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Chapter One

‘Money and TV destroyed this thing!’: Mediated Youth, Popular Music and the Brandscape

‘Money and TV destroyed this thing!’

In 2006, Iggy & The Stooges took to the main stage of Australia’s Big Day Out summer music festival and unleashed an authentic blast of original garage rock. Iggy Pop, dubbed by the music press as the Godfather of Punk, implored the audience to get up on stage. ‘Fuck security!’ he screamed, ‘Get up here!’ Security resisted. Iggy became agitated about the regulation of the event and the passivity of the crowd. ‘Money and TV destroyed this thing!’ he growled at the crowd.

Iggy & The Stooges performing at the 2006 Big Day Out. Note the raised camera in the audience capturing the action as Iggy leans over the front of stage into the crowd, while audience members he has invited on stage dance around him. Photo: Nicholas Carah.

Iggy’s claim points to a paradox at the heart of popular culture. Money and TV arguably created popular music. Popular music, as we know it, has always been a commercial product. Yet, popular musicians and audiences retain a sense of authenticity and realness within their experiences of popular culture. Iggy Pop offers an example of a
pop music performer that audiences take to be original and authentic. In the 1970s he was legendary for incendiary and raw performances characterized by wild stage antics, self-mutilation and excessive volume. Iggy Pop & The Stooges are a building block in punk music’s foundational myth. They are connected with the emergence of punk music in New York clubs like CBGB. These significant myths are mobilized in the commodification of popular music.

Popular music, as we have known it since the middle of last century, is a product of the culture industry (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997). By examining the relationship between popular music and corporate branding I explore how the industrial production of culture influences social, cultural and political life. I begin this analysis with two interconnected questions. Firstly, how does popular music come to be authentic and meaningful to audiences? And secondly, how is popular music deployed to build profitable corporate brands? With these two questions I set out to examine how the culture industry functions in the context of contemporary popular music, web 2.0, cell phones, digital cameras, and corporate involvement in our social world.

This book explores how brands are created as a series of social relations. At first glance, corporate brands appear to be created within corporate head offices and advertising agencies and then disseminated to the market as a collection of influential meanings. At least, this is how corporations and their critics have traditionally conceived of advertising and marketing. In recent years, corporations, citizens and critics have realized that brand creation isn’t simply a linear one-way communications exchange. Brands are mobile, reflexive and adaptable objects that enable corporations to accumulate capital. They are not simply monolithic monologues. Instead, they unfold within social space. The intersection between popular music and branding provides a vibrant social space to explore contemporary brand-building.¹

Market researchers and social commentators pontificate that ‘Generation Y’ or the ‘youth market’ is too savvy for traditional corporate branding. They reject ‘interruption’ marketing like broadcast advertising. Instead, they seek out corporate brands that they take to be ‘real’ and ‘authentic.’ Rather than bombard them with persuasive messages, corporations need to naturally and organically integrate into their lifestyle. Adam Zammit of Peer Group Media, a communications agency that holds the commercial rights for several Australian music festivals, exemplifies this conception of young people. He claims

that corporations need to find relevant roles within the social lives of young people. To his mind, ‘(music) festivals continue to offer a real bear hug opportunity, a genuine tactile exchange, but in stepping into that relationship brands need to create a real role for themselves.’²

Iggy Pop’s performance at the Big Day Out was surrounded by branded spaces created by Peer Group Media. In these spaces corporations set out to meaningfully ‘hug’ the youth market as part of their experience of popular music culture. The Virgin Mobile Recharge Zone, V Energy Drink Mist Tent, Tooheys Extra Dry Snowdome, Duracell Water Tanks, and HP Go Live pavilion all provided spaces where festival goers relaxed, cooled down, and enjoyed themselves within a branded space. In each of these spaces the audience was invited to interact with a corporate brand as part of their music festival experience. Young people’s enjoyment of the music festival built brand equity for global corporations. Music fans play a vital role in bringing corporate brands to life.

Douglas Rushkoff examined how corporations came to be intimately involved in popular music culture in his film The Merchants of Cool.³ In the mid-1990s corporations recognized that young people were cynical about celebrity endorsements. Sprite embraced this cynicism. They launched an advertising campaign in which celebrities visibly accepted large sums of money to endorse the soft drink. Sprite effectively said, ‘You think corporations are fakes and liars? Well, we think corporations are fakes and liars too!’ Young people quickly grew tired of this cynical anti-marketing marketing. Sprite, like many of the corporations I examine in this book moved toward developing ‘credible’ and ‘authentic’ relationships with popular musicians and young people. Corporate involvement in social spaces like music festivals is presented to young people as inherently authentic and empowering. Corporations set out to support the popular music culture that young people find real and authentic. The corporations at the Big Day Out say, ‘You like Iggy Pop? Well, we like Iggy Pop too!’ Corporations have become savvy at embedding themselves within social space. Young people are adept at recognizing corporate involvement in their culture and are cynical about corporate claims to authenticity. Ultimately though, it doesn’t matter what young people think about branding. Brands are brought to life through social action, not necessarily through what young people think about them.

In cultural brand-building, popular musicians play the important role of being the real thing. Performers like Iggy Pop validate the Big Day Out as an authentic space. Once validated by the performance of
authentic popular music, corporations can use the Big Day Out to imbue their brands with similar authentic meanings and values. The brands at the Big Day Out are both parasites that feed off the authentic energy of popular music and proselytizers that zealously defend the meaningful cultural myths that they seek to harness (Holt, 2006).

Originally, brands were a trademark attached to a product that communicated value to consumers. In contemporary culture, brands are embedded within social relations. They specify particular lifestyles and contexts of consumption. Brands become valuable through the social actions of consumers. A corporation can create an advertising campaign attributing particular meanings and values to a brand, but those meanings and values only become ‘real’ once consumers validate them through their social actions. Jack Daniel’s Whiskey claims in its brand mythology to be the drink of choice for rock musicians. This claim is only made meaningful by hard-rocking musicians who drink Jack Daniel’s. Zizek (1989, p. 106) illustrates this point clearly in his description of the Marlboro brand. While the brand connotes American myths (cowboys and prairies), ‘it does not become meaningful until “real” Americans start to identify themselves (in their ideological self-experience) with the image created by the Marlboro advertisement—until America itself is experienced as Marlboro country.’ Brands are ‘open ended objects’ brought to life via consumer action (Arvidsson, 2005; Lury, 2004).

Brands are at the centre of corporate business strategy. They are assets to be managed (Aaker, 1991; 1996). Brand loyalty reduces the cost of keeping old customers and attracting new ones. Brand awareness makes brands present in the social world and imagination of consumers and citizens. Perceptions of quality and associations customers and the public make with brands increase their likelihood of purchasing products and services and integrating the brand into their life and identity. Increasingly, brand equity is crafted through building brand identities and personalities that come alive within social space and the imagination of consumers (Aaker, 1996; Holt, 2004). Iconic brands speak for whole corporations (particular organizations of capital accumulation) rather than individual commodities. The commodity (and its real mode of production) is ‘absent’ from the brand (Goldman and Papson, 1999, p. 19).

Through consumers brands can take on a life of their own and acquire unintended meanings. Corporations cannot exactly specify what a brand means, even though they might try. In contemporary society corporations turn toward managing the cultural, social and political spaces within which brands are constructed. Corporate brands aren’t just visual logos. They are resources that generate value for corporations by managing the spaces within which consumers and citizens construct meaning (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 238).

Rather than focus solely on brands, I examine social spaces within which brands are created. Popular music culture spaces like the Big Day Out can be thought of as brandscapes (Sherry, 1998; Goldman and Papson, 2006; Thompson and Arsel, 2004). Brandscapes are cultural spaces where corporate brands are built experientially by consumers and corporations (Ponsoby-McCabe and Boyle, 2006). In the brandscapes, popular music and corporate brands are symbiotically created in ways that young people find authentic, enjoyable and empowering. The experiential construction of brands has strategic implications for the way that corporations and marketers build brands. They construct branding campaigns that integrate with popular culture practices and spaces. These brand-building practices also have implications for the way that citizens understand how brand-building shapes popular culture, society and politics. The brand is an open, reflexive and living object within popular culture.

I approach branding through two lenses: strategic and critical. Throughout this book, by strategic I mean the instrumental approach of marketers whose intention is to accumulate capital by developing efficient and effective brand-building apparatuses. By critical I mean the examination of the social relations and conditions of production inherent in brand-building practices. From a critical perspective I examine the way in which dominant groups (like corporations and marketers) craft particular spaces that obfuscate the uneven power relationships involved in the accumulation of capital. I introduce both of these perspectives here to situate them within their differing historical trajectories. These different trajectories help to explain and explore the contested nature of contemporary communications, media and popular culture.

A brief history of marketing and branding

To understand branding we need to examine how marketing developed as a system for thinking about and acting in the world. Marketing emerged from the profound impact that the Industrial Revolution had on economic, social, cultural and political structures (Bartels, 1976; Kitchen, 2003; McQuire, 2008; Shaw and Jones, 2005). Marketing is an instrumental way of organizing social exchanges around the
buying and selling of commodities. The industrial production of commodities required a system that stimulated demand for products and developed consumption-oriented lifestyles. Early forms of marketing communication such as advertising played an important role in the development of modern urban life (McQuire, 2008).

Marketing is an instrumental and strategic mode of acting and thinking. Marketers set out to effect change in the world. They set out to make people behave in particular ways in order to serve the strategic goals of corporations (Kitchen, 2003; Mickelthwaite and Woolridge, 2003; Sheth et al., 1988; Wilkie and Moore, 2003). Modern marketing developed in the early 1900s from the rational scientific management paradigms of the time. Following World War II marketing developed rapidly, coinciding with the economic and population growth that fuelled the development of demand-generating strategies and a mass consumer market (Shaw and Jones, 2005; Wilkie and Moore, 2003). During this period the practices and theories of marketing management developed (Kotler, 2000). Key marketers emerged who developed frameworks for segmenting, targeting and positioning products in the marketplace (Hambert, 1964; Mclnnes, 1964). Foundational concepts such as product differentiation and market segmentation (Smith, 1956), the product life cycle (Wasson, 1960, 1968), consumer orientation and the marketing mix (Borden, 1964; McCarthy, 1960) emerged in this period.

During the 1970s the boundaries of marketing practice and thought expanded rapidly. Marketers began to realize the role that marketing played in shaping society (Lazer, 1969). Kotler (1989) illustrated the role that marketing could play in public life through influencing the attitudes, values and behaviors of citizens. These developments expanded the frame of marketing to include a wide field of social interaction (Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody, 2008). Marketers thought that they could solve social problems and make a positive contribution to society. In the past ten years, marketing theory and practice have been caught up in another profound shift. Vargo and Lusch (2004) propose that the ‘dominant logic’ of marketing has shifted from products to services. Where a product is a tangible object, a service is an intangible social exchange. A service is produced in the immaterial interaction between producers and consumers (Brown et al., 1994; Fiske et al., 1993). As a consequence, marketers have to engage with consumers as active subjects in the production of brand value. In conjunction with this shift, cultural accounts of marketing have emerged that situate branding within the production of postmo-

Contemporary conceptions of marketing propose that consumers do not passively internalize the meaning that marketers embed in their communications (Bradshaw et al., 2006a; 2006b; Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Mittelstaedt et al., 2006; Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006). Consumers actively produce meaning. This shift in marketing thought and practice is central to understanding how brands operate as immaterial and experiential processes within popular culture. In the traditional, product-centered, marketing management approach, a brand was a bundle of signs and meanings associated with a product. The corporation created these signs and meanings, attached them to a product, and distributed them to consumers. Even though, in reality, consumers and citizens have always played an active role in the construction of brand meaning and value within social life, marketers have treated them as if they were passive recipients of brand meanings. From the new services and culture-oriented perspectives, brands are mobile and reflexive objects that both structure and embed themselves within social and cultural spaces. The consumer is a co-producer of the consumption experience and brand value (Schembri, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The consumer is an actor in the value and knowledge creation process. This conception of the consumer has changed the way brands are created.

Contemporary brands are embedded within social space. Marketing takes itself to be a natural part of social life. Marketers act to institutionalize the spaces and people that produce meaning. They set out to play a role in the construction of these social realities. The brand is caught up in a state of perpetual co-creation between corporation, marketer, cultural industries, cultural participants and consumers. The brand is a social relation that takes place within the brandscapes. Consequently, marketers manage and regulate the constant co-production of the brand across multiple sites of meaning-making. The people who make brands are not just corporate marketing professionals. They also include a diffuse network of citizens, consumers, and cultural participants. Corporations construct brandscapes in order to harness the social spaces within which brands are made. As Schroeder (2009, p. 124) argues:

If brands exist as cultural, ideological, and sociological objects, then understanding brands requires tools developed to understand culture, ideology, and society, in conjunction with more typical branding concepts, such as brand equity, strategy and value.
I use the concept of the brandscape to describe the experiential brand-building spaces and practices of global corporations. The brandscape can be thought of as an experiential social space where marketers engage consumers in the co-creation of brand meaning (Sherry, 1998). Sherry (1998, p. 112) defines the brandscape as a material and symbolic environment that consumers build with marketplace products, images and messages, that they invest with local meaning, and whose totemic significance largely shapes the adaptation consumers make to the modern world.

In the brandscape consumers and corporations negotiate shared meanings and values (Sherry, 1998). Consumers play an active role in constructing brands through their consumption and cultural practices. They are active meaning makers who take the predetermined aspects of a brand’s meaning and adapt them to their local cultural spaces, practices, identities and lifestyles. The brandscape is constructed on the premise that consumers often appropriate the meanings of global brands to their own ends, creatively adding new cultural associations, dropping incompatible ones, and transforming others to fit with local cultural and lifestyle patterns (Thompson and Arsel, 2004).

The concept of the brandscape emerged from an anthropological approach to branded retail environments like Starbucks and Niketown (Sherry, 1998; Thompson and Arsel, 2004). When you enter a Starbucks you step into a space that is constructed to produce a specific social experience. The combined imagery, smell, taste, sounds and social interaction with consumers and staff construct a particular experience around the consumption of coffee. Starbucks consumers come to know coffee through the Starbucks experience. In a Starbucks store the Starbucks brand comes to life and is made to represent particular values. The coffee is good, the service friendly, and you are reassured that the product has particular values like ‘fair trade.’ Similarly, a Niketown store is a space specifically constructed to communicate the values and personality of the Nike brand. Video screens, interactive displays, athletic and friendly staff and other communicative elements bring the Nike personality to life.

By examining these retail environments researchers demonstrated how brands were created through social experiences and how corporations could manage these social experiences (Sherry, 1998; Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Holt, 2004). For instance, consumers come to sense the values and personality of the Starbucks brand not just through the advertising but through the social interaction occurring within the Starbucks store. Once you realize that brands are created through social interactions, it becomes apparent that these social interactions don’t just take place within retail environments. They can take place anywhere. The Starbucks brand is also brought to life outside of the Starbucks store. It is built in the office, or in other social settings, when you offer to do the coffee run for friends or colleagues, or you tell friends you are craving a Mint Mocha Chip Frappuccino coffee with Chocolate Whipped Cream. Of course, once a brand comes to life within our social worlds, then it can take on a life of its own. I might decide that I have a different concept of what coffee is really all about and say, ‘I hate Starbucks,’ ‘I think they exploit growers in the developing world,’ ‘their coffee tastes bad,’ I know a little café around the corner that makes much better coffee,’ or ‘I hate being asked for my name’ and so on. A brand is a living thing and corporations cannot completely control it. Despite their best efforts, some brands are cool and others are uncool, and sometimes brands that were cool become uncool and vice versa. Through experiential branding and the construction of the brandscape corporations create, monitor, understand and influence the social settings within which brands are created.

The brandscape is a structure through which corporations influence and structure cultural spaces and practices. The brandscape is a space where the global brand is adapted to local cultural spaces, values and practices. I will also use it as a model for thinking about how brands function within popular culture. Marketers argue that consumers are empowered to construct brands that fit with their lifestyles, values and identities. Corporations can no longer prescribe brand values to consumers; instead they must engage consumers in the brand-building process. These brand-building activities may make consumers appear to be active and empowered; we must however, consider how the action of consumers makes brands more valuable and their corporate owners more profitable.

The brandscape and the industrial production of meaning

Experiential branding and the brandscape can also be thought of as a contemporary articulation of the culture industry. Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) described the culture industry as an interconnected series of social institutions that produce culture to conform to the dominant ideology of the mass society. Meaning is industrially pro-
duced in the mass society by professionals who serve the interests of the organizations they work for.

The culture industry critique demonstrated how culture is entwined with the ideological and economic structures of capitalism. The popular music we enjoy arrives in our ears through a complex network of industrial production (Prith, 2007). For the most part we don’t have a direct relationship with popular music performers; instead the music that they produce is mediated by the culture industry. The culture industry invests money in recording popular music and in making popular music celebrities. This music is distributed to us via many mediated networks such as radio, television and the web. We listen to it on devices like stereos, mp3 players and cell phones. We spend money purchasing merchandise, attending live music concerts, and in some cases buying the products that our favorite popular music stars endorse. Sometimes they endorse products explicitly through sponsorship and cross-promotion deals; other times they endorse products implicitly through what they wear, phones they use, cars they drive and lifestyles they lead. In each of these instances, popular music culture interrelates with broader institutions and social processes. When studying the culture industry we can’t seal off a particular cultural artifact for study. We must continually think about how it is embedded within, and is a part of, wider social processes. Culture produced within the culture industry incorporates the social and economic relations that produce it.

The culture industry is instrumental in shaping the way we perceive and think about the world. It wins our consent to capitalist society by embedding us within it. Adorno and Horkheimer (1997, p. 131) argued that the culture industry ‘occupies men’s senses from the time they leave the factory in the evening to the time they clock in the next morning.’ This process subsumes labor into the ‘narratives of the culture industry.’ While Adorno and Horkheimer’s ideas are grounded within the time in which they were writing, we can think about how this critique plays out in contemporary society by noting the ways in which we interface with the media and other forms of industrially produced culture. On any given day we listen to the radio or watch TV in the morning; we listen to mp3 players as we travel around the city; we surf the internet once we get to work or college, and we watch films and television in the evenings. In each of these experiences we make our lives meaningful and enjoyable, and we develop a sense of who we are and what our place in the world is, through the apparatus of the culture industry. The culture industry filters and structures our experiences of social reality. It naturalizes the world in which we live. When we listen to our favorite song, watch a film, a game of sport, or a television show, we very rarely (if ever) find ourselves contemplating the conditions of its production and the way it structures our social reality. We rarely see cultural artifacts as a part of a system that every day produces society and our place within it.

A critical view of the culture industry implores us to view culture and society as constructed. This critical perspective asks us to see society as a structure that serves the interests of those who are powerful. The culture industry performs the work of concealing unequal social relations, of making the world and our place within it appear natural. The culture industry naturalizes capital as a form of social organization. It manufactures the ideologies of capitalist society. Branding is a contemporary manifestation of this process. Experiential branding engages people in forms of culture that also produce profitable corporate brands and hence naturalize those brands within everyday life. In this process cultural practices empower the accumulation of capital.

The culture industry critique has been criticized for understating the role that consumers play in creating meaning through their consumption of cultural commodities (Jarvis, 1998, p. 74). These criticisms though, often simplify Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialectical argument. Adorno and Horkheimer emphasize that the ‘triumph’ of the culture industry is that consumers are compelled to participate and buy its products ‘even though they see through them’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p. 167). Adorno and Horkheimer think about the industrial production of culture dialectically: the culture industry exploits people at the same time it relies on their avid participation. It contains the conditions for increasing democratization and interaction in public life at the same time it exploits these conditions for the strategic accumulation of capital. The production process of the culture industry produces systematic illusions. The audience participates in the repetition, regulation and commodification of culture. People participate in the production of commodities, corporate brands and popular music that they find meaningful. The culture industry is not ‘an inert victim’ because the industry relies on their ‘avid participation’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997). Adorno emphasizes the extent to which ‘cultural consumption has become sheer hard work’ (Jarvis, 1998, p. 75). Social life lived in the culture industry is a form of ersatz labor, by which citizens produce surplus value for corporations.
Even though ordinary people actively participate in making cultural commodities meaningful, the culture industry ‘impedes the development of autonomous individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves’ (Adorno, 1991, p. 106). This is perilous because autonomy is a ‘precondition for democratic society.’ Adorno asserts that the culture industry encloses and regulates the public space within which citizens might autonomously produce meaning (Adorno, 1991, p. 109). Participants in experiential branding programs perform a ‘pseudo-diversity’, where they think they are making autonomous choices. Instead, they largely use resources provided by the culture industry to make choices from a finite selection of brand names and commodities. Consumers are encouraged to recognize themselves as free and empowered, when in reality they are performing actions within an instrumental space that produces surplus value for corporations.

The produce of the culture industry (films, popular music, fashion, and brands) has a ‘false-specificity.’ Cultural artifacts appear different from each other when in reality they are all underpinned by the same instrumental conditions of production. For instance, consumers may differentiate themselves from their peers by wearing Converse rather than Nike sneakers. They might attach different meanings to each sneaker brand. Different tastes in sneakers may signal different values and identities. This sense of difference though is illusory. Regardless of the appearance of difference between Converse and Nike sneakers and the people who wear them, they are both a commodity produced under the same conditions of production for the same purpose. If you removed the labels from each sneaker and could remove the meanings associated with each style from the consumer’s mind, they would be the same sneaker. Whatever differences may appear between products of the culture industry, they ultimately appear shallow when we consider their fundamental similarities.

So far, I have canvassed two different ways of thinking about branding. The strategic view of brands emanates from marketing theory and practice. The critical view of brands emanates from a culture industry critique. We can see two very different conceptions of the production of culture (of which branding is a part) within public life. Marketers position their branding activities as empowering. They grant consumers the power to actively participate in the production of brand meanings. A critical view contends that this sense of empowerment is deceptive. In reality, the active participation of consumers in brand-building only produces brand equity and surplus value and sutures over the power relations at work in the industrial production of culture.

The impasse between critical and strategic approaches to the study of industrialized culture has existed since the beginning of mass communications research. Dallas Smythe (Smythe 1981; Smythe and Dinh 1983) implores communications researchers to engage with administrative and professional communications discourses, such as branding and marketing, to understand how these discourses are used to operate liberal democratic capitalist society. Smythe’s approach is very much a critical one; however, he seeks to understand exactly what administrative, strategic, and professional communicators do. I follow the spirit of Smythe’s approach to the contemporary communications environment. His critical approach acknowledges the strategic efficiency of marketers, and their effectiveness in supporting the institutions of power and capital. Smythe claims that by understanding the language of professional communicators and how they deploy this language to strengthen and defend their positions and institutions, we can develop a more meaningful and powerful understanding of society and culture.

Popular music, branding and ideology

To critically examine how the meaningful experiences people have with popular music intersect with brand-building we need to develop a critical account of how people think and act in the world. Global corporations set out to convince citizens and consumers that they are authentically and meaningfully interested in their social world. In doing so, they set up particular ways of thinking about the social world and the role of citizens and corporations within it. To marketers, branding empowers consumers by supporting and investing in their social experiences. Such a view obscures the ways in which corporations extract surplus value from social life in order to accumulate capital. Corporations also argue that experiential branding empowers citizens by offering them a role in shaping the values, ethics and personality of brands. In response to this claim, we should consider the ways in which consumers perform particular forms of labor for global corporations. We should also consider how they are subjected to forms of surveillance within branded spaces and how branding shapes particular ways of thinking about ethics, society and politics that don’t question the role of corporations in the global world.
The branded social spaces corporations construct can be thought of as hegemonic structures because branding programs are integral in shaping cultural spaces and practices. The hegemonic brandscape enables space for many different brand meanings to be articulated, but ultimately it seeks to legitimate branding as the dominant ideology of the space. The hegemonic brandscape ‘shapes consumer lifestyles and identities by functioning as a cultural model that consumers act, think and feel through’ (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). Consumers and citizens don’t just shape brands. Brands also play a powerful role in shaping citizens’ and consumers’ cultural, social and political identities and values.

To marketers, experiential branding programs are socially responsible because they empower local content producers and invest in the creative industries that support them. They reflect and promote local culture, and they create mutually beneficial relationships between corporations and local cultures. Marketers contend that brands produced within culture by cultural participants are inherently authentic and ethical. This rhetoric obscures the work that young people and popular musicians do to make commodities meaningful, to integrate commodities into popular culture, and to create surplus value for corporations. Examining participation in these spaces raises questions about the use of cultural space by corporations.

In this difference between strategic and critical approaches to branding we can discern a basic social antagonism between those who think branding activities play a positive role in our society and those who think the same branding activities are detrimental. Each of these positions is normative. That is, each is a worldview constructed around how people think the world ‘should be.’ This fundamental gap or antagonism between strategic and critical views of branding is significant. A subject cannot coherently align with both. For instance, I am skeptical of any marketer who professes a sincere concern for the social, cultural and ecological impacts of the corporation they work for. Ultimately, for them to keep their job their concerns must be overridden by the strategic interests of the corporation. Likewise, any critical activist who thinks they can effect real social change within the capitalist system at some point has to decide if problems like the looming ecological crisis, the financial and economic crisis sparked by the sub-prime mortgage industry in the US, endemic poverty, exploitation of labor in the developing world or other social problems that concern them can be solved by the market or whether the market is in fact a central part of the problem. This is important because through

their branding programs corporations simultaneously construct brands and social reality. These branded social spaces preclude any consideration of what impact branding has on social life.

To make claims about the positive social, cultural and ecological impacts of their branding and business activities, marketers adopt the language of their critics. As critics and activists demand that corporations support local cultures, engage in fair trade, or act on concerns about climate change, corporations savvily respond to these calls for action by adopting them as their own. In doing so, they don’t fundamentally alter the role of corporations in the global society. Instead, they develop responses to their critics that don’t undermine their own dominance.

Where global corporations have been criticized for being monolithic institutions that disseminate brand monologues, they respond by localizing their brand-building practices and embedding themselves in the spaces and practices of local people. These engagements with people do not meaningfully place the corporation within a historical and systemic context. Instead, marketers translate criticism into strategic concepts that savvily respond to contemporary cultural conditions. Marketers use the ideas of empowerment and authenticity to create a discourse of capital as a liberating and emancipating social, cultural and political system. Experiential brand-building is a form of creative destruction. Where Sony famously employed teams of engineers to ‘destroy’ their current gadgets in order to come up with new ones, global corporations encourage the market to constantly reshape and reinvent their brands.

Where corporations speak of empowerment and authenticity within contemporary cultural spaces, critics note a complexity in the savvy cultural response to capital’s ‘injunction’ to feel empowered (Zizek, 1989). The contemporary critical position, that in capitalist societies ‘unprecedented freedom’ is coupled with ‘unprecedented impotence’ (Bauman, 2000, p. 23), reflects a lengthy trajectory of Marxist thought. Capital’s immunity to criticism, and ability to generate value from its own crises and contradictions, is a feature of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, the Frankfurt School’s culture industry, and the lengthy history of ideology critique (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997; Althusser, 1971; Bauman, 2000; Goldman and Papson, 1996, 2006; Gramsci, 1971; Marcuse, 1965; Marx, 1990; Zizek, 1989).

Ideology critique provides a framework through which we can understand the way marketers, citizens and consumers use language and social life to craft meaningful accounts of how they think and act.
in the world. The classic Marxist conception of ideology is that people do not understand the material conditions of their social world: 'they do not know what they do.' Marx illustrates how the capitalist mode of production obscures social relations. Producers do not see the social relations embodied in the commodities they produce. This commodity fetishism, the mistaking of social relationships for objective relationships, obscures the social character of labor, and consequently, the extraction of surplus value through the labor process (Marx, 1990, p. 164).

The capitalist mode of production shapes a social world that naturalizes capitalist relations (Marx, 1990, p. 175). Marx contends that economic conditions determine social life and consciousness and that social life mediates, obfuscates and naturalizes economic conditions. Marx's notion of an economic base determining a legal, social and cultural superstructure is frequently dismissed as overly deterministic. His claim could lead to a conclusion that ideology simply denotes citizens as 'dupes' who do not understand their own material conditions of existence.

Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) pioneered a reworking of the Marxist critique that accommodated the development of mass culture in the 20th century. The conception of the culture industry illustrates how popular culture is integral to the reproduction of capital. The culture industry obscures the social relations of production. Zizek (1989, p. 24) demonstrates that this more sophisticated critique illustrates how ideology is:

Not just a question of seeing things (that is, social reality) as they 'really are'...the main point is to see how reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification. That mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence.

Leading on from the Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of ideology, the provocative and productive question Zizek (1989, p. 24) poses is, 'Does this concept of ideology as naive consciousness still apply to today's world?' In response Zizek puts forward the notion of cynical reason as the dominant mode of ideology in contemporary culture. Cynical reason makes the critical-ideological procedure of unmasking reality 'as it really is' absurd. He argues that:

The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he nonetheless still insists upon the

mask. The formula as proposed by Sloterdijk, would be: 'they know very well what they are doing but still they are doing it.' Cynical reason is no longer naive, but is a paradox, of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it.

As we explore the production of popular music and corporate brands I will illustrate how contemporary branding is reliant on forms of cynical and savvy ideology. Corporate brands are produced symbiotically with people's identities and social worlds. Citizens and consumers are dependent on brands and branding for their own identity and their own social symbolic order even though they see right through it. The cynical subject takes the critique of branding into account in advance of their participation in branded social space. Cynicism and savviness fireproof their subjectivity against the inherent contradictions of participating in a branded social world. Participants, just like brands, are savvy, reflexive and mobile subjects.

Adorno and Horkheimer (1997, p. 167), writing at the moment when the culture industry first emerges, already perceive that the 'triumph of the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them.' Our avid participation in popular culture, involves a lot of productive activity on our part. And, even though we enjoy it, this activity produces social formations that reinforce capitalist society. Freedom in liberal capitalist society is an alienating freedom, people are free to choose different ideas, but these ideas reflect the same economic coercion (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p. 166).

To penetrate the slippery, cynical social world, where we are acutely aware of our unprecedented freedom and unprecedented impotence (Bauman, 2000), Zizek (1989, p. 27) offers us the conception of ideological fantasy, 'cynical reason with all its ironic detachment, leaves untouched the fundamental level of ideological fantasy, the level on which ideology structures the social reality itself.' Branding is part of a culture industry that produces the enjoyable fantasies that structure our social reality. If the formulation of ideology is simply not 'knowing' and understanding the material reality of social life, then a simple procedure of unmasking this concealed reality would 'emancipate' people. Such a notion of ideology assumes that if people only knew how capitalists exploited their labor, they would no longer participate in a capitalist society. What such an account overlooks is how dependent people are on this mode of exploitation, how much their
identity and their sense of enjoyment and participation in social life are embedded within a capitalist context of production.

Ideological illusions, therefore, are not located simply in what people 'know,' in how they understand their social reality. Zizek (1989, p. 27) argues that what is left out of this account of ideology is a 'distortion that is already at work in the social reality itself, at the level of what the individuals are doing, and not only what they think or know they are doing.' Even though they might 'know' some aspect of reality is distorted, they act 'as if' it were not:

They are fetishists in practice, not in theory. What they 'do not know,' what they misrecognise, is the fact that in their social reality itself, in their social activity – in the act of commodity exchange – they are guided by the fetishistic illusion.

Ideology serves as a support for our social reality; it is an illusion that makes reality functional and enjoyable. If we were confronted constantly with the social antagonisms caused by the economic mode of production life wouldn't be as much fun. As cynical subjects, we are happy to assist in producing a popular culture that enables us to suture over and ignore them.

Fantasy provides a support for reality. Ideology is not our 'partial' knowledge of our social relations and material conditions. That is, it is not that we don't understand fully how the world works. Instead, it is a totalizing fantasy that obfuscates its own antagonisms. Ideology gives us narratives, meanings and ideas that make our social world possible and enjoyable. It embeds us as subjects within a series of meanings and symbolic relationships that make sense to us. If, as western liberal consumers, we were confronted every day with the misery and exploitation involved in the physical sweatshop production of our clothes, our iPods, cell phones, computers, and so on, it would be hard for us to maintain a sense of ourselves and our lifestyles as having ethically meaningful substance. Popular culture helps us to rearticulate the meanings we attach to commodities. Branding is a mechanism for crafting popular culture that enables us to suture over the antagonisms of global networked capitalism.

Savvy citizens are inherently skeptical. They are intuitively suspicious of the motivations and strategic intentions of the media and corporate brands. Marketers cater to this contemporary savviness by showing (the audience) how mediated appearances are constructed by the culture industry (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 16). Cultivating the 'savvy attitude' becomes a strategy for protecting artifice by exposing it (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 16).

That is, the savvy audience thinks that because they can see the apparatus which strategically exploits them, they are not 'really' exploited. Savviness encompasses the response of contemporary audiences to their perception that marketing's (and capital's) discourse of empowerment is not 'really' empowering. The savvy position is a response to having no alternative but to participate.

The point of drawing on these critical accounts of capital is to demonstrate how contemporary branding is part of capital's drive to accumulate capital by seizing the surplus value created in particular modes of production. Marx (1990, p. 672) demonstrates how:

Surplus value... is in substance the materialization of unpaid labor-time. The secret of self-valorization of capital resolves itself into the fact that it has at its disposal a definite quantity of the unpaid labor of other people.

The brandscape is a social space within which consumers and citizens appear and feel free to enjoy and participate in popular culture, this enjoyment and participation though obfuscate the way the brandscape operates as a strategic productive mechanism for the accumulation of capital. Furthermore, by situating branding and the brandscape within critiques of capital from Marx onward, we can articulate its historical context. Where marketers would claim that experiential branding is a contemporary development in response to a changing market, a critical historical perspective enables us to illustrate how the brandscape is emblematic of capital's reification of social life.

The brief account of ideology I have sketched out here, and will return to at key moments in this book, attempts to capture a holistic contemporary critique of capitalism. I will attempt to juxtapose this radical critique, emanating from Marx, with the liberal empowerment rhetoric of marketers and marketing theorists. My intention is that this juxtaposition will prove useful for thinking about the limits of both marketing's and critical theory's ways of thinking about and acting in the world.
Preface


Chapter 1: ‘Money and TV Destroyed This Thing!’

1 My ethnographic exploration of branding in Australia since 2003 has recorded over 50 prominent global brands using popular music as a source of brand content. Of these brands, market-leading corporations like Coca-Cola, Nokia, Motorola, and Virgin have created sophisticated experiential programs. These market leading corporations are complemented by partner brands in fashion, alcohol, tobacco, entertainment and other youth-oriented brand categories.


Chapter 2: Music...as It Should Be

1 Many global corporations construct an ideology of authentic popular music in their advertisements. They make claims about what authentic popular music is and how their brand supports those values. Here I’ve listed some other examples of these practices by brands other than Virgin and Coca-Cola to demonstrate how the discourse of authenticity isn’t peculiar to these two brands. Jack Daniel’s explicitly supports authentic popular music by claiming that ‘Jack Daniel’s supports Australian music.’ Cooper’s Dark Ale advertisements feature the words ‘Dark Glasses’ beside an image of two glass beer bottles filled with dark beer. The words have a double meaning. They refer to both the dark glasses of beer and to the image of a rock star wearing dark sunglasses. The two bottles of beer are a savvy portrait of a rock star. The alcohol brands possess particular cultural knowledge and values. The ideology of authenticity is also evoked through savvy portraiture. Celebrities featured in advertisements convey a studied sense of disinterest (Holt, 2002). Advertisements for Otis sunglasses and Nixon watches are framed as portraits of artists who just happen to be wearing the featured product. In an Otis advertisement a member of rock band Eskimo Joe sits on his amplifier wearing Otis sunglasses. In a Nixon advertisement pop star Tristan Prettyman is featured holding a microphone and singing while wearing a Nixon watch. The brand logo and copy are merely a frame for the portrait of the artist at work. The silhouette is also deployed to convey intrinsic and essential notions of musical enjoyment. In Apple’s ubiquitous iPod advertisements the silhouette strips musical enjoyment back to its bare coordinates: the relationship b