MULTICULTURAL CONSUMPTION IN THE U.S. SUBURB

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The suggestion here is that, unlike earlier modes of western social organization, ultramodern society is no longer staked upon a simple sacrificial exclusion of otherness. . . . Imagine here a vast array of stereotypical images of the economically oppressed or of women, nonwhites, nonwesterners or any Others excluded from reciprocal participation in the social structuring of the real life of modernity. In ultramodernity these images are not simply excluded. They are excluded by first being included but in a stereotypical and technologically sanitized form [emphasis added].

Stephen Pfohl, Death at the Parasite Cafe

Introduction

Racialized Scene #1: Command

[As my eyes attentively focus on the television screen, I am fascinated by a JCPenney™ clothing advertisement. In the commercial, a young white man is driving a jeep through a mountainous desert on a clear, sunny afternoon. He speeds over the highway with a look of immense enjoyment on his face. The horizon is beautifully contrasting the reddish-copper mountains with the boundless blue sky. At this moment a barrage of images come together devoid of history and in a recombinant form. The horizon is greeted by three Native Americans looking down at the young white man. Not “real” Native Americans, only high-tech doubles revealing totemic gifts with new meanings. Why are they here? The white male narrator informs us that it is due to a new fashion line. The white man is bestowed with Native American totemic imagery. This white man driving down the desert road has been given a simulated sanction by Native Americans to wear JCPenney’s™ latest fashion line, Arizona™ clothes. It is a telecommunicative gift from the past by a traditionally excluded culture to help this ultramodern man get through his day in style. As the camera returns to the young white man, the narrator ponders whether the fashion line was really some archaic form of gift exchange or just a dream. In the ending of the advertisement, the consumer dismisses both of the narrator’s scenarios and returns to the good time he was having. FASCINATING: simulated histories of the present. . . .] Click1

Passages 1,2
The first time I saw this JCPenney™ advertisement, I found myself fascinated by its visual aura, its seeming aesthetic perfection. My fascination with the televisual appeared to almost "transcend" the racist history of the United States and my own relation to it as a suburban-raised white male. Soon after, however, I found myself bothered by the image. The televisual seemed to bring me into contact with the violent and genocidal history of American nation-building. Still, I wondered why the racialized image drew me into such an ahistorical state of fascination. Why was it possible for the advertisement to be so initially fascinating? Why did it not immediately evoke an uncanny, historical reminder of a terrifying process of Native American genocide? Through my white male standpoint, was I perhaps experiencing a new regime of racial representation, where such images are losing their connection to the violent past? Can televisual images of those who have been historically oppressed and repressed by the transnational expansion of European and American capital still represent such terrible histories to those in positions of structural advantage? Do such images still create emotional reactions like guilt or fear among whites? Or are such images merely fascinating in and of themselves? I became interested in my fascination, not just as an isolated moment in front of a television screen but as a complex site for the study of a sociology of feelings; a place where my own emotional standpoint as a white male, consuming racialized images is bound up in the material forces of history, space, social organization, and power.

My consumption of the JCPenney™ televisual also prompted me to think about how my embodiment of these contradictory feelings of fascination and then frustration constituted a complex sociological process, in which such emotions were structured by their particular social standpoint. While I was surely the actor of my emotional reaction to this racialized image, I nevertheless could only articulate such an experience by negotiating my feelings around the culturally significant meanings of this image. To have such an experience could be called a structure of feeling; or, how seemingly individual emotions and reactions are constituted through discursive social norms and visual representations. "A structure of feeling gives notice to the necessarily social nature of what we call the subjective; it gives notice to the texture and skin of the this, here, now, alive, active contemporaneity of our lives" (Gordon 199). In other words, a structure of feeling is an emotional experience that seems due only to individual personality traits, when in fact, it is a common cultural phenomenon, felt in this case through the tangled energy of representations, social organization, and power (Gordon; Williams). As