

## “E” TICKET TO NIKE TOWN<sup>1</sup>

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I visited Nike Town on one of those drab Manhattan Sundays when a little rain threatens the less than serious athletic types but makes for a good shopping day. The sidewalks were busy in front of Nike Town’s impressive façade on East 57<sup>th</sup> Street, cushioned between Tiffany’s and Tourneau—with its giant clocks displaying the time in twenty-three countries—and opposite Hermes, Chanel, Dior, Warner Brothers, and the Original Levi’s Store. In short, it’s a good neighborhood.

In her book, *No Logo*, Naomi Klein describes Nike Town as a shrine or temple: Its mantra of “Honor,” “Victory,” “Courage,” and “Teamwork” is literally carved in stone at each corner of the façade.<sup>2</sup> But for me, the crown of American and Nike flags, the imposing arch-shaped paned glass, revolving doors, and mock turnstiles resemble the grand entrance to a train station, a place where deserving people are swept off to be charmed and challenged; where, in anticipation of journeys, tired bodies and weary existences are rejuvenated. Indeed, Nike Town is about transcending time, for the store interior is designed to resemble the school gymnasium of our youth—with a few additions, including the photo montages encased in the “museum” and the costly multi-media bazaar contrived to zap the enervated back to life.

Seven mounted 26” television screens assault you as you pass through the turnstiles. In synchronous patterns, they broadcast different sporting events to the unifying pulse of loud pop music, reminding us at once that retail sports is about vicarious competition and spectatorship. Opposite the entrance, a 22 x 36-foot screen mechanically descends from the ceiling. Lights dim, the music swells, and one of several stories shown every twelve minutes speaks about Nike faith or self-transformation to inspire your shopping decisions. Scattered among super-quick-cut product promos are video segments that feature actual athletes, who share their victories and disclose their defeats, who know something about self-esteem and personal faith, athletic prowess and determination, competitive wisdom and team spirit. Poetic reflections and dictates, such as “Have I done enough?” and “Exceed the highest expectations, even your own!” accompany the voices and images of sweat, toil, labor, and love of sport. In these sports’ appeals to pathos lies the path to self-actualization—a self donning the Nike swoosh. But if you’re interested in something even more exclusive than the swoosh, Nike’s #1 super sports star brand rules just one flight up the escalator.

Surprisingly, the Jordan brand display is not ostentatious. Perhaps this is evidence to the inverse signification of celebrity: the greater the star, the less attention need be called to the star. Still, it was obvious this was the designer section of the store: Jordan’s athletic perfection is embodied in his logo; printed on every label and featured on all of his apparel is an outstretched male body forming with its limbs the Mercedes star, suspended in mid-air, frozen in time and space, making the perfect shot, the winning shot.

In front of the Jordan merchandise is a video display featuring Michael Jordan and the Nike team during some “backstage” planning and negotiation over performance design decisions. We are informed of just how important Jordan is to the brand. A casual yet professional Jordan tells us, “I’m looking for what I’m

attracted to and try to incorporate that into the shoe or into the apparel [. . .]. The team gives me great guidelines and what I bring to the team is creativity and a final touch of what Michael Jordan likes.”

Never mind the potential disparity between what overseas sweatshop workers earn and what celebrities can pinch for one endorsement deal. In 1992, for example, Jordan commanded twenty million dollars to put his name, “creativity,” and “final touches” on Nike shoes. His pay amounted to more than the total wages of the women in South East Asia who actually made the shoes.<sup>3</sup> Amidst all the glory and triumph of the Jordan brand, the image of an unglamorous, underpaid factory worker simply gets absorbed into a seemingly natural yet highly valorized system of cultural meaning.

Nike Town and the Jordan endorsement are prime post-modern applications of what Marx termed “commodity fetishism”—the kind of “magic” that occurs when we displace value as a product of human labor by projecting it onto objects as if the value were inherent. Marx described a commodity as a mysterious thing because “in it the social character of men’s labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves but between the products of their labor.”<sup>4</sup> In this system of transference, the social relations between the factory workers and the value of their labor are naturally obfuscated by the system of surplus capital and generalized commodity exchange, realized in terms of money. A documented example in another domain of national branding makes the point. Charles Kernaghan, in an open letter to Walt Disney, illustrates the alienation of the workers when he discloses how much the shirts they produce are sold for in the U.S.:

[. . .] it was only when I translated the \$10.97 into the local currency—178.26 gourdes—that, all at once, in unison, the workers screamed with shock, disbelief, anger, and a mixture of pain and sadness, as their eyes remained fixed on the Pocahontas shirts [. . .]. In effect, each worker assembles fifty Disney shirts in a day, which at \$10.97 each, would sell for a total of \$548.50 in the U.S. For her eight hours of work sewing these shirts, the L. V. Myles employee earns just \$2.22!<sup>5</sup>

While Disney and other national brands are self-endorsed, the additional inculcation of celebrity into production in advanced capitalism allows for an analysis of commodity abstraction from two perspectives: the celebrity endorsement from a production standpoint and the consumption of cultural meaning attributed to the celebrity endorsement that is embodied in the commodity-sign. From a production standpoint, the Jordan endorsement is the product of a social and economic process: that is, years of labor by Jordan and countless others (teammates, opponents, coaches, PR specialists) plus enormous sums of capital to nurture and sustain his success. The payoff for advertisers is obviously how well the super sport hero can sell products. To the bottom left of the Jordan video display an explicit endorsement is engraved into the plexi-glass: “I stand behind the Jordan brand because of my contribution to the design process. It’s got to perform. Because I’ve got to perform in it.” Perhaps Marx never imagined that the words and image of a person could be commodified; Jordan’s endorsement is highly scripted, encoded cultural meaning that adds value to the product itself, while it also assumes the symbolic link between what the good communicates and what the consumer finds satisfying. I made my way over to the shoes to see the latest Jordan design that “performs” for him, even though he’s been retired for over two years.

The Air Jordan XV reigns supreme on the shelf, in the middle at about eye level. Its sleek body is ornamented with a navy weave on top, supported by a blue metallic arch, and detailed with white trim. On the sole of the shoe, a series of cryptic numbers is embedded in the plastic wrap along the arch and up the heel: 2 17 23 6 15. Any real Jordan fan can decipher the code, but sales reps stand ready just in case: his birth date, his player number, the number of championships won by the Chicago Bulls, and the model of the shoe, which, one salesperson eagerly pointed out, is also the number of years he played professional basketball. The Air Jordan XV retails for \$150. The inside label reads “Made in China.” Adorno had a

point when he said that consumer culture engages us in a false consciousness of worshipping the price we pay rather than the actual utility of the product; the “real secret of success,” he called it.<sup>6</sup>

In a capitalist society, Marx said, the exchange value of a good inevitably dominates its use value because the production, distribution, and exchange of goods and services will always be dictated by the price they can command—hence their profitability—rather than by the satisfaction of people’s real needs. According to Richard Barnett and John Cavanagh, a typical pair of shoes costs \$5.60 to produce in Asia, and the women who make Nike shoes are paid about \$1.35 an hour.<sup>7</sup> A Chinese laborer working a fifty-hour week would have to spend 50% of her monthly income to buy one pair of Air Jordan XVs for her teenage son. (But none of the shoppers around me looked like they were going without anything vital.)

Remarkably, the added value of the Jordan endorsement has a powerful residual effect that pollinates (or propagates) all Nike products. There is no Air Jordan model for women, but you can still spend \$140 on a pair of Air Max Deluxe, also made in China. You can buy a cute pair of Little Air Jordan XV for an expectant girlfriend for twenty-four dollars plus tax, or about a fifty cents per day given how long the baby could wear them, without actually walking, before growing out of them. If the celebrity value isn’t inherent in these little itty-bitty shoes, what makes them so expensive? At least with the grown-up version, you get about twenty times the shoe mass for about six times the cost. “Do you sell many of these baby shoes?” I asked the salesperson. “Uh huh,” she nodded emphatically, “it’s cuz of this little man right here,” pointing to the incredibly tiny Jordan logo at the toe of the baby shoe. I wanted to ask her if children’s hands made these little shoes, but I figured I’d be asking for an escort out the door in no time.

Despite the controversy over exploitative Third World labor conditions, issues of representation and cultural meaning contained in the Jordan brand, in particular, seem insulated from criticism. Paul Smith attributes the hands-off protection that Jordan enjoys (unlike Kathie Lee Gifford, for example) to what he calls the “regulatory elite” in U.S. black culture. Smith points out that these people who earn millions of dollars a year in the face of systematic devastation of black communities in the U.S. take on the burden of representing blackness in the culture from their positions as cultural icons. Smith writes:

Even though the bill for the rewards collected by this regulatory elite are footed by predominantly white capital, their cultural significance stems from being venerated as bearers of black identity (both by blacks and whites, most likely—by whites wishfully thinking that racial divisions could be elided by their presence; by blacks, wishfully thinking that the status and spoils of someone like Michael Jordan are not eccentric).<sup>8</sup>

Jordan widens the target when he responds to the contradiction of his position with Nike and its subcontractor practices with “That’s not my department.” Still, Jordan trusts Nike to “do the right thing.” Evidently, his deeply connotative semiotic construction deters many of us from questioning his role as Nike’s spokesperson as well as our own role as consumers. Despite Nike’s claims to have improved subcontractor labor practices, recent reports by various human rights organizations and corporate watchdog groups indicate that serious labor abuses and sweatshop conditions continue. Reports based on interviews with workers in China expose twelve-hour days and seven-day work weeks, low wages, illegal deductions, and use of the dormitory system.<sup>9</sup> One has to wonder, given what we know about Nike’s sweatshops, why it is that people keep buying and proudly donning the Nike commodity sign. With products sold in 110 countries, Nike sales for 1998 totaled a whopping \$9.5 billion, making it the #1 shoe company in the world.<sup>10</sup> If we are indeed an active audience, then we are actively choosing to ignore disturbing, even appalling facts about how Nike does business, in order to privilege the dominant, pleasant cultural meanings that the goods communicate. Clearly we can say that advertising speaks louder than criticism, but that doesn’t explain why we listen to ads, or more importantly, why we buy.

According to Sut Jhally, the answer lies in our relation to objects in our consumer society (as opposed to traditional or industrial societies). He contends that consumption has replaced many of our traditional definers of social life, such as community, class, religion, and family. Advertising and broadcast media, having absorbed many of these social conditions, also created a new sphere where meaning in objects—which, in capitalist society, are separated from producers—could be constituted and negotiated. Jhally writes:

Given the central role of objects in the constitution of human societies, human culture and human meaning, one can provide an answer as to where the power of advertising comes from: it derives not from the ingenuity of advertisers but from the need for meaning.<sup>11</sup>

Fetishism in postmodern consumer culture entails emptying commodities of meaning or “hiding the real social relations objectified in them through human labor” to make it “possible for the imaginary/symbolic social relations to be injected into the construction of meaning at a secondary level.”<sup>12</sup> Production, then, empties, and advertising fills, and in this way use value is subsumed by exchange value. The Nike swoosh and the Jordan brand as cultural commodities not only constitute a symbolic code, they also take on a system of significations, coded abstractions realized by “ideological labor,” to borrow from Baudrillard. In the fetish theory of consumption, the so-called magical substance of consumer products is really part of a generalized code of signs, what Baudrillard refers to as “a totally arbitrary code of difference, and that it is on this basis, and not at all on account of their use values or their innate ‘virtues,’ that objects exercise their fascination.”<sup>13</sup> In advanced capitalism, objects lose any real connection with their practical utility and “instead come to be the material correlate (the signifier) of an increasing number of constantly changing, abstract qualities.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in plainer terms Varda Burstyn reminds us that “no matter how appealing shoes and jackets may appear to be, it is the idea of the athlete the equipment represents, not the equipment itself, that is so passionately emulated and identified with, and so carefully cultivated by the mass media.”<sup>15</sup> Advertising links the signified of the athlete with the product by manipulating the semiotic space around the commodities, both physically in Nike Town and, more significantly, through commercials. Nowhere is the junction between commodification, collective identity, and meaning more pronounced and, paradoxically, more distracting (as fetishism) than in television commercials. And nowhere is the logic of signification more captivating than in televised commercial sports events.

In the Jordan section, I asked the sales rep, who was busy restocking jerseys, what he thought the brand meant to customers. “You look at the design and the label. It speaks for itself. It’s excellence,” he said, convincing himself.

Outside, I asked several shoppers toting the Nike Town shopping bag what the swoosh meant to them. Was anybody as exhausted from the labor of signification as I? Some people responded that it’s “cool,” it’s a sporty, trendy brand. Most others insisted it meant nothing to them. Yet everyone I spoke with was aware of the accusations regarding Nike’s labor practices.

It is not that consumers do not care when confronted with the facts about business practices of multinationals. “It’s unfortunate [. . .] if it’s happening,” one man responded. So, what is it that disconnects us from the reality behind the brands, the labels, the logos, and the endorsements of our commodity purchases? For one thing, public memories in consumer society are short-lived or can be easily denied during the business of living our daily lives. At the same time, we live in a symbolic environment saturated with carefully constructed images, raised to a pseudo-art form, even revered as such, by the advertising industry. Appeals to our desires for self-actualization are artfully encoded into objects as meaning. Conveniently, this meaning serves to both distract us from the products’ unpleasant realities *and* to engage us with our incessant adoration of play. In Nike Town, play is sports, play is shopping, and play is the experience of belonging to a common system of meaning-in-consumption that aspires, achieves, wins, and binds us together, even while assuring us that the commodity sign asserts our

individuality. It is no accident that Nike chose the “Town” metaphor to structure the space around its commodities—a space that can transform urban racial conflict into youthful competition and team spirit, a space that houses the “clean” values of a small town past and the hip values of contemporary youth culture. The Jordan brand, the swoosh, and the Nike Town experience strive not to inform consumers, but to transform them through the commodity sign of their purchases.

As I left the Town of Nike, blending with shoppers heading home, one Tourneau clock reported: the time in Beijing was 3:55 a.m.—just a few short hours from the beginning of another work day.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> “E Ticket,” as I use it, denotes Disney’s book of tickets that originally accompanied the price of admission to the park. E Tickets held the highest value and were necessary to access the “best” attractions.

<sup>2</sup> Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Barnet and John Cavanagh, *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, “Capital,” Emile Burns, ed., *The Marxist Reader* (New York: Avenel Books, 1982) 308.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Kernaghan, “An Appeal to Walt Disney,” Andrew Ross, ed., *No Sweat* (New York: Verso, 1997) 101.

<sup>6</sup> Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott, eds., *Mass Communication and Society* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979) 349-383.

<sup>7</sup> Barnet and Cavanagh 325-6.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Smith, “Tommy Hilfiger in the Age of Mass Customization,” Andrew Ross, ed., *No Sweat* 249-262.

<sup>9</sup> Unite! Report, “Sweatshops Behind the Swoosh,” [www.uniteunion.org/pressbox/nike-report.html](http://www.uniteunion.org/pressbox/nike-report.html), April, 25, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> NFLA, “Nike Settles European Headquarters in Hilversum, Netherlands,” [www.nfia.com/html/company/business/nike.html](http://www.nfia.com/html/company/business/nike.html) and [www.nikebiz.com/invest/ar\\_old/in\\_state.shtml](http://www.nikebiz.com/invest/ar_old/in_state.shtml).

<sup>11</sup> Sut Jhally, *Codes of Advertising* (New York; Saint Martin’s Press, 1987) 197.

<sup>12</sup> Jhally 51.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981) 91.

<sup>14</sup> Jhally 11.

<sup>15</sup> Varda Burstyn, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) 145.