of how commodities are produced, consumed, and accrue meaning, both social and cultural, and thus can provide researchers deeper understandings of social stratification. He writes:

What is there to be said about the collection of products brought together by the apparently neutral category ‘cereals’ – bread, rusks, rice, pasta, flour – and especially the class variations in the consumption of these products, when one knows that ‘rice’ alone includes ‘rice pudding’ and *riz au gras*, or rice cooked in broth (which tend to be ‘working-class’) and ‘curried rice’ (more ‘bourgeois’ or, more precisely, ‘intellectual’), not to mention ‘brown rice’ (which suggests a whole life-style)? Though, of course, no ‘natural’ or manufactured product is equally adaptable to all possible social uses, there are very few that are perfectly ‘univocal’ and it is rarely possible to deduce the social use from the thing itself. Except for products specially designed for a particular use...most products only derive their social value from the social use that is made of them... Hence it is

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

necessary to attend, for example, to *ways* of photographing and *ways* of cooking – in the casserole or the pressure-cooker, i.e., without counting time and money, or quickly and cheaply – or to products of these operations – family snaps or photos of folk dancing, *boeuf bourguignon* or curried rice.⁸

Food habits and habitus, representational habitus and habits, and by extension, I add, potato, are examples of how and why the uses, use value, and social valences of commodities themselves are so essential to study in general, and to my project specifically. The intended, and generally assumed, use value of potato is to (re)produce the means of production for the worker: her body and mind, and her ability to sell the fruits of their labour for wages. Potato is a near-perfect symbolic avatar of basic nourishment, an idea I will return to.

But what about consuming potato (or other commodities) nourishes who, and how, and toward what end? Potato (and other material and cultural commodities) is able to operate outside of the ways potato is intended to by upper class fractions: meditating on potato and all the ways it gets (re)used and (re)consumed by people opens doors onto the methodology and impetus behind my study of queer and trans media (re)consumption.

In the deeply comprehensive *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*, Redcliffe N. Salaman ends his opus with a very brief epilogue that seems to implicitly swerve into Marxian, or at least Marxian-adjacent, thought. He writes:

If for any reason, good or bad, conscious or otherwise, it is in the interests of one economically stronger group to coerce another, then in the absence of political, legal or moral restraint, that task is enormously facilitated when the weaker group can either be persuaded or forced to adopt some simple, cheaply produced food as the mainstay of its subsistence ... Whenever, therefore, the potato wins an important, and still more, a dominant position in the dietary of the people, it behoves us to ask ourselves the question: what part is it playing in the economic scheme, and what is the risk society is taking in encouraging or suffering a continuance of the same? *The potato can, and generally does, play a twofold part: that of a nutritious food, and that of a weapon ready forged for the exploitation of*

⁸ Bourdieu, 13.

a weaker group in a mixed society. It is obvious that if a foodstuff is to be used as an instrument of exploitation, the more valuable and acceptable it is as a food, the more effective it will be. Hence the richer nature's gift, be it potatoes, rice or maize, the more extreme the contrast between its dual activities, feeding and exploiting.⁹

Potato, more than just a foodstuff, can be, is, and has been a tool for exploitation through its devaluing of needs of oppressed groups, demonstrating how the tastes of the necessary become weaponized to maintain class structures.

(As a scholar of kitsch, I find I cannot help but make the tangential connection from this very serious discussion of potato as sign of social violence to the children's toy, the potato gun. A mass-produced, kitschy product that has gone through many iterations, the potato gun seems to short-circuit the exploitative, yet nourishing, nature of the potato in a moment of deep capitalist irony. It promotes symbolic violence between the children of workers by consuming, and pretending to hurt one another with the very symbol of survival and sustenance that so many members of lower class fractions rally around and rely on. The potato gun becomes a modest sign of excess and wealth, [being able to spare a potato for kids to play with as a small, likely unconscious, sign of largesse], and promotes class division and upwardly mobile ambition through competition and disregarding the very necessary tastes of workers.)

Potato once again finds connection between material politics and mediation in Salaman's tome, as the second-to-last chapter describes the influence of potato on artistic practices in the modern world (whereas other, earlier chapters explore potato in/as art in the ancient world). With the notable exception Salaman discusses regarding Van Gogh's inclusion of potatoes, potato farming, and potato eating in his explorations of peasant life (most famously in his 1885 painting *The Potato Eaters*, which serves as the frontispiece of Salaman's text), most potato art and craft

⁹ Salaman, 600. Emphasis mine.

involved ornate and elaborate stands, baskets, and dishes for eating potatoes, designed to keep hot potatoes from burning workers or disfiguring the lacquered wood tables of wealthy Irish families. Salaman even describes the practice of potato sellers crossing from providing sustenance to providing warmth to fashionable women in the winter, when one could sell hot potatoes to well-to-do passers-by to put in their muffs and keep their hands warm. This practice then led to the small, inconsistent, but notable creation of potato-shaped casks and flasks that would serve the same purpose when filled with hot water or sand.¹⁰ (A game of “hot potato” indeed.) In potato history and culture, art and practicality, form and function, politics and quotidian life meet in ways I find compellingly parallel to a study of how queer, trans, and minoritized subjects consume the everyday necessities culture wants them to have a taste for, but still develop them into art, or even force art out of something considered ugly and basic, like the fine craft of making “hot potato” warmers.

In “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” Marx uses potato as a metaphor for the “simple” people and labourers, ignored like potato, yet assumed to always be present for the state and economy to use, the “staple” of capitalism’s diet. The peasants of 1800s France lived on largely self-sufficient holdings, yet despite changing economic conditions, simultaneously did and did not form a class:

The small peasants form a vast mass, the members of which live in similar conditions, but without entering into the manifold relations with one another. Their mode of production isolates them from one another, instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse... In this way, the great mass of the French nation is formed by simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sackful of potatoes. In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that divide their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile contrast to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small peasants, and the identity of the interests begets no unity, no national

¹⁰ Ibid., 592-9.

union and no political organisation [sic], they do not form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interest in their own name... *They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.* Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them...¹¹

Though Marx seems to deploy potato here as merely a throwaway metaphor, I take it seriously as a larger symbol of materialist theories of capital. Potato is too often assumed to be a solitary, lonely product, even when in a sack with other potatoes, yet without the mass of potatoes that nourish entire cultures, there is no base on which to build a capitalist (super)structure.

For the purposes of my close reading of this quotation, I've also removed the words pointing to the fact that Marx, in discussing "representation," means political representation, rather than any kind of mediation. I contend, however, that the two have great overlap, especially contemporarily, where identities can be formed or destroyed, political battles won or lost, by political memes, "fake" news, and mass perception often untethered from facts in venues as diverse as social media through cable news through Hollywood cinema. In the consumption of culture, there is always an underlying structure of production, consumption, and materialist aims: there is always mediated potato. Potato, in this argument, stands in for the ways people, even when they share characteristics and could very well be in the same sack, or cultural fraction, don't always see or act on this similarity, in part because of the very utilitarian simplicity of potato, potato media, and the tastes of the necessary (whether regarding food or cultural commodities). In being represented, in accepting the reality of an ontology of potato, a potato being that allows potato to only be a non-agential avatar of nourishing but simple food, culture, and life, there are no avenues available in dominant cultural economies and flows for potato to

¹¹ Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *The Marx-Engels Reader* 2nd ed., Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 608. Emphasis mine.

represent itself, or analytics to account for the ways that potato can be consumed, (re)produced, or engaged with in different, off-the-beaten-track ways.

There is a long history of potato playing a central role in many working class cultures the world over: from its centrality in American cuisine and junk food, to its prevalence as part of wartime food rations and its role as a sustainable and plentiful food for impoverished working class people, potato is a global symbol of necessity, bare life, and living under oppressive economic and political regimes. In “Potato Ontology,” Nancy Ries outlines the social and economic place of potato in postsocialist Russia. Potato is sustenance that many people grow on their own, continuing the legacy of self-sufficiency necessary during wartime rationing and under the postwar Soviet state. Potato is something to never waste, and it demands respect for how long it lasts, how long it has nourished (the) people, and has a place as an unspoken national food. It is a symbol of independence born of the material knowledge that from the hard work of cultivating potato throughout the year, one can “survive the winter” because of the visible, material evidence of one’s hard work in the form of pallets of potato in the house, whether that is the real winter, or winter as a stand-in for the harshness of changing political climates, oppressive regimes, wars, and the booms and busts of unstable economies. Ries even gives examples of how potato structures time and the seasons for many in Russia, including students being excused from schools in the cities during the potato harvest to bus home and help their families gather the bounty necessary to get through the next winter.¹²

Potato is ontology in how it means so much to so many, and becomes the point of condensation for a myriad of social political, and cultural meanings, practices, and aspirations for

¹² Nancy Ries, “Potato Ontology: Surviving Postsocialism in Russia”, *Cultural Anthropology* 24.2 (2009): 181-212.

so many people, communities, and nations.¹³ Potato ontology is, for me, an example of queer praxis: a material object that stands in for theory, practice, politics, ideology, and ways of surviving and thriving in difficult conditions.

So how does one queer potato? What media counts as potato media? Or, rather, media that are part of the tastes of the necessary? Is it the most truly mass media, like reality TV, memes, formulaic movie franchises, and mass sporting events, especially when framed as being “low” culture compared to genres like documentary, “high” art film, and “sophisticated” media like photography mentioned by Bourdieu (and implied by Marx)? If media can be counted as potato media, media that fits into the tastes of the necessary in a contemporary context, it would need to meet the bare minimum requirements of entertainment needs, and be just enough to relax the self and help rest the body and mind of the worker to (re)sell the next day. Potato media, in its creation and distribution, wouldn’t need to provide upwardly mobile cultural capital to its consumers, merely keep them entertained and complicit in their own exploitation, at least from a traditional Marxian/Bourdieuian standpoint.

But like potato, media have many possible meanings and uses outside of their intended use or position in cultural political economy. They can be transformed through consumption to become more than the bare sustenance needed to (re)produce the labour power and, more importantly, the ideological construct and supremacy of the current cultural hierarchy, that a worker then sells to the state or capitalist. For example, in “Potato Ontology,” Ries relates how potato, as a thing to prepare for others, and as a catalyst for cultural and communal memory, for example, becomes so much more than just a means of subsistence and survival in Russia. Potato, as a cultural commodity and object, teaches lessons about hard work and survival, about

¹³ Ibid.

independence from the state if and when necessary to survive, and it allows for fond remembrances of family, friends, and community.¹⁴ Potato, through the consumption of its very quotidian material-commodity self, becomes an extraquotidian, almost utopic, materialization of the tastes of the necessary. Potato (ontology) is about making do, for sure, but it is also about making *more* or the *most* out of having to make do.

Potato, therefore, as a rhetorical strategy, symbol, and social construct serves as an entry point into why I chose my case studies: they all represent a potato media, simultaneously the taste of the necessary, “useless” or sustenance-less commodities to consume, but also the confusing, pretty potatoes of queer, trans, and feminist existence that offer flashes of non-dominant more-ness through their consumption and re-mediation. They serve as tutor texts for establishing a reparative, capacious, and generous framework for theorizing queer and trans media consumption; tutor texts which offer reflections of, and suggestions for, queer and trans (self) love, positive identifications, and an encouragement to care for the self in difficult times. Just as potato ontology is about so much more than stating what oppressed peoples eat, an insistence on seeking out and theorizing queer potato seeks to explore how queer and trans people do *more* with the tastes of the necessary than was ever intended or predicted, while also accounting for how media can have vitalist effects, even agency, in shaping the world they interact with.

I would refer back to the meme at the beginning of this aside, which I have named “Pretty Potato”. Based in the frivolous, throwaway, even “useless” (though increasingly culturally relevant, prevalent, and politicized) genre of the meme, “Pretty Potato” uses art practices and strategies that, though based in making money for capitalists through online circulation, are *not*

¹⁴ Ibid.

all designed to be ones which give social or cultural capital. Taking aesthetic, and implicitly sensual, pleasure in a potato combines the nourishment and sustenance of potato and turning it from a taste of necessity into a taste for freedom through re-dressing, re-preparing it and elevating it beyond that which it is, even in economically hard times. It would be easy to say that this meme offers nothing outside dominant capitalist practices, by gentrifying potato in a way (such as in the photo of fries in an artisanal looking bowl, like those one might see in a hipster or whole food café), taking potato and turning it into something which can be given enough value via dominant tastes to raise its price (I cannot help but think here of the recent spate of restaurants in Ann Arbor aggressively pushing their truffle fries on patrons), appropriating a taste of the necessary to become a commodity both for upper class fractions and to sell back to the very people who produced it at higher prices. This is similar to the ways that minoritized cultures have their cultural codes, traditions, and tastes appropriated by mass culture and sold back to them, turning forms of resistance into forms of profit making.¹⁵

This is exactly the dilemma I have faced in framing this dissertation: no matter how resistant, off-kilter, or queer (in the verb sense of the word) one wants to be, in producing *or* consuming media, one cannot escape the fact that we all live inside capitalism, and no commodity, whether media object or potato, can escape the consequences of that existence. Every single commodity can be appropriated, used, or abused by capitalist (cultural) economies, no matter the intent behind it, or fights for ownership of it by minoritized peoples. Take, for

¹⁵ For example, in “Commodity Lesbianism,” Danae Clark discusses the ways in which lesbian fashion codes were appropriated and used by mainstream fashion publications to seem hip, edgy, and progressive in the 80s while simultaneously selling lesbian culture back to lesbians via the implicit promise that lesbians could be more accepted than before via their fashion choices. Danae Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism,” *Camera Obscura* 9.1-2 25-26 (1991): 181-201.

example, the ever-more-popular TV sensation *RuPaul's Drag Race*¹⁶: this show simultaneously presents queer subjects who cannot access the largely-metropolitan art of drag the chance to identify with a community beyond themselves and allowing queer and trans drag performers to make a living well beyond what was available to most in pre-*Drag Race* days, while also mainstreaming and largely depoliticizing and producing increasingly large profits for RuPaul, Viacom (who owns VH1, where the show currently airs, and Logo, where it aired through season 8 and All Stars season 2), and various other stakeholders, whether from the show itself, advertising revenues, merchandise, or spin-off events like the several-year old, and now twice-yearly, event RuPaul's DragCon.

This realization led to the epiphany that I would need to rethink the scale(s) at which I analyze this dissertation's case studies. Any theory of queer and trans media consumption cannot be entirely radical, as suggesting such would require ignoring the very ubiquity of capitalist cultural flows and functions, and attempt to fix commodities into a state of ontological being (resistant or complicit, for example) which ignores how commodities have their meanings, use values, exchange values, and (counter)cultural values shift and change over time. This doesn't mean that there aren't trends where some commodities have particular meanings condense onto them through time: individual commodities, like a single potato, can be used in interesting, "useless" ways while still being part of a larger history and narrative of potato, writ large. A media-specific example of the multiple meanings or contexts cultural commodities can inhabit: Matthew Tinkcom's work on camp in the classical Hollywood era implicitly says as much: gay filmmakers traded their markers of queerness as a means to succeeding in homophobic industries at a specific time, creating films that were deeply and subtly transgressive, but have now become

¹⁶ For more, see: Josh Morrison, "'Draguating' to Normal" in *The Makeup of RuPaul's Drag Race: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows*, Jim Daems, ed. (New York: McFarlane, 2014), 124-47.

camp classics with entirely different patterns of valorization, circulation, and consumption.¹⁷ I would add that in this example, the ephemeral and culturally degraded, “useless,” commodity was in fact these director’s sexual identity, which is both deployed in a queer way invisible to the mainstream while simultaneously being sold to the “mainstream” or dominant culture for the sake of survival. The transgressive and the complicit, queer and normal, operate simultaneously within the nexus of the individual commodity’s circulation, deployment, different use values to various constituencies, and larger history of what that commodity usually means or is valued for.

What my project and theory needs, then, is the flexibility of potato ontology, modified and queered and materialized: feeling or being or commoditizing potato is a position with many potentialities, from being appropriated for use by dominant cultural fractions to (re)consuming something in a way only semi-recognizable, or even invisible, to the dominant flows of cultural capital, and it is only by attending to *both* the macro flows of power and politics *and* the micro economies of resistance, community formation, and queer and trans world building that flow around, through, and with commodities, that we can fully account of the complexities of queer and trans media consumption. So, potato can be both a taste of the necessary appropriated by mass culture *and* a place from which to become beautiful as, for, and because of one’s difference, no matter the kind of potato or number of eyes and divots one has.

An example: Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head. In their conception and advertising, these are highly gendered toys for children that are meant to be (re)constructed to reify hegemonic social norms through a pedagogy of teaching kids the “right” clothing, facial features, gendered body parts (like moustaches vs. big eye lashes), and bodily comportment of men and women, shutting down any sense of transness or queerness inherent in the fragmented, assemblage, posthuman

¹⁷ Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

body of the anthropomorphized potato toy. And yet, simultaneously, there's so much queer potential, and, frankly, *fun* to be had in doing Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head "wrong": whether that's a transphobic joke made by parents at the "wrong" bodies constructed by kids, or a harmless laugh about a mouth being where an ear should be, or the joy children have a tendency to take in messing up systems and giggling about it, this highly gendered and sexist commodity can also be a space of queering and trans-ing the commodity itself, if only in a small, quotidian, transitive way. There is always the potential for a queer failure¹⁸ of sorts when actively consuming a commodity in the sense of having it fail, at least in part, to maintain its place in dominant flows and meanings of cultural capital. Much as Foucault reminds us that power is not a unidirectional exercise, but a plane of pushes and pulls, actions and reactions, mediations and remediations (to borrow a critical term from Bolter and Grusin)¹⁹, so commodities are always, in a sense, queer, in that they can never *only* exist, function, and provide values as capitalism would want them to. Potato ontology refuses that potato people can only be the similar, yet still un-unified mass of the potato sack in "The Eighteenth Brumaire."

Cruising Potato

My project seeks to answer the question of how queer and trans subjects create and sustain alternative economies of cultural capital and useless use value to sustain themselves in the everyday and the future, via aesthetic media consumption as queer labour and queer production, under late capitalism. The starting point for my intervention is a queer theory of how the love and consumption of media creates positive affect, even if quotidian or temporally

¹⁸ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁹ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT University Press, 2000).

fleeting, building out of queer scholarship recognizing the role of media in world imagining, envisioning, and building. This body of thinking offers evocative pictures of how queer media works to ameliorate social ills, aligning with my own experiences of queer media promising more than you have, today and in the future. For example, Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism explores how even things that imbricate us in dominant power structures can give us optimism and the ability to live through the day, evocatively suggesting how and why we remain attached to commodities that, from a structural perspective, harm us.²⁰ Though useful for examining how media and other commodities or beliefs operate in micro-economies of trauma, much like anti-relational thinkers such as Lee Edelman, Berlant's model does not offer much individual agency towards change on a micro or macro scale: her optimism is one that is just enough to reproduce a subject's current social, cultural, and economic conditions, not change them. Edelman, building off of early anti-relational AIDS-era queer theorists like Leo Bersani, however, suggests we reject dominant culture and power via queer sex/ualities, but in a psychoanalytic framework detached from the material conditions of queer life, production, and consumption.²¹ The only consumption he recognizes is the theoretical jouissance that consumes subjectivity in the act of gay sex. Cruel optimism operates only in the daily without a program for affecting systemic issues, whereas anti-relational thinking makes claims to the symbolic destruction of the systemic without accounting for the everyday, quotidian aspects of queer cultural life.

Theorists including José Esteban Muñoz and Amy Villarejo take a more utopian approach to the value of media, and are key thinkers in the school of utopian queer theory that is

²⁰ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University press, 2011).

²¹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

increasingly pitted against anti-relational queer theory. Muñoz deploys the idea of disidentification to explore how queer and trans people of colour negotiate representations that harm them in performance to disrupt symbolic economies of oppression and provide hope in the everyday, adding a political dimension to explorations of how intersectional queers cope under capitalism.²² He continues to link intersectional queer performance to the politics of futurity in *Cruising Utopia*, suggesting that via performances that evoke the promise of a better future after capitalism, even if we can't know its form, we do radical cultural work.²³ Villarejo, in her discussion of queerness as a key component of television history, concretizes the concept of ascendance: queerness is a ghostly presence in media which uses the conditions of television production to materially promote queerness in the world and offer an ascendance out of the everyday for queer subjects who recognize the hidden queerness of mass media.²⁴ Neither ascendance nor utopia, however, are the same as contingent, quotidian hope found in consumption, even if the concepts are linked. Though I think media consumption can offer glimpses of both, Muñoz and Villarejo are both rooted in questions of queer production. It is unclear in their work what use value their ascendant utopias have today, now, for queer subjects beyond stopping our situation from worsening through cruel optimism or dreaming of a symbolic destruction of that which oppresses us. The hope for change that I believe is inherent to the value of queer consumption which creates alternative forms of cultural capital is more useful than these production-based theories, and it is out of this contention that my dissertation will work to materialize queer theory while queering material theories of cultural value and capital.

²² José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

²³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

²⁴ Amy Villarejo, *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

My project brings materialist theories of labour, political economy, and (especially) cultural capital to bear on discussions of micro and macro social change, and I will consider how queers and trans people labour to create cultural capital and value that isn't recognizable to dominant culture. Methodologically, this project bears resemblance to Tinkcom's *Working Like a Homosexual*, as it is also interested in how queer subjects labour and work through and with media to materialize a queerer world around them and express themselves as queerly creative subjects. Tinkcom also works deeply with Marx to situate his discussions of labour and work in the material world.²⁵ Where we differ, however, is Tinkcom's focus on gay men working in the film industry as media producers, guiding his text into discussions of how queerness can be used to shape what is put into the market as a commodity, and the value of queerness in creating art that was recognizable and valuable to the classical Hollywood studios his subjects worked in. My project, though partially about production (as it cannot be separated out from consumption in any materialist analysis – the two terms operate as different points in the same, dialectical life of commodities), begins at the point of reception and consumption, and is grounded in studying less the remarkable and unique figures of filmmakers and culture setters, but the more “normal,” “unimportant,” or “useless” queers who are inspired by (potato) media to make their lives better. In studying a dialectical process, one has to choose where to begin in a necessarily linear research project: for Tinkcom this start is in production, and he puts less emphasis on consumption-as-production, whereas I will begin from consumption, with less focus on production-as-consumption. This will allow me to get at different subjects and operations of queer labour than Tinkcom could, and also affords me different and unique avenues into combining Marxian theories of labour and value with a theory of *cultural* capital.

²⁵ Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

I situate my work in both the everyday and the structural to encompass how media both ameliorates everyday trauma and suggests radical change. My dissertation rethinks Marx and Bourdieu's ideas of capital, culture, production, and consumption alongside and beyond queer theories of camp, kitsch, and sexuality. In doing so I seek to concretize these ideas in media studies via case studies of how specific forms of queer and trans aesthetic and cultural labour create new forms of cultural capital, value, and identity that operate individually and structurally to destabilize and resist dominant systems of valorization. In production, consumption, and our intersectional queer ways of navigating power both as a top-down systemic force requiring revolutionary change and localized, everyday forces we respond to in little ways, we enact queer cultural and aesthetic labours based in our love of "useless" media genres, forms, and style, and through appropriating dominant forms of cultural capital to be remade in our own cultural fractions, identities, and lives. These excesses of cultural labour and consumption form the backbone of my dissertation: they are the vehicles through which trans and queer media consumers envision different ways to value culture, art, aesthetics, and media.

Uselessness enters here as a central term for my work on several different levels. The first of these is at the level of the commodity: I am interested in commodities that are seen as, on the one hand, having little value or use beyond making money, and, on the other, are engaged in queer and trans projects (of representation, politicization, activism, etc.) and thus painted as useless by dominant and/or hegemonic power structures and institutions. Often, in this case, uselessness is given other names: radical, niche, identitarian, based in identity politics, divisive, partisan, or any other of the brushes used to tar queer and trans cultural production, consumption, and capital. Thus I am seeking to expand uselessness beyond the pragmatic materialist way it is used in Marx and Bourdieu, as well as in broader and more general discourses: they see use as

merely being about what can be done with a material commodity. They don't explore ephemeral, affective, or non-material commodities, which are, of course, increasingly important today, from vapourware products in the early dot-com craze to identity-as-commodity to the use-value accorded to "self-care" feelings, to name just a few. But use, and uselessness, are also discursive concepts, tied to practices and executions of power: in naming a person, group, idea, commodity, piece of media, feeling, or trauma as useless through implying that it doesn't measure up to the "norm" or "standard," the use value of the person using that commodity is assaulted and deemed to be lower. Furthermore, the values or priorities of people, communities, and identities are besmirched. In a capitalist society where endless obedient productivity and hegemonic usefulness are key to maintaining the status quo and growing profits, naming others as useless is about circumscribing what commodities and consumptions practices are "correct" or "useful," while simultaneously working to quell resistance to those norms, or the creation of alternative forms of use value, usefulness and productivity directed somewhere or towards goals other than hegemonic ones.

Following Foucault's conceptions of power, rather than capitalism's conception of its own structures (both of which will be explained more fully in Chapter 1), usefulness, as a discursive exercise of power, can also become a node of resistance and/or redefinition as well as oppression. Just as queer and trans communities (as well as communities of colour and other identity categories) can and have reclaimed former offensive terms, ideas, and representations of themselves, so uselessness in this dissertation will be pressed upon, unravelled, untangled, and critically examined for the entryways being deemed useless under capitalism provide for using media consumption to valorize different, non-hegemonic or alternative circuits of queer value and use.

Thus, potato ontology serves this dissertation, and its conception of uselessness specifically, as an ontology of turning what one can access in their everyday lives into something beyond what it is meant to be, through (re)producing and (re)consuming it in creative ways, tying it to larger queer and trans habitus, or something bigger and better than oneself and one's current condition. The first chapter of this dissertation performs the theoretical heavy lifting of delving into what cultural capital is, isn't, and what it can/not do, especially when rethinking it queerly. I draw heavily on the work of Marx and Bourdieu, as well as people who further complicate and explicate on them, especially Jon Beasley-Murray and Brian Massumi, to argue that a more complex, postmodern conception of capitalist power flows, which are the streams through which discourses on value, use/lessness, and the valourization of cultural capital move, shift, and are diverted. Though this chapter does not lay out an in-depth case study like the following three, it is essential to map out the systems of capitalist power as I see them operating in contemporary mediascapes because though the terms of materialist analysis central to my argument (including value, consumption, use, cultural capital, use/lessness, and valourization) all seem static in their definitions (x commodity has y value at z time), but their deployment, all the way back to Marx, is a dynamic one. Understanding a commodity and its uses and value in any circumstance, whether examining it related to hegemonic capital or alternative consumption, requires seeing how it moves, shifts, changes, and grows in different contexts, times, places, and in the hands of different people with wildly different commitments or purposes in apprehending and consuming that commodity in the first place. Uselessness is always doubled: it is a term of value based in structural materialist analyses of economies of value (economic, cultural, and/or social) and in its discursive, power-based deployments at the same time. This is, in fact, a very classic Marxian statement: for Marx, commodities live in dialectical situations, being pulled and

shaped from different, often opposing, forces. Thus, we must also place commodities, when viewed through a queer potato ontology, within a doubled map of power which accounts for both top-down, structuralist, disciplining practices *as well as* a more fluid, discourse- and affect-based map of power. Just as potato means many different things to many different people depending on its positioning to power, capitalism, consumption, and identity (national identity for Ries, broader categories of identity for this project), so commodities, and uselessness as a critical term, must be viewed and apprehended from multiple vantage points and positionalities to determine its shapes and contours for that specific commodity, and thus how it will, can, should, or should not be consumed *for particular goals* as defined by the consumer as well as the producer.

The three case studies in this dissertation reframe aesthetic styles and media genres as active consumptive processes of queer and trans cultural labour. Each chapter combines media case studies with larger questions of queer and trans artistic labour, consumption, and production that benefit the intersectional queer cultural fractions producers and consumers occupy. I enact an interdisciplinary approach to my dissertation, crossing between screen media studies, print media studies, and broader frameworks of feminist, queer, and trans labour and consumption to develop a theory of consumptive media labour out of historically centered archive research, textual analysis, and reception studies. Trans and queer people and communities build their own futures through labouring on, consuming, and valourizing non-dominant, “useless” queer cultural capital, and this dissertation will begin to tell these important stories of the media they love and what it does for them.

The arc of these case studies start at entirely personal and individual consumption and move outward into thinking through how community and communication networks form through queer consumption, then to how queer and trans media can encourage new forms of

consumption through a politicized focus on community, solidarity, and healing. Thus chapter two, “I Really Really Really Wanna Zig-a-Zig-AH: Spice Kitsch Under Postmodern Capitalism” comes first, as it focuses on very individual consumptive practices and concerns. My third chapter, “Ur(sine)texts: *BEAR* Magazine, the Bear Mailing list, and Prodsusage as a Site of Identity and Community Formation,” the scope of my analysis of queer consumption practices as a means of forming alternative cultural capital and queer value moves outward from the individual to individuals seeking community and connection through media consumption. My case studies end at the fourth chapter, “Cutting Camp with Killing: ‘Bad’ Feelings, Homeopathy, and Consumptive Camp.” Moving into studying the aesthetic and political style of camp, specifically as is being deployed in new ways by trans communities, the scope of this project moves further out, exploring how queer and trans camp media offers a vision of communities which experience trauma together, and can heal together. From individual consumption as a means of envisioning other possibilities to consumption which actively facilitates connections to community, to a communal aesthetic style seeking to promise hope, healing, and solidarity through media consumption, these case studies follow an expanding vision of queer and trans media consumption as tools for creating unique queer cultural capital and value at larger and larger scales, subtly paralleling how many queer and trans people, including myself, grew into their queerness and/or transness through media consumption, expanding their access to media, representations, and community as they consumed their way out of themselves and into capitalist flows, expanding their agency in defining and valuing the use/lessness of queer and trans media along the way.

Potato ontology, for me, serves as a framework for exposing and exploring the alternative use values of the “useless” aesthetic strategies my dissertation engages: kitsch, porn, and camp.

Just as food nourishes and is cherished, as potato nourishes and is cherished by working classes the world over, so “useless” media act as cultural potato. Taking a potato approach to studying “useless” media allows us to see the commodity being consumed as *both/and* the complicit taste of the necessary, where we consume what’s put in front of us just enough (and cheaply) to reproduce ourselves to work again, *and* the reparative, recuperative consumption of a complicit commodity that is within one’s price range (whether literal or metaphorically in the realm of cultural capital) but being determined to make it into a pretty potato for oneself, and perhaps (but *NOT* necessarily) others or even larger communities.

In chapter two, potato, as kitsch media, as Spice, can be the meal made after an exhausting day that will give the calories necessary without stretching already-precious resources (monetary or cultural), or it can be the moment of luxury to oneself where you force out the taste of freedom from the tastes of the necessary, making a pretty potato for oneself and others as a means of resistance, resilience, and survival. Kitsch, like queer potato, is viewed as culturally useless in dominant flows of capitalism and value, its only value coming from being cheap and mass (re)producible, making it the ultimate “useless” artistic commodity from the standpoint of dominant cultural capitalism, use value, and exchange value: it provides nothing but empty cultural calories. As with my other case studies, however, I have not chosen this one solely because it is branded useless from a dominant cultural perspective, but also because it is queerly useful for people, communities, and/or identities also deemed useless, in the discursively violent sense I discussed above. In the case of this chapter, the uselessness resides on the individual level and in the feelings of those who occupy identities that are discriminated against, yet are central to queer identity formation and life. Specifically, Spice, as a phenomenon, reached out to me as a young queer man, and to many other young people, especially young women, through the

simultaneously empowering and empty, or (politically) “useless,” message of Girl Power, the ephemeral and affective commodity which I trace being creatively repurposed through queer consumption to become a taste of freedom for consumers who are frequently assumed to only have access to tastes of the necessary.

And yet, kitsch is also very much *something* for its consumers: Alvarez and Olalquiaga show how religious and cultural kitsch are key in community rituals and identity formation for Latina/o and Chicana/o people on the border and in New York (respectively).²⁶ Olalquiaga also shows how kitsch is such a beloved phenomenon for collectors who use it, even need it to negotiate the difficulties of modernization and industrialization, both economically and personally.²⁷ Yet when kitsch is pointed out as a sign of difference, of being the kitschmensch, or bad, useless, or otherwise devalued consumer, it can also be harmful and hurtful: too much of something can be just as tough inside capitalist systems of production and consumption which simultaneously encourage mass consumption *and* judge people for following that imperative, especially women, people of colour, queers, trans people, poor people, the elderly, and others with marginalized identities. Negotiating the dialectical nature of kitsch, and specifically kitsch media, as a consumer *and* as an academic, is the quest to find the way to feel to keep one satisfied (to riff on a Spice Girls lyric). It is a *process* of consumptive practices that balance these different perspectives, from the imperative to work to survive and be a properly disciplined member of a capitalist consumeristic society, and to engage in resistant practices of self-definition. Kitsch always already props up dominant forms of cultural capital, but it can also be

²⁶ Maribel Alvarez, “Made in Mexico: Souvenirs, Artisans, Shoppers, and the Meaning of Other ‘Border-Type-Things’” (Dissertation, University of Arizona, 2003).
Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

²⁷ Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

site for resistant and different forms of identification and affective succor, turning hegemonic uselessness into queer use value.

My second case study focuses on bear pornography, and the development of bear culture and its mediated cultural output more generally, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Pornography, as a genre, is often viewed as culturally useless. Trading in base needs usually framed as merely biological all the way to demonstrating perversion, porn is not usually viewed as a catalyst for community and identity formation, as I argue bear porn, especially through the output of *BEAR* magazine, in fact did. That very “base”-ness of pornography lays the ground for this chapter’s exploration of uselessness: despite being a massive and extremely profitable industry, culturally and socially pornography is still crusaded against, referred to as destructive or harmful to society, as a solvent on traditional family structures and morals, and in various other moral-panic-esque ways. So, though pornography, and media in which the sexualities it espouses and shapes are represented and contested (as in queer communities, and demonstrated through the ways that members of the Bear Mailing List continued to advance and debate issues around body positivity, queer desires and identities, and sexuality begun through the pornography of *BEAR* magazine and its VHS porn releases) clearly have high exchange value potential, they can still be seen as useless, dangerous, or harmful from the perspective of hegemonic *cultural* capital. The bears I saw, read about, and encountered in the archives are the location of the second valence of uselessness critical to each of my case studies. In this instance, bear communities and media were actively framed as being speaking back to both mainstream culture’s homophobia (especially during the AIDS era) and the gay “mainstream” and its dismissal of larger bodies as desirable, and thus, useless in the flows of gay sexual (use) value, affectively and culturally. In this chapter I use archival research and historical discourse analysis to see how a general feeling

of uselessness spurred the creation of a unique queer masculine culture through the “useless” genre of porn, which then expanded onto the early internet, a medium often questioned for its mass value and use in its early years, to continue defining the usefulness of bear identity, values, and bodies to, for, and by bears in their own digital media spaces, reframing what and who gets valued based on a community-defined set of values and morals, shifting the commodities of bear porn, through consumption, into a different framework of queer value (supported by the ongoing work of the Bear Mailing List, a new cultural scaffolding or circuit of valuation). Drawing on archival sources spanning pornographic magazines and VHS tapes through an expansive study of a year of the Bear Mailing List online listserv, this chapter skews more towards the material side of the material/discursive maps of power and circuits of queer valuation I am studying, whereas chapters two and four’s analyses are more focused in the discursive and affective registers of the map of power I lay out in the first chapter. This methodological code switching is intentional: not only does it materialize the interdisciplinary methodological and philosophical tenets of this project (which is already invested in holding the material world and materialized instances of phenomena in productive and real conversation with critical theory), but also acknowledges that studying the parallel or doubled lives and movements of commodities, even potato media, requires multiple approaches to research and analysis. Through embracing the radical act of desiring outside the norm (whether those are the norms of gay club culture or society at large, as bear culture pushes back against both, in different ways), early bear porn and the cultural discourses surrounding it demonstrate a concrete example of alternative cultural capital being formed out of queer potato consumption practices, especially in the context of larger gay men regularly degraded for their size and food-related consumption habits. In bear culture, the couch potato learns to love itself as itself.

In my final chapter, I explore the ways in which camp, as an aesthetic and political strategy, can be used to model communal love, acceptance, and political solidarity through its ability to mediate the traumas capitalism inflicts on trans and queer subjects and, via humourous introjection, turn media consumption into a space and practice of healing. Camp is, of all the media styles I study, the least invested and inculcated in mass culture (though, like anything, it has certainly been coopted into mass cultural discourses and anti-radical politics, as in the case of *RuPaul's Drag Race*), and the most invested in actively seeking to improve trans and queer subject's lives through humour, joy, and political and ideological awareness. This chapter examines *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* (dir. Israel Luna, 2012) and argues that they seek to allow their viewers to experience and come to terms with "bad" or "useless" feelings, as defined by dominant cultural narratives and lobbying groups attached to homonormativity, including trans rage, anger, trauma, and the desire for revenge. The uselessness in this chapter is once more a dual one. Camp, as an aesthetic, political, and cultural style of performance, generally speaking, takes great pride in its hegemonic uselessness: it often gleefully rips off, copies, twists, and maims "dominant" cultural forms, references, genres, and conventions for purposes far outside the goals of hegemonic capitalism, from making queer and trans people laugh and feel welcome all the way through promoting radical political action and change. This chapter is not attempting to make an argument about all contemporary queer and/or trans camp, however: as camp adjusts to contemporary media industries and flows, from spreading onto the internet and allowing new avenues of camp self-expression to queers and trans people of all identities,²⁸ not only are there new mediated venues for camp production, but also a proliferation of camp which seeks to wrest camp's definition out of the hands of both mainstream gay authorities like RuPaul

²⁸ Aymar Jean Christian, "Camp 2.0: A Queer Performance of the Personal", *Communication, Culture & Critique* 3 (2010).

and its own historical narrative of largely “belonging” to cisgender gay men. Thus, the chapter looks in-depth at *TOTWK* as the “useless” style of camp being taken up, owned, and reframed as healing, communal, and reparative by trans women, including trans women of colour. Trans women of colour, in particular, are one of the most vulnerable groups in American society, facing higher rates of violence, mental health issues, and other cultural, social, and material harms. Trans women, and especially trans women of colour, are regularly killed in the US and Canada, their cases, faces, and selves only visible to the mainstream via media in death, often misrepresented, deadnamed, and victim-blamed even in death: I am not sure I can think of a group more culturally and socially deemed useless through rhetorical and material violence. Out of this dual uselessness, I argue, rises a unique and vibrant trans camp based not solely in fighting the system, but also working communally to heal and cope with the traumas and violences inflicted on trans and queer communities by capitalist society as an equal part of the struggle and fight to make all people, communities, and identities be seen as useful, valued, and a positive and essential part of the social world. Though all three case studies, as they move from the individual and micro-level changes and functions of queer valuation via queer consumption, engage in reparative work to value and celebrate queer and trans cultural capital and value, they also expand outward in the scope of the kind of political, rhetorical, and cultural or social change they strive to enact as commodities to be consumed. This is not the central focus of my work, as that argument would hinge a great deal more on production rather than consumption, but it is still present underneath the surface of all three case studies, and comes most to the fore in this final chapter on camp.

Though disparate in objects of analyses, and spanning methods including archive research, close reading, discourse analysis, and critical theorizing, all of these chapters explore

ways in which queer and trans media consumption practices seek to turn the potato of necessity into the pretty potato of freedom. As with any project striving to be interdisciplinary and theoretically provocative, my choice of case studies, crossing generic boundaries as they do, is absolutely a site of possible critique of my work, particularly from positionalities found within more traditional media and gender studies methodologies and research philosophies. That said, these case studies weren't chosen randomly or by accident. As is the case in much of the best queer, trans, and feminist scholarship, personal experience and affective allegiances have greatly shaped the object choices I've made. Just as my own love of potato media has guided me into my queer identity, I maintain that a personal connection is necessary to properly account for the affective, emotional, and often very fleeting moments of queer media consumption I am interested in exploring.

In this way, though I have already established how my work is not necessarily attempting to stake out claims to utopia, my project is informed, structurally and formally, by Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*. In this gorgeously written tome, daring in its wide selection of case studies ranging across many art forms and time, as well as theoretical underpinnings combining contemporary critical theory with queer re-readings of the "old dead white guy canon" (a phrase I've heard used to critique Muñoz's work many times in queer theory seminars and conferences, usually suspiciously applied by white scholars working to discredit Muñoz's unabashedly proud championing of brown queer cultures and artists). Muñoz invites his readers to cruise utopia with him, drawing on the gay definition of cruising, where it names the activity of looking for sex, often in public places. Cruising, for Muñoz, moves from an erotic act in the quotidian to a methodology of hope, in which the theorist (and reader) cruise across and through many different cultural locations and objects, evaluating them, perusing them, appreciating them, before moving

on to another, transforming the everyday prowling through the club into a queer academic stylistic methodology.

Muñoz chose his objects of study for *Cruising Utopia* based on his interpretation of them as demonstrating some level of queer incandescence. The concept of incandescence is most fruitfully explored by Muñoz in chapter 9, “A Jeté Out the Window: Fred Herko’s Incandescent Illumination.” This chapter stands out as one of the most formative and inspirational works of academic writing I have ever experienced, especially about thinking surplus value queerly, shining forth from an equally inspirational and daring text.²⁹ Incandescence can be apprehended for Muñoz, through the cruising of art, aesthetics, community, and identity for flashes of queer utopia, which Muñoz positions as always existing just beyond the horizon of perception. Cruising, in this context, is specifically and intentionally referencing gay practices of cruising, or looking for connection through looking at others, seeking recognition and understanding through furtive, subjective glances, gestures, and codes, and looking for the unexpected connections queerness enables and thrives upon. Muñoz builds his theoretical and rhetorical method of cruising cultural objects, styles, and discourses on the lived queer history of cruising, foregrounding the centrality of queer erotics, connection, community, and the valuation of ideas, practices, and identities deemed “useless” by hegemonic society and capitalism as loci of queer and trans history, style, consumption, and valuation. And, though the utopias we glimpse or try to evoke in art and aesthetics may not ever materialize as we see them, it is the process of

²⁹ I had the chance to meet Muñoz before his untimely death when he visited the University of Arizona to give a talk and run a seminar with graduate students, and I can assure you, reader, that he was incandescent as the subjects he studied.

striving for them, trying to think differently about how the world could, and should, be shaped, that facilitates brushes with incandescent people, places, things, and media.³⁰

So, this dissertation asks you to cruise potato media with me, following the incandescent and iridescent flashes and traces of queer and trans alternative cultural capital across case studies, time periods, and places, in the hope that the journey will facilitate a greater understanding and questioning of the role of media consumption in queer and trans communities, identities, and lives.

³⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising*.

Chapter 1

Queering Use/lessness and Cultural Capital

This chapter performs the theoretical heavy lifting of my dissertation, exploring the ways in which I see theories of cultural capital, drawing especially from Karl Marx, Pierre Bourdieu, John Beasley-Murray, and Brian Massumi, can be repurposed for thinking through the stakes and implications of queer and trans media consumption. Moving through key terms for my theorizing in later chapters, including use and exchange value, uselessness, and cultural capital, I outline the ways in which thinkers of value, both classic and contemporary, have situated value and commodities, while meditating on how to reframe these terms specifically within the realms of contemporary mediascapes.

Uselessness and Power

This section explores a key element of materialist theories of capital that frames my intervention into queer media studies: the violence of economic and cultural capital. I aim to expand concepts of cultural capital and value via queer studies to encompass the ways that minoritized subjects create their own economies of value and worth *inside, through, and around* the hegemony of economic capital and the role that media play in this crucial endeavour. In this vein, my dissertation studies different kinds of aesthetic labour that demonstrate how intersectional queer subjects use aesthetic labour and consumption to ameliorate the violence which surrounds us as an inherent part of life under capitalism.

Marx and Bourdieu's theories of capital posit its violence to be an oppressive force exerted by the ruling classes against the lower classes. For Marx, this violence is most clearly demonstrated through his graphic display of the deteriorating body of the worker, destroyed through attrition by the factory and the greedy capitalist, in *Capital Volume 1*. Despite being a text on political economy, *Capital* is also a tragic tale where the main character, the universal proletariat worker, suffers under the boot of the bourgeoisie, speaking with many individual workers' voices about the violent dehumanization heaped on her body and soul by the social relations of capital and its (re)production. Her nemesis is the heartless avatar of unchecked accumulation and avarice, the capitalist.

The most graphic examples of *Capital's* woeful tale are in Chapter X, "The Working Day," which paints a dire picture of long hours, no social benefits, and the constant increase in physical and economic exploitation that the worker undergoes. Section 3, "Branches of English Industry Without Legal Limits to Exploitation," for example, presents a litany of direct quotations from workers in factories producing products as diverse as Lucifer (sulphur) matches, bread, and pottery, among others. These workers, many of them women and children, have no recourse as they work long hours in dangerous conditions, recounting one tale of suffering after another. This section even includes a tale of a train crew, forced to work for days straight delivering cargo, who became so exhausted as to fall asleep at the helm, leading to the death of a man for whom they were convicted of manslaughter.¹ The process of (re)producing capital on the backs of the worker forced to sell their labour power for wages is a process of dehumanization. For the capitalist, the only expenditure of labour by the worker which is considered productive and worthwhile is that which makes him more capital or which is the bare

¹ Marx, 268-82.

minimum necessary outside of the factory to recreate and sustain that labour power. In Marx's words, "what the labourer consumes for his own pleasure beyond that part, is unproductive consumption...the individual consumption of the labourer is unproductive as regards himself, for it reproduces nothing but the needy individual; it is productive to the capitalist and the State, since it is the production of the power that creates their wealth. From a social point of view, therefore, the working-class, even when not directly engaged in the labour-process, is just as much an appendage of capital as the ordinary instruments of labour."² Anything the labourer consumes or produces beyond this is frivolous, needy, and unproductive: the labourer, and the proletariat writ large, becomes another armature of the factory.

For Marx, the violence of capital arises the separation of labour-power from the means of labour (the body of the worker), reproducing and perpetuating the conditions of exploitation of the labouring class ad infinitum.³ Because there is no alternative to capital's "economic bondage," "It is the process itself that incessantly hurls back the labourer on to the market as a vendor of his labour-power, and that incessantly converts his own product into a means by which another man can purchase him. In reality, the labourer belongs to capital before he has sold himself to capital."⁴ The very process of accruing wealth for the capitalist and sustaining the body of the worker cannot *not* entail violence directed downward at the worker, who loses the freedom to control her own life, labour-power, capital, and liberty. The worker who rebels is stripped of the ability to easily maintain their life under capitalism, i.e. their wages. Capitalism, thus, thrives on *social* and *cultural* control functions as much as economic ones.

² Ibid., 627-8.

³ Ibid., 632.

⁴ Ibid., 633.

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu adds to theorizing the violence of capital by expanding upon Marx's gesture towards the prohibition of pleasurable consumption for the worker, naming it the symbolic violence of economic and cultural capital. For Bourdieu, "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences."⁵ These social differences, in the realm of culture, determine who can benefit from pleasurable consumption, and for whom it is frivolous, linking processes of capitalist production to aesthetic and artistic concerns, including media. For Bourdieu, social differences are between not just the larger classes, but also the *class fractions* within them, constituted by groups of people linked through occupation, income, and shared tastes. In the realm of culture, the aesthetic knowledge necessary to both produce and "properly" consume art is a material symptom of having the privilege, time, and ability to cultivate good taste: "The true basis of difference found in the area of consumption...is the opposition between the tastes of luxury (*or freedom*) and the *tastes of necessity*."⁶ Therefore freedom, in cultural economies, is not an inherent trait but one ascribed to the upper class fractions that have the time and cultural capital to cultivate the luxurious tastes of freedom. Furthermore, "Taste is *amor fati*, the choice of destiny, but a forced choice, produced by conditions of existence which rule out all alternatives as mere daydreams and leave no choice but the taste for the necessary."⁷

But what about people of lower class fractions for whom the desire to have a taste of freedom *feels* necessary? Marx and Bourdieu both propose a structuralist, top-down system of power where even if the proletariat *want* to improve their tastes and (cultural) capital, they can't,

⁵ Bourdieu, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 177, emphasis mine.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

because the only capital Marx and Bourdieu see is dominant, mainstream or mass capital, which is limited to upper class fractions. The very means of reproduction of taste with regards to artistic creation (and food, clothing, manners, education, etc.), including media, builds into it an exclusion of those without the leisure time, cultural capital, or economic means to learn about art, how to discuss it, and leverage that education for their own social benefit. Under capitalism, for lower class fractions, the *taste of freedom is neither available nor necessary*. Thus, those who are frivolous consumers, including Marx's dehumanized labourer, are not *supposed* to have access to the freedom and luxury of cultural or economic choice, and are relegated not just to the taste of necessity manifest in cheap, sustaining food, but also in their cultural intake of popular media over the "refined" tastes of the upper classes. I contend that for queer and trans subjects, and people in lower class fractions broadly, there is no less desire to taste freedom, perhaps there is even more, but when all you've been given is the taste of the necessary, you have to use what you have to redefine what the tastes of freedom look like, feels like, and what nourishment it provides.

For Marx and Bourdieu, lower class fractions' lack of choice in economic and cultural consumption forms the basis of the social violence of capital. On top of the three forms of measurable capital Bourdieu outlines (economic, cultural, and social, the last of which is outside the scope of this chapter to address in full), symbolic capital consists of the effects of any of the other forms of capital which dis/advantage people but is not perceived as capital as such. Symbolic capital, which manifests as things like prestige, honour, acclaim, or attention, is a key source of the power over distinction and taste, bestowing upon those who accrue symbolic capital the ability to set tastes which help define cultural capital and continue the oppression of

lower class fractions.⁸ Whether consciously or not, exercising symbolic violence to judge the tastes of others puts in stark relief the political stakes of cultural capital and the ability of people to access and understand the forms of culture which can advance one up social and economic ladders. Symbolic violence parallels economic violence in capitalist systems via its limiting of the labourer's ability to choose and control their creation of cultural value within dominant systems of production. Because of the slippery nature of symbolic capital, people of dominated class fractions come to perceive the symbolic violence carried out against them as natural and just. The labourer internalizes the hierarchies of taste that create the political, cultural, and social system which denies them access to the cultural capital necessary to advance in life. Thus, for Bourdieu, capitalism's symbolic violence is more insidious than the physical violence of the factory that Marx fixates on because it is never recognized as a form of violence that must also be resisted if any kind of revolutionary social change is to take hold. Symbolic violence kills the will to rebel against the capitalist's exploitation of his workers before it forms. Therefore, the (re)production of dominant cultural capital is equally connected to affect, violence, hope, pain, and fear as economic capital: just as Marx lays out the grisly scene of the deteriorating worker's body in *Capital*, so my dissertation explores the contours of symbolic violence in the media. My work, however, moves beyond exploring only the oppressive elements of cultural capital to ask how representational tutor texts about queer and trans subjects offer suggestions on how to resist the top-down oppression of capitalism by labouring on and consuming aesthetic and cultural forms to make them useful to us and for our emotional and cultural survival, making the taste of the necessary into a taste of "useless," un-valourized queer freedom.

⁸ Ibid., 291.

Marx and Bourdieu lack a recognition that violence can and is directed not only at the proletariat, but also upwards at the ruling classes, especially within the realm of aesthetics, culture, and media. The deployment of violence by the subdued class fractions can, in fact, be a generative one, particularly as it is articulated through representations of the social relations of capital. Being able to account for these resistances, however, requires a rethinking of the structuralist theory of power set out by Marx, Bourdieu, and many other materialist theorists. These theories assume a top-down model of power and pleasure alike, often framing queer pleasures as resistant or radical by positing that they fight back against the powers that be. Power is exerted from the ruling class fractions onto the dominated ones, and this power that defines what pleasurable activities constitute the tastes of freedom and necessity through culture, taste, and the production of cultural capital. With only one locus of power, the implicit, necessary, and largely impossible goal of dominated fractions is to find ways to access, assimilate to, and adopt the social and cultural capital necessary to move up into a “better,” and more systemically recognized, class fraction. To have a better life, one has to give up the trappings of the fraction you reside in, regardless of your feelings about them, and the system continues to reproduce itself *ad infinitum*.

This conception of power has been contested by postmodern, post-structuralist, and anti-relational theorists of various stripes, usually with some variant of the position that all power is completely relative (often through subsuming it to discourse, psychoanalysis, or another meta-theory), and thus there is equally little ability to advance because the goal is an always relative and shifting target, quickly leading to a position divorced from material reality. Though structuralist accounts of power do not account for all uses of media and cultural labour, capitalism very much envisions and, more importantly, represents itself as a top-down power

structure, and the top-down exercise of power by people and institutions have real material effects, so we can't throw out the structuralist bath water with the post-etc. baby.⁹ Thinkers including Marx and Bourdieu are still useful for studying and theorizing queer and trans media consumption because, though I disagree that top-down power structures are the only way that power operates over and through cultural capital, it is *one* way that power is deployed, perceived, resisted, and desired in contemporary capitalist cultures.

Though we move through life as parts of larger systems, that doesn't mean that we always feel directly connected to the hierarchies and power systems they create, and we often do things in our daily lives to feel better about ourselves through cultural labour and consumption that, from a post-structuralist, discourse-based analysis could be seen as resistant at a micro level as they have affective, material effects on how we live our lives, but do not register as important, or even present, in a macro level analysis. Therefore I argue that a comprehensive theory of cultural capital needs to combine elements of post/structuralist models of power, and to this end Foucault can be helpful interlocutor alongside Bourdieu and Marx. Queer consumption and labour often step out of hierarchies of symbolic and cultural power, but not always to be explicitly resistant: sometimes sidestepping for ourselves or our community is useful only insofar as it makes the day better, or provides some hope for a better future, and though these sidesteps may not overthrow capitalism, patriarchy, or heteronormativity, they are still important and worth studying. Furthermore, so much of this stepping outside involves consuming commodities, including media commodities, in queer ways seeking to move beyond, outside of, or even

⁹ Credit for the structure and idea of this sentiment goes to Tania Modleski, who, on a panel about queer Hitchcock at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) Conference 2014, insisted that we mustn't "throw out the feminist bathwater with the anti-relational baby." I found this argument and turn of phrase so effective and evocative that I couldn't help but modify and borrow it here, as imitation is, after all, the greatest form of flattery.

completely ignore, the cultural rules of consumption and valuation we all navigate and are complicit within under capitalism.

A modification and expansion of Bourdieu's concept of the class fraction provides the flexibility necessary to account for both the micro- and macro-level interactions with cultural power and symbolic violence that trans and queer people and communities navigate. Class fractions, alongside the concept of habitus, offer a spatialized mapping of how we affiliate with other people in our lives, accruing and expending cultural capital in varying places. We are all part of multiple class fractions based on our inherited or acquired privilege, education, opportunities, tastes, and cultural competencies. Bourdieu still envisions these fractions as operating in a mostly vertical framework, as much of his work in *Distinction* categorically names which kinds of cultural capital are more valued or devalued under capitalism. Similarly, he proposes that class fractions occupy absolute positions in the hierarchy of fractions, and that if one is able to access, master, and deploy the correct (and valued) forms of cultural capital, she can advance into a higher fraction.

In more contemporary scholarship which uses a Bourdieuan framework for studying cultural capital, class fractions as a concept are often reframed as subcultures, a ubiquitous term in mass discourse for groups of people loosely affiliated via a shared set of interests, beliefs, practices, performances, styles, consumption and purchasing habits, visual and/or behavioural (sub)cultural markers, or other commonalities. One particular touchstone text in this vein is sociologist Sarah Thornton's *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, originally published in 1995 and still cited as an important work in the genealogy of thinking cultural capital materially. The text's most important theoretical contribution, particularly to my own work, is laying out how subcultures generate, maintain, update, and (de)value their own

cultural codes, commodities, styles, etc. by and for their own members internally, often without reference or interest in how those same commodities circulate in mass culture. Thornton explains how, just as Bourdieu sees class fractions able to form and dissolve in space and time in response to cultural and economic changes, subcultures and their capitals also move in and out of the mainstream. They are often appropriated to make more money after they have become ubiquitous within a subculture and its practices. Thornton explains how subcultures, and thus the things they value and treat as cultural capital, define themselves very much in opposition to “the mainstream” or whatever avatar thereof is seen as oppressing or impinging on the freedom and/of expression of a subculture’s members. *Subcultures* always exist in relation to, and in opposition of or in contention with, culture on a mass, generalized scale. Importantly though, the shape of that mainstream, nebulous culture, for the actual members of a subculture, is in many ways a projection based in what those people value and how they see those values being devalued (or, treated as useless, I might add).¹⁰ Though I do not use Thornton’s term “subcultural capital,” the concepts behind this term, specifically defining a group of consumers against an ideal of the mainstream as a mode of carving space for new circuits of value and that niche groups actively work to create and value alternative forms of cultural capital, do align with my own theoretical framework.

Bourdieu’s framework is a useful starting point for thinking through how people occupy multiple positionalities in the intellectual, cultural, and emotional lives, but needs to be expanded to think through how we also occupy class fractions beside our dominantly recognized ones, and that these may be the places we choose to grow towards and into. Bourdieu’s assumption that everyone wants to only move upward helps him explain how symbolic and cultural violence

¹⁰ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1995).

prevent particular people from upward mobility, but it's not true of how I believe queers consume and labour on cultural objects to make their everyday lives better. Thornton, meanwhile, due in no small part I believe to the methodology of her study and its different goals than mine, doesn't do much to explore what kinds of movements members of a subculture (in her terms) or a cultural fraction (in my terms) might want to take, or not. Her work is impressive in its ability to map and represent the complex and complicated music-based youth subcultures she's invested in, but in this sense, it is more of a jumping off point for my own theorizing and analysis than a template for my study, either methodologically or disciplinarily. The assumption of desired upward mobility further hides an assumption that the taste of the necessary is always something we want to move beyond, rather than being something we can turn into a taste of queer and/or trans hope and freedom through alternative economies of artistic and aesthetic use value.

Foucault's map of power is horizontal: power is exerted and resisted (or evaded) by individuals or groups under discourses of knowledge in localized pockets determined by context in temporally bounded moments. Rather than being exerted in Althusserian (or Bourdieuan) sovereign or episodic act of violence, domination, or coercion, it is dispersed and pervasive: coming from everywhere, it is in constant negotiation.¹¹ Embodied and represented as what Foucault calls regimes of truth or the general politics of a society, the exercise of power through discourse and societal institutions shape us body and mind, and determine both how we wield and resist power.¹² This politics, however, is not bounded to the political system or the state: it is an everyday, social, and embodied phenomenon, allowing for a certain (sometimes unconscious)

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

¹² Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

agency to be available for creating and grasping in the general politics of our worlds. Though Foucault is largely not interested in class in his discussion of knowledge/power, it is interesting to note that knowledge and discourse can be deployed much like cultural capital to push back against power or propagate it. Though knowledge is only one form of cultural commodity that can accrue social and cultural capital for a person, this intersection of Bourdieu and Foucault's thinking provides another place to map these theories together in a more three-dimensional system of cultural power, labour, and consumption.

I recognize that, in many ways, I'm treading well-worn territory in discussing spatializations of power, especially when considering post/structuralist schools of thought. I do still think, however, that spatial metaphors are useful to my project. Firstly, they acknowledge that, even when theorizing, we must pay attention to material concerns, such as how things move through space and time, why, and how. Spatialized conceptions of power also remind us that, depending on one's viewpoint, positionality, direction, and intention (whether metaphorical or material) changes not just what one perceives, but also the possibilities afforded them in their specific, quotidian, immediate and embodied lives. Finally, surplus value is created because of excess, in its most basic formulation: excess wealth generation potential, excess cultural knowledge or capital, etc. Capitalism functions based on excess, as Brian Massumi argues in his provocative text *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto*.¹³ Massumi's text does not engage with capital and capitalism outside of contemporary economic concerns, but his in-depth engagement with what value does and doesn't mean under capitalism affords many places where our work coincide, more of which I will discuss nearer the end of this chapter.

Without excess, especially unknown, untamed excess value, capitalism as a *system* has nothing

¹³ Brian Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

to expand out towards, consume, and incorporate into itself for the production of more value. The key for Massumi is that capitalism, especially contemporary globalized capitalism, is simultaneously premised on an unending assumption of excess and newness which it needs to consume to grow and feed itself, while also needing to contain the very people and communities which strive to materialize excess. As we see with the increase in buzzwords like “creative capital,” there is a contradictory, perhaps even dialectic, engagement between promoting the creation of new, different, unaccounted-for value (and thus, I add, cultural capital) and then curbing that creation of excess via incorporation, colonization, and consumption.¹⁴ So, following both Bourdieu and Foucault, who conceive of power under capitalism in spatialized terms, I seek to take their more two-dimensional maps of power (horizontal for Foucault, vertical for Bourdieu and Marx), and combine them into a three dimensional map of power that accounts for capitalism’s representations and exertions of its own power, as well as the horizontal resistances and exercises of power Foucault paints, and recognize that, as commodities and their consumption moves between these different, but related, flows of cultural power expressions, there is always space for excess value to spurt out from commodities as they travel between modes and nodes of consumption and power. Excess is central to capitalism no matter how much it protests to the contrary, and finding new ways to apprehend that excess and study it is my primary goal in rehearsing and expanding these debates about power and its exercise.

This framework is more useful for thinking about how people do little things like remaking a “bad” cultural commodity to have value for themselves. Foucault provides the flexibility to explore the agency behind the “useless” cultural labours of intersectional queer subjects. Foucault even insists that when power is exerted through discourse by an institution of

¹⁴ Ibid.

social authority, there will *inevitably* be resistance to it from those subordinated.¹⁵ Accordingly, “Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.”¹⁶ Beyond this, and most importantly for bridging the gap between a theory of consumption and Foucault’s theory of knowledge/power, “We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes,’ it ‘represses,’ it ‘censors,’ it ‘abstracts,’ it ‘masks,’ it ‘conceals.’ In fact, *power produces*; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. Is it not somewhat excessive to derive such power from the petty machinations of discipline? How could *they* achieve effects of such scope?”¹⁷ The dominated class fraction will always find ways to speak back to the structural power exerted by and through dominant class fractions. More importantly, if power produces, must it only produce cultural capital, value, and commodities recognizable and with exchange values defined by dominant systems of capital? Queer cultural capital and consumption must be viewed both as use/less within structurally defined systems of exchange and value *and* as unique queer forms of expression and exchange worthwhile only within our own communities, identities, and selves. In reworking these theories of power in the places where intersectional queerness meets capital, my

¹⁵ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 100-1.

¹⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 194. Emphasis mine.

dissertation will seek a balance between these two kinds of production and how they are created through excessive labour and consumption of “bad” or devalued cultural commodities.

So, although Foucault conducts a very different analysis than Bourdieu, particularly as he does not give primacy to class relations as structuring of identity the way Bourdieu does, his horizontal representation of power and resistance does provide a linking point with Bourdieu’s idea of social fields. These fields are the spaces in which class fractions exist, shift, and gain or lose cultural capital as they react to capitalist systems of power and distinction.¹⁸ Social fields are defined by which fractions occupy them, their tastes, and their differing levels of social, cultural, and economic capital. Social fields shift and change with tastes, and at their interstices lie conflicts over taste and distinction, conflicts which I consider to be entry points into intersectional queer cultural labour, consumption, and resistance. Since distinctions of difference are part of the classificatory system of identity for Bourdieu, it is not difficult to map social fields onto Foucault’s map of power, providing it some anchoring verticality which acknowledges the structural violence of capital, while also making Bourdieu’s structuralist account more flexible and open to the production of resistance. Class fractions, then, can be defined through the sharing of an identity category and consist of identity-based communities that wield certain forms of cultural capital and power to both oppress and create.

To accommodate this more comprehensive framework of cultural power, a different term is needed to describe the groups I am discussing. Class fraction, though based in a discussion of cultural labour and consumption, only accounts for one’s position within class-based hierarchies. Through adding Foucault’s discursive analyses of how identity categories affect one’s life choices, the fractions we inhabit can also account for definitions of the self and one’s cultural

¹⁸ For a more thorough accounting of social fields, see chapter four of *Distinction*, “The Dynamics of Fields.”

consumption and labour, therefore incorporating sexuality, gender, race, and class into my accounting of fractions and their operation. Though many queer and feminist materialist theorists, such as Rosemary Hennessy, insist on the dominance of class in defining our sexual, racial, and gender identities, their theories largely operate only in the realm of economic capital, not cultural capital, and in cultural analysis their insistence on the primacy of economic class falls short of accounting for all the kinds of cultural labour and consumptions queers do.¹⁹ A term that accounts for how class may be an equal or lesser constitutive element in a person's relationships to power is needed.

The common phraseology of subcultures also does not fit well in my analysis, as it both assumes a structuralist position of another culture being above one's own, and a certain rigidity of the borders around one's location in networks of social powers. Sub/cultures are discrete categories with borders, whereas fractions are porous and flexible, even if members of a fraction might try to present it as having rigid borders and rules for entry or membership, such as those Thornton explores regarding the rave and club cultures she explores. By approaching my case studies and theoretical framework with other methods, I am seeking to move outward from just what cultural fractions, especially those based in shared identity categories, say about themselves, but also how the media they consume flows and moves as vital commodities.

To remedy these concerns, I use the term *cultural fractions*, which can consist of the groups of people, (imagined) communities, affiliations, and identities that we occupy when consuming, producing, and valourizing media. They are the places in which intersectional queer cultural labour takes place and create the conditions for alternative economies of cultural value that resist or operate outside of structural power. Cultural fractions, as an analytic term, take

¹⁹ Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

seriously Bourdieu's claim that cultural capital is its own form of exchangeable, unique, and I argue, potentially empowering and hopeful capital. My term provides a queerer framework to explore cultural power as it acknowledges both that we live in and under large, systemic systems of social violence which control our futures and general wellbeing *and* that we live day-to-day lives moment-to-moment and make small, perhaps "useless" resistances through consumptive labour that make life more bearable and hopeful. By expanding the conditions under which we connect to one another and value our cultural labours, both productive and "useless," my dissertation how queer and trans media consumption become contestatory sites of alternative valourization of difference and the creation of non-hegemonic queer cultural capital.

Uselessness and Emotional Labour

Queer media theory complicates structuralist readings of cultural and economic capital, rooted as they are in traditionalist sociological views of class hierarchy. For both Marx and Bourdieu, upper class fractions exert power downward, and the only productive counter to this violence is an uprising in which the lower class fractions, together comprising the proletariat, direct their violent energies upward in a bid to overthrow the ruling capitalists. Though this is indeed a worthwhile revolutionary project on its own, contemporary queer theory acknowledges that after over one hundred years of history since Marx's writing without successful revolution, the likelihood of this drastic scenario occurring is slim. Instead, through a more in-depth examination of cultural capital and how it can function as a form of *capital*, rather than wealth or value, and the application of queer media theory exploring the labour of queer artists and scholars to carve out their own spaces of cultural distinction, I contend that cultural capital is a

far more dynamic framework for examining the artistic efforts of queer subjects and their micro-level resistances to cultural hegemony and the symbolic violence of capitalism.

In his incredibly lucid essay “Value and Capital in Bourdieu and Marx,” Jon Beasley-Murray lays out a framework to put economic and cultural capital into an equal exchange the way that Bourdieu originally posited them, but didn’t achieve in *Distinction*, through a careful consideration of the surplus value, exploitation, and valorization of alienated cultural labour. Cultural capital is a seductive and valuable term of analysis used throughout the humanities, including film and media studies, to situate aesthetic, artistic, and cultural productions within larger discussions of value and capital, and yet Beasley-Murray contends that Bourdieu’s oeuvre treats it as a form of *value*, not as a form of *capital*.²⁰ Value is the accumulation of wealth from the sale of commodities: it is an additive quantity that, though related to capital, does not account for the *surplus* wealth required in capital. Surplus value is produced by the alienated labour that goes into the creation of a commodity (economic or cultural), and, for Marx, is reinvested into the capitalist production process to produce more capital *and* wealth. Though Bourdieu asserts that cultural capital is not reducible to economic capital but is a distinct form of capital that can be measurably exchanged with economic capital, we cannot map how one discusses the value of cultural objects using Bourdieu’s framework alone. To remedy this, Beasley-Murray returns to Marx’s formulation of capital, separate from value (rather than conflated with it, as in Bourdieu). By accounting for the surplus and exploitable cultural labour that goes into the creation and exchange of cultural capital and its attendant products, we can begin to construct a materialist theory of artistic and media cultural political economies.

²⁰ Jon Beasley-Murray, “Value and Capital in Bourdieu and Marx,” in *Pierre Bourdieu: Fieldwork in Culture*, eds. Nicholas Brown and Imre Szeman (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 100-19. Due to the complexity of Beasley-Murray’s argument, which draws on many more critical concepts from multiple texts by Marx and Bourdieu, the sections of this amazingly well-written and cogent essay relevant to my own arguments are summarized in my own words.

Beasley-Murray, in returning Marx to discussions of cultural capital, reminds us that to account for both economic and cultural commodities, we need to differentiate between their *exchange* value and *use* value before we can understand the nature of their alienated, exploitable *surplus* value. Traditionally, exchange value accounts for the cost of a commodity only at the point of transaction: an abstract value (including capital profit) is calculated for the commodity, and that is paid in money, wages, or labour to obtain the commodities you need to sustain yourself as a worker. For cultural products and commodities, the exchange value can account for using the knowledge, education, and cultural prestige that comes from your habitus (based in the class fractions and fields of distinction you occupy) to advance in your class fraction.²¹ Use value, however, is measured and consumed over time. Though you might exchange money for a commodity (material or cultural) in one instance, it takes time to reap the benefits of using that commodity, be it a pair of pants, which take time to wear out and go in or out of style, affecting their use value in accruing cultural capital, or the cultural cachet of knowing a great deal about a classic novel that is only legible in certain literary circles. A key difference between exchange and use value is that exchange value is situated in *abstract time* in the same way that it is an *abstract value*: it is largely a-temporal and its value is based on social relations which extract alienated labour from workers. The value of this labour is factored into a complicated formula determining the monetary/cultural worth of the commodity, largely determined by economists.²² Use value, however, plays out in *concrete time*, and is a *concrete value*: we can measure how

²¹ For more on Habitus, see *Distinction* chapter 3, “The Habitus and the Space of Life-Styles.”

²² I contend that economists and accountants can determine an economic value of a cultural commodity, further demonstrating Bourdieu and Beasley-Murray’s assertion that cultural capital can be exchangeable with economic capital. For proof of this we need look no further than stars who take out insurance policies on their voices or body parts, contending that they lead directly to the accumulation of cultural and economic capital, and thus can have an estimated monetary worth which can be insured against damage.

long a commodity remains useful after obtaining it, and its value is measured in material usefulness.

The concreteness of use value points to my interest in exploring consumptive labour centrally in my dissertation: the tastes of the necessary are also rooted in concrete, material needs, and thus are linked more directly to use value than exchange value. If it is queers' lot to labour on necessary tastes and media to turn them into something more hopeful and special, then this is a labour of consumption that transforms use value. Not only do queers do what they must to find new and different concrete affective uses for cultural commodities, they perhaps even create entirely new use value through their transformative consumption, simultaneously making the taste of the necessary into a taste of hope and freedom. It is from this processual labour where the basis for questioning if new, different, or resistant forms of cultural capital are created through the active (if not always "purposeful" or conscious) short circuiting of capital flows of media consumption inherent in the use-value focused theorizations and readings I conduct in this dissertation. To return briefly to Massumi, capitalism is still premised on explosions of excess and the discovery of capitalism's always-already-necessary outside. But, to expand his work into questions of cultural capital, I posit that capitalism is also based on an assumption that people must *want*, always, to convert use value into exchange value, whether that is in the economic realm of generating money (such as through hoarding mint condition dolls to hypothetically net the highest price possible if they're ever sold – a condition in which the use-value stutter remains immanent, as we all know many of those collectors have no intention of converting their collections into money, and thus they must have another, non-monetary use value for them...) or in demonstrating one's knowledge of cultural commodities, through their consumption and regurgitation elsewhere, as a form of expending cultural capital to advance into a "higher" or

“better” class fraction (a strictly Bourdieu-ian reading). And yet, what if cultural excess is discovered, spurted out, via gumming up the gears of capitalist consumption? A process which is designed, in part through its insistence on the conversion of use value into exchange value, to always-already eventually consume and normalize excess cultural production.

There is a basis in Marx for how queer consumptive cultural labour is transformative and useful outside of dominant cultural economies. The flip side of value is the way in which cultural consumption is also a productive force that can have its consumptive labour valorized into new cultural capital. For Marx, consumption is always productive because the act of consuming commodities produces the sustenance needed to (re)produce the labourer’s body, strength, and labour-power to (re)sell to the capitalist for wages the next day. With cultural commodities, their consumption (whether watching a film or learning the terminology with which to formally criticize it) adds to their value through the reproduction of the idea that this commodity is worthwhile and has the potential to add to one’s cultural capital when consumed. Cultural commodities, then, have a high exchange value if they are valued within one’s class fraction or if they facilitate entrance into a more prestigious class fraction. Much like use value, consumption may or may not yield an exchange value that can be used to advance one’s social position. For example, conventional wisdom awards more cultural capital and cultural exchange value to a business degree than a comparative literature degree, so the consumption/production of earning the latter may not provide as much cultural capital to turn into exchange value that might help get a well-paying job than the former. Within film cultures, being able to intelligently discuss *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1941) after consuming it (and learning enough about film terminology to discuss its merits credibly) is more likely to gain one cultural capital than even the most incisive reading of *Ticked Off Trannies with Knives*. Thus, as Beasley-Murray reminds

us, the concrete time of use and use value of a cultural or economic commodity can be much greater or lesser than the exchange value set by the abstract economies of class fractions' cultural economies or the monetary value assigned at the time of sale.

To concretize this example: at any given North American university, a business degree should cost relatively the same amount as a comparative literature degree in exchange value at the point of sale, the paying of tuition and fees. But their use value, played out over concrete time, might vary greatly, both economically in the amount of wages the jobs they facilitate bringing in *and* in the social prestige they award which contributes to different amounts of cultural capital being generated out of the alienated academic and cultural labour it took to get either degree. Another point of friction between use value and cultural capital is that, from the standpoint of converting cultural capital's values into economic capital and wealth, then the business degree is more likely to be of higher value, but if one moves within "cultured" "high society", there might be more future, harder to quantify cultural capital and wealth gained by the knowledge of "great classics" afforded by the comparative literature degree.

I argue that in the more ephemeral realm of cultural capital, the use and exchange values of a cultural commodity have an even more tenuous relationship to one another than with regard to an economic and material commodity. It may even be possible to think of how the use and exchange value of a cultural commodity can become mutated or even untethered from one another depending on which cultural fractions value the commodity with what kinds of dominant or alternative cultural capital. In a queer cultural economy that cannot award the kind of capital or valorize the kind of labour that moves you up in the world, knowing *TOTWK* could very well be more useful than knowing *Citizen Kane*, and having this knowledge valued can produce a

connection to a community that does the affective labour of the necessary to get a minoritized subject through the day or to feel valued and valourized *for their difference* and identity.

Herein lies the inherent contradiction of capitalism: there is a fundamental mismatch in the actual material usage of cultural and economic commodities and their exchange value, and between the concrete and abstract times that they embody. To properly analyze cultural capital *as capital*, we need to look at the use value and concrete time in which it takes to produce new cultural capital for consumers and producers, regardless of their social position or class fraction. In many ways, expanding cultural and/or economic wealth and capital to accrue new cultural commodities and skills require gambling that their consumption or production will pay off in concrete time and use value, and that the cultural capital they (re)produce will be recognized, and thus *valourized*, as worthwhile *by the class fraction you seek to enter or remain in*. To a far greater extent than with economic commodities, exchanges of cultural capital require the consumer, viewer, or target of its expenditure to recognize in the first place, before deciding whether or not to valourize it. Through Beasley-Murray's re-reading of cultural capital as a form of capital, we can extend his method to study why certain media objects, aesthetic traditions, and artistic expressions are valuable in non-dominant social fields and class fractions.

To push beyond Beasley-Murray's intervention, I add that in his framework for studying cultural capital not all surplus concrete time and use value will be convertible into cultural capital valourized by ruling class fractions, whereas the expenditure of economic capital is much more certain to produce more capital through reinvestment and new avenues of exploitation (if done correctly, of course, and barring catastrophe). Thus the surplus value created by alienated cultural labour is *not* always productive of profit and new capital in dominant cultural economies: one has to accrue the *right* surplus value from cultural labour time *for the intended*

audience to valorize, thus returning on one's investment in some kind of calculable way. Both Marx and Bourdieu assume that even pleasurable labour done outside of the workplace is meant to maintain one's cultural class standing or help better and advance the person doing it: they assume that I read a novel to gain a cultural competency of literature that might help me socialize with people of a higher class fraction, rather than simply for the joy of it. To further this metaphor, reading a trashy romance novel as cultural labour would fail the user, as it is not a valued form, and won't help the person reading it advance to "higher" fractions. For Marx and Bourdieu, this is useless labour. This line of reasoning results in many of the stereotypes of gender, sexuality, class, and race that perpetuate capitalist hierarchies of identity and value, as their forms of cultural labour, consumption, and capital are deemed useless and, eventually, lesser or demeaning.

Here lies another difficulty with traditional structuralist models of capital: both Marx and Bourdieu assume there is useless labour which people do, usually from the proletariat or other dominated class fractions. These useless labours, associated for Bourdieu with the tastes of the necessary, do not produce cultural capital that is exchangeable for economic, cultural, or social gain in the dominant system. And yet, queer and trans people and communities have a long history of making new, vibrant, and resistive feelings, performances, and identities out of the production and consumption of the products of so-called useless labour.²³ This is, then, another place for my framework of power and cultural fractions to intervene in cultural analysis and

²³ I would argue that many of the first and most important texts of queer history, including Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis' *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, George Chauncy's *Gay New York*, and Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet*, just to name a few, elaborate some of these histories, though none of them are directly framed through cultural capital, or even questions of consumption and value. From claiming spaces in Buffalo's industrial districts for butch/femme bars to fairies developing complex non-verbal queer languages to facilitate sex to the pervasive role of queers in creating and sustaining Hollywood, these texts show how regularly and generatively queers create forms of cultural value and capital outside of dominant symbolic and cultural economies not to advance in the world, but to survive it, and, most importantly, find joy in systems of power that provide them little.

question how the performance of structurally unrecognized, unvalourized, and useless labour can create new cultural economies of capital and value among the cultural fractions queer and trans people and communities inhabit. These labours do not produce as much, or any, surplus cultural or economic capital for the dominant system of cultural exchange, but they do produce media with queer use values including alternative identity formation and affirmation, making the daily grind of life under oppressive conditions bearable, and envisioning worlds where different kinds of cultural capital are valued and valourized. Queer media consumption and labour create opportunities for people who do not often reap the most beneficial rewards of capitalist cultural economies.

My dissertation intervenes in the study of cultural capital by asserting that no labour is useless labour, but that it can appear as such from the vantage point of a different cultural fraction that a person or community does not inhabit or aspire to inhabit. Uselessness, as a concept, must be defined against what is useful to someone or something, locking it too easily into binary relations of value that are used against those already most vulnerable under capitalist systems of value. Exploring the “useless” labour of envisioning non-capitalist futures, jacking off to porn which represents us, creating representations of bashing back, and loving “worthless” kitsch media objects reveals different economies of cultural capital and value created by and for trans and queer subjects partially or completely outside of dominant systems of cultural exchange. We create for ourselves as ways to feel valuable and insist that our values are important and can be used to create surplus cultural capital within our own communities and in the future.

Uselessness and Cultural Capital

Cultural capital, like economic capital, can be leveraged to benefit non-dominant class fractions to, at the very least, ameliorate the suffering of cultural capitalistic violence, if not turn it back on itself in smaller, subtler ways than a full-fledged revolution. The most common form this takes is queer cultures being incorporated into dominant economies of value. For example, in *Business, Not Politics*, Katherine Sender discusses how gays and lesbians began to be seen as a population segment worth marketing to in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Networks such as Bravo constructed a (largely fictional) audience of gays and lesbians with no children and lots of disposable income that they could market to, and began creating TV shows like *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-7), which simultaneously legitimized queer relationships and culture, making them entertaining and worthwhile for straight and queer consumers alike, but also selling queers their own culture back to them.²⁴

On the one hand, Sender's examples, alongside other histories of queer TV such as Ron Becker's exploration of the rising popularity of gays on TV in shows like *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) as a way for yuppie liberal consumers to feel good about themselves via consuming "queer" culture,²⁵ demonstrate how queer audiences get to both feel valourized *and* become consumers of *their own culture*, creating surplus profit and capital for straight and/or mainstream institutions in the process. The resale of queer culture alienates the cultural labour carried out by queers in the definition of their own cultural fractions' cues and customs to produce economic and cultural capital for hegemonic capital. Sender's and Becker's analyses parallel Marx's contention that individual choice, and thus the rhetoric of freedom advanced by identity politics, is often subsumed into the market, as it always seeks out new forms of expression to commodify

²⁴ Katherine Sender, *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

²⁵ Ron Becker, *Gay TV in Straight America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

and mass produce for profit. This function takes cultural value only once valorized and recognized within dominated cultural fractions, a taste of the necessary, and turns it into a desirable taste of freedom for dominant cultural fractions which, though being appropriated for affluent cultural fractions to consume, can provide some positive, socially recognized cultural capital for the members of the cultural fraction being poached from. Though capitalist appropriation and consumption of our cultural codes is problematic, there is still space for some queer agency in appropriative political economies. Capitalism takes aesthetics already granted cultural capital in dominated fractions, and through its appropriation, valorizes it for a broader audience, demonstrating the use value of a minoritized practices of stylistic labour, providing use *and* exchange value to the surplus cultural labour of queer self-expression which queers can cash in for cultural capital in broader society *and* their own communities.

I contend, however, that multiple surplus values are created from cultural queer labour that is legible by multiple cultural fractions occupying many social fields. Non-dominant queer cultural labour facilitates the necessary ability to survive and thrive emotionally under the symbolic violence of capitalism and produces aesthetic and artistic commodities which have resonances beyond their mainstream use or exchange value, or even their culturally ascribed uselessness. When examined through my more localized map of power, consumption, and local or micro valorization of cultural labour, my dissertation explores how cultural commodities are appropriated from the mainstream, created outside of it, or transformed to serve queer survival and futurity. My dissertation thus has many starting points in common with projects such as Sender's, but moves laterally away from her project by exploring how queers constantly reshape their own cultural commodities through consumptive, excessive labour to keep them out of the

mainstream even as they are also incorporated into it, turning those consumptive labours onto dominant cultures to steal from it, queer it, and make it our own.

Through the application of a cultural political economy, the queer cultural labours I am examining generate *cultural profit in different social fields and cultural fractions for different consumers with a multitude of identities*. Perhaps when something campy, kitschy, or pornographic has fallen out of fashion in the mainstream it has used up its *dominant* use value, but it still contains surplus use value, producing cultural capital for dominated class fractions that is not readily visible or useful to dominant structures of capital and power. These new values are unlocked via creative, quirky, and non-dominant forms of *consumption* on the part of minoritized cultural fractions that transform cultural commodities by consuming them with the goal of using them to improve their own lives. By examining the ways that queer media labourers and artists have *different* cultural surplus value and capital arise from their consumptive labour, I will chart resistances to dominant cultural power and symbolic capitalist violence through the valourization of labour and cultural use value which is outmoded, anathema, or invisible for the dominant class fractions. Though our cultural labour will often be alienated when accounted for in dominant cultural economies, perhaps it doesn't need to be so alienated from ourselves *as members of identity-based cultural fractions* when we examine the surplus value produced and valourized within our own class fractions.

I have demonstrated how discussions of queer media theories of cultural capital open up fissures in Marx, Bourdieu, and Beasley-Murray's conceptions of economic and cultural capital, which still define all forms of value, labour, and capital against dominant political economies. Though these theories are useful for examining the ways in which cultural commodities operate in and with economic capital, they do not question a top-down conception of the symbolic and

cultural violence of capital. As Beasley-Murray reminds us, Bourdieu “sets too much stock by the way in which the state valorizes cultural capital, and hence fails to investigate other modes of valorization and other institutions that provide compensatory or even completely alternative valorization for the concrete time of subaltern or other otherwise disenfranchised subjects.”²⁶ I contend, however, that cultural capital can be deployed by identity-based, non-dominant class fractions to create their own micro-scale political economies of cultural value and exchange. These micro economies are based on (re)producing *queer* cultural capital invisible to dominant class fractions and the valorization of consumptive labour that might be considered worthless or useless by non-queers. The queer labours I explore in this dissertation never fully untether dominant cultural commodities from their original contexts: this is the nature of dialectical cultural political economy. Dominant cultural logics will never be able to fully account for the alternative forms of labour, value, and capital invested in them and created through their consumption, providing a space of micro-resistance to the symbolic violence of capital that can be exploited by trans people, queers, people of colour, women, and other minoritized groups. Queer artists and scholars have long laboured to define and control the terms of how they create, consume, and value cultural commodities within and for their own class fractions, defying the logic of structuralist conceptions of capital which insist upon dominant forms of cultural capital are the only forms of valuation worth aspiring to.

A traditional Marxian-Bourdieuian cultural political economy offers no avenues for minoritized subjects to claim any kind of artistic or cultural agency, claiming that the best a stigmatized group can hope for is to fight to have their best characteristics recognized by the dominant classes via the structures of taste and distinction which oppress the lower class

²⁶ Beasley-Murray, 115.

fractions in the first place. In dominant political economic analyses, there is no place for minoritized subjects to form their own fields of value, meaning, place, and space, so Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital wouldn't be able to fully account for the value and capital created and consumed at queer film festivals, queer community events, or even individually by queers as they consume media which makes them feel queerer, and more hopeful or happy or valued for it. Our communities have long developed their own ways of ascribing value and cultural capital to our own artistic productions which are celebrated and help queers accrue acceptance and value for their creative labours among ourselves even as we are considered lesser than in the larger contexts of capitalism's social fields. By exploring the more localized sites of labour, consumption, and valorization within and among dominated class fractions, we can see how we choose to work on/with/for the best of ourselves among each other, to build different ideas of what's valuable, create our own economies of cultural capital which we need to encourage, promote, and study as ends unto themselves, not always as a completely dominated/subordinated field of aesthetic/cultural production.

Therefore, most importantly, Bourdieu and Marx do not account for the *surplus* affect, labour, culture, and connections that queers form within our class fractions and social fields, wresting complete control over art, aesthetics, and culture from dominant class fractions through our refusal to measure ourselves only against their yardsticks of success. Uselessness, and an embrace of being seen as useless, or otherwise devalued in some way, but dominant culture can, in fact, become entry points into letting media consumption offer new avenues for positive affect and emotion. Put another way, an embrace of critical queer and trans uselessness can be the catalyst for creating, analyzing, and theorizing new cultural capital and value(s) out of queer and trans media practices. As W. J. T. Mitchell reminds us, images (and media objects) produce

value and surplus value in their circulation through cultural ecosystems.²⁷ Thus, who is to say that some of that surplus value might not spin out in new and exciting directions, asking the consumer to think queerly about the world and their experiences through consumption? Bourdieu believes that “social subjects comprehend the social world which comprehends them.”²⁸ I contend that a properly queer analysis of cultural capital in media and cultural studies acknowledges that, though subordinated subjects certainly do comprehend the larger social world and their subordinated place in it, we actively seek to frustrate the social world’s ability to comprehend, and thereby completely subdue, us. We may not yet be able to realize a truly revolutionary art that fully turns the violence of capital against itself, but we are not without agency to resist through valorizing our own, unique forms of artistic labour.

The concept of cultural capital is more flexible than that which Marx, Bourdieu, and even Beasley-Murray explain, and it has the potential to account for the study of the localized, micro film, media, and artistic cultural practices of queers which destabilize and resist the never-fully-victorious symbolic violence of capital. Rather than framing cultural capital as a wealth we give away in a futile attempt to buy our way up social hierarchies enforced by symbolic violence, we can transform our own cultural surplus values into alternative forms of cultural capital which builds us up within our own communities, making them sites of resistance to hegemonic tastes and forms of distinction. This is a key reason why, culturally and artistically, queers continue to produce unique and valuable media that challenge dominant aesthetics and practices. Through recognizing and exploiting the surpluses of cultural capital that come from queer artistic labour, much like the worker in *Capital*, we continue to resist, valorize our own, and survive.

²⁷ Mitchell.

²⁸ Bourdieu 482.

Conclusion: Does Uselessness Even Really Exist Under Capitalism? (It Depends On Your Perspective)

An important question that undergirds my theorizations in this chapter is the place of leisure in my analysis: is “useless” labour the same as leisure? Is it sometimes leisure and sometimes not? Can a single act of cultural consumption exist both as leisure activity *and* an action that can be theorized as a very real, and even serious, creation of queer cultural capital? This is a complicated question, and in some ways, one that has the potential to stray outside of the bounds of my arguments here. An action being leisurely doesn’t mean that it happens outside of work, or is non-consumptive, or non-productive, as our interpretations of what is leisurely, and thus implicitly providing some kind of pleasure, doesn’t actually map particularly clearly onto terms of (cultural) economic analysis. One can walk leisurely on the job, eat a leisurely business meal, or do any number of activities outside of work that don’t feel leisurely at all, from chores and housework to the affective inertia of simply sitting and decompressing. In chapter four I will explore “bad” feelings and how they can serve as sites of homeopathic healing and political critique in a movie that could be leisurely, but is also very difficult to watch in its explicit violence: *Ticked Off Trannies with Knives* is leisurely and not, doing deadly serious work along side campy fun work. Leisure also doesn’t map well onto questions of use and/vs. exchange value: do leisure commodities not contain both? Thus, in many ways, for my specific goals in this study, leisure is not that useful as an analytic term.

To obliquely address this final theoretical knot, I return to Massumi’s theorizations of value. One of his most important claims is the need to shift social, political, and economic conceptions of value away from the quantitative and into the realm of the qualitative. Massumi,

well known as a key thinker in affect theory, unsurprisingly asks us to take seriously the role of affect and emotion in capitalist flows and tenets. Like leisure, value can traverse many of the terms of analysis involved in any project about cultural capital, and thus both must be accounted for in terms of affective and/or emotional labour, recognizing that one's unique vantage point, one's unique experience with a commodity or a condensation of meaning under capitalism, will shape the consumption (or production, or sale, etc.) of a commodity, whether cultural, mediated, or in any other form.

More importantly, and allowing me to zero in on the place where my work comes closest to addressing the question of leisure, is Massumi's reminder, even insistence, that the excess and unexplored outsides necessary for contemporary capitalism to exist and keep growing as a *system* (even if it's one that still narrates itself frequently as a structure), means that capitalism is also about escape,²⁹ and escapism is, so often, a term frequently applied as a pejorative when discussing the consumption practices (and one might say leisure practices, in an analysis very similar to mine with slightly different coordinates and key reference points) of queer people, trans people, women, people of colour, and the working class (one need look no further than contemporary scholarship on kitsch and its devaluation to see this connection). Escapism is far too frequently and easily deemed useless consumption, but, to return to my commitment to studying the ways in which media helps queer and trans people *survive* the violence and traumas of capitalism, escapism is also a key venue for exploring how minoritized subjects seek out the ever present, but never quite visible, excesses of capitalism.

Though Massumi doesn't explicitly discuss capitalism's historical (and contemporary) reliance on (neo)colonialism, he does, in naming capitalism's need to have an ever-present

²⁹ Massumi.

outside full of new and different potentialities, assert that capitalism is also, thus, premised on escapism into the “wildness” of the unknown. This is not a particularly utopic or rose-tinted position: Massumi is very explicit in discussing the fact that this is not an escape that frees consumers. Complicity is not just impossible to avoid under capitalism, but is, in fact, central to its operation. Capitalism wants and *needs* people to engage in escapism, though the goal is to then absorb, colonize, and profit off of what is found in those acts of escape (yet another resonance between my work, Massumi, and Sender and Clark’s explorations of queer cultures being subsumed into mainstream consumerism). Thus, for Massumi, resistance to capitalism is simultaneously nebulously real, yet also essential, in any accounting of contemporary flows of value.³⁰ Resistance, then, in an almost Foucaultian turn yet also evocative of Muñoz, appears in flashes and starts. It may not last forever, but it is there, and even if it is always already complicit in capitalism’s functioning, *it still matters* as it happens. I would add that, even more, it matters even more when it engages in stopping and sitting with use value as primary value.

So, is uselessness really real under capitalism? Yes and no, depending on your vantage point within one’s cultural fraction, identities, life conditions, values, and experiences or exercises of power. Useless commodities, and thus useless media, are really demonstrating escapes into the excesses of contemporary capitalism, a realm of uncontained and unrestrained (cultural) surplus value and meaning. Even if it’s likely that these escapes (whether leisurely or urgent, flippant or essential) will eventually get rolled back into hegemonic flows of exchange, value-generation, and capitalist accumulation, whether cultural or economic, they still happened, and, I would say back to Massumi, when they queerly sit and stew in use value *for their*

³⁰ Ibid.

consumer in their specific context and moment and place and time, become future pointing moments of the same queer work Muñoz's utopian seeking artists are doing.

Thus, Massumi insists that complicity is an inherent part of living under capitalism, but it can lead to escapism (even leisure, perhaps?) that can be used to start the slow but certain work of growing something newer and better. Just as Marx insisted that capitalism grew out of the conditions of feudalism, so anything coming after capitalism, or changing it, grows within it.³¹ Massumi asserts that the more we promote escapes into the qualitative realm of potentialities just beyond the horizons of capitalism, the more chances there are to grow new and different ecologies of power and exchange. On this topic, he writes that “There is a need to embrace *creative duplicity*: emergent ways of strategically playing the ontological condition of complicity, to tendentially postcapitalist effect...Don't bemoan complicity—game it. Don't critically lord it over others with your doctrinal prowess—get creatively down and dirty in the field of play...Alter-economy projects need to consciously build in, and build on, creative duplicity.”³² In fact, capitalism has set up the very conditions to allow this escapist function: capitalism requires an untold realm of potentiality beyond the horizon, always calling out for explorers to search. I am not making quite the grand statements about the end of capitalism that Massumi's manifesto does, but thinking through how queer and trans subjects escape into creatively duplicitous media consumption practices serves as a site in my dissertation to plumb the depths of queer cultural capital creation, valuation, and valorization. Capitalism's explorers might seek to colonize, but in the realm of queer cultural expressions and value generation, I

³¹ Massumi, 87.

³² Ibid., 69. All emphases are the author's.

believe it's possible to see a growing condensation of queer and trans world building, activism, and very quotidian survival strategies in plotting trans and queer artistic escape pods.

Having laid out this project's broader theoretical claims and frames, I now shift into my case studies, beginning with kitsch and the Spice Girls, as an example which does not engage as explicitly with how cultural fractions form or maintain themselves, but begins at micro-, quotidian-level media consumption as a site for creating alternative queer forms of valuation of the self, identity, and difference which are important for many queer and trans people as the basis for seeking out new cultural fractions which better represent them or feel more like home. Chapter 2 is also most invested in thinking through how media and cultural commodities have changed due to the modern, and later postmodern, advances in mediated, artistic, and aesthetic commodity mass production and reproduction, and the implications these changes have for cultural tastes of the necessary and freedom.

Chapter 2

I Really Really Really Wanna Zig-a-Zig-AH: Spice Kitsch Under Postmodern Capitalism

In February 2008 I had the ecstatic pleasure of seeing the Spice Girls live in Toronto during their “The Return of the Spice Girls” ten-year reunion tour. I went with three friends from high school, reuniting our old gang of fans for the concert. Though we got our tickets online in the first minute or two of them going on sale, the Air Canada Centre sold out so fast we were spread out in four different sections of the nosebleed sections on different sides of the arena, and I ended up sitting alone. I was seated around a lot of tween and teen women (one of whom had the audacity to ask me to move back several rows so she could sit with her friend next to me!), but to my left was a woman with short grey hair who appeared to be in her 50s or 60s. After the aforementioned attempt to get me to move back several rows, the woman scoffed at the request, and we struck up a conversation to pass the time as we waited for the show to start. I had made the mistaken assumption that perhaps she was there with children or grandchildren, which was surprisingly common at this show, despite the sexual nature of a lot of the Girls’ lyrics: there had been enough time since the 90s that many older Spice fans had kids now and were determined that they would also experience the glory of Spice. This woman was, in fact, at the concert alone. She proceeded to tell me about how she was the biggest fan of the Girls, and always had been. She told me that she had seen every concert of theirs they did in Canada, and this was no exception. She also told me that when she couldn’t get tickets to their first Toronto show (I

remember her saying it was at the SkyDome, though tour records show it was at the Molson Amphitheatre – it’s possible I misremembered this detail, but the important part is that both are open air venues) she decided to book one of the flying lessons she was taking to *fly directly over the concert venue* so that she was still there in person. The concert proceeded, and we bonded one more time over being annoyed that we’d have to stand the whole time to see over dancing fans, and she spent most of the concert viewing the stage through opera glasses.

From an academic standpoint, I have no way of confirming or denying this woman’s stories, but, in all truth, it’s not actually all that relevant to this chapter to do so. I open with this anecdote about a woman who is, clearly, one of the Spice Girls’ biggest super fans, because it crystallizes much of my interest in the Spice Girls as kitsch, and more specifically in the work that people are willing to do to experience their love of kitsch things: getting concert tickets is work, trekking across countries is work, taking flying lessons is work and scheduling them over a concert one couldn’t get tickets to is work (and dedication!). Kitsch, so regularly conceived of, theorized, and derided as useless or unworthy of being taken seriously, is very regularly the site of great amounts of affective investment, personal and cultural labour, and a lot of love. Through an examination of the Spice phenomenon as an exemplar of postmodern media kitsch, this chapter will explore the ways that Spice provides a window into thinking through one way people use investments in uselessness as a way to make their day-to-day lives more enjoyable and livable. Kitsch is a trap for feelings and ideas, but it is also a material embodiment of moments of rupture, conflict, and the disintegration of the commodity under capitalism where new meanings, very much at the micro-level of consumption, are possible.

I cannot think of a better example of glorious mass (re)produced cultural kitsch than the Spice Girls. From being the biggest megaband of the girl- and boyband craze of the 1990s, to the

Spice Girls' translatability around the world, everything about them, including their performance personae, repetitive and formulaic musical form, their over-determined style, their lyrics, and the mountains of paratextual merchandise and tie-ins, the Spice Girls are a mass reproduced kitsch commodity extraordinaire. Now more than twenty years after the release of their breakout mega-hit single "Wannabe", the band breaking up and reuniting for a reunion tour and to perform at the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremonies, the Spice phenomenon continues to resonate as a symbol of pop culture's excesses as well as the potentially empowering aspects of Spice and, I would argue, kitsch consumption. One need look no further than the "#WhatIReallyReallyWant" campaign, following girls from around the world lip-syncing and dancing to "Wannabe" while providing graphical and textual representations of what feminism and girl power looks like to them in their local contexts, to see how Spice, despite its kitschy formulaicism, continues to be a cultural force today, and continues to morph and change in the cultural imaginary. But what kind of kitsch does Spice embody? I theorize Spice as a powerful and relatively contemporary example of kitsch as a reparative cultural and consumptive force, and a case study of how kitsch can bridge the gaps between mass pop culture, the traumas of capitalism, and practices which consume useless commodities as part of projects of queer and trans world building.

But why the Spice Girls, of all bands, of all the examples of kitschy postmodern cultural mega-phenomena (beyond my personal attachment to them and their music, no matter how important that is to the selection of my case studies)? More than other girl- and boy-bands of this era, the Spice Girls seemed to radiate out across the world with an incandescence belying, perhaps even at odds with, their incredibly mass-reproduced nature as a band, musicians, and cultural commodities. That incandescence, leaving them on the lips of people around the world, spurring just as much condemnation as adoration, is an excellent example of the power of

glamour and allure in our postmodern pop culture landscape, where the mass commodity appears to be highly auratic, and fine art loses some of its lustre. Before I circle back to the predominantly modernist thinking about kitsch and commodities, I offer a brief explanation of how and why such a glamorous beacon of mass reproducible culture is exactly the site through which to explore questions of kitsch in postmodern media cultures.

As Massumi insistently reminds us, there is only complicit consumption in capitalist systems, because even consumption that strives to create and grow something new is still intended to be part of capitalist processes of wealth and value growth.¹ Kitsch, despite its schlocky nature and endlessly repeated form, is a fruitful site of the kind of contingent consumptive complicity in oppressive social norms that can allow for moment-to-moment healing and solace that are missed by the grand narratives of postmodern high theory.

To ground the allure of Spice Girls kitsch in the mechanisms within which it attracts consumers, I turn to theorist Nigel Thrift and his work on the technologies of glamour. According to Thrift, the “imagination of the commodity is being captured and bent to capitalist means through a series of ‘magical’ *technologies of public intimacy*...Each of these technologies demonstrates the singular quality of *allure* through the establishment of human-nonhuman fields of captivation, for what seems certain is that many of the objects and environments that capitalism produces have to demonstrate the calculated sincerity of allure if people are to be attracted to them.”² Allure is the intangible quality of an object that draws us to it on an affective level: we don’t have to know why, we just know that we groove towards it and that it might provide us a connection to something greater than us through consuming it. Thus allure allows us

¹ For more on Massumi’s theories of value under capitalism, see Chapter 1.

² Nigel Thrift, “Understanding the Material Practices of Glamour,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 290.

to connect to consumable commodities, including media commodities, through the sense of intimacy that they provide to nonhuman objects and, in my framework, human commodities made into consumables like the Spice Girls. In their emphasis on their “unique” fashions, looks, aesthetic styles, visually exciting music videos, flashy concerts, glossy magazine and print media presence, and their ubiquity of representation in mass culture, the Spice Girls represent a wondrous example of an excess of allure in their glamour. When thinking kitsch consumption alongside my work theorizing queer cultural capital in Chapter 1, excess functions as a key area of commonality between kitsch theory and materialist theories of value. Massumi and Muñoz, along with my other critical interlocutors, both posit excess as a key condition for alternative, even radical, consumptive practices (Massumi) and for queer and trans world building projects (Muñoz). The Spice Girls’ excessive presence in the postmodern landscape of the 1990’s encouraged their fans, and perhaps even detractors, to feel a public intimacy connecting them to other people who also consumed or decried their commodified selves and to the Spice Girls themselves through the promise of taking the Girls into oneself through consumption.

Glamour is, for Thrift, a style of allure that capitalism uses to captivate and engross its subjects.³ Importantly, glamour is in the eye of the beholder, meaning that it can exceed typical or hegemonic conceptions of glamour as a rich, high class, expensive phenomenon: glamour is what people perceive as being alluring, shiny, enticing, and desirable. A commodity can be perceived as glamorous by one or many for any number of reasons that are not always conscious, articulated, or planned, and the alluring object can even fail at being properly glamorous the way that kitsch fails at being properly artistic without losing the individualized glamour that it embodies in a contingent, fleeting moment. Glamour is a contingent and deeply

³ Ibid., 297.

personal function of postmodern capitalism's increasingly fractured, overcrowded commoditätscape, where a glut of mass reproduced products constantly strives to entice more consumers to consume more broadly and often, yet also provides ever-proliferating cracks through which allure, or a Muñoz-ian incandescence, can appear within and around a commodity. A flash of aura just for one, shining out of the object of desire, doing nothing to prevent complicity with capitalism, yet also offering the chance to be a place where, through consumption, something different can be nurtured.

Thus we can apprehend the tantalizing and irresistible pull of the Spice Girls in all their empty, tacky, schlocky pastiche and simulation. "Glamour is about that special excitement and attractiveness that characterizes some objects and people. Glamour is a form of secular magic, conjured up by the commercial sphere."⁴ Glamour is the alluring glimpse, perhaps even postmodern pastiche, of the aura and is constructed of ethereal feeling that draws people to the objects exuding it without recourse to rationalism or reason. And yet, glamour still manages to create a sense of specialness like an aura does for as long as it takes to enjoy the object before it is cast aside for the next simulacra in line. Glamour allows for the flashes of feeling intimately included in a depersonalized world, hinting that though the aura might not be intact anymore, perhaps it has been shattered but not destroyed, being handed back to us in small, shiny pieces like so many rhinestones on one of Ginger Spice's union jack unitards.

The Spice Girls are thus an example of the "object effect" of glamour. They allow for "an object [to stand in] for a world without troubles or with troubles you want."⁵ This is what kitsch can do for people in positive way even if it is low art, or not "art" at all. Yes, the Spice Girls are

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 298.

a happy-go-lucky pastiche of gender, feminism, and race with relatively bad politics; yes Girl Power is infantilizing; yes Spice Fever is an avatar of evil capital; but damn it do they provide a moment of giddy solace from all those things by making me feel *good*, even to this day. That is a quality that is un-measurable by economics and Marxism and postmodern high theory, and an excess of value that provides a small but significant reparative reading of the ways that people buy into the systems around them when they have no alternative. Thrift, citing McCloskey, argues that glamour can lead to experiencing “alternate versions of ‘me’ that can act as a particular imaginary norm, often speculatively and in parallel [to the “real” world], in order to realize a particular form of character.”⁶ Even though the Spice Girls and their five cookie-cutter identities are deeply problematic, the Girl Power they offer really can be powerful in the here and now by allowing us to be someone else, even if we know that it won’t be forever and it won’t cause a revolution. The Spice Girls are glamorous postmodern kitsch at its best, and I still love them for that.

Just as postmodernism contains leftovers of modernism and kitsch has the glittering remains of the aura embedded in its synthetic self, so the glamour of postmodern kitsch can lure us to it through memories and the feelings of the past *and* the present. In providing comfort for the trauma of the postmodern, glamour also asks us to remember times past when we felt something similarly healing, or even have memories that are more about group experiences and how a community experienced glamour then about our individual lives. Kitsch, as originating in the modern era through mass reproducibility, can also even evoke memories of the supposed “structure” and “safety” of modernism, providing an escape from its own new form and the uncertainty of the very system of production that created the commodity in the first place. Thus, I

⁶ Ibid.

now move back into an examination of modernist theories of the aura and mass reproduction, to lay the groundwork both for exploring how the Spice Girls act as a kitsch phenomenon *and* to begin the larger intervention that this chapter carries out in kitsch studies: beginning to move the study of kitsch out of strictly modernist frameworks of theorization.

Kitsch, Mass Reproduction, and Modernism

When discussing kitsch as reparative and from the perspective of kitsch-as-commodity, I believe it is important to explore the work of Walter Benjamin, whose thinking on how the commodity changes under the advent of mass reproduction and industrialization, as well as how the artistic commodity, specifically, is affected by capitalism is central to much kitsch theory, especially theorists like Caryl Flinn, Maria Alvarez, and Celeste Olalquiaga, who are helping to develop theories of kitsch which are not rooted in always seeing kitsch as debased and useless. The central issues when thinking through Benjamin and kitsch are, for me, Benjamin's assumptions about the consumers of art, culture, and kitsch, as well as his assertion that mass reproduction has destroyed the unique artistic aura. In this section I hope to begin undoing some assumptions about the consumer of media (and) kitsch, while also setting up how to transition thinking about kitsch in a modern world into examining it as an increasingly important part of *postmodern* media, aesthetics, and culture.

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin posits that what is unique about a piece of art is its aura, the unique quality of a piece of art (defined broadly) made by people who put time, labour, energy, and affect into its creation as an individual

creation, one-of-a-kind.⁷ Though not always taken up as a materialist thinker, what I find most compelling about this essay, central to many sub-fields of critical theory, is exactly its materialist underpinning: it is the *work* and *time* put into a work of art by its creator which makes it unique and, implicitly, allows a commodity to cross into the realm of Art for Benjamin. These are very similar to central terms of Marx's analyses of the working of capital, where a commodity's value is determined by the labour done to create it which takes concrete time to have happen. Thus, the aura comes from, interestingly, not the abstract time of exchange value, but, in fact, the concrete time of material creation which is much more linked to use value. Though Marx largely discusses concrete time as how much time and use one can get out of a purchased commodity before it stops fulfilling its purpose, taken together, Marx and Benjamin show us that, when it comes to art (and, I contend, media), there is also concrete time put into creation, not just consumption, and these two things together contribute to the use value of an artistic commodity. The aura grows out of this creation-time, and though an artwork's aura is certainly connected to its exchange value (one need only look at how much collectors will pay for a painting by a "master" to see the aura at play in determining exchange value and a commodity's monetary worth), it is also *a precondition of the aura*, at least as Benjamin conceives of the term.⁸

Even *Spice World* draws the connection between work and the production of art. The movie is framed around the Girls' nerves about their upcoming, "extremely live" gig at the Royal Albert Hall, and the film mixes the various fake flashbacks, surreal dream sequences, and other hijinks with scenes of the Girls' rehearsing and preparing for the show the movie implies is the biggest moment of their career to date. These different elements of the film even collide in a

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007).

⁸ Ibid.

sequence during which the Girls are sent to dance boot camp⁹ by their manager, Clifford, to help them brush up before the gig with the help of Mr. Step (Michael Barrymore), an entirely ridiculous caricature of a seargeant-major-cum-uppidty-dance-instructor. In a seemingly pro-aura twist, the girls are instructed in Mr. Step's confusing and poorly explained "complicated" dance steps, but they reject his help in favour of their own, simpler steps, which the film positions as being more authentically theirs. The Girls' individuality is being "oppressed" here by the pop music machine, represented by Clifford, his tyrannical schedule, and his unwillingness to let the Girls have fun and be spontaneous throughout the film, and Mr. Step's silly portrayal, even though he is actually suggesting they use real dance moves, like a port de bras (though he cannot execute any real steps convincingly, part of his campy body comedy). They opt, instead, for a repetitious hip swivel and arm flourish, their idea of dance work, creating an extremely mass reproducible dance routine (more on reproducible dances and songs further on in this chapter when I examine the Spice Girls PlayStation game). The film frames this very basic dancing as being *theirs* in an authentic, even auratic way, ending the scene with two kitsch (or perhaps one kitsch and one camp) dance routine in the room, very little actual meaning, and a smile on the audience's face as the film produces yet another joke that simultaneously pokes fun at the emptiness of the Spice Girls as media commodities while also, contradictorily, promoting the themes of Girl Power: being strong, independent, unique women who don't take crap from anyone and always do their own thing. Importantly, this is a small, concrete example of how kitsch, in a postmodern consumer capitalist world, occupies a grey space between being a commodity meant to sell and make money for the rich while promoting messages of freedom, choice, and individuality that we academics might automatically wish to criticize as false

⁹ I will say, I wouldn't be surprised if the use of "camp" here was intentional: I am focusing on the kitsch of the film for this chapter, but kitsch and camp very regularly overlap and cohabit in media, and *Spice World* is no exception.

consciousness or duped empowerment. The catch, though, is that like any dialectic, any grey space, kitsch can occupy both of these spaces, empowerment and disempowerment, alienation from labour and money vs. personal happiness and a taste of freedom, all at once, and it can read both ways to different people depending on their consumptive choices and unique experience of Spice's alluring glamour, perhaps even occupying both positions for the same person. Kitch's very nature, as mass (re)produced, is to occupy this fuzzy area, and it is the purpose of this chapter to not repeat assumptions about a duped or stupid consumer of kitsch. I believe many kitsch consumers know exactly how kitsch commodity consumption does nothing to stop the violence of capitalist exchange, including in their own lives, but that they also can take seriously messages of empowerment, happiness, or even just survival, simultaneously afforded through kitsch consumption.



Figure 2: Dance Camp. Screenshots from *Spice World*.

The connection between modern(ist) kitsch and mass reproduction, along with its impacts on art, aesthetics, and culture, is a concern shared by Benjamin and the first serious kitsch theorists, though they don't cite Benjamin extensively, if at all. In the collection of essays *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, Gillo Dorfles plumbs the depths of common definitions of kitsch, its aesthetics, and the span of its influence. Dorfles writes that for thinking kitsch, "Another relevant

factor is the lack of an authentic ‘lived experience’ obtained through the new media: a phenomenon that anyone can observe by himself and on himself. The sight of reproduced images - via photography, cinema, television and magazines - is no longer capable of transmitting a truly ‘lived’ experience, although it does allow us to store up ideas promptly and rapidly, as has been amply proved.”¹⁰ With the advent of mass communication, Dorfles identifies a decline in people experiencing things, people, and events live in an unspoken, but clear, parallel of concerns expressed by Frankfurt school thinkers. We fill our existence with ghostly replicas that lack the original’s specificity and uniqueness created through the ubiquity of the mass reproduction, very strongly recalling, or at least paralleling, Benjamin’s thoughts on aura. Thus kitsch’s meaning expands to include both bad art and the “kistch-man” who consumes it: it is increasingly easy and common to become Dorfles’ “man of bad taste,” the *kitschmensch*, in the postmodern age.¹¹ Dorfles connects the rise of the kitsch-man to a lack of education, the normalizing of habits of mass consumption, and the attendant lack of the ability to judge value in aesthetics that comes from these two contemporary conditions: a typically paranoid reading full of negative assumptions about the kitsch consumer. Kitsch, as opposed to art, becomes a commodity to be uncritically consumed, and unlike the valuable artistic masterpiece, it serves a purpose for a time then is cast aside in the quest for the next commodity: it has no duration or lasting value, and the kitsch-man doesn’t see a problem with this.¹² As such, “Kitsch belongs to all the arts, to all man’s forms of expression.”¹³ Dorfles’ overall argument, then, is to condemn the growth and expansion of modern mass-manufacturing. The changes mass kitsch has wrought in our ways of

¹⁰ Gillo Dorfles, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1969), 31

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17-8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 26.

interacting with art and culture have become industrialized, which is a process I only see increasing in the postmodern moment as mass-produced culture spreads far and wide, becoming the fractured landscape of commodities designed to be accessible by everyone at all times without a central guiding narrative like a universal Western aesthetic hierarchy to regulate it. Like Benjamin (and Adorno and Horkheimer, implicitly) Dorfler assumes that if a kitsch commodity does not have an Aura as he sees it, then it must be aura-less: also like Benjamin, this to me seems an assumption based in a very modernist either/or, black/white logic which doesn't ask if something can have a piece of an aura, a remnant, or a reflection (or projection?) of it.

According to Benjamin, the mass reproduction brought on by modernism destroys the aura through making many identical copies of something artistic, and in doing so, implicitly negating the time and labour that went into creating the art being mass (re)produced. (Benjamin is also only dealing with reproductions of already-crafted art: as we move into the postmodern later in this chapter, it will become clear that the aura is even more of a tenuous concept now that there are very often no originals to the aesthetic and commodity [re]productions we consume.) But though Benjamin is adamant mass reproduction destroys the aura, he doesn't necessarily dive into exploring *how* it is destroyed, or if its destruction is complete, as if vapourized, or if it leaves debris, fragments, or pieces of itself behind. When dealing with kitsch, I propose thinking of the aura as shattered.

An example to illustrate my point: any tchotchke that has a reproduction of a piece of art on it. One of my favourite sets of fridge magnets I've ever seen is a magnet of Michelangelo's *David* with a set of other magnets you can put on top of him to dress him in various ridiculous garb, from a cowboy hat to a tutu to leather gear. Does Fridge David have the aura of *David*? Absolutely not. Benjamin's assumption would, I believe, be that by not having the original aura,

Fridge David has *no* aura period, and thus, it follows that the people consuming Fridge David are mindless consumers, being duped into thinking that Fridge David has some kind of connection to the actual *David* and its aura, spending their money on a lie, and taking joy out of something that is tricking them. This isn't an uncommon assumption to make: it is the same assumption behind the term kitschmensch after all. But what if we start from the (entirely reasonable) assumption that the consumers of Fridge David, and other kitsch commodities reproducing Art, are well aware of its fakeness, but still perceive something of the aura of the original despite that, and still take cultural sustenance of some kind from kitsch consumption, even if many might see this consumption as the equivalent of eating cultural junk food. Just as the working class increasingly have to eat less healthy food as it becomes cheaper than good food in our modern day, or how Bourdieu's subjects still had to sustain themselves on the tastes of the necessary, or how the Marxian worker must eat food like potatoes to replenish their bodies to go out and sell their labour for another day, so I posit that the kitsch consumer is making the best out of their situation, and we should take that seriously as a site for theorizing and valourizing the (media) consumption practices of minoritized subjects.

So, perhaps it is important to move away from thinking about the aura as being an all or nothing proposal. Part of this chapter's intervention into kitsch theory is to move it out of its modernist theory roots, and though still taking the insights from them about mass reproduction (of commodities in general and media commodities specifically) that are useful, but update thinking kitsch commodities for our postmodern cultural landscape. Just as postmodernism refuses modernism's sweeping statements about history, power, and culture, so we need to think about how auras might move, change, glimmer, and glow differently now that mass reproduction is, in fact, an entirely quotidian part of cultural life. I would advance a media specific example to

support this point: the huge rash of remakes, reboots, and relaunches in television and film as of late. Trading in sentimentality and banking on audiences being willing to reliably spend money on remakes that evoke their memories of their good old favourites, we have a glut of media flooding the market that is dubiously auratic as a copy of an original, yet also one moving one, and even twisting and changing the aura in the process. Here we see a shattered or destroyed or lost aura of the original object, yet through the process of mass-reproducible media forms (from the selling of formats in global television to the reboot film) we also see some auras shift and change, such as in the dark reimagining of the Archie comics in *Riverdale*. In many ways, I'm not invested in making a statement about whether Benjamin was right or wrong about auras; I care far more about thinking through how to update the way we think about auras, commodities, mass reproduction, and how more contemporary cultural landscapes have changed what it means to interact with artistic commodities, especially as queer people and women.

A turn to the Spice Girls to further ruminate on this point: I very clearly and distinctly recall watching a MuchMusic Intimate & Interactive special live with the Spice Girls in the late 1990s hosted by famous VJ Master T in which he asked the Girls what “zig-a-zig-ah” meant.¹⁴ The phrase was central to the chorus of the Girls' international breakout single “Wannabe”, in which the Girls' sing that “I'll tell you what I want, what I really really want/So tell me what you want/what you really really want./I'll tell you what I want, what I really really want/I really really really wanna zig-a-zig-AH!” The easiest and most common answer to the question of what the end of the chorus means is, naturally, that zig-a-zig-ah is a stand-in for sex, orgasm, sexual pleasure, etc. On the surface, the song is fairly clearly one about women demanding sexual

¹⁴ Alas, despite extensive searching, I've yet to be able to find any copy of this live special, so I am forced to source this discussion from both my memory and a conversation I had with VJ and I&I host Master T about his encounter when he visited my class I Want My MTV: Critical Perspectives on the Music Video in August 2015.

pleasure from men, and insisting that being a good partner to a woman means becoming part of her life, befriending and respecting her friends, and respecting her; all awesome Girl Power messages for sure. What was fascinating in this live special, however, was Scary's answer to VJ Master T's invocation of this common query, which was that zig-a-zig-ah means whatever the listener wants it to mean or thinks it means.

Certainly one interpretation of this response, in the framework of considering Spice as a kitsch phenomenon, is that this answer is a cop-out to avoid saying the song is about sex, and one which could very easily be used to back up many early scholars of kitsch's beliefs that kitsch has no real or true meaning of any import. In this framework, kitsch can mean literally anything and kitsch commodities are entirely empty of meaning because the kitsch consumer is always already the dupe caught in the capitalist and/or ideological cultural machine telling them that the empty, useless kitsch is unique or special or meaningful. These schools of kitsch thinking line up nicely with other Frankfurt school thinkers of media such as Adorno & Horkheimer who, in their influential essay "The Culture Industry", also posit the audience of mass media as dupes.¹⁵ On the surface, "Wannabe" and zig-a-zig-ah provide a message of nominal feminist empowerment, but with no real meaning behind it, as it offers empty platitudes of individual choice and independence that are actually just another part of the commodities being produced to make money off the masses by the culture industry and capitalism. The independence promised by this song is illusory. From a Marxian perspective, one might even see this illusory commoditized promise of independence and freedom as ideologically supporting the base tenet of capitalism: getting workers to sell their labour, alienating it from themselves, to make profit for the capitalist. By convincing the consumer it is her choice to be independent and strong through

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

consuming a mass produced, mass-market band and its messages of Girl Power, she becomes ideologically more primed to think selling her labour for wages is her choice, her freedom, her independence. Reading the song through Bourdieu results in a similar conclusion, lumping Spice, and its kitsch, into a media-based version of the tastes of the necessary, low calorie cultural content being sold to workers for their meagre wages to allow them to rejuvenate their bodies and minds just enough to keep working steadily. This kind of message is part of the (mass) reproduction of capitalism's mechanisms of alienation and violence.

Even the music video for "Wannabe" could back up this reading of Spice as negative kitsch. In the video's one-take cinematography, the Girls invade what seems to be an upper crust British fete, dancing on tables, running amok through rooms, singing, being greeted by reactions ranging from horror to bemusement to some revelers even joining the Girls in dancing and partying by the end of the video, seduced, no doubt, by the allure of Girl Power. I am particularly taken with one older woman with white shoulder-length hair in a little black dress and black opera gloves who ends up getting her life dancing with several of the Girls throughout the video, smiling the whole time. Her joy could still fit into this largely paranoid reading scheme of early kitsch scholars and the Frankfurt school though: the video could be seen here as showing how "silly" it is to see older women hold onto their "lost" "youth" and "beauty" by trying to ape the movements of our lithe, young, gorgeous Girls, her wrinkled skin and somewhat tousled white hair standing in stark contrast to the Girls, especially as the woman is framed in the very front of several shots.

And yet, I can't help but see, in the figure of this woman, so brief an appearance in a brief media example, the catch-22 that this kind of thinking, valuable and helpful as all paranoid analysis can be, leaves consumers, especially marginalized consumers like women and queers,



Figure 3: A Fabulous Woman. Screenshot from “Wannabe” music video featuring an unnamed actress.

mired in. As Sedgwick reminds us in her discussion of paranoid and reparative reading strategies in *Touching Feeling*, the paranoid mode of scholarship is extremely helpful and useful for pointing out oppressive power structures, but it tends to fall into thinking the worst of people and the world generally, sometimes missing out on the moments of good, and resistance, and meaning that we find through also engaging in reparative reading. Most importantly, Sedgwick advocates for theory which keeps both toolsets, the reparative and the paranoid, on hand and in dialogue with one another.¹⁶ So, the video for “Wannabe” is, on the surface level, a critique of the ruling classes and capitalism. We see Posh give a lap dance to a horrified priest, the unhappiness and disdain of the upper class people watching the common Spice Girls soil their

¹⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

affair with their tawdry dancing and suggestive lyrics, and yet the paranoid reading style of kitsch theory would point us to how this message of supposed independence is all delightfully packaged up as a clone-esque five-girl supergroup producing a video that, beyond its single-take cinematography, is a low-budget, fairly average music video flogging a commodity (the band, their songs, and the Spice phenomenon generally) for the consumer, undercutting any message of true Girl Power that the content might offer. From the get go, the Spice Girls set up their entire message: they are an entirely mass produced pop act selling the consumer empty idols of individualism and freedom. Really, what we see here is a materialization of the contradictions young women, and all young people, and queer and trans people, really, are constantly stuck in: being told their worth must be individual and rooted in ignoring systemic oppression or becoming overly politicized, yet simultaneously being told that their independence is disruptive, loud, even scary. From a paranoid perspective, “Wannabe” concretizes the symbolically violent dialectics of being a young woman or a young queer consumer under postmodern capitalist culture. I will leave you, dear reader, in suspense of a more reparative reading of this song and video, however, as I will return to “Wannabe” and zig-a-zig-ah at the end of this chapter.

Benjamin’s theory of the aura and culture cannot function as he intends it without a consumer who is assumed to be a dupe of culture; he cannot have a consumer with agency, who knows what they’re buying, what it means, and how it fits into systems of capital, and still love it and/or value it anyhow. So, my question to Benjamin, then is what do we do with consumers who aren’t dupes, and who are aware that what they love and consumer might be aura-less copies, and don’t care?

The tastes of the necessary are made out of what’s available, what’s present, and still fulfills a worker’s need to rejuvenate their bodies and minds, whether that sustenance is literal

food sustenance or the cultural equivalent thereof. So, why not see a “failure” (but, in reality, inability) to strive for, procure, and access properly auratic objects, those which might provide upwardly mobile social and cultural capital, as an entry point for talking about what kitsch consumption can still do for people, especially when thinking through the consequences of the paradigm shift to postmodernism culturally, aesthetically, and with regard to changes in cultural (mass) (re)production. Though true in Benjamin’s time, it is even more likely now that only the rich and those in upper class fractions have the economic and cultural capital not just to “properly” appreciate auratic art¹⁷, but also to be able to own it, access it, or even visit it. Hence “Wannabe’s” appeal to “low” classes and peoples via disrupting a party full of (stereotypically) posh people (which interestingly sets up Posh Spice as more relatable than her kind, simultaneously a sympathetic figure and one who represents dreams of upward class mobility perhaps). This is particularly poignant in British pop culture and television, where class difference is regularly the central concept behind much British humour, from the look at British working class “life” in *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960-) and *Shameless* (Channel 4, 2004-13), to accent-based comedy such as the subtitling of Brad Pitt’s thick Irish Traveller brogue in *Snatch* (dir. Guy Ritchie, 2000), to the interactions between working class (and often vulgar) sales staff and customers in *Are You Being Served?* (BBC, 1972-2016), or the lampooning of people going to extraordinary lengths and engaging in ridiculous hijinks to appear to live above their station and class background in *Keeping Up Appearances* (BBC, 1990-5). Striving for the tastes of freedom, of which auratic art and culture could, and would, certainly be a part, is a symptom of class-based hierarchies, cultural and economic alike, including for Benjamin. Part of what he

¹⁷ Bourdieu discusses the importance of education in *Distinction* as another metric through which upper class fractions maintain their borders, so to speak. It is only through a “good” education that one can have the vocabulary, context, and background to demonstrate a “full” or “proper” appreciation of art, a point which dovetails nicely with Benjamin’s placement of the aura into high art and culture.

seems to be mourning in “The Work of Art” is how mass reproducibility has led to things with what he sees as having real aura, (implicitly high) art, being increasingly difficult for anyone to see, create, or possess. The aura, under capitalism (modern and postmodern alike, I would assert), no longer belongs to “the people”; it has been commodified and privatized: when you can mass reproduce endless copies of a work of fine art or the original score of a symphony or a statue by a great master, then there is no longer a strong case, under the logics of capitalism, for keeping them public or available for mass consumption. On top of that, if auras become increasingly privatized, it allows for economies to develop around charging people to see the originals *and* sell them trinkets and keepsakes of them after the experiencing art and aura, wrapping the tourism industry even more wholeheartedly into flows of cultural capitalism and wealth generation. It is the very nature of mass reproducibility to take auratic art and culture *away* from the masses and place them in the hands of the capitalist, exposing a place where Marx, Bourdieu, and Benjamin are all in agreement with one another, even if they look at the issues of capitalism and mass-ification from different perspectives.

In many ways, I see Spice as declaring war on the assumed valuation and perpetuation of the aura, though sometimes in a confused, fuzzy, very postmodern way, as the phenomenon and its avatars occupy the always-already compromised space of working as capitalist media commodities and requiring complicit consumption. An example: the music video for “Stop” and its class politics. On the surface, this is a fairly straightforward music video: as the Girls begin singing their lines in the first verse, they leave houses implied to be theirs (which they very clearly are not in real life) on a road in a fairly nondescript looking town, running through the street and dancing on their way to a gig at a community or town hall. Here, they perform to a room of older people in nondescript, inexpensive clothing on a low stage with no visible lights or

tech setup beyond their mics. One interpretation of this video could be to read the Girls as slumming with the lower classes, giving a “personal” performance in a tiny setting as an addendum and additive to their fame and image after getting hyper famous (“Stop” was the second massive single off their second album, after all). And yet, there is at least the potential of reading “Stop” as suggesting that people of all class fractions can be that person with the “human touch” that the chorus¹⁸ of the song establishes as being the most important criteria for a partner or relationship. The song’s lyrics have a secondary theme of needing to slow down, enjoy one’s life, and not always move too fast or be too busy. This message is particularly interesting in the context of a working class town hall, as it seems to contradict the girls’ aloofness from anyone but one another in the video, and yet it also could be seen as being the entirely wrong venue to deliver this message. The video and song materialize the complicated and difficult spaces of living under postmodern capitalism, caught between messages like “slow down, enjoy life, find love, be an individual” (and, of course, consume the products that will help achieve those goals) and the realities of having to always work more, do more, and do it all faster to survive, let alone thrive. I see these incoherences, however, as generative spaces in which kitsch media (and kitsch generally) walk the line of being a debased, “worthless” or “useless” commodity and being things which people who live with the tastes of the necessary love, and even need. Everyone in the “Stop” video is presented as enjoying themselves, and the video introduced the world to the epic “Stop Dance”, one still used by many Spice fans (myself included) to test other fans about their depth of knowledge and love of Spice. The dance, a repetitive set of 8 hand/arm dance moves (which one can conveniently do while walking, standing still, or engaged in other forms of ambulation), functions in many ways like a new “Macarena” kitschdance: known by the

¹⁸ “Stop right now/Thank you very much/I need somebody with a human touch./Hey you/always on the run/Gotta slow it down baby/Gotta have some fun.”

masses due to its popularity and simplicity, relegated now to wedding receptions and other such social occasions where the “Macarena” and “Chicken Dance” make regular appearances, the dance is easily mass reproducible and takes on elements of fandom, love, and even joy for some consumers. I remember watching entire gaggles of “popular” girls doing the dance at recess when I was in grade school, headphones firmly on and attached to WalkMans and DiscMans, flouting their own sense of superior cultural capital by showing that they knew the dance, had the money and ability to play it for themselves at school via portable media technologies far from universal in my small town, and making a strong statement of their own coolness by doing so. The kitsch of “Stop”, mired as it is in capitalist contradiction, provided me one of the earliest instances I’ve seen of people turning a kitsch commodity, through their own unique and creative consumption patterns, into an avenue for establishing cultural capital in their own milieus, even if that’s as small and insignificant and inconsequential as the playground of River Heights Elementary School in Caledonia, Ontario, Canada. It is in and through these ideologically fuzzy spaces where most people have to live every day, and they see these spaces of contestation, dialectics, and contradiction reflected in mass media, presenting opportunities for consumers to ask why so many people love something without having to resort to judging them for doing so. The proliferation of “Stop” as a song, video, and dance is but one small example of an undoing of the negative assumption about the kitsch consumer in postmodern media capitalism. This is especially true when thinking about the gendered nature of people judging Spice and its fans as “silly”, “naive”, or what have you: in Spice the classed nature of negative assumptions about kitsch lovers collides with the way that girls are devalued even as they are being sold the products used to devalue them en masse. Sometimes an incoherence of message brought about by kitsch, its production, and how it has to be sold to get it consumed by a mass audience leads

to a failure of message, netting productive and creative responses to it through alternative consumption practices.

Another important additive to Benjamin's theories are the implications his thinking have for considering the role of cultural capital when thinking through issues of aura and mass reproduction. When discussing how cultural capital operates, one of the key examples Bourdieu uses is the role education, and (especially perhaps) the ability to perform the "right" education for the "right" people in the "right" circumstances to advance into "better" class fractions. When it comes to art, literature, media, and other cultural output, possessing an education which gives one the ability to discuss these things with a level of sophistication and mastery to demonstrate one's cultural capital. This position dovetails with Benjamin's positions on how less and less people have (physical) access to auratic art: as art becomes commodified and increasingly privately owned, this kind of cultural capital becomes harder and harder to access as it faces barriers both in getting an education (financial, class barriers, systemic barriers preventing people of colour from achieving the same level of formal education success as white peers, etc.) *and* in having not just access to art, but even a sense that "high" art is available at all. Thus, if auratic art is now very much a taste of freedom, to borrow once more from Bourdieu, then people increasingly disenfranchised from upper class fractions must make do with cultural tastes of the necessary, which in an artistic and aesthetic sense would include kitsch media in all its mass produced ubiquity and glory. Increasingly, as inequality along many different identity factors increases, and even education itself becomes increasingly mass commodified (one need only look at fraudulent for-profit universities, like Trump University, to see this force in action), then in parallel, increasingly people from non-dominant class fractions and identity categories end up only with the tools to understand potato media, kitsch media, and tastes of the necessary.

Even the increasing democratization of “quality” TV in the era of HBO and Showtime offers up little more than a Baudrillard-esque Disneyland of TV, promising high art in a mass produced format, which is actually a reflection of an entirely empty concept, “quality” tied to the tastes of freedom and cultural capitalist stratification.

Thus, this chapter aims to move theories of kitsch, mass (re)production, and the aura out of discussions of modernism and into theories of postmodern aesthetics and cultures. The benefit of this shift includes the fact that it takes away the need to continue any debates about the aura’s existence, or whether knock-offs and kitsch contain a sliver of aura, a shard from a shattered concept, or merely a simulacra of aura, because in postmodern aesthetic theory, at its base level, the *perception* of aura is enough to give a commodity real, material auratic effects, including allowing reinterpretations of the commodity as auratic and useful in other places, spaces, and times than those originally intended for it. In the postmodern world, authenticity and realness mean very little, so by shifting questions of mass reproduction and kitsch into the postmodern sphere, we are afforded a way out of Benjamin’s (and other contemporary thinkers, as well as thinkers of kitsch) assumptions about the duped consumer. Kitsch object may have a tiny piece of aura, or they might have a simulation of it reflecting the brilliance of the inaccessible original, or it might all be in the consumer’s minds, but it is what consumers actually do with commodities that matters most here, allowing for the filling of kitsch objects with new, different, unique, and personal meanings and use values.

Gold Diggers of 1997: Kitsch and Postmodernism

Well my dear you know that he pleases me/(pleases me)/But short term solution ain't no resolution/There ain't no release for me.”

-“Too Much” by the Spice Girls

Walter Benjamin envisioned the progress of modern history as an angel with his face turned to the past as he is blown inevitably into the future, seeing the catastrophes wrought by modernism pile at his feet but unable to stop to repair them. “This storm,” writes Benjamin, “irresistibly propels [the angel] into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”¹⁹ As flaneur and author, Benjamin resonates with this angel, unable to stop what he saw as the dangers and sickness of modernism, marking him as an outsider, a figure that resonates with many queer historiographers including David Gerstner, who rethinks Benjamin’s angel as a queer figure. For Gerstner, much of the debris left behind in progress’ wake is the product of queer identity and cultural production. The queer angel of history takes in dominant forms of culture, like Hollywood, and turns them into detritus, leaving them behind as beautiful trash, as Kenneth Anger did in his *Hollywood Babylon* project.²⁰ The queer angel of history (and queer historiographer and/or theorist) refuses to travel in a line and instead stops and spins in the wreckage left in the wake of dominant histories: she is unable to fit their work inside progress narratives of history, like Benjamin, similar to Wilde’s rejection of realism for a queer aestheticism where life imitates art (a model for queer scholarship if I’ve ever seen one).²¹ Queers’ bodies and history are both works of art waiting to happen to the queer angel/historian: “the queer angel of history hovers in the debris of history...because he or she burns with the passion to re-write and re-present the hope of history.”²² Though based in a modernist historical method which assumes that there can

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 257-8.

²⁰ David Anthony Gerstner, “Queer Angels of History Take It and Leave It From Behind,” *Stanford Humanities Review* 7, no. 2 (1999): 161.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 152-5.

²² *Ibid.*, 162.

be some element of authenticity in a re-presentation of the wreckage left in the wake of heteronormative culture, the notion of finding value by staying with the garbage of the past, and capitalist mass (re)production broadly, is a valuable one to guide queer historiography and theory, and as an additive to kitsch theory.

Key for thinking kitsch alongside the queer angel is the fact that the angel revels in the detritus and ruins of capitalism and modernism, the commodities cultural elites name junk, including, I propose, kitsch. From this reveling, the labour of kitsch (media) consumption emerges: embracing the idea of the queer angel allows for insights not just into queer scholarship methods, but (more importantly) the method through which queer and trans subjects transform the tastes of the necessary into tastes of freedom by not just sitting in the ruins, but working through and with them to make life more bearable in the moment. The queer angel seeks out value in the detritus of post/modernism, recognizing that if all we have is detritus, then it needs to be what is used in daily life, especially for people like minoritized subjects who have to make do with what's available while living under the structural violences and traumas of capitalism. Kitch, being a phenomenon about taste, is also, then, necessarily about work and time, and it seeks out cultural rejuvenation (in the same way that Marx and Bourdieu discuss the necessary rejuvenation of the worker's body and cultural self as a necessary precondition of capitalist economies).

Benjamin is something of a melancholic writer, whether in the wistful sentimentality of the *Arcades Project*, the bleak picture of modernism painted in his essays on history, his love of collected material objects in "Unpacking My Library", or the mourning of humanity's artistic soul in "Work of Art." Yet, somehow, he is unable to move beyond a focus on loss and what is lost to culture, a desire that, though understandable, is a little too eerily (and paranoidly) "Make

America Great Again” for me: when put next to kitsch theory, his desire for things lost moves a little too close for comfort to the thinkers who place kitsch, as culture, solely within a fascist framework and political project. Benjamin seems to see a dream of artistic beauty lost, killed by capitalism and modernism (and, understandably, but the rise of Nazi fascism), but in my readings of his work he always seems to fall short of anything beyond this melancholia and regret. Olalquiaga’s reworking of his thinking in *The Artificial Kingdom* starts to address this tendency of his implicitly through her reparative reclaiming of sentimentality as a potentially positive function of kitsch, but her work is still mired in the past, and falls short of asking how kitsch can facilitate the kind of creation of value I’m interested in (even though her investment in Rodney the Hermit Crab in the text’s introduction comes close, implicitly). My shift to postmodernism facilitates the ability to ask what I believe is a much better question: if what’s past is lost, and not really missed by those without much privilege, then *what do we build with what we’re left with now?*

Another example from media theory that comes up in discussing kitsch media is Siegfried Kracauer’s mass ornament and its discussion of, especially, film musicals of the 1930s such as the *Gold Diggers* series. According to Kracauer, when the mass ornament is presented on screen, it is regularly done so via the filming of women’s bodies, dressed in uniform costumes, performing coordinated mass choreography routines, enhanced through the cinematographic affordances of cinema like overhead shots and camera movement. The women in these scenes become automatons through this imaging, and film, through its ability to capture the spectacle of bodies moving like machines from inhuman perspectives, an impression that comes not just from camera position, but also the unison of the dancers’ motions and close-ups and extreme close-ups which segment parts of the women’s bodies from the rest of their forms in a way impossible

watching a stage play, for example.²³ The mediation of bodies into a mass ornament turns bodies, and especially women's bodies, into kitsch objects through their sexuality and the impression of bodily mass reproducibility created by the techniques Kracauer outlines.

The Spice Girls, as a more contemporary pop act, regularly become a kitsch mass ornament of their own, and the tendency in mass culture to treat girl fans as a mass ornament all their own via shots of crowds screaming and crying, reduced to their overflowing emotions (whether for the Beatles in the original British Invasion, Spice love, or at a One Direction concert). The Girls themselves flirt with (self) mass-ornamentation regularly as pop divas performing choreographed numbers on screen and in concert, dancing in a line or circle more often than not. Even when they break out into "individual" dances during song bridges and instrumental breaks, they tend to repeat moves that they are known for, such as the Posh Point, where she sticks one foot out at an angle from her other straight leg, then points at the camera/audience/whatever is in front of her, index finger straight out, and the others fanning back toward her palm without making a complete fist. This point is so iconic it shows up constantly in *Spice World*, especially in moments satirizing the Girls and their relationship to showbiz. For example, when the movie execs are trying to pitch movie ideas to the Girls' manager Clifford, one suggestion involves the Girls starring in a spy thriller called *Spice Force Five*, in which each girl is given a spy expertise lining up with their Spice name. Posh doesn't have a specific job beyond being sexy, as she is described last in the pitch and the exec speaking just calls her Posh then is rendered speechless by her hotness, followed by a cut to her pointing and making a sexy cat growling noise. From music videos to *Spice World* to my own Spice

²³ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

concert experience, Spice involves the mass ornamentation and kitschification of the Girls' bodies and personae, turning them into explicitly consumable cultural commodities.

According to Ihab Hassan, the postmodern, and especially postmodern artistic production, came about as part of the "tradition of the new" composed of the avant-garde, modernism, and postmodernism.²⁴ These new art forms aimed to rework social institutions and ways of inhabiting the world through reinterpreting the changes wrought by the (post)modern moment. The avant-garde, composed of early movements like Dada and surrealism, sought change through anti-bourgeoisie anarchism, modernism sought the higher authority of growth and progress narratives, while postmodern art is "playful, paratactical, and deconstructionist...Yes postmodernism remains 'cooler'...than older vanguards - cooler, less cliquish, and far less aversive to the pop, electronic society of which it is a part, and so hospitable to kitsch."²⁵ For Hassan, postmodernism's embrace of popular forms and new cultural technologies makes it a more accessible, perhaps even democratic, form of artistic production, which parallels not just Benjamin and Kracauer's concerns about mass reproduction in/and art, but also what I see as the postmodernism's more horizontal conception of culture (which maps nicely onto the post/structuralist power grid I outlined in Chapter 1 as being the site of queer and trans cultural capital creation), rather than the hierarchical vertical structures of modernism's focus on progress and structure. In its leveling of different art and culture combined with the technologies of mass reproduction, postmodernism becomes a fruitful site for the continued dispersion and evolution of kitsch. Normally conceived of as trash consumed by the masses who lack good (or any) taste, kitsch is thought of as Cheetos to high art's caviar. It is associated with

²⁴ Ihab Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," in *A Postmodern Reader*, eds. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 279.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

consumption by trashy people who cannot discern good art and culture from bad, and thus is generally used as a term of derision and judgment by those who place themselves in a position of artistic authority in contradistinction to the kitsch consuming Other. But I am curious what becomes of kitsch, and how it can take on meanings outside of being the chaff of “legitimate” artistic production, or even become “cool,” when postmodernism makes formerly “low” culture accepted mass culture and spreads the kitsch commodity far and wide through mass communication and boundless circuits of consumption. In the postmodern age, kitsch can no longer be contained by critics who control the definition of “high” culture and knowledge, and the mass reproduced ornamental, useless kitsch commodity takes on new potentialities and vitalities.

The Spice Girls, then, in a framework like Dorfler’s, create the empty category of “girl” addressed by the Girl Power slogan as one of postmodernism’s many new forms of the kitsch-man, a fact perhaps even demonstrated by the aforementioned “#whatIreallyreallywant” “Wannabe” cover, which frames itself specifically as filling in what “girl” means around the world, and what “girls” “really, really want”. This example is yet another, however, demonstrating that an empty symbol created by kitsch can be filled with new, different, transformative meaning: the empty category of “girl” and slogan of “girl power” is taken seriously by these women, regardless of the band’s pop background, or mass reproducibility. From that seriousness, they fill “girl power” with new meaning, using it as a way to spread awareness of different girls’ plights around the world, and promoting their feminist causes. The “girl” (of which I was and am, in many ways, one, despite my male gender identity – this is the queer potentiality of kitsch emptiness, and an interesting overlap between kitsch and camp studies, the latter having thought much more about queer men identifying across genders with

divas) evoked by thinkers like Dorfler, Benjamin, and Adorno & Horkheimer consumes because of her passion for frivolity, she lacks the “good” judgment to discern how low the Spice Girls’ art is (though I will trouble this assertion later), and she is conceived of as embodying all the usual stereotypes of infantilized girlhood that the mass media purveys and likely even assumed when constructing a “useless” mass produced girl group for the a “girl” audience, an industrial term rife with assumptions of consumer hierarchies and value. She is given the rhetoric of Girl Power with the apparent aegis of gaining individual empowerment through it, but is really only getting the ability to buy even further into the consumption of the fragmented Spice Girls product, forcing her to subsist on a junk-food diet of rhinestoned Dorito kitsch. The *kitschmensch* becomes the *kitschjungemensch*, or perhaps even the *kitschjungefrau*. Kitsch is cultural junk food, an assertion I see as paralleling the way that mass-produced food, and its role in continuing to make eating healthily a privilege: mass-produced food, mass produced art, and kitsch becomes the potato of media.

Mass culture becomes the cultural taste of the necessary; empty cultural calories that give the workers of lower class fractions, or as I am expanding Bourdieu’s concepts, people who are part of minoritized cultural and identitarian fractions and groups, the mental stimulation necessary to keep them healthy enough to keep selling their own (cultural) labour, in this case affectively and emotionally rather than physically. The *kitschmensch*, thus, consumes the kitsch which fuels the tastes of the necessary, as a foolish person, a negatively feminized subject, subsisting on cultural potato and seen as the duped consumer and worker in a strictly Marxian/Bourdieuian reading of cultural economies. Kitsch consumption, then, is the process and labour of finding avenues to create and extract queer use value out of the kitsch necessities, of enacting a non-hegemonic taste of freedom out of the available potato culture.

Following Bourdieu's conception of the tastes of the necessary, and Bourdieu and Marx's connected beliefs about the inherent violence of capital and the taste economies it creates to enforce hierarchies of cultural and social capital, the cheapest, most mass-produced "knock-offs" of "proper" culture becomes the tastes of the necessary in a cultural realm, allowing cultural commodities, media or otherwise, to be examined based on how they will or will not allow for the accrual of upwardly-mobile cultural capital. The violence enacted by these taste economies, which very much view kitsch consumption as providing no avenues for advancement because they aren't accorded cultural worth and value, is one which seeks to keep the flow of 'bad' media in a feedback loop, or a constant circuit, to perpetuate 'bad' taste. This violence, though, is one which is also the dialectical space where minoritized subjects can, through the alternative consumption labours of *kitschwerk*, make the tastes of the necessary to feel like queer and feminist freedoms, even if contingently, momentarily, in a quotidian kind of way.

The Spice Girls, as a postmodern kitsch staple, function as a mass-reproduced copy of the possibility of a truly feminist group of musicians with a unique, empowering message. Jean Baudrillard sees postmodernism as being an age of such copies, which he calls simulacra. He writes that "The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks, and command models - and with these it can be reproduced an infinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal, the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere."²⁶ The kitsch of the postmodern hyper-mass reproduction thus questions how much, if any, of the real is left standing when postmodernism has removed

²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, "The Procession of the Simulacra," in *A Postmodern Reader*, eds. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 343.

the need to measure what we consume against the unique, original object or state of being that modernism lauded, drawing a surprising parallel between the simulacra, Dorfles' kitsch object, and negating the modernist, Benjaminian paranoia about the loss of aura. The postmodern creates endless simulations without a real original, creating a hyperreal that supersedes and discards of the real. The Spice Girls are the epitome of the hyperreal simulated "subject." They are real women turned into endlessly reproducible commodities for mass consumption, starting with their heavily formulaic names/personality avatars of Scary, Sporty, Baby, Posh, and Ginger Spice. Beyond this, the simulation of their personae is then endlessly mass-reproduced in consumable objects that I can only begin to list here: their spectacular concerts, endless TV appearance, CDs, CD singles that sell you the same songs as the CDs but with cheesy bonus tracks like Christmas medleys, dolls, postcards, trading cards, candy with their likenesses on the packaging, cheap jewelry, clothing declaring which spice "team" you're on, and a seemingly endless list of other bumpf and schlock.



Figure 4: Recursive Spice. Screenshot from the *Spice World* Playstation Game.

Media paratexts emanating out from the Spice phenomena largely confirm the usefulness of thinking postmodern kitsch through the simulacra. For example, in the original PlayStation game *Spice World* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 1998), one of the last vestiges of any kind of auraticness or uniqueness for the Spice Girls, the unity and composition of their songs, falls apart. This game, cheaply made with an extremely clunky interface and little to no explanation of its rules or goals, takes the player on a choppy and plot-less journey through a pop star's "life" as one of the five Spices. After selecting the pixelated avatar of the Girl you want to play, the player is prompted to choose one of the Spice Girls' hit songs, and create a "remix" of it (though this game does not have any actual DJ or track mixing mechanics built in, and doesn't tell you *how* to

create this remix). Upon playing around, the player finds that creating the remix involves jumping their Spice avatar across a grid of squares, each of which triggers a brief sound byte from the selected song, all of which are the same tempo and length. After selecting enough clips in whatever order the player wants, the “remix” is populated, and the player’s avatar moves to a new screen where she leads the other four Spices in creating “choreography” to the player’s “remix.” Once again providing no interface or mechanics tutorial, the player must button mash the four buttons on the right side of the PlayStation controller, each of which will trigger a very basic dance move for the Spices to carry out to each successive song snippet in the “remix” being played over a repetitive backing track that sounds vaguely like the original song (this is why it is important that all the snippets chosen in the previous mini-game are of the same length and tempo: they are entirely interchangeable). The game does inform you that there are dance move “combos” possible by pressing more than one button at once, but they are not flagged or defined, and are very difficult to figure out without extensive (and, for me, frustrating) experimentation. Once the dance is done, the player have created their remix, and can watch it with the choreography. Continuing to play the game involves repeating this process ad infinitum until finished playing, based on whatever criteria of “finished” the player might bring with them to the game, and I would suspect, is likely defined by emotions and affects such as boredom and frustration.

When evaluated as a game, *Spice World* is, frankly, atrocious. There are no real win conditions, few to no unlock-able rewards, the interface is clunky and poorly constructed, there’s no plot to speak of, and the game doesn’t really incentivize replaying beyond the initial attachment to the Spice Girls that led to the game’s purchase in the first place. This is a kitschgame if I’ve ever seen one, and this status is earned in no small part because of its embrace

of the mass reproducible simulacral nature of Spice. Even the Girls' songs, which could be seen as the one rock of originality and aura in an otherwise constructed pop culture superphenomena, are rendered to entirely interchangeable pieces, taking away any sense of originality or aura, and drawing the fan/player's attention to the fact that, as pop songs, the Spice Girls' oeuvre isn't even original more than a collection of formulaic conventions, lyrics, and motifs. Furthermore, the game's mechanics seemed premised on consumption in the form of an unending loop of the same act of consumption, just with a different surface applied to the "product" output (ie the various "remixes" that, though different each time, exist solely within the bounded nature of a digitally programmed game with finite options). The *Spice World* game evacuates any pretense that the Girls' live in a real world rather than a hyperreal pop music Disneyland.

The music video for "Spice Up Your Life" takes the acknowledgement of Spice-as-simulacra one step further, situating the Girls' commoditized, chopped up, mass ornamented personae in an undefined, gritty and gray megalopolis, seemingly a near-future space suggested by the video's adoption of a steam-punk-esque aesthetic. As the Girls' cruise over the city, surveying their world from a hovering vehicle and on hoverboards (that are clearly repainted and slightly modified surf boards), we are treated to constant pop culture iconography repurposed to be Spicy, in the form of popular logos and cultural references recast as being about the Spice Girls. These include, but are not limited to: a billboard for Spicesonic (rather than Panasonic) electronics; "Spice Girls" written in the same font as Burger King's logo, with the words inside two buns; a screen in a public square playing the opening of a movie titled *Spice Wars*, written at the top of the iconic yellow scroll used to introduce the *Star Wars* movies; and Spice Girls Coffee, written in white in a green circle spoofing Starbucks' corporate branding, with a picture of Sporty Spice replacing the mermaid in the centre of the circle. Throughout the video the



Figure 5: Pastiche Spice. Screenshot from the “Spice Up Your Life” Music Video

inhabitants of this futuretropolis are seen watching Spice Girl videos, such as “Wannabe” and “Say You’ll Be There”, further situating the Girls’ entirely as commodities, both in their actual music and video output, and with a recognition of their ability to take over the world through the power of Spice, framed here as corporate expansion through the appropriation of so many iconic corporate and entertainment media references. Spicing up ones life requires stepping into the hyperreal world of mass reproducible kitschpop, jettisoning any sense of grounded reality in favour of a fantasy of Spice dominance (all of which is represented in a music video whose job it is to sell more Spice).

Baudrillard draws on the example of Disneyland to explore how the proliferation of simulacra conceals the fact that there is no real world left in the postmodern age. Accordingly, “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality

principle.”²⁷ The creation of highly visible sites of “imagination” and “fantasy” are thus the postmodern world’s red herrings, convincing us that the world around us is real because the spectacle before us isn’t. The Spice Girls are simulacra that we are asked to consider real representations of gender, feminism, and the social order in the ways that they are staged as being a locus of affective and capitalistic investment and consumption. They convince us that gender is about uniqueness and empowerment (girl power!), allowing them to be branded as feminist when they uncritically purvey infantilizing notions of gender in their five formulas of womanhood, style, and consumption.

Spice World (1997), which campily sends up the Spice Girls own story by overtelling their “actual” (but entirely fake) story of the rise to fame (they were not friends before, like the film insists – in fact, Baby wasn’t even one of the original five women chosen to be in the band, which wasn’t originally going to be called the Spice Girls) to make it seem like a nod-nudge-wink in-joke, becomes the Disneyland that creates the illusion of the band’s reality. *Spice World* is a hyperreal mockery of the constructed simulacra of the Spice Girls, presenting a second layer of simulation that seeks to convince us that the first layer, evoked through examples like the *Spice World* game (which came *after* the movie temporally, in a very postmodern confusion of time and meaning) and the video for “Spice Up Your Life” evoke, is actually real. The film thus points out the endless reproduction that can be carried out on commodities, but adds that in the mass reproduction of kitsch and schlock, we can be convinced that a previous simulation of realness actually is real and carries the unique aura of creation, covering up the never-ending kitsch circuit of the horizontal postmodern capitalist landscape. These circuits are shown in how *Spice World* is a caricature of a caricature of gender and stardom being dogged in the film by a

²⁷ Baudrillard, 352.

caricature of a paparazzi reporter who can wend his way through toilet pipes without harm to snap photos which demonstrate the world's obsession with the band while its members complain about how they just want to be authentic and friends with each other as politically correct tokens of "feminism," along with their fictional pregnant Asian friend who adds another lay of token diversity that the band does not contain. In creating this rather ridiculous, if enjoyable, fantasy that hints at how the Spice Girls want to be "real" people, it suggests that there are real people hiding under the commodity in the form of the mass consumable band already flooding the Western world's airwaves.²⁸ I am obviously not saying that the Spice Girls are not actual people with actual histories, but the entirety of their public presentation and personae are simulacra for the kitsch consumerism of postmodernism, no matter how hard *Spice World* might try to be the Disneyland that covers up this truth.

Like the simulacra, kitsch questions the real through its shattering of the aura: it has taken away the privilege of seeing art and culture for any uniqueness it might have, and done its best to destroy the ritual and labour that goes into the crafting of art. This shattering, however, is not infinite or timeless, as (post)modernism also embraces speed and increases the pace of life, suggesting that the concepts it employs to purvey itself must also have movement. Dorfles posits that if "this pseudo-culture has no form of differentiation in enjoyment...we cannot deny that even this leveling type of culture needs some kind of differentiation if it is to be accepted by the general public. This explains the incessant quest for new products, which have never been issued

²⁸ I would add here that the Spice Girls truly were a world-wide fame phenomenon, with huge followings in non-Western countries, as evidenced by their concert in Istanbul, Turkey, being the one selected to be turned into a concert DVD of their first world tour. Their world-wide fame certainly provides an avenue to discuss the ways in which postmodernism and kitsch spread across, create, and perpetuate flows of globalized American capital and cultural imperialism, but these analyses are beyond the scope of what this paper can accomplish.

before and are in some way individualized. And this gives rise to yet more examples of kitsch.”²⁹

To keep pace with the motion of (post)modernism, then, new kitsch must be endlessly (re)produced once the current iteration of kitsch has been consumed. This provides the false idea that consuming kitsch simulacra is an individualizing action, since there is the appearance of the “choice” to drop one form of kitsch for another. The pop bands of the 1990s are a perfect example of this process: a new band pops up that, underneath its new “look,” is suspiciously similar to the last one. This new band has its moment in the spotlight, then is cast aside for the next “big thing” (that is also suspiciously similar to the first two). The Spice Girls, along with other super-bands like the Backstreet Boys, might have had longer in the spotlight due to their extreme marketability and serialization in spin-off products, but even they exemplify this pattern. The brilliance of the Spice Girls lies, I believe, the marketing of five “unique” and different personalities inside the same product where previous (and following) bands did not work as hard to differentiate their members. Rather than calling them by their names at all times like the Backstreet Boys (even if there was a general idea that Nick was the “boyish” one, AJ the “bad boy,” etc.), the Spice Girls were attributed their own descriptive flavour, making a five-in-one consumption deal that provided exponentially more opportunities for kitschification and mass (re)production. They presented a simulacra of individualism that other pop bands could not match, making them able to fulfill the craving for “individualism” for a longer time than others and in an ironically unique example of generalization.

Therefore, girl power, as a feminist (or “feminist”) concept is one which must at least acknowledge this reality of being a woman, performer, and celebrity, especially one marketed to girls, in a postmodern media landscape. To be successful, object-ification and a making-

²⁹ Dorfler, 32.

simulacra of the self and body are prerequisites in pop music, a devil's bargain to be sure, but that doesn't mean that in this gray dialectical space of mass reproduction and kitsch commodities it is impossible to find spaces of resistance, or consumption patterns and choices which offer alternatives and ideas on how to survive under capitalism while playing the gold digging games of capitalist fame.

In the song "Naked" from the Girls' first album *Spice*, the listener is presented with a story about a woman looking to explore her sexuality, desiring to express her true self to the outside world, but doing so while navigating sexism and cultural expectations of womanhood. In this song, nakedness, as a concept, resides simultaneously and in a rhetorically slippery way between physical, embodied nakedness as a symbol of a woman's power and sexuality, especially as she is first discovering it (which is very significant when thinking about the Spice Girls' original adolescent and teen fan base) and the metaphorical nakedness of taking the risk of expressing oneself truly and without shame to other people and society.

Like many women, queers, and other minoritized subjects, the subject of "Naked" has faced trauma in the past: "Naivety and childhood left behind/deprived of the goodness of mankind/past encounters have made her strong enough/to carry on and on./Undress you with her eyes/uncover the truth from the lies/strip you down don't need to are/lights are low exposed and bare./Naked." She also knows what's socially expected of her: "She knows exactly what to do/with men like you./Inside out in her mind/there's no doubt where you're coming from/mystery will turn you on." "Naked" recognizes that sex is power, but it is a power that comes with potentially dangerous social expectations of womanhood, and the ways women are allowed to express their sexuality. The chorus intones she is "Naked/nothing but a smile on her face./Naked/she wants to play seek and hide/no one to hide behind./Naked/this child has fallen

from grace./Naked/don't be afraid to stare/she is only/naked." From here, the protagonist is caught. She uses her sex for pleasure and self-discovery, but gets burned, implicitly thanks to the line above about past experiences. In the song's bridge, we hear "Hello, it's me/I thought you'd understand./Well maybe I should have kept my mouth shut/I keep seeing such a pretty picture./I'd rather be hated than pitied/maybe I should have left it to your imagination./I just want to be me." Like the virgin/whore dichotomy (dialectic?) of womanhood rife in modern mass media and culture, "Naked's" heroine is left with no good options: she must either take care of herself and hide (the submissive virgin), or expose herself and take the chance of being branded a whore, a strong possibility evoked by the multiple repetitions of "this child has fallen from grace" in the songs choruses, sung by Sporty Spice, the band's belter who is regularly given the lines which most punctuate a song's meaning.

The virgin/whore paradigm is one which is intimately connected to the mass ornament and kitsch in cinema history, as outlined by Pamela Robertson in *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp From Mae West to Madonna*, specifically in her chapter on the musical spectaculars of Busby Berkeley, such as *Gold Diggers of 1933* (dirs.. Busby Berkeley and Mervyn LeRoy, 1933). Though focused on feminist camp, rather than kitsch (though Robertson, like most camp scholars, cannot avoid mentioning kitsch as the popularly-conceived empty "other" to camp's irony and politics), Robertson argues that the detached nature of the Berkeley numbers, especially in *Gold Diggers of 1933*, show how women under capitalism are forced to play with being represented as virgins and whores, commodifying themselves to get by during the Great Depression. The "gold digger" then is more than just a base woman seeking a man to make money off of: she is a woman using the resources at hand, via the spectacles of film musical numbers based in representations of women as mass ornament, to get ahead and build a life for

herself.³⁰ The lead women in the film, for Robertson, are turned into mass ornaments through their places in the film numbers, cut apart and turned into mass-reproduced and indecipherable body parts by the camera and technologies of film, yet the very spectacle of the ornament points out the contradictions of capitalism, especially during the depression, that they must navigate as they search for love and work to keep their careers as showgirls alive. They must commodify themselves as showgirls (the whore), while also landing a man by playing up, and through, feminine stereotypes like the ingénue (the virgin).³¹ The Tiller Girls or Berkeley's showgirls, on their own, fall into the empty, negative view of the kitsch mass ornament. But just as Robertson insists that feminist camp works with cultural stereotypes of women (virgin/whore, gold digger, etc.) and changes their *context*, through film and spectacle, to give a feminist message, so I argue the same happens with kitsch and Spice. The difference here is that the context is given in consumption, rather than production, allowing me shift the key tenets of Robertson's arguments about the mass ornament out of camp and into kitsch. It is the very emptiness of the spectacle of the gold digger for capitalism, working within the system to get by and build a life, that allows it to become a touchstone for affective investment via consumption. The "Naked" girl, and implicitly the Spice Girls themselves, must become a (post)modern day gold digger of 1997: her sexuality and body are sources of empowerment and resources she can use to advance herself in her life (a very Marxian idea, even if he only focused on bodies as productive in factories and other traditional venues of capitalist production), and yet that same basic capitalist power, the power to control and sell one's own body and the fruits of its labours, represents huge risk in a society dominated by patriarchal values and systems of power. Just as the gold digger must be

³⁰ Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp From Mae West to Madonna* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 57-84.

³¹ *Ibid.*

both virginal and pure to be considered attractive yet is simultaneously branded a whore for using what resources, embodied or otherwise, she has available to get ahead in life.

And yet, despite this, the song ends with an almost strident, angry tone, with the Girls singing primarily in their lower ranges, including during Sporty's inevitable climax-belting-solo, lending an ominous but powerful tone to the last verse of the song. "This angel's dirty face is sore/holding on to what she had before/not sharing secrets with any old fool./Now she's gonna keep her cool/she wants to get naked." Though the song's use of "angel" perhaps invokes the virgin/whore dichotomy once more, I do find the use of the term interesting for discussing Spicekitch, as we are offered here an updated, feminist angel of history who, most importantly, is *aware* of the oppressive forces which come into play when her assertions of independence and bodily/sexual autonomy come up against hegemony and patriarchy. She's holding onto scraps and pieces and her own belief in herself as a powerful person as she continues to strive to attain the privilege of being naked, being fully herself. This song ends in a very queer, feminist, defiant act of coming out, so to speak, as naked: her being burned hasn't stopped her drive to make something of herself in difficult circumstances outside of her control, just as *kitschwerk* and the queer angel of history strive to make tastes of freedom out of the tastes of the necessary.

When performed on their various world tours, this song is equally fascinating (and also extremely consistent across all concert recordings I've found, *including* those from after Ginger left the band). On stage, the girls strip behind a screen their dancers bring out after the previous song, and are revealed on five hard-backed chairs turned backward so, as they straddle them and drop the dark, drab, blankets they've wrapped around themselves, their legs are visible as is everything above the bust, but the back of the chair covers their torso and pelvic regions. (If you look closely at some performance videos you can see that they're still wearing modesty garments

hidden behind the chair backs, but that's a practicality largely hidden by the performance, especially in a massive stadium setting.) The girls dance sensuously in the chairs with their arms and legs, and sometimes wrap themselves in their blankets to get up and walk around the stage while singing.

The performance, like the song, plays with the consumer, offering tantalizing tastes of sex and sexuality to the viewer while never actually revealing the Girls' full nudity (physical or metaphorical, the performance suggests, giving a subtle reminder that the Girls' personae are simulacra – more on this below). So, despite a desire to be naked, expressed visually and aurally, the consumer is never granted the privilege, permission, or right to fully experience, consumer, or own that nudity, a subtle but powerful statement of resistance both to societal norms for women (and queer people, when one thinks about the catch-22 of the need to come out, for example) and to the Girls' own mass-commodified fame that I, even as a pre-teen, recognized in a very base, visceral, embodied way. The Girls', and for me as a fan, by extension, my own identity, secrets, identities – our nakedness – is a source of power and desire, of drive and ambition, but it is one not to show to just anyone. Even as one must use their naked, true self as resources to make do in an awful capitalist world, it is a resource to be treasured and shared fully with only the right people where possible. “Naked,” then, is an invitation, through consumption, to find one's own agency in being a queer angel, reveling in identities, ideas, and commodities simultaneously sold to minoritized communities and lower cultural class fractions and debased as being low-brow, useless, or otherwise worthless because of their consumption by the very people they were always designed to be sold to as part of the capitalist system of cultural and economic reproduction in perpetuity.

This is, in many ways, one of the key elements of Marx's theories of capital, not just for thinking about class and labour, but the ways in which many minoritized subjects, including queers, girls, and women, have *always* been put in these kinds of catch-22s by capitalism and culture when it comes to selling their bodies and labour power (cultural or otherwise). Kracauer and Benjamin also have this point hiding within their work, but they tend to miss the trees (people who have always been forced to commodify and automatonize themselves by culture, representation across media, and capitalism alike) for the forest of modernism. Perhaps, then, in a postmodern world and culturescape, we must all be gold diggers of one kind or another. By refusing to shame women (and queers and trans people) using their bodies and sexualities (the one thing they sometimes get to control in difficult economic circumstances) for personal and life gain, we can begin to think about how people have a tenacity and resilience to dig for gold, or something else they find valuable and desirable, where there might be none, in the detritus of (post)modern capitalism, and to make the most of their lives while doing it. The gold digger dancer is a queer angel of history, and the kitschmensch is too, a fact that is all the truer in a postmodern cultural landscape.

Reparative, Incandescent, Ornamental Spice: A Love Letter and Conclusion

Too much of nothing so why don't we give it a try/Too much of something we're gonna be living a lie/Too much of nothing so why don't we give it a try/Too much of something we're gonna be living a lie.

-“Too Much” by the Spice Girls

According to Baudrillard, “it is practically impossible to isolate the process of simulation, through the force of inertia of the real which surrounds us, the inverse is also true...*it is now*

impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real.”³² But if the Spice Girls are one of many examples of the necessity of giving up on the real or proving the real, could kitsch provide us a way to find value in something other than the real? Though much postmodern theory, like the school of kitsch theory that Dorfles is part of, paints a bleak picture of society as a place where the lack of reality also means a lack of positivity, happy affect, or even hope, Baudrillard does provide a small but significant avenue for a more positive take on the mass reproducibility of the (kitsch) simulacra in the postmodern world. He writes that “Transgression and violence are less serious [offenses to the postmodern condition], for they only contest the *distribution* of the real. Simulation is infinitely more dangerous, however, since it always suggests, over and above its object, that *law and order themselves might really be nothing more than a simulation.*”³³ Though the simulacra takes active part in destroying the real, it simultaneously suggests that the “real” laws, orders, norms, and ideologies of our society are equally simulated. Similarly, kitsch functions to also call into question the “realness” of the stereotypes that it also trades in. Is Scary Spice an endlessly simulated stereotype of “wild” black femininity or a simulation that points out how utterly baseless, empty, and offensive those very stereotypes are? Or does a theory of postmodern kitsch allow us to see her as *both*? If kitsch simulacra show their own content to be nothing more than arbitrary signs and meanings that are not tied to anything real, and thus can be repeated and (re)produced ad nauseum, then they also show how these very same signs are false truisms that can be discarded like so many tacky paperweights. It is this disruptive potential of postmodern kitsch that both acknowledges and discards its more pejorative functions, that allows me to question how kitsch can promote a

³² Baudrillard, 359.

³³ *Ibid.*, 358.

reparative and generative attachment to pastiches and simulacra on a micro level, giving back some positive affect to that which has been largely cast aside as base, including the Spice Girls.

And so, as promised above, we return to “Wannabe” and zig-a-zig-ah, but with a brief diversion into Halberstam’s take on what it means to be a gaga feminist, especially for young women and queers, in the age of Lady Gaga. To define gaga feminism, Halberstam begins with the actual definition of the term gaga, meaning nonsense, noise, and embracing chaos and confusion, as being a key tool of new generations of young feminists growing up in the postmodern internet age. Taking inspiration from Lady Gaga’s referentiality, over-the-top performances, and general culture jamming, gaga feminism is, then, using the tools of contemporary mass media to create noise and disruption and nonsense, not just in media, but in culture broadly, and as a tactic for pointing out the contradictions and injustices of ideologies of gender, sexuality, race, class, age, and dis/ability.³⁴

I see Girl Power as a similar project to Gaga: a massive pop sensation with an ostensibly feminist message, but also deeply problematic and extremely open to criticism because of the artists’ ties to consumer capitalism and the creation of wealth for themselves, their producers, and the music industry which are inherent in becoming a pop star in the first place. And yet, with both Lady Gaga and the Spice Girls we are presented with extremely powerful and potent examples of strength in femininity and difference for entire generations of people growing in truly mass media culturescapes. So, though we need to keep our paranoid critical lenses on these phenomena, we also need to take girl power, gaga, zig-a-zig-ah seriously as movements which resonate with and motivate people in progressive, meaningful, reparative ways.

³⁴ J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

And so, a return to Scary Spice's assertion that zig-a-zig-ah can mean anything you want, or perhaps even *need*, it to mean. Zig-a-zig-ah is the empty container that kitschwerk fills with meaning, with happy feelings, to help people make it through their lives and, just like pop stars who I do believe genuinely want to make a positive change in the world through their privilege and power as stars, zig-a-zig-ah and gaga alike offer models to people for how to navigate living lives that are always already inculcated in consumer capitalism and all its violences. Gaga and zig-a-zig-ah are not Big Theory or Big History meta-narratives of freedom, but they are sites of contradiction, dialectical identity formation and movement, where, through more reparative kitsch theory, we can see quotidian, everyday, micro-scale resistance, self-love, and the creation of alternative cultural capital.

Zig-a-zig-ah is an intentionally disruptive phrase as well: the term drops at the end of the first verse of "Wannabe", and it is the only answer the song provides to the question "Tell me what you want, what you really really want", or, really, the question capitalism tries to answer in a grand sense through selling products we want, "want", need, or "need", but also through constructing the very concepts of what it is that we are meant to want in the first place, creating the tastes of the necessary and the self-sustaining system that is capitalist wealth generation. By so blatantly answering such a key question to capitalist life with an entirely nonsensical phrase, the kitsch meaning of "Wannabe" and its video start to emerge. They both understand what we are supposed to answer to the question of what we really want: it is the "job" of the consumer under capitalism to want what is already offered to them, and, Marx and Bourdieu might add, to want and desire and naturalize one's own subjugation to capitalism and its structure of power and taste. And yet they insist upon an alternative and open-ended answer to the question, inviting alternative consumption practices and meaning-making practices to fans just discovering what

Girl Power does or doesn't mean *to them* through this first single and the entire Spice phenomenon it set off.

Girl Power and zig-a-zig-ah are about knowing you live under the ugly violence of capitalism and are very materially, bodily, affectively, and consciously aware of the difficult, contradictory dialectical ideologies and power structures one is forced to live under as a woman, a queer person, a person of colour, or other minoritized identity categories. Capitalism is, in the grand scheme of things, a no-win situation for most people, so the only thing to do is keep fighting the power, but also to take care of yourself while you do it, a twist on the negative views of messages of individuality in capitalism media seen through the paranoid frameworks of Benjamin, Adorno & Horkheimer, Bourdieu, and even Marx. Like gaga, zig-a-zig-ah means nothing on its surface, it's a nonsense phrase, and yet that meaninglessness, its definitional uselessness, contains the power (like kitsch) to mean what its consumer *needs* it to mean. The use value of gaga and zig-a-zig-ah come exactly from their meaninglessness and uselessness.

One of the major takeaways for me from Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism* is that when you live under restrictive power structures, sometimes the best micro-level, quotidian act of resistance is to be illegible to power, to be nonsense, to be noisy, to go gaga, to enact zig-a-zig-ah. This is one way of being the queer angel of history under capitalism, making use out of the "useless" tastes of the necessary and the detritus of power and history. Implacable like the single take cinematography of "Wannabe", joyous in disruption like the tablecloth pulling and table dancing Spice Girls as they celebrate their own sexuality and individual empowerment even while living under capitalism, and free to be herself without fear like the woman in black who converts to the ways of Girl Power in my reading of this video, Spice kitsch offered me a way

out of myself, a space to dream and be free, and that is power of kitsch and zig-a-zig-ah and uselessness under postmodern capitalism.

The final question to address, then, is how one finds reparative kitsch zig-a-zig-ah in the Girls' texts, such as the *Spice World* videogame and the video for "Spice Up Your Life," which, as my above readings show, do an excellent job pointing out just how fake Spice, and the postmodern capitalist mediascape it circulates through and is founded on, are. To answer this question, I return to the issue of ornamentalism so fruitfully raised by Kracauer. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz theorizes ornaments, first and foremost, through their decorative functions: coming from the perspective of architecture, he reminds us that ornaments are not just decorative, but are specifically not part of a building's (or artwork's) structure, ie that which keeps it erected and secure.³⁵ Ornaments are, thus, "useless" from a pragmatic position on art and aesthetics, an interpretation supported by Muñoz's engagement with ornaments via Ernst Bloch's writings on utopia. Like so many other examples of "useless" art in this dissertation, Muñoz and I make similar moves, interpreting the "useless" ornament as being a site for reaching beyond what is in the here and now for something more or something different. For Muñoz, this something else comes from the inherently excess-ive nature of the ornament: it is, by definition, an excess built onto the necessary structure of the artistic commodity. And, just as both Muñoz and Massumi see excess as being the path to utopia and postcapitalism, respectively, so I see the excesses of kitsch ornamentation as being exactly the spaces and places where kitsch media consumption finds reparative spaces of enjoyment, fun, hope, or even just mindless, repetitive relief from the onslaught of capitalist life. When seeking escape to the excessive lands outside of one's quotidian life (or even capitalism as a system, in the grand register of Massumi's

³⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising*. This gloss of Muñoz's theorizing of ornamentalism is drawn primarily from chapters eight and nine of *Cruising Utopia*.

theorizing), who is to say that the most healing, reparative vector for that consumption is, in fact, into the hyperreal, empty kitsch topography of Spice? Perhaps it is in the cracks formed by mindless “remixing” of kitsch commodities through which an incandescent light can shine, offering contingent, quotidian moments of relief. The literal Spice world of “Spice Up Your Life” can serve as a comfort, just like Disneyland does for so many people, including many radical queers and feminists in my own life. Finding ways to make entirely complicit, consumerist consumption not just draw one in with glamour and allure, but produce new, positive affects through consuming those mass-reproduced alluring, glamorous commodities, is a queer act of consumption and valuation of the useless. These are not revolutionary consumptive acts, and have less overt political or ideological resonances than the examples in the following chapters, but it is, in many ways, the kind of consumption closest to my heart, and the basis for the more politically inflected analyses to come.

In the next chapter, this study takes one step backward from the individual consumption of this chapter, to see how individual acts of queer media consumption can become the catalyst for beginning to form the links between people and other people like them and/or individuals and communities (both perceived or projected and materially real). These links are an example of how cultural fractions, and especially queer and trans cultural fractions more invested in creating and valourizing “useless” cultural capital travelling through queer circuits of value, can coalesce in contemporary media, both analog and digital, through the concept of a communication network.