

**Philosophy and Business Administration
Masters Thesis**

**“Marketing and Meat-a-physics:
Managing an appetite for meaning
in modern consumer society”**

“There is a cultural love affair with meat.
And Brown’s here to help you through the breakup.”
- Ethan Brown, CEO, Beyond Meat

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Abstract

The following dissertation will raise the question of the role that meaning and culture plays in consumption in general and meat consumption in particular. It will pursue the notion that culture, understood as the concepts and actions humans use to construct our world, is underdeveloped in marketing, and marketing on the other hand has been starved for anthropological attention.

After looking at some of the symbolism related to meats cultural status of the issues that modern meat consumption presents, it will go on to inspect the emergence of a new industry that seeks to solve these issues by disrupting the existing livestock industry through technological food innovation. At the end, it will introduce the question of culture and meaning to ask whether this emerging industry, needs to incorporate a deeper understanding of culture in its' marketing strategies.

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1. Introduction: On the theological origin of marketing and meat consumption

"Marketing has been around for a long time – at least since Satan waged a promotional selling campaign to persuade Eve to eat the apple in the Garden of Eden. Hence, marketing is as old as original sin itself – indeed, a little bit older." - Holbrook and Hulbert¹

Regardless of whether or not we ascribe actual historical value to the book of Genesis, many critics of western material culture, argue that the art of marketing today plays a strikingly similar role of luring consumers towards acts based on selfish desires.

The only change, is simply the scale, and the fact that the Devil's monopoly on the art has been broken by an army of marketing managers.

But is marketing solely this tool of sin? A glance at the dire consequences of modern consumption and marketing's contributing role in this, would for most lend this view at least some merit.² But this paper will explore a different take of the role of marketing and modern consumption in general. By donning an inquisitive lens and exploring the theories of the cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken, a more nuanced view emerges. A view where marketing also plays an important role as a cultural sparring partner in the modern individual's construction of self and where consumption is an important mode of self-expression. This makes a deeper understanding of the cultural landscape and the ability to navigate successfully in it, of central importance to any modern companies engaged in marketing.

Another essential part of the myth of humanity's fall from grace and Adam and Eve's exodus from Eden, is that we picked up the habit of consuming meat. The diet in the Garden of Eden was vegetarian. We lived in harmony with the other animals and nature itself.³

Again, albeit our interpretation of the bible can be less than literal, the role of meat consumption in western culture is of central symbolic importance. For the cultural anthropologist Nick Fiddes, meat represents the epitome symbol of man's supremacy over nature and helps to delineate civilisation against nature. In his view, meat consumption acts as humanity's constant cultural claim to a place at the top of the food chain and a historical reminder that "[t]he initially endangered species, humankind, has become the endangering species."⁴ Apart from the strictly nutritional properties of meat, it's involved in the thoroughly cultural acts of expressing masculinity and power, social status and wealth, and dominion over nature.

¹ P. 706 Holbrook and Hulbert 2002

² P. 3 McCracken 2005

³ P. 13 Shprintzen 2013 A christian vegetarian sect during the early 19th century, argued from the original diet in Eden, that a vegetarian diet was morally superior.

⁴ P. 108 Fiddes 1991

Although meat may play this central role in our collective cultural narrative, the sound of the sizzling steak on the grill is in many ways a dangerously alluring siren song in the odyssey of modern civilisation.

Humanity's huge consumption of meat, milk, dairy and eggs, is contributing to a wide range of global issues; environmental degradation, climate change, food insecurity, farm animal suffering, lifestyle diseases, anti resistant bacteria and financial risk.⁵

A new innovative industry is emerging as a response. They are offering products that promise to tremendously transform the ill effects of producing meat, dairy and eggs, by using technology to remove animals altogether from food production. If we look at the level of visionary drive and technological advancement behind the alternative protein industry, there is no doubt that they are able to bring both tangible and tasty solutions to the table.⁶ Yet in the following thesis, we will question whether the sole solution lies in the technology to replicate or surpass the taste and texture of traditional animal products or whether culture plays a defining part in people's' decision to eat or not to eat, meat.

The research question guiding this thesis will be: What are the cultural aspects of marketing in modern consumer society. And how can a culturally sensitive notion of marketing, help make sense of the emerging alternative protein industry?

This dissertation will pursue an alternative view of marketing, where consumption is seen as an integral part of the way humans constitute their own identities. In this view, getting people to switch to more healthy, humane and sustainable products, becomes less a question of meeting a scientific requirement, of reaching some sort of burger-benchmark. It becomes more about presenting people with the correct puzzle pieces to author their own identity. If this is the case, then it becomes paramount to understand what piece of the puzzle that meat plays in the collective cultural narrative. Or to phrase the issue in a different way; When Pat Brown, founder of Impossible Foods, says that he's been searching for "the molecule that makes meat"⁷, maybe he should be looking for a cultural component? Maybe it's really a question of meat-a-physics?

⁵ See chapter 6.1 for an elaboration of the issues.

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/opinion/sunday/finally-fake-chicken-worth-eating.html>

⁷ <http://www.grubstreet.com/2015/06/silicon-valley-fake-meat-burger.html>

2. Methodology

It has been remarked, that: “Every theory strikes a bargain with reality.”⁸

Usually it’s a choice between a broad or a narrow focus, between knowing more about less and knowing less about more. In this dissertation, I will focus narrowly on the cultural aspects of consumer acceptance of the products of an emerging industry. Thus disregarding many other important matters of marketing. There are obviously a plurality of motives behind modern consumption patterns. I will however, take a broader approach the industry, and examine it as a whole, thereby foregoing the precision and depth of focusing on a single company.

The analysis builds on a structure, as in Holt and Cameron 2004⁹, where data on firm strategies, such as interviews and media articles, are analysed in interaction with secondary sources on socio-cultural dynamics in the marketplace. In this instance, works in cultural anthropology and the socio cultural status of meat. The analysis occurred in 3 stages. The first stage sort was to develop a descriptive case narrative of the emergence and evolution of the alternative protein market. In the second stage of analysis, the strategies of actors / firms was identified. These strategies was analysed in relation of secondary sources of the cultural status of meat consumption. Through this it was learned how firms in the market had navigated the socio-cultural meanings associated with meat consumption.

In the 3rd phase I have tried to abstract the findings of the study to a more general theoretical observation of how marketing works.

The dissertation will take be divided into two main sections. I will start with the question of consumption and marketing. I will then move to the specific case of meat consumption and the emerging alternative protein market.

I have chosen Žižeks theory of the subject, as a preliminary tool to open up the question of marketing to enquiry.

I have chosen Grant McCracken’s theory of consumer culture, as it has a strong focus on the cultural aspects of consumption and marketing.

Because of this, in this dissertation his theory will simultaneously serve as both as a description of how culture functions in consumption and as a testimony to the importance of of marketers to be aware of the cultural aspects of consumption. The argumentative force of his theory lies in its explanatory power, so we will develop it in depth.

His anthropological method anticipates that of Nick Fiddes, who has been chosen for his extensive analysis of the cultural aspects of meat consumption. Due to the similarity of the their methods, McCracken's theory will serve to pave the conceptual way. So when we reach the theme of meat consumption raised by Fiddes, we will assume to the reader is by then familiar with the concepts of meaning and symbols inherent in consumer goods. So with Fiddes, we will get straight to the issue, as it were.

⁸ P. 169 McCracken 2005

⁹ Holt 2004

As note on personal bias, I currently work as the campaign manager for a climate and public health, called Meat Free Mondays, that seeks to address many of issues caused by modern animal agriculture. In this dissertation, however, the focus will be analysing how the products of the alternative protein fare against the cultural parameters of the animal products. I am therefore inclined to present the case as objectively as possible, as any inaccuracy or overstatement will not serve my own understanding of the case. My enthusiasm, however, might occasionally show itself.

Overview of interviews:

They will be referenced according to last name, e.g "Interview Friedrich". They are added as appendixes in the end. Due to a bad sound quality, imany of the interviews are not completely transcribed, as indicated by a [...] in the transcribtion.

Interviewee:	Duration
Bruce Friedrich, Founder, GFI	00:23:25
Chen Cohen, Experienced Animal Rights Activist	00:35:50
Jacob Crumbine,Head of Sales Development, Impossible Foods Inc.	00:36:54
Jaya Bhumitra, Former Director of Corporate Outreach at Mercy for Animals	00:33:35
Josh Balk, Co-Founder, Hampton Creek	00:35:21
Marta Zaraska, Science Journalist	00:36:22
Tobias Leenaert, Experienced Animal Rights Activist	00:29:29
Brian Kincaid, Brand Activation, Beyond Meat, interview	written

3. The question of marketing, or how to “mind the gap”

In the following we will raise the question of the role marketing plays in modern consumer culture. First we will introduce a commonsense concept of marketing, as it's applied in the paper “Elegy on the death of marketing”, by Morris B.Holbrook and James M.Hulbert. Then we will question this conception of marketing, by a brief discussion of Žižek's theory of the subject.

As the title of Holbrook and Hulbert's (H&H) paper suggests, they believe marketing as we know it, is coming to an end. Drawing from a common and a more historic notion of marketing, they define it as follows:

“Marketing comprises managerial activities – such as those associated with channels of distribution, product design, promotional communication and pricing – that facilitate and/or consummate exchanges by closing the gap or removing the separation between two parties such as a producer and a consumer.”¹⁰

The first part is a seemingly uncontroversial textbook-like definition. The concept of the gap between producer and consumer comes from a more historically grounded concept.

H&H argues that marketing actually came into being a bit later than humanity's exodus from Eden, more precisely with the industrial revolution. In the pre-industrial age, marketing did not exist:

“[O]nce upon a time in the ancient days of the old barter economies – no separation or gap existed between producers and consumers.”¹¹

It was when civilisation moved from tailor-fit to mass produced, that a gap between consumer and producer came to be. In the pre-industrial economy, we would simply go directly to whichever craftsman, who produced what we wanted and get it custommade to fit. When cheap, mass produced good outcompeted the old school craftsmanship, the consumer lost the connection with the producer. This gap stripped the consumer of a lot of the influence on the manufacturing process and hence the end product, that they previously had enjoyed. It also shrouded the process of production from consumers, both making it more complex and less transparent. So in short, consumers exchanged tailor-made products, for a greater variety of cheaper products, which they knew less about. A wedge had been driven between supply and demand. And in this gap between producer and consumer, the marketer was born. A need arose to manage the information lost. Marketing arose to best match the demand of consumer needs on one hand with the vast supply of goods on the other. In this sense, marketing managers are simply information brokers.

According to H&H, we are now experiencing an information revolution, driven by the many modern information technologies.¹² Just as the technological innovations of the industrial revolution allowed mass-production of goods, the new information technology is making it

¹⁰ P. 713 Holbrook and Hulbert 2002

¹¹ P. 708 Holbrook and Hulbert 2002

¹² P. 720 Holbrook and Hulbert 2002

possible to mass-customize goods. We can now easily go online, do our own consumer research and, in an increasing number of product-categories, simply ask the producers to custom-make a product. This is in many ways akin to the tailor-made production of yesteryear.

Technology is now bridging the gap originally created by technology, and allowing the consumer yet again to gain information and influence on the products. As paradigm examples, H&H mention “Toyota personalized cars, Levi-Strauss individually fitted jeans, [and] Dell customer-specified computers.”¹³

This development will eventually make marketing obsolete:

“[T]he gap-closing activities in which marketers have excelled – the analysis of market segments; the specification of segment-defining general customer characteristics (demographics, socio-economics, psychographics, etc.); the design of offerings targeted to appeal maximally to these various segments; the implementation of such targeting strategies; and so forth – will no longer be needed by the business community, precisely because the gaps or separations that call forth such areas of expertise will have disappeared.”¹⁴

So in short, the industrial revolution created the gap filled by marketing, and the industrial revolution will close it again. This concludes what H&H consider their obituary of marketing.

I will argue that H&H’s theory of marketing fail on two accounts, and that we shall not expect to be able to erect a mausoleum to marketing anytime soon.

First of, their account of what the system of marketing does and the role it plays in society, does not present the full picture. And this ties in closely with the second critique; that H&H has an underdeveloped notion of what constitutes a modern consumer.

Starting with the latter critique, it can be argued that they put a too great emphasis on the importance of information. Their argument basically says that we lost access to information, and technology allows us to regain this access. This carries with it the implicit assumption, that consumer behavior almost entirely rest on rational processing of information. But is this a correct description of consumers? Are we really that rational? Markets, where the consumer pursues a high degree of knowledge and takes a very rational degree, do exist, yet they are far in between. Douglas Holt calls this “technocratic consumption”, where the consumer possesses a great deal of expertise on the products and can evaluate them thoroughly.¹⁵ Examples of technocratic consumption include carpenters buying tools and pro-athletes purchasing sports equipment. The fact that only very few markets operate around a high degree of information, can be used to make the point that in the complexity and busyness of modern life, the consumer simply can not process all the product information available. This is a fairly simple point about the limited cognitive capacities of humans in the face of excessive information and limited time. Yet we will take the point a bit further and argue that the question of the consumer is not purely a psychological one, but also one of ideology. Žižek defines ideology as: "a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’

¹³ P. 717 Holbrook and Hulbert 2002

¹⁴ P. 722 Holbrook and Hulbert 2002

¹⁵ P. 183 Holt 2010

itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel.”¹⁶

As humans we structure our reality out of fantasies that serve to make reality coherent. This functions as a sort of glue, that binds our reality together, thereby also serving to hide that reality is not as coherent as its representation. One illustrative example of this, is the western calendar system. The earth continuously journeys the around sun, while spinning around itself. We have constructed a system where we call one spin a “day”, which is comprised of 24 hours. One journey around the sun we call a “year”, which is comprised of 365 days. This system functions really well as a symbolic representation of reality. But it is revealed as a symbolic system, by the fact that we have a leap year every 4th year, to compensate for the failure of the system to fully represent the real journey of the earth.

One of the main things hidden from us is the structure our self, or as we will also refer to it; subject. We perceive our self as coherent, but for Žižek the subject is not characterised by being complete, but rather constituted by a lack: “the subject as such is constituted through a certain misrecognition”¹⁷. That the structure of our self is constituted by a “lack” or “misrecognition” is an abstract notion, that deserves some further explanation. It is better understood in the context of the *mirror phase*, a concept suggested by the psychoanalytic Jacques Lacan, whom Žižek builds a lot of his philosophy on.

The mirror phase refers to the first time a child recognizes itself in a mirror. For Lacan “the phenomenon demonstrates clearly the passing of the individual to a stage where the earliest formation of the ego, can be observed.”¹⁸

Two things should be noted. First, there need not be an actual mirror. We may “mirror” ourselves in our parents for example. Second, it’s both a historical notion, referring to the early stage of ego formation in childhood, and also a general structure of how we relate to our concept of our self. What happens in the mirror phase, is that we are able to turn ourselves into an object for our own perception and that we start identifying with this object. Yet the fact that we try to identify with an image of self outside of ourselves means that it’s bound to fail. It’s like chasing our own shadow; we will always be so close to catching it, but always step away. As one reviewer of Žižek puts it:

“The subject is never fully constituted; rather, the subject is these constant, but always futile attempts at constituting the subject.”¹⁹

That there is an inherent gap in the human constitution means that we are in a constant process of creating of our identity. In a way Žižek translates the classic train-platform warning “mind the gap” into a continuous existential imperative. We have to mind the gap constantly, with no hope of ever bridging the gap:

“The point is not just that we must unmask the structural mechanism which is producing the effect of subject as ideological misrecognition, but that we must at the same time fully

¹⁶ P. 45 Žižek 2008

¹⁷ P. xxv Žižek 2008

¹⁸ Lacan 1953 <http://movallali.fr/Some%20writings%20from%20Lacan.htm#1>

¹⁹ http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.501/11.3.r_thomassen.txt

acknowledge this misrecognition as unavoidable”²⁰

The subject is not the only concept that is not static and under continuous construction.

Žižek explains how we sometimes engage in a sort of cultural armwrestling for meaning, like the neo-conservatives and social democrats over the concept of freedom:

“the neo-conservatives try to demonstrate how egalitarian society, embodied in the welfare state, necessarily leads to new forms of serfdom, to the dependency of the individual on the totalitarian state, while the social democrats stress how individual freedom, to have any meaning at all, must be based on democratic social life, equality of economic opportunity, and so forth.”²¹

So our concepts are cultural phenomena engaged in a negotiation for their meaning, which is what Lacan is getting at with his provocative statement: “woman does not exist”²² It’s not to say, that no women exist, but that the concept of “woman” as such, does not exist in a positive, final sense. Rather, what it means to be a woman, is constantly being constituted. What it meant to be a woman 100 years ago is very different from what it means being a woman in modern society.

Following this line of reasoning, we may even conclude that; “meat does not exist”. Again, this is not to say that the flesh of animals does not exist (as most zoologists would readily dismiss), but that the cultural meaning of meat is not static, and varies across ages and cultures.

Let us sum up.

H&H argues that marketing will be made obsolete. The industrial revolution created a gap between consumer and producer, which made room for marketing. This gap will be bridged by the information revolution, which will reunite the consumer with the producer, and thereby making marketing obsolete.

But with Žižek we may say, that in a sense the important gap, is not between the consumer and the producer, but inside the consumer herself. Our concept of self, is structured in such a way, that we are persistently engaged in attempts to create our own identity. This identity project it is akin to constantly pouring water in a cup, that has a hole in the bottom, so we keep pouring. With this view of the subject, we may say that consumption has an ideological side to it. We as consumers, are not strictly rational surveyors of information. This of course begs the question, then how can marketers be the simple peddlers of information, that H&H posits them to be?

In the following chapter, we will develop the view that marketing is actually an indispensable cog in the sensemaking mechanisms of modern society.

This is not to say, that the information revolution won’t have a huge effect on the field of marketing. Yet, if we as humans, are ideological in nature, an increase in the amount of information available, will not change our modus operandi of constant self-creation.

²⁰ P. xxv Žižek 2008

²¹ P. 96 Žižek 2008

²² P. 79 Žižek 2008

4. McCracken and consumer culture

4.1 Intro: Providing some much needed anthropological attention to consumer culture

In the following I will present cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken's theory on consumer culture, as he puts them forth in the books *Culture & Consumption* and *Culture and Consumption II: Markets, Meaning and Brand Management*.

Crossing the chasm from the nitpicking conditions of philosophy to the methodological apparatus of anthropology should be done with a measure of conceptual caution.

In quoting Edward Bruner, McCracken gives me reason to believe his own understanding of self is compatible with Žižek's notion of the subject as a lack:

“As Bruner puts this, “Self and society [can] not be taken as given, as fully formed, fixed, and time-less, as either integrated selves or functionally consistent structure. Rather, self and society are always in production, in process.””²³

For the practical purposes of this thesis, I will interpret a sufficient overlap between McCracken's use of *self* and Žižek's *subject* to use them interchangeably.

The introduction of McCracken's theory on the culture of consumption, is to give an idea of the extent to which material culture, for better or worse, both forms the theatrical stage on which we enact our self-realisation and provides the props to enact it with.

In short, McCracken's project contains both a negative and a positive project. On the negative side, he presents a critique of the traditional way in which academia at large have examined consumption in culture and argues that it has blinded us to valuable insights into human culture.

In his positive project, he aims to show us the insights that a new perspective on consumption can yield. I will examine them in the above order, yet to give better context to his critique and avoid the temptation of an academic cliffhanger, I will start with a brief revelation of his view on consumption:

“[Consumers] use the meaning of consumer goods to express cultural categories and principles, cultivate ideals, create and sustain life-styles, construct notions of the self, and create (and survive) social change. Consumption is thoroughly cultural in character.”²⁴

Consumption in his view, is a highly integral part of the way we express ourselves, or more aptly; express and construct our *selves*. Even though consumption is so central to our way of life, McCracken argues that the topic traditionally has not received a proper treatment from

²³ P. 39 McCracken 2005

²⁴ P. xi McCracken 1990

anthropology as a field in its own right, and has therefore been exiled to the status of the chewed up leftovers from other fields such as economy or sociobiology. This is due to several factors, that combine to constitute a bias towards consumer culture.

Traditional anthropology looks at the noble human pursuits of leisure and work to find out how humans construct themselves and culture, yet western consumption has been “dismissed as a nasty combination of self-indulgence, greed, vanity, and irrationality that does not need or deserve systematic study.”²⁵

From this dismissal, it is clear that the social sciences have in many ways regarded consumption in *opposition* to culture. Materialism is seen as the lowest part of culture, if culture at all. It is also posited as one of the biggest evils in our society and main cause of many of modern society’s ailments²⁶: This has led to an academic imperative to criticize mass consumption culture. This comes with an underlying normative implication, which in its’ negative formulation reads something like the following: To talk about consumption without denigrating it, by implication denigrates yourself.

The critical roots of social science consider a study of consumer culture, to be a sellout. As McCracken puts it, there is an “ideological suspicion that any treatment of the cultural properties of consumer goods is tantamount to participation in the free enterprise system.”²⁷

In other words, to give an account of the consumer system, embedded in the capitalistic system as it is, is deemed equal to extending a seal of approval to the system itself.

This, of course, is a fallacy, and one that McCracken aims to correct. It is logically possible to give an illuminating account of the system, without buying into the underlying ideology of the system. Yet the widespread convention to talk about consumption this way, is reinforced and further entrenched by the abovementioned imperative to criticize:

“The social critic pursues his social mobility by criticizing the vehicle by which others seek theirs.”²⁸

Another obstacle, is that anthropology traditionally has examined exotic, foreign cultures and systematically avoided a ‘look in the mirror’ of its’ own culture.²⁹ It has chosen the marginal over the mainstream.

In his first book from 1988, McCracken notes that there is a change underway. Anthropology is slowly starting to broaden its scope to include consumption and has developed some of the theoretical tools for capturing the symbolic and cultural aspects of consumption. He is also seeing a big change in the field of consumer behavior. This field has begun acknowledging the importance of culture, and scholars in the discipline are starting to see the value of topics, outside the immediate proximity to marketing. Between the developments in these two

²⁵ P. xii McCracken 1990

²⁶ P. xi McCracken 1990

²⁷ P. xiii McCracken 1990

²⁸ P. 67 McCracken 2005

²⁹ P. xii McCracken 1990

disciplines, he argues that the cultural aspects of consumption are becoming illuminated and given the proper academic treatment.

In light of the above, it is interesting to note that his book from 2005, a good 17 years later, starts by reiterating his original critique in force. It would seem that the incentives for academics to frown upon material culture are still going strong. Or perhaps, the growing awareness of the environmental damage caused by excessive consumption, is fuelling the view that consumption is an evil to be shunned. Here it is worth noting, that for McCracken this does not mean that the consequences of mass consumption should be ignored. The environmental damage and exploitation of workers intricately linked to the production of consumer goods or the issues of gender inequality contained in some of them, to name a few, are serious ethical issues. Yet, conflating the critique of the *consequences* of consumption, with the critique of consumption itself, mutes any enlightening enquiry.

One could argue that these negative consequences, makes a deeper enquiry all the more imperative.

In arguing for a new discussion of consumption, McCracken asks us to look at some of the curious conclusions, that follow from disciplines less culturally sensitive than anthropology. The economic analysis of home improvement investments, as an example of consumer behavior, fails to yield convincing insights. From the viewpoint of Homo economicus, home improvements can be seen as a way to improve property value. Yet, McCracken states, that usually very little, if any, of the investment is recovered.³⁰ As such, it is not a very rational decision. Another option for the economist, is to view the investment, as a way people purchase some measure of happiness. McCracken argues, that when we calculate the cost of the average home investment, including the inconvenience cost of living without a kitchen or bathroom for several months, the cost is too great to justify the benefit. If happiness was the ultimate goal, financially focused homeowners would be better off treating themselves to a fancy hotel stay every weekend.

The sociobiologists fare no better in his eyes. From their perspective, renovating our house is a way to claim it as our property. In McCracken's view, this is the same as saying that the enormous thought efforts gone into homebuilding is just false consciousness. In other words, home renovation "is the way our species pees in the corner."³¹

Both views present less than a satisfactory account. They both miss what McCracken takes to be the main point: By creating our homes we are creating our selves. His contention is, that, although other accounts of consumer behavior might have some merit, they only present part of the puzzle. To find the well-hidden secrets of consumption we need to turn to anthropology.

In the following we will examine McCracken's theory of consumer culture.

³⁰ P. 19 McCracken 2005

³¹ P. 20 McCracken 2005

4.2 Rise of modern consumption: From Patina to Fashion

McCracken's main undertaking is to examine the relationship between culture, understood as "the ideas and activities with which we construe and construct our world"³² and consumption, understood as "the processes by which consumer goods and services are created, bought, and used."³³

Even those who criticize dominant material culture are not immune to the human processes of developing aesthetics. The preponderance of certain fashions within the halls of academia may be counter-cultural symbols, but they are nevertheless also material culture.

These people are usually very easy to recognize, whether by the intellectual's fetish for tweed or the hippies' affection for specific jeans and sandals.³⁴

As McCracken puts it:

"They depend upon material culture, to make their culture material."³⁵

They use meanings contained in goods, to express and construct their selves, in ways strikingly parallel to the consumers they criticize. They are still reliant on material expression to advocate a greener society and create a counter-culture. We should keep in mind, that very few of them advocate a nudist utopia.

Another way to get at this point is saying that goods are simply the visible parts of our culture. As such they can provide a way to look at the invisible parts of it.

Vital parts of feminist history is the refutation of submissive clothing and the strive to invent new outfits, that refuse subordination. This is an example of a cultural negotiation of gender roles, where the materials form the ink and parchment on which we write the new agreement. This is not new or uniquely pertaining to modern western society. That being said, there are elements pertaining specifically to the modern consumption of goods, such as the rapid speed of consumption, the widespread availability and diversity of goods, and the central role it plays in the continuous authorship of the modern self.

It is by virtue of these that we've truly earned the title "consumer society".

Let's look at the trail of breadcrumbs that have lead us here. A good focal point for this explanation is the story of how the concept of *patina* was supplanted by the concept of fashion.

Patina refers to the subtle signs of aging that occurs on human artefacts, such as the oxidation, accidental, yet almost inevitable denting from use and otherwise erosion by the hands of time. Up until the 19th century, patina acted as a stable gatekeeper of status and as a barrier to any counterfeit claims of status. Any family experiencing a recent influx of money, could buy the silverware necessary to claim high ranking social status. Objects that had taken on patina, presented proof of the longevity of the object, and as such a way to authenticate the claim to longstanding status, of the families who possessed it.

³² P. xi McCracken 1990

³³ P. xi McCracken 1990

³⁴ P. 4 McCracken 2005

³⁵ P. 5 McCracken 2005

Yet, in the 17th century, in the England of Elizabeth the 1st, an important change started taking place in the status-conveying dynamics of goods. Drawing inspiration from the model of consumption observed in the Renaissance courts in Italy, Elisabeth managed to make her court the cradle of the modern concept of consumption. In an effort to control the mounting external and internal pressure on her kingdom, she lured the noblemen of her day from their country manors, and invited them to take up residence in London.³⁶ Here they were to be active participants in the perpetually resource-demanding parties and ceremonies of the court. An important underlying imperative of these expenditures was “dress to impress”, with the queen as the focal point. The noblemen's efforts to spend on clothing, banquets etc. were a way of signalling their loyalty and subordination to the throne and she would bestow her favor on them in return. In leaving their country-manors, they also left their locally grounded, undisputed, apex social status. Now they had to compete for social status with all the other members of nobility, in an anxiety-driven effort of consumption, aimed at satisfying the ever-hungry ceremonial demands of court. This had some profound effects on consumption. The nobleman's spending became part of an individual enterprise to increase his own social standing, and dislodged it from the previous emphasis of family, weakening this institution in the process. Before, many goods had been bought with the intent for them to enter into the family enterprise, and therefore with longevity and their patina-potential in mind. Now, many new types of goods surfaced, destined for the rapid consumption by the hand of the individual. These changed patterns of consumption trickled their way down through the hierarchy of classes, and thus constituted a shift towards fashion-driven consumption. This signalled the eclipse of patina as the prime conveyer of status and the rise of novelty to fill this role. McCracken calls this new type of consumption “competitive spending”³⁷. The 18th century saw the blossoming of the fruits of consumption that were planted in the 16th century. It was further fuelled by the industrial revolution, borne on the newly harnessed forces of nature, further accelerating the speed of consumption towards the levels that we are now so comfortable with. A further magnification of this effect was contributed by Josiah Wedgwood, who was one of the first to consciously exploit the trickle-down effect and contributed to the advent of marketing. The wellspring of fashion at the time, the royal court, had previously advanced through a rather haphazard manner. Now conscious attempts were being made to awaken and direct consumer desire. This increase in the intensity of and number of participants active in competitive spending, required goods to be replaced at a more rapid pace than before. Novelty and aesthetics was displacing the focus on sheer functionality and utility. It also led to a higher need for the consumer to dedicate time for consumer learning.³⁸ Consumers needed increasing amounts of information about what's fashionable and what's not. This new relationship to goods, where they increasingly had to take on and express various meanings, meant a strong alliance between individualism and consumption. McCracken sees a possible explanation of this alliance, in the Romantic concept of self:

³⁶ P. 12 McCracken 1990

³⁷ P. 14 McCracken 1990

³⁸ P. 19 McCracken 1990

“The Romantic insistence on the uniqueness and autonomy of the self, and its insistence on the realization of the self through experience and creativity, both drew from, and drove, the consumer revolution.”³⁹ Increasingly we came to believe that through consumption, the self can be achieved. McCracken sees this as the foundation of the many present day commercials inviting us to live up to our fullest potential.⁴⁰

By the beginning of the 19th century, consumption as self-expression had taken firm root. It is not just the institution of the family, that is being set aside in the name of individual freedom, but also the other traditional institutions and formations of religion, nationality, class and gender are eroding. These institutions have previously been substantial identity markers, cultural reference points for the individual to anchor their notion of self in. Their diminishing influence leaves the individual more free in terms of self-expression and more reliant on consumer goods to participate in this newly won self-expression:

“Also pertinent is the relative collapse of institutions that once supplied the self with meaning and definition (e.g., the family, church, and community). Working together, individualism and alienation have conspired to give individuals new freedom to define matters of gender, class, age, personality, and lifestyle. The freedom to choose is now also an obligation to decide, and this makes us eager consumers of the symbolic meanings contained in celebrities and the goods they endorse.”⁴¹

This concludes our brief sketch of the rise of consumption to the central stage of existential expression.

Previously we have only touched upon consumption as it pertains to social status. The modern cultural landscape however, is more complex than a mere vertical race towards the top of the cultural food chain and the consumption patterns express this. McCracken states, that likely the 18th century was when goods started to take on a multitude of meanings.⁴²

4.3 Not just vertical: A multitude of meanings

The vertical status race takes place in adherence to the widespread model of trickle-down theory, of which McCracken attributes the origin to sociologist Georg Simmel in 1904.⁴³ It states that changes in fashion, proceed by people of lower social status, called the subordinate group, pursue advancement of status by mimicking the clothing of people of higher status, the superordinate group.⁴⁴ The superordinate group, responds by differentiating themselves through adopting a new fashion, embracing new status markers and abandoning the old. This

³⁹ P. 20 McCracken 1990

⁴⁰ P. 20 McCracken 1990

⁴¹ P. 112 McCracken 2005

⁴² P. 19 McCracken 1990

⁴³ P. 93 McCracken 1990

⁴⁴ P. 93 McCracken 1990

perpetual dynamic between mimicry and differentiation is actually powered by an upward motion, a “chase and flight”⁴⁵ model. So McCracken justly criticizes the metaphorical notion of “trickle-down” and the image of the passive effect of gravity it conjures. The original trickle-down theory only applies to status mobility and describes only the simple act of “copy-pasting” styles of clothing. McCracken seeks to rectify some of the theoretical gaps in original theory and extend its explanatory power.

For him, imitation is anything but a clumsy, random act:

“Imitation then is not the simple pursuit of prestige nor the work of some generalized force; it is a culturally purposeful activity motivated by an appreciation of the symbolic liabilities of one style of dress, and the symbolic advantages implicit in another.”⁴⁶

A fine example of the intricacies of the imitation game at work, is the advent of the woman’s business outfit in the late 70s. For McCracken, the outfit is an attempt to give women the authority, presence and credibility, that men had hitherto enjoyed in the businessworld.⁴⁷ This example illustrates how a subordinate group, women at the workplace, imitate the superordinate group. Yet it differs from Simmel's original theory, on important accounts. First, it’s not a straightforward example of a social class standing (ie. members of the middle class buying the same clothing as the upper class); the two groups are differentiated by gender. And second, the appropriation is not a complete “copy-paste” of the male business clothing, only certain aspects of it. The woman’s outfit retains a lot of it’s femaleness, while incorporating the desired aspects of the “business look”.

So this is a good example, of imitation of material items being more than a simple step up the social ladder, and how it can be used in a creative and constructive effort to express new identities of gender and work. The example also hints at the complexity of identity formation in society. An individual seeks to create many overlapping notions of self, as man, woman, employee etc. When faced by the constraints by the collective prejudice against one expression, we may consciously manipulate it, by selectively borrowing the advantageous symbols of another.

McCracken suggests to modify Simmel's theory to allow greater sensitivity to cultural context, as the above example illustrates.⁴⁸

A modified trickle-down theory, will allow a more accurate prediction of the development of fashion. The simple status-oriented theory of Simmel, would merely predict that when a superordinate group has some of it’s symbols appropriated by a subordinate group, they will eventually seek another material expression.

The modified version, allows us to say, that when the superordinate group is seeking to differentiate, it will seek to reclaim the exact symbolic advantage claimed by the subordinate group.

As an illustrative example, McCracken explains how the style guiding male fashion in the fall

⁴⁵ P. 94 McCracken 1990

⁴⁶ P. 100 McCracken 1990

⁴⁷ P. 96 McCracken 1990

⁴⁸ P. 100 McCracken 1990

of 1983 is a counter-reaction to the female business outfit.⁴⁹ By a seemingly unexpected departure from the traditional conservative and understated look, towards greater refinement and richness in detail. The Esquire magazine called it “Return to Heroic Elegance” and it asserts that “the impulse to dress richly and with authority is a traditional male prerogative that has never gone out of style.”⁵⁰ For McCracken this is a clear example of the chase and flight mechanics at work; the male fashion was aiming at reclaiming the look of authority appropriated by the female business outfit.

4.4 Comprehending the meaning in material items

In the previous, we have looked at the historical factors underpinning modern consumption and the role it plays in contemporary culture. But how does meaning in material goods work? One option of understanding the way material goods carry meaning, is understanding it as a form of language. According to McCracken, approaching clothing as language, was at a point widely adopted by the social sciences.⁵¹ Although this served to open the academic enquiry to the expressive properties of material goods, McCracken argues that there are at least four fundamental differences in our use of language and consumer goods. Although McCracken is explicitly discussing the subject of clothing, he continuously generalizes his points to material expressions in general.

First of all, he argues that clothing is a conservative code: “It encourages the use of the code for the purpose of semiotic repetition rather than innovation.”⁵²

Meanings inherent in material goods are more immune to changes, whereas language is more fluent and creative. This makes consumer items more suitable for cultural messages that we wish broadly conveyed, but conserved.

Second, whereas language is overt, material messaging is covert:

“The semiotic information of material culture appears typically to seep into consciousness around the edges of a central focus and more pressing concerns.”⁵³

The ability for culture to “speak sotto voce”⁵⁴ with material goods, allows it to express messages with less risk of critical protest, than expression with language would entail. As McCracken puts it: “It allows culture to insinuate its beliefs and assumptions into the very fabric of daily life, there to be appreciated but not observed.”⁵⁵

Thirdly, material messages are less universal than language. Within one given speech community, with an understanding of language, there can be big differences in code of clothing: “Different age-groups and classes will encode and decode clothing messages in a strikingly disparate manner and with a low degree of mutual intelligibility.”⁵⁶ We are simply

⁴⁹ P. 101 McCracken 1990

⁵⁰ P. 101 McCracken 1990

⁵¹ P. 57 McCracken 1988

⁵² P. 68 McCracken 1988

⁵³ P. 68 McCracken 1988

⁵⁴ P. 69 McCracken 1988 “Sotto voce” is italian for “under the breath/voice”.

⁵⁵ P. 68 McCracken 1988

⁵⁶ P. 69 McCracken 1988

bad at understanding the material expressions of other groups. Lastly, material messages are limited in their complexity and scope. They do not possess the expressive power of language: “Material culture allows the representation of only a very limited number of things in only a very limited number of ways.”⁵⁷

This limited scope of material culture, begs the question, of why we’ve come to rely so heavily on it for communicating, when we indeed have language.

For McCracken, the aforementioned three properties of material messages, the conservative code, the covert messaging and the group-specific code, presents symbolic advantages over language. It is these that make material expressions better suited for existential purposes than language:

“This instrumental ability, this capacity to serve in the construction of the self and world, makes material culture indispensable to culture.”⁵⁸

Lets return to Žižek, for a brief remark. For Žižek the structure of the subject is constituted by a lack, and the subject is understood as these constant futile attempts to constitute itself as a coherent identity. If this constant motion to constitute ourselves, is brought to a halt, this results in existential anxiety:

“[T]he subject can pay for such a reflection with the loss of his very ontological consistency.”⁵⁹

We may compare this experience to a scene in the famous Looney Tunes cartoon series, starring Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner.⁶⁰ Coyote is constantly chasing Road Runner. At a certain point, Coyote chases Road Runner over a cliff side and into thin air (as cartoon physics allow for). They both keep running, until Coyote eventually realizes he’s not running on solid ground. After a slight realization period, Coyote starts falling to the ground. This is a perfect picture of the gap-filling efforts of the subject. Coyote is completely absorbed by his desire to catch Road Runner. So much, that it’s the only thing holding him up after entering thin air. For Žižek, the only thing holding our sense of identity afloat is this constant chase, this distraction by the object of our desire. If we stop and realize this lack, we fall to the ground like Coyote. The illusion of our self as coherent, only works, as long as we keep running, as long as we are distracted by something.

Maybe this adds credibility to McCracken’s theory of why material goods are indispensable to the construction of the modern self? From this we can argue, that the conservative code of material things, i.e. the fact that their meaning is more immune to changes than language, makes them good focal objects to materialize our self-constitutive efforts; they allow us to keep chasing them. The covert nature of consumer goods, allows them to be focal points, all the while keeping us from reflecting further on the impossibility of our existential endeavour. They function as the Road Runner, keeping us distracted from the fact that we are running on thin air.

⁵⁷ P. 69 McCracken 1988

⁵⁸ P. 70 McCracken 1988

⁵⁹ P. 73 Žižek 2008

⁶⁰ P.1 Bjerg 2011

4.5 Goods as bridges to displaced meaning: A way to mind the gap?

One important way, in which consumer goods act as a placeholder of meaning, is as the keeper of our ideals. McCracken calls this displaced meaning and defines it in the following: “[I]t consists in cultural meaning that has deliberately been removed from the daily life of a community and relocated to a distant domain.”⁶¹

Every society has its ideals, a certain way we picture the perfect constellation of things. In a capitalist notion of society, one example could be the ideal of a market in a state of perfect equilibrium, which we may also call the *Efficient Market Hypothesis*. This is a state where there is perfect information and no external constrictions on the transfer of goods, so the prices of a good will always fully reflect the information available, and will therefore constitute a just and efficient distribution of goods.⁶² It is not obvious that this is the state of most markets most of the time. Reality rarely lives up to our ideals. Society therefore has a need to cope with the inevitable discrepancy between ideals and reality. One of the strategies readily employed in modern society is displacing meaning.⁶³

This means that we place ideals in a temporal or spatial distant place, to keep them immune to the falsification of the current reality. In other words, we dream up a utopia, and place it in either the future, the past or a distant geographical location.⁶⁴ Not only does this keep our ideals “epistemologically immune”⁶⁵ to contradiction, the utopias also provide some sort of empirical claim to the validity of the ideals:

“What is otherwise unsubstantiated and potentially improbable in the present world is now validated, somehow “proven” by its existence in another, distant one.”⁶⁶

This allows us to say to anyone who questions our ideals; “No, of course the current state of affairs is not ideal. But they once were, in the good old days.” Or; “No, it’s not ideal here, but in some distant place, it does work perfectly.” We should suspect that the future, would not present such a “proof” or demonstration of the validity of present ideals. Yet, the ethereal nature of the future, actually makes it the perfect blank canvas, to paint an even more solid vision of our utopia: “The future has no limitation but the imagination that contemplates it.”⁶⁷

The distance of our utopias, work like the characteristic super speed of the Road Runner; it conveniently keeps us from ever approaching them. To ever catch the Road Runner of our desire, would be the real tragedy. The whole point, is in the journey towards our ideals, as Oscar Wilde eloquently put it:

“A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves

⁶¹ P. 104 McCracken 1988

⁶² P. 38 Quiggin 2010

⁶³ P. 105 McCracken 1988

⁶⁴ P. 106 McCracken 1988

⁶⁵ P. 109 McCracken 1988

⁶⁶ P. 106 McCracken 1988

⁶⁷ P. 107 McCracken 1988

out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.”⁶⁸

The strategy of meaning displacement functions on an individual level as well.⁶⁹ Both the meaning displacement of society and that of individuals, pose the same difficulty: “How does the culture reestablish access to the meaning it has displaced?”⁷⁰

McCracken’s answer to this question, is that we can use goods as bridges to partially traverse the gap between reality and ideal.⁷¹

The reason it can only be a partial traversal, is that it needs to uphold the immunity of the ideal. There are two ways, in which goods work as bridges to the realm of displaced meaning. The first, is by the power of anticipation. A good may hold the promise of fulfilling a personal dream, of an improved life. Imagine the longing sigh of a woman staring through the exhibition window of a wedding dress parlor, her thoughts already halfway to the altar. Before the actual (or incessantly imagined) purchase, the good works as the perfect concrete and material proof of the ideal, the latter always being abstract and immaterial.⁷²

The second way it works, is by possession. Buying the coveted object runs the risk of disclosing the illusion. When we own it, we may be disappointed to find out it hasn’t delivered on it’s promise of a better life. Yet, normally the good actually retains its function as a bridge, even as it comes into our possession. It does so by cleverly only posing as part of the whole ideal. According to McCracken it functions like the particular figure of speech called a *synecdoche*, “in which a part is used to represent the whole”.⁷³ The classic example is the maritime command “all hands on deck”. By “hands”, we obviously understand the full body of sailors. A purchased item may keep acting as a bridge to the displaced meaning in this same manner. When we buy the fancy watch, we buy only part of the dream of an upper-class life, while the ideal remains intact. It acts as a physical proof that this lifestyle exist, yet by only being part of a whole, it does not allow any critique of the ideal itself. We allow ourselves the defense mechanism of thinking: “this is not the whole package of the ideal, but only a small fraction. The rest is still out there for us to claim.” In instances, where the possession of an object, does run the risk of discrediting the ideal, we may simply transfer the meaning to another object. The plentitude of goods available to the modern consumer, assures that we rarely run the risk of running out of something to desire. For most people, there is always another level of consumption to aspire to.⁷⁴

It is the goods most out of reach, whether by pricetag or other limiting factors, that make for some of the best placeholders of displaced meaning: “the economic value of these objects helps give them symbolic value.”⁷⁵ The fact that they are out of reach of the individual’s

⁶⁸ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/150705-a-map-of-the-world-that-does-not-include-utopia>

⁶⁹ P. 108 McCracken 1988

⁷⁰ P. 109 McCracken 1988

⁷¹ P. 109 McCracken 1988

⁷² P. 114 McCracken 1988

⁷³ P. 114 McCracken 1988

⁷⁴ P. 114 McCracken 1988

⁷⁵ P. 114 McCracken 1988

conventional purchasing power, adds to the desirability.

McCracken notes how great financial wealth may disrupt the system of displacing meaning, by putting everything at our disposal: “One’s displaced meaning is no longer safely out of reach.”⁷⁶ There is no longer a refugee for our ideals.

And so the story goes, that when Alexander the Great saw the breadth of his domain, he wept, for there were no more worlds to conquer.

On the positive side, using consumer goods as bridges to displaced meaning can help make sense of change and continuity, to keep intact our hopes and ideals. The flipside is that it works to perpetually whet the consumer appetite for more goods. With no inherent constraint on consumption, we may end up exceeding the earth's ecological limits of industrial production, the dire consequences readily apprehended on the webpage of any environmentally conscious organisation.

4.6 A note on the difficulty of discernment and social reproduction

The modern consumer landscape, with its multitude of meanings in goods, the emphasis on novelty, the importance of continuous consumer-learning and the dissolution of institutions all add to the complexity of being a modern consumer. This puts a lot of importance of consumers’ ability to discern which goods hold the specific meaning they want to express. In the chapter *Culture and culture at the Royal Ontario Museum*, McCracken discusses how museum-goers lay claim to the status of being associated with the museum, and how owning art conveys status to its owner:

“If I have art/culture, I must have discernment, and if I have discernment, I must have status.”⁷⁷

By choosing fine art, an art collector is displaying his skill of discernment. Only a person with a developed sense of discernment can sense the fine quality of art. The ability to sense the fineness of an object acts as evidence of the fineness of the person herself: “Thus does the fineness of the object in some sense prove the fitness of individuals for high standing.”⁷⁸

For McCracken, the formula for status is not confined to the context of museums or art, so we may interpret the “culture” in “art/culture” to refer to any good in our possession, that has status-conveying properties.⁷⁹

Discernment thus play a central role in social mobility.

We’ve seen, how moderns goods are employed in a variety of identity expressions, not just those involved in a vertical status hierarchy.

Therefore we will interpret discernment as a central skill in creating other successful expressions of self, not only those pertaining to status, but also gender, age, etc.

This is visible in the earlier example of the women's business dress. Some women have skilfully discerned the social context of the workplaces and, recognizing the symbolic

⁷⁶ P. 112 McCracken 1988

⁷⁷ P. 136 McCracken 2005

⁷⁸ P. 136 McCracken 2005

⁷⁹ P. 136 McCracken 2005

disadvantage inherent in their traditional workplace outfit, they readily adapt and gain the benefits of a new expression.

We may also think of this as a sort of cultural or symbolic literacy. The term *cultural literacy* was coined by E.D. Hirsch Jr. in his 1987 book, “Cultural Literacy: What every American Needs to Know”. Hirsch argues, that people's’ degree of cultural literacy, will greatly determine their social mobility.⁸⁰ Hirsch describes cultural literacy in the following:

“Cultural literacy, unlike expert knowledge, is meant to be shared by everyone. It is that shifting body of information that our culture has found useful, and therefore worth preserving. [...] This shared information is the foundation of our public discourse. It allows us to comprehend our daily newspapers and news reports, to understand our peers and leaders, and even to share our jokes. Cultural literacy is the context of what we say and read[.]”⁸¹

So what I interpret Hirsch to mean, is that being culturally literate is like having a developed knowledge of a sort of cultural curriculum and the ability to draw from this and employ the fitting cultural expressions. In the context of material culture, I will assume that cultural literacy will also encompass the ability to choose the right material expressions for a situation. It’s hard to imagine that Hirsch would agree that one can be highly culturally literate, and choose the wrong material expressions for the situation. E.g. bring wine as birthday gift for a recovering alcoholic or a copy of Salman Rushdie’s “The Satanic Verses” to one’s younger muslim cousins for the celebration of the islamic festival Eid (unless one is consciously trying to make a statement).

We pursue advancement of status by mimicking the material expressions of superordinate groups. That means there is an upward motion driving our consumption and identification patterns, what McCracken called a “chase and flight” pattern.

This runs the risk of implying that our identification patterns are *always* directed towards the classes above. If this is the case, then perhaps, aside from the financial limitations of our starting point in life, maybe our degree of discernment or level of cultural literacy are the most influencing factors of our how far we climb up the social ladder? This would be similar to how a person’s proficiency with reading and writing would greatly influence their chances of pursuing an academic career. The women’s business dress is a nifty innovation, allowing for an upward social mobility of sorts. But do we always identify upwards?

Is it not true that we sometimes follow a more regressive pattern, not always an innovative upward one? This is worth reflecting on in detail.

McCracken advances the point, that groups undergoing a change in cultural category, are often more reliant on drawing meaning from material culture.⁸² So when people are changing age category, or moving to another country, they depend more on material expressions.

Let’s consider the following fictional, yet arguably plausible example.

Imagine a family moving to another country, with the parents suddenly insisting more heavily on the clothing and home decoration native to their former country, in order to retain their identity. All the while their son and daughter eagerly embrace the material expressions of the

⁸⁰ P. viii Hirsch 2002

⁸¹ P. x Hirsch 2002

⁸² P. 112 McCracken 2005

new youth culture surrounding them. To navigate the disruption in identity, the family more readily rely on the material expressions at hand. The different generations simply follow different identity patterns. The parents are trying to retain their old sense of identity and follow what we may call a regressive pattern. The children are trying to create a new notion of themselves to blend in, and follow what we may call an innovative pattern.

We may even imagine, that the identification efforts of the parents even come at the cost of symbolic advantages, e.g. they don't expand their social network as easily as they would have done by assimilating to the new culture, affording them less job opportunities etc. This poses the question: Why would they not identify in ways that would maximise social advantages? With Žižek, we may explain the need for identification as such. If we reflect on the inherent lack in the constitution of the subject we risk losing our sense of ontological consistency. So there is a strong drive to keep the identification process running. When we change cultural category such as in the above example, we are in effect experiencing a disruption in identity. When we experience a distortion in identity, we may risk being confronted by the inherent lack of the subject. This may in turn lead to a greater effort in identification, to avoid the anxiety following this revelation. So we may conclude that a disruption in identity may lead to an increased effort to identify.

Earlier we brought to attention some of the attributes of consumer items, that make them well suited for use in our identification process. So the above reasoning may help us understand why people changing cultural categories, make more use of material expressions; they are managing the threat of a potential destabilization of their identity by use of the meanings inherent in consumer items.

But it still doesn't explain why we do not always identify upwards, only that we have a strong desire to identify. Could the differences in identification strategy of the emigrant family be explained by a difference in their degree of cultural literacy?

Recall from, how McCracken states that across groups belonging to different cultural categories, there is low understanding of their different material expressions, even though they share a language. So understanding expressions across groups is hard. In our example we may think of the kids as more culturally literate, perhaps due to their youth they learn faster and adapt quicker. And since it's hard to navigate, the parents are forced to stick with an identity they understand. This could be part of explaining why cultural literacy is so essential to social mobility. Yet, is cultural literacy all that keeps up the class divide? Should we assume that the desire to move upwards is always there, albeit the necessary skill is lacking?

Couldn't we also imagine someone with a high cultural literacy, choosing to follow what we called a regressive identity pattern?

In his paper, *Distinction in America? Recovering Bourdieu's theory of tastes from its critics* Douglas Holt, arguing from Bourdieu, claims that consumer choices play a role in social reproduction.⁸³ Social reproduction we will here take to be simply the phenomenon that the divide between social classes is kept up. At the heart of the matter, it seems lower classes tend to regard the customs and material expressions of the upper classes with disdain:

⁸³ Holt 2007

“In fact, it is more typical that those with lesser cultural capital resources are dismissive of, or antagonistic towards, the objects and practices of those with greater cultural capital resources.”⁸⁴

So we are not always motivated to model our consumption on those of higher social standing. Holt explains that our *tastes*, here understood as the preferences of consumption and other practices, play an important role in keeping up the class divide. We gain our tastes through our social environment. Taste is not gained through conscious process, yet when in place, we tend to rationalize them. The less than overt way we come by our tastes, actually empowers them to keep up the class divide, as Holt explains:

“They serve as a potent resource for social reproduction precisely because their political consequences are routinely misrecognized as disinterested practice. Rather than an emulative "competition" for high status tastes, class hierarchies of taste are an unintended consequence of the rational cultivation of those tastes that are readily acquired and have purchase in one's social class milieu.”⁸⁵

So our sense of taste helps us navigate within our own social group. Our tastes becomes part of group-specific norms of consumption and behavior. By rationalization we integrate our tastes (and distastes), which makes them the taken-for-granted norm by which we also judge other classes.

Holt mentions as an example how people of lower class tend to view the preferred movies of cultural elites as pretentious.⁸⁶

The distaste that the lower class may exhibit towards the preferences of the upper class, is an integral part of keeping up the class divide.

The tastes we've acquired by participation in a certain class, makes these very tastes take normative precedence, causing us to act with antagonism, not admiration towards the tastes of others. By virtue of our “social taste buds”, we come to identify with people who share our taste and do not seek to commingle with people of another class or group.

So our tastes actually function as class boundaries, tacitly enforcing the social status quo.

This reproduction of hierarchy through taste is performed throughout our normal consumption patterns:

“[T]he fields of consumption that are most consequential in social reproduction are typically those in which the vast majority participate -- food, housing, fashion, art, vacations, entertainment, and so on.”⁸⁷

Let's come back to our example of the emigrant family. We may now conclude, that it is more complex than a simple matter of cultural navigational skills. The parents have already formed a sort of identity comfort zone, where they experience a high sense of familiarity with the established customs of taste. Their acquired distastes may also actively prevent them from identifying with the practices of their new country. And lastly, pushing the boundaries of our comfort zone, comes with the risk of facing our ontological lack. In the above quote from

⁸⁴ P. 95 Holt 1997

⁸⁵ P. 95 Holt 1997

⁸⁶ P. 95 Holt 1997

⁸⁷ P. 97 Holt 1997

Holt he mentions how tastes may “have purchase in one's social class milieu.” What he means by “purchase” I will interpret as relating to cultural literacy. Our tastes belong to our class, and so the refinement of our tastes will be part of determining how well we navigate within our social group. The skill of cultural literacy may also be used to advance up from one group to another. This vertical movement is more difficult, because our group-specific tastes act like a boundary, providing a degree of incommensurability. We have a strong preference for the practices and consumption patterns we already know.

4.7 Marketing and meaning: “The *Existential Market Hypothesis*”

According to McCracken, there are three places that hold meaning: the culturally constituted world, consumer goods and the individual consumer.⁸⁸ The meaning travels from the cultural world, to consumer goods, through the advertising and the fashion system. The meaning then makes the last part of the journey, to the individual consumer, by way of different possession rituals.

We will go through them in the above order. For purposes of this thesis, our primary focus will be on the advertising system, and so we will leave out the fashion system. We will also examine thoroughly, a particular instance of the advertising system, the celebrity endorsements, that holds many central insights.

The culturally constituted world “is the world of everyday experience in which the phenomenal world present itself to the senses of the individual, fully shaped and constituted by the beliefs and assumptions of his or her culture.”⁸⁹

So by the culturally constituted world, we will understand the world as it reaches our experience, already mediated by the principles and categories of our culture. E.g. walking down the street, you carry with you the lens of your culture, and upon seeing a dog, you automatically think “pet” (and not food, as some cultures are prone to). This categorisation also carries with it the breadth of actions available to you; kicking a pet will usually carry with it some social penalty, while public displays of petting might earn you some goodwill. Cultural categories are the packages that our culture has classified our world into. Cultural principles are the ideas and values, by which this classification is done.⁹⁰ Furthermore, McCracken states that consumer goods always signify both the category they belong to and the principle they are governed by, at the same time: “When goods show a distinction between two cultural categories, they do so by encoding something of the principle according to which these categories are distinguished.”⁹¹ E.g. Differences in clothing between men and women, or higher and lower class, express the alleged delicacy of women and alleged strength of men, or the alleged refinement of the high class and alleged vulgarity of the lower class.⁹² When goods carry the principles of our cultural world, e.g. our distinctions between

⁸⁸ P. 72 McCracken 1988

⁸⁹ P. 73 McCracken 1988

⁹⁰ P. 76 McCracken 1988

⁹¹ P. 76 McCracken 1988

⁹² P. 76 McCracken 1988

gender or class, they are a vital part of upholding these distinctions. They are not only objects of this world, they also work to objectify the world according the cultural principles they embody: “Goods substantiate them and therefore enter into the culturally constituted world as both the object and objectification of this world.”⁹³

This also adds to the understanding of the conservative code of material goods, that we touched upon in earlier.

Meaning originates from the culturally constituted world. One of the important institutions through which meaning enters consumer goods in modern society, is the system of advertising. Unlike the information-centered view of marketing, as propounded by Holbrook and Hulbert, McCracken argues that meaning is an important factor in marketing:

“Advertisements are deliberate attempts to put meaning into goods.”⁹⁴

It should be noted, that his aim is not to completely dismiss the information-based model of marketing, yet to account for its shortcomings, and shine light, where it cannot. It’s not that informations does not plays a role, but it only tells part of the story.⁹⁵

According to McCracken the information model, cannot account for the influence that culture exacts on the individual. By making it a matter of simply processing information, it divorces the individual consumer from her or his entire cultural landscape:

“It makes the individual the only locus of meaning and significance and supposes that within the teeming neurons of an individual brain one can discover and capture all the essential ingredients and logics of the decision-making process.”⁹⁶

Yet, what we’ve endeavoured to show with McCracken up until now, is that a great deal of human expenditure is existential in effort; we are trying to construct our notion of self, through the components of meaning made available to us through the cultural world.

What the marketing system does is to take the meaning inherent in the cultural world, and pass it on to consumer goods.

The good marketer seeks to do this, by establishing a symbolic equivalence between the consumer object and the cultural world.⁹⁷

He succeeds when the intended recipient starts to attribute these meanings to the object.

To do so, the marketer must put the object in a context, that is loaded with the intended meaning, that express the exact cultural categories he is seeking to establish in the object and then simply hope the meaning “rubs off” off on the object. It works by the principle of being guilty simply by association. By virtue of this process, McCracken sees no restraints on the potential meanings that products can be infused with:

“[A]dvertising is such as powerful mechanism of meaning transfer that virtually any product can be made to take virtually any meaning.”⁹⁸

According to McCracken, the marketer is not always completely cognizant of the choices she

⁹³ P. 77 McCracken 1988

⁹⁴ P. 167 McCracken 2005

⁹⁵ P. 168 McCracken 2005

⁹⁶ P. 167 McCracken 2005

⁹⁷ P. 77 McCracken 1988

⁹⁸ P. 104 McCracken 2005

or he makes. As a creative act, many of the processes takes place below the level of consciousness.⁹⁹ I speculate, that the fact that the unconscious plays a prominent role in marketing, is partly what makes it hard for the more quantitative sciences to grasp the complete picture. Instead they are quick to adhere to more transparent explanations that rely on a narrow sense of rationality. McCracken argues that the notion of “economic man” creeps into the explanatory models of the social sciences, and they are therefore too quick to assume marketplace rationality behind people’s actions.¹⁰⁰ Rationality does play an important role, yet focusing too narrowly on it, disallows other important perspectives. “The issue is not to dispense with the notion of rationality but to broaden it.”¹⁰¹, as McCracken puts it.

4.8 Celebrity endorsement: The rich, the famous and the meaningful

A powerful and often employed strategy to infuse goods with meaning, is the use of celebrity endorsements. As with marketing, the field of celebrity endorsements is also home to some theories, with explanatory shortcomings, which McCracken aims to amend.

The source-credibility model states, that for a message to be persuasive, the messenger must be perceived as having a degree of expertise on the given subject and a degree of trustworthiness.¹⁰² The source-attractiveness model, contends that a message, owes its effectiveness to the perceived familiarity, likeability and similarity of the messenger.¹⁰³

These two models both provide insights into some aspects of celebrity endorsements, yet fail to explain certain cases.¹⁰⁴ If it was solely a question of expertise and trustworthiness, a doctor would likely always be the best endorser of medical products, and perhaps a long range of other products. If it was solely a question of familiarity and likeability, Tom Hanks would always be the top choice for all product endorsements in the US. He was voted the most likable man in Hollywood, and has been voted the most trusted person in America.¹⁰⁵ Yet McCracken argues that, to a big degree, the success of an endorsement, can be attributed to the symbolic properties of the endorser, i.e. the meaning they bring with them to the process.¹⁰⁶ This cannot be reduced to a simple question of credibility or attractiveness. Many people have heard actors complain about how being typecasted is disabling to their career. Ironically, typecasting is in fact an enabling factor in many Hollywood careers. Anyone who’s received an invitation to an american frat party, knows the abbreviation B.Y.O. which stands for Bring Your Own (the absent referent here is usually alcohol).

⁹⁹ P. 78 McCracken 1988

¹⁰⁰ P. 169 McCracken 2005

¹⁰¹ P. 169 McCracken 2005

¹⁰² P. 98 McCracken 2005

¹⁰³ P. 98 McCracken 2005

¹⁰⁴ P. 99 McCracken 2005

¹⁰⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/25/tom-hanks-most-likable-man-hollywood_n_4163462.html

¹⁰⁶ P. 102 McCracken 2005

The Hollywood system depends largely on an analogous system. It requires the actors to bring their own meaning.¹⁰⁷ The meaning the actors already possess “simplify the movie’s dramatic and expository task and give it substance and direction.”¹⁰⁸ As humans, constantly trying to constitute ourselves, we hold in high regard, those that succeed well at this task.

And celebrities are prime examples of a well-built self:

“Celebrities create a self out of the elements put at their disposal in dramatic roles, fashioning cultural meanings into a practicable form”¹⁰⁹

As such, the celebrity is both an inspiration as an existential job well done, and they are also creators of new meanings, that consumers can apply to their own lives. The highly creative celebrities break down old cultural notions of identity, and present new ways to express oneself. McCracken says, that we may see this as celebrities “product-testing” versions of self, for consumers to mimic.¹¹⁰

A fitting label may be “existential innovation”, as the celebrities act in ways that may expand our choice of identities the same way that innovation expands the range of products and services available to consumers.

I will briefly illustrate the point in case.

McCracken exemplifies the creative powers of celebrities, by two fictional roles, played by Bruce Willis and Tony Shalhoub. The characters are David Addison (Willis) in the series *Moonlighting* and Adrian Monk (Shalhoub) in the series *Monk*. Addison as a character presented a new way of responding to the rising feminism of the 70’s and 80’s. Monk is a neurotic hero, with compulsive disorder, which presents a way of responding to the uncertainty of the present times.¹¹¹ They present templates of self, that give people ways to deal constructively with the changing cultural circumstances: “In a sense, both actors product-test no-tions of the self for a group of consumers who are themselves engaged in an act of experimentation.”¹¹²

There are two ways of interpreting who McCracken is pointing towards by “group of consumers”. In one sense, every consumer is “engaged in an act of experimentation”, i.e. we are all actively constructing notions of self. Understood in another way, McCracken is pointing to a very distinct group of consumers, who are more actively engaged in existential innovation than others. This group welcomes the challenge of addressing a changing cultural climate by creating new notions of self.

Not all consumers groups however responded to the advancing feminism of the 70’s and 80’s, by mimicking the creative response of Bruce Willis’ Addison character.

It would seem some groups respond with a more regressive attitude, when they sense a challenge to their identity and preferred symbols. And some celebrities may assume the same role of identity leadership for those who seek to construct culturally conservative notions of self. Let’s consider one real-life example.

¹⁰⁷ P. 107 McCracken 2005

¹⁰⁸ P. 107 McCracken 2005

¹⁰⁹ P. 110 McCracken 2005

¹¹⁰ P. 111 McCracken 2005

¹¹¹ P. 111 McCracken 2005

¹¹² P. 111 McCracken 2005

In his campaign to become the republican nominee for the presidential election in 2008, Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee makes clever use of the meaning inherent in a celebrity icon. In a video add, he states:

“My plans to secure the border? Two words. **Chuck. Norris.**”¹¹³ After featuring a series of endorsements from Mr. Norris himself, Huckabee ends the video by saying:

“Chuck Norris doesn’t endorse. He tells America how it’s gonna be.”¹¹⁴

No doubt Chuck Norris has created a world renowned masculine expression, and this was put to well-placed strategic use in the above example. Norris has also used his macho renown in other circumstances.

In 2015, the US military conducted a military exercise codenamed Jade Helm, which covered 7 southern states, including Texas.¹¹⁵ This led to a lot conspiracy theories among Texans, with some fearing the exercises were part of a pending invasion of Texas from the US government, and that some abandoned Wal-Mart superstores would serve as:

're-education centres' to brainwash free-thinking Texans with the liberal, anti-gun philosophy of Barack Obama's administration.”¹¹⁶

This paranoia was not only shared by internet conspiracy theorists. Governor Gregg Abbott ordered the Texas State Guard to monitor the exercise “to ensure that adequate measures are in place to protect Texans.”¹¹⁷

This paranoid response might have easily been dismantled with a little bit of critical reflection, as one commentator remarked, tongue-in-cheek:

“[I]t’s not entirely clear what a “takeover” would constitute given that Texas is of course part of the United States already”.¹¹⁸

Yet for Chuck Norris, the border-security joke from 2007 took the form of a twisted prophecy, when he joined the heated debate. He voiced his fear that the exercise “could turn into a full-blown occupation of the state.”¹¹⁹ He encouraged citizens to defend liberty till their dying breaths”¹²⁰ and made an implicit threat that government forces should stay away from his ranch.¹²¹

By this mix of suspicions and accusations, Norris blows more fuel to the paranoia, and uses his celebrity status, to legitimize this paranoid political stance.

¹¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDUQW8LUMs8>

¹¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDUQW8LUMs8>

¹¹⁵ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3071387/Chuck-Norris-vs-Special-Forces-Texas-Action-star-urges-citizens-vigilant-reveals-huge-multi-state-military-operation-troops-place-ranch-s-backdoor.html>

¹¹⁶ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3071387/Chuck-Norris-vs-Special-Forces-Texas-Action-star-urges-citizens-vigilant-reveals-huge-multi-state-military-operation-troops-place-ranch-s-backdoor.html>

¹¹⁷ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3071387/Chuck-Norris-vs-Special-Forces-Texas-Action-star-urges-citizens-vigilant-reveals-huge-multi-state-military-operation-troops-place-ranch-s-backdoor.html>

¹¹⁸ <http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2015-05-05/chuck-norris-pledges-protect-texas-federal-invasion>

¹¹⁹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3071387/Chuck-Norris-vs-Special-Forces-Texas-Action-star-urges-citizens-vigilant-reveals-huge-multi-state-military-operation-troops-place-ranch-s-backdoor.html>

¹²⁰ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3071387/Chuck-Norris-vs-Special-Forces-Texas-Action-star-urges-citizens-vigilant-reveals-huge-multi-state-military-operation-troops-place-ranch-s-backdoor.html>

¹²¹ <http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2015-05-05/chuck-norris-pledges-protect-texas-federal-invasion>

He is reinforcing an identity of unnuanced macho-territorial behavior. It's possible to criticize his actions on a normative level. Yet his use of his unique expression did garner him support with certain population groups and gave voice to their insecurities. As such, it seems like it was a successful display of cultural literacy, all the while being an example of what we previously called a regressive identity pattern.

The full force of the meanings that celebrities bring with them to advertising, may be understood better when we compare them to the use of models for similar purposes. Models are more readily available and considerably lower wage. So why should marketers not make do with the use of models? McCracken argues, that models can be used to convey a lot of relevant demographic information. Yet celebrities can convey a wide range of unique meanings, and with a level of precision unavailable to anonymous models.¹²²

The meaning celebrities bring to advertising, are generated in their various roles in public life, where they come into contact with elements of meaning, which rubs off on them.¹²³ When we are enquiring into what meanings a particular celebrity possess, we need only look at the roles the generally assume: "For communications purposes, the celebrity is a composite of his fictional roles."¹²⁴

This meaning must be handled with care. It means there can be mismatches between celebrity and the type of meaning that the marketer wants associated with the product.

Earlier we've established perhaps the least controversial finding of this thesis; Tom Hanks is a nice guy. But what if we are not trying to convey a "nice-guy"-message with the product? According to McCracken's model, if we are looking to infuse our new protein bar with a raw macho expression, all things being equal, perhaps Arnold Schwarzenegger provides the best endorser.

The process of celebrity endorsement works in a way very similar to the one described in the earlier chapter. The marketer seeks to establish a symbolic equivalence between the consumer object and the cultural world. He can rely on the powerful meanings inherent in celebrities to help him accomplish this. The marketer must identify a celebrity which possess the meanings intended, and then cultivate the transference of the meaning to the product through the advertisement.¹²⁵

Yet, where other objects of the cultural world, may be chosen with laser-precision for the task, the unique identities of celebrities presents an extra challenge:

"Even the most heavily stereotyped celebrity represents not a single meaning, but an interconnected set of meanings."¹²⁶

The multiple meanings inherent in a celebrity personality, means that the marketer must take care to insure that only the intended meaning transfers to the product. He must take care that other meanings implicit in the celebrity, which are unwanted for the product, does not rub off.

¹²² P. 106 McCracken 2005

¹²³ P. 107 McCracken 2005

¹²⁴ P. 110 McCracken 2005

¹²⁵ P. 108 McCracken 2005

¹²⁶ P. 103 McCracken 2005

Put in another way, the marketer must ensure that the meaning, the whole meaning and nothing but the meaning transfers to the product.

The marketer accomplishes this goal, by what McCracken calls the *principle of redundancy*. The advertiser attempts to control the symbolic context of the commercial, by filling it with objects, people and other hints that convey the intended meaning. Thus they instruct the consumers to know which are the relevant meaning they are meant to draw from the celebrity. This is like a surgical incision into the symbolic anatomy of the celebrity, meticulously extracting the desired part.

After a successful symbolic transfer, the process is now out of the hands of the marketer. Whether the commercial makes use of the power of celebrities, or make do with objects and anonymous actors, the last part of the meaning transfer, from consumer item to consumer, is left up to the consumer. This last journey is not an automatic process. Since the consumer is an active participant in seeking out meaning for their own identity project, the consumer must actively take ownership of the good themselves:

“Consumers must claim, exchange, care for and use the consumer good to appropriate its meanings”.¹²⁷

If the consumers doesn't appropriate the meaning for their selves, the whole chain of meaning transfer stops short of its final destination. To claim the meaning, consumers engage in the following rituals of possession: “exchange, possession, grooming, and divestment”.¹²⁸

This concludes our examination of the marketing system. We've shown the path meaning travels, from the wellspring of meaning, the cultural world, through the advertising system into goods, and by possession rituals to the end consumer. We we may call this our *Existential Market Hypothesis*, as a friendly nod to the Efficient Market Hypothesis. and the latter's presuppositions of narrow economic rationality, selfish purchasing motives and reductionist understanding of consumers. Contrarily, we've aimed to show that the market operates and is highly influenced by existential considerations.

As McCracken states it:

“The consumer system supplies individuals with the cultural materials to realize their various and changing ideas of what it is to be a man or a woman, middle-aged or elderly, a parent, a citizen, or a professional. All of these cultural notions are concretized in goods, and it is through their possession and use that the individual realizes the notions in his own life.”¹²⁹

The marketing systems is one of the main channels, by which meaning seeps into material items. As such, a great deal of consumer learning takes place through the advertising system. McCracken stresses the importance of advertising as it keeps us informed of the organization of meaning in society. He compares it to an ever-changing dictionary, we need to consult to

¹²⁷ P. 110 McCracken 2005

¹²⁸ P. 84 McCracken 1988 For the sake of brevity, we will leave out a further discussion of these rituals.

¹²⁹ P. 88 McCracken 1988

read our cultural surroundings.¹³⁰

4.9 Conclusion

To a large degree, anthropology have left the treatment of consumer culture to academic disciplines, that are more prone to assume that market rationality governs our consumer choices. Their treatments miss those aspects of consumption, that are not covered by this narrow rationality. Through McCracken's theory of consumer culture, I have aimed to show that modern western consumption is a highly integral part of how consumers create their notions of self. The consequences of consumption, such as environmental destruction, should not be conflated with the motives behind consumption; as selves, that are never fully formed and thus constantly being created, consumers rely heavily on the meanings inherent in consumer items.

We've seen how the mode of modern consumption took root in the 17th century, and has developed in close alliance with the industrial revolution, increasing individualism and greater social mobility. As the institutions of nation, church, community and family slowly withered in influence, so did the imperative for consumers to create themselves in accordance with these institutions. The modern consumer has greater freedom and correspondingly greater obligation to create her or his own self. Consumer goods acts a faithful companion in this endeavour, as we may count on them to capture, contain and conserve meanings for us. We may even use them as bridges to displaced meaning. Their concrete, material nature is perfect for containing the abstract immaterial nature of our ideals.

As the function of consumer items shifted from an emphasis on functionality and patina, to greater emphasis on novelty and the expression of multiple cultural categories such as gender, age, class, so the marketing system developed accordingly.

The fully fledged marketing system actively channels meaning from the cultural world to consumer goods, for us to claim.

Marketing, celebrities, and the frequent combination of the two, play an important role of informing and instructing the modern consumer in the ways they may manage their expressions of self. Celebrities are a particularly potent source of meaning. The consumer admires them, both for having accomplished what they are aiming at themselves, and because they supply them with meaning to accomplish this task.

As modern consumers, we are charged with the daunting challenge of creating our selves, in this ever-changing and increasingly complex world. Some may respond to this challenge, by defensively identifying with material symbols. They try to conserve and protect their identity by insisting on a single interpretation of material items.

Others accomplish the task by innovatively using the symbolic properties of goods to create new identities to deal constructively with the change. Celebrities may play a special role of leadership in identification, by either showcasing a new type of self, or lending legitimacy to conservative notions of self.

¹³⁰ P. 165 McCracken 2005

So in short goods contain both an aspect of utility and one of meaning. The latter aspect, we use as stencils to author our self on the blank pages of modern existence.

According to McCracken, neither critics of consumer culture nor marketers seem to have been highly aware of this.

If the critics ignore this, they run the risk of never aiming their critique any higher than the symptoms. The marketers who ignore it, consign themselves to a fate far worse; they run the risk of losing market share.

In the following we will examine the socio-cultural symbolism of meat.

5. Meat-a-physics

5.1 Intro: “Calories or culture?”

In the previous chapter we saw how culture plays a big part in modern consumption. In the following we will look at cultural aspects of a specific area of consumption: meat. In chapter 6.1 we will touch upon the many negative effects of our livestock production. Despite growing consumer awareness of this smorgasbord of reasons for reducing meat consumption, it remains a centerpiece of many people's diet. In her book, *Meathooked : the history and science of our 2.5-million-year obsession with meat*, Marta Zaraska accounts for many of the reasons why so many humans enjoy meat. Here we will name just a few. *Mailards reaction* occurs when carbohydrates mix with amino acids at high temperatures, such as when we cook meat. Studies show that animals also prefer cooked meat over raw, pointing to a biological preference of cooked meat.¹³¹ According to Zaraskas findings, this is likely because it indicates that it is free of bacteria, which helped our ancestors to know it was safe to eat.¹³² Another reason it that meat is rich in the taste of umami. It is believed that umami signals the presence of protein, and thus helps us navigate towards protein rich foods.¹³³ Finally, the density of nutrients contained in meat, compared to the other options available to the hunter-gatherers societies of old, made it very desirable.¹³⁴ Despite compelling taste and nutrients, Zaraska still concludes that culture plays the bigger part in making us valorize meat:

“There are biological reasons why meat is so appealing to us but the cultural parts are more powerful.”¹³⁵

Zaraska further makes the point, that the cultural valorisation of meat, builds on the biological ones.¹³⁶

¹³¹ P. 62 Zaraska 2016

¹³² P. 63 Zaraska 2016

¹³³ P. 69 Zaraska 2016

¹³⁴ Zaraska interview

¹³⁵ Zaraska interview

¹³⁶ Zaraska interview

Though valued for its nutrition, historically meat was not easy to come by, because of the toil of either hunting or raising animals for meat. This scarcity meant, that the rich had access to meat, while the people of lower class didn't and so meat came to be associated with power and wealth.¹³⁷

In modern day, meat is abundant, and the growing middle class in India and China are able to afford it, driving demand up.¹³⁸

The association of meat with wealth, tempts us to conflate the symbolic value with the economic. Nick Fiddes, in his book *Meat: A Natural Symbol* argues that the field of economics tends to assume intrinsic value in the things we buy:

“Economics is nonetheless still commonly represented as if it were an independent force in our affairs, governing habits rather than reflecting them.”¹³⁹

Price obviously has an effect on what we buy. Yet in itself, price does nothing to indicate *why* we buy something. Ethical vegetarians (who oppose the rearing and slaughtering of animals) for example, would not buy meat for any price. And if we assume the price of meat is any indication of the level of animal welfare, then a cheaper price would likely warrant an inversely proportional harsher judgment from the vegetarian. So to explain the value we put on meat, we must look at the underlying ideas:

“Meat eating, like any consumption, is a manifest expression of personal ideas in a cultural context, and it is to the *ideas* we must look for the source of observed value.”¹⁴⁰

So in the following, we will look the some of the specific ideas, that have made us value meat so highly. In the following we will get metaphysical, so to speak.

5.2 Anthropocentrism and the Great Chain of Being

The main aim of Fiddes' book is to show that an important concept within western civilization has been the conquest and dominion over nature. This line of thought posits humans as distinct from and above nature. The consumption of meat is the epitome symbolic demonstration of our elevated status. Fiddes does not explicitly use the concept of *anthropocentrism*. The term “anthropocentric world view” does appear in a quote he is using to make a point, without further commenting on the concept.¹⁴¹ Due to this tacit use and the similarities his theory shares with anthropocentrism, I will interpret this concept as central to his theory. Anthropocentrism is defined as the “philosophical viewpoint arguing that human beings are the central or most significant entities in the world. This is a basic belief embedded in many Western religions and philosophies. Anthropocentrism regards humans as separate from and superior to nature and holds that human life has intrinsic value while other entities (including animals, plants, mineral resources, and so on) are resources that may justifiably be

¹³⁷ Zaraska interview

¹³⁸ P. 168 Zaraska 2016

¹³⁹ P. 167 Fiddes 1991

¹⁴⁰ P. 173 Fiddes 1991

¹⁴¹ P. 117 Fiddes 1991

exploited for the benefit of humankind.”¹⁴² Opposed to anthropocentrism, we find *biocentrism*, which in its simple version simply states that all life is owed moral consideration.¹⁴³ Fiddes does not explicitly use the phrase biocentrism either, yet as we will see he describes a development of an ideology, that fits the bill perfectly.

The Great Chain of Being, a concept introduced by the philosopher and historian Arthur Lovejoy, is also central to Fiddes’ theory. Fiddes defines it as: “a notional hierarchy of all creation ranging from God at the apex, through the angels, to humans, to other animals, to plants, and to the inanimate”.¹⁴⁴

For Lovejoy, this hierarchy of beings is one of the most pervasive and powerful assumptions in western thought.¹⁴⁵ It has thus helped to shape numerous other notions in western culture. Fiddes traces this view back to Aristotle, who reasoned that plants exist for animals, and animals exist for the use of humans.¹⁴⁶ According to Lovejoy the idea can be traced up through the influential thinkers of the west.¹⁴⁷ Although the idea posits God at the highest level of being, it acts to position humanity at the center of attention; our existence is at the intersection between the higher forms of existence and mere nature.

This collective ego of our species is probably what zoologist Desmond Morris was getting at when he said: “We may prefer to think of ourselves as fallen angels, but in reality we are rising apes.”¹⁴⁸

When the notion of God waned, and increasingly gave way to modern science and empiricism, the concept of the Great Chain of Being didn’t walk quietly to the grave.¹⁴⁹ Instead of waning, it thrived with the new spirit of industrial ingenuity and served as conceptual justification that the natural world was a resource destined for human consumption:

“Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the ethic of human supremacy was consistently invoked to justify the steadily increasing power of industrial civilisation. Conversely, the exploitation of nature tangibly exemplified, and so was seen to confirm, our evident difference and natural elevation.”¹⁵⁰

Descartes is a prime example of the type of thinking that served to justify humanity’s expanding dominion over nature.¹⁵¹ Descartes’ dualism divided the world into beings with souls and things without, thereby sanctioning the exploitation of the latter by the former. His infamous vivisections testify to this.

¹⁴² <https://global.britannica.com/topic/anthropocentrism>

¹⁴³ <https://global.britannica.com/topic/biocentrism>

¹⁴⁴ P. 52 Fiddes 1991

¹⁴⁵ P. 52 Fiddes 1991

¹⁴⁶ P. 53 Fiddes 1991

¹⁴⁷ P. 53 Fiddes 1991

¹⁴⁸ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/18708.Desmond_Morris

¹⁴⁹ P. 53 Fiddes 1991

¹⁵⁰ P. 54 Fiddes 1991

¹⁵¹ P. 54 Fiddes 1991

The technological advancements were seen as the triumph of civilisation over nature, and thus led to an increasing antagonistic relationship with nature.¹⁵²

This antagonism can be witnessed in the mirror of other cultural approaches to the nature surrounding us. One example is when Sioux Chief Luther Standing Bear reflects on the European colonisation of America:

“We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and the winding streams with tangled growth as wild. Only to the white man was nature a wilderness and only to him was the land infested with wild animals and savage people. To us it was tame... Not until the hairy man from the East came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it wild for us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was for us the Wild West began.”¹⁵³

Apart from the temptation to perhaps overly romanticize the native americans lifestyle, the above quote illustrates well the animosity with which the western mindset met its surroundings. Fiddes argues that the material dominance following from the scientific progress, and the desire for conquest is part of what has made the western values expand to many parts of the world.

As a fundamental hierarchical principle in western philosophy, the Great Chain of Being with its division between civilization and nature, is also influential of a number of other dichotomies. These are; culture/nature, man/woman, europe/non-europe, human/animals, higher class and middle class/working class.¹⁵⁴ On the left side of the divide we find what is typically ranked higher in the western hierarchical system. On the right side we find that which is typically repressed by the same system. This might explain why we rarely find a group of protesters pleading on the behalf of a group that is not by one way or another associated with the right side of the division. In the western world our associations tend to group together those on one side.¹⁵⁵ This means that we tend to view nature, woman, non-europeans, animals and the working class both as lower and sharing traits. For example, we view women as closer to animals and nature.¹⁵⁶

This system therefore posits at the top, the european, upper class, human male.

We might wonder if this Great Chain of Being still holds sway in western thought, after all the industrial revolution was [specific time period].

Fiddes argued that the concept is still very much alive, and has adopted to the modern western discourse:

“The notion of the Great Chain of Being survives, although today its earthly links have been scientifically reformulated as the Food Chain.”¹⁵⁷

This specific formulation of the hierarchical system hints more at the one question we've left out of our examination of the symbolic importance of meat so far; what *is* the symbolic

¹⁵² P. 54 Fiddes 1991

¹⁵³ P. 107 Fiddes 1991 (quoted from Brown)

¹⁵⁴ P. 152 Fiddes 1991

¹⁵⁵ P. 152 Fiddes 1991

¹⁵⁶ P. 152 Fiddes 1991

¹⁵⁷ P. 63 Fiddes 1991

importance of meat?

For Fiddes, the precondition of meat consumption (the dead animal) makes it a pivotal symbol of anthropocentrism:

“Although nothing is intrinsically luxurious, meat may justifiably be said to be a Natural Symbol of high value. It is an obvious choice of focus for our esteem in view of the spirit in which, traditionally, we have approached the world. Meat is the flesh of what were once living animals; it is destined for our physical consumption. This makes it an exceptionally well suited exemplification of our ability to control and vanquish the non-human world.”¹⁵⁸ We have seen how meaning travels from the culturally constituted world into goods, through the marketing system. When Fiddes calls meat a “natural symbol,” it is understood that meat maintains its symbolism on its own. This is not to say that the marketing apparatus of the meat industry is not doing its part to keep this symbolism alive. Fiddes argues that marketing of meat tends to emphasize both “naturalness” and “ideas of rivalry, violence, strength, moral fibre, and mastery.”¹⁵⁹ The marketing of meat industry also tends to focus on “rational” benefits of meat, such as nutrition and price.¹⁶⁰

The logic implied in eating meat, shares the characteristic of the way the industrial revolution proved to us the very ethical superiority of humanity, that we invoked to justify it; the fact that we eat them, seems to posit us as above them. And we may eat them, exactly because we are above them. There is a performativity at work; we *enact* ourselves on top of the food chain. In the light of Žižek's concept of the subject as the constant attempts to constitute itself, this need to perform our identity does make sense.

So through meat consumption, we are performing the principles of the Great Chain of Being. Here it is important to note that such symbolic performance does not take place in on a conscious individual level, but on a level of cultural consensus:

“It is not that we each consciously exult in our mastery of nature whenever we bite into a piece of flesh, but we are brought up within a culture which has regarded environmental conquest as a laudable goal, and which has deployed meat as a primary means to demonstrate it.”¹⁶¹

Although not conscious, meat consumption still relies on a clear “conceptual division” of humans and other animals, that the Great Chain of Being provides.¹⁶²

5.3 In defence of a dichotomy: Human exceptionalism

As I will try and illustrate in the following, there is a strong desire to defend this conceptual division. This is done by trying to demonstrate the unique qualities of humans. We find one such contemporary intellectual proponent in Wesley J. Smith. He is a Senior Fellow at the

¹⁵⁸ P. 173 Fiddes 1991

¹⁵⁹ P. 86 Fiddes 1991

¹⁶⁰ P. 160 Fiddes 1991

¹⁶¹ P. 228 Fiddes 1991

¹⁶² P. 129 Fiddes 1991

Discovery Institute's Center on Human Exceptionalism. The Institute also promotes the idea of Intelligent Design.¹⁶³

In his book from 2010, *A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy : the human cost of the animal rights movement*, he argues that the movement to give animals rights comes with the cost of lowering human value.

He gives a clear voice to the view that humans are exceptional:

“The idea that human beings stand at the pinnacle of the moral hierarchy of life should be - and once was - uncontroversial. After all, what other species in the known history of life has attained the wondrous capacities of human beings? What other species has transcended the tooth-and-claw world of naked natural selection to the point that, at least to some degree, we now control nature instead of being controlled by it? What other species, builds civilizations, records history, creates art, makes music, thinks abstractly, communicates in language, envisions and fabricates machinery, improves life through science and engineering, or explores the deeper truths found in philosophy and religion?”¹⁶⁴

Albeit an awe-inspiring recitation of the perks of being human, what is also at work in Smith's quote is known as the *differential imperative*.

The differential imperative is an articulation of the desire, inherent in the anthropocentric world view, to differentiate humanity from animals and nature:

“what is virtuous in the human is taken to be what maximizes distance from the merely natural. The maintenance of sharp dichotomy and polarization is achieved by the rejection and denial of what links humans to the animal.”¹⁶⁵

So when Smith is outlining what he believes sets humans apart and above from the animal kingdom, he is heeding the differential imperative. The main point here is not, whether those things are actually a unique monopoly of mankind. The main point is that he is so adamant about defending the sanctity of the Great Chain of Being. The loss of such a fundamental hierarchy of beings, and thereby our own spot at the top, seems to bring about some existential fears.

As we spoke of earlier, these principles take place at the level of cultural consensus, not individual consciousness. So although deeply ingrained in the worldview, people might not be able to consciously articulate it, and the reasons given may vary.

Still, one example from the foreword to Smith's book will be illustrative.

Here it is argued that denying human exceptionalism will “force upon society a simple and intellectually hollow materialism that reduces nature to a machine lacking in mystery and reduces all the splendid, diverse creatures on the earth to one and the same thing: meat. It is a denial of the world's profound depth, of meaning and sacred order.”¹⁶⁶

Again the question is not whether the described state of affairs will actually come about. This would technically be an empirical question. It's possible to imagine other, more egalitarian worldviews. The interesting point is in the fear of the breakdown of the metaphysical

¹⁶³ <http://www.discovery.org/p/13>

¹⁶⁴ P. 238 Smith 2010

¹⁶⁵ P. 156 Elliot 2004

¹⁶⁶ P. xii Smith 2010

hierarchy. Another interesting part of the quote, is the concept used to describe what this state of affairs will reduce all beings to; meat. This is *de facto* what we are reducing a lot of beings (the livestock industry) to. Meat is a creation of humanity's own dealing with nature. It is then fittingly invoked as the symbol of what we might be reduced to, if we give up our place at the top of the food chain.

The scientific advances are also part of challenging our view of humans as conceptually distinct from nature.

The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness in Non-Human Animals from 2012, clearly states that non-human animals also possess consciousness.¹⁶⁷ This idea is not brand new, but was already present when Darwin stated:

“[T]here is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties.”¹⁶⁸

It is a testament to the conceptual resilience of the Great Chain of Being, that it took over a century from Darwin's groundbreaking theory, before declaration in Cambridge was released.

The differential imperative might also help to enlighten the other dichotomies we introduced earlier. Although the imperative only asserts that what makes us distinctly human is what differentiates us from nature, the logic involved can be extended.

Applying the logic at the other dichotomies, we may say that what constitutes real *men*, is what separates them from *women*. What constitutes the upper class, is what separates them from the lower class. What is virtuous in the European is what distinguishes them from non-Europeans etc.

Recall that associations tend to be made on one side of the dichotomies, so symbols that help uphold one distinction might be used to uphold the others. And meat consumption appears in many of the other dichotomies.

We've already discussed at length the role of meat in the distinction of culture/nature. As we mentioned earlier, meat was traditionally a prerogative of the wealthy, upper class and thus became a symbol of wealth and power. Traditionally, meat has also played a more central part of the western diet, than in other places of the world.¹⁶⁹

The role of meat in the dichotomy between humans and animals is pretty straightforward, as meat entails humans eating the animals. Fiddes argues that the activity of hunting emerges consistently in “post-biblical” accounts of how our species was formed, and thereby distinguished us from the other animals.¹⁷⁰ Fiddes argues, that there is a tendency both in science and popular culture, to see the shift from foraging for food to hunting, as a significant cause of civilisation. This argument goes, that it fundamentally changed our social relations, requiring more teamwork, leadership, division of labor etc. This has led some theorists to believe that the beginning of hunting also brought with it the beginning of gender

¹⁶⁷ <http://fcmconference.org/img/CambridgeDeclarationOnConsciousness.pdf>

¹⁶⁸ http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/published/1871_Descent_F937/1871_Descent_F937.1.html

¹⁶⁹ P. 168 Zaraska 2016

¹⁷⁰ P. 55 Fiddes

inequalities, since men were the designated hunters.¹⁷¹ This takes us to the final distinction, between man and woman.

In her book from 1990, Carol J. Adams argues that meat plays a substantial role in the distinction between the sexes: “Meat-eating societies gain male identification by their choice of food”.¹⁷² In these societies “vegetables and other nonmeat foods are viewed as women’s food.”¹⁷³

We have introduced the idea from McCracken, that meaning flows from the culturally constituted world into consumer items. We then use the meaning in these items to construct our identities.

An important tool of the identification process, is differentiation:

“In other words, one group can appreciate its own existence more meaningfully by conjuring up others as categorical opposites.”¹⁷⁴

We can create a stronger identity by focusing on what differentiate us from others.

So those consumer products, including meat, that help us delineate our identity from others, have a particular value in our self-constitutive efforts.

5.4 The good, the bad and the biocentric

The sociologist Eileen Christ, argues that an anthropocentric worldview usually invites us to think of human nature and our relationship with nature in two ways.¹⁷⁵ The first sees human nature as a special species, almost god-like. Although we haven’t done a good enough job so far, the thinking goes, we have a great responsibility to shepherd the rest of nature. This should be done through our extraordinary human capacities of scientific enlightenment and technological advancement.

The second view sees human nature as a torn page from the manuscript of social darwinism. We are greedy, ego-centric and competitive. Therefore, our unconstrained use of nature is just a consequence of our own nature, and technology just a tool of dominion.

The two views share the fundamental belief that humankind is above nature, either by a divine, enlightened nature or simply because we’ve risen, victorious, through the gladiator-like, antagonistic strife that is natural life.

Yet another line of thinking opens up, if we abandon both notions of humanity.

Although anthropocentrism serves to give our species a collective ego boost, by positing us as either benign kings or dictators of the natural world, this dominion comes with a price.

As Adorno and Horkheimer eloquently put it:

¹⁷¹ P. 57 Fiddes

¹⁷² P. 26 Adams 1990

¹⁷³ P. 27 Adams 1990

¹⁷⁴ P. 123 Fiddes (quoting Arens)

¹⁷⁵ <http://ifg.org/techno-utopia/program/>

“Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power.”¹⁷⁶

This alienation has led to a loss of respect, as the natural world is only posited as resources. Without respect to give rise to restraint, humanity has hastened towards the ecological boundaries of industrial production we face today.

This sentiment is shared by an increasing number of people, according to Fiddes:

“Today many dissident individuals and groups stress a counterposing view of culture. Instead of emphasising control and separateness, these represent society as one special component of the entire living world, potentially living not by parasitic manipulation but in dynamic interaction with nature.”¹⁷⁷

Fiddes sees an increasing scepticism of the state of affairs brought about by our management of the natural world.¹⁷⁸

The industrialisation of the natural world, once viewed as surest sign of humanity’s progress, has now become the problem itself:

“The new ideology, in contrast to tradition, regards unrestrained domination of other creatures as a sign not of civilized elevation but of regrettable backwardness.”¹⁷⁹

Technology, understood here as the tool which humanity has gained dominion over nature, is therefore viewed with suspicion.¹⁸⁰ The problems are a symptom of the antagonistic way we’ve been approaching nature. Instead of working against nature, we should work with it.

On the other hand, the anthropocentric view sees the environmental problems as unfortunate side-effects, but nothing that cannot be fixed with the proper application of technology.¹⁸¹

In view of the central symbolic role that meat plays in the traditional worldview, it is not surprising that the dismissal of meat goes hand in hand with the dismissal of the traditional worldview:

“As concern at the destructive excesses of industrial domination of the planet has grown, so refusal to eat the flesh of other animals has also become an ideal exemplar through which to state a preference for forms of human activity with different goals than the prosecution of an unwinnable fight to the finish against our own life support system.”¹⁸²

Due to the connection between masculinity and dominion over nature, this shift in our attitudes towards nature, Fiddes argues, shows itself in the shift of perception of some of the central concepts of masculinity. Masculine values now comes with an ambivalence. Strength and power may also be interpreted as cruelty and aggression.¹⁸³ The connection between masculinity and meat, means that “meat now signifies barbarity as well as power.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁶ P. 77 Elliot 1995

¹⁷⁷ P. 109 Fiddes 1990

¹⁷⁸ P. 118 Fiddes 1990

¹⁷⁹ P. 117 Fiddes 1990

¹⁸⁰ P. 219 Fiddes 1990

¹⁸¹ P. 218 Fiddes 1990

¹⁸² P. 223 Fiddes 1990

¹⁸³ P. 110 Fiddes 1990

¹⁸⁴ P. 116 Fiddes 1990

Fiddes, at the time of his writing, sees a rise in an alternative view of humanity's relation with nature and a distrust of the destructive aspects of masculinity. Yet, western society as a whole has not seen an unequivocal movement towards a more biocentric worldview and a devalorization of meat. In 2016 Marta Zaraska interviews Carol Adams about the current relationship between meat and masculinity:

“[T]raditional masculinity is threatened nowadays by feminism, the gay movement, metrosexuality, and all the BabyBjörn-wearing carrot-munching fathers of the world. Old-school masculinity needs to be reaffirmed, and one way to do this is to connect it once again with eating bloody slabs of animal flesh, even if that flesh didn't require any skills or strength to kill and came in a plastic wrap from a supermarket.”¹⁸⁵

So according to Adams the very movement away from traditional male-centric values has challenged the masculine identity. And to such a degree that some men feel a need to migrate towards meat-heavy diets, the traditional symbolic safe-zone of masculinity.

The above quote also hints at the hunting myth, and the questions the funny notion of how modern meat eaters believe themselves to be somehow be hunters by proxy. Yet to Fiddes, the convenience of having our meat pre-hunted, pre-killed and pre-wrapped is actually another symbol of our species superiority:

“Convenience is leisure; convenience is the power to have the work done by other means; convenience is to be on top of the heap - and meat signals convenience.”¹⁸⁶

According to Fiddes, the link between meat and masculinity is also one of the causes that vegetarianism has suffered from social stigmatization. Vegetarians may be “treated with barely disguised suspicion as if their subversive beliefs and behavior threaten more than just conventional nutritional wisdom (which of course they do: in effect they challenge the society's entire cosmology).”¹⁸⁷ So the very existence of carrot-munching vegetarians might be perceived as a threat to the metaphysical fabric of the masculine order.

To Fiddes, it's also not a coincidence that “bloody slabs” of meat are used to reaffirm the masculine order. Meat is naturally associated with red blood.¹⁸⁸ This makes red meat a more “masculine” meat, due to its more direct associations with power and violence.

5.5 “Where do you get your protein?” A symbolic monopoly

In the introduction we touched on the role meat has played to our ancestors, as a rich source of nutrition and protein. Fiddes traces the modern association of meat and protein, back to the nineteenth-century German chemist, Baron Justus von Liebig.¹⁸⁹ Liebig promoted the view that protein was essential to building muscle, that we needed large amounts of it and that protein came solely from meat, also called the *protein myth*.¹⁹⁰ Fiddes argues this idea, that meat monopolized the association with protein, has been scientific orthodoxy up until the late

¹⁸⁵ P. 111 Zaraska 2016

¹⁸⁶ P. 93 Fiddes 1990

¹⁸⁷ P. 183 Fiddes 1990

¹⁸⁸ P. 116 Fiddes 1990

¹⁸⁹ P. 176 Fiddes 1990

¹⁹⁰ P. 177 Fiddes 1990

twentieth-century.¹⁹¹ In 1971, with the book, *Diet for a small Planet*, Frances Moore Lappé argued that although no single vegetable contained all the essential amino acids¹⁹², by eating a diverse source of plant protein, it is possible to get all of them.¹⁹³ Lappé's aim was actually to move people towards a more plant-based diet. Yet it actually served to reinforce a belief that it was very hard balance your nutritional needs on a plant-based diet, since you had to be so careful of what you eat.¹⁹⁴

Zaraska argues that science has now shown that:¹⁹⁵

- 1) Some plants foods contain all the relevant amino acids.
- 2) Human bodies may produce amino acids itself, so there is no need to fear the balancing act.
- 3) In western society, we are actually consuming too much protein on average.

Although the debate on nutrition is interesting and important, the relevant part for our enquiry is the symbolic equation of meat with protein, muscle and meat.

In summary, we've seen how the concept of the Great Chain of Being in western thought, has put humankind as the top of the natural world. It posits everything in the natural world as lower and therefore sanctions the use of it as a resource. This anthropocentric world view, tends to rank western over non-western, upper class over lower class, men higher than women and culture higher than nature. Meat has long acted as a symbol of wealth, power, muscle, species-superiority and masculinity. As such it may act as a demarcation between the different places in the anthropocentric hierarchy. This has also helped make the reduction or complete boycott of meat consumption, a natural symbol for the growing group of people who are moving towards a more biocentric worldview.

In our collective understanding of our species, meat is a symbol of what sets us apart and above the rest of nature. This means that companies aiming to replace animal protein with plant protein are possibly tearing at building blocks that have for a long been fundamental to the very fabric of western reality. This begs the following question. If meat indeed plays the part of a "post-biblical" myth of creation and is a vital reminder of our place atop the food chain, what chance do the alt-protein have?

On the other hand, if they succeed in this "compassionate take over" of such a powerful symbol, they stand to gain a lot. In the following, we will try analyse their attempt of disruption.

¹⁹¹ P. 176 Fiddes 1990

¹⁹² Proteins consist of 20 different amino acids. P. 47 Zaraska 2016

¹⁹³ P. 47 Zaraska 2016

¹⁹⁴ P. 48 Zaraska 2016

¹⁹⁵ P. 48 Zaraska 2016

6. Analysis

6.1 Background: Livestock's long list of issues

Of the many different ailments in the slipstream of modern consumption, animal agriculture is represented widely across the spectrum. In the following I will briefly present a few of the most important ones. The list is not meant to be exhaustive and will be favor broadness in scope over detail in description. It is intended to outline the issues with the scale of the world's meat consumption and the importance of addressing it. The issues are the main motivation and business opportunities of the companies we will be examining. The following is therefore meant to provide context as well as further motivate the relevance of research question.

The issues described will be; environment, food-security, animal welfare, public health and financial risk.

In terms of environmental degradation, the UN states that: "The livestock sector emerges as one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global."¹⁹⁶

It's 14,5% share of the total anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, holds it's own against even the emissions from the combined transportation sector,¹⁹⁷ and as such is a major contributor to climate change.

Behind the scenes of climate change, lurks a question of global justice. The rising water levels, changing weather patterns etc. will hit the hardest in poorer countries, which lack the political and financial infrastructure to mitigate the effects and on average the consumption patterns of wealthier countries contribute substantially more to global warming.

On the topic of natural resource depletion and food security, the issue is summed up neatly, in a proverb often attributed to Gandhi:

"The rich man's cow is eating the poor man's bread."

The rearing of livestock for food is very resource-intensive, with around 33% of the world's crops and drinking water going towards the production of meat, and meat only covering 17% of the global population's calorie-intake.¹⁹⁸

These issues are also socially lopsided, with a significantly higher per capita meat consumption in richer, western countries. This demand for feed for western livestock, incentivises the agricultural sectors in developing countries to export instead of meeting the domestic food demands. As an grim example, during the 84-85 famine in Ethiopia, which cost the lives of 1 million people, the country continued to export linseed, cottonseed and

¹⁹⁶ <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/a0701e/a0701e00.pdf>

¹⁹⁷ <http://www.fao.org/3/i3437e.pdf>

¹⁹⁸ <https://www.mm.dk/verden-brug-alternative-loesninger/>

rapeseed meal to the European agricultural sector.¹⁹⁹ Jeremy Rifkin, influential economist and author of “Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of Cattle Culture,” estimates that 80% of the world’s starving children live in countries, where surplus food is used for livestock which is destined for the dinner table of the well-off.²⁰⁰ In Brazil the major export is now soya for western livestock. This trading is favouring the heavily subsidized western cattle industry, and not doing a good job bringing prosperity to poor Brazilians.²⁰¹

At the core is the inherent in-efficient calorie conversion, with the animals basically being poor “machines” for converting food. They are an expensive middle-man in our food’s journey from farm to fork. If the estimated growth in population towards 2050, correlates with a corresponding craving for animal protein, we will struggle to feed the world’s population (even more than today).²⁰²

Another ethical issue, arises from the fact that animals are not machines to begin with. Increasingly, both animal rights and animal welfare organisations are bringing to public attention the plight of farm animals and the many welfare issues with rearing sentient animals on an industrial scale. In 2012, The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness in Non-Human Animals²⁰³ was released by a group of prominent neuroscientists, providing further ink to the epitaph of the Cartesian dictum that animals are simple automatons without the ability to feel pain.

Yet, whether we decide that animals should be included in the sphere of moral concern or we conclude that morality is simply a contract that you cannot sign with claws and hooves, their fates and our fates are intertwined. The ancient Greek philosopher, mathematician and one of the grandfathers of vegetarianism, Pythagoras, famously said: “Let thy medicine be thy food and thy food be thy medicine.” But he didn’t foresee the degree to which modern conventional agriculture would mix the two. The cramped, stressful living conditions on a modern factory farm, entails a systemic overuse of antibiotics to treat the inevitable outbreaks of disease.²⁰⁴ The annual global amount of antibiotics fed to livestock is 67,000 tonnes.²⁰⁵ If the US in any indication on the rest of global agriculture, the animals are using a lot more than us. In the US, 80% of antibiotics are used in animal agriculture. This liberal use is causing a rapid evolution of multi-resistant bacteria, which many scientists fear will lead to a “post anti-biotic era”, where even the most common ailments will be untreatable.²⁰⁶ Lynora

¹⁹⁹ <http://www.viva.org.uk/feed-world>

²⁰⁰ <http://www.viva.org.uk/feed-world>

²⁰¹ <http://www.viva.org.uk/feed-world>

²⁰² <http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/i2425e/i2425e00.pdf>

²⁰³ <http://fcmconference.org/img/CambridgeDeclarationOnConsciousness.pdf>

²⁰⁴ <https://www.nrdc.org/issues/reduce-antibiotic-misuse-livestock>

²⁰⁵ <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn27218-superbug-risk-from-tonnes-of-antibiotics-fed-to-animals/>

²⁰⁶ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/editorials/overuse-of-antibiotics-causing-resistance-that-could-undermine-medical-advances/article4098034/>

Saxinger, professor of medicine at the University of Alberta, described the situation as “a trainwreck in slowmotion”.²⁰⁷

Antibiotic apocalypse aside, Pythagoras’ ancient dietary advice still carries weight today. If we would simply eat more vegetables the public health would improve. A 2016 Oxford University study estimates that transitioning towards a more plant-based diet by 2050 would save 5,1 million lives annually.²⁰⁸ In the US, it would also account for yearly health care savings amounting to \$700-\$1,000 billion. Pricing the value of good health is complex, and the professor behind the study, Dr. Marco Springmann, believes that the financial benefit could potentially be even higher, if we look beyond simple health care savings: “The value that society places on the reduced risk of dying could even be as high as 9-13% of global GDP, or \$20-\$30 trillion (US).”²⁰⁹

A bigger hospital bill, is only part of the price. The Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR), under the World Bank, released a report in 2016, estimating that by 2050 1.3 billion people and assets totaling \$158 trillion will be at risk.²¹⁰ This is due to further population growth and urbanization, which will make cities more vulnerable to climatic changes.

A growing awareness of some of the above issues, have sparked the formation of the Farm Animal Investment & Return-initiative (FAIRR) in 2016. FAIRR is a \$1,25 trillion strong coalition of 40 investors, who are have mapped 28 environmental, social and governance (ESG) issues, that modern factory farming is vulnerable to. FAIRR is engaging 16 global food producers and retailers, such as Unilever and Walmart, to have them formulate and implement a strategy to respond to these risk.²¹¹ In short, their advice is a spin on the old adage; “do not put all your eggs one basket”, and they are asking companies to diversify their protein supply chains, moving towards less financially vulnerable, more sustainable plant-based solutions.

According to the UN, further increasing the protein-output of conventional agriculture, is not a viable solution in the long run. Further improving efficiency equals intensification.²¹² And further intensification will require higher use of antibiotics, a further compromise with animal welfare, and will not be compatible with organic farming systems. Increasing efficiency further, will make meat-production more profitable, which will create a financial incentive

²⁰⁷ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/editorials/overuse-of-antibiotics-causing-resistance-that-could-undermine-medical-advances/article4098034/>

²⁰⁸ http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/news/201603_Plant_based_diets

²⁰⁹ http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/news/201603_Plant_based_diets

²¹⁰ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2016/05/16/unprepared-for-a-risky-future>

²¹¹ <http://www.fairr.org/wp-content/uploads/Sustainable-Protein-Engagement-Press-release-26-Sept-2016.pdf>

²¹² <https://ing.dk/artikel/derfor-ma-vi-aendre-madvaner-redde-klimaet-183317>

for existing farmers to expand, and draw more people to the industry, further escalating the problems.²¹³²¹⁴

This concludes our overview of some of the most relevant issues. Most of them are multifaceted issues requiring solutions on many levels. Yet, as with as with a traditional western dinner plate, the meat is at the center of it all.

This makes it a very good place to start looking at a solution.

6.2 Background: The alternative protein-industry: More than simply “Tofu 3.0”?

And this is exactly what a new generation of food startups are aiming at. With bold names as “Beyond Meat” and “Impossible Foods”, they setting out to disrupt the existing meat, dairy and egg industry. “Industry disruption” is an inflated term in business writing these days. Yet so far, these companies are on a good trajectory. Hampton Creek, a company that makes alternatives to egg-based products, was the fastest growing food company in 2015, and was put on the World Economic Forum’s list of the 49 most promising technological pioneers.²¹⁵ Beyond Meat, a company that textures vegetable protein into burgers, ground beef and chicken strips, has broken out the protein-alternative “penalty-box” where supermarkets usually keep meat-alternatives, and managed to get their product, the Beyond Burger, into the meat-aisle of Whole Foods.²¹⁶ Impossible Foods has managed to raised \$183 million dollars, even before it’s flagship product, the Impossible Burger, had hit the aisles. In 2015 14% of all venture capital investments in the food sector, vent to Impossible Foods.²¹⁷ Less than a decade old, Hampton Creek, Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods are now valued at \$2 billion combined.²¹⁸ Other noteworthy companies include New Wave Foods, specializing in sustainable seafood made from plants, and Daiya Foods which in 2009 debuted with it’s line of plant-based alternatives to cheese.²¹⁹

Another generation of disruptive foodtech companies are in the pipeline. Back in 1931, in an article entitled “Fifty Years Hence” Winston Churchill made the following prediction: “We shall escape the absurdity of growing a whole chicken in order to eat the breast or wing, by growing these parts separately under a suitable medium.”²²⁰

With the exception of getting the date wrong by a few decades, Churchill was pretty spot on. In August 2013 Dr. Mark Post of the Maastricht University, hosted the first tasting of a

²¹³ <https://ing.dk/artikel/derfor-ma-vi-aendre-madvaner-redde-klimaet-183317>

²¹⁴ Here it is worth mentioning that some researchers do believe in “Intensified Sustainability”. They believe we should look primarily at the of the production side, to mitigate emissions:

<http://www.pnas.org/content/107/43/18237.short>

²¹⁵ <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20150805006885/en/World-Economic-Forum-Awards-Hampton-Creek-Technology>

²¹⁶ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-whole-foods-beyond-meat-veggie-burger-20161026-story.html>

²¹⁷ <http://newfoodeconomy.com/impossible-foods-burger-bet/>

²¹⁸ Appendix 1. GFI one-pager

²¹⁹ <http://daiyafoods.com/why-daiya/our-story/>

²²⁰ <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/fifty-years-hence/>

cultured tissue beef burger in London, under the watchful eyes of 200 journalists.²²¹ The first burger cost €250,000 to produce, yet provided a radical breakthrough in the field of cellular agriculture. It is created from bovine fetal serum grown in a media, where nutrients are added and the serum grows into muscle cells. It's popularly being referred to as *clean meat*, with a nod to the fact that it uses no antibiotics.

2 years after it's debut a burger costs less than €10 to produce, which bodes well for clean meat's potential to become cost-competitive.²²² The companies Memphis Meat, Mosa Meat and SuperMeat are stepping up to the challenge of lifting clean meat towards commercialization, and expect to have achieved this feat within the next 5 years.²²³ Along the lines of cultured tissue meat, is the company Modern Meadow, which is utilizing the technology of 3D printing, to print meat.²²⁴ They are also working to "grow" leather, in an effort to increase sustainability in the textile industry.²²⁵

To complete the "ecosystem" of this new, alternative protein industry it has its' own dedicated venture capital fund, with the slogan "Funding the next generation of food industry disruptors".²²⁶ The industry is also complete with a couple of interest groups, Plant Based Foods Association, The Good Food Institute (GFI) and New Harvest.²²⁷ The two former were launched in 2016, and the latter in 2004.²²⁸ While all three work to advance alternatives to traditional animal products, Plant Based Foods Association focuses solely on plant-based products, New Harvest on cellular agriculture, with GFI being the only one to promote both. GFI argues that there is a huge business case for the alternative protein industry. In the US today, plant-based meat makes up around 0.25% (\$500 million) of a \$195 billion meatmarket. The growing market for plant-based milk in the US makes up around 8% (\$2 billion) of the total \$24,5 billion milk market. Benchmarking against the milk market, GFI estimates that closing the gap would result in a \$20 billion plant-based meat market.²²⁹ FAIRR-founder, Jeremy Coller, estimates an annual growth of 8,4% in the plant-based protein market the coming 5 years.²³⁰

The above are seemingly some impressive industry statistics. But let us zoom out a bit. Mea-alternatives has been around for many years, with tofu first making its' appearance on records, in 25-225 CE, on the inscription of a chinese tomb mural.²³¹ Yet so far, neither tofu, nor its modern siblings have succeeded in disrupting our longstanding tradition of consuming

²²¹ http://www.new-harvest.org/mark_post_cultured_beef

²²² <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/technology-science/science/250000-lab-burger-can-now-5429338>

²²³ <http://www.gfi.org/2016-a-tipping-point-for-food>

²²⁴ <http://www.globalmeatnews.com/Industry-Markets/3D-printed-meat-on-the-way-and-it-will-be-disruptive-say-American-specialists>

²²⁵ <http://www.modernmeadow.com/>

²²⁶ <http://www.newcropcapital.com/>

²²⁷ Other interest groups exist. For an overview see: http://www.futurefood.org/in-vitro-meat/index_en.php

²²⁸ <http://www.new-harvest.org/about>

²²⁹ Appendix 1. GFI one-pager

²³⁰ <http://www.fairr.org/news-item/2019/>

²³¹ P. 29 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014

animal meat for protein. This begs the question: What makes these newcomers think they stand any chance? What emboldening characteristics do these new companies possess?

For one, they are teeming with the spirit of social entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurs behind it are out to solve some of society's biggest issues.²³² More traditional plant-based companies have been content with supplying protein to the 3% of the population who already eats a vegetarian diet.²³³ As Beyond Meat's goal of hitting the mainstream meat-aisle hints at, they are aiming to displace traditional meats in the long run. Unlike traditional companies, they are uncompromisingly benchmarking their products against the very products they aim to displace. As the founder of Impossible Food states:

"We have to clear a very high bar because we have to produce a product that — for a consumer who's not gonna cut us any breaks — outperforms as a burger what we're getting today from a cow. [...] because the only customer that we care about — given our mission — is someone who loves meat, is not looking for an alternative, and is not gonna compromise on the pleasure of eating meat for some principle or because they're concerned about the climate impact or something like that."²³⁴

They are aiming at the palate of an audience, that is not likely to change eating habits for political or ideological reasons. This sets the bar high for the companies' R&D departments. And characteristically of many of them, they have grown out of out the high tech startup scene in Silicon Valley.²³⁵ Another "Silicon Valley-symptom" is the of list of backers, with high-tech venture capital companies such as Khosla Ventures, Kleiner Perkins, Obvious Corp and personalities such as Bill Gates and Sergey Brin (co-founder of Google) lending both financial support and, perhaps just as important, considerable credibility to the companies.²³⁶ On a blog post entitled "Future of Food", Bill Gates shared his encounter with the chicken-free strips of Beyond Meat:

"What I was experiencing was more than a clever meat substitute. It was a taste of the future of food."²³⁷

Eric Schmidt, the executive chairman of Alphabet Inc., which is the holding company behind Google, has the reputation and credentials of a technological sage.²³⁸ In 2016, to a room full of investors and business leaders, he made a forecast of six revolutionary technologies, that will have a game changing impact on society.²³⁹ Number one on his list, he dubbed "Nerds over cattle", and pointed to the potential of plant-based protein to curb climate change. With

²³² Interview Bhumitra

²³³ Interview Bhumitra

²³⁴ <http://www.vox.com/2016/7/7/12106708/impossible-foods-ezra-klein-show>

²³⁵ <https://gigaom.com/2014/10/08/meet-impossible-foods-another-vc-backed-veggie-meat-startup/>

²³⁶ <https://gigaom.com/2014/10/08/meet-impossible-foods-another-vc-backed-veggie-meat-startup/>

²³⁷ <https://www.gatesnotes.com/About-Bill-Gates/Future-of-Food>

²³⁸ <http://fortune.com/2016/05/02/eric-schmidts-6-tech-trends/>

²³⁹ <http://fortune.com/2016/05/02/eric-schmidts-6-tech-trends/>

present day technology we are well-equipped to meet nutritional needs and accommodate taste buds, Schmidt asserts.²⁴⁰

Besides the technological advances on the supply side, on the demand side of things, we are seeing a growing consumer awareness of the many issues of conventional agriculture.²⁴¹ This has translated into an increased interest in plant-based diets, with vegan and vegetarian related content, at times getting more social media mentions than Coca Cola.²⁴² The generation of millennials are generally environmentally conscious, and their focus on the environment is also contributing to more plant-based eating.²⁴³ So whether or not, the companies' R&D departments perfects the burger-recipe, it would seem there is a growing customer base regardless.

In summary, modern livestock production is contributes to some serious global issues. The alternative protein industry are presenting plant-based or “clean” alternatives to the traditional animal products. These alternatives aim to offer equivalent quality while, while not carrying many of the negative consequences. The success of the new industry depends on their ability take over the existing market of animal based products. We will argue in the following, that this takeover in turn, will depend on the ability of their products to fully or partly assume the same cultural meaning as the traditional counterparts.

6.3 Analysis of the alternative protein industry

In this analysis I will occasionally comment on the alternatives to eggs and dairy, but the primary focus will on those products that present themselves as alternatives to meat. The analysis will be centered around the idea that meat carries a specific cultural meaning for consumers. I will assume that part of what explains our huge market for meat is explained by this cultural significance. I will examine whether the new industry will have to imbue their products with a similar symbolic value, much like they need to imbue it with the equivalent nutritional content.

I will use the term *alt-protein industry*, as a combined term for both the companies that are using plant-protein and those developing clean meat. Although I am examining the industry as whole, I am of course not assuming, that there is no individual variation in the motivation, narrative and approach or other relevant factors. Since I am mostly focused on the concept of meat I will nevertheless look at the similarities and my comments are intended to apply to the industry as a whole, unless otherwise noted.

²⁴⁰ <http://fortune.com/2016/05/02/eric-schmidts-6-tech-trends/>

²⁴¹ Interview Bhumitra

²⁴² In a period of 90 days, in 2016, vegan/vegetarian had 4,3 million mentions and Coca Cola 4,1 million.

<http://www.foodnavigator-usa.com/Markets/Vegan-is-going-mainstream-trend-data-suggests>

²⁴³ <http://www.foodnavigator-usa.com/Markets/Vegan-is-going-mainstream-trend-data-suggests>

As clean meat is not in the market yet, and presents it's own set of challenges and opportunities, I will comment on it in it's own section.

I have structured the analysis around the following themes: "Mission", "Taste, Texture, Availability, Affordability", "Stakeholder and Target group", and Clean meat.

We may fittingly begin the analysis with the following question: *What is a meat alternative?* In book published by the Soyinfo Center, entitled *History of Meat Alternatives (965 CE TO 2014)*, they give a the following straightforward definition:

"It is a meatless food that has approximately the same taste, appearance, and texture of a related food made from meat, poultry, fish or shellfish. It's nutritional value is, in general, approximately equal to (or sometimes greater than) that of the related food".²⁴⁴

So it's a food that purposefully mimics meat from an animal.

More interestingly than *what*, is perhaps the question of *why*? As scientific journalist Marta Zaraska puts it: "Why does such an oddity like fake meat exist at all? We don't concoct fake nuts for those who are allergic, nor are there fake carrots for the strict Jains, who avoid root vegetables (they believe pulling them out of the ground is gross violence)".²⁴⁵

If it was a simple matter of nutrition we would probably eat more chickpeas and beans. They have a good protein content, and can be produced with far less resource expenditure.²⁴⁶

Yet maybe we should treat meat alternatives as a sort of compliment to meat's cultural status, as Fiddes puts it:

"The range of soya-based meat-analogues and other substitutes available today testifies to the centrality of the *concept* of meat, not to its dispensability."²⁴⁷

Meat alternatives have a long track record in Asia, originating in China 25-225 CE.²⁴⁸ In 965 tofu was mentioned as "mock lamb chops" or "the vice mayor's mutton".²⁴⁹ Not until 1885 are meat alternatives are mentioned in the western world, in the American newspaper *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*.²⁵⁰ The earliest meatless burger in the US, named "Soy-burger", was introduced in 1937.²⁵¹

In 1974 the company Morningstar Farms, brought frozen meat alternatives to the mass market.²⁵² Tofurky launches in 1995.²⁵³ In 2001, the market of meat alternatives is approximately 500\$ in the US.²⁵⁴

²⁴⁴ P. 5 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014

²⁴⁵ P. 2 Zaraska 2016 (Jains are adherents of the religion Jainism, practised in India)

²⁴⁶ See chapter 6.1 on calorie conversion.

²⁴⁷ P. 16 Fiddes 1990

²⁴⁸ P. 29 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014

²⁴⁹ P. 5 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014

²⁵⁰ P. 5 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014

²⁵¹ P. 7 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014

²⁵² P. 8 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014

²⁵³ P. 9 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014 (Tofurky is a traditional company, well-renowned in the US for its meat alternatives).

²⁵⁴ P. 9 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014

Burger King is the first national fast food chain to put veggie burger on menu in 2002.²⁵⁵ Meat alternatives are then not completely foreign to the US consumers.

Traditionally companies producing meat alternatives have catered for small part of the population, that were already vegetarian, approximately 3%.²⁵⁶

The mission of the new companies however, is more lofty than that.

6.4 Mission

The alt-protein is aiming to disrupt what they see as an outdated food system. Pat Brown called livestock “an antiquated technology”.²⁵⁷

On a whole, the alt-protein industry sees the many issues pertaining to the livestock sector as a business opportunity:

“I think that the ways that so many different societal ills can be addressed is a massive opportunity, because there are members of the public, who care about the environment, health, world hunger, labour abuse and animal suffering. These are huge issues, in and of themselves. Each one of those issues has numerous organisations working on behalf, and numerous people affected by each of those topics. So now, you have one particular idea, meat, milk and eggs or plant-based innovation, that can address all of these societal ills, in one fell swoop. That's pretty remarkable, to have one new form of innovation address so many different, huge topics all at once.”²⁵⁸

This focus on addressing the entire system system of agriculture, has three interesting implications for the alt-protein industry. For one, they need to move beyond the customer base of the traditional meat alternative companies. Not only would they not achieve their goal of disruption, they might end of putting the other companies out of business, as Tobias Leenaert put it:

“Yeah, who are they competing with? I mean, are they going to enlarge the pie, or are they going to eat the part of the pie at the cost of the companies that were already there. It would of course be interesting if they were going to enlarge the pie, you know?”²⁵⁹

Their aim is, we will assume, not just to gain some market shares, but to “enlarge the pie” i.e. expand the group of people eating plant-based. This means they don't need to achieve this goal by claiming the entire market for themselves. It might be enough just to call attention to the market opportunities. Recall the protein myth, the scientific orthodoxy that meat was the only proper source of protein. This mythological monopoly is beginning to weaken. The 2016 March issue of “Meatingplace”, an industry magazine covering the meat industry, sported a frontpage with a cowhead silhouette comprised of plants, and the heading “Non-Meat Grata :

²⁵⁵ P. 9 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014

²⁵⁶ Interview Bhumitra

²⁵⁷ <https://gigaom.com/2014/10/08/meet-impossible-foods-another-vc-backed-veggie-meat-startup/>

²⁵⁸ Interview Bhumitra

²⁵⁹ Interview Leenaert

Plant-based meat substitutes are evolving, luring investors”.²⁶⁰ The magazine featured an in-depth article on the emerging market, where one meat industry employee voiced the need for the meat industry in America “to become the ‘protein’ industry” and a “one stop-shop.”²⁶¹ It also featured an advertisement from a marketing company entitled “How to please a flexitarian?”²⁶²

The Danish Agriculture & Food Councils report on food trends from 2017, concludes that more and more consumers are getting their protein from sources other than meat.²⁶³

Think of the effect that releasing a patent on a drug, has on the pharmaceutical industry, or making a computer program open source. Suddenly every company is developing their own version of drug and every rogue programmer is coding their own version of the program.

In the perception of the general public, protein is now accepted to come from many different sources.²⁶⁴ Protein has gone “open source”, as it were.

This is already starting to show on the market level, with the largest private American company, Cargill Meat Solutions, changing its name to Cargill Protein Solutions to accommodate the shifting public perception of protein.²⁶⁵

The world's largest meat processor, Tyson Foods, has bought a 5% share in Beyond Meat.²⁶⁶ Tysons new CEO says he believes the future of food might be meatless and is transitioning the company towards more plant-based protein.²⁶⁷

So the alt-protein industry might make the turn the existing meat industry into allied stakeholders in, by making them shareholders.²⁶⁸ Or they may otherwise “inspire” other companies to launch their own plant-based products, as when the food giant Unilever, launched their own egg-less mayo, after a failed lawsuit against Hampton Creek.²⁶⁹

The alt-protein industry might have luck inspiring change in on certain levels of the existing food system.

²⁶⁰ <http://cdn.coverstand.com/17672/293261/c827f9488f77436a6f9005d09e0cd1ab97932930.2.pdf>

²⁶¹ P. 36 <http://cdn.coverstand.com/17672/293261/c827f9488f77436a6f9005d09e0cd1ab97932930.2.pdf>

²⁶² P. 34 <http://cdn.coverstand.com/17672/293261/c827f9488f77436a6f9005d09e0cd1ab97932930.2.pdf>

²⁶³ <http://www.goderaavarer.dk/~media/goderaavarerprotean/nyheder/2017/februar/markedsanalyse-forbruger-og-foedevaretrends-2017.pdf?la=da>.

²⁶⁴ Here it is worth noting, that some differences exist in the public perceptions of the different plant-protein sources, with soy-allergies and a “gluten-free” trend playing a role. P.34
<http://cdn.coverstand.com/17672/293261/c827f9488f77436a6f9005d09e0cd1ab97932930.2.pdf>

²⁶⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelpellmanrowland/2016/10/19/international-food-leaders-race-to-go-beyond-meat/#71c91e69617b>

²⁶⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelpellmanrowland/2016/10/19/international-food-leaders-race-to-go-beyond-meat/#71c91e69617b>

²⁶⁷ <http://www.foxbusiness.com/features/2017/03/07/tyson-foods-ceo-future-food-might-be-meatless.html>

²⁶⁸ Another example is canadian meat company Maple Leaf buying up Lightlife Foods.
<http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1602M5>

²⁶⁹ <http://fortune.com/2016/02/02/unilever-hampton-creek-mayo-wars/>

“Here, at the processing level, and on the distribution level, these people don't care if they are like, distributing or processing meat or plant-based products. And a lot of meat companies [...] a lot of the things they can do with meat, they can do with plant-based resources or source material, right? But, of course the farmers can't. The farmers, they would have problems.”²⁷⁰

So although producers and retailers might easily transit to the paradigm of plant-based products, the alt-protein industry might encounter more resistance on the production level. This is because farmers have invested more heavily in production equipment, so they cannot transition without incurring financial loss. This might further entice the agricultural lobby to combat a transition. One possible solution, could be to initiate dialogue with the producers, and proposing direct solutions and incentives to the transition.

6.5 Taste, texture, affordability and availability

The alt-protein industry has is keenly focused on creating alternatives that mimic the taste and texture of meat from animals. As Bruce Friedrich, founder of GFI states it:

“We foster innovation, support innovation, we work on corporate engagement and we work on institutional engagement. And it's all focused on taking ethics off the table for consumers and creating products that consumers want to buy because they compete with animal products on the basis of taste, price and convenience. Those are the three factors that are really crucial for consumers.”²⁷¹

When talking about consumers wants, Friedrich refers to some studies that have shown that “the primary factors in any consumer’s eating choices are taste, price, and convenience.”²⁷²

As we’ve seen the meat industry also tends to stress the “rational” reasons in their marketing efforts. For Fiddes, however, the price of meat in itself, bears no mention *why* it’s is valuable to us in the first place. If dollar per calorie or gram of protein was the sole focus of consumer purchases, we would probably choose chickpeas or beans when doing our protein shopping. Rather the cultural conditioning of the western world has taught us to see it as a symbol of wealth and masculinity. Yet as this conditioning functions on the level of cultural consensus, and not individual consciousness, it makes sense that consumers would state their choices in terms of price when asked. Or, when choosing between different meat products, they would let their wallet decide most of the time. This does not say anything however, of why the category of meat is so prevalent on the supermarket shelves to begin with.

Cohen states the issue of convenience in the following:

“I think it's meat, and burgers, and even pizza have like, an image of a joyful food.

Convenience food that is really nice, fast and tasty and I think that people were born into those concepts, right, like those conceptions.”²⁷³

Through Fiddes’ lens, the concept of convenience is signifier of having clawed our way so high up the food chain, that the hunting is already done for us.

²⁷⁰

²⁷¹ Interview Friedrich

²⁷² Appendix 1. GFI one-pager

²⁷³ Interview Cohen

These cultural considerations are of course not meant to dissuade the alt-protein industry from the focus on price and convenience. They are merely to state that part of the high value we put on meat is due to its cultural embeddedness. If convenience indeed carries the symbolic effect of making us feel more valuable in a hierarchy, then it's only that more urgent to make sure that the meat alternatives are just as readily available. Making plant-based meat cost competitive is naturally also important. Yet we may take it as a cue to look more to the symbolism surrounding meat and meat alternatives. Jacob Crumbine of Impossible foods makes the case that people do take economy into account:

“We offer someone something equally tasty, if not more tasty, equally healthy equally convenient and at a cheaper price, I think they'll take the cheaper price.”²⁷⁴ It does seem rather obvious that if asked to choose between to equal products, all else being equal, we would choose the the cheaper product.

According to Cohen, however, there still seems to be something going on behind the scenes, invisible to taste our buds, but visible to cultural perception:

“I think that even today we have substitutes that under a blind test, people wouldn't distinguish between the real one and the substitute. but, once they know that it's a substitute it immediately causes in them another resistance, a prejudiced opinion. a prejudiced opinion about the product itself.”²⁷⁵

So consumers seem to have a built in opinion of the alternatives. Earlier we mentioned that meat alternatives have been around the US for a while now, with the introduction of frozen products to the market already in 1974. We've also established that part of what constitutes the new generation of alt-protein companies, is their huge investments in product development. The natural conclusion from this, is of course that the earlier companies had less developed products, mostly aimed at those already vegetarian who will buy them for other considerations that taste. So maybe a run-in with the earlier product is where this prejudice comes from. So perhaps we can say; “once tofu, twice shy”?

Brian Kincaid of Beyond Meat lends this consideration some merit:

“One of the biggest challenges we've seen is shedding the "vegan" or "plant-based" stigma in meat eaters minds. They are expecting a product that's frozen, soy/tofu based, and overall unsatisfying compared to their traditional animal products.”²⁷⁶

So the alternatives might have inherited the image of a culinary underdog. Zaraska also points this out: if you go and have a really bad steak in a restaurant, it's not going to stop you from eating another one, you'll just say this was a horrible steak, I'm gonna go somewhere else. But if you have a horrible plant-based meat then people usually don't give it a second chance.”

So there is a definitely a need to focus on the taste, to not give first time consumers a bad experience and a lingering prejudice that they will apply collectively to the entire industry of plant-based alternatives.

²⁷⁴ Interview Crumbine

²⁷⁵ Interview Cohen

²⁷⁶ Interview Kincaid

Luckily the new companies seem to live up to their promise of high quality taste, as they do really well in taste reviews.²⁷⁷

If even they haven't perfected the formula right away, they are determined to keep on going till they do get it right:

"You know, we don't want to compromise, and we won't compromise and so if that means it could take us another five years to get another product right, then we'll take that time."²⁷⁸

Let's for now assume, that they have made the products very tasty. Perhaps not yet 100% to the attentive consumer, but a high quality taste nonetheless.

Should not this do away with the prejudice opinion that Cohen talks about? Would not the right cause of action, when faced with an overwhelmingly pleasant taste sensation, cheaper price, as well as the lingering aftertaste of ethical and environmental benefits, be to dismiss such prejudice once and for all?

For Cohen however, there is something more to the concept of origin that he thinks consumers will have a reaction to:

"Let me clarify. I think that even if they will mimic it for 100% and it will be indistinguishable under blind tests, still, when people will know that these ingredients are plants, in their mindset and in their perception, they will say 'ah, it's not real meat, it's not conventional meat, it can't mimic' even if they won't be able to distinguish it, to identify it under a blind test, the very perception, the very knowing of that it's plant-based and not really tissue cells or muscle tissue cells will get them a little bit off of it."²⁷⁹

Fiddes' own reflections on meat-alternatives supports this view. He wrote the book in 1990, mind you, so his own encounter with meat-alternatives were with an older generation of products. Nonetheless Fiddes seems to think that origin trumps taste in some respects.

"But it seems likely that even if a perfect substitute for meat were developed, indistinguishable in any respect from the real thing, many meat eaters would be reluctant to swap. There is just something important about its having come from an animal."²⁸⁰

As we've discussed, meat acts as a natural symbol, that helps express the superiority of humankind. According to Fiddes' reasoning, the things that are perceived by the companies to be the added value to the plant-based products (the environmental benefits etc.), may be the very things detracts value for some consumers:

"To the many human cultures which have striven to establish their identity apart from and above the rest of nature the consumption of animal meat is an eminently suitable choice to represent power, achievement, prestige, civilisation: humanity. Meat is partly valued *because* it is expensive to produce in terms of effort and environmental cost, not in spite of it."²⁸¹

²⁷⁷ <http://www.businessinsider.com/review-of-beyond-meat-veggie-burger-that-bleeds-2016-5?r=US&IR=T&IR=T>
<http://www.revelist.com/food-drink/impossible-burger-momofuku-nishi-review/3908>
<http://www.businessinsider.com/new-wave-foods-lab-made-shrimp-2016-2?r=US&IR=T&IR=T>
<http://www.eater.com/2016/6/7/11877916/beyond-burger-review-meatless-vegan>

²⁷⁸ Interview Crumbine

²⁷⁹ Interview Cohen

²⁸⁰ P. 17 Fiddes 1990

²⁸¹ P. 174 Fiddes 1990

So the point Fiddes is arguing, is that on some level we are aware of the toil and trouble that has gone into the production of the steak on the plate before us. This very toil conveys to us our own significance. Taking the origin of meat out of the product, is giving up the species prerogative, that the generations before us worked so hard to secure. The solution is, of course not to increase the production costs of meat alternatives and extol these negative consequences to the consumers, and create a race to the bottom in terms of natural resource depletion. This wouldn't work in to gain markets shares in the short run either. Meat already has the symbolic effect installed:

“Meat’s economic primacy is conditioned at an altogether different level of thought: by what meat represents to our society - control of the natural world and everything in it.”

So wasting unnecessary resources on the production of meat-alternatives, would in public perception amount to simply that; an unnecessary waste of resources. With meat, the value is already assumed and the cost justified.

What if we look at the “stigma” inherent in vegetarian products from a symbolic perspective? As mentioned earlier, meat alternatives have a long history. And looking at their role throughout history, it appears they have long association with renunciation.²⁸² In China in 965, a magistrate of the province Qing Yang, endorses the sale of tofu instead of meat, due to the virtue of frugality.²⁸³

Somewhere between 1621-1627 a group of buddhist nuns are told they are safe eating the meat-like substances at a banquet in China: “This is vegetarian food made to look like meat. It has come from the temple, and there can’t possibl[y] be any harm in eating it.”²⁸⁴

Meat alternatives was introduced into America by a *Grahamite*.²⁸⁵ Grahamite denotes a follower of the teachings of a presbyterian minister, Sylvester Graham. He appeared on the American reform scene in the early 1820s and believed in a close link between physical and moral health. He thus preached against “the horrors of overtaxing the body with alcohol, processed bread, tobacco, masturbation, and flesh foods.”²⁸⁶

The preachiness of the Grahamites vegetarians was met with heavy resistance as witnessed in how popular media, during this period, presented vegetarians as physically frail and even sexually impotent.²⁸⁷

It is interesting to note that vegetarianism in the US actually started growing more, as it started tapping into existing values and attitudes in society. One example of this is the physical exploits of D.U. Martin, who came to be known popularly as the “Vegetarian Wherryman”.

In August 1860 he rowed singlehandedly from Boston to New York. A voyage that took him 80 hours of continuous rowing solely fueled on fruits and vegetables. He undertook the 400 nautical mile journey, “to demonstrate what a person could endure, living wholly on

²⁸² P. 5 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014

²⁸³ P. 5 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014

²⁸⁴ P. 5 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014

²⁸⁵ P. 5 Shurtleff & Aoyagi 2014

²⁸⁶ P. 6 Shprintzen 2013

²⁸⁷ P. 5 Shprintzen 2013

vegetable food.”²⁸⁸ His journey was covered widely. As the first time a vegetarian diet was linked to physical supremacy in the mainstream press, it did a lot to legitimize the vegetarian lifestyle in a society “that associated strength, virility, and even social status with meat consumption.”²⁸⁹

If meat has a symbolic link with power and wealth, we might assume that the traditional meat-alternatives have come to assume a reverse symbolism. So traditional veggie burgers will have an aftertaste of bitter renunciation, due to an association with a lifestyle much like the one Graham preached.

If this reasoning is correct, then moving away from the marketing expression of the traditional meat alternatives and towards the expression of meat, will likely serve to heighten consumer acceptance. It seems this is indeed part of the strategy in the alt-protein industry's migration to the mainstream:

“I know that one of the concepts is that we want to leave out the word vegan/vegetarian as much as possible because, again, we want the product to be accessible. We're not necessarily marketing these products as vegan or vegetarian because that is sort of not the point.

[...]I think it's a departure because there actually are of course companies that wear their identity quite proudly on their packaging and are very proud of it, and this just means it's great. But when you're looking at appealing to a mainstream population, we have to get into their psychology and think about what will make them feel comfortable making these purchasing choices.”²⁹⁰

So leaving out the label of vegetarian/vegan, which of course would make it more accessible to the core group of consumers who go by the same name as the omitted label, is a deliberate part of the strategy to go towards the mainstream, and differentiate from the traditional meat alternative companies.

The alt-protein industry is not only putting space between themselves and the traditional companies. They are also actively moving closer to meat, both by approximating the taste and texture, but also by other symbolic appropriations. Part of the big hype surrounding the Impossible Burger, is that fact that it bleeds. Whether we should take the bleeding part literally is up to debate. The burger contains heme, which is the molecule that gives blood its color and is part of the slightly metallic taste of meat.²⁹¹ Pat Brown has found a way to extract it from plants.²⁹² So in a sense it is blood. Pat Brown argues that it is “the molecule that makes meat meat.”²⁹³ In a way he's partly right. We touched earlier on the notion of how red meat, due to its link with blood, is seen as more masculine meat. So it seems like a very clever association. Although there is not a lot specific market research out there, Crumline says the impossible burger might have done something to overcome the gender barrier:

²⁸⁸ P. 108 Shprintzen 2013

²⁸⁹ P. 107 Shprintzen 2013

²⁹⁰ Interview Bhumitra

²⁹¹ <http://www.businessinsider.com/impossible-foods-burger-heme-secret-ingredient-2016-10?r=US&IR=T&IR=T>

²⁹² <http://www.grubstreet.com/2015/06/silicon-valley-fake-meat-burger.html>

²⁹³ <http://www.grubstreet.com/2015/06/silicon-valley-fake-meat-burger.html>

“I just kind of assumed before we launched that we would attract you know a pretty big female following, but its been split pretty 50/50 if not a little bit more males, it’s a bit hard gauging with what’s online and commenting, and likes and what not, you know it’s very, the sample is very small but it was just interesting to me.”²⁹⁴

As he points out the it is a bit hard to track, but if there is a higher group of males buying the Impossible Burger, it might be a small hint that bleeding veggie burgers are the way to go. Most research seems to point to a majority of females favouring plant-based diets.²⁹⁵ Beyond Meat has also launched a bleeding burger, the Beyond Burger albeit with beet juice to achieve the desired effect.²⁹⁶

Another way the companies are trying dodge the stigma, is by physical distance; by getting their products in outlets where no meat alternatives have been before.

One great example is the Impossible Burgers entry into David Chang's famous Momofuku Nishi restaurant.²⁹⁷

“[P]art of our choice to go with David Chang was if he is known for cooking and using a lot of meat in his menu, and I think he went on record at some point saying that he would never put a meat alternative on his menu, and then he tried our product and he just fell in love with it.”²⁹⁸

So getting the meatless burger into a restaurant known for a meat-centric diet, with an owner that has expressed scepticism of meat alternatives, is helping prove a point about the quality and the dissimilarity between the Impossible Burger and traditional meat alternative.

The same logic is behind the Beyond Burgers advancement into the meat aisle of Whole Foods. Josh Balk explains the importance of breaking this barrier:

“[V]irtually there's no grocery in the United States where you go to the meat section and you'll find plant-based meat. So where do you find it? You have to go to some vegan section. Do most americans go to some vegan section? Of course not.”²⁹⁹

So the the fact that the the meat alternatives have hitherto been exiled to an alternative section has kept it from the mainstream consumers. Getting the burger into the meat aisle will help expose the consumers and normalize the products.

As the previous example of the vegetarian wherryman illustrates, connecting to the mainstream normative culture instead standing in stark contrast can help increase acceptance. We’ve discussed how price in itself cannot account for the value of meat. Yet articulating the alt-protein industry in a in rational, economic language, might have an important symbolic effect. Fiddes argues that formal economics “It is part of the masculine ethos that has been in the ascendant in western culture.”³⁰⁰

²⁹⁴ Interview Crumbine

²⁹⁵ https://faunalytics.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Fundamentals_How-Many-Vegetarians.pdf

²⁹⁶ <http://www.eater.com/2016/6/7/11877916/beyond-burger-review-meatless-vegan>

²⁹⁷ <http://ny.eater.com/2016/7/26/12277310/david-chang-impossible-burger-nishi>

²⁹⁸ Interview Crumbine

²⁹⁹ Interview Balk

³⁰⁰ P. 171 Fiddes 1990

So the very way that these companies are talking about themselves, may help shape the discourse. As a reporter remarked: “Like Brown and Tetrick, Rhinehart uses the word “efficiency” a lot.”³⁰¹

The FAIRR-initiative is also an example of an actor on the market, that helps shape the discourse, with their plea to traditional food companies to start diversifying their protein-supply chain. This is helping put the market possibilities in a language that the traditional industries understand.

The emphasis that the alt-protein industry puts on technology may also help an anthropocentric, technology-fixated world conceive the possibilities it offers:

“The idea is that technology has the potential to render obsolete systems that are outdated, archaic and potentially bad for society. So in the same way that the horse and buggy was a primary mode of transportation for people but was rendered obsolete by car, when the car became available as a transportation option.”³⁰²

For Fiddes, the origin of meat is the reason, that we value it so highly, and that many people will be reluctant to give it up. He does grant that this will only hold true, while society insist on its antagonistic relationship with nature:

“This is not to say that meat will *inevitably* hold elevated social status, only that it is likely to be viewed positively so long as our ability to control the wild is highly valued.”³⁰³

Still it seems the alt-protein industry is doing a good job of appropriating some of the status and meaning inherent in meat. This may of course be due to a shift towards a more biocentric worldview, where meat is losing its cultural status. Seeing it in terms of a binary division of worldviews, runs the risk of oversimplifying things. It springs to mind the image of a pendulum that is slowly swinging from an anthropocentric worldview towards a biocentric worldview with some sort historical necessity. This view does have merit. We may easily interpret the environmental awareness of the millennials as a symptom of this.

The point I will add, is that human socialization is probably more complex than that a single trajectory leading towards a more harmonious society.

There may be many other cultural factors pulling in different directions, even if should continue to see a growing trend towards biocentrism on average.

With this in mind, I will be analysing the potential target groups of the alt-protein industry in the following.

6.6 Stakeholders and Target group

The alt-protein industry has the task of communicating to many stakeholders. There is the obvious investors, such a Bill Gates and Sergey Brin.

³⁰¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/bfa6fca0-5fbb-11e4-8c27-00144feabdc0> Robert Rhinehart is cofounder of the vegan company Soylent.

³⁰² Interview Bhumitra

³⁰³ P. 173 Fiddes 173

“Because of the unsustainability of the animal foods market, creating solutions that are more sustainable is a really big potential, a really good opportunity and this is why Sergey Brin, Google co-founder is behind this. This is why Bill Gates has joined and is onboard.”³⁰⁴

These investors seem to be attracted to the spirit of social entrepreneurship, and the potentially game changing food innovations. Bill Gates blog post where he praised Beyond Meat chicken strips as the “future of food” attests to this. The industry has grown out of the Silicon Valley and as such shares a familiarity with the language of social entrepreneurship: “So, you're kinda getting this energy, that you'd see in, lot of these companies are in Silicon Valley, but you're getting this sort of Silicon-Valley-energy about, what can we do, what is the possibility, and there's an excitement around the potential. So that energy is certainly characteristic. There is also a David and Goliath-thing going on here, and that's really interesting. You have these little scrappy companies, they're the underdog and they are just kinda trying to make their ideas a reality and they're really seeing a future, because the ideas around the meat, milk and eggs is so visionary.”³⁰⁵

They are not afraid to dream big and they know how present their value propositions both in terms of profit and societal benefits. Then there is the general media, which seem to love their bold statements of disruption and innovative solutions they bring. The David vs. Goliath scenario also makes for a great story, and the media coverage I have encountered so far, are in general really positive. The coverage they got in the meat industry magazine Meatingplace is also quite positive. The story here is that the alt-protein is growing and it presents some opportunities for the established meat industry to follow suit.

Then there is the issue of target group.

Principally speaking, when the alt-protein industry is aiming to disrupt the existing meat industry, there is no customer group falling outside of their scope. The only group the companies do not have to aim to please, are perhaps the vegetarians and vegans, as this group has already boycotted the existing meat industry. One major group, is then the flexitarians: “[N]o company is going to, you know, really change their menu or their strategy for 3% of the population. It's too small a slice, but they will for 60% of the population and their are about 60% of americans that consider themselves flexitarians, or meat-reducers, or at least eating vegetarian meals some of the time”³⁰⁶ It is a much larger group than the vegetarians, so their demand might fuel the growth and expansion of alt-protein industry. A study has shown that around 70% of meat consumers, use a meat alternative minimum once a week.³⁰⁷ The same study shows that 22% have increased their use of meat alternatives within a year. Another study has shown millennials make out the bulk of the flexitarian consumer group, so I will assume that millennials are the primary purchasers of meat alternatives.³⁰⁸

Seeing as millennials are more inclined to reduce their meat consumption and also tend to be more environmentally conscious, I will also assume that they are more biocentric on average.

³⁰⁴ Interview Cohen

³⁰⁵ Interview Bhumitra

³⁰⁶ Interview Bhumitra

³⁰⁷ https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/11/business/tyson-foods-a-meat-leader-invests-in-protein-alternatives.html?smid=fb-share&_r=1

³⁰⁸ <http://www.foodnavigator-usa.com/Markets/Vegan-is-going-mainstream-trend-data-suggests>

This makes them an obvious and easy target group for the alt-protein industry.

Yet to disrupt the industry, they have to get to the meaning in their products to resonate with the identities of normal consumers:

“And so the hurdle we have, I think, has less to do with taste because I think this stuff like Beyond Burger and Impossible tastes wonderful. The hurdle now is getting everyday consumers who won't identify as someone who buys plant based products to now start buying them. That's the tough part.”³⁰⁹

The companies obviously have a good public image and have have been likened to a “food version of alternative energy”.³¹⁰ This is exactly the kind rhetoric the Silicon Valley investor types love. Yet for the type of average consumer, this might not be enough to get them to switch out their favorite beef burger with an alternative:

“This is you know our delicious vegan product that is good for greenhouse gas emissions. Does that resonate with most dudes out there? I don't think so.”³¹¹

If the analogy with alternative energy holds some to some degree, we might ask, which consumer base might go through all the trouble to switch their private energy supply to alternative energy? The environmentally conscious millennials could perhaps be persuaded. Yet the very traditional consumer will likely hold the symbolism of meat very dear.

Josh Balk asks us to think of an average, rural Alabama dad:

“We on the plant-based side have to help people who identify themselves as someone who wouldn't eat that stuff to get over that hurdle. I don't know the answers but how do we get every man who lives in rural Alabama in the United States who works hard in the factory and on the weekends watches college football and is a good father and wants to feed his kids and gives them meat pretty much every meal. How do we get someone like that move to a plant-based product and say 'yes, that's the kind of product I want to get' - that's a tough thing to do.”³¹²

So the question becomes, how may we get the Alabama dad to try the meat-alternatives? He would not seem to be the type of person actively seeking “alternative energy”-meaning when he goes shopping for dinner.

We might even assume that he's experiencing a bit of pressure of his traditional way of identifying.

Recall that Adams was actually seeing an increase in the need to reaffirm masculinity through the consumption of meat. The increasing focus on gender equality, same sex marriages and loss of traditional masculine prerogative, is causing a group of men to actively seek out the traditional, masculine meaning in meat. If we see the millennials on average as group that might be more inclined to experiment with their identity. This can be much the men who used the type of identity that Bruce Willis' character in Moonlighting gave life to. Recall that this was a new form of masculine expression in response to the rising feminism of the 70s and 80s. Yet not all follow an experimental identity pattern. Recall our discussion of social

³⁰⁹ Interview Balk

³¹⁰ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-whole-foods-beyond-meat-veggie-burger-20161026-story.html>

³¹¹ Interview Balk

³¹² Interview Balk

reproduction. Some tend towards more regressive patterns, similar to the Texans, who rallied behind Chuck “Walker Texas Ranger” Norris. We tend to stick to the material tastes of our own social group, and the tastes of other groups might seem hard to understand if not downright a threat. So perhaps the people of the alt-protein industry, due to their own values and tastes tend to see the value of taking the animal out of the product as a given. To them it would be a given that the choice between meatless burger and a traditional burger, if the price and taste is similar, might not be much of a choice at all. To a man, who feels emasculated, the idea of not even being able to enjoy a symbol of species superiority might seem downright subversive. The following example seems to support this. In an OP-ED entitled “Will adding a veggie burger to the In-N-Out menu destroy the country?”, Emily Bird of GFI describes how she petitioned the burger chain In-N-Out to add a veggie burger to their menu.³¹³ This sparked an outrage on social media directed at her. She reveals the nature of the comments: “We have learned that this single menu addition could lead to In-N-Out, and quite possibly the whole country, becoming “a gender-free, multicultural safe space to cuddle in” that’s populated by “the worst types of humans.”

Although the Alabama dad might not act quite as defensive (or most men for that matter), the example serves to illustrate that there is something more than question of calories at stake. The veggie burger comes to symbolise all that seems to threaten the traditional masculinity. In times when people's identity feels threatened they cling extra tight to their preferred material symbols, and their anti-thesis, here the veggie-burger, is seen as threat. It is not likely, at least in the short run, that the regressive identity patterns will be properly addressed by a focus of taste, texture, affordability and availability. Of course these parameters should be addressed. Yet it might pay off to try figure out more how to address the identity issue. Here we might be guided by the differential imperative. If our species and gender identity is so important, perhaps we should seek to imbue the burgers with this type of meaning. Beyond Meat has a marketing campaign called Future of Protein, where top athletes use and endorse the products, and this of course links the products to virtues of sports. To my knowledge, sports embody many masculine values, such as power and competitiveness. Yet the question is, whether the exact expression of masculinity might be delivered with better precision by celebrities. Similar to the effect it probably had to get the Impossible Burger served by a chef who said he would never serve a meat alternative, the best expression would probably be from a very classic masculine image where we would not expect it. From here, the suggestion would be to look at the rooster of the action trilogy “The Expendables”.³¹⁴

6.7 Clean meat

Clean meat is an interesting phenomenon, as it technically *is* meat. Jose Alvarez, a senior lecturer at Harvard Business School, sees the problem as one of consumer acceptance:

³¹³ <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-byrd-veggie-burder-in-n-out-20160926-snap-story.html>

³¹⁴ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1320253/>

“I’m certain the technological hurdles of tissue culture beef will be overcome,[...] but the ideological hurdles will be much more difficult. The real issue is: how do you get people to eat this?”³¹⁵

I will argue, that of the two, plant-based and clean meat, clean meat has the symbolic upper hand. It retains the origin aspect, that Fiddes finds essential. On the other hand, there is an issue of technology. As Fiddes argues, there is an increasing scepticism of technology, and this might affect the consumer acceptance of this product. The choice of name of “clean meat”, however, will help to focus on the advantages that clean meat has, compared to the way conventional meat is produced today. Another smart way, that clean meat is reducing the issue of technological scepticism, is by making the production process recognizable:

“Beer is something that is very relatable, accessible, and helps the public understand what the concept is and just simplifies the science. It sounds much more interesting and it sounds much more edible, so there's going to be an emphasis, I think, on using the term brewery, meat brewery, egg brewery, because people then get what you're trying to do.”³¹⁶

The articulation of clean meat as a brewery process is already taking root, which testifies that the idea has traction.³¹⁷

The clinical process of production is much more safe, since it cuts away the messy part of raising an entire animal. This however lends the process some anonymity, that will present a challenge to the creativity of the marketers of clean meat (and plant-based for that matter):

“[T]hey cannot tell this story of like 'oh we made this food like, really authentically', you know, it's tech-food, I mean it's made in a lab or it's like - so one example I saw of that was that Gardein brands itself like, it says 'made with ancient grains'. So that's an attempt to give it some content and some story.”³¹⁸ So the missing animal could potentially present an issue in marketing, compared to traditional meat companies, that has the option of telling a romantic story of the animal. This story-telling is visible in the case of Kobe-beef.³¹⁹ The amount of press clean meat has gotten, considering it's 5-10 years from hitting mainstream shelves, seems to suggest that hype can get it along way in getting consumers curious.

Romanticising the labs where it's grown, might be tricky, but then again, traditional micro breweries producing special beer, seems to have achieved this effect. Even to the point where huge beer companies are tapping into this effect, with their own launch of traditional beer. For example with Carlsberg's Jacobsen beer, which is also tapping into the story of Carlsberg's founder.³²⁰ Recall that McCracken believes that any product can be imbued with any meaning. Another interesting fact, is how clean meat, besides retaining the myth of

³¹⁵ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/hbsworkingknowledge/2015/11/20/the-real-issue-with-beef-grown-in-a-lab-how-do-you-get-people-to-eat-it/#d4e127db3489>

³¹⁶ Interview Jaya

³¹⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/meet-the-guy-who-envision-a-meat-brewery-to-help-solve-a-global-problem/2016/07/22/2e5716b8-3e30-11e6-a66f-aa6c1883b6b1_story.html
<https://munchies.vice.com/en/articles/why-the-meat-factories-of-the-future-will-look-like-breweries>

³¹⁸ Interview Leeneart

³¹⁹ P. 73 Zaraska

³²⁰ <http://www.jacobsenbryg.dk/>

origin, can be articulated in a very anthropocentric language, here understood as language proving the god-like capabilities of human technological ingenuity. It's being attributed to the human ability to "Read and write DNA"³²¹ and has also been called the 2nd domestication, referring to the time when people started domesticating animals in farming. An investor in Memphis Meats stated the following: "Traditionally we have domesticated animals to harvest their cells for food or drink[...] Now we are starting to domesticate cells themselves."³²² If we can attribute our love of meat as a symbol for setting us apart and above nature, perhaps a good way to articulate clean meat, would be to turn up the volume on this kind of language. It definitely adheres to the differential principle, and this could help stroke the collective ego of humankind. On the other hand, the symbolic understanding of meat goes on at level of collective consensus, so it's hard to predict how people will react to this over articulation. It might turn someone people off, but then again, this might be the very people that would be more open to trying a plant-based burger. As with many matters both inside and outside the field of philosophy, there is only one way to find out. Perhaps the alt-protein industry should do focus group tests to examine people's response patterns to these different ways of articulating. If the success of the plant-based companies are in anyway attributed to their ability to distance themselves from a cultural stigma, that threatens to subvert the entire cosmology of anthropocentric society, then perhaps marketers of plant-based and clean meat should heed the differential imperative in their messaging.

In summary, the alt-protein industry is aiming to disrupt a food system, that is creating a huge range of issues for global society. In a twisted irony, it's the very range of issues, that serves to give meat its symbolic power, as it sets humanity apart from nature. To take over the food systems, the must also seek to take over much of the meaning inherent in meat.

³²¹ <http://www.modernmeadow.com/about-us/>

³²² <https://www.ft.com/content/967099ce-a693-11e6-8898-79a99e2a4de6>

7. Discussion

There are other barriers to the alternative protein industry that I came across. I did not touch upon them in the analysis, since they are not specifically cultural in nature, at least not cultural the sense that I have using the term. One of these is pushback from the existing industry.

These include attempts from the animal agricultural lobby to erect barriers in the legal framework surrounding the alternative industry. One specific case of labelling law, now states that “vegan cheese” must be referred to as a “cultured nut product”.³²³ These types of labelling issues will make it harder to communicate the similarity of the plant-based products to the consumers, and probably decrease acceptance. As Bhumitra put it: “If you say soy liquid instead of soy milk, then people don't know that it's supposed to be eaten with your cereal.”³²⁴

Although the clean meat, and other types of cellular agricultural products are not being commercialized for some time, the issues of legislation and consumer acceptance might be a huge issue, if the the existing agricultural lobby tries to thwart their efforts. Therefore it is important that the clean meat industry starts thinking about the following question

“What would be the appropriate terminology to appeal to consumers and also to pass regulatory approval.”³²⁵

Another issue of industry pushback, is the more direct kind, as witnessed in the lawsuit of Hampton Creek by Unilever. Although this particular case turned out well for Hampton Creek, there might be an increasing risk of run-ins as the alt-protein grows in market share. This makes it even more important that the interest organisations and the alt-protein industry as a whole, seeks to form alliances with the existing industry, as witnessed by the investment of Tyson in Beyond Meat.

For the clean meat industry, one issue is the general lack of funding, as one research paper points to.³²⁶ Although clean meat seems to be enjoying preliminary public acceptance, this has not translated into wide nationally funded research programs, which would likely be a cornerstone to success.

From the findings of the analysis, we may conclude that the meaning inherent in meat, plays a very central part in how we masculinity is expressed. Some of the regressive identity structures employed, bear the promise of great insight into the difficulties of consumer acceptance of product categories, that touch upon deep-rooted norms surrounding the of expression of gender identity. Although arguably a less volatile product category, the concept of make-up for men, might disturb some of the same deep rooted norms. A deeper enquiry into the normative surroundings that determines whether people employ a regressive or experimental identity strategy might shed some light on this and related issues.

³²³ Interview Bhumitra

³²⁴ Interview Bhumitra

³²⁵ Interview Bhumitra

³²⁶ <https://senticence-politics.org/research/policy-papers/cultured-meat/>

8. Conclusion

We've seen how the constitutive efforts of the self, employs the meaning inherent in consumer goods. Traditional explanation that favor a view of the self and the consumer as more rational in nature, fails to account for the complexity of material self-expression. When dispensing with the notion of culture, we are dispensing with the notion of what it means to be human.

This means, that although a pastime favorite of many, the consistent, continuous critique of consumer culture is not enough to keep it from continuing, since they are only hammering at the symptoms. An effort to lessen the consequences of consumption or attempt to disrupt the supply-side, would do well to take into account humanity's appetite for meaning. This is doubly true, if the symbol we are aiming our iconoclastic efforts at, has the status of post-biblical myth of creation. With the very constitution of our identity, revolving around a fundamental lack, our attempts run the risk of triggering a reaction akin to a species inferiority complex as expressed in the differential imperative.

In the very beginning we introduced the notion from that both marketing and meat consumption goes back to the theological roots of our species self understanding. Marketing was the very tool by which we were banished from a state of biocentric bliss, and eventually took up meat consumption to fulfill our calorific and cultural needs.

Perhaps the time has come for humanity once again to let us be lured by the forces of marketing, only this time to help us evolve beyond our cultural love affair with meat.

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