Starbucks Coffee in America:
Consuming the Simulated Sub-Culture of the Siren

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The term *behemoth* is not one to be used lightly. Nor is it a term to be strewn about carelessly; such as the way *love* is often misused and diluted. Rather, behemoth is a large word that should be applied grandly. Its implications are animalistic, biblical, and of a grandiose nature; a beast, in some cases. So when I refer to Starbucks Coffee Company as a behemoth, I am very serious, and careful to assign a word of such magnitude to a company deserving of it. I consider Starbucks to be the behemoth of fast food in America. The famous coffee corporation operates on a level that exceeds that of even McDonald's. Because despite their overwhelming parallels, Starbucks relies on the notion that the same customers will visit daily, if not multiple times per day; which is something that McDonald's cannot match.

It is common to associate *fast food* with companies such as Wendy's, Arby's, and McDonald's. However, on a basic level, Starbucks provides the same service as all of those other places; merely under a different façade. The term *fast food* has a negative connotation in American culture. It is considered 'bad for you,' fattening, and cheap quality. Despite Starbucks' attempts to counter those ideas, the fact remains that it entails all of them (the issue of quality remains debatable). In addition to the current trend of drive-thru Starbucks, the low-capacity and demonstrably uncomfortable seating implies that Starbucks wants you out the door as quickly as it takes for the automatic espresso bar to pull controlled shots. The caloric content of the most popular Starbucks drinks often matches that of a McDonald's hamburger. Starbucks can most aptly be described then, as

liquid fast food; operating in a manner reflective of any number of fast food restaurants, yet never drawing attention to its own paralleled design.

So how is Starbucks exempt from being associated with its greasy equivalents? Because they do not simply sell coffee-based products. Starbucks sells a sophisticated image, a sub-culture; one that is carefully planned and constructed. The society of Starbucks is one of the most brilliant and successful marketing devices I have ever encountered. Not to take any clever marketing credits away from McDonalds, who succeeded by contriving an atmosphere specifically designed to lure children. By digging in the talons at an early age via; a do-gooder clown, a kleptomaniac hamburger and other lovable cartoon food friends, toy surprises, indoor playgrounds and of course, addiction to product; McDonalds is able to mold unsuspecting children into loyal customers for life. Starbucks has not yet attempted to brand children to the degree that McDonalds has; however they have created a similar type of specified atmosphere that entices people regardless of age or race. Through the fusion of a unique terminology, an exotic ambiance, and good old consistency of product, Starbucks manages to balance exclusion with exclusivity. Starbucks created the boundaries and the rules of the sub-culture. The people sheepishly abided.

The Beast Emerges

"We try to create, in our stores, an oasis, a little neighborhood spot where you can take a break, listen to some jazz, and ponder universal or personal or even whimsical questions over a cup of coffee" (p. 12).
-excerpt from Howard Schultz' book, *Pour Your Heart Into It* (1997)

Starbucks Coffee Company was started in 1971 by three partners; Jerry Baldwin, Gordon Bowker, and Zev Siegel. The trio opened the first store in Seattle, Washington; located in Pike Place Market, where it still operates. The name, "Starbucks," was not

merely a tribute to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, as is commonly mistaken. Originally, one of the three members proposed the name "Pequod," (the ship in *Moby Dick*); a suggestion which was quickly denied by the other two. The founders desired a name that spoke more to the locale of Seattle. They stumbled upon the name, "Starbo," which was an old mining community on Mount Rainier. Making a phonetic connection to the name of the first mate in *Moby Dick*, "Starbucks" was agreed upon by all three men.

The original Starbucks was far different from the coffee chain known and loved worldwide today. For one, individual drinks were not sold. Rather, whole beans and brewing machines were the central products. As personal acquaintances and followers of Alfred Peet, founder of Peet's Coffee and Tea in Berkeley, California, the Starbucks founders sold coffee purchased and supplied by Peet exclusively, for their first year of operation. Peet's devotion to quality beans met the goals of Baldwin, Bowker, and Siegel, who shared the same love of specialty coffee.

In 1982, Howard Schultz joined the Pike Place Starbucks after tasting a brewed sample of the whole beans. A trip to Italy inspired Schultz to push for the sale of individual espresso drinks, to which the three store-owners refused. Determined to package the Italian experience in America, Schultz went on to open his own café, *Il Giornale* (1985). In 1987, the three original founders of Starbucks decided to sell the store to Schultz and pursue work with Peet's. Schultz transformed his own *Il Giornale* shops into Starbucks and began to expand the company, opening locations in Vancouver and Chicago. By 1992, Starbucks had 150 locations nationwide. Today, fourteen years later, there are nearly 11,000 locations worldwide.

Establishing a Method to My Madness

"Take the gun from my hand before I 'Star Skills' this place to dust."
> – Excerpt from an untitled poem I wrote in 2004

I would like to briefly explain how and why the topic of Starbucks came to mind. It was not much of an accident nor a fleeting experience with the coffee hegemon that inspired me. Rather, I spent a great deal of time in high school loitering in the downtown Starbucks of my quaint Chicago suburb. But it was not merely intelligent marketing that brought me through the doors. I became a Starbucks junkie at the mercy of my friend, Mike, who worked there our senior year. Luckily, I never had to pay for my drinks, which I can see being a major deterrent for anyone looking to nab a cup of Starbucks' specialty lard. But I, like the rest of American youth, was sucked into the sugary delight of White Mochas and Caramel Macchiatos. With my metabolism at full-power, I had absolutely no qualms about consuming seven hundred fluid calories at a time.

As my senior year came to a head, the need for a part-time job became more apparent. After having an unsuccessful bout with the Gap my junior year, I turned to Starbucks to employ my sunny, positive self. At least that describes the former me- a person who generally liked the human race. After nearly three years employed at Starbucks, that once-optimistic girl had mysteriously warped into an angry, cynical, scornful version of herself. I began inadvertently studying people's actions in public: mannerisms, behaviors, relationships; the snobbish air of superiority and righteousness that surrounded most of my customers. I documented everything. I wrote feverishly in hopes that someday I could turn my observations into a more cohesive and official argument. I finally had the opportunity to do so.

The content of my writing comes from two main sources: one being my years of experience and examination into the world of Starbucks; the second is my review of other writings related to Starbucks, coffee, theory, and culture. Additionally, I also refreshed my Starbucks knowledge by participant-observing random stores throughout Chicagoland. And finally, I maintained several relationships with former co-workers and current employees of Starbucks, who were more than willing to provide me with up-to-date anecdotes of customer crises.

Ever since my induction into the Starbucks family, and even more so since my departure from it, I have been intrigued by how precise and calculated the system works. I have never seen everyday people become so emotional over a single fast food product. A malfunctioning espresso bar was nothing short of earth-shattering for many and most customers. Denying people their Starbucks never failed to incite their beasts within. To many people, Starbucks coffee is like oil to the Tin Man. I felt compelled to get to the bottom of why the Starbucks sub-culture is so appealing and essential, to so many different types of people.

I hope when all is said and done, I have inched a bit closer to an answer. If nothing else, I intend to present why I personally feel, after years of observations, what Starbucks has done differently and more successfully than any other fast food corporation known today. Almost two years past hanging up my official black Coffee Masters apron, I have been able to more objectively analyze the strategic takeover of Starbucks.

The Changing Function of Coffee in America

"Can the study of changing marketing and consumption patterns of a single commodity at a particular moment- even a mundane commodity produced for everyday and routine consumption- shed some light on a wider range of social and cultural shifts?" (Roseberry, p.124)

In order to understand the momentous rise of Starbucks, it is important to first grasp the changing significance of coffee in America over the decades. As alarming and unbelievable as it may be, there was a day before the thrills and frills of Mocha Frappuccinos (say it ain't so). I personally cannot remember such a time, as it was before my own. From what I understand, it was a simpler, less caloric time; a time before televisions and cell phones became favorite driving companions, and before the 'terr'rists hated our freedom.'

The majority of coffee sold in the 20th century was freeze-dried in aluminum cans. Folgers, Chock Full O' Nuts, and Maxwell House dominated the world of coffee; specifically for brewing at home. The grind was consistent and standard nationwide- none of the *fine* and *coarse* options that challenge the bean-buyer today. Not to mention the quality of the beans left something to be desired. Decaffeinated coffee was hardly even a drinkable option, in regards to pleasuring the palate.

Popular trade journal *World Coffee and Tea* published a graph in a 1989 issue that showed the percentages of Americans drinking coffee over the years. The chart begins with the year 1962, where 74.7% of Americans drank coffee. Throughout the 70s and 80s, the numbers fall dramatically, until the chart's conclusion in 1988, with sales at their lowest- a mere 50% of Americans consuming coffee (Roseberry, 1992, p.127). So why the sudden loss of java love? For one, Brazil's frost in July 1975 caused wholesale prices to jump, leaving angry purchasers who boycotted the inflation. Also, the majority of coffee drinkers were over thirty, which presented a large demographic to be targeted. The younger crowds (with some exceptions) gravitated towards soda drinking, as coffee

was a beverage too closely related to their parents and grandparents. In other words, coffee was not yet *cool*.

In 1981, Kenneth Roman Jr., president of Ogilvie and Mather (a marketing company that carried Maxwell House) delivered a speech to the Green Coffee Association of New York. By this point in the 80s, coffee sales had already declined to around 56% of the population, leaving many "coffeemen" worried about the future of their trade. Roman imagined different market models of common people, and suggested the creation of coffee products that would fulfill the needs of each segment accordingly (Roseberry, 1992).

For example, one targeted niche was "the Grays;" a described yuppie, double-income couple who preferred gourmet beans, and to whom specialty coffee would appeal. Another model was "Karen Sperling," a single thirty-something mother who has little time for anything but instant coffee. Finally, Roman addressed the dilemma of "Joel," a college student who never drinks coffee. As he stated in 1981, "We don't know yet what to do about Joel...Finding the right answer to that question will be the toughest, and probably the most important task coffee marketers will face in the 80s" (Roseberry, 1992, p. 127-128). It is evident that not only was the Joel crisis resolved; but Joel was masterfully conquered. Starbucks across the world are swarming with Joel's.

The price increase after the 1975 Brazil freeze also caused purchasers to reconsider their options. As William Roseberry notes in his 1992 article *The Rise of Yuppie Coffees and the Reimagination of Class in the United States*, "consumers faced with paying $3 a pound for tasteless coffee began searching for something 'better' and found that 'quality' coffee that used to cost three times supermarket prices was now only

about a dollar more" (p. 128). So began the shift towards gourmet beans, as was most successful along the West Coast, namely in Seattle and San Francisco. Throughout the 70s and 80s when coffee sales were declining, the popularity of specialty coffees was growing exponentially, setting the perfect stage for the launching of Starbucks in America.

Beyond the shift in coffee's role from a practical eye-opener to the social commodity that it is today, there is the perception of a coffee house, which is also considerably different from what it once was. I personally recall associating cafés with finger-snapping, poetry-reading, bongo-playing, *noir*-garbed beatniks. For the younger crowds, coffee was once a form of independence and resistance. The scene was artsy, unique, atypical, and parent-less. Surprisingly enough, these 'alternate life-style' people were the original baristas at places like Starbucks. Like most forms of revolt and rebellion, coffee was commoditized right under the pierced noses of the very people who originally sought to distance themselves from the norm. Nowadays, Starbucks baristas are less individualistic than they once were. No longer are facial or tongue piercings acceptable among the Starbucks workforce, for example. Nor does the company encourage "loud" accessories, which might draw too much attention from the company logo.

The Language of the Latte

"Do you see any flashing buttons back here behind my counter: Press Here for Caramel Macchiato? No, you don't, because there aren't any, and I don't even know what the fuck a Macchiato is."

-Excerpt from an anonymous barista rant

Perhaps one of the most successful ways in which Starbucks created a sub-culture is by constructing their own language. Upon entering any Starbucks coffee shop, a

person is confronted by a menu that vaguely reminds of English, but is uniquely influenced by Italian. This hybrid is what I like to call "Ital-ish." For example, one of the most popular drinks on the Starbucks menu is called a *Caramel Macchiato*. To the average American, only half of those words should be in the immediate vocabulary. Starbucks employees (less abrasively called "partners") are taught that *macchiato* means *marked*, as with a shot of espresso over foam. Another definition of *macchiato* that is left out of the Starbucks partner manual is *stained*; a far less flattering translation, to say the least.

Unfortunately, the customers are not given the same lessons, nor pronunciation clues. It is here at Starbucks that the true effectiveness of sounding out words, learned as early as preschool in American schooling structures, is finally put to the test. Aside from the widespread embarrassment felt throughout Starbucks across the nation, as grown adults demonstrate their inability to phonetically sound out words, the strategically-placed foreign terms also lead many people to order drinks that decoded into English, are not as exotic and enticing. A *Caramel Mark*, or worse, a *Caramel Stain,* both lack the flowery fluidity that "macchiato" otherwise provides...although they do leave little room for mispronunciation.

In Roland Barthes' 1961 essay *Toward A Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, he discusses what linguists refer to as transformational analysis: the differences in symbols, meanings, and connotations associated with the assignment of language. In Barthes' example, he compares the linguistic differences of ordinary white bread versus *pain de mie* (p. 22). While both terms symbolize the same object in French culture- sliced white bread- the labeling of them conjures far different ideas. White bread

is associated with everyday life, whereas *pain de mie* is typically a staple at parties; a bread that is enhanced by the addition of sugar. This example may function best in the context of French culture, from which Barthes wrote; however it is a great example of how language paints specific illustrations.

Likewise, Starbucks excels at creating the illusion of authenticity and quality through its unique vocabulary. Just as *macchiato* literally translates to a rather non-exotic notion of throwing espresso over foam, to say "stain" in its place would lessen the appeal of the product. And much like *pain de mie* inspires a romantic image of French cuisine and the social extravagance of a party, *cappuccino* and *macchiato* carry their own associations. Generated authenticity can make even the dullest product seem exciting. Starbucks customers are not necessarily ordering drinks based on the appeal of flavor, but rather buying heavily into the implied sophistication of foreign words and the taste of a higher class who can pronounce them. After all, every Caramel Macchiato drinker knows exactly what *macchiato* means, right?

Another part of Starbucks' success with creating a sub-culture, has been the reliance on Americans' fascination with European lifestyles, especially in the realm of food. Sidney Mintz addresses in his essay, *Eating American* (1996), that America lacks a foundation of cuisine specific to American soil (p. 23). Italian, Polish, French, Mexican and Chinese cuisines are some of the foods easily available, in some form or another, to hungry Americans. The fact that many Americans originally immigrated from Europe, and the relative youth of America as a country, has made it difficult for a cuisine uniquely American to be established. The argument could be made that American cuisine *is* the diverse array of tastes that are available, from all different places in the

world. This assertion fits nicely into the auspicious, palmy view of America's melting pot- a concept in which some Americans take great pride, while others scoff at its illusive idealism. I tend to scoff.

Regardless, there is a certain *je ne sais quoi* that makes anything European alluring to Americans. Starbucks capitalizes on the romanticism of Europe by selling a product that is assumed to be genuinely Italian, specifically through the use of a simulated language. Additionally, the language creates an esoteric barrier not unlike the one that prevents an uneducated person from reading difficult literature. Not only is authenticity channeled through the language of Starbucks, but so is a concept of class, which I will expand upon later.

The appeal of a generated language relates to the exclusivity of Starbucks society. A customer may struggle the first several times they order from the foreign-sounding board (providing the baristas with plenty of material for condescending attitudes to ensue). However, once pronunciation and familiarity is achieved, the customer feels like they have become part of something. The *you're-so-stupid* looks from the baristas cease, and approval is gained by all other Starbucks-goers within earshot. The language barrier is overcome; the vocabulary needed to survive and express the espresso has been planted.

The influence of Starbucks continues outside the doors as well. It is not uncommon for a regular Starbucks customer to occasionally venture into a different coffee shop (although infrequent and abashedly as it may be) and order drinks and sizes that are specific to the Starbuck's menu. Small coffee house workers that I spoke with could attest to this, claiming that they often received order requests for *Frappuccinos*, the

frozen drink popularized by Starbucks. And there seems to be bitterness in the voices of competitive coffee house workers who must deal with customers who complain that their drink does not taste right- in other words, it does not taste like Starbucks determines it should.

It seems as though after several visits to Starbucks, a person will entirely forget a lifetime of training, being told that *tall* should signify something other than *small*. The expectation to throw out pre-established knowledge comes with the Starbucks territory. Belief in nutrition, language, and reality must be suspended in order to subscribe to the laws of Starbucks' society. The lack of nutrition is not new among fast food restaurants, but at least McDonald's does not overtly supply whipped cream-based products for breakfast. Forget what your parents taught you; it is now acceptable to consume one thousand fat calories for breakfast, condensed into a twenty-ounce (I'm sorry, *venti*) plastic cup, topped with extra whip and chocolate sprinkles. Would it be too cliché to call that a breakfast of champions?

American Techniques to Market the Exotic

"Commodified ethnicity is a way to spice up boring American whiteness."
-From a conversation with Ann Hetzel-Gunkel; on why America loves foreignness

Along with the language of Starbucks signifying the exoticism of foreign places, the whole bean coffees offer glimpses into locations even more fantastic and inconceivable than Europe. Naturally, all of these locations- Indonesia, Africa, and Panama to name a few- are romantically presented through the narrow lens of Starbucks; a lens created by rich Westerners. Images adorn coffee bags that offer only the most beautiful qualities of the bean regions and the smiling happy people who grow the beans.

Never is there a poster on the wall that demonstrates the impoverished bean cropper's plight to stay afloat. Clearly that would be poor marketing. Yet the images of harmoniously unified races and ruggedly handsome and tanned bean croppers are a tad misleading. Average prices for bagged coffee run anywhere from ten dollars to around twenty per pound, and mere cents of that go back to the bean growers.

Part of the notion of exoticism, is the masking of the work required to produce the goods. As I mentioned before, attention is rarely given to the precise work that is required to cultivate coffee beans. Starbucks almost exclusively uses Arabica beans, which are a higher quality than the alternative Robusta beans. This also means that the process to grow the beans is more difficult and heavily reliant upon weather and attention to detail, on the part of the grower.

Also in Roseberry's article, he quotes a plantation owner in Costa Rica, William McAlpin, who observes the imbalance of selling specialty coffees in America:

> "I am always amused to see that many of these same people, who are involved in the final stages of selling specialty coffee, while proclaiming that they support this or that charity or political action squad, are careful to avoid mentioning that the usual mark-up by the specialty coffee trade is from 400% to 600% of the price paid for delivered green coffee...
> From the producer's point of view, it seems truly ironic that a product that takes a year to grow, and that requires thousands of worker hours of difficult, delicate, and often dangerous work, should be so remarkably inflated by someone who simply cooks and displays the coffee" (p. 132).

The exoticism of foreign places appeals to Americans almost as much as using devices specifically American. In my opinion, the two most powerful ways to market a product to Americans is to make it either overtly foreign; or to make it obviously American. By taking the exotic route, a company is able to charm its customers through the fascination of other locations. With the latter device, a company can play upon the

innate desire and insecurity within Americans to be patriotic; such was the strategy of

Coca-Cola during the Second World War.

While Starbucks most obviously targets the curious traveler within us, something

can be said about the manner in which Starbucks is undoubtedly American. At the heart

of Starbucks is a shot of greed, a cup of capitalism, a sprinkle of monopoly, and a carafe

full of white guys. Very American, indeed. In his 1995 study of coffee production and

consumption, Michael Jimenez calls coffee "the beverage of US capitalism," for the ways

in which coffee's history was shaped in a paralleled fashion to the rise of capitalism

(Roseberry, p. 135). Coffee, like sugar, was increasingly attractive to, and subsequently

consumed by, the same under-privileged people who painstakingly produced it. Perhaps

Mintz was most accurate in his dryly humorous 1979 description of coffee and sugar (as

well as tea and chocolate) as "proletarian hunger killers" (Roseberry, p. 135).

Blurring the Lines of Class

"It is clear that class, regional, and ethnic differences profoundly affect differences in
eating behaviors" (Mintz, p. 29).

As I have discussed, Starbucks supplies a cheap product at expensive designer

prices; ergo creating an enormous gap between the production cost and sale prices of

their goods. Starbucks is not the only corporation to do this. In fact, I will not hold it

against a company to mark up a product, since that is how they are expected to turn

profits. However, when a beverage that actually costs pennies to make sells for many

dollars, I am a bit skeptical of the intent. There is no reason why a twelve-ounce latte

(one espresso shot and milk) should cost more than the price for a gallon of milk. Or is

there?

More importantly to my discussion of how Starbucks functions in American culture, is the gap created between the Americans able to afford Starbucks, and those who remain in the cold of Dunkin' Donuts. Most 'specialty' or 'gourmet' items remind us that a class division exists between those able to consume such luxurious treats, and those who consume what they can afford. The relatively new trend of specialty coffees is one that appeals to two classes of people: the class that is able to afford it, and the class that wants to look like they can afford it.

Typically, it is the upper class who defines the terms of *gourmet* dining. It is rare that a sophisticated palate is associated with members of the lower classes, who tend to eat what they can buy, and not what is encompassingly pleasing to of all the senses, as Starbucks coffees claim to do. In one way, Starbucks appeals to a higher class because the product is more expensive and the pseudo-Euro-culture and overpriced merchandise create an imagined class boundary. However, one of the most apparent things I noticed when I worked for and observed Starbucks, is the vast array of customers, in regards to race and class. It would be too easy (and incorrect) for me to generalize that Starbucks is for yuppies, and yuppies only. The term "yuppie" has itself shifted in cultural meaning. Once representing young urban professionals, *yuppie* now conjures multiple ideas, in urban, rural, and suburban settings alike. While one might assume that only the financially stable are enjoying daily $4 cups of coffee, quite the opposite is true.

A 1934 study by P.F. Lazarsfeld called *The Psychological Aspect of Market Research*, yielded the observation that,

> "certain sensorial 'tastes' can vary according to the income level of the social groups interviewed: lower income persons liked sweet chocolates, smooth materials, strong perfumes; the upper classes, on the other hand, prefer bitter substances, irregular materials, and light perfumes" (Barthes, p. 22).

With this explanation of taste and class relations, old as it may be, we can see how Starbucks has achieved a range of product wide enough to tempt different classes. More than half the menu at Starbucks boasts the overly sweet, the sugary, the dessert-style drinks; the taste that appeals to everyone at a very basic level, but is described by Lazarsfeld to suit the lower classes. The rest of the menu, including the famously extended-roasted coffee (as an old customer of mine called it, "Charbucks"), includes bitter choices and irregular, lightly-perfumed tastes, such as the Chai Latte.

The best way I can interpret this is as follows: Starbucks created a product with the intent of appealing to the masses, but priced the merchandise high enough to ensure that not everyone could enjoy its appeal. It does not take a sophisticated palate, per se, to enjoy the smoothness of a Caramel Macchiato. But it *does* require a certain income level to comfortably enjoy a couple of trips to Starbucks per day. Coffee and sugar are both substances that appeal to all varieties of people. Starbucks priced their product to be exclusive enough to appear to keep the riff-raff out. By distinguishing high prices, Starbucks is able to maintain an *image* that boasts upper-class exclusivity. In this manner, the affluent members of society consume Starbucks as a confirmation of their rank.

In the same exact way that Starbucks appeals to an upper class, it also attracts the opposite crowd. Starbucks serves a large number of well-to-do Americans, but it also brings in hordes of people who cannot rationally afford the $3 cup. Similar to how Nike has been selling expensive shoes to lower classes for years through the appeal of status, Starbucks sells a comparable sense of belonging to people who are insecure about their social posture. This sense of belonging that is figuratively being sold through Starbucks,

is more powerful than the over-roasted specialty coffee that is literally being marketed.

Or better yet, what is more important than the contents in the siren-adorned cup, is the siren itself, the logo of a company affiliated with wealth and power.

Barthes (1961) summarizes the phenomenon of marketing an idea, rather than the product itself:

> "The development of advertising has enabled the economists to become quite conscious of the ideal nature of consumer goods; by now everyone knows that the product as bought- that is, experienced- by the consumer is by no means the real product; between the former and the latter there is a considerable production of false perceptions and values" (p. 21).

Despite the fact that Barthes' wrote this a decade prior to the birth of Starbucks, his words are unfailingly precise still today, forty-five years later.

Without the fact that people will forever be striving to *appear* wealthier, Starbucks would only be servicing a percentage of its customers. Just as Starbucks is reliant upon the business of the wealthy to maintain its image of upper-class, it is also just as dependent upon the lower-classed people to spend the last of their pennies to buy into the exclusive culture. Much like a drug dealer wooing a first-time user, Starbucks offers free samples and entices with the illusion of high quality at barely justifiable rates. And it would be downright negligent of me to overlook that Starbucks *is* selling an addictive product.

Liquid Identity: You Are What You Drink

"New Rule: The more complicated the Starbucks order, the bigger the asshole. If you walk into a Starbucks and order a "decaf grande half-soy, half-low fat, iced vanilla, double-shot, gingerbread cappuccino, extra dry, light ice, with one Sweet-n'-Low and one NutraSweet," ooh, you're a huge asshole."

- from George Carlin's *New Rules for 2006*

Amidst my barista glory days, one of my favorite indicators of the power of Starbucks, was the way in which customers were willing and happy to be called by the name of their drinks. Whenever I did not know customers' names, I would simply refer to them by the title of their usual drink. Sure enough, not only was this acceptable to most, if not all of my customers, but I sensed that it was actually preferred. I imagined many of these people were comforted by achieving the ever-important standing of having the baristas know them by drink.

To a different degree of drink identification, my fellow co-partners and I created nicknames for the drinks, based on the type of person who typically ordered them. For example, a Vanilla Skim Latte became better known as a "Soccer Mom," due to the large number of mini-vanned yuppie wives who consumed that particular drink. Frappuccinos could most precisely be described, simply as "Fat-asses." Shockingly, the majority of the people who would order Frappuccinos were in fact overweight. Just to provide an example, according to Starbucks' official website, a Grande (translation: medium, 16-ounce) White Chocolate Crème Frappuccino with whip contains roughly 610 calories, and 81 grams of sugar (www.starbucks.com). In all seriousness, I served several customers who would purchase two or three of these drinks per day...only in the *venti* size, which adds a couple hundred calories to the numbers provided above. Consuming that much sugar and fat in any given day is certain to affect the body, proving once again that we are what we eat.

Also a testament to the way in which people can identify with their drinks, are the observations that my co-workers and I made, regarding race and beverages. The following conclusions were drawn over my years of service to Starbucks. The majority

of White women ordered skim milk-based drinks. White men were more hesitant to order "froofy" (the technical term) drinks, and typically stuck with black coffee or Americanos (espresso shots and water). Black men and women traditionally ordered drinks with whole milk, most often Caramel Macchiatos; and Frappuccinos (the two most popular Fraps among Blacks were Caramel and Strawberries and Crème flavors). Coincidentally, in a poster that was quickly recalled from Starbucks walls, the Strawberry and Crème Frap was described as, "The New Black." In addition to that, the majority of Blacks ordered extra of whatever ingredient was dominant in the drink; be it caramel, mocha, strawberry sauce, or whipped cream. Middle-Easterners seemed to prefer the spicy, perfumed tones of the Chai Latte. And Eastern European men almost always ordered Doppios (two straight shots of espresso).

So what can be concluded from these observations? Perhaps certain tastes have developed among different races over time. At the very least, I was able to deduce that most White women were on diets, or at least watching their weight, as indicated by the overwhelming majority who strictly ordered skim milk. White men seemed to stick with the basic coffee to preserve the image of manliness and tradition. The few men who strayed from black coffee and ordered, say, a White Mocha, would in turn be patronized by their friends for ordering a 'girly' drink. I was constantly amazed that so many people fell right in line with these generalizations, without ever consciously acknowledging the existence of them. This demonstrates that certain associations have been made with particular drinks, regardless of how unspoken it goes. Again, Barthes provides an analysis of how foods function as symbols:

> "[food] is not just an indicator of a set of more or less conscious motivations, but that it is a real sign, perhaps the functional unit of a system of communications....for all

food serves as a sign among the members of a given society. As soon as a need is satisfied by standardized production and consumption, in short, as soon as it takes on the characteristics of an institution, its function can no longer be dissociated from the sign of that function" (p. 21).

Here, Barthes addresses that foodstuffs are undoubtedly symbolic of a society, and also that the standardized production of foods creates a system of signs, not only relative, but also married to the producer. It is not difficult to apply this theory into the Starbucks discussion. Every time a person, programmed to the terminology provided by the Starbucks culture, seeks a drink specific to Starbucks, he or she is further promoting the union of coffee and Starbucks. Much like the way in which soda will forever be linked to Coca-Cola, and how McDonalds will forever be *the* fast food restaurant, coffee is now forever symbolically represented by Starbucks.

Simulating a Community

"We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning" (p. 79).
                    -from Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981/1994)

I have now spoken at length about the way in which Starbucks excels at creating a specific atmosphere that brilliantly compliments the product and symbols being sold. In a different approach to examining the Starbucks community, I want to discuss Jean Baudrillard's theory of *simulacra*. Baudrillard theorizes that reality, as we know it and experience it, is created from an inaccurate perception of the "real" (p. 2). In other words, everything we experience and assume to be *real*, is merely a copy, or a replication of an accepted, yet mostly unsubstantiated reality.

For a prime and obvious example of this, one does not have to look further than the television. In the last decade, "reality television" has become one of the most popular and successful genres of small-picture programming. However, one of the notable

qualities of reality television is its blatant removal from the very realm that lends its name. Whatever the staging, these programs are all very concise and rehearsed, in order to portray the dramatic quality of *actual life*. Here we can see how the replication of reality becomes unreal; and ultimately we forget how to distinguish between what is, and what is created to simulate reality.

Baudrillard does not suggest that the simulacrum is based entirely on false foundations. Much like reality television hooks us through our fascination with human conflict, struggle, and raw emotion, the simulacrum works through the belief in its realness. Baudrillard quotes French philosopher Émile Littré to support this idea: "Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever *simulates* an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms" (p. 3). Baudrillard follows this Littré example by noting that "pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" (p. 3).

Applying this within the doors of Starbucks is also quite simple. Howard Schultz was determined to simulate Italian coffee culture when he revamped Starbucks in the late 80s. Yet the product and experience that Starbucks sells is far from the Italian one that originally inspired Schultz. Starbucks is a replica of Italian cafés, and Americans have accepted this simulation as the real. Starbucks has not only naturalized the process of consuming "exotic" coffee, but also defined it. What most of us know about coffee, we know from Starbucks. What we drink at Starbucks, we assume to be how coffee *should* taste; despite the fact that a Caramel Macchiato is like the Big Mac of espresso

beverages- a doctored imitation of real Italian coffee (just as a Big Mac is a vague simulation of a burger).

I am not suggesting that Schultz schemed this duping from the start. Like most globalization into the West, Starbucks maintained *elements* of its Italian models, but placed these elements into an American backdrop; in turn creating a de-contextualized concept of Italian culture. As David Harvey states:

> "it is now possible to experience the world's geography vicariously, as a simulacrum. The interweaving of simulacra in daily life brings together different worlds (of commodities) in the same space and time. But it does so in such a way as to conceal almost perfectly any trace of origin of the labour processes that produced them, or the social relations implicated in their production" (Roseberry, 1992, p.136).

Here, Harvey describes the ways in which our simulation of exotic foreignness is incorrectly representative of the actual locale and conditions that originally inspire our curiosity. And due to the influential role of the media in this aforementioned process of "masking," one must wonder: do we congregate at Starbucks and other coffee houses because the atmosphere just happens to suit our personalities? Or do we subconsciously relate the social space of a coffee house to the glamorous (and unrealistic) lives of a certain highly-attractive, impossibly-coiffed group of *friends* who definitively re-popularized the hangout on television in the 90s?

Even daily interactions with other humans follow a sort of structure. Small talk is not just a way to kill awkward silence with semi-strangers in close, unavoidable proximity. Small talk is an art- something to be learned and mastered in order to network successfully. But it also is constructed and applied in day-to-day public encounters, particularly for my argument, in the world of customer service. At Starbucks, the idea of small talk is slightly different than other fast food places. Very rarely are we compelled

to maintain conversation with the cashier at McDonalds while we wait for our food. On the other hand, it was rare for me to experience a customer *not* willing to chat while waiting for a drink. There is something different about the personality that has been injected into the Starbucks community; something that makes strangers feel more at ease with one another. As if merely being part of the sub-culture, simply contributing to its function, breaks down boundaries that exist so obviously outside Starbucks walls.

I link this simulated comfort to the design of the drink identity. Although it is uncommon for a person to personally connect and relate themselves to, for example, a Burger King Whopper (and the average person probably would not accept being addressed as such), people inadvertently allow their coffee preferences to mimic their personalities, as I previously explained. Simply by ordering a Starbucks drink, a person is sharing a piece of personal information with a stranger. Perhaps this is the first step, the breaking of the ice that gives way to a more natural conversation. Because the drinks are personalized, and each ingredient is specific to each person, a simulated connection is formed between customer and drink; consequently customer and barista alike.

I lack scientific evidence to support my claim that these types of interactions cease to take place at the average fast food restaurant, so the best support I can give is again my own experiences. While I am yet to form temporary bonds with my servers at McDonalds, as a Starbucks barista, I was constantly befriending my customers and blurring the line between barista and therapist. For my female customer going through a divorce, my role as barista was second to my role as "a shoulder to cry on." Eventually I realized that this person was no longer just buying her usual Americano. She was buying a friend, a confidant.

The fact remains that I was often shocked at how comfortable otherwise random strangers felt opening up to me, their barista. My role was closer to that of a bartender, only there was no liquor being served to loosen the scene, or the patrons. Accompanying this bartender correlation, I also experienced moral conflictions behind the Starbucks counter. A bartender's duty is often to serve and promote the misery of habitual customers. In the case of two of my regulars, Cynthia and Kelly, who both exceeded 400 pounds in size, I had a difficult time blending their venti Mocha Frappuccinos (double mocha and whipped cream, mind you) at 8:30 in the morning, and then again at lunch time. Preston, another heavy-set customer who always ordered venti White Mochas had a heart attack one day and returned the next to order *the usual*. Although my job was primarily to give the people what they wanted, I often sneaked skim milk or decaf shots into the drinks of customers who I knew to be unhealthy.

This troubling responsibility, as well as the social openness of Starbucks customers leaves me to wonder if people really do feel more comfortable in Starbucks as a result of my prior hypothesis, relating the personality of the drink to the person drinking it. Or is the comfort just part of the original blueprint of Starbucks? Are we comfortable in Starbucks because clever marketing shows us that we should be? Is this just one of the many subconscious emotions or symbols that Starbucks implants? Do hippies wear Birkenstocks because they are comfortable, practical footwear? Or do hippies wear Birkenstocks because hippies wear Birkenstocks? All of these questions fit into Baudrillard's simulacrum. We are practically unable to distinguish between the genuine and the replication.

Conclusion

"Don't feel special that we remember your name/drink. We do that for everyone. And this privilege can be revoked at any time for bad conduct in our store. If you piss me off I will purposefully forget everything about you for as long as it takes to teach you some manners. We control your daily intake of caffeine. Do not fuck with us."

-Anonymous Starbucks barista

Overall, I find it safe to say that Starbucks operates differently than most fast food corporations. I have applied this description based on its blatant similarities to other typical fast food places- the speed of service, the nutrition-less product, the conformed atmosphere of any and every Starbucks worldwide. But despite all of the simple ways in which Starbucks functions as fast food, it also defies many of the common traits. The quality of Starbucks whole beans is arguably better than most fast food java. The fact remains that they do use Arabica beans, a markedly better quality bean than Robusta. Additionally, partners are treated and paid better than most other fast food places, with access to health benefits for part-time work, as well as tips and stock options.

However, it is not entirely in these ways that Starbucks has become so rapidly successful. Through the specifically simulated atmosphere and language, Starbucks created a product that has re-defined the product of coffee itself. Coffee as we know it today, is not coffee from the past. Our coffee consumption is forever changed and measured against Starbucks standards, which is demonstrated any time a customer strays from the chain and tries to order specifically Starbucks menu items. People cannot distinguish that coffee at Starbucks is not coffee everywhere- it has become a standard. Since Starbucks became so successful at doctoring basic coffee, other common chains have been forced to conform just to stay alive. Dunkin' Donuts now offers many similar products to Starbucks- from iced coffees, to blended coffees, to 'coffee alternatives' (as

the Starbucks menu calls them) such as icy fruity drinks. A sign I recently saw in Dunkin' Donuts cleverly states: "Star Coffee, Less Bucks."

Equally as important as the product itself, is the symbol of class and status that is inherent in Starbucks culture. Because the knowledge and terminology needed at Starbucks is so specific to it, people feel like a part of a little society when they are involved. A first-time Starbucks customer sticks out like an errant cowlick upon his first visit. But over time, any average coffee dunce can master the domain that is Starbucks. After a little help, a first-timer will find a drink that suits him; and after the mandatory stumbling over menu pronunciation, the person has paid his dues and earned the skills necessary to become a regular customer. This former Starbucks virgin will come in again and again, gaining confidence with each visit. Eventually, the handiness of the re-loadable Starbucks card is discovered and this is the official sign that a loyalty is formed. The once-nervous customer becomes a card-carrying member of society.

Another key to Starbucks' success has been in the marketing of the product to an upper class crowd. This guarantees the business of those who fit into the upper class demographic, as well as those who strive to appear as such. In addition to that, is the fact that Starbucks has become so convenient in its standardization of coffee, that it appeals to anyone- even non-coffee drinkers. Starbucks has been able to create a variety-driven menu with literally something for everyone. One of the most popular drinks on the menu, the Strawberry Crème Frappuccino, does not even pretend to have coffee in it.

While most of my opinions towards Starbucks are negative, it is for the same reasons that I oppose corporations in general. I could write similarly dissatisfied arguments against any number of greedy corporations whose dominance and

homogenization eliminate small businesses left and right. Starbucks just had the misfortune of employing me long enough for me to formulate a deeply-rooted distaste for not only the product, but the whole simulated sub-culture itself. Although I mostly maintain a personal disdain for the functionings of Starbucks, I can also admit to its genius, and its undeniable clout in society.

With the current rise of consumerism in America masking the current failing of democracy, Starbucks is the perfect balance of choice and standardization. Without people noticing, American democracy and the idea of government *for the people* has lost its potency. Instead, it is through mass consumerism and free market that democracy is experienced today. Starbucks is just one outlet for people to exercise their vague constitutional rights. Starbucks is a place to display individuality...through a worldwide standardized product, that is. This is potentially the reason why so many cases of wildly angry customers arise when their Starbucks is compromised- because this is how America encounters freedom today. To deny them of their lattes would be a symbolic violation of basic rights.

And although I would like to remain a cynic until the end, I must admit that even the relationships that formed through constructed expectations and the simulated sense of community, were genuine as they occurred. As I was recently observing a Starbucks, I saw two young women both engaged in schoolwork, momentarily look up from their work and have a quick conversation over the nuisance sunlight. I am forced to see the positive in this- that two people who otherwise would never talk or meet, shared an experience, brief as it was. Two strangers were able to connect and chat within the familiar space of Starbucks.

As insignificant as it may seem, these constructed interactions are taking place all over the world, every day. Perhaps this idea of constructed relationships is scary in terms of simulacra, but these interactions do hold great meaning to the people involved, whether they are fleeting or develop into more. The divorcee who sought my comfort does not know me anymore today. But for that time in her life, I was important to her, and likewise, I carried her burden as though we were old friends. As simulated as our relationship was from the cynical viewpoint of a Baudrillard enthusiast, it was experienced with the utmost authenticity at the time.

It is not by accident that the Starbucks logo is an alluring mythological creature, known for tempting her prey through infallible, yet inexplicable addiction. Regardless of how or why, Starbucks just is. Starbucks is the present and future of coffee consumption; it is a social space to end all social spaces; it is liquid fast food, fattening and straight to the hips in all its caramel goodness; it is the behemoth of corporate food in America. And when I say *behemoth*, dammit, I mean it.

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