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Art's Imitation of the Capitalist-Consumerist Business World

In the American capitalist-consumerist business world, society's values are often aligned with consumption. Consumption allows members of society to display their material wealth, and Americans have made shopping a traditional part of everyday life in order to own the best products and to impress their peers. Consumers often shop for things that they cannot afford, and they often use credit cards, to do so in order to keep up with the appearance of wealth. Social historian Daniel Bell sums up the connection between consumption and its display when he writes, "[a] consumption economy. . . finds its reality in appearance" (Pop Impact!, 23). The world of art has been especially sensitive to this trend in society. Many works of the Pop Art movement reflect and critique consumerist values by exaggerating the portrayal of commodification¹ in the business world.

Business advertisements aim to lure consumers to commodities by using the female form as a sex appeal to entice the shopper to the product. For instance, at an auto show, dealerships frequently use female models to lie on the hoods of the cars that they are advertising in order to entice consumers. The female form in *Great American Nude* by Tom Wesselman becomes the commodity just as a car in an auto show, which Wesselman exaggerates instead of a business's product (Appendix 1). The product advertised in *Great American Nude* is the sexuality of the female form. The female form lacks eyes and a nose, which contributes to the overall lack of individual character of the woman, and this is also comparable to grocery store commodities such as rows of Coca-Cola bottles on a shelf that look exactly the same without individual character. The lack of individual character of the female form is exaggerated to advertise her

¹ *Commodification*: the result of an object becoming an article of commerce (It is technically not a word in the English dictionary, however it is liberally used in *Pop Impact!* as well as my paper.)

sexuality through the accentuated lips and nipples. Wesselman's exaggeration of the female form in *Great American Nude* is critiquing the portrayal of commodification in the business world by making the woman a commodity that is bluntly advertised through nipples and lips that lure the consumer toward the female form as an object of desire with a generic erotic and exotic image that can be easily found in men's magazines (24). Wesselman's portrayal of the female form also critiques the behavior of consumers and how they are visually enticed to products. Overall, Wesselman exaggerates the commodification of the female form in order to critique the visual enticement consumers fall victim to.

The portrayal of commodification is further exaggerated as Pop artist, Andy Warhol critiques the American grocery store experience with his *Campbell's Soup I* that is representative of the repetitious and predictable nature of American consumerism specifically in grocery stores (Appendix 2). The American grocery store experience is similar all around the country because grocery stores all lack spontaneity with their predictable shelves full of identical products such as Campbell's soup cans that do not differ from any other shelf full of Campbell's soup cans in any other grocery store. When it comes to grocery shopping, consumers realistically buy products that they are familiar with and that have a good reputation. Warhol exaggerated the consumer reality with the large Campbell's Soup can because in the mind of the consumer, Campbell's Soup is familiar to them, and that is the soup product with a good reputation, "accounting for eighty-five percent of all U.S. soup sales" (16). The Campbell's Soup label is enticing to the American consumer. The red label summons artificial feelings of comfort, and consumers form a loyalty to Campbell's soup out of habit and reliability. Furthermore, repetitiousness and predictability of the label has much in common with the consumer. Consumers predictably buy what is familiar and comforting to them, and they repeatedly do this every time they go

shopping. Their shopping habits become well represented by the massed-produced Campbell's Soup can, and Warhol could be making a statement about how businesses' advertisements such as the Campbell's Soup label get into the psyche of the consumer. Then consumers are forced to feel guilty if they consider buying a different brand of soup because in their minds, Campbell's soup is the best soup product. *Campbell's Soup I* exaggerates the portrayal of commodification in the business world by critiquing both the consumers' shopping habits as well as the repetitiousness and predictability of grocery store commodities such as Campbell's soup.

Pop artist, Wayne Thiebaud exaggerates the commodification of deserts in diners and restaurants by emphasizing the standardization of desert options in *Pie Counter* (Appendix 3). *Pie Counter* critiques the mass-produced food served in the post-World War II era of convenience by depicting rows of standardized pies that fall into five or six desert options (24). The standardized pie options critique the idea of consumer conformity by forcing the consumer to comply with only five or six options for desert. The pie options are limited, and the consumer is forced to eat a standardized and generic piece of pie is they want desert. In *Pie Counter*, desert then becomes a unified experience that lacks individuality because everyone in the diner or restaurant who chose the pumpkin pie will be experiencing the same pumpkin pie taste and not only in the same diner, for most pumpkin pies in diners and restaurants across America taste similar. *Pie Counter* is an appetizing visual of reality for the consumer (24). The consumer's artificial reality is depicted by the lush appearance of the pies. The appearance of pie is very predictable, crust on bottom, a type of filling, and maybe some whip cream or frosting on the top all to portray an enticing appearance so that the consumer will purchase and consume. Consumer purchases are based off of appearance, and whether or not the consumer buys a product, depends on if the appearance of the product enticed them enough. This enticement is an

artificial behavior of consumers that has no wholesome value, much like a slice of standardized pie that has no nutritional value. Artificial behaviors are superficial and based off of visual enticement, and *Pie Counter* is an exaggeration of this visual enticement that commodities provide in the business world.

Theater as well as Pop art reflects and critiques consumerist values while exemplifying the exaggeration of commodification. *The Visit*, a tragic-comedy by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, portrays the power of greed and how people are quick to put profits over people when they are given the opportunity to gain some material wealth. During the play, Claire Zachanassian, an old wealthy woman, visits the townspeople of Guellen. Claire offers to make the town very wealthy if they agree to execute Ill, a man from Claire's past. Suddenly, Ill becomes the bad guy when the townspeople are offered millions, and they begin to spend money on credit. On credit, many of the townspeople purchase new yellow shoes toward the end of Act two. Yellow shoes are an exaggeration of the portrayal of commodification as well as a critique of the townspeople's consumerist values because the whole town loses individuality by buying the same yellow shoes as their neighbor. Yellow shoes are comical and an exaggerated portrayal of consumerist behavior. When picturing yellow shoes, one could easily picture a bunch of people looking like Mickey Mouse (who wears yellow shoes) or some other cookie cutter identity. The fact that the shoes are yellow represents gold as well as the monetary wealth given to the town by Claire Zachanassian. Claire has "the Midas touch" because she touches the town with her wealth and suddenly the people are eating out of the palm of her hand by agreeing to kill Ill for money, and the yellow shoes are representative of the town's conformity and compliance toward Claire's will. Yellow shoes take away individuality and support the conformity of the capitalist-consumerist society while exaggerating commodification.

Many aspects of the art world whether it be from Pop art or theater, reflect and critique capitalist-consumerist values through the exaggeration of commodification. Tom Wesselman's *Great American Nude* exaggerates the commodification of the female form while critiquing the consumer's weakness to visual enticement. Andy Warhol exaggerates commodification through the grocery shopping experience with *Campbell's Soup Can I*. Warhol critiques the repetitiousness as well as predictability of the rows of grocery store commodities while using the Campbell's soup can as a representation of the consumer's shopping behaviors and how they predictably buy what is familiar to them while repeatedly doing so every time they go shopping. Wayne Thiebaud exaggerates the commodification of deserts in diners across America in *Pie Counter* while claiming that the visual enticement of standardized pies are representative of the artificial behaviors of consumers who lack individuality much like a slice of standardized pie lacks individuality. Friedrich Durrenmatt concludes the exaggerates portrayal of commodification in *The Visit* with the townspeople of Guellen putting greed over morality and purchasing yellow shoes on credit as a representation of material wealth provided to them by Claire Zachanassian. In conclusion, a consumption economy truly does find its reality in appearance.